

Brasserie in Brussels

Changing trains in Brussels when traveling between Cologne and London is always a pain so it is nice to take some “time out” at Brussels Midi ...

We went off to browse around a local flea market and popped into an old, independent restaurant that we like: The food is down-to-earth and not expensive with a full range of traditional Belgian dishes.

This time we were doubly blessed as, among the staff and the guests, we spotted at least one Jacques Brel and several who could have been characters from a Tintin story.

Spending a couple of hours in “the real world” put us in a very good mood so the intimidating Eurostar check-in (with airline-procedures) didn’t irritate me quite so much as it normal does.

Then, after that pleasant interlude, we arrived at our hotel in Croydon, looking forward to our time there. But, at that point, the “the modern world” kicked in with us having trouble getting into the lobby and then having to struggle through complicated and intrusive screen-based check-in procedures. Staff were available with their job being to guide “idiot-guests” through check-in. Of course we felt like idiots.

So there we have it: “The Real-World” is dying and being replaced by screens and algorithms. I work with computers and have nothing against them, but, when it is the people who are serving the machines (rather than vice-versa) as was the case at the hotel, I really think that humanity needs to pause to re-consider where we want things to go.

Basil

BBC-Radio 4’s “Farming Today” (22nd April 2026) covered the topic of “vertical farming” where crops, in this case the herb basil, can be grown in “stacks”. Very interesting and certainly a useful concept. But it was something else which caught my attention ...

The interviewee mentioned that this method would help prevent fuel shortages because, at the moment the basil is being flown in by Jumbo-jet from Nairobi.

That made my jaw drop: We are threatened by climate change and now, through war, an energy crisis ... but we are freighting in luxury and non-essential items by air-freight!

This is simply madness because in one fell swoop this practice massively negates all other environmental efforts that we purport to be making.

Going Dutch

I recently took a train from Rotterdam and, having a prepaid ticket, could pass through the barrier onto the platform. But, while queuing, I heard an official explaining to one passenger that the ticket that they needed to get would cost them €1.60 extra from a machine or from the ticket-desk. This charge does not apply to tickets bought with the “App”.

Here I reflected on all the laws that we have to help handicapped people (e.g. requirements to fit ramps, lifts and other aids) comparing this to “digitalisation” where aggressive moves away from “analogue mechanisms” (like this surcharge) will seriously compromise the old and the disabled.

I would say that we need a law which guarantees that an “analogue path” should ALWAYS be available and that this should never be more expensive than the digital one.

Petersberg Climate-talks

Every year Germany hosts the Petersberg Climate Talks (originally held on the Petersberg near Bonn).

At these talks Chancellor Merz spoke in praise of Germany’s “climate credentials” but said that this could not be at the cost of the economy.

On the same day he spoke about Germany expanding its military with personnel set to increase from 80 thousand to 210 or even 260. Certainly ambitious.

For me these statements raised several questions ...

How can anyone reconcile (in any way!) “The Military” with climate protection? Both war and the preparation for war involve massive emissions (and death and destruction).

And, with “the economy”, what exactly are we talking about here? As far as I can see The West has offshored most of its manufacturing to far-off countries (where the emissions occur!) and then freights (also by air) these goods in. Actions which carry massive carbon footprints.

In carnival here in Cologne there is an ironic “cheer” which is tagged on to every statement. This is the word “Alaaf!”. So, all I can say is “Climate Talks Alaaf!”.

Data-centers

France Inter (radio) reported that France is pushing ahead with a radical expansion of data-centers while

Ireland was considering a moratorium ... because of a shortage of electricity!

To me this seems a strange comparison to make. Indeed, rather than making comparisons, surely we should be drawing conclusions and considering steps to put the brakes on these energy-hungry monstrosities (the data-centers).

Of course people will say that they intend to use “renewable power” but surely renewables should first be reserved for schools and hospitals rather than for people to generate flippant (and sometimes pornographic) images and poems about their favourite slippers.

The team at France Inter did make one very interesting point: They pondered where we would get the electricity for other uses (e.g. heating and transport), if it is all being gobbled up by A.I.?

90 Billion Euros

A bizarre piece of news flashed through the media (e.g. Euronews): This was that, because Hungary will now receive supplies of Russian oil through Ukraine, a loan of 90 billion euros will be released to Ukraine.

You have to ponder this for a moment to realise how weird it is ... on a number of levels:

First it is strange that this means that money will now be flowing from Europe to both Ukraine AND Russia.

Next is the fact that this “deal” was arranged to placate Orban. Orban has now been voted out so why is the oil link-up still going ahead? Maybe, at the end of the day, we (the consumers) want it and are hoping to blame it on Orban?

For years people have been saying that Orban was “undemocratic” but now, after an election, he seems to be going quietly. That seems quite democratic to me.

Even now (in 2025) Ukraine is way down in Transparency International’s Corruption Index, ranking 104 behind Gambia, Lesotho and Zambia. So chances are that a good part of those 90 billion Euros will leak out, melt away and end up in private accounts in Zürich.

The massive debt that Ukraine has taken on mean that, after the war, it will be a complete vassal to its creditors ... with Europe keen to Hoover up rare earths and whatever other resources it can get its hands on.

This thing makes me think that there are a whole lot of vested interests sloshing about under the surface. No good will come of it.

Trolley- and Battery- Buses

In Rotterdam I noticed an electric bus at a special bus-stop charging its batteries. The same system is being installed here in Cologne too.

That all seems great but are battery-buses really what we want and need?

My brother recently bought a small electric van (seating-capacity 5). This not-very-large vehicle needs a battery which weighs 700 kilos: Over two thirds of a tonne! So how heavy will those battery-buses be?

This puts a massive extra strain on the tires, axles, suspension, steering ... and on the roads. So imagine an accident with a bus of that weight: It will certainly mash up any smaller vehicle.

And lithium batteries are highly flammable so I wonder how long it will be before one of these buses goes up in a ball of flames.

The irony of this is that the world has had electric buses since 1911 ... running on overhead wires! It is very simple technology. And indeed, I am sure that with a little imagination you could have a hybrid arrangement where, for most of the route, power comes from overhead cables and, at tricky junctions, the bus disengages and trundles on for a few metres under its own power.

Rotterdam

We recently took the ferry from Hull to Rotterdam and, as the ferry cruised along the Humber out to the North Sea, we had a panorama view of a number of oil processing facilities ... with a strong smell of sulfur wafting in.

This was interesting but the arrival at Rotterdam simply blew my mind: On the approach to the harbour- entrance there were swarms of other vessels (large tankers, freighters and container-ships) all around. With a smattering of wind-turbines on the horizon.

Then there was our passage through the harbour to the quay: Chugging on for well over an hour with oil- and chemical- processing plants and storage tanks on both sides ... as far as the eye could see!

After that, on the transfer bus, for a further 25 minutes we drove past similar industrial facilities ... until we reached Rotterdam itself.

At various points there were groups of wind turbines which are great. But, when I compare this “drop in the ocean” to the oil-processing plants, my heart sinks.