Headline: Bruges is Belgium’s medieval masterpiece

Deckhead: City of canals offers magical tranquility, centuries of history

Sometimes referred to as “the Venice of the North,” Bruges is famous for its canals and medieval architecture, most of which remains intact. Highlights of this UNESCO World Heritage Site include the Basilica of the Holy Blood, a 12th-century Gothic church, and the Belfort, a 272-foot-high tower that figured so prominently in the 2008 film “In Bruges”, a dark comedy about two Irish hitmen on the run.

The view from the *Rozenhoedkaai* is one of the most photographed places in the Historic Center. This is where the Groenerei and Dijver canals intersect, and it’s a popular stop for tour boats plying the waterways encircling the town. Visitors can stroll the ramparts and admire the windmills, as well as several medieval-town gates.

The Belfort, which presides over Market Square, forms part of a 13th-century complex that served as a market hall during the Middle Ages. Visitors up for the challenge of climbing the 366 steps to the top of the tower can stop for a breather and admire the old treasury, a carillon with 47 melodious bells and an imposing clockwork mechanism. Those who succeed in making the strenuous climb will be rewarded with unforgettable views of the city and surrounding countryside.

The Stadhuis – Bruges’ City Hall – is one of the oldest in the Low Countries. Constructed in 1376, the Gothic hall is a work of art in itself, with its splendid 19th-century murals and a colorful vaulted ceiling.

The 400-foot-high tower of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk, or Church of Our Lady, makes it the second-tallest brick building in the world. Construction began in 1225 and continued for nearly 300 years before it was completed. The interior houses a treasure trove of art, including Michelangelo’s *Madonna and Child* carved in 1505. In 1944, the Nazis looted this exquisite, 4-foot-tall marble sculpture, and it was recovered a year later from a German salt mine, a story recounted in the 2014 film *The Monuments Men*.

The Groeninge Museum houses an impressive collection of Belgian paintings from the late Middle Ages to post-war modern art. One highlight is the world-famous collection of “Flemish Primitives”, which includes works by Jan Van Eyck, considered the father of oil painting, and celebrated for “The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb”, a 15th-century polyptych, consisting of 12 wooden panels and is one of the most coveted masterpieces of medieval art.

Minnewaterpark in the south part of Bruges, is home to a small rectangular lake known as the *Lake of Love*. Legend has it that if you walk over the lake bridge with your partner, you will experience eternal love.

Bruges is a popular destination on European river cruises. Travelers are discovering that river cruising is one of the most comfortable and intriguing ways to discover Europe. River cruising allows up-close-and-personal access to cosmopolitan cities and quaint villages because so many towns were built along these medieval highways.

Cutline: IN BRUGES – The Rozenhoedkaai sits on the river in the foreground of Belfort tower. Image: Emperorcosar. Adobe Stock.