



BLISTERING BRUSSELS!

**MORE THAN JUST 'FRITE' REVOLUTION
AND FUNNY BUSINESS**

BY VANI SARASWATHI

A

t the end of five days, I can truly say I've experienced just about everything Brussels has to offer. F16s escorting us in Belgian airspace. Axelle Red live. Staying in an erstwhile jail. Chocolates by the tonne, speculoos by the carton, unmentionable beverages, truffles, mussels, art nouveau architecture, brilliant comics, efficient paramedical service and the not so

efficient emergency care.

True, two F-16 fighter jets piloted by Belgian air force officers welcoming the inaugural Qatar Airways flight to Europe's capital is a tough act to follow. But Brussels put up a fight, despite the average temperature staying between -5C and 2C.

The trip came to an end with a bang, as well. Trip-



GRAND PLACE
BY NIGHT

ping on an almost invisible road divider, flying across the street, landing on the pavement nose first, right in front of a fine dining restaurant, where a group of us were planning to celebrate our last night in Brussels. How aptly slapstick that this should happen in a country whose pride is its comic heritage.

Brussels' appeal is not just its rich and complicated history, it's also about the rather incomprehensible present. To put it simply – the French speaking and Flemish speaking parts of Belgium are not quite seeing eye to eye. So nine months after an election, the country still doesn't have a government – the longest a country has gone without one. The previous record holder was Iraq, so a rather dubious distinction, this.

Surprisingly, the lack of governance doesn't seem to have affected the functioning of the capital city – home to the EU Parliament, where at any given point a dozen dignitaries are visiting. Possibly, only the emergency services have felt the brunt of non-governance. One of the leading MICE destinations in the world, Brussels thrives on its citizens' passion for it. There is a stunning lack of nationalism amongst a lot of the people we interacted with. No Hercule Poirot-like Belgian pride; but more of "I am European, and I love Brussels. That's all," as one tour guide said. About the city, however, there is no ambivalence. Even a recent economic migrant to the city cannot help but

sing its praises.

Its sheer compactness, its connectivity within and to other European destinations, the civility of its residents, its eclectic – and sometimes not so pretty – architecture, the array of cuisines on offer, little wonder that it's rocking the MICE charts.

Old railways stations converted to trendy venue for events like the Royal Depot of Tours & Taxis.

Outside of business there is plenty to see as well. And you can do most of it by foot. But the Grand Place is where evenings are meant to be spent, branching off from the main square are little alleys where you can get hot frites (thicker, meatier version of the French fries) and fresh waffles; cheap made in China rip-offs of Bruges lace and authentic Belgian tapestry; priceless antiques; Tintin merchandise, gorgeous Delvaux bags and cheap rexine jackets; thirst quenchers; and chocolates in every corner.

But what is really going to inspire people to stop over in Brussels is probably Spielberg taking on Herge. Having got the rights to make movies of three Tintin books, Steven Spielberg and Sony have finalised Brussels as the location to shoot the films. Next up, the city is trying to win the rights to host the world premier as well.

If you do decide to go there before Tintin is immortalised on the silver screen, there is still plenty to do.

OTHER NOT TO MISS SPOTS INCLUDE:



EU PARLIAMENT

AND OTHER OFFICES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION ARE WORTH A VISIT, TO UNDERSTAND HOW IN AN ERA OF DISSONANCE, THERE ARE ATTEMPTS TO DO AWAY WITH BOUNDARIES.



GALERIE ST HUBERT:

A GLAZED SHOPPING ARCADE, THE GALERIE IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE EARLIEST SHOPPING MALLS IN EUROPE.



MAGRITTE MUSEUM:

THE RENÉ MAGRITTE MUSEUM OCCUPIES THE HOUSE IN WHICH THE BELGIAN SURREALIST PAINTER WORKED NEARLY 24 YEARS OF HIS LIFE.



F16
F16S PILOTED BY THE BELGIAN AIR FORCE WELCOMES QATAR AIRWAYS INAUGURAL FLIGHT TO BRUSSELS INTO THE COUNTRY'S AIRSPACE.



AKBAR AL-BAKER,
CEO, QATAR AIRWAYS

QR'S CONTINENTAL ODYSSEY

BUDAPEST, BUCHAREST, BRUSSELS, STUTTGART...

The third European destination to be launched in January itself, Qatar Airways obviously is relishing cocking a snook at its continental adversaries.

Always up for a challenge, Qatar Airways CEO Akbar Al Baker spared no opportunity to retaliate against 'unjust' allegations made by European legacy carriers.

"They accuse us (fast expanding Middle Eastern carriers) of being subsidised and coddled by our

governments. That's bull**** (sic). How did they start off? And we don't even get the kind of aid they did," he said to a packed press conference in Brussels, the day after the launch.

He ruled out multiple hubs – reciting the failure of airlines that have attempted this – and said Doha would continue to be the hub, feeding other sectors.

Of course, no QR presentation is complete without its GTL-fuelled sprint from London to Doha in October 2009. Al-Baker told *Qatar*

Today that 2012 will see several more commercial flights fuelled by GTL with the arrival of the A340s.

Cleaner air travel fuelled his continuing tirade against European airlines at the Gala dinner. "Then there is this whole talk of our carbon emissions – when figures only show them in poor light."

"Our emissions are only 94.5g CO₂/RPK compared to over 100g for European legacy carriers," he stressed.

The heated welcome to the Gala was only matched by Axelle Red's performance late into the night.

HERGE MUSEUM

THOUGH NOT IN BRUSSELS, IT'S JUST A SHORT DRIVE OUT OF THE CITY TO LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE. THE MUSEUM WAS ESTABLISHED BY FANNY RODWELL, HERGE'S WIDOW AND HER HUSBAND NICK RODWELL. RODWELL WANTED A MODERN, AIRY, BRIGHT SPACE THAT SPOKE OF HERGE WITHOUT RESTRICTING HIM TO HIS MASTERPIECE, TINTIN. AND THAT'S WHAT THE EXHIBITS DO - SPEAK OF HIM AS THE ILLUSTRATOR, CARICATURIST, ADVERTISER, GRAPHIC DESIGNER, AND THE CREATOR OF OTHER CHARACTERS SUCH AS JO, ZETTE, QUICK AND FLUPKE. DESIGNED BY CHRISTIAN DE PORTZAMPARC, THE MUSEUM IS AN ELONGATED PRISM THAT SEEMS TO FLOAT IN A FOREST OF ANCIENT TREES.



Sablon

If you do have an eye for antiques and deep pockets to go with it, then the street is worth visiting. We also stopped for some aperitifs at the beautiful where from what you sit on to what you brush against has a history and value that can overwhelm you.



VILLA EMPAIN

A CULTURAL EXCHANGE CENTRE, ENVISIONED BY JEAN BOGHOSSIAN (INSET) AND HIS FAMILY

Villa Empain

A gorgeous example of Art Deco architecture, the Villa Empain is now a centre for cultural exchange between East and West. The pet project of the Boghossian Foundation, we not only met Diane Hennebert who was in charge of the renovation (she incidentally also directed the Atomium renovation) but also had the unique pleasure of meeting Jean Boghossian one of the two brothers behind the vision of this project.

Created in 1992, the Boghossian Foundation has been involved in contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of those affected by war and natural disasters, especially in Lebanon and in Armenia. In 2006, the foundation acquired Villa Empain, and after complete restoration opened its door to the public in April 2010.

Auquier recounts his family's flight from native

Armenia to Lebanon and Syria, and then arriving in Belgium in 1975. The family of jewellers established the exclusive Bogh-Art brand (available in Qatar at Al Majed Jewellery).

Having seen strife and war throughout his life, he wanted people to grow past enmity and conflict and find a common language – art in this case – that ignores differences in religion and culture. “We don't want millions more dead before we find that language. And this was our family's commitment to that end.”

Apart from collections from the Arab region, there are temporary exhibitions that touch upon a lot of sensitive and topical issues. During our visit, it was the Colours of the Orient: Arts and lifestyles in the Ottoman Empire. Next month, the exhibition entitled 'Of Women's Modesty and Anger' will talk of rituals, garbs and convictions.

GETTING THERE



QATAR AIRWAYS FLIES



TIMES A WEEK TO BRUSSELS

FOR BOOKINGS

WWW.QATARAIRWAYS.COM.QA



WHERE TO EAT

AND OF COURSE WHAT TO EAT. DO TRY FRESH CHOCOLATES FROM THE FINEST - MARCOLINI, NEU HAUS, GERBAUD (WHERE YOU CAN EVEN ATTEND A CHOCOLATE MAKING WORKSHOP).

STOP AT THE ROADSIDE CAFES FOR HOT WAFFLES OR FRITAES - WHEN THE TEMPERATURE IS RELENTLESSLY BELOW ZERO AND THE SKY A STEADY SHADE OF GREY, CHOCOLATES, WAFFLES AND CHIPS CAN BRIGHTEN THE DAY. FOR SHEER NOVELTY AND AN UNBEATABLE VIEW OF THE CITY, LUNCH AT THE RESTAURANT ON THE TOPMOST SPHERE OF THE ATOMIUM.

KWINT AND MUSEUM BRASSERIE (NEAR THE MUSEE MAGRITTE) PROVIDE EXCELLENT BELGIAN CUISINE.



WHERE TO STAY:

These are just two of the many reasons why you could choose to stay in Hotel Amigo.

First, its location. It's just a stone's throw away from the Grand Place, and walking distance from several shopping areas, museums and fantastic restaurants. Getting crisp speculoos from Dandoy or chocolates from Neu Hause demands nothing more than 10 steps out of the doorway. The quirkier reason is the kick of staying in what used to be a prison. The original building predates 1522, when the city council bought the building from a wealthy merchant and converted it to a prison. The Spanish rulers at that time mistook Flemish for prison to mean 'friend', and made it 'amigo'. As the guide joked, then it wasn't easy getting out of Amigo, now it's difficult to get into it. The Hotel was built by the Blaton family in 1957 on the occasion of the World Fair. In 2000, it became a part of the Rocco Forte collection. For bookings check www.roccofortecollecton.com.



AMIGO
THE FORMER JAIL IS NOW A LUXURY HOTEL



COMIC STRIP CENTER
WHERE CHARACTERS FROM CHILDHOOD COME ALIVE

Belgian Comic Strip Center

Even if you are not into comics, this place is not to be missed. As the promotional brochure claims, it is the 'Kingdom of the Smurfs, Tintin, Lucky Luke.' It is not only about what is housed at the centre alone, it is also about where it is housed. It is a masterpiece of Art Nouveau architecture, designed by the famous Belgian architect Victor Horta (one of the most important names in the movement). A haven of natural lighting, the building once used to be a boutique for silk fabric.

The 4,000 sq mts of space is used for both permanent and temporary exhibitions. It brings together everything related to comic strips, from its beginnings, through its persistence during periods of war, and to recent developments, not only from Europe but even from emerging comic centres like Japan (Manga).

As Jean Auquier of the Center says, "Our little country, that probably has the world's highest density of paper heroes and story tellers per sq km, owed it to itself to create this centre."

ATOMIUM

The Atomium was built for the 1958 World Fair, and was not meant to survive beyond the exhibition period. The Atomium symbolised an iron crystal (magnified 165 billion times), to show the power of nuclear energy, and its use for peaceful purposes, which was the subject of the exhibition that year.

Of the nine spheres, three are supported by the other six. Except for those three, the rest are now used for exhibitions, restaurants and events. A permanent exhibition is dedicated to the '58 Expo.'

The spectacular view from the top (including over Mini Europe theme park), and the ride in the elevator – which in 1958 was the fastest, are the highlights of a visit to the site. The Atomium was refurbished in 2006.



ATOMIUM
AN ARCHITECTURAL WONDER



MANNEKEN PIS:

THERE IS NO ESCAPING THIS LITTLE NAKED BOY – HE IS THERE ON FRIDGE MAGNETS AND CHOCOLATE MOULDS. HIS IMAGERY WILL STALK YOU – EVEN TIRE YOU A BIT. LEGEND HAS IT THAT HE SAVED THE CITY OF BRUSSELS FROM A BOMB BY WETTING IT. AND THOUGH HE FLAUNTS HIS NAKEDNESS, HE HAS A WARDROBE OF CLOSE TO 1,000 FORMAL UNIFORMS, GIFTED BY VISITING HEADS OF STATE FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

EU EXPERIENCE TO A SEAMLESS GCC

TIME FOR A STUDY

Home to EU parliament, Brussels – even without a government of its own – is where diplomacy, compromises and doing away with boundaries can be studied.

That apart, trade between Qatar and Belgium has been on the rise. Imports were around 193 million euros in 2006, and it touched €337 million in 2009, covering trade in machinery and chemical products.

Exports had risen from €188 million (2006) to €989 million (Jan-Oct 2010), and about 95% of this was in LNG trade. There are a few big players in the construction industry in Qatar. However, the Belgian Ambassador to Qatar Luc Devolder is confident that in light of the 2022 FIFA world cup, there could be more opportunities.

“Sixconstruct and CFE in construction and Jan-DeNul and DEME in dredging and Landwinning are some of the biggest companies here. There are dozens of other companies who export products and services to Qatar but on the basis of smaller and specific contracts and without permanent representation in Qatar.

“There is certainly scope for expansion. They should take part in the large infrastructure projects connected to the World Cup 2022. As for the World Cup itself, the Belgian Sports Technology Club, an association of companies specialised in services and products for international (sports) events, is very interested in participating.”

Apart from MICE, there are regional similarities that could make for good exchange in learnings.

The common currency for one. “This is as much a political as a financial and monetary project. The euro has been a success but the recent past has learned that to be sustainable, the monetary union has to be supplemented by a stronger harmonisation of the national economic, fiscal, tax and social policies,” says Devolder. On the common market that the GCC states have been working on, he feels it is another long-term project. “It involves not only the abolition of internal custom borders and the creation of a unique common border with the outside world. The most difficult part is the harmonisation of legislations, regulations and rules concerning production, safety, marketing etc. of products and services. It involves also the introduction and implementation of strict rules to guarantee free and fair competition.”

MICE capital

With an annual MICE turnover of €4 million, about 25,000 people are employed in the industry in Brussels alone. In 2009, 70,000 meetings were held in the city, which resulted in more than 1.8 million overnights in 165 hotels, according to official statistics.

The similarities between Doha and Brussels are many, which is why it would pay to pay attention to how the European city pushes ahead of other hot MICE destinations in the EU. In general terms, Brussels’ main rivals for hosting MICE events are Barcelona, Paris and Amsterdam. In 2009, Paris was the most popular choice for those organisations/businesses that did not choose Brussels. In 2009, Brussels welcomed 2,728,516 visitors of whom 2% were from the Middle East.