



CHASING TINTIN

Tintin was a lucky chap. He travelled the world while his bills magically paid themselves. Adventures landed in his lap. His dog was superbly house-trained. He flew to the moon. And the evergreen Belgian could call edgy, underrated Brussels his hometown. By Richard Asher.

Yes, Brussels is actually a great place. Some may like to knock it, along with the rest of Belgium, but they forget what a diverse, undiscovered, yet oddly familiar, place it is. As in South Africa, you can cross a town only to find they're speaking another language. And it could well be Flemish, Afrikaans' closest living relative. Furthermore, there's no evidence to suggest that Brussels sprouts really came from Brussels. Instead, think beer. Chocolate. Waffles. Raspberry beer.

Mussels. The Smurfs. Cherry beer. The world's greatest *slap* chips. And Tintin. Such a bad place? Really? Okay, so maybe it's true that Belgium's top celebrity is a comic-book character. After all, this is a country that doesn't even need a president: it recently functioned without a government for well over a year because they couldn't agree on forming a coalition. We can't help thinking Tintin would have banged their heads together, were he still around. Sadly, Tintin has long since retired.

His long career came to an end in 1983, having begun all the way back in 1929. While Brussels is hardly made explicit as his hometown in the books, there's no doubting that the quiffed one was a patriotic citizen of the Belgian capital. His creator, Hergé (real name Georges Remi), was a born and bred, French-speaking *Bruxellois*. As was Tintin. The volumes are littered with city landmarks anybody can visit, comic book in hand. For a Tintin fan, Brussels is *the* pilgrimage.

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THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The budget traveller may be lucky enough to find a free bed in some parts of town; Tintin and Captain Haddock make their presence felt on Rue de l'Étuve; the central square in Brussels known as Grand Place is one of the city's most popular tourist destinations; don't leave Brussels without treating yourself to a traditional thick, crispy waffle topped with cream and fruit.



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First, a little history

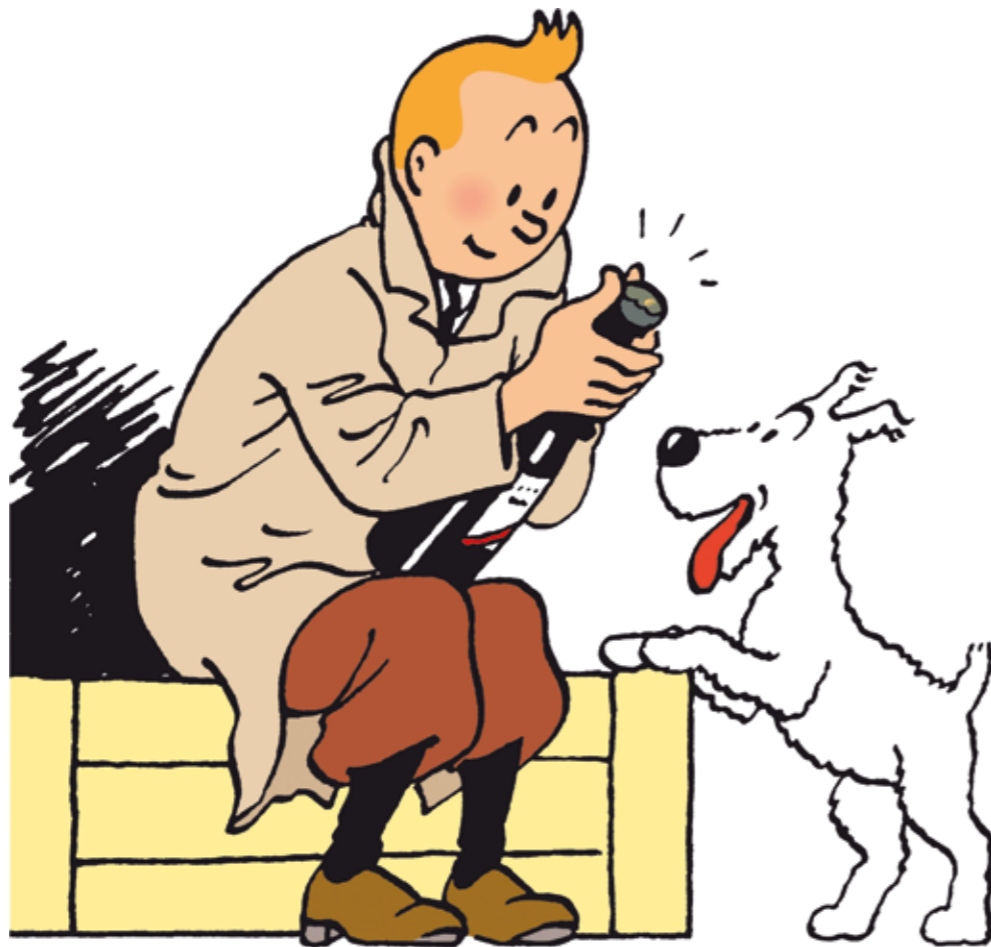
Tintin began as a weekly children's serial in *Le Vingtième Siècle*, a Brussels newspaper. The very first adventure, 'Tintin in the Land of the Soviets', began on 10 January 1929 and sees the young reporter head to Russia to find out all about the Bolshevik baddies. It's black-and-white, slapstick, unrecognisably haphazard and still something of a collector's item, but it's definitely Tintin. And Hergé's readers (not just kids, then as now) really took to the young man with the little white Scottie. So



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much so, that a vast crowd gathered when the newspaper (and a Tintinesque actor) staged the hero's 'return' from the USSR to coincide with the end of the serial.

Several adventures later, the Nazis rolled into Brussels, and Hergé was forced to move Tintin – still a weekly serial – into the German-controlled *Le Soir* newspaper. After Belgium's liberation, Tintin moved to his own magazine as Hergé began to work more with the final book products in mind. By the 1960s, with the early books having been coloured and translated into many languages, Hergé began to tire of the demands of Tintin. His production rate slowed, and only three completed books emerged after the 1960 classic *Tintin in Tibet*. When Hergé died in 1983, he was working (at glacial speed) on *Tintin and Alph-Art*, a series of draft sketches around an art thievery plot. We'll never know how that adventure would have panned out, but there's a certain charm in that.



The unofficial Tintin heritage trail

When embarking on your Tintin trek through Brussels, allow at least three days, as the sites are scattered over a large area.

If you have more time, so much the better. The city's non-Tintin delights need attention too, and you'll pass most of them on your way around.

If you're arriving by rail from Paris or London, you're likely to pull into town at the Gare du Midi. Straight away, Tintin makes his presence felt.

There's a mural – a scene from *Tintin in America* – just inside one of the entrances. Step outside, look up and to your right, and there he is again, gazing out from the top of Le Lombard on Avenue Paul-Henri Spaak, where *Tintin* magazine was once published.

But the logical place to really get going is at

the house in which Hergé was born, and survived a childhood said to have been 'unbelievably dull'. The address you want is 33 Rue Philippe Baucq, Etterbeek, where there's a plaque on the wall to 'Tintin's spiritual father'. Situated in the heart of old-school suburbia in the city's southeast, you'll find it next to the funeral parlour.

Moving from the birth of Hergé to the birth of Tintin, you might want to cross town towards Gare de Bruxelles-Nord. Or, to be precise, to the nearby Place Rogier, where the original station building stood until 1955. The very first scene from the very first book is set here, as Tintin boards a train headed for Moscow. He promises his editor (this is the only book in which he really appears to be a working reporter) that he'll send vodka and caviar, before falling asleep in his compartment.

The Place Rogier is also where the staged homecoming took place to wild acclaim more than a year after that first episode. It looks a lot different now, though, so you'll need some imagination. While you're here, you'll also notice a Dutch-style red-



light district next to the existing Gare de Bruxelles-Nord. Like we said, Brussels has its gritty side.

Now that you've paid homage to the origins of Tintin and his creator, the sequence doesn't matter all that much. But there are relevant museums, which you may want to do before you go any further. One is the Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée

Step outside, look up and to your right, and there he is again, gazing out from the top of the Le Lombard offices on Avenue Paul-Henri Spaak, where Tintin magazine was once published



Watch *The Secret of the Unicorn*

Tintin movies invariably divide opinion. For many, the idea of bringing a comic-strip character to life on screen doesn't sit well. So Steven Spielberg had a challenge on his hands when he made *The Secret of the Unicorn*.

It wasn't a complete disaster. The graphic geeks were reasonably faithful to the characters' appearances, and the voices aren't as cringe-worthy as they might be – at least they don't speak with American accents. Although Spielberg did meddle with the plot by splicing together elements of two separate books, it's still entertaining.

But the film's over-the-top, unrealistic antics drew vitriol. Tintin books were rooted in a reality that went beyond Hergé's accurate depictions of Brussels. Tintin may have enjoyed a greater share of fortune and adventure than most of us, but nothing that happened to him was physically improbable or outlandish. Not so for Spielberg, who allowed the computer show-offs to run amok creating chase scenes featuring buildings that move.

The film hit SA cinemas in December 2011 and is available on DVD.

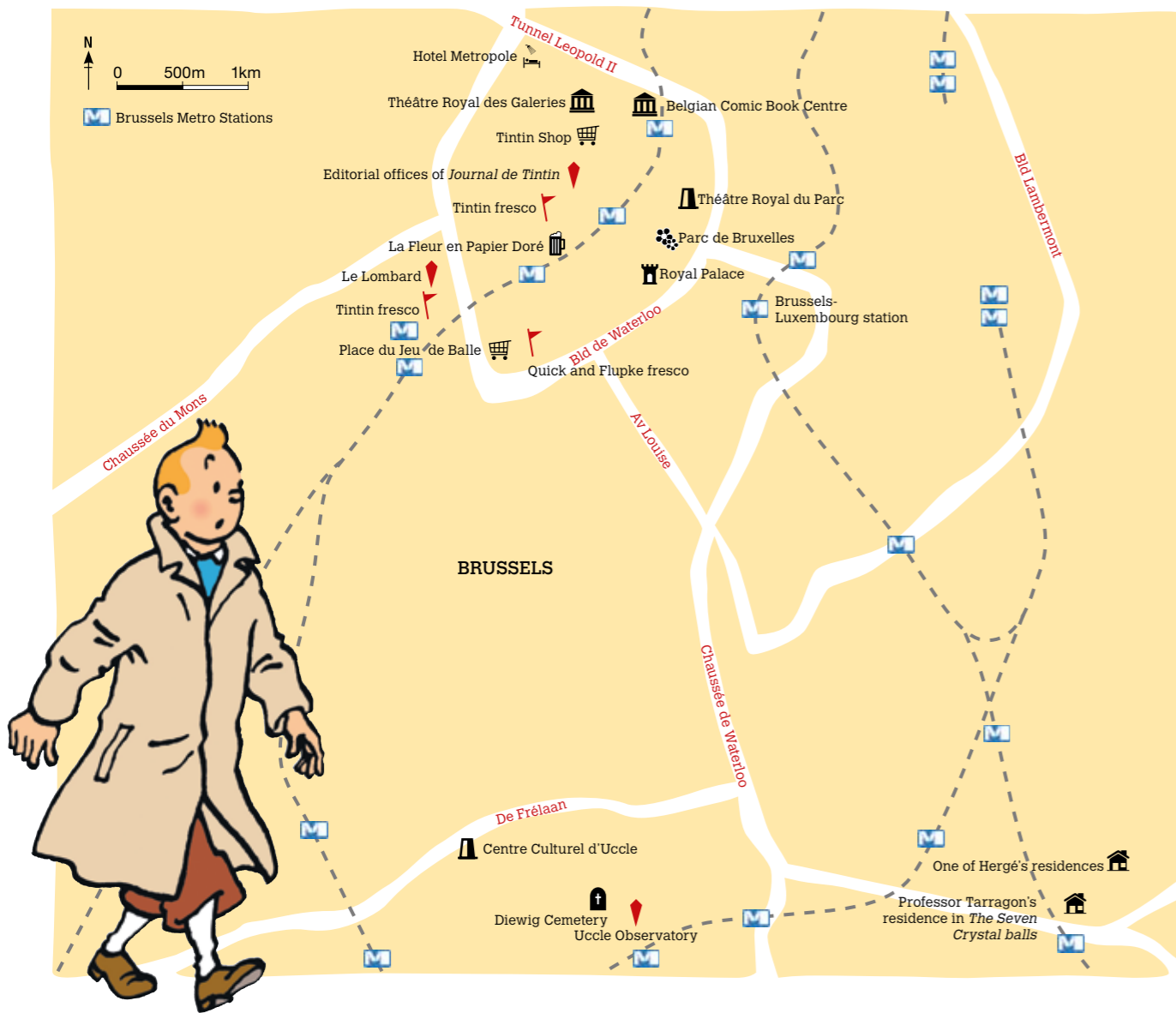
ABOVE: Tintin and Snowy look down on the streets of Brussels from atop the Le Lombard offices. BELOW LEFT: City restaurants spill onto sidewalks and pavements bustle with pedestrians.

(the Belgian Comic Strip Centre) on Rue des Sables. This city-centre museum is unmissable for comic-book junkies, but isn't exclusively devoted to Tintin. Same goes for the quirkier Museum of Original Figurines on Boulevard Auguste Reyers. If you want a devoted Tintin museum, there is the modernistic Musée Hergé, founded by Hergé's widow Fanny. This is well out of town at Louvain-la-Neuve, however, which takes an hour on the train. If you want to make hiring a car for a day worthwhile, you could dovetail it with a trip to nearby Waterloo. Bear in mind that all the museums are closed on Mondays.

But if you find museums stuffy, you could easily give them a skip. You're here to follow in the real-life footsteps of Tintin, after all. For that, there's no better place than the Place du Jeu de Balle in the Marolles district. This is the unmistakable inspiration for the opening scenes of *The Secret of the Unicorn* – both the original book and the recent Steven Spielberg movie. What makes this cosy open-air

market so special is that it seems to have changed little since Hergé drew it in the 1940s. The vendor demographic may have evolved, but the bric-a-brac on sale (think headless dummies, old gramophones and amusing African masks) is straight from the pages of *Tintin*. Ditto some of the shoppers showing off equally dated wardrobes. Dating back to 1873, the place seems lost in time. Remember your camera, and your copy of *The Secret of the Unicorn*.

Nearby is another essential pilgrimage, Rue Terre-Neuve. It has been speculated that this is the inspiration for the fictional Labrador Road, where Tintin resided at number 26. Take a look, and judge for yourself. Also within walking distance is the busy, fashionable Avenue Louise, home to Hergé's former studios at number 162, where the Hergé Foundation is now housed. Avenue Louise is also recognisable in various frames from Tintin's 'home' adventures. Avenue de la Toison d'Or, which meets Avenue Louise near the Louise metro station, is said to be the street on



which Tintin and Captain Haddock walk on page one of *The Calculus Affair*.

If you want to dive headlong into the pages of a Tintin adventure, your best bet is the Parc de Bruxelles. This is where Tintin (quite typically) finds his innocent stroll turning into a full-blown international mystery after he finds a suitcase on one of the park benches. And you won't be judged if you can't resist recreating that scene from *King Ottokar's Sceptre* with a photo of your own bag on a bench.

The Royal Palace, on the southern fringe of the park, bears striking similarities to the Syldavian king's residence seen later in the same book. At the other end of the

park you'll find the Théâtre Royal du Parc, which features at the start of *The Seven Crystal Balls*. Book a show by all means, but don't try charging onto the stage stuck inside a cow's head. Captain Haddock gave that a bash, but it didn't end well...

If all of this is too much walking, treat yourself to a metro ride. You need to go all the way to Stokkel, at the end of the inspirationally named Line 1B. Here you'll find your train pulling in alongside a remarkable mural running the full length of the platform. Planned by Hergé himself, it features 140 familiar characters and is an absolute hoot. Just make sure there is no staff around when you take pictures – they

don't like photography in stations.

Itching to see the Grand Place? Do it now. This is one square that really does live up to its billing. Even if you're not an architecture fan, you can't help but admire such shiny buildings. Handily, the tourist office is also here. They're pretty tuned in to the whole Tintin thing, so ask them for a *Tintin in Brussels* or *Comic Strip Trail* map. While you're here, you'll also have to visit the Tintin shop, which is just around the corner on Rue de la Colline. If you're looking for an original black and white version of *Tintin in America*, or the post-humorous edition of *Tintin and Alph-Art*, this is the place to get it.



There's more to Brussels than Tintin

If you've been dragged to Brussels by somebody who is more of a Tintinophile than you are, fear not, because there's plenty else on offer. Don't forget this isn't only the capital of Belgium, but also the continent. Yet amid all the European Union pomp lies arguably the least pretentious of Europe's capitals. Away from the grandeur of the Grand Place, it's rough around the edges and decidedly lived-in. Not everything is clean. Not everything works. But some of that is borne of the Belgians' famous indifference to the existence of their country, a cultural phenomenon quite unique in Europe.

Like Cape Town or Johannesburg, the city is linguistically divided, Flemish and French (aka Walloon) quarters are scattered about with no real logic. And like Cape Town or Joburg, you're never far from somebody Congolese. It's hard to know what language to say good morning in, which is kind of fun.



Further south is another mural, on Rue de l'Étuve. This is a clever rendition of a fire-escape scene from *The Calculus Affair*. Also nearby is *La Fleur en Papier Doré* – a *gueuze* (beer) at this appealingly cramped public house is compulsory drinking. Supposedly the city's oldest bar, Hergé himself was a regular here.

You have one more cluster of sights to visit. Take tram 94 to Boisfort and head to number six Avenue Delleur. You should recognise this house as that of the bearded Professor Tarragon from *The Seven Crystal Balls*. Yes, this is where the spooky Inca mummy, Rascar Capac, jumps through the

windows in the middle of the night, shattering glass all over the place.

Clearly Hergé didn't like to travel far for inspiration. Up the road at number 17, you'll find the house where the artist lived and worked from 1939 to 1953. From here, head west (it's a bit of a walk, so you may prefer public transport) to the Uccle area. On the giant circular road called Avenue Circulaire, you'll find the Uccle Observatory, as seen in *The Shooting Star*.

Just one stop remains: Hergé's grave. Head a few hundred metres off the giant roundabout, down Dieweg, and you'll find Hergé resting in Dieweg Cemetery. Born, bred and buried in Brussels, Hergé and Tintin conspired to brighten the days of kids and grownups since 1929. The unlikely-est of double acts. Hats off to them both. ■

➔ **Travel planner overleaf**



ABOVE: Captain Haddock's antics in a cow's head, a highlight of the mural at Stokkel underground station. **TOP LEFT:** Tourists walk along Rue des Bouchers, known as Brussels' belly, with numerous cafés and restaurants offering all types of local and international cuisine. **TOP RIGHT:** The Koekelberg Basilica dominates the skyline north of the city centre.



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: In addition to being home to the world's most famous comic-book character, Brussels is also known for its delicious mussels, a giant traffic cone, the Manneken Pis statue and the throwback that is the Place du Jeu de Balle.

See the sights

Yes, Brussels is famous for its waffles and *frites*, but as the capital of a country that's home to 178 breweries, it's also one of the best beer cities in the world. So, if you're hunting for the legendary Belgian Trappist beers made by monks or the spontaneously fermented Lambic ale that's unique to the Brussels region, start at Moeder Lambic in Saint-Gilles (tel +32-2-544-1699) – and finish at Delirium Café in the Grand Place (www.deliriumcafe.be) which is undoubtedly one of the best beer bars in Europe.

You'll then have to find time to visit the city's most famous resident, Manneken Pis. Aside from his decidedly forthright pose, he also stands apart from regular statues by his tendency to dress up on occasion. Less well known is his equally uninhibited sister, Jeanneke Pis.

Watering the daisies in public isn't limited to statues – it's

something of a national sport, particularly if you're male. Visiting the urinal-up-against-a-church-wall at the Église Sainte Catherine is possibly the most authentic Belgian experience you can have – even if it's hard to imagine Tintin frequenting a stinky *pissoir*.

All of the above are to be found in the compact city centre, which is great for wandering around and discovering curious things you'd find only in Brussels – a giant orange-and-white sculpture of a traffic cone, anyone? But under no circumstances should you feel bogged down in the capital. One of the joys of Belgium is that it's ridiculously small. Vibey Antwerp, for example, is only about 40 minutes away by road or train. Despite the short trip, it's in the Flemish heartland and suddenly your *'Bonjours'* won't be so well received. Beautiful Bruges is equally accessible as a day trip, and the historic university town of Leuven is so close that it's effectively a suburb of Brussels.

Travel planner

Getting there

There are no direct flights from South Africa to Belgium, but there are dozens of ways to get there with only one stop. A return for under R7 000 is a good deal, and you could arrange a stopover in somewhere such as Egypt (EgyptAir), Turkey (Turkish Airlines) or Spain (Iberia).

If you'd rather keep the flights to a minimum and tailor your own stopover, simply take a direct flight to Paris, London or Amsterdam and hop on a train once you've had a look around. Brussels is only a couple of hours away from any of these holiday favourites, and there are loads of trains daily. Generally, it's cheaper to book the trains in advance, so visit www.eurostar.com (London), www.raileurope.co.uk (Paris) or www.ns.nl (Amsterdam). Be careful of opting for cheap, crack-of-dawn trains though: make sure there will be a way to reach the station at the relevant ungodly hour, unless you particularly enjoy sleeping on the doorstep of famous railway terminals.

Where to stay

☞ to ☞ For the budget traveller there's a hostel with Tintin connections. The **Sleep Well Hostel** on Rue de Damier has a couple of frescoes by Johan de Moor (son of Hergé's artistic sidekick Bob de Moor), who helped with the abortive *Tintin and Alph-Art*. It's €19.50 (about R199) for a bed in an eight-person dorm, and twin rooms go for €27 (about R276) a person sharing. Prices include breakfast. www.sleepwell.be.

☞ **Thon Hotel Bristol Stephanie** is another good choice for the discerning Tintinophile. Situated right on Avenue Louise, it features in *The Red Sea Sharks*. From €60 (about R614) a person. www.thonhotels.com.

☞ If money is no object, then **Hotel Amigo** on Rue de l'Amigo ticks both the location and Tintin boxes. Just a few steps away from Grand Place and

dozens of restaurants, the five-star establishment also has more than a few Tintin touches scattered about the rooms. The Tintin Collector Experience package includes a night's accommodation, buffet breakfast, tickets to the Hergé Museum, a box of Belgian chocolates and special Tintin gifts. The catch? Prices start from €243 (about R2 487) a person a night. www.hotelamigo.com.

☞ Also five stars, and with a Tintin appearance to its name (see page 20 of *The Seven Crystal Balls*), is the opulent **Hotel Metropole** on Place de la Brouckère. From €165 (about R1 689) a person. www.metropolehotel.com.

Note that Brussels hotels always slap you with an additional 'city tax' when you check out. Apparently they think it's clever to keep it as a farewell surprise for tourists rather than including it in the rate. Clarify the charge upon arrival.

When to go

Brussels in winter is a lot like Cape Town in winter. Brussels in summer is ... often much the same! It's all rather moderate, but with so much outdoor walking in prospect, the Tintin tourist has the best chance of sunshine from June to August. Just don't try ordering mussels at that time of year – they're strictly winter fare.

Where to eat

The year 2012 is a great time to be eating in Brussels, as the city celebrates its 'Brusselicious' food festival from March to September. But whenever you go, you'll find Tintin-themed dining options. **The Faubourg Saint Antoine bistro** in Schaarbeek is a compulsory stop for Tintinophiles. It's positively bursting with Tintin decorations. It's closed on weekends and most evenings, so your best bet is to make it a lunch stop. Tel +32-2-245-6394.

The Comics Cafe in the Place du Grand Sablon likes to think of itself as

a 'cartoon village' rather than merely a restaurant. Look out for the bronze Tintin statue. It's open till late, and has a bar too.

Tel +32-2-523-1323.

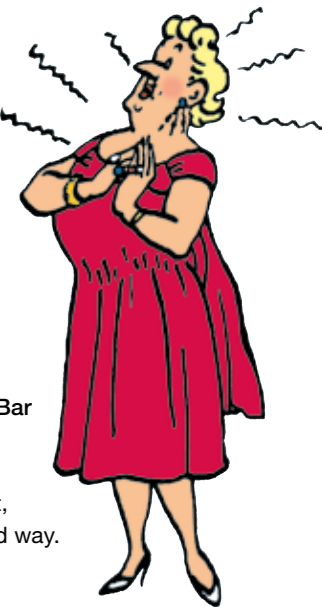
For a posh after-dinner drink, try the **Bar Dessiné** at the Hotel Radisson SAS. It's devoted to comic art, but in an understated way. Tel +32-2-219-2828.

What you'll need to get by

Brussels is not an expensive city by European measures. This is one place where you can eat cheap chips all day without tourist guilt; *frites* are the national food! You can pick up a reasonable tub for under €2 (about R20), washed down with a reasonably priced beer. If you're planning to visit a few museums and use public transport, it's a good idea to get yourself a Brussels card for 24, 48 or 72 hours. These offer free entry to museums, unlimited tube, tram and bus rides and various restaurant discounts. They cost €24, €34 and €40 (up to about R400) respectively. Book in advance at www.visitbrussels.be or get one at the tourist office on Grand Place.

Suggested reading

Ideally, read all of the Tintin adventures before you go. If you have to pick one, make it *The Secret of the Unicorn*. Reading some Tintin background won't hurt either. Try Michael Farr's *Tintin: The Complete Companion* (John Murray, London) or *Tintin: Hergé and his Creation* by Harry Thompson (John Murray, London). For a guide to the city, get hold of *The Rough Guide to Brussels* by Phil Lee and Martin Dunford (Rough Guides). ■



Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board ☞ under R250 ☞ R251 – R499 ☞ R500 – R750 ☞ R751 – R999 ☞ R1000+