

# Europe - A student's playground: Belgium - Northern France

By Brandon MacKenzie

Scotland had been a dream, but it was time to move on. My trip would be three months of travel and adventure, taking in as much of Europe as possible. Scotland had shown me a side of this world which I had only dreamed of, but I know that so much more laid in-front of me. Off to Belgium I flew, again for only 7.99 pounds as discount airlines offer the unique opportunity for students to hop the continent on very limited resources.

Arriving in Belgium was a return to a world somewhat familiar. Cars now drove on the right hand

side of the road and the currency is the Euro, converted at roughly the same as the US dollar - simple enough. I jumped on a bus for the capital of Brussels, where else would I want to go - of course to the land of waffles and sprouts.

Brussels was cheap, very cheap. The city is lined with affordable and classy hostels and unique roadside kebab shops perfect for the budget traveler. Belgium is arguably the home of beer, or at least strong beer, the kind that blinds you. For a beer to be over 12% is quite common and somewhat expected. I remember a local teasing me about the 5% Canadian beer we had back

home, although I quickly reminded him about our neighbors to the south. The hour long discussion began to slur and become incomprehensible after only three pints. Aside from the awful taste and it wasn't that bad. Those crazy Belgians may be on to something.

The country of Belgium is quite small, at roughly half the size of Nova Scotia which a population of 10 million. For those of you who did well in french immersion - no problem as half the country speaks French. But after one day in the capital I quickly learned something very important: do not come to Brussels. Brussels has city hall buildings, national government buildings and is now the capital of the European Union. Trust me, this city is boring. Get out to the smaller towns like Bruges, or better yet, as a Canadian head west to learn the most important lesson of your life. One I most certainly did.

Just west of Belgium in France is the town of Arras, in the region broadly known as Flanders Fields. Arras had the misfortune of being positioned near the focal point of the Allied-German front line during WWI and was completely destroyed during both world wars. The one hostel in Arras plays wel-

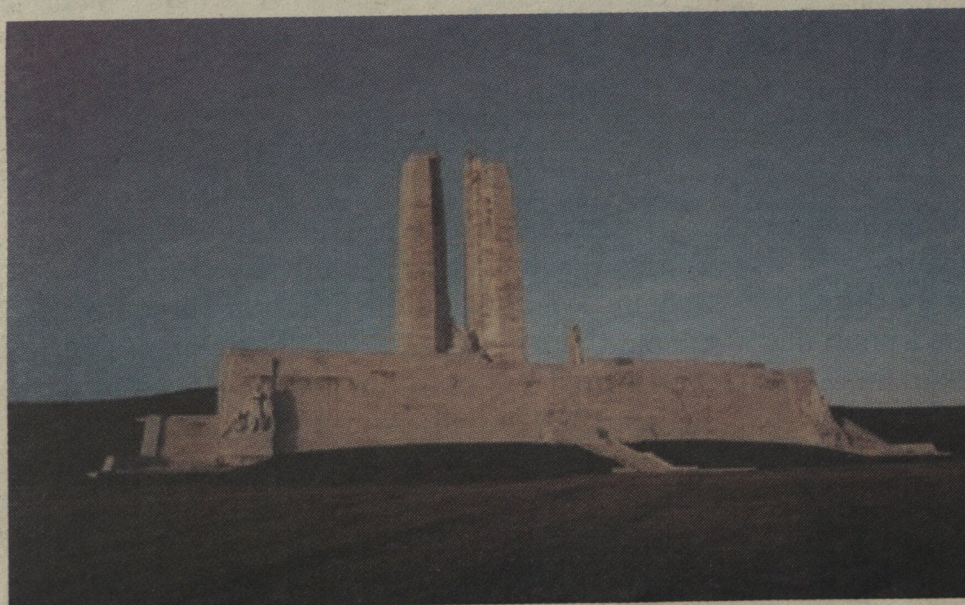
come to many Canadians for one reason - Vimy Ridge. A five minute train ride from Arras is the single greatest battle site for Canadians during WWI. Most of the site was left as it was after the end of the war. Shell holes and mine holes fill the site causing most of the land to be off limits as there is one unexploded shell per square meter. Many trenches and tunnels remain - but are all overshadowed by the ridge's centre piece - the largest and most impressive monument of the First World War.

Take your time to walk around the memorial - it is worth it. The view from the top of the ridge explains why this was a key position in the war and necessary to hold. Take a moment to read one of the 11,285 names of Canadians missing and presumed dead.

From Vimy, one's natural path would lead you to Dieppe - a sacred destination for Canadians on a journey through northern France. Canadians tried valiantly to free the coastal town during WWII, only to suffer extreme casualties - but we came back in 1944 to free it once and for all. And the town remembers as many streets and squares are named after Canadian cities, towns, and soldiers who fought to free it. I



Omaha Beach Cemetery, a picture says a thousand words



Vimy Ridge Memorial with the names of 11,285 missing Canadians



Trenches and shell holes fill the landscape at Vimy 90 years later