

Discovery Tour Ypres, Flanders Fields and the Somme

Here at the SJA we always strive to give the best personal service to our groups and teachers. One of the ways of achieving this is to know first-hand the destinations we offer so in January 2020 I joined a group of 120 fellow tour operators on a trip to Ypres and the Somme.

On an early morning in January we met up at various points on the route from Glasgow to Dover for our journey to Belgium. We were travelling in a very comfortable air-conditioned coach with reclining seats, on board television and toilet. (Galloway Travel). There were 4 coaches from all corners of the UK, all Coachmarque /CPT operators (Turners, Greys of Ely, Galloway and Bibbys of Ingleton)

We crossed the channel with P and O ferries, enjoying smooth passport control (on the coach) a short delay due to French work to rule and a short onward journey to Ypres.

A warm welcome awaited us at our various hotels and hostels. I stayed at **Poppies 1 in Ypres**, where we were given a tour of the facilities, (very well thought out for school groups), they include spacious en-suite dorms with bunk beds and 2 -3 bedded rooms for teachers, a large breakfast room and a games room plus a meeting room and bar area. The location is very quiet, central with coach drop off nearby. Ypres is a small town and felt very safe and welcoming.



Visit – new *Yper Museum* (general history of Flanders, good for Primary Schools) and *In Flanders Fields Museum* depicting what life was like for ordinary folk during WWI alongside the history of the conflict (excellent, with comprehensive teacher resources online) in the Cloth Hall.

Reception at the Cloth Hall with Ypres Mayor – followed by walk to Menin Gate for Last Post Ceremony – as it was low season there were few crowds so we all got a front row view.

Another moving but uplifting experience, (schools may lay a wreath during the ceremony and perform, so if your choir would like to be involved do get in touch for more details).

Dinner was at various venues throughout the town, I ate at *Uptopia restaurant* just behind the Cathedral. A delicious 3 course dinner was served, including Flemish Stew, we sampled the same food that the school groups enjoy. (Closed Tuesdays)

Day 2 – Friday

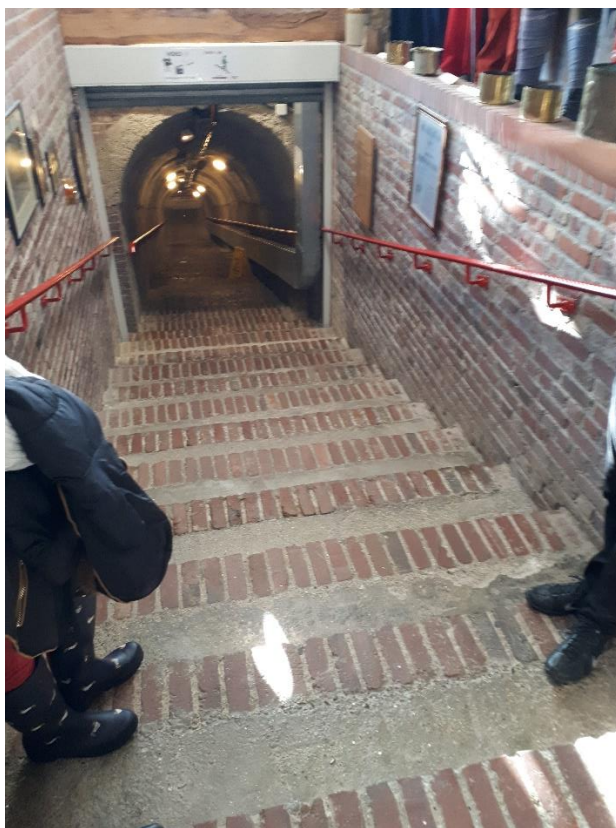
We departed Ypres before dawn for the Somme, (approximate journey time 2 hours) En route we picked up our guide (Valentin) who explained about the Battle of the Somme July 1916 and then travelled to *Thiepval Memorial to the missing* and *Lochnagar Crater*, both of which are on our itineraries. Met CWGC staff at Thiepval who are often on site to answer questions.



We then travelled into Albert for a reception in the Town Hall with the Mayors, they spoke about continued cooperation post Brexit and keeping the Memorials to the Somme battles alive.

Next visit was to **Poppies Albert** which we use a lot. Again very good hostel facilities, new bunk beds are arriving soon. All very clean. Lunch (delicious) was served by The Corner's Pub who host the groups when they stay at Poppies Albert, 10 minutes' walk from the accommodation. Halal menus possible. Very quiet area with ample coach parking. Sole occupancy of a floor or whole accommodation possible.

This afternoon we visited the *Musée Somme 1916*



Pupils can have an activity pack, tailored to Primary or Secondary schools. Groups can picnic in the municipal gardens next to the museum. An enjoyable and well thought out museum for school groups. Our next visit was to the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* museum in Péronne which focuses on German, French and British perspectives in the Great War. More suited to Secondary school pupils.

Today showed how it is easily possible to combine a day trip to Albert and the Somme from Ypres or vica versa.

Day 3 – Saturday

This morning after another big breakfast there was a *Tourism Fair in Ypres* – local guides / accommodation / tourist boards.

Next I visited the *Leonidas Chocolate shop* where Hans and Stephanie give our school groups a very warm welcome, top tip book in advance for treats for the teachers.

A quick visit to St Georges Memorial Church before we spilt up into 4 guided tour group options. Coaches can stop for 10 minutes outside the Cathedral to collect groups, otherwise coach parking is near the station. I was on the Ypres Salient North tour with our guide Pol who was aided by 2 tour guides from UK operators. All three gave a full insight to our afternoon tour, stopping at the Cheese Factory for lunch – a suitable alternative for groups looking for a change from packed lunches. We visited *Langemark German cemetery* which is

popular on our itineraries, to show the soldiers still need to be remembered as someone's son/brother/uncle/husband. A poignant visit.



We also visited the *Guynemer Pavilion* at Langemark-Poelkapelle, a museum (currently under construction) dedicated to the role of military aviation in the war and the French participation.

We had time to visit *Tyne Cot Cemetery*, the largest Commonwealth Cemetery in the world. This gave us all the chance to reflect on what we had seen and learnt over the past couple of days.

We returned to Ypres and visited some hotels. I visited **Menin Gate**, a stone's throw from the Menin Gate, view from the teacher's room.



My next visit was to **The Salient** which is suitable for larger groups.

Both properties are run by Menin Gate Accommodation and are along similar lines to Poppies.

This evening a gala dinner was hosted in the *Museum Café of the In Flanders Fields Museum*.

Day 4 – Sunday

Our final day was in contrast as we went to the *Bellewaerde AquaPark*, which was the perfect end to a very busy but enjoyable trip. Most suited to Primary school children.

This was followed to a visit to a brewery for a guided tour and farewell lunch before our return journey to Calais. Passport control was more efficient than my previous trip 18 months previously but it remains to be seen how it will all work out post Brexit transition in 2021. The ferry option is more expensive than Eurotunnel but some schools from further afield prefer it as the pupils can stretch their legs etc. Crossing time approx. 90 minutes as opposed to 35 minutes with Eurotunnel.

To summarise I learnt so much on this trip and would highly recommend Ypres Salient and the Somme, do remember the School Journey Association can tailor-make a journey according to the learning objectives and budgets of your school, whether it is for a Year 6 pre or post Sats trip or a tour to enhance GCSE studies. The guides and educational suppliers are passionate about their subjects and their countries and the accommodation available is of a very good standard for school groups.