

Keeping vigilant

Belgium's terror alert is heightened in response to NSA reports

► 4

You rang?

Brussels' very first school for butlers opens in the swanky Le Plaza Hotel



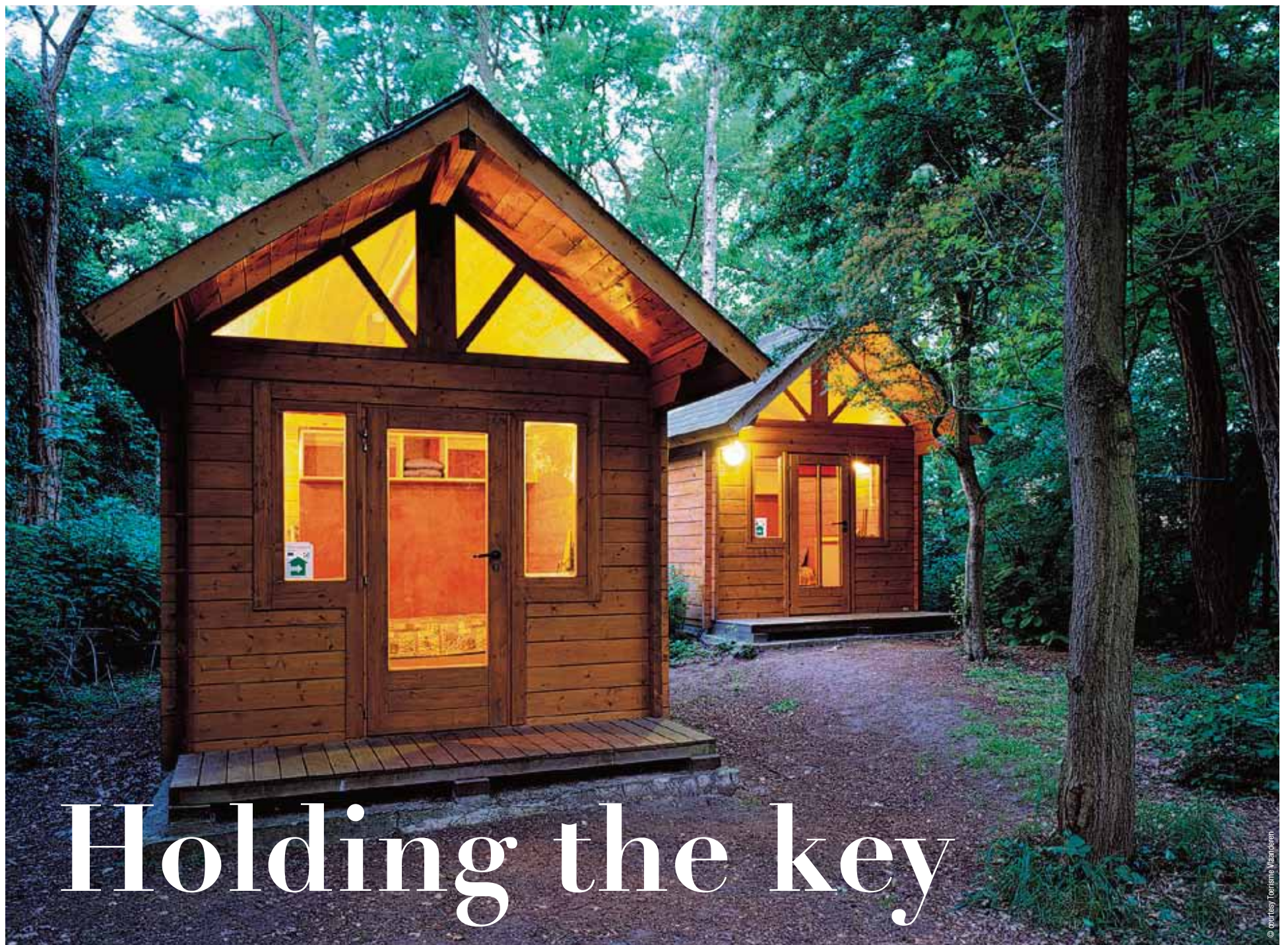
► 6

Animal instincts

Former vegetable farmers have turned a menagerie into a model children's farm



► 11



Holding the key

An eco-label programme is slowly opening the door to a new era of tourism in Flanders

Andy Furniere

You might be doing all you can at home to recycle, conserve water and cut down your use of electricity. But what about when you go on holiday? Only a small minority of travellers pay attention to the eco-friendliness of their holiday destination. The Flemish tourist sector, though, is gradually adapting to environmental necessities, thanks in part to the Green Key programme.

Flemish tourist agency Toerisme Vlaanderen and environmental organisation Bond Beter Leefmilieu (BBL) award the Groene Sleutel, or Green Key, to tourist enterprises that have implemented the measures necessary to earn the eco-label.

The Green Key programme is a global initiative that started in Denmark and was adopted by the international non-profit Foundation for Environmental Education in 2002. Today, the quality label for eco-friendly tourism facilities is used in 41 countries. For the last seven years, the label has been awarded in Flanders. While Toerisme Vlaanderen is responsible for the co-ordinating and marketing side of things, BBL receives subsidies from the Flemish government to monitor candidates. "The original demand for an eco-label came from the campsite federations," explains Griet Geudens of Toerisme Vlaanderen. "They wanted to boost the environmental initiatives in their sector and provide tourists with a clear idea of which enterprises kept their ecological footprint as low as possible." Since the first eco-label was awarded to camping facilities

in 2007, the target groups have gradually been expanded. In April, Green Key labels were awarded to 10 campsites, 26 youth hostels, 27 hotels, 11 guest houses, 10 attractions, 13 meeting locations, two holiday homes and one vacation centre. In total, 100 enterprises met the strict requirements, 11 more than last year. In the near future, restaurants will also be able to apply. "There are about 50 criteria," says Miriam Van Loon of BBL, "but what is most essential is the efficient use of energy and water. Also, a well-organised waste management system is of the utmost importance to limit the impact on our eco-system." Other categories on which candidates are judged include the use of chemicals, food and beverages, open spaces, transportation and general environmental management. It's recently also become a condition to involve both your staff and

FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope



Mike Zinzen

The city of Antwerp has granted a burial space of honour in the Schoonselhof cemetery to saxophonist Mike Zinzen, who died last week at the age of 81. Zinzen was born in 1932 and for many years was an unmissable figure in the nightlife of the port city. He first started to make a name for himself as a musician in the 1950s, around the time when he was also becoming known to jazz fans as the owner of the café Gard Sivik. His bars were all about jazz – he later ran places called De Mok and Sibemol – because it was the most effective way, he said, to ensure people like himself had places to play. Not that there was ever any shortage of welcome for Zinzen, who formed part of the Flemish broadcaster’s jazz orchestra, which was disbanded in 1987. He explored the styles of bebop (Charlie Parker’s influence was important in attracting him to the alto sax) and free jazz. He later formed the group Jazz Combine with his wife Patricia Beysens on vocals, while also playing music inspired by themes in the music of Ornette Coleman.

Until the last, his smooth, melodic style and incomparable alto tone, still clearly audible on video clips, transcended momentary fads and provided a sound jazz fans will always travel to hear. Because of advancing illness, he was forced to hang up his horn in 2010. Earlier that same year, he issued a rather belated debut album, *Flashes & Crashes*, compiled from recordings made in 1994. The reason for the delay, he said, was purely financial. Zinzen was also responsible for the success of the jazz club De Muze, still going strong on Antwerp’s Melkmarkt, where he would play and see the night through at least three times a week, into his 70s. The café gives pride of place to a larger than life-sized nude photo of the musician. That, as well as the album, will be Zinzen’s monument, together with the place of honour in Schoonselhof, where he will join such illustrious figures as comic artist Jef Nys, literary figures Herman De Coninck and Hendrik Conscience and singer Esther Lambrechts, better known as La Esterella.

News in brief

The US Senate has approved the nomination of Denise Campbell Bauer as the **new US ambassador to Belgium**. Bauer, who previously worked in the media before becoming a prominent campaign donor and manager for president Barack Obama, takes over from the media-friendly Howard Gutman from the end of this month.

Mieke Van Hecke, director-general of the Flemish network of Catholic schools, has announced that she will step down in September of next year. A former member of the Flemish parliament for CD&V, Van Hecke stayed on in the job after reaching retirement age last year at the request of colleagues. A successor will now be sought by Belgium’s bishops, led by Antwerp prelate Johan Bonny. One of the names being tipped for the job is former Flemish welfare minister and former federal finance minister Steven Vanackere.

The national mint will issue a special commemorative €2 coin in September to mark the **centenary of the Royal Meteorological Institute**. The coin is based on a design by a Zemst man, who won a competition out of 700 entries. The national side of the coin will depict the sun, snowflakes and isobars, as well as the initials of the Institute, KMI-IRM. The issue will consist of two million coins, with an additional 700,000 in two versions for collectors.

Two 20-year-old Antwerp men have been sentenced to seven years in prison for **attacks on gay men** in the city. The court heard how the men monitored the gay chat channel of broadcaster TMF, arranged meetings by SMS, then robbing and beating their victims and threatening them with firearms.

The number of **medical tourists** – patients from other countries – visiting Belgian hospitals has gone up by 14% in the last four years, according to figures from the Observatory for Patient Mobility. For those coming from the border countries plus the UK, the number went up by 18% to over 46,000. The most popular specialities sought out by patients are orthopaedics and cardiology.

Municipal authorities are finding it harder to cope with the **cost of running public swimming pools**, which dangerously decreases the numbers of people learning to swim, according to the Flemish Institute for Sports Management and Recreation Policy. Recent weeks have seen a large increase in the number of drownings at beaches in France and the Netherlands, an occasion for the Institute to draw attention to the increasing number of public pools forced to close for financial reasons.

A 42-year-old man said to be a former **leader of the organisation Hezbollah** in Turkey was arrested last week in Antwerp, on an international warrant issued by Interpol. The man, who has not been named, will now be extradited to Turkey.

Police in Ghent are blaming pranksters for **damage to the tarpaulin** depicting the Van Eyck brothers’ altarpiece “Adoration of the Mystic Lamb”, which is hanging in front of Sint-Baaf’s cathedral, where the masterpiece is housed. The panel known as the “righteous judges” was cut out of the tarpaulin – a reference to the disappearance of the actual panel, which was stolen more than 80 years ago and remains missing.

The Fire Services Association Flanders (BVV) has warned that

structural changes could mean that some municipalities will see **drastic cuts to fire services staff**. Paid members of one fire service often serve as volunteers in another corps, but new rules mean they would have to choose one or the other. “The operations of those corps with a lot of volunteers could be at risk,” the BVV said in a statement. “A great deal of know-how is in danger of being lost.”

The city of Hasselt is introducing a **ban on alcohol** in the area of the train station and the passage linking the Groene Boulevard (the R70 ring road) to the Runkst quarter. The ban affects anyone carrying alcohol in an open container but does not affect terraces of bars and restaurants. Mayor Hilde Claes says the move is in response to growing complaints of nuisance drunks in the station area.

Flemish photographer and filmmaker **Pieter-Jan De Pue** was shot at in north-eastern Afghanistan last week, after he had taken to the hills to search for his Afghan film crew, who had been attacked by armed men. De Pue is in the country with several other Belgian journalists working on a documentary about child labour and child soldiers. He was not injured in the shooting and believes the local police mistook him for a kidnapper. Federal foreign minister Didier Reynders, meanwhile, said he could not ensure the safety of the film crew and has asked them to return home.

The Dutch-language municipal library of Brussels’ district Sint-Agatha-Berchem will next spring **open a seed library**, which will lend seeds to growers and gardeners. Once the plants are growing, borrowers are asked to harvest seeds to replenish the library’s stock.

► www.sint-agatha-berchem.bibliotheek.be

FLANDERS TODAY

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OFFSIDE

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Fowl weather

The effects of the long winter of 2012-2013 continue to make themselves felt, by flora – the strawberry crop is the latest to suffer – and by fauna. Spare a thought for the poor mice, whose problems started in autumn last year, when there were relatively few beech-nuts and acorns. The mice, therefore, had little to stash away for the winter. To add to that disaster, the low temperatures meant fewer than usual made it through to spring, so fewer were able to mate, so there were fewer baby mice.

It’s a knock-on effect: We’re now seeing a drastic reduction in the numbers of owls. According to Flemish owl expert Philippe Smits, the church owl (or barn owl) is particularly affected, and in places where four or even six young owls might be expected, two can this year be considered a bumper crop.

Adult owls can tell by instinct what the food situation is and tailor their egg production accordingly, rather than waste resources by laying too many eggs for the available food supply.

On the bright side, another owl is doing well in Flanders: the *gamma-uil*, known in English as the Silver Y. OK, you got me, it’s actually a moth but gets its name from the gamma- (or Y-) shaped white



© Jürgen/Wikimedia Commons

marking on its wings when at rest. The moth showed up in surprisingly high numbers in the latest butterfly census organised by Natuurpunt.

The most commonly spotted butterfly, incidentally, was *dagpauwoog*, or the peacock butterfly, keeping the top spot from last year and present in some 70% of Flemish gardens.

Holding the key

Aside from impressing tourists, work towards a Green Key label lowers energy costs

► continued from page 1

guests in your efforts by spreading the word on eco-friendly behaviour and initiatives.

Apart from international criteria, each region sets additional requirements based on the local legislation. "If business owners want to receive a Green Key, they have to reach standards that are higher than legally required," explains Van Loon. "In Flanders, the bar is raised higher than in most of the participating countries because our environmental legislation is already very demanding. Legislation on the use of air conditioning, for example, is unusually rigorous."

Concrete measures

The advantage of the Green Key programme is that it ensures accessibility by keeping the administrative procedures down to a minimum and focusing on the practical side. "External advisors go to the tourism businesses to carefully explain which concrete measures they can take – for example, using recycled paper or installing technology that limits energy and water consumption."

When they feel they have implemented all necessary measures, tourism enterprises can submit an application for the eco-label. External auditors then inspect the facilities and write a report. The final decision is in the hands of an independent jury, consisting of representatives of organisations such as Flemish waste agency Ovam and the Centre for Youth Tourism.

After they are awarded a Green Key, businesses are monitored annually to ensure continuity of their efforts. Although the number of interested businesses in Flanders is increasing every year and there is much enthusiasm among participants, Geudens feels that the region is lagging behind internationally. "We still have a lot of trouble convincing business owners to take part," she says. "Because many owners don't consider eco-friendliness a priority, they don't want to invest in it. There is a big mentality difference with neighbouring countries, like Germany, France and the Netherlands."

Geudens also thinks that the



The luxurious Sandton Grand Hotel Reylof in Ghent stores heat in paraffin wax

majority of Flemish owners that take the necessary steps do so for purely economic reasons. "They primarily see the advantages of saving on energy costs," she explains, "but don't have a personal conviction to improve the environment."

She does admit that she is starting to see more exceptions to this rule in recent years, especially in the sector of youth lodging. "The owners are aware that young people are more committed to limiting their impact on their natural surroundings. Many of these owners are themselves also strong supporters of an eco-friendly philosophy."



On the cover: Green Key holder Domein Roosendaal in Sint-Katelijne-Waver has camping facilities, a holiday home and two cosy private cabins

Geudens also thinks that the attraction of eco-labels for Flemish tourists is less than for populations from those other neighbouring regions. "The three main factors that determine the choice of destination and accommodation are location, comfort and price," she says.

expressed concerns related to waste and materials and the consumption of energy and water. However, only 4% took the impact on the environment into consideration when booking their holidays. "It seems that Flemings leave their green awareness at home when

"An eco-friendly holiday destination is generally just as cheap and comfortable as any other alternative"

"Ecological advantages only figure when there is no difference in those factors."

This opinion was recently confirmed by the Flemish government's department of environment, nature and energy, which measured the perception and attitude of Flemings concerning eco-friendly consumption. The results of a survey among 1,000 residents showed that 59% have a reasonable understanding of environmental sustainability.

At least half of those surveyed

they go on vacation," says Van Loon, "while 5% of our ecological footprint is caused by going on holiday."

Tourism enterprises are responsible for about one-fifth of that 5%. (The majority is due to the transportation.)

To increase eco-friendly awareness in the tourism sector, BBL is stepping up its awareness campaign through extensive advice services. It will also make sure the Green Key indicator is included in more booking sites; for the moment, you can only select on the basis of the eco-label via the

booking site Bookdifferent.com. "We especially need to make consumers more aware that an eco-friendly holiday destination is generally just as cheap and comfortable as any other alternative."

In the last selection round, 19 new establishments were awarded a Green Key. In the category of attractions, **Antwerp Zoo** fulfilled the requirements for the first time. One of the crucial improvements was the water management plan. Over the last five years, the zoo managed to cut its water usage in half. It also installed biological filters, which recycle water, in, among other areas, the new habitat for its seals. Rain water, meanwhile, is collected for cleaning purposes. In their catering facilities, they replaced plastic cups with real glasses and mugs. "Sustainability is central to our philosophy and day-to-day activities," emphasises spokesperson Xavier Beghin.

The press conference of the Green Key awards last April took place in the **Sandton Grand Hotel Reylof** in Ghent, which opened last year. The new hotel invested in cogeneration, or combined heat and power, with a power station simultaneously generating electricity and heat. Especially innovative is their system to store heat in paraffin wax. Their "paraffin buffers" retain the heat four times more efficiently than the usual water buffers. The hotel also offers facilities to load electric cars. "We notice that especially business travellers are starting to pay much more attention to the eco-friendliness of accommodation," says Nancy Vanden Berghe, the hotel's sales manager. "It certainly is an important asset in the competition with other hotels."

One of the first holders of a Green Key for holiday homes, meanwhile, is **Abelia** in Bruges. Owner Sabine Taillaert invested in a highly efficient condensing boiler, an awning to replace the air-conditioning and a system to monitor energy and water usage. "I also try to inform my guests how to be more eco-friendly," Taillaert says. "Abelia is a small establishment, but every little bit helps."

► www.groenesleutel.be

A CONCERT VENUE WITH A GREEN KEY — BRUSSELS' FIRST PASSIVE HOTEL

Ghent's Handelsbeurs is a well-known concert hall for rock and world music, but it also hosts conferences. Seventy-five percent of its lighting is now provided by LED lights, which are five times more energy-efficient than traditional lamps. During concerts, visitors drink from glasses, not plastic cups. All employees signed a personal eco-charter in which they committed to eco-friendly behaviour.

"As a cultural centre, we have an important function in society," says communication manager Claire Van Trimpont. "We want to sensitise our audience to eco-friendly values." Later this year, Handelsbeurs will launch a campaign to convince concert-goers to arrive



by bike. On 3 October, ticket holders who ride a bike to the hall get a free cocktail. On 26 October, they can get their bike fixed for free – which will perhaps become a permanent service.

Last May, the German hotel group Meininger set up a youth-oriented hotel in the former Belle-Vue brewery along the Brussels canal. It is the capital's first passive hotel: Solar energy is stored and used throughout the year, without the aid of electrical or mechanical devices. The red-brick building, now with solar panels on the roof, was until recently used as an exhibition space. That artistic atmosphere has been preserved by involving local artists in the interior design – among them well-known graffiti artist Bonom.



Terror alert raised in Belgium

NSA snooping reveals “concrete indications” of planned attack

Alan Hope

Terrorists linked to Al Qaeda made specific mention of Belgium in conversations about a planned attack, the state security services announced last week. Federal interior minister Joëlle Milquet raised the terror alert to level three (out of four) as a result of the intelligence.

The information comes from telephone taps carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States, which led to a number of US embassies in the Middle East and Africa being closed and diplomatic personnel withdrawn.

“I’m not going to go into detail, but when the co-ordination centre for risk analysis raises the alert level, I think we can assume there were concrete reasons for doing so,” said Alain Winants, administrator-general of the state security service. Winants stressed that his services have had no direct contact with the NSA, which has recently been the subject of controversy surrounding



A bomb was discovered at Leuven's train station but was not the work of terrorists, said authorities

telephone and other surveillance carried out on domestic and foreign targets, including EU offices and missions in Brussels.

Examples of measures taken last week included heightened security at airports, A Dutch police presence on trains crossing the border from the Netherlands and security patrols at Brussels South

station and some embassies. The heightened state of alert also led to several incidents:

- An alarm was raised at the Kleine Brogel military base in Limburg, where nuclear weapons are said to be stockpiled, when a bicycle was spotted fastened to a perimeter fence. A blue box was attached to the bicycle but was found by the army

bomb squad DOVO to be harmless.

- A suspect package discovered at the Zaventem city railway station (not the Brussels Airport station) also turned out to be innocent, as did one found in the metro station Rogier in central Brussels, and another at Brussels South.

- Another suspect package, however, did contain a bomb. However, the device found by cleaning staff at Leuven's train station last weekend was described as “an amateur construction”, more likely to have been planted by students or anarchists than by terrorists, according to Milquet. During the investigation, however, an area of the station and part of the city centre were closed.

“This is simply the reaction you’d hope for,” explained security expert Brice De Ruyver. “It’s not a matter of panic or paranoia. The whole point of a terror alert is to make people more alert to things they normally wouldn’t pay attention to. You can’t take a risk with suspect packages.”

Sports minister asked to address Russia’s anti-gay law

Socialist member of the Flemish parliament Jan Roegiers (pictured) has asked Flanders’ sports minister Philippe Muyters to “exercise pressure” on the International Olympic Committee and the Russian government over the existence of an extreme hardline anti-gay law in Russia, which will house the winter Olympic Games in 2014. The Russian government last week

stated that the law, which outlaws “homosexual propaganda”, will also apply to athletes and members of the public visiting Russia for the Games. The law has already given rise to a wave of violent attacks on gays in the country.

“We need to exercise pressure on [Russian president Vladimir] Putin, even from here in tiny Flanders,” Roegiers said, arguing

that the law stands “diametrically opposed” to the Olympic ideal, and called on Muyters to make the government’s opposition known. “We’re talking about the law of another country,” a Muyters spokesperson told *Knack*. “You can’t criticise something like that without sparking a diplomatic row.”



© courtesy SPA

Ghent murder suspect confesses

The man accused of the murder of 29-year-old Aurore Ruyffelaere in Ghent during the weekend of 27-28 July has admitted he killed the young woman, saying that he lost his temper when she began hitting him.

Russian national Andrei Grigoriev, 29, was last week ordered to be detained for a further month by a court in Ghent. He was previously admitted to hospital after a suicide attempt but is now back in jail.

After an evening at the Gentse Feesten, Ruyffelaere was returning

to her car, which was parked in a lot in Sint-Denijs-Westrem. Her body was later found in the boot of a car belonging to the accused. According to Grigoriev’s initial testimony, three other men killed her, but he would not reveal their identities.

According to reports, he has now told investigators that the woman had clearly been drinking, and he had attempted to convince her not to drive. When she became aggressive, he lost his temper and strangled her, he said.

Limburg vigilant for horse attacker’s next move

The governor of Limburg province, Herman Reynders, has called on the population of Limburg province to be “vigilant” in looking for an attacker who has mutilated two horses in the same area, including a three-month-old foal who was severely injured in a knife attack last week in Beverlo, a district of Beringen.

“People need to look out for suspicious vehicles and movements,” said Reynders. “I call on everyone to be more vigilant in the hope of catching

this person in the act.”

The previous week, police received a report of a horse whose genitals had been mutilated in Koersel, just a few kilometres from Beverlo in the same police zone. Police will now carry out increased patrols, as well as examine possible links with cases in 2009 and 2011, when horses were attacked in the region around Sint-Truiden and Landen in southern Limburg. The Beverlo foal, meanwhile, has undergone surgery and is said to be recovering.

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

14%

fewer cats and 9% fewer dogs taken in by animal shelters in 2012. According to an animal welfare department spokesperson, the fall is a result of an action to sterilise stray animals

up to 200

people a day are using the Brussels waterbus, which operates two days a week between the city centre and Vilvoorde. Organisers describe the first month as a success, although it’s barely used by working commuters

► www.waterbus.eu

15%

more restaurant clients run off without paying their bill, compared to the same period a year before. According to the federal police, the true figure is likely to be much higher as cases are not always reported

1,063,000

views of a YouTube video by Flemish singer Natalia in one night, arousing suspicion of paid clicks. The singer’s management has taken the clip down while an investigation proceeds

€1,502

a month gross, the minimum wage in Belgium, now the second-highest in Europe, after Luxembourg at €1,874 according to figures from Eurostat

FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

Summertime blues

Prime minister Elio Di Rupo left for his Italian holiday in a good mood, after his government had reached an agreement on a couple of thorny issues. With six parties (socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals) making up the government, some had thought that it making one single decision would be impossible, but the prime minister proved them all wrong. In his absence, though, everything seems to be coming apart. The signs were there even before Di Rupo set sail, as the government was unable to agree on a reform of the law on competitiveness. Before the New Year, the government had announced this reform, with the goal of lowering the cost of labour.

Di Rupo’s own Parti Socialists (PS) has had second thoughts though, fearing the reaction of its dwindling electorate. As a result, there has been no sign of the reform, even though the government has met on it repeatedly.

As if that wasn’t enough, more bad news on Dexia reached government ranks just before the holidays. The so-called bad bank has a net loss of €905 million for the first half of this year. The new minister for finance Koen Geens (CD&V) has downplayed the loss, but another capital injection, at the taxpayer’s expense, may be necessary – once again raising Belgium’s government debt. A horror scenario you do not want to hear about under the Italian sun...

Also before the holidays, decisions could not be made on a number of appointments, including the new CEO of the railway company NMBS. Now that story is turning into a true soap opera, with the CV of top candidate Ellen Joncheere listing a university degree she never earned. How was this not noticed before is in itself under speculation but, more importantly, is the question of who will get the job now. That is a real problem for the Di Rupo government as all the other candidates are politically backed – and therefore vetoed. While he was enjoying the Italian life, another problem popped up for the prime minister: a study showing that the split of the judiciary district BHV will lead to a shortage of Dutch-language judges in Brussels. Solving this would mean renegotiating the entire BHV agreement, an issue the Flemish and French speakers have only debated for ... some 40 years. This could possibly mean the end of one of the federal government’s proudest achievements.

Another gelato anyone?

“Threat” to Doel nuclear plant

Electrabel and regulator launch legal action against port expansion plan

Alan Hope

The government of Flanders has rejected claims that the extension of the port of Antwerp will bring safety risks to the nuclear power plants at Doel on the Scheldt estuary. Last week power company Electrabel, owners of the plant, and the nuclear industry regulator FANC decided to take their concerns to the Council of State in an attempt to force the government to review its plans for the port area.

According to the complainants, they brought their concerns to the government on several occasions previously. Among the problem areas they cite in the new plan is that it eliminates one of the two roads offering access to the Doel reactors (*pictured*), raising concern that emergency vehicles could be blocked by fleeing workers in the event of an accident. FANC is also



asking for a safety perimeter of 1.8 kilometres around the reactors. “We also want to have an advisory role within the zone,” FANC spokesperson Nele Scheerlinck told

the VRT. “If a new installation were to be added or an existing plant undergo changes, we’d like to have the opportunity to give our opinion.” Port project manager Jan Hemelaer

said Electrabel and FANC had been involved in meetings with both officials and ministers. The government was “a little surprised” that the two critics had elected to bring the matter to the Council of State.

“It has always been the concern of the Flemish government to guarantee the safety of the nuclear plant,” said Hemelaer. “The planning of the area around the plant will involve consultation at every stage, with FANC as well as with Electrabel, to make sure safety can go on being guaranteed in the future.”

According to Flemish planning minister Philippe Muyters, meanwhile, a consultation meeting will take place with concerned parties and the government “as soon as possible” after the summer holiday period.

Half of all families in Belgium unable to save

Fewer than half of all families in Belgium have enough money to allow them to save, and 3% have more debts than assets, according to a survey carried out by the European Central Bank.

Only 48% of families in Belgium said they were able to put money aside as savings, and most of those were families who owned their own homes. Among those who rent, only one in three is able to save. At the same time, 2.7% of families have net asset worth – their debts are more than any savings and property owned – amounting to 130,000 families.

Professor Ides Nicaise of the Research Institute for Labour and Society at the University of Leuven pointed out that a lack of savings greatly increases the risk of debt, as any emergency spending has to be financed by borrowing, usually adding to debts already existing debts.

The ECB figures offer another perspective on the news from the



National Bank that the total worth of savings accounts in Belgium reached €245 billion in June. Belgians on average save 7% of their income directly and another 9% through investments in new home construction and renovation. The average household has total net assets of €338,000; the richest 10% have an average of €700,000 and the poorest 10% about €2,800.

Government removes self-made business signs

The Flemish government’s Roads and Traffic Agency (AWV) has begun an operation to remove all home-made road signs from regional roads. The signs are fashioned by local businesses and installed at roadsides to direct potential customers to the business. They are usually placed without permission and, in many cases, the proliferation of such signs detracts from the clear view of official signs, with implications for safety. Flanders counts 1.5 million official signposts along its network of 6,288 regional roads, which includes 420km of access roads and 916km of motorway – the equivalent of 24 per kilometre. The government has for some time made it a priority to reduce the number of official signs as much as possible.

“If our people see direction signs for businesses and restaurants along the roads, they will check for the existence of a permit. If there is none, the signs will be taken down,” noted AWV spokesperson Ilse Luybaerts.

Unizo, the organisation that represents the self-employed, urged restraint. “The businesses concerned need first to be given the opportunity to set things straight,” a spokesperson said.

Headhunter questioned on embellished CV of rail candidate

The federal minister for government enterprises, Jean-Pascal Labille, has called for an explanation from a leading firm of headhunters on how a candidate for a top job at the rail authority NMBS could have submitted a CV containing false information.

Last week it emerged that the curriculum vitae of Ellen Joncheere, on the shortlist for one of the two top jobs at the restructured rail authority, listed a Master’s degree in communications from the Free University of Brussels (VUB). Joncheere, who is currently operations manager at waste-management company Sita, does not hold that degree, instead having earned the equivalent of a Bachelor’s from a university college in Mechelen.

A Master’s or equivalent is a condition of the job, and Joncheere last week admitted she did not have the necessary qualifications. She also could not explain how the inaccurate information came to be included in her CV. The NMBS is no longer considering Joncheere as a candidate for the position.

The government retains the Brussels office of international headhunter bureau Egon Zehnder to handle filling top jobs not only at the NMBS and Infrabel but also about 100 other posts at 17 state enterprises, including the National Lottery, Belgacom and the state pensions service. The company is now being questioned for its failure to verify Joncheere’s credentials.

Court suspends €50m bus contract

The Council of State has suspended a contract worth €50 million for the Brussels public transport authority MIVB to buy 172 new buses from the German constructor EvoBus, a subsidiary of Daimler.

The contract for 79 articulated Mercedes Citaro buses (*pictured*) and 93 standard was announced at the end of June, to the disappointment of Flemish competitors Van Hool and VDL Bus Roeselaere. The latter company took its objections to the Council of State and has won an interim judgement.

The court, which scrutinises the decisions of government or state instances, found that the decision to award the contract to EvoBus was insufficiently explained to the other competitors. The MIVB can now devise a more complete explanation of the motives for the decision or wait for the Council’s final decision, which could see the contract scrapped altogether. The MIVB said



it would study the ruling in detail before deciding on a reaction.

VDL Bus managing director Peter Wouters welcomed the ruling as a recognition that the original contract procedure was neither consistent nor transparent. The contract was important to the company, he said, not only for its face value but also because it also contained a strong indication of more orders in the future.

THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

Banking ▶ Dexia

Federal finance minister Koen Geens promised “constant vigilance” after failed bank Dexia announced a loss for the first half of the year of €905 million, mostly as a result of new accounting regulations.

Banking ▶ KBC

The Leuven-based bank-insurer has announced net profits for the second quarter of €517 million, bringing the year’s profits so far to just over €1 billion – a spectacular improvement on results from the same period last year of losses of more than half a billion. The announcement saw shares go up by 4%, and the rise, together with that of Delhaize (see below), helped bring the Bel20 index to 2,804.92, its highest level since before the economic crisis in 2008.

Media ▶ DRIE

TV production house Woestijnvis has launched the venture DRIE, together with TV channels VIER and VIJF and *Humo* magazine. The new company will publish TV-book tie-ins in co-operation with WPG Uitgevers. Woestijnvis’ parent company De Vijver owns the two channels and works closely with *Humo*.

Retail • JUTS

Site preparation work began last week on the former Godin site in Brussels, home to the new shopping centre Just Under the Sky (JUTS). Close to the Van Praet bridge, JUTS is the farthest-advanced of the three major shopping centre projects planned in and around the city, with an opening date of 2015. Works began last week with demolition of existing structures, due to last three months.

Supermarkets ▶ Delhaize

Supermarket chain Delhaize has issued an improved forecast for the year, following the announcement last week of better than expected second-quarter results. The company took in €5.3 billion in sales in the second quarter, 0.6% up on the same period last year. Net profits were up 20.3% to €104 million, higher than forecast. The company’s shares rose 8% on the news.

Telecoms ▶ Base

Troubled mobile operator Base has signed a contract with the Indian ICT company Tech Mahindra for the extension of Base’s mobile infrastructure, following an agreement between Mahindra and Base parent KPN. Mahindra will help Base build up its 4G network across Belgium, saving the company an estimated €200 million in costs.

At your service

The country's first-ever school for butlers opens in Brussels' Le Plaza Hotel

Georgio Valentino

From Bertie Wooster's Jeeves to Bruce Wayne's Alfred to Jabba the Hutt's Bib Fortuna, the butler has become a fixture in the popular imagination. The archetypal valet is a human Swiss army knife, able to carry out any task required by his boss, who is often only half as competent for all his blue blood. And yet the butler remains loyal through thick and thin.

Unless you're playing Clue, in which case he might have "dunnit".

Such is the butler as he exists in pop culture. Very few of us, of course, have met a flesh-and-blood butler, nor do we have a very good idea of what the job really entails. Make no mistake: it is a job, and it requires—in addition to a certain natural equilibrium—a good deal of specialised training.

That's where Vincent Vermeulen comes in. The Flemish entrepreneur has recently founded the School for Butlers and Hospitality in Brussels. We sat down together in the capital to talk butting (yes, it's a real word). Vermeulen is a bit of an expert on the subject. "I was literally born in the hospitality industry," he says. Indeed, he comes from a long line (four generations, to be exact) of hospitality professionals. His parents ran a hotel-and-restaurant operation on the Belgian coast, hence his passion for service and lifetime of practical experience in the field.

After growing the family business in partnership with his brother, Vermeulen decided to explore the world of service from a different angle. So, 11 years ago, he decamped for the UK. He first trained at the Guild for Professional English Butlers, then embarked on a decade-long odyssey through the world



Vincent Vermeulen is a fourth-generation hospitality specialist

of über-high-end hospitality, an odyssey which took him to London's legendary Lanesborough Hotel and beyond.

Vermeulen knew all the while, however, that his destiny was in education. "The idea of starting my

Hospitality was born. Vermeulen describes the enterprise as "the best of British tradition coupled with all things Belgium has to offer." His tri-annual courses are designed for small groups of no more than 12 students. The first of these is set to

maintaining protocol and procuring the right luxury goods (after all, not all caviars and champagnes are created equal). Record-keeping is also a crucial component of butting. "Today's butler is a professional organiser," Vermeulen explains. "He needs to log every detail about the house." Candidates will even learn the fine art of ejecting inebriated or unruly guests from the table.

In keeping with Vermeulen's emphasis on practical experience, there are also hands-on field trips to luxury destinations and brand headquarters. Students will stand on the shoulders of giants: the tailors of D'Longueville, the tanners of JM Weston, the silversmiths of Christofle, the champagne-makers of Bollinger and the gourmets of Bruges' triple-Michelin-starred restaurant De Karmeliet.

"The demand is overwhelming. Butlers are needed on yachts and in Asia's booming high-end hotels"

own school has been in my mind since that first day at the Guild," he says. "This was the logical next step for me."

The butler recently returned to Belgium with a plan and the endorsement of the British Butler Institute. The School for Butlers and

embark on the road to butler-hood in September. Their classroom is Brussels' sumptuous Le Plaza Hotel. Vermeulen's butlers-in-training will master a broad range of tasks such as housekeeping, serving drinks, packing suitcases, making travel arrangements, managing staff,

Graduates will benefit from these partners and contacts long after the course is over. Vermeulen's international network is a veritable placement service for an industry in which recommendations and reputations are everything. It's about who you know. It's about what you know. But above all, it's about *who knows* what you know. Vermeulen's already on-going butler-for-a-day programme, in which candidates are placed with clients looking to engage a butler for a special event, is an example of the opportunities available at the ground level.

Then there are the full-time butler positions opening up around the world. "The demand is overwhelming," says Vermeulen. "Butlers are needed on yachts and in Asia's booming high-end hotels. Successful people want to use their time as efficiently as possible and employ a butler to run the household."

If the possible rewards are substantial, though, so is the initial investment. The four-week course will set an aspiring butler back €6,980—and this doesn't include room and board. Vermeulen insists that his fees are comparable to other programmes in the field and, most importantly, that these skills and opportunities will pay off in the long-term.

It certainly is worth considering, especially in light of the increasingly bleak economic forecast for us middle-class plebs and the increasingly conspicuous consumption practiced by the super-rich, whose only crisis is mid-life. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

► www.schoolforbutlers.com

Renaissance mail carriers

Bpost CEO wants his staff to provide more services to the public

Alan Hope

An employee of bpost could, in the future, be much more than just a mail carrier. Company CEO Johnny Thijs envisions the national postal service providing many more services in future, including reading electricity and water meters, delivering online orders or even making observations on behalf of your insurance company. Thijs was being interviewed by business daily *De Tijd* following the publication of results for the second quarter, which show a 5% drop in the volume of mail. In order to maintain jobs, he said, the service would have to take on new roles to increase productivity. "A lot of companies have lost physical contact with the customer,

or have cut it out for budgetary reasons," he said. "We're able to offer them that contact with their customers. Our network covers the whole country. We get everywhere at least once a day."

Thijs did not go into detail, and unions representing postal workers are now awaiting more information from him. "We understand that this sort of thought exercise is a result of the need to compensate for the loss of volume of traditional post," commented Lieve Vanoverbeke of the Christian union ACV-Transcom-Post. "But we also have a number of questions: What would this mean for the working conditions of postal workers? Will they receive training to be able to carry out all of these extra duties? ... And what happens



to those who don't pass the training successfully?"

Vanoverbeke pointed out that the

idea of expanded duties is not new. Pilot projects are being carried out in some areas that involve

postal workers delivering meals to the elderly and infirm, and even delivering books on loan from public libraries.

"It's a good thing that management is looking for alternatives to fill the place of mail volumes," said Marc De Mulder of the liberal union VSOA-Post. "But postal workers have to be given the time needed, and it has to take place in safe circumstances."

In some instances, such as postal workers who take note of damage to report to insurance companies, the postal worker essentially becomes an expert, De Mulder said, and would merit a salary increase as a result. Unions and management will meet at the end of this month.

Welcoming new life

A team from Genk develops an affordable fertility treatment

Andy Furniere

Twelve healthy babies have already been born thanks to an inexpensive fertility treatment developed in a co-operation between scientists at the University of Hasselt, the Genk Institute for Fertility Technology and the University of Colorado in the US. The research project is supported by The Walking Egg, an international non-profit founded in Flanders that offers more couples in developing countries access to fertility care.

The results of the pioneering study, which took place in Genk, were presented last month at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology conference in London. The new technique showed a pregnancy rate of 35% – about as effective as in vitro fertilisation. But the innovative system costs less than €200, while the usual treatment now is at least 10 times more.

Kitchen medicine

The team at the Genk institute saved money by replacing expensive medical equipment with “kitchen ingredients”. When growing embryos in an IVF clinic, scientists need high levels of carbon dioxide gas to control acidity levels. This requires clinics to use costly carbon dioxide incubators, medical grade gas and air purification systems.

Researchers at Genk, however, produce carbon dioxide by mixing inexpensive citric acid



and bicarbonate soda in a simple two-tube system.

The technique cannot completely replace conventional IVF. Men with severe infertility require more



advanced treatment in which the sperm is injected into the egg, known as intracytoplasmic sperm injection. Still, the cheaper method could be a real gift for numerous couples in developing countries, who are often unable to afford the current IVF treatment.

The low-cost culture system is known as tWE, named after The Walking Egg. The non-profit was founded in 2010 by Flemish artist Koen Vanmechelen and Flemish scientist Willem Ombelet (pictured left), who believe that fertility care is a neglected aspect of family planning in poor countries. The Walking Egg gathers medical, social and economic experts, along with artists, to work towards the goal of affordable and accessible fertility programmes. It works in

co-operation with the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Professor Ombelet also led the study at Genk. “In many areas of developing countries, infertility can be an economic and psychological disaster,” he told the BBC. “Couples can become socially isolated because their families break off all contact.” For the moment, IVF is only affordable for less than 10% percent of the world’s population. According to the WHO, infertility affects about 200 million couples worldwide. Professor Ombelet says he has also had interest from the United States.

After this proof-of-principle study, Genk plans to complete the construction of a low-cost centre by November and provide training for clinics in developing countries. The Flemish researchers anticipate starting in Ghana, Uganda or South Africa. A first-rate IVF clinic today requires an investment of between €1.5 and €3 million, but the inexpensive equivalent would cost less than €300,000.

Experts in London acknowledged the huge potential of the method but pointed out that the success was achieved in a well-equipped lab in a Western country and that thorough tests in developing countries are now necessary.

► www.thewalkingegg.com

New Flemish database to stimulate the development of medicines

To accelerate the translation of innovations in health care into practical applications, the government is investing in the establishment of the Flemish Biobank. A biobank assembles medical data and biological material from patients and healthy volunteers. Medical data includes, for example, information on a person’s previous health problems and current

condition. Materials are, among others, blood samples and DNA. The database is developed and co-ordinated by the non-profit Centre for Medical Innovation (CMI). The government of Flanders created the CMI two years ago in collaboration with the Flemish universities, university hospitals and the health-care industry. Bringing this institutional knowledge together

in one place should lead to new medicines being developed more quickly. The databank will also be useful in more quickly assessing which medicine a patient needs. “Being able to consult a centralised biobank for basic research should help researchers of knowledge institutions and pharmaceutical companies to develop better applications and more customised

health solutions,” said Flemish innovation minister Ingrid Lieten during a CMI workshop. The Flemish Biobank should be operational by the end of 2014 and would include more than 30,000 samples. The CMI also anticipates future collaborations with international partners. AF

► www.cmi-vzw.be

Q&A

For her Master’s thesis in Applied Economics at Hasselt University, Hanne Muermans assessed to what extent campaign spending determines election outcomes

Which were your main research objectives?

I analysed the expenditure of politicians in Limburg province during their campaigns for the local elections of last year and examined if and by how much the spending affected their results. I compared to what extent five other factors were decisive in earning votes for admission to the local council, including recent political positions, the place on the electoral list, their party and their personal characteristics – gender and age.

So in the end, was the campaign budget crucial to their failure or success?

No, electoral expenditure turned out to have the second least influence on the result, coming

in at 10% influence. Already holding a political seat – whether on a local, provincial or federal level – influenced their electoral achievement the most, with 18%. The place occupied by a candidate on the party’s electoral list is the second most-defining factor, amounting to an importance of 16%. Age and gender had no significant impact.

How did you find out the electoral expenditure of politicians?

All candidates are obliged to register the financial details of their campaign at a Court of First Instance within 30 days after the election. For 15 days after this month, you can get access to the data. However, I have serious doubts about the accuracy of



some accounts. Some politicians declared they had no budget, which seems suspicious. I suppose it is possible they relied completely on the financial backing of their party. But other candidates just filled in

exactly the maximum amount that they were legally allowed to spend. Some candidates didn’t even register their expenditure, which is a punishable offence.

You recommend a stricter monitoring of the registration of expenditures.

Although it isn’t key, an extensive campaign still helps to convince voters, so the government should apply more control. Today, the candidates who don’t fill in the necessary forms are seldom punished and there is little or no monitoring of the accuracy of registrations. It should certainly be possible to do random checks of a few candidates and asking them for proof – such as invoices. AF

THE WEEK IN SCI & ED

In the scientific journal *Cell*, researcher Peter Carmeliet of the Flemish Institute for Biotechnology (VIB) reported that his team discovered the essential role that the sugar metabolism process plays in the formation of new blood vessels. Because it is already known that excessive blood vessel formation stimulates the growth of cancer, this insight opens up new **therapeutic opportunities in the fight against cancer**. There are already treatments that slow down cancer growth by disrupting the blood supply to the tumour. But their success is limited by resistance, poor efficiency and harmful side effects.

The government of Flanders is investing €6 million in four living lab platforms to manage **innovative trials in the health-care sector**. The LiCalab project focuses on prevention, awareness and coaching to help the elderly live independently for a longer period of time. With a mix of informal and formal care, Actief Zorgzame Buurt wants to increase the quality of life for elderly people and their caregivers. InnovAGE envisions adding on average two more quality years to our lives by 2020. Ageing in Place Aalst will assist the elderly in living at home longer, with special attention to socially vulnerable groups.

Combined education, which allows students to follow part of their classes from behind their home computers, is quickly gaining in popularity. Last academic year, nearly 36,400 students took part in this option, more than double the 16,000 in 2008-2009. The centres for adult education now offer 134 study courses via combined education, while four years ago only 78 courses were available. The most popular courses for combined education are teacher training, informatics and business management. Students can make use of combined education in secondary school and higher vocational education.

An increasing number of students in the Flemish Community education network GO! are choosing the **optional subject of Islamic religion**. In the last academic year, the number in primary education rose to 23% from 13% in 2005; in secondary education, the figure went from 10% to 17%. The trend has led to a shortage of well-trained teachers. Flemish education minister Pascal Smet has announced the establishment of a Master’s degree in Islamic theology and religious science. But experts recommend more specific training for teachers. AF

The background of the entire page is a vibrant red. At the top, the word "THE Bulletin" is written in white, with "THE" in a smaller font. Below this, a black silhouette of the Brussels skyline is visible, including the Atomium structure and various historic buildings. A white, curved road with dashed lines winds through the scene. On the left side, there are stylized black and red house icons. On the right side, a series of black silhouettes of people in various poses (walking, running, sitting) are arranged vertically. At the bottom, there is a black silhouette of a city skyline with various building shapes.

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Adventures heroic, joyous and glorious

Discover Damme, the medieval home of Tjil Uilenspiegel and a contemporary village of literature

Andy Furniere

Conveniently located between Bruges and the coast lies Damme, a medieval town with an important literary role in both past and present. Famous as the hometown of folk figure Tjil Uilenspiegel and author Jacob van Maerlant, it's a hotspot of both bookshops and book fairs. It also is an ideal starting place for an exploration of the polder area, along the canals and nature reserves near the Dutch border.

Beware, when entering Damme on a sunny summer's day. You may be seriously tempted to spend most of your time on one of the many terraces in the lovely heart of the town centre or along the calm water of the canal.

Journalists assigned to visit the town, however, don't have that option, I remind myself. And besides, a stroll along the cobblestone streets of the historic centre is certainly a worthwhile activity, getting to know the colourful characters and military episodes that have shaped the Damme of today. Apart from maps, the tourist office now also offers the free iDamme application, a virtual walking tour guide.

A statue of Jacob van Maerlant greets you from his stone base in front of Damme's city hall. This 13th-century poet and author lived and worked nearly his entire life as a clerk in the town. Van Maerlant's primary merit lies in his translations of French and Latin works to Middle Dutch, the language of the common people. You will also encounter a memorial sculpture of him at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw church, where he is buried under the church tower. The tower is open for visitors, and its unusual flat top provides a convenient platform to look across the countryside.

An early villain

In the garden of the church stands a memorial for the other literary hero of Damme, Tjil Uilenspiegel. Along the banks of the canal, another monument features the folk character holding up a mirror to two owls. This



symbolises his last name, *uil* meaning "owl" and *spiegel* meaning "mirror". In English, the character is known as Till Owlglass.

But Uilenspiegel in fact has a whole museum dedicated to him at the Huyse de Grote Sterre, where you also find the visitor centre for Damme and the Zwin area. An interactive exhibition illustrates Uilenspiegel's fictional adventures and his importance to Flemish cultural history.

Originally, Uilenspiegel was a villainous character whose evil deeds were transmitted orally until written down around 1500 by the German writer Hermann Bote, with the moralistic purpose of showing readers how you should not behave. A Flemish translation soon followed, and, in the 17th century, the tales started to be linked with the town of Damme.

In 1867, the popularity of Uilenspiegel and his connection to Damme were solidified with the publication of a novel by Belgian writer Charles De Coster, translated into English as *Legend of Uilenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak and Their Adventures Heroical, Joyous and Glorious in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere*.

De Coster portrayed Uilenspiegel as a jester, born and bred in Damme, who amuses readers through his bold adventures and instils admiration through his rebellion against the Catholic Spanish domination in the 16th century. De Coster created a girlfriend for Uilenspiegel called Nele and the companion Lamme Goedzak – a soft-hearted *bon vivant* obsessed with food.

"From then on, Uilenspiegel became a symbol of the Flemish spirit, and



Clockwise from top left: Damme's 13th-century Onze-Lieve-Vrouw church; power your own ferry boat across Napoleon's Damse Vaart canal; rent bikes and bright orange Vespas from the elegant city hall

his adventures were translated into numerous languages," says the museum's curator, Jan Hutsebaut. "He not only featured in novels, comics and children's books but also in all kinds of propaganda. At one time, both communists and Nazis tried to misuse him for their goals." Damme not only honours its literary heroes from the past, it has earned a reputation as a book lover's town. Every second Sunday of the month, a large book fair takes place right on the central square. But every day, you can browse the eight cosy bookshops around the town of just 11,000 residents.

Among them is the bookshop d' Oede Schole; the name is dialect for "the old school", as it's located in a former school building. In the former school yard stand sculptures of the Walloon artist Charles Delporte, who donated an extensive collection of works to the city.

Front line

Damme also has a significant military history, which is still clearly visible. In the 17th century, during the Dutch War of Independence (or Eighty Years' War), Damme lay on the front line and was transformed into a fortress town by replacing the medieval fortifications with ramparts. The ramparts, which gave Damme the shape of a seven-pointed star, have been renovated, and a walking path leads visitors along the military relics in a current nature reserve.

Near the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw church and the picturesque Haringmarkt, you'll also find casemates – former ammunition depots. Today, bats have made their home in the casemates and, during the Night of the Bat, on 23 and 24 August, the casemates are open for visitors.

Over the next few weeks, you can also be one of the last visitors to the museum at the 13th century Saint-John's Hospital. More than 500 pieces of furniture, paintings, silverware, documents and books from the convent library illustrate

the history of this former hospital. Support for the museum has been withdrawn, and it will close at the end of September.

Damme has more on offer than a historic centre; it has a whopping six districts: Hoeke, Lapscheure, Moerkerke, Oostkerke, Sijsele and Vivenkapelle. The polder region, interspersed with canals, forms an ideal terrain to explore on a bike or Vespa – both of which you can rent at the tourist office in Damme. (The office also offers a Vespa weekend, with accommodation and culinary treats.)

On the many signposted routes, you will spend a lot of time along the Schipdonk and Leopold canals. Among locals, these are known as De Stinker (the stinker) and the De Blinker (the brilliant); the Schipdonk has history of pollution problems, contrary to the Leopold. Today, however, both canals are pleasant waterways.

A third canal, the Damse Vaart, is often referred to as the Napoleonvaart. It was dug in 1810 on order of the French emperor and connects Bruges with the Dutch border town Sluis. Near the town of Hoeke, you can cross the Damse Vaart on a small ferry boat. You'll note the absence of a captain as you propel yourself across by turning a wheel.

The meadows alongside the routes also house much in the way of military history. You can spot, for example, remains of the Burnt Fort in Oostkerke and the Fort of Bavaria in Koolkerke (just outside of Damme). However, if you're more like Lamme Goedzak than Tjil Uilenspiegel, you can also enjoy a relaxing trip on the nostalgic river boat – logically called Lamme Goedzak – that sails between the Noorweegse Kaai in Bruges and the centre of Damme. A bus takes you from Bruges' railway station or central market square to the river boat jetty and back.

INNS ALONG THE WAY

When rambling through the countryside around Damme, you won't have to worry about finding places where you can rest awhile. Het Oud Gemeentehuis, located near the church of Oostkerke, is both a nice brasserie and a hotel. If you want to stay at an authentic 17th-century farm, say, book a room at the Hofstede De Stamper (pictured). Apart from pampering their guests, the owners still raise their own cattle and sheep.



► www.hetoudgemeentehuis.be
► www.destamper.be

► www.toerismedamme.be

“

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Sam (School President, BSB)

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From tomatoes to ostriches

How a farming family switched careers to set the standard for children's farms

Tom Peeters

When former vegetable grower Ludo Gielis used to bring his tomatoes to auction, sometimes a wholesaler would pick one out that looked a little less fresh than the rest and say: "Mm, could be better."

So what a change it made when he decided to close down the greenhouses and use the space for a children's farm. Instead of growing tomatoes, he focussed on breeding ostriches. Their eggs are now used in the pancakes for the kid's parties they organise at 't Struisvogelnest (The Ostrich Nest).

Of course it was not just the lack of positive feedback that led to this remarkable transformation of career. The crisis in horticulture was pretty serious. "Energy prices and the cost of employees were rising. To stay competitive, we needed an extra investment of €2 million," says the 55-year-old Gielis, who ran the greenhouses with his wife, Lieve Van Dessel. "That was just too much at our age. But we had to do something; we were too young to stop working."

The idea of a children's farm was a creative way to cope with their situation. They had the land and the space.

Eggs aplenty

After Gielis and Van Dessel got married in 1981, they started growing vegetables on farmland in the outskirts of the city of Lier in Antwerp province. Seven years later, they switched from field leeks, lettuce, beans and sprouts to greenhouse vegetables – at that time a very profitable choice.

On what was left of their 10 acres of land, they decided to keep animals. In 1994, the first ostriches arrived, later followed by alpacas, wallabies and more ostriches – now there are 100.

"In the beginning it was just a hobby and a way to keep on using the land we



Wallabies, pot-bellied pigs and, of course, ostriches join a number of other kinds of animals at 't Struisvogelnest, where kids also discover where their food comes from

didn't need anymore," Gielis explains. "We bred the ostriches for the eggs. The fertilised ones went to the hatchery for the trade in baby birds."

Though soon there was a real invasion of ostriches on the family's land, not a lot of people knew about them: 't Struisvogelnest lies in a quiet dead end street, and you can't see the fields from the road. "But sometimes groups or schools asked if they could visit them. Because we were too busy with the greenhouses, it wasn't possible ... yet."

After a few bad harvests, the idea of opening a children's farm really took off. They brought in some furniture from a defunct bar and started acquiring farm animals. One of their

daughters, Ellen, a primary school teacher, worked out programmes for schools and groups and began organising birthday parties.

In the meantime, her sister Marijke, who quite conveniently had studied paediatric nursing, completed the team. Two years ago they opened what they call "a watch, do, care, hug and children's farm".

On an improvised tour, Gielis shows me horses, ponies, cows, pigs, sheep, goats, deer, peacocks and more. There's a special space to hug rabbits, a newly built beehive and an insect hotel. I run into kids staying here on a summer workshop. One of them asks if he can feed the pygmy goat an apple he picked up from the ground. He can.

When we pass a particularly active ostrich, Gielis says: "That's a courtship dance."

"We want to concentrate even more on the educational aspects of the farm," he adds. "Lots of kids don't know anything about farming and vegetable growing. Even adults ask me things you normally learn at primary school."

His basic goal is to teach school kids where products really come from. "These days everything originates from the supermarket, you know," he laughs. "So if schools want to work around the agricultural industry, they are welcome."

Gielis is thinking of topics such as "from grain to bread" and "from milk

to ice cream". But his scope is wider than just animals and vegetables. "Now I want to create a little dwarf wood, with herbs and spices to teach the kids how to use them."

But 't Struisvogelnest also serves an important social function. "We are also a care farm, meaning we give shelter to a few people who are struggling in society. They can join us during our daily routines."

For a 42-year old man staying at the Psychiatric Center Broeders Alexianen in the nearby Boechout, spending time at the farm brings some structure into his life. A student from the local Sint-Gummaruscollege who's experiencing problems drops by two or three afternoons a week.

Buy your own

The family still grows vegetables in their greenhouse, for their own consumption and to sell to their visitors in a little shop. Paradoxically, Gielis' vegetables are more tasty now. "Wholesalers only want hard tomatoes they can preserve longer," he explains. "But as a result, the flavour disappears."

They have quite a taste for ostrich eggs, as well, which contain the volume of up to 25 chicken eggs. "And it's very tasty!" says Gielis. "I prefer them to chicken eggs because they're more frothy."

The couple make cakes and pancakes with ostrich eggs but also *speculoos* and *advocaat*. Especially the *advocaat*, that famous, thick, egg liqueur, is becoming increasingly popular. "A recipe from my wife," Gielis says. If you want to taste any of these, feel free to drop by the family's terrace, which is open Wednesday through Sunday from 14.00 to 19.00 during the summer.

www.tstruisvogelnest.be

STREEKPRODUCT SERIES

Alan Hope

Regional recipes

Nine public libraries in the Dendermonde area of East Flanders are running a competition to find the best recipe making use of local *streekproducten*, or regional products. It's a list that includes an impressive range of products: fruit juice from Berlare, Malheur beer from Buggenhout, Moese patat from Hamme, spicy gingerbread from Lebbeke, mare's milk from Laarne, *advocaat* from Wichelen, goat cheese from Zele, the Koetjesreep chocolate bar from Wetteren and, finally, the tart known as *vlaai* from Dendermonde itself, made with candy syrup, cinnamon, mace and a splash of rum.

Plenty there for the locals to work with, but if you're also interested in recipes using recognised Flemish regional products, there are virtually no limits. The products are all listed on the website of the Flemish agricultural marketing agency Vlam, and they



also offer a few recipes to start you off.

It doesn't get much simpler than a hunk of beef shin (known as *soepvlees*) cooked in a bouillon, which would normally be the basis for a simple beef stock. However, with the addition of some watercress from Haspengouw and a good dollop of grain mustard from Hamme, you've transformed a basic cut of meat into a classy salad, perfect for the end of summer days. And of course the stock is ready to be used or frozen until the next time you're making soup.

These days, you're expected to be as innovative with your nibbles as you are with your main course. The recipe for tomato tea with cannelloni of filet d'Anvers (*photo*) from Antwerp and grey shrimp from Zeebrugge includes two of the most noble and celebrated of the range of products.

It's a matter of taste, of course, but nothing could entice me to try a *papillotte* (a tinfoil package cooked in the oven) of apples, nectarines, raspberries and cuberdons. We will make one concession to the sweet of tooth, however, with a recipe for Mechelse *koekoek* (a type of chicken which actually comes from Aalst) given a delicious crunchy crust of *speculoos* cookie crumbs.

There are 87 recipes on the site. Some are weird: a cocktail of Belgian Elixir with watercress and sparkling wine, or a soup of buttermilk and potatoes garnished with grey shrimp. Others are just irresistible: like the combination of veal cheeks braised in red beer from south-west Flanders or rabbit cooked in Oude Geuze with Leuven mustard.

www.streekproduct.be

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TRUWALK ZERO GREY & GREEN

The art of being Belgian

Retiring Flemish art critic Claude Blondeel makes a final statement

Tom Peeters

For the exhibition *Baza(a)r Belg(i)ë*, now on display in the centre of Brussels, retiring VRT critic Claude Blondeel united 100 diverse pieces of art. The drawings, paintings, sculptures, photos, videos and installations all have one thing in common: They are quintessentially Belgian.

It's hard to grasp that special something that makes a Belgian a Belgian. Foreigners often get lost in this complex country with different languages, mentalities and sensitivities. Some local politicians even try to make us believe that the concept "Belgian" doesn't exist at all.

Retiring art critic Claude Blondeel, a fan of both Flemish and francophone art, is stepping up to say it does.

In *Baza(a)r Belg(i)ë*, the Brussels-based Blondeel, seen and heard for decades on VRT and radio culture programmes, tells his personal story of the Belgian art scene. He starts in the late 19th century with the surrealist painter James Ensor and finishes with Luc Tuymans' intricate images of King Boudewijn from his *mwana kitoko* (beautiful white man) series, dealing with Belgium's colonial past.

Imaginary museum

Walking through Blondeel's "imaginary museum" in the Centrale, it becomes clear that he has an associative mind. So we go where his mind leads us. He juxtaposes the grotesque and the exuberance of the Cobra movement, for example, with the sobriety of the late Raoul De Keyser, focussing on the bare essence of painting with only one line and one surface. He emphasises the direct connection between the North Sea (see the striking painting by Constant Permeke), and particularly Ostend as the birthplace of Ensor, symbolist painter Léon Spilliaert and rock star Arno, with their capital (and Arno's home) Brussels, where the cross-pollination clash between the two mentalities and languages is most obvious.

"Living right at the border of the Germanic and the Latin world, in between the German of Goethe and the French of Proust, always inspired me," says Blondeel.

A signed copy of Hugo Claus' classic novel *Het verdriet van België* (*The Sorrow Of Belgium*) lies next to *Congo: A History*, the award-winning book by journalist David Van Reybrouck about Belgium's former colony. By calling these two books the most important publications of the last 30 years, Blondeel, 65, illustrates how crucial self-criticism, perspective and not a little stubbornness were in the final 100 works chosen for the exhibition.

Belgitude

But how does he explain this mentality – what he calls "Belgitude" – to his foreign friends? "A Belgian is serious but does not take himself seriously," he says. Blondeel prefers the jokes of *Le Chat* and *Gaston* to what he sees as the more mainstream *Adventures of Tintin*. And besides, "not having to negotiate with Moulinsart was a plus," he says, referring to the organisation that looks after the legacy of Hergé as "hijackers". This *Belgitude*, a mix of blatant self-criticism, surrealism and a certain devil-may-care attitude, is also why we see an installation with a myriad of mops by Jan Fabre. These "Bic-Dweilen" all have symbolic statements on them, written with ink pens and a subtle strip with the three colours of the Belgian flag. "And what do we do with these? We clean the floor with them," Blondeel notes.

On the other hand: It didn't stop the royal family supporting Fabre. "And would you really prefer a president like Sarkozy, Berlusconi or Putin?"



Included in the 100 pieces representing more than a century of Belgian art are one of 1960s fashion designer Ann Salens' knitted dresses, a portrait of Arno by Flemish photographer Stephan Vanfleteren and "Gust of Wind" by Ostend-born Léon Spilliaert

Not me."

L'union fait la force (strength in unity), says the critic, who spent his entire career working for the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, first as a producer, later as an art critic. He's both quoting the national motto of Belgium and recalling the words of a French journalist who visited the exhibition and couldn't believe it was organised in a year's time.

And *Baza(a)r Belg(i)ë* is not just an exhibition. Before his retirement last month, Blondeel dedicated a radio programme to this final project, and there is also a book and a triple CD compilation (with one black, one yellow and one red CD). "In France, it would be impossible" to pull something like this off in one year, he says. "People rather work against one another. But here, everyone co-operated."

Blondeel received a lot of support from Chantal Pattyn, the director of Klara, the classical radio station he's worked for since 2007. She knew full well that most museums would be eager to give something back to Blondeel, who covered their collections and exhibitions for years. Nearly every work he wanted to show, he was loaned. Nearly. "I wanted a saxophone from the Musical Instruments Museum and a painting by artist Antoine Wiertz, but Michel Draguet refused," he says, referring to the director of the Royal Museums of Art and History. "But he has quite a reputation for that." They did manage to get a saxophone from the Adolphe Sax museum, "but the Wiertz canvas is a real lack".

When we met, Blondeel's official retirement had only reached its third day, and he isn't resting on his laurels. He'd just returned from a short holiday in Avignon, where he ... what



do you think? ... visited the contemporary art exhibition *Les Papesses*. There he was reminded just how good our local art scene is. Ghent-based artist Berlinde De Bruyckere "excelled," he says, next to other more internationally famous artists, like Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith.

"With De Bruyckere, Tuymans, Hans Op De Beeck ... we have an extremely talented generation of artists," he says. He names contemporary arts museums Wiels in Brussels, SMAK in Ghent and M KHA in Antwerp as "doing some really great things, as are the Brussels galleries. There's only one thing missing: a place to visit our contemporary art collection in our own capital. We really don't need an expensive, newly built project like Bilbao's Guggenheim – just an empty space to show visitors what we already have."

Despite the retirement, that's a project Blondeel would like to put his weight behind. If it sounds like a faraway fantasy, only reached in one of Panamarenko's flying machines, consider that he is now in negotiations to take *Baza(a)r Belg(i)ë* to Paris and Amsterdam.

UNTIL 29 SEPTEMBER

Centrale for Contemporary Art

Sint-Katelijneplein 44, Brussels

► www.centrale-art.be

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Flemish director Patrice Toyé's film *Little Black Spiders*, which opened last year's Ostend Film Festival, has now received the **most nominations for the 2012 Ensors**, the Flemish film prizes. Organised by the self-same festival, which runs from 6-14 September, the Ensors will be handed out on the final day. *Little Black Spiders* pulled down 11 nominations, including for best director, actress, debut and photography but missed out on a best film nomination, which went to Fien Troch's *Kid*, Felix Van Groeningen's *The Broken Circle Breakdown* and Pieter Monsaert's debut feature *Offline*. The Ostend Film Festival also introduces an international prize this year called LOOK!, which honours the film with the most visual flair.

► www.filmfestivalaloostende.be

The programme is out for this year's **Open Monument Day**, which marks the 25th anniversary of the event. Rather than the usual theme, the jubilee edition, set for Sunday, 8 September, is more of a best of the 24 previous editions. The largest heritage event in Flanders, Open Monument Day finds nearly 200 municipalities opening the doors to 650 spaces normally closed to the public. See the 4 September edition of *Flanders Today* for highlights and suggestions.

► www.openmonumenten.be

Hail cannons tested at the Tomorrowland dance festival in Boom last month are being blamed for the death of 3.5 tonnes of fish in the nearby park De Schorre. The cannons are used to send shock waves into clouds to prevent the formation of hailstones, and the two maintained by Tomorrowland were tested just hours before the dead fish were found floating on the surface of the lake. Organisers denied the charge, saying that the cannons were 200 metres from the lake.

Hollywood's Universal Studios has finally announced a **release date for the American remake** of the 2008 Flemish smash hit movie *Loft*. The film, called *The Loft*, will release in the US in August of next year, and a worldwide release will follow. It's the widest release ever for an American remake of a Flemish movie. The original director, Erik Van Looy, also helmed the remake, in which five men rent a secret loft apartment for extra-marital affairs. The American version stars New Zealand actor Karl Urban (*Star Trek: Into Darkness*), American actor James Marsden (*30 Rock*, *Bachelorette*) and Flemish actor Matthias Schoenaerts, who reprises his role from the original film.

Surrounded by greatness

The Star Alphabet of ELT Mesens

Ian Mundell

Edouard Léon Théodore Mesens was a pivotal figure on the European art scene in the early 20th century. He was a gallery owner, writer and publisher, a champion of Dada and Surrealism and an artist in his own right. But he was all of those things in that order of importance. This sets a challenge for MuZee in Ostend: how do you organise an exhibition around someone whose famous friends made more interesting art than he did? Its answer is to put Mesens the artist up-front and hope for the best. The first thing you see is a selection of Mesens' collages, most made in the decade or so before he died in 1971. These involve scraps of found paper, such as bus tickets and envelopes, as well as images and texts cut from newspapers and magazines. In "Manhattan" (1960), skyscrapers made of tickets are topped with René Magritte-style hats, held in place with mapping pins, while "Pancarte d'évangélisateur" (1959) spells out the



ELT Mesens with Magritte's "Clairvoyance" at The London Gallery in 1937

message "He who has never dreamt of Mae West will lose his place in heaven". These are pleasant enough, but hardly cutting edge for their time. When

Salvador Dali obsessed about Mae West in the 1930s, it was current affairs; by the late '50s, it was nostalgia. Similarly, Kurt Schwitters (one of Mesens' many contacts) had been turning out

his pockets to make collages since between the wars. The more you see of Mesens' work (and there is another room of it at the end of the exhibition), the more it looks like copy-and-paste rather than cut-and-paste.

Inside man

The exhibition is more successful in dramatizing Mesens' passage through the art world. He was born in Brussels in 1903 and as a teenager was a precocious musician. Aged barely 18, he became friends with composer Erik Satie, who introduced him to the Paris art scene. Drawn into the emerging Dada and Surrealist movements, Mesens became increasingly active in the arts, contributing to journals, staging exhibitions and running galleries, first in Brussels, then in Paris and London. For each of these phases, MuZee reconstructs the atmosphere of the time, presenting works that show Mesens' interests but also weaving in others for context, along

with journals, photographs and other ephemera. For example, alongside the Surrealists Mesens promoted in the 1920s are clusters of work by artists he was reacting against, such as the Flemish Expressionists and Constructivists. There is also a fascinating section on the work he and Magritte did in advertising during the same period. Meanwhile, the London International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936, which Mesens seems to have hijacked, is represented with work by the artists concerned, plus African masks of the kind he hung between paintings. If Mesens the artist remains minor in this exhibition, there is still some impressive work to be seen by others, such as Yves Tanguy, Magritte, Schwitters, Paul Delvaux and Modigliani. There are also some unexpected pleasures, including a rich selection of work by British surrealist Eileen Agar and Man Ray's "Seguidilla", a haunting airbrush painting from 1919.

Until 17 November | MuZee, Romestraat 11, Ostend | www.muzee.be

FAIR

Int'l Doll and Teddy Bear Show

Toy enthusiasts converge at this annual event to trade or simply show off their collections. You'll find historical dolls as well as brand-new, "reborn" pieces. Every bear has a tale to tell. The fair is also an occasion for collectors and amateurs alike to have their antiques restored by skilled doll doctors. Bruges' Belfry hosts the fair, giving it an even more whimsical flavour. Indeed, it's a good weekend to visit the fairy-tale metropolis. After a full day among the bears in the Belfry, you can partake of a scenic nocturnal promenade along the city's waterways where the Reieffest, or Feast on the Canals festival, is in full swing. **Georgio Valentino**

17 & 18 August
Belfry, Bruges

www.niesjewolters.nl



MORE FAIRS THIS WEEK

Knokke

Art Nocturne Knokke: Annual after-hours arts and antiques fair for casual buyers and experienced collectors alike
Until AUG 18 16.00-21.00 at CC Scharpoord, Meerlaan 32
www.artnocturneknocke.be

Mechelen

Dog Show: International all-breed show featuring on-going competition and judging, plus a market
AUG 18-20 at Nekkerhal, Nekkerspoel Borch
www.kvsvr.be

FESTIVAL

Druivenfeesten

Flemish gastro-tourism association Vlaanderen Lekkerland selected Overijse as one of its 2013 ambassadors for a reason. The Flemish Brabant town is situated in the heart of grape country. Belgian varieties, especially the Leopold III, are reputed for their quality (and price). In honour of their local crop, the townsfolk of Overijse throw an annual mid-season grape festival. Two dozen open-air concerts are spread out over nine days, with veteran Flemish singer Will Tura top of the bill. In addition to the street festival, there's an on-going grape exhibition, winery visits, tastings, cooking demonstrations and a market as well as nature walks and sport competitions. The highlight of Druivenfeesten is the Grape Parade and coronation of the year's Grape Queen (18 August), who will become the face of Overijse's grape industry. **GV**



17-25 August | Markthal, Overijse | www.druivenfeesten.be

MORE FESTIVALS THIS WEEK

Eeklo (East Flanders)

Herbakkersfestival: Free annual festival featuring concerts, street theatre, Sunday Brunch and more
AUG 16-18 at CC De Herbakker, Pastoor De Nevestraat 10
www.eeklo.be/herbakkersfestival

Ostend

Paulusfeesten: Free festival at the coast featuring street theatre, concerts and workshops, plus food & drink stands
Until AUG 18 on Paulusplein
www.paulusfeesten.be

Watou

Kunstenfestival Watou: Fifth annual summer arts festival featuring a creative blend of visual arts, poetry and music
Until SEP 1 at Marktplein 1
www.kunstenfestivalwatou.be

FAMILY

Science & Culture in the Palace

Every year the Royal Palace of Brussels (not to be confused with the Royal Palace of Laken, on the leafy outskirts of the capital) invites the public in for a free, month-long open house. The beautiful neoclassical building has been the Belgian sovereign’s office since the position was created in 1830, but the palace itself is even older than that. The earliest structure built on the site dates back to the Middle Ages. For all that, the royal family isn’t looking backward. The theme of this year’s open house is science and technology. The Science Policy Office is on-hand to explain their role in Belgian society. The event is also held in conjunction with the interactive exhibition *Aha* at Mechelen’s science centre Technopolis. There is a little room for nostalgia here, in the form of an exhibition of children’s drawings spanning the 20 years of King Albert II’s reign. **GV**



Until 8 September | Royal Palace, Brussels

► www.monarchie.be

MORE FAMILY ACTIVITIES THIS WEEK

Brussels

Mini-Europe by Night: Post-dusk visit to the park’s models of major landmarks, awash in lights, shadows and special effects
Until AUG 17 at Mini-Europe, Bruparck
► www.minieurope.eu

Ghent

Dansen in het Park: Free annual outdoor dance festival featuring performances, workshops and a children’s village all about dance
AUG 16-18 at Azaleapark, Achterstraat
► www.danseninhetpark.be

Holsbeek (Flemish Brabant)

Kasteelfestival: Medieval festival featuring castle tours and activities for knights and maidens, including painting, crossbow, weaving and jewellery making
AUG 15-18 10.00-18.00 at Castle van Horst, Horststraat 28
► www.pynnockriddershorst.be

PERFORMANCE

Gala of the Stars



The arts have always relied on one form of patronage or another. The bards of old were sponsored by kings and nobles. Monumental modern art was underwritten by wealthy investors. Today artists look to everyday aficionados. The Royal Ballet of Flanders and its fundraising arm Friends of the Ballet give you the chance to give them the chance to keep dancing. This international ballet gala features performers from the Stuttgart Ballet, the Dutch National Ballet and London’s James Cousins Dance Co, in addition to the Royal Ballet of Flanders (*pictured*). But the big star is you, *the benefactor*. You don’t have to be loaded to help keep the ballet in business. Tickets start from €25. But if you do happen to have more to spare, a donation of €250 will earn you the VIP treatment: the best seats in the house plus a buffet dinner, champagne reception and post-performance party. **GV**

17 October, 18.30 | Flemish Opera House, Antwerp

► www.tinyurl.com/balletgala

PERFORMANCES THIS WEEK

Abele (Poperinge)

Spel zonder de grens (Theatre without Borders): Walking theatre performance that leads the audience along 10 surprising corners of the West Flemish border village (in Dutch and French)
AUG 21-27 18.45 begin at ’t Kommiezenkot, Abeelseweg 183-185
► www.spelzonderdegrens.be

Knokke-Heist

Kooza: Cirque du Soleil show dedicated to acrobatics and clowns
Until AUG 18 next to the train station, Natiënlaan 1
► www.cirquedusoleil.com

Opera on the beach: Free open-air screenings of some of De Munt’s best productions, including Giacomo Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* and Jules Massenet’s *Don Quichotte*; seats provided, bring an optional cushion or blanket
AUG 22 & 29 21.00 at the beach at Nikkis World, Heldenplein
► www.tinyurl.com/operaonbeach

CAFÉ SPOTLIGHT

COBRA Gallery-Bar
Karthuizerstraat 1, Brussels

Sandwiched between the swanky Greenwich restaurant and the flagship Kartell design shop is a tiny haunt easily overlooked in a corner of Brussels known for its exclusive boutiques, fine-dining establishments and the trendy crowd drawn by both. Amid all that Dansaert hustle-and-bustle, COBRA Gallery-Bar breaks the mould because everything about it feels so understated, so familiar, so normal. If you like your bars unpretentious yet cosy, this is where you need to be. With its worn living room interior, low ceilings and dim lighting, COBRA offers a welcome escape from the racket of the nearby



Sint-Goriks cafes. Though it looks deceptively small from the outside, COBRA actually boasts two floors. Climb to the top one, settle

into one of the faded couches and enjoy the view offered by the huge glass shopfront (that is, if you can handle the dizzyingly narrow staircase). I must have walked past it umpteen times, but I only discovered COBRA last year on a late Friday evening. My friends and I couldn’t get a seat at the nearby Lord Byron, so we decided to try our luck at the little place just across the street. I remember feeling like I had hit the jackpot as I crossed the threshold. COBRA recently celebrated its 22nd birthday, and I doubt that, beyond an expanded menu, much has changed since the ’90s. You will

find no conversation-crushing music here, no lip service to the latest drinking fad, no carefully selected retro decor. I’ve also heard that it is one of the few places in town where you can get a decent Scotch. Owner Fitim Pagarusha makes a great host, but COBRA’s secret weapon is the endearing 20-something West Fleming who runs the bar on most evenings. Serving patrons with a warm attentiveness that is hard to come by in most venues in this area, he makes every visit to COBRA feel like a homecoming. COBRA is quite simply Dansaert’s only real neighbourhood bar.

Linda A Thompson

BITE

Robyn Boyle

de Vitrine ★★☆☆

It's located in one of central Ghent's seedier neighbourhoods, the little-known red-light district, but de Vitrine is one of the finest restaurants in the city. Its name, meaning "the window", is a double entendre that refers as much to the building's history as a butchery as to its friendly neighbours behind glass.

Lest you be deterred, upon opening just over two years ago, star chef Kobe Desramaults transformed the interior into a classy place. The former butcher's shop at the front is an ideal spot to enjoy an *aperitif* at the bar while waiting for your table. We've reserved for the first dinner shift, which starts promptly at 18.30. (The second at 21.00).

My partner and I wait at the bar for our dining companions and enjoy two tall glasses of Kriek Boon. The sour cherry lambic beer makes for a tart and refreshing choice on this warm summer evening.

When the rest of our party arrives, we transfer to the dining area at the back, which is a long, snug room lined with no more than 12 tables and blessed with a lot of sky lighting and a distinct 19th-century feel. The atmosphere is good from the very start, with a handful of relaxed yet extremely professional servers taking turns jotting down our orders and delivering a



knowledgeable response to each of our questions.

While Flemish Foodie Desramaults is not often present in this kitchen – he also owns Michelin-starred In De Wulf in West Flanders – he does plan the menus, which change every three weeks. Vitrine chef Matthias Speybrouck executes them with obvious skill. While extolling the virtues of the fresh crusty bread on our table, we all agree to order the four-course menu for €45.

This month's seasonal menu includes a starter of lobster from the Eastern Scheldt estuary in Zeeland. The meat, whitish pink and tender, is accentuated with diced cucumber and celery, dots of tangy lemon gelée and a few pretty leaves of Indian cress and edible flowers.

This is followed by an additional starter: *bouchot* mussels with pointed cabbage and milk whey. Not only is it perfectly in line with the season, but the dish surprises as the best on the menu. This culture of French mussels is farmed for its robustness and soft, sweet flavour. The chunk of pointed cabbage has been broiled until tender, and its earthy flavour is brought out by a drizzling of pale yellow milk whey.

Our main dish features a slab of Holstein entrecote, cooked *saignant* – otherwise

known as rather bloody – with a side of braised green onion and succulent bone marrow. The beef from this breed of dairy cattle is known for its tenderness, and this cut is no exception.

Afterwards, my companions order a cheese platter, while I opt for the strawberry dessert. Plump specimens of the juicy fruit come with slices of baba, or rum sponge cake, and an elderberry sorbet. We enjoy our cappuccinos and espressos on the bench out front, seeing as we've overstayed our welcome and overlapped into the second dinner shift.

Including all the pre- and post-dinner drinks plus two bottles of wine, the bill comes to about €300. When divided four ways, it's a fair price for our four hour dining excursion.

www.de-vitrine.be

- 📍 Brabantdam 134, Ghent; 09.336.28.08
- 🕒 12.00-14.00 & 18.30 or 21.00 Tue-Fri; 18.30 or 21.00 Sat
- 💶 €24-€55 for the three, four or five-course menu
- 📖 Gastronomic cuisine served in an easy-going bistro with vintage appeal

TALKING DUTCH

Derek Blyth

By any other name

Most parents have long discussions deep into the night before they agree on a name for their newborn child. It might be that one parent has a soft spot for Kylie, while the other roots for Kate. Or they spend a week trying out different options before deciding that George is really the only sensible choice for a baby boy born in 2013.

But it could get a lot more stressful for future parents following a new law introduced by federal justice minister Annemie Turtelboom. *Ouders kunnen binnenkort kiezen of ze hun kinderen de familienaam van de vader, van de moeder of van allebei meegeven* – parents will soon be allowed to decide on whether they want the child to have the father's surname, or the mother's, or both.

The existing law is simple, she told *Het Laatste Nieuws*. *Pasgeboren kinderen krijgen op dit moment normal gezien enkel de familienaam van hun vader mee bij de geboorte*. At the moment, babies are usually just given the surname of the father at birth. *En dat al sinds de dertiende eeuw*. Which has been the case since the 13th century.

But Turtelboom wants to bring an end to this custom dating back to the time of Flemish knights and wandering minstrels. *Vrijheid is een belangrijke waarde in onze samenleving*, freedom is an important value in our society,



Wake me when you decide

she says. So she wants parents to be allowed to give a baby either surname, or both.

It makes perfect sense, but it could make things much more complicated for the parents. In the old days, they just had to battle it out over Christian names. Do we call a boy David in honour of Beckham? Or do we call a girl Jennifer in the hope that she will become a cute movie star?

But now parents have to run through the different combinations. Mother's surname? No, that will annoy the father's family. Father's

surname? No, that will look like we are still living in the 13th century. Both names? Much better, but a bit tedious when filling out online forms.

But then what will happen in future when each couple brings two names to the baby naming discussion? One newspaper has worked out that there could be as many as 12 different combinations.

It used to take parents a lot of time to choose one Christian name from all the possibilities. But they are soon going to be arguing long into the night about which surname to adopt, too.

The last word...

The devil's in the detail

"Anything that's popular gets counterfeited. Now that the Red Devils are popular again, the fakes are springing up like mushrooms after the rain."

Chantal De Pauw of the federal economy ministry on the growing business in knock-off football memorabilia

Cold comfort

"I think I'm going to sell it. I only just bought a house in Belgium."

West-Flemish cyclist Stijn Neyrinck won a plot of land at the North Pole for his performance in the Arctic Race

Highway robbery

"Normally we'd have filed a complaint, but against whom? Sometimes you have to be a little bit creative if you want the law to do its job."

Police in Bruges held up three buses full of Polish football supporters until they had coughed up enough cash to compensate a supermarket owner whose shop they had wrecked

Local hero

"Force cannot be eliminated, and it is the only real and unanswerable power. We are told that the pen is mightier than the sword, but I know which of these weapons I would choose."

The entry on Brussels-born general Adrian Carton de Wiart (1880-1963) has been voted the most exciting article on Wikipedia

NEXT WEEK IN FLANDERS TODAY

Cover story

Have you about half given up trying to recycle because you can't seem to get it right? If you have been the victim of the dreaded sticker with its vague information slapped on your blue PMD bag, look no further than next week's issue to find out where your recycling goes in Flanders and how you need to prepare it

Business

Trends change, which can make or break business in a specific industry at a certain time. Popular beers are now using hops, for instance, that are not the kind that come out of West Flanders. We look at the ambitions of the local hops business and its likelihood of success in the coming years

Living

A popular theme in urban culture has always been: What's behind those closed doors? Well, the average Brussels resident would be amazed at what's atop the unsightly concrete multi-storey car park on Vlaamsesteenweg: Fruit trees, flowers in abundance and bee hives. We'll tell you why