

It's a rainy Wednesday afternoon. In the Cafe Marengo middle-aged couples are dancing to 80s euro swingbeat. It's three o'clock and I'm sipping a Duvel; watching, with Jan, Mike Garbett and his sons, Matthew and Roger. Welcome to Leuven, Flanders. We fall into good company and stay for another beer, but the rain doesn't ease off.

We've stayed here a few times - it's a fair day's drive. We have good, inexpensive accommodation, and there's plenty of choice for eating and drinking, as long as you don't arrive on a Sunday.

The city's quite small and manageable on foot but you have to dodge the bicycles; there's a big student population, so it feels young and vibrant, and the Stella brewery, so it feels prosperous.



Thursday morning we're back in the van and heading for Liège, Wallonia, a much bigger city (Belgium's third, after Bruxelles and Antwerp) where we buy books, prints and antiques. And lunch of course - we are a van full of appetites.

It is a stone's throw from here to Maastricht and we arrive earlier than expected. The stands in Sint Janskerk are still being constructed and if you're in the way there is a danger of being painted. We go sightseeing. It's a beautiful town and we climb the hill (not many of those in the Netherlands) to the fort for a fantastic panorama.

Sint Janskerk, with its distinctive red tower, the tallest in Maastricht, dates from the late 14th and early 15th century and has a 15th century wooden belfry with a bell dated 1687, cast by John and Josephus Plumere. We spend three days walking on uneven medieval tombstones. The Maastricht Antiquarian Book and Print Fair (MABP) always coincides with the opening weekend of The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in the conference centre, the largest and finest gathering of Decorative Art and Antiques in Europe, and a sight to behold. The town is full, the weather comes good, and people take to the streets. This is our fourth and best MABP.

Saturday night is always the exhibitors' dinner and when the last of the public has left we fill the transept with tables, and party.



The fair closes on Sunday evening and we pack but stay the night. Our hotel is good, and close to several good restaurants and bars - because of TEFAF everything is open. Drive fifty kilometres and it's a different story.

We make the whole journey home on Monday, rolling into Devon about seven o'clock. We have just over a week to unpack, convert prices back into sterling, and repack to go to Edinburgh. Oh, and I squeeze in a gig improvising with a poet at the Chagford Literature Festival.

Another wet Wednesday afternoon, 850 kilometres from Leuven. We're in Kendal in the Lake District en route for Edinburgh with Geoff Tyson. Can't find a bookshop apart from Oxfam, where we get a few things including a restaurant recommendation. Decent antiques shop with a lot of pictures, but they're closing; tempt me back tomorrow with a mention of something interesting. Still raining we hit the pub, slight shock seeing the news of the terrorist incident in London; a few messages sent, everyone we know is okay.

There's a good restaurant next to the hotel so we choose that rather than trudge back through the rain; it's a good choice.

Return to the antiques shop in the morning and buy the temptation - could be good I think, then find myself climbing through what feel like medieval attics looking for more stock. Then an Antiques Centre on an industrial estate. Strange environment, but an interesting large stock, and we all find something. Back in the van we snake past Shap Fell, all around covered in snow from only yesterday; very beautiful. Lunch in Biggar, before collecting from a slightly surreal auction house near Penicuik, then on to Edinburgh. We unload Thursday night and although we can't set up, the PBFA in the room downstairs can. This is a cunning plan, and we all spend lots of money before retiring to the pub. The best one in Edinburgh is the Oxford Bar made famous as the preferred hangout of Inspector Rebus in the novels of Ian Rankin, who graciously opened the fair on Friday.





Edinburgh was bathed in sunshine and the fair was very busy for both days, with good sales to both trade and public; hats off to the organising committee. Highlight amongst some interesting restaurant recommendations was undoubtedly the Indian Tapas bar just around the corner from the fair, and inexpensive too. Nearby also lurks the Jazz Bar with several varieties of live music (including jazz) every night. The live entertainment everyone was talking about on Saturday morning, however, was the mysterious appearance of a naked bookseller in the lobby of our hotel. It's probably fairly common for someone to lock themselves out of their room whilst looking for the bathroom in the middle of the night, but what are the chances of it being precisely the moment when a party of female Norwegian tourists are checking into the hotel. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate copies of any of the selfies they allegedly took with said naked bookseller.

We left Edinburgh Sunday morning still in bright sunshine and took the scenic route through Galashiels to Carlisle. Very timely tea break in the South Lakes courtesy of Roger Treglown and Marjorie - lovely house in a lovely village; an oasis of calm in the motorway madness. As we headed south through more and more roadworks, we learned the M5 was closed near Cheltenham and we had to make a detour through some very pretty parts of Gloucestershire. Very slow, though, and we didn't reach Honiton until half past eight or so. Gruelling; didn't bother unloading until Monday. Wednesday 10am and I'm on the train to London for the ABA council meeting and AGM. The last train from Waterloo is at 8.20pm and arrives in Honiton at 11.35pm with no refreshments. What sort of service is that? Not surprised that Stagecoach have lost the Southwest franchise, but will it get any better?

"Time for bed", said Zebedee.