

The Lost Highway

Journey along the Kortrijksesteenweg

130

[D E R E K B L Y T H]

The plan was to drive from Ghent to Kortrijk on the old Kortrijksesteenweg. There was no reason to do it, none at all. It makes much more sense to take the E17 motorway, which will get you there in 26 minutes if there are no delays. But on the way you see nothing. You miss almost everything that is interesting. So, choosing the road less travelled, I programmed the satellite navigation to take me to Kortrijksesteenweg 1, Ghent, the start of the road.

0 km

A curved white neoclassical building stands on the corner. The ground floor is occupied by a restaurant named La Rotonde that had seating around a circular bar. It was too early for lunch, so I programmed a new destination into the satellite navigation and set off back down the road. 'Continue on the present route', said the pleasant female voice.

1 km

Ghent's Kortrijksesteenweg is a grand nineteenth-century boulevard lined with town houses in various eclectic styles. They keep their secrets well hidden behind solid walls, but occasionally a dusty bronze plaque will reveal something about the inner life of the street. The house at Kortrijksesteenweg 128 offers one of those rare insights. 'Miss Edith Cavell,' reads the plaque. 'The glorious victim of German barbarity was secretly harboured in this house in April 1915.'

Her profile is etched on the plaque. She looks like a strict, determined woman, a forerunner of Margaret Thatcher. 'The lady is not for turning', you could well imagine her saying to her German captors. As I walked back to the car, I wondered what secret mission had brought Edith Cavell to the Kortrijksesteenweg in April 1915. But it had to remain a mystery. The road was all that mattered for the moment.

After ducking under the railway line, the steenweg to Kortrijk skirts a residential quarter called the Miljoenenkwartier, the Millionaires' Quarter. It was

developed as the site of the 1913 Ghent World Fair because of its location close to the new Sint-Pieters Station, and later became a fashionable residential district. I took a quick look at the quarter, hoping to find something like the mad delirium of Cogels-Osylei in Antwerp, but Ghent's millionaires seemed to prefer a dull historical architecture.

3.5 km

As it leaves the city, the Kortrijksesteenweg becomes straight and wide with two lanes of traffic in each direction. Marked on maps as the N43, this is a national highway, one of the straight four-lane roads built in the 1930s. But these routes became obsolete in the 1960s when the faster, safer motorways came along.

The old routes were abandoned, left to decay. They have become back roads with their own memories. They are the roads that the Canadian jeeps drove down in 1944 to liberate Ghent, the routes along which families went on holiday in the 1960s. They shaped history for a couple of decades and then lost almost all significance.

You could see them now as museums of travel with their streamlined Art Deco architecture and slender Atom age street lamps. Or you might view them as places where utopian dreams have gone sour.

So a journey down the N road is a lesson in history. You slip back five decades in the time it takes the satellite navigation voice to instruct you to take the second exit at the next roundabout.





6 km

Most of the houses along the steenweg look as if they were put up in the 1930s when this was a fashionable place to live. They were designed in a streamlined brick modernism that was popular at the time in Belgium. They are now a bit crumbling and neglected, because no one wants to live here anymore.

These days houses are surrounded by hypermarkets, car showrooms, furniture warehouses, the architecture of late twentieth-century consumerism. You can find everything you need on this road. But it might still leave you wanting something more.

7km

One of the houses looks a bit strange. You slow down to take a look. The walls are painted pink. A neon sign reads Tropical. Beside it, the word Parking in large red letters. The house next door has a heart-shaped sign with the invitation Kiss Me.

These are roadside brothels, drive-in sex clubs. The highway to Kortrijk is lined with them. There are apparently more than 35 along the 41-kilometre route linking Ghent and Kortrijk, or almost one brothel for every kilometre of road.

Many of these places have English names, like The Dolls and The Cotton Club. Others are French, like the aristocratic Madame Du Barry and L'Emeraude, or they have names that do not fit neatly into any recognisable language, like Gl'amour. But the bar owners seem to shy away from Dutch language names, as if these places are not truly part of the territory. They lie across a border, even if it is an invisible ethical one.

A handwritten sign had been placed on an empty bar stool in the window of the Tropical. Demande Serveuses, it says. But only in French. It seems that strict language rules do not apply when recruiting waitresses along the Kortrijk road.



7.2 km

I pulled off the road to take a photograph of the O'Bar. It was a strange isolated house with black walls, symmetrical windows and two giant pink flower-pots. It was the sort of house a child of six would draw, one window on either side of the door. But it had an underlying sense of menace. It seemed like a place where dreams could easily turn into nightmares.

It was still morning and the place was closed, but you could see into the front windows. Two steel-framed bar chairs with leopard-skin padded seats were placed in the window. A sign pointed to the back of the house where clients were offered 'discreet parking'.

I have talked to people from Ghent about this strange road that leads to temptation. No one finds it scandalous. Some even enjoy driving down the road at night just to look at the strange row houses lit up in purple and pink neon. 'I take all my visitors there,' one local told me.

The Flemish film-maker Felix Van Groeningen shot his debut film *Steve + Sky* along this strip. The film charts the tormented relationship between Steve, who is trying to go straight after coming out of jail, and Sky, a dancer in a night club on the Kortrijksesteenweg.

It is filmed mostly at night as Steve cruises the strip in search of motorbikes to steal. The action is framed by brash sex bars, brightly-lit petrol stations and gaudy Chinese restaurants. It makes the steenweg look sexy, the Las Vegas of the Low Countries.

Van Groeningen is not alone in his obsession. The photographer Thomas de Bruyn has taken strange eerie photographs of the brothels along the route and the Ghent folk singer Berlaen released his first song accompanied by a video filmed in one of the brothels.

Despite the glowing neon and the exotic names, the clubs look sad and tragic places. Many seem to have closed down for good, like Club Le Rose Garden's,



which once entertained clients in a strange isolated modernist house with two circular windows. It now lies empty and abandoned, the neon sign slowly disappearing under ivy. A fitting punishment, some might argue, for Le Rose Garden's errant apostrophe.

8 km

The presence of this sex strip seems all the more strange when you turn down one of the side roads. For you immediately find yourself driving along leafy rural roads lit by old wooden lampposts that look as if they might be relics of the eighteenth century. It is as if you have gone from 2014 to 1714 in the time it takes to change down a gear.

I drove for a while through this idyllic countryside, past old farmhouses with horses in the fields, huge villas with neatly clipped hedges and old country houses. The landscape looks as if it has hardly changed since Emiel Claus painted his cows. The only modern touch is the black BMW 4X4 in my rear mirror nudging me to drive faster.

10 km

At some point on the road through Sint-Martens-Latem, the name changes to Xavier de Cocklaan, commemorating a local artist who painted the flat countryside around Sint-Martens-Latem. It then becomes Emiel Clauslaan as the roadside sprawl of Sint-Martens-Latem comes to an end and open farmland stretches off to the low Flemish horizon. The next village is Astene where in 1883 the painter Emile Claus settled in a villa called Zonneschijn, or Sunshine.

After Astene the highway goes through another identity change that turns it into Dorpstraat. It then becomes Kapellestraat, then Gentsesteeweg, followed



by Kortrijkstraat and finally, just beyond the roundabout on the edge of Deinze, back to Kortrijksesteenweg.

The N43 is well-maintained for a Belgian N road. Even the bus shelters look immaculate. They are De Lijn's latest design with bright yellow stripes on the windows and blue benches. No one has smashed the glass so far. But then no one ever seems to wait for a bus in this part of Flanders.

19 km

A side road off the N43 leads to the village of Machelen-aan-de-Leie, where the painter Roger Raveel lived until his death in 2013. His works can be seen in a beautiful white museum designed by the Ghent architect Stéphane Beel in 1999. The Raveel Walk takes you from here down to a bend in the River Leie and along an old country path. It feels as if nothing has changed here in a hundred years, though if you stand still long enough you can hear traffic rumbling along the E17.

On the edge of the village, a French flag flaps lazily in the breeze. It marks a French military cemetery from the First World War with row after row of simple crosses. The 750 soldiers who lie buried in Machelen died in the final weeks of the war, in October and November 1918, many of them buried under Islamic headstones. No one now seems to remember these Muslim soldiers far from home who died to liberate Ghent.

20 km

Even if the occasional bus passes, the Kortrijksesteenweg was built for the car. It represents a utopian dream where you can live your entire life on the road. You even see shiny bread automat at the side of the road where you can stop to pick up a fresh loaf on the way home.

The car is rapidly losing its appeal in cities like Ghent and Kortrijk where pedestrian zones are becoming increasingly popular. But out on the Kortrijk highway it is still 1966. The road is the place to be, the car still as an object of desire. The route is lined with shiny glass car showrooms selling expensive brands like Porsche, BMW and Harley Davidson. The Ferrari showroom is the most spectacular on the strip with sleek yellow models displayed behind huge glass windows.

25 km

The people who live near the N47 maintain perfectly manicured front gardens although they never seem to use them. The gardens are decorated with sculptures that sometimes seem quite bizarre. They come from large garden centres like the one specialising in Italian Renaissance replicas on the outskirts of Sint-Martens-Latem where a fake Michelangelo's David costs 237 euros according to the label tied around his neck.

Another place outside Harelbeke has a vast garden that has a hint of Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights. Here you can pull off the road to buy a life-size elephant, or a bust of a French philosopher, or a classical temple, or three children astride a tortoise. Anything you want, you can find it on the N43.

30 km

The road runs straight through the centre of Zulte, passing a modern roadside hotel with a large blue sign on the roof that reads HOTEL-CAFÉ while a smaller sign above the entrance says RALLYE. I went into the bar to see if I could find out more about the Rallye. Several old men were sitting at the counter, smoking and drinking Stellas. It was not yet 11.30, but they looked as if they had settled down for the day.

The Café Rallye stood here up until 1971 when the building was demolished to widen the road. But the road expansion never happened, so the hotel-café built in the 1970s sits on a quiet side road set back from the N43.

I picked up a copy of the local newspaper. The main news story involved a plan by Zulte council to carry out some road repairs. An incident in Kortrijk was treated like foreign news. A story from Antwerp might as well have happened on a different planet.

Flanders is like that. It sometimes seems as if everyone is driving on fast roads and at other times as if no one ever intends to move from their favourite stool at the bar.

42 km

Omleiding. Diversion. My heart always sinks when I see that sign. It means that I might as well give up trying to get to the destination, because there is never going to be another sign to direct me back to the route. But it is not always such a disaster to be diverted. Sometimes you come across some hidden feature that you would otherwise never find. That is how I came to step inside the most



extraordinary modern church I have ever seen in Belgium. It is dedicated to St Rita, the patron saint of the impossible, and looks from the outside like a giant lemon squeezer. The interior of this vast concrete structure is filled with an astonishing baroque light that streams through a round window in the roof.

39 km

Back on the road, I was nearing the end of the road trip when I glimpsed a statue of a caribou perched on a rock beside the road. I couldn't stop to look at it more closely because it was standing next to a busy junction. But I found out later that it was a relic of the First World War commemorating soldiers from Newfoundland who had died in Belgium. Otherwise I might have thought it came from the garden sculpture centre down the road.

41 km

I was almost there. The road was no longer called the Kortrijksesteenweg. It was now the Gentssteenweg. 'You have arrived at your destination', the satellite navigation voice announced.

It did not look like a destination, so I drove on into Kortrijk and parked on a square next to the site of the Battle of the Golden Spurs. I walked through a little park and came eventually to a narrow passage leading into the Begijnhof.

This was more like it. The Begijnhof is a perfect little community with narrow cobbled lanes and old whitewashed brick houses. The last Beguine died a few years ago, but the place still has a religious stillness. It represents a different way of moving, not in a fast car, not in a straight line, but slowly, more thoughtfully. It felt like the end of a journey, a place to stop for a while. ■

All photos by Derek Blyth