



FRONTIER GUARDIAN.—Towering above the rooftops of the village, the Chateau de Vianden looks out from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg across the river to Germany.

BELGIUM ON A BUDGET

A January, 1947, Holiday in the Ardennes and Luxembourg with a 1¼-litre MG

Recalled by JOSEPH LOWREY

TWELVE months ago this week, lunching in a restaurant which contrives to exist in the middle of the Thames, I found myself in the crossfire of two conversations. On my left, a lady was telling the world that she would not dream of going to the winter sports with the Browns—of all the insanity, they were going off into all that snow by car. On my right, a hard-bitten gent was declaiming that he certainly was not going to have one of the new models; somebody else could find the faults of the design first.

Sitting back and saying nothing, I must have betrayed my thoughts by a smile, for I was suddenly questioned as to what was so ruddy funny about plain common sense I had to own up to the fact that the joke was on me, for I was about to fly furiously in the face of providence: not merely by leaving a snowy England for even colder parts of Europe, but by making the trip in a car so new that its public announcement remained several months ahead.

The trip really sprang from my incurable habit of putting two and two together. I was just pondering the attractions of a holiday from the winter drabness of London, when the MG Car Co. told us that their new 1¼-litre car was

ready for testing prior to public announcement of the model. A phone call to Hector Cox revealed that MG's were quite agreeable to the car's being taken abroad, so I quickly set the R.A.C. Foreign Touring Department to work on the formalities of tickets and Customs documents.

With rumours of a limited restoration of foreign currency allowances for tourists circulating fairly freely, suggesting the possibility of perhaps a £35 "basic" quota, it is interesting to look back on experiences of 12 months ago. At that time, travellers abroad were freely allowed £75 to spend during the year, but with both my mother and myself planning summer visits to the Alps, we determined to keep most of this amount in reserve for a later date. In actual fact, for a 10-day holiday trip covering just over 1,000 miles outside England, made at leisure with ample time to seek out the hotels and restaurants offering best value, we ultimately used only approximately £40 worth of foreign currency between us, plus about £25 of English money spent on tickets for ourselves and the car.

British motorists touring abroad are not infrequently heard to complain that the interesting scenery is reached only after

hundreds of miles of driving through relatively flat and unattractive country. Such people are usually thinking solely in terms of the Alps or the Riviera and overlook the nearer attractions of Belgium, which is indeed a land flowing with petrol and pork chops.

The Belgian Royal Mail service from Dover to Ostend offers one of the least expensive methods of taking a small car on to the European mainland, and I found no snag accompanying the moderate fares. The Customs formalities at Dover were transacted indoors, providing warmth which was welcome after a journey over embarrassingly snowbound roads, and the boat was comfortable enough to make a four-hour sea crossing pass quickly. At Ostend there were the inevitable passport and currency formalities, after which we retired to the adjacent station buffet to await unloading of the car.

Possessed of the 1¼-litre MG. once again, our first action was to fill up with petrol; the tank had not been drained for the crossing, but the prospect of unrationed fuel at the equivalent of 2s. 2d. per gallon had led me to hoard precious British coupons against our return home. The one-grade petrol of Belgium was murky and yellow in aspect, but, thanks to an admixture of locally produced benzol, offered rather better anti-knock characteristics than British "Pool" fluid. Starting properties I was unable to judge, as the MG. was a first-touch starter on any fuel even after nights spent standing out in a blizzard.

The Belgian coast is well favoured as a summer resort, but with young icebergs piled on the shore we were glad to press on inland. The medieval town of Bruges is only half-an-hour's journey inland, but even here frozen plumbing was afflicting the hotel and, after a magnificent lunch in Ghent, we pressed on to Brussels.

Window Shopping

To British eyes, the well-stocked shops of Brussels were an incredible sight, although even at a subsidized rate of exchange the prices were on the high side. Determined, however, to conserve our precious allowance of money for the summer ahead, we reminded one another of Customs officers waiting to charge import duties and purchase tax, and firmly resisted most of the temptations.

Even in an economical mood, the day and night brightness of Brussels appeals. Even more attractive, though, is Belgian food, vast meat meals and delicious cream pastries being taken as a matter of course in either large cities or peaceful country villages. Prices of food varied widely, of course, but with a little exploration most towns revealed restaurants offering a good "menu at 54 francs"—in other words, lunch plus a simple drink and the usual service charge for fractionally under 10s. per head. Less expensive meals were usually a doubtful economy in big towns, though possible in country districts, while the more obvious hotels and restaurants provided excellent food at much higher prices.

Attractive as the fine old towns of Flanders are, the touring ground of Belgium is the Ardennes district. West of the River Meuse the whole country is formed of rolling hills, which are thickly wooded in the north, intersected by rocky gorges farther south and occasionally undermined by vast natural caverns.

Starting just over 100 miles inland, the Ardennes country is so well provided with roads that there can be no set route for visitors. It is better to set off almost at random armed with 1/200,000th-scale Michelin maps (roughly 1 inch to 3 miles) and the names of a few places worthy of visiting, and to explore any by-way along which your fancy takes you.

Ways into the hills are somewhat more constrained by the available bridges over the Meuse. On this occasion we left Brussels by the Liege road bound for the northern Ardennes, and although we did not regret the choice, it is a route which cannot be universally recommended. The open, cobbled road has been badly battered by heavy traffic, so that the surface is in a very rough condition; not the place to take an old car, but with a well-sprung new model I enjoyed the drive, studying with interest the rear-axle cavortings of an independently sprung Continental car as I followed it at a steady 50 and ultimately accelerating past when the passenger began to find the outlook too frightening.

Liege is an industrial town sheltering in a series of deep valleys, and most tourists endeavour to pass straight through it. I use the word "endeavour," having repeatedly found the twisting, hilly and ill-signposted roads confusing, especially so since war destroyed some of the bridges.

The northern hills of the Ardennes, to which Liege is the gateway, are rolling and thickly clad in pinewoods. It is a pleasant countryside and the roads generally are good outside war-damaged areas, even if devious and lacking in signposts—an unusual complaint in Belgium, but perhaps deliberate in a district which bitter experience has shown to be sadly open to invasion. The principal resort in the area is Spa, known in motoring circles for its proximity to the Grand Prix circuit, a valley town well provided with hotels which has been lucky enough to escape major war damage. Malmédy, a little farther east, has been less fortunate, the towns and roads having suffered considerably, while nearer the German frontier



FLEMISH SURVIVOR.—The medieval city of Ghent is a magnificent reminder of the commercial importance of Flanders in days past.



TOPSY-TURVY.—To emerge from a tunnel and suddenly look down upon the church spires is typical of precipitous Luxembourg.

St. Vith has been rebuilt on lines of the starkest austerity following extermination so complete that scarcely a building remains in the original town, of which even the site has been abandoned.

The obvious alternative approach to the Ardennes, farther to the south, is by Namur, a town which combines scenic value with industrial importance. Guided by the map in an aged Baedeker guide, we succeeded in finding an amusing road which, turning off to the main riverside route behind the casino, zig-zags up a cliff, following a tram track which disappears into tunnels at each hairpin bend. Five hundred feet above the confluence of Meuse and Sambre rivers we reached an old fortress, then climbed farther up to reach the Chateau de Narnur, a summer-season hotel which commands an immense view.

The most attractive roads out of Namur are, not the direct hilltop route towards Marche and Luxembourg, but rather the two valley roads leading to Dinant. Running along opposite banks of the Meuse, these follow a valley, which is flanked in many places by bare and precipitous rocks and through which a busy railway runs towards France. The excellent main road on the east bank carries most of the traffic, but if you can spare time for delays at level-crossings, the lesser road west of the river gives finer views of the rocky countryside.

Dinant is an attractive riverside resort, set where the valley opens up slightly from a gorge barely able to accommodate the road. Not unexpectedly, in view of its strategic position, it has suffered more than a little damage in successive German

wars, the local caves providing welcome refuge for the inhabitants.

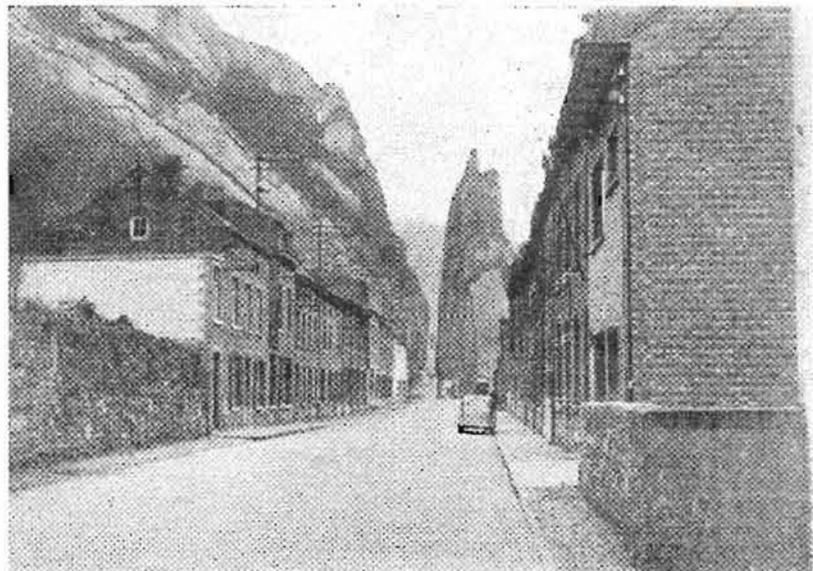
Formed by the River Lesse, to short-circuit a 3-mile loop in its valley, the Grotto of Han is vast and beautiful. The entry and exit, on opposite sides of a wooded hill, are a mile apart on the map, but between these points one walks steadily for more than an hour through be-stalagmited, electrically lit underground halls and passages. Finally, entering a boat on a wide subterranean river, you are rowed away into stygian darkness until, rounding a series of corners, you are gradually returned to the dazzling light of day.

Out of this World

Although I have written hitherto about Belgium I must admit that, in fact, most of our holiday was spent rather farther afield in the fairyland-come-true, which is Luxembourg. Tucked into a quiet corner between France, Germany and Belgium, with its own ruler, its own paper money and its own toy army, this tiny, independent state seems unreal in the crazy modern world.

We might have realized that something unusual was ahead when, approaching the frontier by the main route from the north, we found a solitary soldier sitting beside the road guarding a tattered red flag, a soldier who was with difficulty persuaded to glance at the outside of a passport, but would have no truck with the subtleties of a Carnet de Passage en Douanes. Yet for a short spell after crossing into the Grand Duchy everything looked quite normal.

The road southwards from the frontier is straight and tree-lined. It is, in fact, just like any road across any plain in Western Europe. And then, quite without warning, it swerves violently aside just in time to escape falling into a gloomy ravine. Away to one side of you a valley tumbles away down to impossible depths, its steep sides clothed in the darkest of green pinewoods. And in the far distance, perched precariously upon a crag which rises above the stygian gloom of this impossible underworld, towers a castle which could not possibly exist outside a fairy tale.



THE EYE OF A NEEDLE.—The main road out of Dinant, squeezes twixt pinnacle and cliff, the only available space in the gorge cut by the River Meuse.