

Along the Belgian Coast in a Streetcar Named Desire

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

Most people tell you the same thing. The Belgian coast is ugly. It is just a long line of apartment buildings. It has been ruined by property developers. It rains almost every day. The waiters are rude. The mussels have grit in the shells. The wind blows sand in your face. And so it goes on. No one has a good word to say about the Belgian coast and yet millions visit it every year. I am standing at De Panne station thinking about this paradox when the tram arrives.

I am setting off on the longest tram ride in the world, all the way along the Belgian coast from De Panne to Knokke. The route is 67 kilometres from beginning to end with 68 stops along the way. I could do the whole journey in two hours and thirty minutes, according to the timetable, but I have decided to get off along the way to take a look around. I want to find out if the coast is as bad as they say.

De Panne station. The doors close. We are off. Next stop Plopsaland. It is soon clear that the coast tram is not as quaint as you might hope. It speeds through the streets of De Panne like any other tram without offering even a brief glimpse of the sea. You might as well be on tram 94 in Brussels.

Sint Idesbald

The tram stops at Sint Idesbald. I get off here to visit the Paul Delvaux Museum. It is a long walk from the tram stop. I have time to think about the artist I have come to see. Delvaux was a quiet, reclusive painter who died 20 years ago at the age of 96. For most of his life, he painted Neo-Classical nude women in unsettling locations, like a third-class Belgian railway carriage or a deserted Brussels street.

The museum is dark and quiet. A skeleton stands in a glass cabinet along with a collection of skulls and paintbrushes. I sit on an old wooden seat salvaged from a railway carriage and contemplate a voluptuous naked woman with big brown eyes.

It is hard to know how to interpret these paintings. Fortunately the museum has put up a text by Delvaux. "One must first find the subject: an object, a landscape, a face in the street that touched and has captured your attention, a piece of music, even certain passages of a book," he writes in an essay titled The Birth of



a Painting. "One must now find the other elements that complete the ensemble and make it stable and efficient." I am not sure this makes his work any clearer.

Nieuwpoort

I am still thinking about Delvaux when the tram arrives. It rumbles through the streets of Nieuwpoort and emerges on the harbour front. I get off to take a short walk down to the beach. But then I notice a little ferry carrying people across the river estuary. What lies over there, I wonder. The ferry is crowded with families and cyclists. On the far side, I find a bird hide where you can sit in darkness watching rare species paddling around in the mudflats. It feels wild out there in the middle of the marshes, far from the crowds on the other side eating waffles and ice cream.

Middelkerke

The tram arrives in Middelkerke. It sounds dull. And looks dull. The tall apartment buildings have no charm. No anything. I contemplate catching the next tram that comes along. But then I discover one of the most romantic museums on the coast.

Kusthistories opened in 2009 in an old post office building. It is a museum of the coast. Here you can see a historic coast tram and an ancient go-kart, as well as a reconstructed hotel dining room and several creepy waxworks figures dressed in vintage swimming costumes. It is a sad, romantic place to wander around, like flicking through a childhood photo album, with its faded photographs of demolished Art Nouveau buildings and menus of hotels that vanished decades earlier.

I walk down to the sea to look at the old casino. It was built on the promenade in the romantic Anglo-Norman style. I sit inside in the Tavern on the Sea with a cup of coffee looking out on the grey sea that stretches all the way to Norway. It is only later that I learn of plans to demolish this quaint casino. It makes sense, I decide, if Middelkerke is to preserve the purity of its dullness.



Raversijde

The tram now runs along the sea. I can see tiny figures walking along the beach. People on horses. Little black dots that are dogs. On the other side of the tracks, huge menacing guns in the dunes point to the sky. They are relics of the great Atlantic Wall built in World War Two, a warren of dark concrete tunnels and abandoned bunkers that was meant to protect Nazi Europe from invasion. But the guns were pointing the wrong way when the Allies finally arrived here.

Oostende Marie-Joséplein

I step off into the light drizzle and see the warm lights of the Café du Parc across the street. This comfortable old Belgian place is just as I remember it. The old leather sofas, the brass coat hooks, the large mirrors. All still there. The retired couples reading *La Libre Belgique*. Still living comfortably on their pensions. The waiters in black uniforms. Polite but formal. The filter coffee dribbles into a glass cup. It is slow, but then no one is in much of a hurry here. I drink my coffee and wait. The tram is not due for another 15 minutes.

I walk down a long empty colonnade. It leads to an impressive statue in honour of King Leopold II. It was Leopold who commissioned the tramline, funded the grand hotels and built the first resorts. Without his money, the coast would be very different. He turned it into a summer playground for Europe's élite. Now he sits on his horse high above the beach huts, surrounded by bronze figures representing his adoring subjects.

Except no one adores Leopold any more. He is accused of ruthlessly exploiting the Congo for his own gain. Some say his agents cut off people's hands, which is why activists came here one night and hacked the hand off one of the bronze figures. The protestors say they will return it if Ostend apologises for Leopold's crimes.

I find myself later in the Langestraat looking for the city museum. It moved a few years ago into the old summer residence of the Belgian royal family. Its dusty rooms are filled with old ship models, seaside souvenirs and faded ferry posters.

I stand in a small room watching a short video in which an actress is dressed as Queen Louise-Marie. "This is where I lived at the end of my life," she says. A creaking staircase leads to the top of the building where a little observatory was built for Louise-Marie. When she became too sick to climb the steps, she was hoisted up here on a chair to enjoy the sea view. Now the sea view has gone.

I sit in a café to write down my impressions of Ostend. I like the fact that it has stopped calling itself the Queen of the Belgian Resorts. Ostend has decided instead to reinvent itself as a city of culture by opening a museum of contemporary art in an abandoned department store and a cultural centre in the former post office. It combines the quirky charm of a faded seaside resort with the edgy art of a big city. It is Brussels with seagulls.

Oostende station

I have mixed feelings about Ostend Station. It brings back memories of sea crossings on the Dover to Ostend ferry. After a couple of hours, you would see the coast of Belgium through the grubby windows. At first it looked like a long line of cliffs, but then you began to realise that this was a continuous barrier of grey concrete apartment buildings, a modern Atlantic Wall.

The ferry was never really glamorous, not even when you caught a whiff of French perfume coming from the duty-free shop. It always had the smell of fried food and engine oil. Now the ferries no longer run and the harbour looks desolate. I came across a Facebook campaign to bring back the Ostend to Dover ferries, but I'm not planning to click "Like".

Weg naar Vismijn

The tram follows a meandering route from the station around the old port, past vast piles of gravel and a handsome 19th century bridge with locomotives carved in the stonework. It stops on the far side of the port near the fish market. I get out to look at Fort Napoleon, a massive brick fortress built in the dunes in the early 19th century. It was recently restored by the Ostend architects Govaert & Vanhoutte to create a museum and an upmarket restaurant.



Bredene

It is not far to Bredene, so I decide to walk along the beach. I come to a large forbidding sign that reads NAAKTSTRAND 200m, translated into French, German and English. It reminds me of those stern Cold War signs you used to see in West Berlin that warned people: YOU ARE LEAVING THE AMERICAN SECTOR. Somehow Bredene manages to instil a similar sense of totalitarian terror.

Bredene used to be a quiet family resort until the municipality voted to create the first nudist beach on the Belgian coast in 2000. It is still the only nudist beach in the country, whereas The Netherlands has almost 70 along its coastline and inland lakes. I am not sure that Belgians are really relaxed about their one short stretch of nudist beach. Some complain that it has become a gay cruising area. Others murmur about voyeurs taking photographs. I do not risk going beyond the sign.

De Haan

The tram runs through the woods to De Haan. I get off at a pretty station with half-timbered walls and steep pitched roofs. De Haan is different from the other resorts. I walk along quiet lanes lined with romantic villas. Everything is neat and well-maintained. I come across a statue of Albert Einstein sitting on a bench in a small park. He was travelling back to Germany when he learned that Hitler had seized power. He could not go back to Germany so he stayed in a little villa in De Haan for six months.

De Haan was one of Leopold II's resorts. He brought in the German urban planner Hermann-Josef Stübben to draw up a plan. Stübben insisted on low buildings surrounded by large gardens. Unlike other resorts, De Haan has barely changed. The houses have quaint names like Little Red Riding Hood and look like drawings in a German fairy story.

Blankenberge

The tram arrives in Blankenberge. This is a totally different kind of resort. It takes time to adjust. I walk down a side street and come to a row of fin de siècle seaside houses decorated with pretty painted tiles. Three of the houses have been turned into a museum of the Belle Epoque. I go inside and wander through rooms filled with nostalgic relics from the time when Blankenberge was the most elegant resort on the North Sea. The biggest surprise is a roof terrace with a replica Gaudi bench made with fragments of ceramic tiles salvaged from demolished seaside houses.

I wander along the promenade, past an exceptionally ugly casino with two large babies climbing the façade. They were created, I find out later, for a sculpture festival held on the coast some years ago. The modern apartment buildings along the beach are uniformly hideous, but the concrete pier has a certain rugged Art Deco charm. I sit with a coffee at the end of the pier facing out to sea. It is the only way you can avoid looking at the ugly buildings.



Zeebrugge kerk

I see a huge container ship from the tram. The port of Zeebrugge has bitten off a huge chunk of the coastline. I am curious to see the old port so I get off at Zeebrugge church and walk down to the waterfront. The huge fish market has been turned into a maritime theme park where a sleek Russian submarine is the main attraction. The fish market has moved elsewhere, but giant photographs of fishermen taken by Stefan Vanfleteren hang on the building.

Knokke

The tram arrives at Knokke. I am hoping for a grand finale, but there is not even a shelter. Nothing. The tram turns in a little grassy area. Terminus, the driver announces. The doors open. And that is the end of the longest tram journey in the world.



I walk down the long main street of Knokke in the direction of the sea. Knokke is considered the most glamorous resort on the coast, but I have never really liked the town. It is full of rich people who don't seem to be having much fun as they cruise around in conspicuous sports cars or ridiculous golf buggies.

The local council is rather mean spirited. It has banned cool boxes and kite flying and beach bars that play music after 8pm. I feel more comfortable in Blankenberge where cool boxes are permitted, or in Ostend where there are plenty of bars that play music until the early hours.

It is in Knokke that I see a strange vision of the future. An exhibition called Shifting Lands had brought together five architects who had developed a new radical vision of the coast. They started from the idea that the coastline should be restored to its old state with mudflats and tidal inlets. The towns would become more varied and interesting once this happened. Eventually the Atlantic Wall would disappear.

I walk along the Zeedijk, past the last beach bar in Belgium, the last palm tree, the last pampered dog. Soon I reach Het Zwin, the wild area of mudflats and screaming birds that marks the end of Belgium. I stand on the edge of the emptiness thinking that it used to be like this all along the coast.

Most people say the coast has been ruined by property developers. It is 70 kilometres of unsurpassed monotony. I might have agreed when I first set eyes on the coast from the deck of a Cross-Channel ferry. Now I see it differently.

I love the wild places that have survived, the little museums filled with model boats and seaside trinkets, the views of the greyish-green sea. I also like the ferry that chugs across Ostend harbour, the romantic paradises like De Haan and Het Zoute, and the quaint little chapel in Mariakerke filled with model ships and seashells.

At the end of it all, the coast is not just a stretch of sand or a row of apartments. It is a place where Belgians come to realise their dreams and desires. It is a 70-kilometre strip of fantasies. ■