

If you go . . .

Where to stay
New Hotel Charlemagne
 25-27 boulevard Charlemagne
 011-32-2-230-2135
www.new-hotel.com/Charlemagne/en
 During the week, basic rooms at this modest business hotel near the European Union government offices start around \$375. On weekends, rates plunge as low as \$93 for the same room booked through the website.

Where to eat
 There are many great restaurants in Brussels — with prices to match. Travelers on a budget should run the gauntlet on rue des Bouchers and its extension, Petite rue des Bouchers, both just off Grand-Place. **Ethnic and Belgian** restaurants compete here, most offering a complete meal for around \$18. Stick to **simple plates** like mussels and fries, be careful about ordering extra beer, and you'll escape with a pleasant meal for the advertised price.

What to do
Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée
 20 rue des Sables
 011-32-2-219-1980
www.stripmuseum.be
 Admission \$10.85.
Brusel
 100 boulevard Anspachlaan
 011-32-2-511-0809
www.brusel.com
 Gallery, bookshop, and library of comic books and graphic novels.
Musée Hergé
 Louvain-la-Neuve
www.tintin.com
 Opening in June about 30 minutes southeast of Brussels, this museum promises to exhibit extensive works by Hergé and examine his role in the emergence of the comics art form in Belgium.

A walking tour of 'ninth art'

The entire itinerary of 30 murals covers a lot of ground in central Brussels. This group, most from the early years of the project, makes a pleasant two-hour stroll around the heart of the city.

From the Metro stop at Bourse, walk one block up rue J. Van Praet to Place St-Géry, a former market turned exhibition center. Inside the market, face the reception desk and go out the right-hand door. On a wall to the left is (1) Néron by Marc Sleen.

Walk away from the mural and turn right on rue Van Artevelde. At the first big street, make a hairpin left onto rue des Chartreux. In less than a block, (2) L'Archange by Yslaire will be watching over you. You will also note a bronze statue of a dog next to a fire hydrant. This is a recent parody of Manneken Pis.

Walk through the flower market square along rue des Fabriques to the next big cross street, rue de la Senne. Covering a whole corner in front of you are fantastical zoo animals and a dreaming boy, (3) The Dreams of Nic by Hermann. Turn around (or look over your shoulder), and



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Lucky Luke was so fast he could outdraw his own shadow.

you'll see the tall-ship-era scene of (4) Bob de Moor's Cori Le Mous-saillon.

Turn left on Senne, then make your second left onto rue T'Kint. In one block you'll encounter a grand scene of (5) Lucky Luke by Morris at the corner of rue de la Buanderie. Note that Luke is

pointing his pistol at the bank robbers but his shadow is not.

Continue down rue de la Buanderie, turn right on rue Van Artevelde, then left onto rue de la Verdure. Just before you reach Place Fontainas, you'll see (6) Willy Maltaité's alluring Isabelle and Calendula, sitting by a river as



SOURCE: Michelin Guides

DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

fantasy figures dismantle the brick wall.

Turn left onto boulevard Maurice Lemonnier, a great street for comic shops and used bookstores, and now a lot of places that sell video games. Continue through Place Fontainas, where the street becomes boulevard Anspach. Stop to peruse the books at Brusel, a comprehensive bookshop and gallery of comics art. Then turn right onto rue de Bon Secours, where you'll immediately spot (7) Tibet's detective Ric Hochet in one of his trademark dering-do exploits.

Make a left into rue de Marchéau Charbon. When you reach the corner, turn around and over your shoulder you'll see (8) Fran-

cis Carin's dashing spy Victor Sackville leading a woman across the street.

Across the square, which is ground zero for Brussels gay night life, (9) Frank Pe's Broussaille depicts an androgynous couple strolling arm in arm. Turn right onto rue Midi and watch for a vertical sliver of a wall to catch the ominous world of (10) Le Passage by François Schuiten.

At this point it's time to return to sweetness and light. At rue de Grandes Carmes, turn left and keep walking a half block past Manneken Pis. Turn around to see a couple touch with an explosion of light in (11) Dany's Olivier Rameau.

DAVID LYON

Crafting an art: from light-hearted Tintin to 'Dark Thoughts'

► **BRUSSELS**
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spotted the long-winged angel crouching under the eaves where the roofs of two buildings meet. It seemed an apt roost for the graphic first cousin of a gargoyle.

I was beginning to grasp that the Belgians take their comics seriously. In Flemish "stripverhaal" or "story strip," or French "bande dessinée" or "drawn strip," the local term carries none of the juvenile association of the American "comic strip." As far as the Belgians are concerned, graphic storytelling is more art than amusement. They often call comics the "ninth art" (after architecture, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, cinema, and television). From Tintin's debut in 1929, the art form blossomed after

World War II with two weekly magazines of strips introducing dozens of characters and sagas. Now nearly a dozen publishers issue hard-cover graphic stories every month.

While Brussels remains the city of European Union ministers in standard-issue suits and tourists gorging themselves on massive cones of fried potatoes doused with mayonnaise, it's also a city of considerable visual sophistication. Shortly after the Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée (Belgian Comic Strip Center) opened in 1989, the museum and the city began collaborating on a project to paint famous comic heroes on the city walls. The first mural went up in 1991; now 30 of them are scattered around the city, and looking doesn't cost a dime.

But it's worth paying to see the museum first. Located in an Art Nouveau masterpiece building by Victor Horta, the museum often has long queues. Inside, the place is so spacious that you can spend as much time as you want with each exhibit. Most of the permanent exhibits have English signage in addition to French and Flemish.

The center's first sequence of exhibits explains the process of creation from initial concept to printed strip. The wall text seems to have been devised by French academics who cut their teeth on Cahiers du Cinéma and deconstructionist criticism, but the actual comic strip pencil drawings, text lettering, and hand coloring are far more eloquent. Not only is the comic strip an art, it's a com-

plexified craft with lots of practitioners.

Once you've run the educational gauntlet, the rest of the museum is pure fun. The tour begins in the "treasure room," a rotating exhibition of unique original drawings of famous comic strips. The remainder of the museum consists of freestanding wall panels where you can study the styles and signature characters that you'll see on the walls of the city.

The exhibits detail the careers of important comics innovators from the launch of Tintin to "adult entertainment" graphic novels of recent years. A sign in French and Flemish warns parents about delicate subject matter.

I found myself most simpatico

with André Franquin, who created several strips over the years, including the antihero goofball Gasto Lagaffe, an avant-garde ecologist and slacker way ahead of his time (1957). Toward the end of his career in the 1970s, Franquin turned to a series he called "Les Idées Noires," which translates best as "Dark Thoughts." In these satirical meditations, generals and admirals toss hand grenades with planet Earth as the target in a game of lawn bowls, race horses shoot fallen jockeys, and a man feeding seagulls is left on the beach as a pile of rags and bones.

Now that's a long way from Tintin.

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In the desert, life's lessons

Continued from preceding page
 press gratitude.

Salah Kberat, our lead-footed Touareg driver and guide, loses his sunglasses on one of the first days into the trip. A few days later, he hits the brakes in the middle of nowhere, makes a U-turn, and drives back a few hundred feet to where he's spotted a pair of shades in the sand that fit him perfectly. He flashes a million-dollar grin and gives a yelp of joy. Five minutes farther on, we come across a herd of goats followed by a young shepherd holding a newborn kid. Our guides stop to talk with him and, saying goodbye, load him up with oranges while Kberat puts his new sunglasses on the shepherd. Easy come, easy go — a louder yelp, a bigger smile.

These lessons become even clearer later in a wadi (dried riverbed) garden in the desert. Fearing the ethnic and religious violence in their native Nigeria, Touareg farmer and shepherd Mohamed Ali, his wife, Salaam, and their infant daughter, Zarnat, joined the thousands of refugees who have fled their country in the past year.

"Before, I was a shepherd, but my sheep were being stolen and I

had to flee with my wife and child," Ali says. "Eight of us came in a clandestine taxi from Nigeria. We've had no news from our family who stayed behind."

Sitting across from Ali, it's hard to imagine — let alone digest — his story, yet some of the problems he could face here are alleviated by his Touareg roots. He has found work as a gardener in this tiny cooperative, selling vegetables to passersby and to the farm owner who sells in the markets of Tamanrasset.

At the end of our talk, he asks me to take a few photos of him and his daughter and I show them to him on the camera screen. He smiles, takes a ring from his finger and hands it to me. It's not an exchange or a veiled attempt to ask for money, but like Kberat's sunglasses, a gift.

I look to Kberat, who has been translating, on how to return the ring without insulting his friend. He says a few words to Ali, nods, and I hand it back.

"What did you say?" I ask.
 "I told him that the gift was ours in meeting him."

Joe Ray can be reached at www.joe-ray.com.



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Rock pinnacles and the ripples of time in the Algerian Sahara.