



### Oren's Travels: Part One

Hey, everyone! My name is Oren Smith and I'm a junior at Muhlenberg, currently studying abroad at Vesalius College in Brussels, Belgium.

I can't express enough how much I am loving this experience, and I've been asked to share bits and pieces of my travels through this incredibly unique country and its surrounding fellow European nations.

I departed the U.S. on August 18, and so I've been here for exactly a month. I've gotten to know the city of Brussels fairly well already, and I have been all over Belgium.

It's hard to encapsulate a month's worth of adventures in a short column, but I'll try my best to at least capture the beginning in words.

I suppose this will be an introduction of sorts. Although I was jetlagged for the first couple of days (Brussels is 6 hours ahead of Eastern Time), my orientation was very enjoyable, and I made some solid friendships right off the bat.

It was easy, as everyone in my CIEE program group was very outgoing. We went on both walking and bus tours of Brussels, and saw all kinds of famous sites, including the Atomium, Grand Palace and the Mannekin Pis.

Brussels is an amazing city, not only for its multicultural and officially bilingual (French and Dutch) communities, but also for its eclectic mixture of old and new architecture, its continuous and lively nightlife and its wide array of fine chocolates, tasty beers, frites and famous waffles.

All of my classes at school have international students in them, so the perspectives shared during discussions are so interesting, especially since I'm going to a school similar to Muhlenberg in size and teaching style. I'm even taking Dutch this semester, and that is probably the last thing I expected of myself.

As for other Belgian cities, I've been on an excursion to Waterloo and walked along the battlefields where Napoleon was defeated, I've been biking through Bruges, the most picturesque location in the country, I've visited Antwerp, the world renowned diamond center of Europe and I've been kayaking through the Ardennes forest on the Less River.

I'll write more in detail about these places and events in Brussels soon enough, and later on I'll let you know how Oktoberfest goes in Berlin during the last weekend of September! Until then, I hope everyone at Muhlenberg and abroad is having a great start to the year. Au revoir!

## Oren's Travels: Part Two

Hey everyone! I'd like to back-track a little bit to better describe my visits to the Belgian cities before I talk about what I've been up to more recently (which includes traveling to The Hague, Berlin, and Luxembourg).

Belgium is often an overlooked country, and many people know little to nothing about it. In fact, a number of famous individuals in many different fields are originally from Belgium. Audrey Hepburn, Jean-Claude van Damme, Adolphe Sax, inventor of the saxophone, Jacques Brel, legendary singer, Gerardus Mercator, cartographer, Victor Horta, Art Nouveau architect, René Magritte and Jan van Eyck, Justine Henin, tennis champion, and Albert Claude, first person to isolate a cancer cell, just to name a few. Edward de Smedt, the inventor of modern-day asphalt is even from Belgium. Now, what would we do without asphalt... seriously.

I'd like to start off with my trip to Bruges. It is an unbelievable place. I really would like to visit it again before I leave in December. It's a bustling city with the atmosphere of a quaint village. The canals that run through it are so cool, and there is one seemingly endless canal along which we biked for a while that stretches all the way to the Netherlands. I was able to see an authentic Belgian windmill up close, and it felt kind of like I was in some kind of storybook or something.

The city itself is also known for its lace, and there are many elaborate designs in many of the shops. We saw several swans and wild white rabbits ambling around houses built along the water, and the fresh pastries were so delicious. It must have been pretty funny watching me on the biking tour, considering I hadn't sat on a bicycle since middle school, but once the whole "it's like riding a bike" phenomenon kicked in, I was all set, and it was difficult to concentrate on anything except my picturesque surroundings and stopping to take pictures with my friends.

Antwerp was very different from Bruges, but it definitely did not disappoint. Three of my friends and I took a train to the city one Saturday and scoped out the zoo and the diamond museum. The zoo gardens were outstanding and seeing all the animals was very fun. I think I just really like zoos to begin with. It was particularly funny for me to see the North American porcupine at the zoo when I can see them in my backyard in Maine, although I never knew they could climb trees!

The diamond museum had some fascinating artifacts in it, and I learned a lot about the industry that fuels a sizeable portion of Antwerp's business. Antwerp has a more urban feel to it, and there are lots of places to shop.

Sometimes it's nice to just get away from city life and experience the outdoors to the fullest. My study abroad CIEE group went on a kayaking excursion in the Ardennes forest, and we also went on a tour of some famous caves which happened to be the oldest tourist attraction in Belgium.

Despite the battle with the waters, the river died down enough for me to take out my camera and snap some pictures, including one of a modern-day castle we paddled by. It's moments like that where I realize how lucky I am for this opportunity and that I'm really enjoying a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Until next time! Take care