



BRUGES CITY ROLL OR STROLL

This tour—which takes you from Market Square to the Burg to the cluster of museums around the Church of Our Lady (the Groeninge, Gruuthuse, and Memling)—shows you the best of Bruges in a day.

If the route (2/3 mile) seems too long to cover in a day, break it up into manageable pieces. Skip the portions or museums that don't suit your mobility level, and simply move on to the next stop. Wheelchair users can use the bike lanes—just be alert to the many bicycle riders sharing the paths.

THE TOUR BEGINS

Market Square (Markt)

Access: Most of the square is fully accessible (Level 1), but the cobblestone streets (with 2" curbs) vary in degree of roughness.

The pleasant, shop-lined street just off the square, Geldmuntstraat (AE-A, Level 2—Moderately Accessible), has 4" curbs, with curb cuts down to one or two inches. Some stores have entries that are wheelchair-accessible; others have steps.

The Sight: Ringed by a bank, the post office, lots of restaurant terraces, great old gabled buildings, and the bell tower, this is the modern heart of the city. And, in Bruges' heyday as a trading city, this was also the center. The "typical" old buildings here were rebuilt in the 19th century in an exaggerated neo-Gothic style (Bruges is often called "more Gothic than Gothic"). This pre-Martin Luther style was a political statement for this Catholic town.

Formerly, a canal came right up to this square. Imagine boats moored where the post office stands today. In the 1300s, farmers shipped their cotton, wool, flax, and hemp to the port at Bruges. Before loading it onto outgoing boats, the industrious locals would spin, weave, and dye it into a finished product.



By 1400, the economy was shifting away from textiles and toward more refined goods, such as high-fashion items, tapestry, chairs, jewelry, and paper—a new invention (replacing parchment) that was made in Flanders with cotton that was shredded, soaked, and pressed.

The square is adorned with **flags**, including the red-white-and-blue lion flag of Bruges, the black-yellow-and-red flag of Belgium, and the blue-with-circle-of-yellow-stars flag of the European Union.

The **statue** depicts two friends, Jan Breidel and Pieter de Coninc, clutching sword and shield and looking toward France during their 1302 people's uprising against the French king. The rebels identified potential French spies by demanding they repeat two words—*schild en vriend* (shield and friend)—that only Flemish locals (or foreigners with phlegm) could pronounce. They won Flanders its freedom. Cleverly using hooks to pull knights from their horses, they scored the medieval world's first victory of foot soldiers over horsed knights, and of common people over nobility. The French knights, thinking that fighting these Flemish peasants would be a cakewalk, had worn their dress uniforms. The peasants had a field day afterward scavenging all the golden spurs from the fallen soldiers after the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302).

Geldmuntstraat, a block west of the square, has fun shops and eateries. Steenstraat is the main shopping street and is packed with people. Notice the Café-Brasserie Craenenburg (Level 4—Not Accessible) on Market Square, at #18. Originally the house where Maximilian of Austria was imprisoned in 1488, it's been a café since 1905.

Bell Tower (Belfort)

Access: The Bell Tower is Level 4—Not Accessible; the Exhibition Hall is AE, AI, AL, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible. While the Bell Tower requires a long, steep climb (366 steps), you can reach the Exhibition Hall on the second floor by elevator (in the courtyard, down the hallway toward the toilet).

Bruges City Roll or Stroll





Cost and Hours: €5, daily 9:30–17:00, last entry 45 min before closing.

The Sight: Most of this bell tower has stood over Market Square since 1300. The octagonal lantern was added in 1486, making it 290 feet high. The tower combines medieval crenellations, pointed Gothic arches, round Roman arches, flamboyant spires, and even a few small flying buttresses (two-thirds of the way up).

Try some french fries from either stand at the bottom of the tower (both are fully accessible). Look for the small metal model of the tower and the Braille description of the old town. Enter the courtyard. At the base of the bell tower, find the posted schedule of free carillon concerts (with photos of carillonneur at keyboard; normally Mon, Wed, and Sat at 21:00, sit in courtyard—a great experience). This courtyard also has an accessible toilet (€0.30, ask attendant for key).

If you can handle the 366 steps, consider climbing the tower (€5, no wheelchair access). Just before you reach the top, peek into the carillon room. The 47 bells can be played mechanically with the giant barrel and movable tabs (as they are on each quarter hour), or with a manual keyboard (as they are during concerts). The carillonneur uses his fists and feet, rather than fingers. Be there on the quarter hour, when things ring. It's *bellissimo* at the top of the hour.



Atop the tower, survey the town. On the horizon, you can see the towns along the North Sea coast.

• *Leaving the bell tower, turn right (east) onto pedestrian-only Breidelstraat. Thread yourself through the lace and waffles to...*

Burg Square

This opulent square is Bruges' historical birthplace, political center, and religious heart. Today it's the scene of outdoor concerts and local festivals.

Pan the square to see six centuries of architecture. Starting with the view of the bell tower above the rooftops, sweep counterclockwise 360



degrees. You'll go from Romanesque (the interior of the fancy, gray-brick **Basilica of the Holy Blood** in the corner), to the pointed Gothic arches and prickly steeples of the white sandstone **Town Hall**, to the well-proportioned Renaissance windows of the **Old Recorder's House** (next door, under the gilded statues), to the elaborate 17th-century Baroque of the **Provost's House** (past the park behind you). The **park** at the back of the square is the site of a cathedral that was demolished during the French Revolutionary period. Today, the foundation is open to the public in the **Crowne Plaza Hotel** basement (described below).

• *Complete your spin and go to the small, fancy, gray-and-gold building in the corner of the Burg Square.*

Basilica of the Holy Blood

Access: The Lower Chapel is **AE, AI**, Level 2—Moderately Accessible; the Upper Chapel and adjacent Treasury are Level 4—Not Accessible (up thirty-seven 7" steps).

Cost and Hours: Museum entry—€1.50; April–Sept Thu–Tue 9:30–11:45 & 14:00–17:45, Wed 9:30–11:45 only; Oct–March Thu–Tue 10:00–11:45 & 14:00–15:45, Wed 10:00–11:45 only; tel. 050/336-792, www.holyblood.org.

The Sight: The gleaming gold knights



and ladies on the church's gray facade remind us that the double-decker church was built (c. 1150) by a brave Crusader to house the drops of Christ's blood he brought back from Jerusalem.

Lower Chapel: Enter the lower chapel through the door labeled *Basiliek*. Inside, the stark and dim decor reeks of the medieval piety that drove crusading Christian Europeans to persecute Muslims. With heavy columns and round arches, the style



The Legend of the Holy Blood

Several drops of Christ's blood, washed from his lifeless body by Joseph of Arimathea, were preserved in a crystal phial in Jerusalem. In 1150, the patriarch of Jerusalem gave the blood to a Flemish soldier, Derrick of Alsace, as thanks for rescuing his city from the Muslims during the Second Crusade. Derrick (also called Detric or Thierry) returned home and donated it to the city. The old, dried blood suddenly turned to liquid, a miracle repeated every Friday for the next two centuries, and verified by thousands of pilgrims from around Europe who flocked here to adore it. The blood dried up for good in 1325.

Every year on Ascension Day (usually falls in May), Bruges' bankers, housewives, and waffle vendors put on old-time costumes for the parading of the phial through the city. Crusader knights re-enact the bringing of the relic, Joseph of Arimathea washes Christ's body, and ladies in medieval costume with hair tied up in horn-like hairnets come out to wave flags, while many Bruges citizens just take the day off.

is pure Romanesque. The annex along the right aisle displays somber statues of Christ being tortured and entombed, plus a 12th-century relief panel over a doorway showing St. Basil (a 4th-century scholarly monk) being baptized by a double-jointed priest, and a man-sized Dove of the Holy Spirit.

• *Leave the Lower Chapel and go outside. If you need to avoid stairs, head directly to the Town Hall (see listing below). Otherwise, take the staircase to reach the...*

Upper Chapel: After being gutted by Napoleon's secular-humanist crusaders in 1797, the upper chapel's original Romanesque decor



was redone in a neo-Gothic style. The nave is colorful, with a curved wooden ceiling, painted walls, and stained-glass windows of the dukes who ruled Flanders, along with their duchesses.

The painting at the main altar tells how the Holy Blood got here. Derrick of Alsace, having helped defend Jerusalem (*Hierosolyma*) and Bethlehem (*Bethlema*) from Muslim incursions in the Second Crusade,

kneels (left) before the grateful Christian patriarch of Jerusalem, who rewards him with the relic. Derrick returns home (right) and kneels before Bruges' bishop to give him the phial of blood.

The relic itself—some red stuff preserved inside a clear, six-inch tube of rock crystal—is kept in the adjoining room (through the 3 arches). It's in the tall, silver tabernacle on the altar. (Each Friday—and increasingly on other days, too—the tabernacle's doors will be open, so you can actually see the phial of blood.) On holy days, the relic is shifted across the room, and displayed on the throne under the canopy.

The Treasury (next to Upper Chapel): For €1.50, you can see the impressive gold-and-silver, gem-studded, hexagonal reliquary (c. 1600, left wall) that the phial of blood is paraded around in on feast days. The phial is placed in the “casket” at the bottom of the four-foot structure. On the wall, flanking the shrine, are paintings of kneeling residents who, for centuries, have tended the shrine and organized the pageantry as part of the 31-member Brotherhood of the Holy Blood. Elsewhere in the room are the Brothers' ceremonial necklaces, clothes, chalices, and so on.



In the display case by the entrance, find the lead box that protected the phial of blood from Protestant extremists (1578) and French Revolutionaries (1797) bent on destroying what, to them, was a glaring symbol of Catholic mumbo-jumbo. The broken rock-crystal tube with gold caps on either end is a replica of the phial, giving an idea of what the actual relic looks like. Opposite the reliquary are the original cartoons (from 1541) that provided the designs for the basilica's stained glass.

Town Hall (Stadhuis)

Access: AE, AI, AL+A, Level 2—Moderately Accessible. The Gothic Room is upstairs and accessible by elevator.

Cost and Hours: Entrance Hall-free, Gothic Room-€2.50, includes audioguide and entry to Renaissance Hall, daily 9:30–17:00.

The Sight: Built around 1400, when Bruges was a thriving bastion of capitalism with a population of 35,000, this building served as a model for town halls elsewhere, including Brussels. The white sandstone facade is studded with statues of knights, nobles, and saints with prickly Gothic

steeple over their heads. A colorful double band of cities' coats of arms includes those of Bruges (Brugghe) and Dunquerque. (Back then, Bruges' jurisdiction included many towns in present-day France.) The building is still the Town Hall, and it's not unusual to see couples arriving here to get married.

Entrance Hall: The ground-level lobby (free, closed Mon) leads to a picture gallery with scenes from Belgium's history, from the Spanish king to the arrival of Napoleon, shown meeting the mayor here at the Town Hall in 1803.

• *Take the elevator up to the...*

Gothic Room: Some of modern democracy's roots lie in this ornate room, where, for centuries, the city council met to discuss the town's affairs (€2.50 entry includes audioguide and Renaissance Hall). In



1464, one of Europe's first parliaments, the Estates General of the Low Countries, convened here. The fireplace at the far end bears a proclamation from 1305, which says, "All the artisans, laborers...and citizens of Bruges are free—all of them" (provided they pay their taxes).

The elaborately carved and painted wooden ceiling (a reconstruction from 1800) features Gothic-style tracery in gold, red, and black. Five dangling arches ("pendentives") hang down the center, now adorned with modern floodlights. Notice the New Testament themes carved into the circular medallions that decorate the points where the arches meet.

The **wall murals** are late-19th-century Romantic paintings depicting episodes in the city's history. Start with the biggest painting along the left wall, and work clockwise, following the numbers found on the walls:

1. Hip, hip, hooray! Everyone cheers, flags wave, trumpets blare, and dogs bark, as Bruges' knights, dressed in gold with black Flemish lions, return triumphant after driving out French oppressors and winning Flanders' independence. The Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302) is remembered every July 11.



2. Bruges' high-water mark came perhaps at this elaborate ceremony, when Philip the Good of Burgundy (seated, in black) assembled his court here in Bruges and solemnly founded the knightly Order of the Golden Fleece (1429).

3. The Crusader knight, Derrick of Alsace, returns from the Holy Land and kneels at the entrance of St. Basil's Chapel to present the relic of Christ's Holy Blood (c. 1150).

4. A nun carries a basket of bread in this scene from St. John's Hospital.

5. A town leader stands at the podium and hands a sealed document to a German businessman, renewing the Hanseatic League's business license. Membership in this club of trading cities was a key to Bruges' prosperity.

6. As peasants cheer, a messenger of the local duke proclaims the town's right to self-government (1190).

7. The mayor visits a Bruges painting studio to shake the hand of Jan van Eyck, the great Flemish Primitive painter (1433). Jan's wife, Margareta, is there, too. In the 1400s, Bruges rivaled Florence and Venice as Europe's cultural capital. See the town in the distance, out van Eyck's window.

8. Skip it.

9. City fathers grab a ceremonial trowel from a pillow to lay the fancy cornerstone of the Town Hall (1376). Bruges' familiar towers stand in the background.

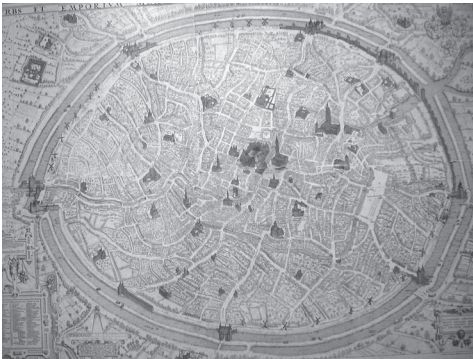
10. Skip it.

11. It's a typical market day at the Halls (the courtyard behind the bell tower). Arabs mingle with Germans in fur-lined coats and beards in a market where they sell everything from armor to lemons.

12. A bishop blesses a new canal (1404) as ships sail right by the city. This was Bruges in its heyday, before the silting of the harbor. At the far

right, the two bearded men with moustaches are the brothers who painted these murals.

In the adjoining room, old paintings and maps show how little the city has changed over the centuries. Map #8 (on the right wall) shows in exquisite detail the city as it looked in 1562. (The map is oriented with south on top.) Find the bell tower, the Church of Our



Lady, and Burg Square, which back then was bounded on the north by a cathedral. Notice the canal (on the west) leading from the North Sea right to Market Square. A moat circled the city with its gates, unfinished wall, and 28 windmills (4 of which survive today). The mills pumped water to the town's fountains, made paper, ground grain, and functioned as the motor of the Middle Ages. Most locals own a copy of this map that shows how their neighborhood looked 400 years ago.

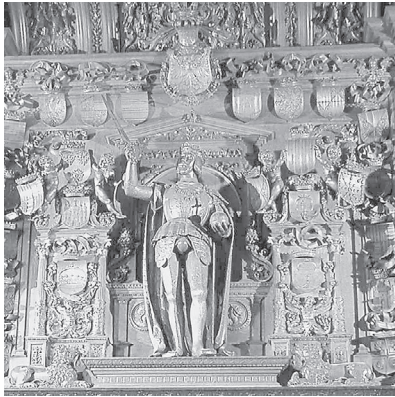
• *Back on the square, leaving the Town Hall, turn right and go to the corner.*

Renaissance Hall (Brugse Vrije)

Access: AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible.

Cost and Hours: €2.50, includes audioguide and admission to Town Hall's Gothic Room, Tue–Sun 9:30–12:30 & 13:30–16:30, closed Mon.

The Sight: This elaborately decorated room has a grand Renaissance



chimney carved from oak by Bruges' Renaissance man, Lancelot Blondeel, in 1531. If you're into heraldry, the symbolism makes this room worth a five-minute stop. If you're not, you'll wonder where the rest of the museum is.

The centerpiece of the incredible carving is the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The hometown duke, on the far left, is related to Charles V. By making the connection to the Holy Roman Emperor clear, this carved family tree of Bruges' nobility helped substantiate their power. Notice the closely guarded family jewels. And check out the expressive little cherubs.

Crowne Plaza Hotel

Access: AE, AI, AL, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible. Wheelchair access is through the De Linde restaurant, which is connected to the hotel. Once inside, you can reach the ruins by elevator.

The Sight: One of the city's newest buildings (1992) sits atop the ruins of the town's oldest structures. Around 900, when Viking ships regularly docked here to rape and pillage, Baldwin Iron Arm built a fort (*castrum*) to protect his Flemish people. In 950, the fort was converted into St. Donatian's Church, which became one of the city's largest.

Ask politely at the hotel's reception desk to see the archaeological site—ruins of the fort and the church—in the basement. If there's no

conference, they'll let you take the elevator down and have a peek.

In the basement of the modern hotel are conference rooms lined with old stone walls and display cases of objects found in the ruins of earlier structures. On the immediate left hangs a document announcing the *Vente de Materiaux* (sale of material). When Napoleon destroyed the church in the early 1800s, its bricks were auctioned off. A local builder bought them at auction, and now the pieces of the old cathedral are embedded in other buildings throughout Bruges.

See oak pilings once driven into this former peat bog to support the fort and shore up its moat. Paintings show the immensity of the church that replaced it. The curved stone walls are from the foundations of the ambulatory around the church altar.

Excavators found a town water hole—a bonanza for archaeologists—turning up the refuse of a thousand years of habitation: pottery, animal skulls, rosary beads, dice, coins, keys, thimbles, pipes, spoons, and Delftware.

Don't miss the 14th-century painted sarcophagi—painted quickly for burial, with the crucifixion on the west ends and the Virgin and Child on the east.

• *Back on Burg Square, roll or stroll south under the Goldfinger family down the alleyway called...*

Blinde Ezelstraat

Midway down on the left side (about a foot above the ground), see an original iron hinge from the city's south gate, back when the city was ringed by a moat and closed up at 22:00. On the right wall higher up, a black patch shows just how grimy the city had become before a 1960s cleaning. Despite the cleaning and a few fanciful reconstructions, the city looks today much as it did in centuries past.

The name "Blinde Ezelstraat" means "Blind Donkey Street." In medieval times, the donkeys, carrying fish from the North Sea on their backs, were stopped here so that their owners could put blinders on them. Otherwise, the donkeys wouldn't cross the water between the old city and the fish market.

• *Cross the bridge over what was the 13th-century city moat. On your left are the arcades of the...*

Fish Market (Vismarkt)

The North Sea is just 12 miles away, and the fresh catch is sold here (Tue–Sat 6:00–13:00). Once a thriving market, today it's mostly full of souvenirs...and the big catch is the tourists.

- *Take an immediate right (west), entering a courtyard called...*

Huidevettersplein

This tiny, picturesque, restaurant-filled square was originally the headquarters of the town's skimmers and tanners. On the facade of the Hotel Duc de Bourgogne, six old relief panels show scenes from the leather tanners—once a leading Bruges industry. First, they tan the hides in a bath of acid; then, with tongs, they pull it out to dry; then they beat it to make it soft; and finally, they scrape and clean it to make it ready for sale.

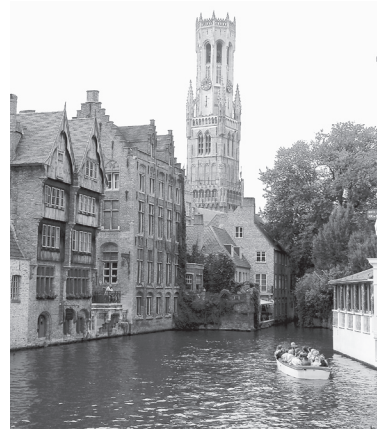
- *Continue a few yards to Rozenhoedkaai street, where you can look back to your right and get a great...*

Postcard Canal View

The bell tower reflected in a quiet canal lined with old houses—the essence of Bruges. Seeing buildings rising straight from the water makes you understand why this was the Venice of the North. Can you see the bell tower's tilt? It leans about four feet. The tilt has been carefully monitored since 1740, but no change has been detected.

Looking left (west) down the Dijver canal (past a flea market on weekends) looms the huge spire of the Church of Our Lady, the tallest brick spire in the Low Countries. Between you and the church is the Europa College (a postgraduate institution for training future “Eurocrats” about the laws, economics, and politics of the European Union) and two fine museums.

- *Two blocks away on Dijver street is the...*



Groeninge Museum

Access: AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible. The museum's entrance has steps, but if you go past the entry to Groeninge (a little alley-like street), you can enter the museum with no barriers. Inside, there's a uni-sex adapted toilet in the men's restroom.

Cost and Hours: €8, includes audioguide, Tue–Sun 9:30–17:00, closed Mon, tel. 050/448-751.

The Sight: This sumptuous collection of paintings takes you from 1400 to 1945. While the museum has plenty of worthwhile modern art, the highlights are its vivid and pristine Flemish Primitives. (“Primitive”

here means before the Renaissance.) Flemish art is shaped by its love of detail, its merchant patrons' egos, and the power of the Church. Lose yourself in the halls of Groeninge: Gaze across 15th-century canals, into the eyes of reassuring Marys, and through town squares littered with leotards, lace, and lopped-off heads.

• *Next door is the...*

Gruuthuse Museum

Access: Level 3—Minimally Accessible. There are six 6" steps at the entry, and the building includes many levels accessible only by steps, sometimes winding and narrow.

Cost and Hours: €6, includes audioguide and entry to apse in Church of Our Lady, Tue–Sun 9:30–17:00, closed Mon.

The Sight: This 15th-century mansion of a wealthy Bruges merchant displays period furniture, tapestries, coins, and musical instruments. Nowhere in the city do you get such an intimate look at the materialistic revolution of Bruges' glory days.

With the help of the excellent and included audioguide, browse through rooms of secular objects that are both functional and beautiful. Here are some highlights:

On the left, in the first room (or **Great Hall**), the big fireplace, oak table, and tapestries attest to the wealth of Louis Gruuthuse, who got rich providing a special herb used to spice up beer.



Tapestries like the ones you see here were a famous Flemish export product, made in local factories out of raw wool imported from England and silk from the Orient (via Italy). Both beautiful and useful (as insulation), they adorned many homes and palaces throughout Europe.

These **four tapestries** (of 9 originals) tell a worldly story of youthful lust that upsets our stereotypes about supposed medieval piousness. The first tapestry, the *Soup-Eating Lady* (on the left), shows a shepherd girl with a bowl of soup in her lap. The horny shepherd



lad cuts a slice of bread (foreplay in medieval symbolism) and saucily asks (read the archaic French cartoon bubbles) if he can “dip into the goodies in her lap,” if you catch my drift. On the right, a woman brazenly strips off her socks to dangle her feet in water, while another woman lifts her dress to pee.

The next tapestry (moving clockwise), called *The Dance*, shows couples freely dancing together under the apple tree of temptation. *The Wedding Parade* (opposite wall) shows where all this wantonness leads—marriage. Music plays, the table is set, and the meat’s on the BBQ as the bride and groom enter...reluctantly. The bride smiles, but she’s closely escorted by two men, while the scared groom (center) gulps nervously.



From here, the next stop is *Old Age* (smaller tapestry), and the aged shepherd is tangled in a wolf trap. “Alas,” reads the French caption, “he was once so lively, but marriage caught him, and now he’s trapped in its net.”

In Room 2, see the *Bust of Charles V* (on top of an oak chest) and ponder the series of marriages that made Charles (1500–1558), the grandson of a Flemish girl, the powerful ruler of most of Europe, including Bruges. Mary of Burgundy (and Flanders) married powerful Maximilian I of Austria. Their son Philip married Juana, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabel of Spain, and when little Charles was born to them, he inherited all his grandparents’ lands, and more. Charles’ son, Philip II (see his bust opposite), a devout Catholic, brought persecution and war to the Protestant Low Countries.

• *If you are able, continue to the rest of the museum: Facing Philip, climb the stairs on the left to the third floor, pass through Room 10, and cross the open mezzanine. In the far left corner of Room 16, find a chapel.*

The Gruuthuse mansion abuts the Church of Our Lady and has a convenient little **chapel** with a window overlooking the interior of the huge church. In their private box seats above the choir, the family could attend services without leaving home. From the balcony, you can look down on two reclining gold statues in the church, marking the tombs of Charles the Bold and his daughter, Mary of Burgundy (the grandmother of powerful Charles V).

The last room (ground floor, directly below) deals with old-time justice. In 1796, the enlightened city of Bruges chose the new-fangled **guillotine** as its humane form of execution. This 346-pound model was

tested on sheep before being bloodied twice by executions on the Market Square. Also see the branding irons, a small workbench for slicing off evildoers' members, and posts used to chain up criminals for public humiliation.

Leaving the museum, contemplate the mountain of bricks that towers 400 feet above, as it has for 600 years. You're heading for that church.

• *Return to the main street, then go left to Mariastraat and the church.*

If you're on foot, take the interesting back way to the church (includes six 6" steps over rough cobblestone): At the Arentshuis Museum entrance, duck under the arch at #16 and into a quiet courtyard. Veer right and cross a tiny 19th-century bridge. From the bridge, look up at the corner of the Gruuthuse mansion, where there's a teeny-tiny window, a toll-keeper's lookout. The bridge gives you a close-up look at Our Lady's big buttresses and round apse. The church entrance is around the front.

Church of Our Lady

Access: AE, AI, Level 2—Moderately Accessible. The church is wheelchair-accessible, with the exception of a small room (up two 8" steps) at the end of the apse. The nearest accessible toilet is across the street at the Visitors Center of the Memling Museum (see below).

Cost and Hours: Michelangelo viewing is free, art-filled apse costs €2.50, covered by €6 Gruuthuse admission, Mon–Fri 9:30–16:50, Sat 9:30–15:50, Sun 13:30–16:50 only.

The Sight: This church stands as a memorial to the power and wealth of Bruges in its heyday.

A delicate *Madonna and Child* by Michelangelo (1504) is near the apse (to the right as you enter), somewhat overwhelmed by the ornate Baroque niche it sits in. It's said to be the only Michelangelo statue to leave Italy in his lifetime, bought in Tuscany by a wealthy Bruges businessman, who's buried beneath it.

As Michelangelo chipped away at the masterpiece of his youth, *David*, he took breaks by carving this (1504). Mary, slightly smaller than life-size, sits, while young Jesus stands in front of her. Their expressions are mirror images—serene, but a bit melancholy, with downcast eyes, as though pondering the young child's dangerous future. Though they're





lost in thought, their hands instinctively link, tenderly. The white Carrara marble is highly polished, something Michelangelo only did when he was certain he'd gotten it right.

If you like tombs and church art, pay €2.50 to wander through the apse (also covered by €6 Gruuthuse admission). The highlight is the reclining statues marking the tombs of the last local rulers of Bruges, Mary of Burgundy, and her father, Charles the Bold. The dog and lion at their feet are

symbols of fidelity and courage.

In 1482, when 25-year-old Mary of Burgundy tumbled from a horse and died, she left behind a toddler son and a husband who was heir to the Holy Roman Empire. Beside her lies her father, Charles the Bold, who also died prematurely, in war. Their twin deaths meant Bruges belonged to Austria, and would soon be swallowed up by the empire and ruled from afar by Hapsburgs—who didn't understand or care about its problems. Trade routes shifted, and goods soon flowed through Antwerp, then Amsterdam, as Bruges' North Sea port silted up. After these developments, Bruges began four centuries of economic decline. The city was eventually mothballed, and later discovered by modern-day tourists to be remarkably well-pickled—which explains its modern-day affluence.

The balcony to the left of the main altar is part of the Gruuthuse mansion next door, providing the noble family with prime seats for Mass.

Excavations in 1979 turned up fascinating grave paintings on the tombs below and near the altar. Dating from the 13th century, these show Mary represented as Queen of Heaven (on a throne, carrying a crown and scepter) and Mother of God (with the baby Jesus on her lap). Since Mary is in charge of advocating with Jesus for your salvation, she's a good person to have painted on the wall of your tomb. Tombs also show lots of angels—generally patron saints of the dead person—swinging thuribles (incense burners).

• *Just across Mariastraat from the church entrance is the entry to the St. John's Hospital's Visitors Center (AE, AI, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible; good Internet café and an accessible toilet for €0.30). The entrance to the Memling Museum, which fills that hospital's church, is 20 yards south on Mariastraat.*

Memling Museum

Access: AE, AI, AL, AT, Level 1—Fully Accessible, with the exception of a corner room (two 8” steps). You’ll find an elevator (on the right side of the inside entry) and an accessible unisex toilet (€0.30, located in men’s room at the St. John’s Hospital’s Visitors Center, described above). Loaner wheelchairs are available.

Cost and Hours: €8 includes fine audioguide, Tue–Sun 9:30–17:00, closed Mon.

The Sight: This medieval hospital contains some much-loved paintings by the greatest of the Flemish Primitives, Hans Memling. His *Mystical Wedding of St. Catherine* triptych deserves a close look. Catherine and her “mystical groom,” the baby Jesus, are flanked by a headless John the Baptist and a pensive John the Evangelist. The chairs are there so you can study it. If you know the Book of Revelation, you’ll understand St. John’s wild and intricate vision. The St. Ursula Shrine, an ornate little mini-church in the same room, is filled with impressive detail.

• *Continue south about 150 yards on Mariastraat. Turn right on Walstraat, which leads into the pleasant square called Walplein. From here, the lacy cuteness of Bruges crescendos as you approach the...*

Begijnhof

Access: AE-A, AI-A, Level 2—Moderately Accessible. The cobblestones in the Begijnhof are heavy and rough, making for a bone-jarring wheelchair ride. The museum has one 4” entry step, one 4” step to visit the kitchen, one 8” step to the courtyard, and two 7” steps to see the sleeping quarters.

Cost and Hours: The courtyard is free and always open. The museum costs €2, open daily 10:00–12:00 & 13:45–17:00, shorter hours off-season, English explanations, Beguine’s House is left of entry gate.

The Sight: The peaceful courtyard is lined with small buildings. The simple museum to the left of the entry gate gives you a sense of *beguine* life.



Begijnhofs (pronounced gutturally: buh-HHHINE-hof) were built to house women of the lay order, called Beguines, who spent their lives in piety and service without having to take the same vows a nun would. For military and other reasons, there were more women than men in the medieval

Low Countries. The order of Beguines offered women (often single or widowed) a dignified place to live and work. When the order died out, many Begijnhofs were taken over by towns for subsidized housing. Today single religious women live in the small homes. Benedictine nuns live in a building nearby.

In the church, the rope that dangles from the ceiling is yanked by a nun around 17:15 to announce a sung vespers service.

• *Exiting opposite the way you entered, you'll hook left (over some big, rough cobbles) and see a lake with silver swans...*

Minnewater

Just south of the Begijnhof is Minnewater (literally, “Water of Love”), a peaceful, lake-filled park with canals and swans. This was once far from quaint—a busy harbor where small boats shuttled cargo from the big, ocean-going ships into town. From this point, the cargo was transferred again to flat-bottomed boats that went through the town’s canals to their respective warehouses and Market Square.

When locals see these swans, they remember the 15th-century mayor—famous for his long neck—who collaborated with the Austrians. The townsfolk beheaded him as a traitor. The Austrians warned them that similarly long-necked swans would inhabit the place to forever remind them of this murder. And they do.

• *You're a .3-mile roll or stroll from the train station (where you can catch a bus or taxi to Market Square), or a .7-mile roll or stroll from Market Square—take your pick.*