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MUSSELS IN BRUSSELS A SINGLE PARENT TALE OF THANKSGIVING

The idea came to my head when the Sabena Airline representative visited my office and told me about their irresistibly low off-season fare to Brussels. Sofitel had offered me some complimentary hotel nights in return for some business I brought to their doorstep. I had never been to Belgium. The light bulb went on.

Thanksgiving was two weeks away. My ex was taking our teen-age son to visit his family so I called my daughter at work and invited her to spend Thanksgiving week with me in Europe. She agreed but insisted on having an afternoon Thanksgiving dinner with her friends in Manhattan and suggested we fly out Thanksgiving night. "Alright," I said, "but that leaves me turkey-less. I won't have time for dinner, not with my commute to JFK Airport." "Not to worry, Mom," replied my daughter. "Just arrive early and bring your appetite."

Thanksgiving evening I found my daughter at the Sabena gate, with a large plastic bag in hand. We checked in for our flight and sat down at a nearby café. I ordered coffee, opened her bag, and slowly unwrapped eight plastic containers, which held a complete homemade Thanksgiving dinner, right down to the pumpkin pie! It was an offbeat beginning to what would be an offbeat trip.

I had hastily planned a ten day circle driving trip to all the little "pockets" of Europe we had never visited: Bruges, (Belgium). Heidelberg (Germany), Maastricht (Holland), Strasbourg (France), and Luxembourg City. Bruges, our first stop, instantly became one of our favorite cities in Europe. Immersed in history and medieval flavor, walking through its winding streets was like being transported hundreds of years back in time. A relaxing mid-afternoon canal boat ride provided another interesting perspective on this enchanting town.

Having vacationed the previous five years with my kids in third-world countries, we encountered sticker shock when we ordered our first meal. Not exactly what we had budgeted for. We decided to eat light two nights in a row (a sandwich or bowl of soup), and then have a formal European meal every third night, thus saving calories and money.

Midway through the trip we were feeling pretty satisfied with ourselves, “smooth, suave, sophisticated” travelers that we were. We were on budget, on schedule, and successfully negotiating our way about the towns and cities. We had even packed the right clothes for the chilly Northern European November weather. Then we encountered our first public parking garage.

Planning to spend about four hours in Maastricht, en route to our next stop, we pulled into a self-service parking garage in the center of town. Unable to find a parking space after ten minutes of searching, we returned to the exit. As we lined up our car next to the automated departure gate, we realized the machine would not make change, nor would it accept a higher amount as payment. Leave it to the Dutch. It had to be the exact amount. By now four cars had lined up behind us. I sent my daughter scurrying down the street to get change but it was still early morning and the shops were not open. She returned moments later, unsuccessful in her mission. Now there were eight cars behind us. My daughter went down the car line begging for small coins. At the last car she secured the required coin and ran back to the machine only to discover that enough time had passed so that it needed another coin. By this time I was considering the consequences of ramming our way through the gate. Dutch jails should be clean, I thought. Suddenly a man from behind us stepped out of his car, ran a card through the machine and the gate miraculously went up. After a quick “Dank U” we sped off. So much for suaveness.

Friday night we pulled into Brussels, our last stop. Tired from driving, I was happy to park the car at a nearby garage and spend the next day strolling about town. Having stuck to our budget diet plan for the past week, we splurged the next twenty-four hours. Belgium is world-famous for its chocolates, which are not only decadently delicious, but also works of art. It seemed like there was a chocolate shop on every corner. I think we sampled every single one.

Saturday night we took in a movie at the local mall preceded by a scrumptious dinner. Only in Europe do you find white tablecloth restaurants in a mall, only a few steps away from a movie theatre. We each ordered mussels that arrived steaming hot in large black cast-iron pots. Until you have had mussels in Brussels, trust me, you have never had mussels. There were so many of them we had to hurry through the meal, singeing our fingers, in order to consume every one of these succulent morsels and still get to the movie on time. The cinema was another unusual experience as it was the only time we viewed an English-speaking movie sub-titled in two languages (French and Flemish).

Sunday morning we decided to leave extra early for the airport. Smugly armed with a pocketful of small change, we headed toward the parking garage. To our horror, the garage was sealed shut. There was a little sign to the right I hadn't noticed when I parked the car that said on Sunday the garage opens at noon. It was now 9:00am and our flight home departed at 1:00pm. We dashed back to the hotel and secured their help in contacting a garage attendant who “volunteered” to open the garage for a fee. I

had a gnawing feeling that this had happened to other travelers. One hour later and \$60 poorer, we were driving our car to the airport. Another lesson learned: Read all signs, no matter how little. At least there would still be time to relax before our flight, I thought.

As we approached the airport there were no signs guiding us to the Budget Rent A Car drop off area. In fact there were no signs guiding anyone to any rental car area. Forced to exit the airport onto the highway, we circled around for another pass. No luck. On the third try we ducked into one of the unmarked parking buildings, which we quickly discovered was the magic portal. Another lesson learned: When an airport is under construction, ask for return directions when you pick up your car.

As we boarded our flight, I thanked the travel gods for getting us to the gate on time. We had learned some hard lessons about European parking garages. We vowed not to tell "the guys" (Dad and her brother) but there was one lesson we would share with everyone: When in Brussels, always order mussels.