

BATTER UP!

Get your waffle on and then some in Brussels

By SUSAN B. BARNES

WALKING towards Brussels' Grand-Place, a UNESCO World Heritage site, my senses were overwhelmed. It might have been the jet lag that first day, but the sounds of the bustling city streets, the masses of people darting about like schools of fish and the cool air all had a dizzying effect.

What struck me most, however, was the heavenly aroma of hot-off-the-griddle waffles — my mouth instantly began to water as I sought out the closest stand.

And that was just a taste of a city that has so much to offer.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Belgians pride themselves in their sense of humor and take delight in Brussels' world-famous pseudo-mascot, Manneken Pis, the bronze sculpture of a boy relieving himself into a fountain. I was quite surprised when I finally caught a glimpse of the little guy. And I mean little. Instead of towering over his onlookers, Monsieur Pis stands atop the fountain and is quite small, measuring a mere 2 feet tall.

That same sense of humor is on vivid display at the Belgian Comic Strip Center (comicscenter.net), with exhibits featuring some of Belgium's best-known comic-strip heroes, including Tintin, Spirou and the Smurfs. (Yes, the Smurfs are Belgian!) Tintin fans will also certainly want to make the effort to visit the Musée Hergé (museeherge.com), a work of art in its own right, located just south of Brussels in Louvain-la-Neuve.

Back in the capital, comic art also can be found painted onto the sides of buildings tucked into the streets and alleyways throughout the city — you never know who'll peek around the corner.

Brussels is well known for its Art Nouveau structures — designed by



Susan B. Barnes; Getty Images (right)

SWEET TALK: Gerbaud is one of Brussels' finest chocolatiers.

prominent architects like Victor Horta — not to mention Baroque-, Gothic- and Louis XIV-style buildings, examples of which are found within the Grand-Place. On a clear day, the buildings' gold leafing glints in the sunlight, creating a fairytale-like setting. Making it even more storybook-like, for one weekend every other August (next in 2014), a flower carpet made of 500,000 begonias is laid out and takes center stage.

An architectural marvel that's beyond the city center is the Atomium (atomium.be). Built for the 1958 World's Fair, the massive atom-shaped structure is truly a wonder. Each of the spheres features an exhibit, including "The Atomium: From Symbol to Icon," a permanent installation over two floors depicting the history of the structure. Aside

from the exhibits, on a clear day you'll have magnificent views of Brussels.

EAT

Moules-frites (mussels served with french fries, which are originally Belgian, not French) might as well be the official dish in Belgium. Oh, wait — it is! Prepared with onion and celery in white wine or with a tomato sauce, you'll find mollusks being consumed by the bushel. We dined twice at Chez Léon (uk.chezleon.be) just off the Grand-Place — it might be deemed a tourist trap by some, but even ex-pat locals sit at the green-and-white-checked covered tables and gingerly coax the meat from the shells and sip their beers.

Let's talk chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate. Well-known chocolatiers such as Godiva, Guylian and Leonidas got their starts over the past century in Brussels. Today, artisanal chocolatiers are making names of their own in boutique shops throughout the city. Rising local and international favorites include Pierre Marcolini (marcolini.be) and Laurent Gerbaud (chocolatsgerbaud.be). Want to learn the art of chocolate-making? Take a class with Gerbaud, and you'll learn more than you ever thought you could about the confection including the different grades of chocolate and their varying tastes and textures. Oh, and there are plenty of tastings, too.

Back to the waffles — I found the best in Brussels at Mokafé (Galerie du Roi 9). Those in the know forgo any toppings and enjoy their crisp yet

chewy waffle delicately sprinkled with fine sugar. Add to that the warmth of it having been just pulled off the griddle, and the pastry nearly melts in your mouth. If you just have to take some home with you, stop by Elisabeth (elisabethbrussels.be), a chocolatier off the Grand-Place that also sells pre-packaged waffles in all their vanilla goodness.

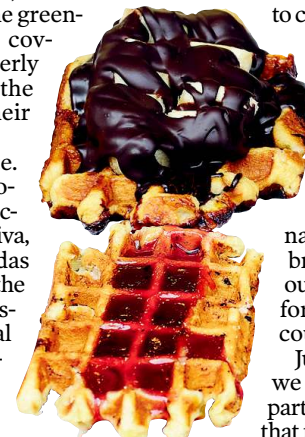
DRINK

With more than 450 beers brewed in a country roughly the size of Maryland, beer aficionados will have plenty to choose from when they belly up to any bar in Belgium. We stopped into Délirium Café (deliriumcafe.be) mid-afternoon and found a nearly empty barroom. After perusing an international beer list more than 2,000 names long, we sipped our brews (and cider) and made our way down the road before the sure-to-be raucous night ensued.

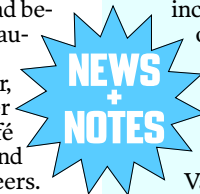
Just around the corner, we found the quieter part of the Délirium Café that features all abbey- and monastery-brewed beers.

The extensive list, including many libations unique to Belgium, friendly staff and cozy seating areas made this spot a favorite, one to which we'll certainly return.

A quieter still (at least in the mid-afternoon) spot popular with locals off the Grand-Place is A la Mort Subite (alamortsubite.com), where beers are served at long, wooden 1920s tables, and you'll find friends sharing stories over a glass. Be sure to try the Mort Subite Gueuze — served warm and a bit sour — and a tartine, an open-faced cream-cheese sandwich, often topped with radishes and onions.



SQUARE MEAL: Bravo to Belgian waffles!



SHOP, DROP & ROLL

Fort Lauderdale's all-suite il Lugano hotel has a "Shop 'Til You Drop" package, including an overnight stay, a \$50 AmEx card for lunch, coupon books, a shopping consultation, transportation and a shopping assistant. Two 50-minute massages at Red Door Spa are also included. \$999. Reserve two weeks in advance; 954-564-4400. illugano.com

CHEFS' SPECIAL

Relais & Châteaux has a new book, "99 Inspirational Chefs," with 210 recipes from said number of chefs (including 25 Grand Chefs in North America, Mexico and the Caribbean). \$99. To order, call 877-334-6464. relaischateaux.com

FAMILY AFFAIR


The Four Seasons Hotel St. Louis is offering a "Family Night Out Package" that includes four hours of babysitting and a \$20 food-and-beverage credit at the pool. For the kids, there are snow cones. Valid through Sept. 26. From \$315 per night. fourseasons.com/stlouis

30 YEARS YOUNG

The recently renovated Sheraton New Orleans Hotel is celebrating its 30th birthday with a "special anniversary package" — rates, from \$139 a night, include a \$30 food-and-beverage credit. Through Dec. 31. sheratonneworleans.com travel@nypost.com

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