

Together

magazine

The
**Made in
Belgium**
issue

IN THE LEAD
Noémie Wolfs

IN FASHION
**Céline De
Schepper**

**MAN AT
THE TOP**
Elio Di Rupo

GOURMET HEAVEN
Brusselicious 2012

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Publisher's letter

Much of the magazine this month, as the cover would suggest, is dedicated to all things Belgian

There's a lot happening on the creative front in Belgium, and gone are the days when Belgian artists, designers and musicians were obliged to seek fame and fortune elsewhere because the recognition their talent deserves wasn't forthcoming at home. So if you haven't yet discovered them, enjoy meeting **Hooverphonic** lead singer **Noémie Wolfs** on page 32, who graces the cover, and up-and-coming fashion designer **Céline De Schepper**, who made the clothes.

Writer **Delphine Stefens** makes it obvious she had a schoolgirl crush on one of her contemporaries, now designing a range of exclusive watches – read Delphine's article about **Benoît Mintiens** on page 49, as well as her pieces on fashion and beauty elsewhere in this issue.

Veteran Brussels correspondent **David Haworth's** profile of Belgian Prime Minister **Elio Di Rupo** on page 16 mentions the premier's pledge to learn Flemish. But if history had turned out differently, he may also have been obliged to learn Neo, a so-called universal language invented by a Belgian diplomat. **Colin Moors** has the details on page 18.

Some may mourn the absence of the black pages which used to separate the different sections of the magazine; we've decided to replace them with good photography, and hope you like what you see.

As usual, the magazine is packed with articles about leisure, travel, fashion, entertainment, the arts and much more besides. In between issues, why not check out the daily updates on our website www.togethermag.eu. ☺

ON THE COVER



Cover photograph of **Noémie Wolfs** of Hooverphonic, the picture above and image on pages 30-31 by **Charlie De Keersmaecker**

STYLIST
Amke Rijkenbarg

MAKE-UP
Hassan Benabid
Giorgio Armani Cosmetics

HAIRDRESSER
Juliette Girard
de Client

CLOTHES
Céline De Schepper

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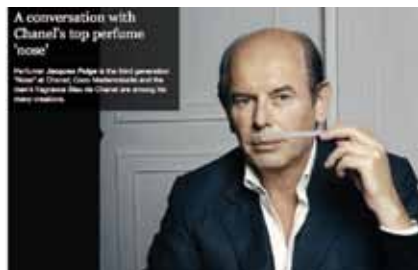
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Starring in Belgium

A choice of entertainment compiled by **Federico Grandesso** and **Mary Sue Kiso**



ANOUK

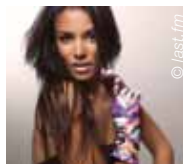
Dutch rock goddess Anouk, appearing with band members who have worked with her over the past 15 years, will perform in Antwerp before taking an extended leave to spend time with her children. It will be one of the last live opportunities to appreciate her seventh album, *To Get Her Together*. Antwerp's Sportpaleis on March 24. Seats start at €40.

www.sportpaleis.be



BÉNABAR

French singer and songwriter Bénéabar draws audiences in with his *chanson française* lyrics and songs reflecting everyday life with a touch of humour. Forest National on March 20. Tickets from €34.50. www.forestnational.be



SHY'M

In 2006, French pop singer Shy'm released her debut album, *Mes Fantaisies*, which rose to number six in the French charts. Four

songs from the album made the French Top Ten, and she has released two more albums since then. Her style is mainly pop-dance and R&B, but her latest album is more electropop. Forest National on March 23. Tickets at €39. www.forestnational.be



CHRIS REA

Welcome back Chris Rea, on tour in celebration of *The Santo Spirito Project*, which includes three CDs and two DVDs. Rea is considered one of England's most talented English singer-songwriters thanks to his husky voice and guitar talent. Antwerp's Lotto Arena on March 13. Tickets from €39. www.sportpaleis.be



BRYAN ADAMS

Having appeared many times at Belgium's Werchter Music Festival, top Canadian musician Bryan Adams is back again at Antwerp's Sportpaleis performing his greatest hits. Heather Nova, with her most recent album *300 Days at Sea*, will open the concert. March 20; tickets start at €43. www.sportpaleis.be



TRULS MØRK & KHATIA BUNIATISHVILI

The Centre for Fine Arts welcomes back Norwegian cellist Truls Mørk, joined by Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili and performing sonatas for cello and piano by Beethoven, Rakhmaninov and Shostakovich. Centre for Fine Arts, Bozar, on March 7. Tickets from €16. www.bozar.be



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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



Post-it note
portrait of the
Belgian Prime
Minister Elio Di
Rupo at Socialist
Party HQ

© Tommy Forbes

From poverty to power

No stranger to public office, Elio Di Rupo took over as Prime Minister of Belgium late last year, ending a political vacuum that lasted 18 months. Profile by **David Haworth**

All last year and much of the previous one Belgium established a debilitating world record of being without a government for 541 days. For most of that period of murky political and linguistic turmoil, no one had any idea if the nation would survive in its present form, still less who would emerge from the intra-party negotiations as prime minister. It's fair to say this historic vacuum did little for Belgium's reputation and "the divided heart of Europe" was increasingly cited overseas as analogous to the European Union's own crisis as successive summits rolled by inconclusively.

COALITION

Few threw their hats in the air, therefore, when the 60-year-old political veteran Elio Di Rupo emerged just before Christmas as the next Belgian Prime Minister. There was some relief that what had become a national embarrassment, a sour joke even, was finally at an end; relief, too, that he had pulled together a six-party coalition which satisfies most of the electorate except Flemish separatists, who still want more drastic schisms in the way the country is ruled than the familiar ones.

For his part Di Rupo is a traditionalist, clear-eyed about the wonky political

scenery in the certain knowledge that it is the best available for the time being. Whether – and for how long – he will be able to hold everything together is a large question for Belgians and, increasingly, for the watchful elsewhere.

In some ways he's an improbable figure. Born in Mons of an immigrant Italian family, the youngest of seven children, his mother was illiterate and his miner father died in a motor accident when Elio was still a baby. He knew poverty all right and, it might be said, was bred into his Socialism. Appearing younger than his years, bespectacled and with black hair a bit too long for statesman-like dignity, he is inevitably attired in dark suit, black shoes, white shirt and trademark bow-tie – nearly always a red one, so that no-one loses the point.

Di Rupo trained as a chemist, gained a doctorate from the University of Mons-Hainaut and lectured at Leeds University; were it not for politics, he might have become head of a laboratory pioneering something arcane. But politics took hold of him in an environment not for the fastidious: Wallonia Socialism. Yet he prospered as the movement's boss for twelve years, presiding over what one Belgian commentator dubbed "a genuine crocodile pool".

Between 2005 and 2007 Di Rupo was Wallonia's Prime Minister, a period when



he honed a national profile as a battler against the corruption which plagued the south of the country. He admitted to a biographer to having considered suicide when falsely accused of sex with a minor. It was a malicious charge of which he was cleared completely. During a politically dizzy moment pursuing media bellowed at him in the street: "Some people are saying you're homosexual." He shouted back: "Yes, I am. So what?" After that, he says, there were some moments of silence. The issue, if it ever was such, died on the spot.

The country's economic predicament gives Di Rupo no leisure for a reflective way out of trouble. His "in tray" held the Dexia Bank portfolio; then there was the random massacre of Christmas shoppers in Liege at which he shed public tears. His first appearance on the international stage at an EU Summit was somewhat

obscured by the Sarkozy versus Cameron uproar over the euro. Straight off Di Rupo must find public expenditure savings of 11.3 billion for a nation whose debt is 96 percent of the gross national product; there are no goodies to offer the electorate.

It is not yet known whether he can rise to the economic crisis. Is he just a snappily dressed boffin? Or is there real depth and stature in someone who claimed to his biographer: "My life is an angel's tale. You couldn't make it up." Indeed it is a strange trajectory, moving through the sump of Belgian politics for so many years, always attended by the aggro of rust belt deprivation: wouldn't angels have feared to tread?

LANGUAGES

Di Rupo's sunny insistence on good fortune doesn't conceal his imperfect use of Flemish. He speaks French and Italian plus English, but stumbles in the language used by the majority of the population – 60 percent – and is mocked for this.

The premier has promised linguistic improvement right up to intelligibility, which "Psychology Today" sneers at for being "a modest ambition". The publication calculates he will need

Inevitably attired in dark suit, black shoes, white shirt and trademark bow-tie

hundreds of hours more tuition before he gets up to speed in Flemish and questions whether his brain is "plastic" enough for the task.

Much more to the point: would he have time? Needing to navigate the perilous currents of Europe's financial and economic crisis is surely enough of a challenge; ideally he requires calm to deal with a jaundiced nation's problems. But he must already suspect that 2012 is Lady Luck's sabbatical year. ❶

Learning the lingo

The idea of a universal language, or to give it the correct name, *auxiliary* language, is nothing new.

Inventors of auxiliary languages, starting in the late 19th century with *Volapük* and continuing with *Esperanto*, often spoke several European languages at least, and tended to make the grammar inaccessible at best.

EASY TO LEARN

Although relatively unknown outside the field of linguistics, a Belgian diplomat called Arturo Alfandari perfected yet another auxiliary language, but this one had a twist – it was easy to learn.

Alfandari, as his name suggests, was born an Italian. He served as a cipher officer for the Italian High Command during the First World War, after which he settled in Belgium. He went on to become a diplomat for the Belgian government and ran a successful export business. When he wasn't occupied with these things, he found the time to learn six other languages – and to create an entirely new one. His new language, Neo, was essentially a subset of Esperanto but he had striven to make it easier and more accessible. He was also at pains to point out that Neo be used "... when [the] two mother tongues differ too greatly for mutual comprehension," and that "in each country, the national language is sovereign, having nothing to fear from a 'second language' like Neo." It is safe to assume that he learned a lot from his time in Belgium. The motive behind the

huge amount of effort he put into his new language was honourable: "Whether you are Flemish or Walloon, white or black, Americans or Russians, you all want peace. To make an attempt to understand and support each other."

Alfandari tried very hard to ensure the grammar was as simple as possible. To his credit, the entire grammar of Neo is explained on pages 12 and 13 of his 402-page study guide and dictionary *Rapid Method of Neo International Auxiliary Language*. A quick Google search will reveal copies of his book for around €25.

CONJUGATION

Verb conjugations in Neo are enough to make a student of even French, German or Spanish whoop with joy. All verbs, with no exceptions, are conjugated in the same manner. There are no surprises when it comes to the gender of objects, as there is none. Everything, as in English, is gender-neutral language. The most striking feature of Neo is the obvious bias towards Romance languages in its construction, appearing to be a healthy mix of Spanish, Italian, French and Latin. Anyone with even a basic grasp of any of these tongues should have no problem learning Neo.

The main problem with Neo, as with so many other constructed languages, is that people would seem to prefer a language with a greater user base – practise makes perfect after all. In an interview with the US magazine

In 1961 a Belgian diplomat launched a new language on the world; **Colin Moors** finds out what became of it

LIFE upon the launch of his language in 1961, Alfandari said: "*Mi tralir krei no nur un simpla mo an un bel linguo.*" After 25 years of research and 1,300 pages of grammar and vocabulary, he was ready to present the world with its own brand new *lingua franca*. His sentiments ("I have tried to create not only a simple but a beautiful language") may have been altruistic enough but, as LIFE pointed out: "Alfandari and a friend are currently the only two people in the world who speak it."

SUPPORT FOR NEO

With a severely limited user base, public reaction was lukewarm. Alfandari received letters of support and praise, some even written in Neo; it appears that his claims that Neo could be learned in ten days, and complete fluency in the lexicon of 60,000 words achieved in around three months, had some foundation.

Alfandari struggled to keep his language alive. Even though it was touted by the International Language Review as a simpler, more accessible language than Esperanto, and promoted by his newly formed group for 'Neists', the Friends of Neo (*Amikos de Neo*), it still didn't catch on. He eventually formed the Neo Academy, in the hope of further promoting the language, but it was already too late. A philanthropist, and driven by a passion that consumed nearly a third of his life, when Alfandari died in 1969, Neo died with him. ☹

A simpler, more accessible language than Esperanto

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Technology to tackle dyslexia

A new solution for reading problems involves no reading at all, reports **Alan Hope**

Two Israeli inventors have developed a system that can dramatically improve the reading abilities of children with dyslexia in only six weeks. But according to the man who's trying to bring the system to market, conventional educators are offering "nothing but resistance".

The BrightStar Reader was developed by Saul Kullok and his son Jose, and is a deceptively simple system using computer games to train children's brains to overcome the basic problems which give rise to dyslexia, but which can also be used to tackle other learning

difficulties involving reading. Oddly, perhaps, the computer games are designed not to be too exciting. Odder still, this solution to reading problems involves no reading at all.

LICENCE

The technology, according to Hans Wackwitz, a Dutchman now living in Brussels who was so impressed by the system he bought the licence to market it, "is a feedback system

which strengthens neural pathways between the two brain halves, and trains the eye to become more still. If a person does not rest his eye on a word for at

least one third of a second he cannot read the word."

Wackwitz is a venture capitalist, but his interest in BrightStar arose from a more personal experience. "I got into it because my oldest son is dyslexic, though that's a few years ago now. Because we live in Brussels, my son at age nine had to go to a specialised boarding school in the UK. When I finished high school my parents sent me to boarding school for a year because they thought I was too young for university. When I came out I said to myself, I will never send my children to boarding school. But I had to with my nine-year-old, and it broke my heart. He lived at the school for three years and only then I came in contact with this technology. In his third year, I brought the technology to the school, we put 30 kids through the process, and at the end of that year I could take him home."

COMPUTER GAME

The technology was originally a package of computer software, but has now moved onto the Internet. The essence of the programme, however, hasn't substantially changed. The game has two parts. In one, you try to steer a car along a winding road, while the software measures your accuracy. In the other, a grid of squares is lit up by a flashing light on which you need to concentrate, while a sign telling you to press (or not press) the space-bar appears from time to time,

THE TECHNOLOGY
HAS NOW MOVED
ONTO THE INTERNET



© Yuri Arcurs @ Shutterstock

and your reaction time is measured. Both parts of the game are designed not to be as exciting as you might expect computer games for kids to be.

Remarkably, the developers claim the system can produce results in only eight 12-minute sessions. British Olympic swimmer Duncan Goodhew, who is

vice-president of the Dyslexia Institute and has the condition himself, tried

If a person does not rest his eye on a word for at least one third of a second he cannot read the word

the system out and later declared: "Unless you have driven in fog, you don't know what fog is like. Dyslexia is a bit like fog. I've had a massive improvement and I feel very comfortable from that point of view."

Adults, then, may also benefit, although their brains are less flexible than those of children. "They are less plastic, but you

can still teach an old dog new tricks," says Wackwitz.

ADVANCEMENT

The results reported by the makers are impressive: children who have followed the system in controlled tests showed advancement of between seven and 18 months in their age-equivalency scores, depending on the reading scale used. But getting the scores is a lot simpler than convincing the educational establishment to adopt the technology.

"Yes, there has been resistance," Wackwitz says. "Why? Because it's at the crossroads between health, medicine and education, and all of those sectors are very, very conservative. Yes, there is resistance; remedial teachers for example see it as a threat. But we will get there, there's no doubt." ●



HANS WACKWITZ

Losing a parent

Death is the single inevitability of life, yet few people are prepared for it; relationship counsellor **Suzette Reed** on coping with the death of a parent

Buddhism has the maxim, “we are alive therefore we will die”. This is a simple and obvious truth of existence but one which we struggle to come to terms with. Death and dying are often a big taboo in families, who would readily discuss other life changing experiences.

There is the natural expectation that parents will die before their children but nothing really prepares adult children for the loss of this relationship. When parents die we have to face a changed reality. The people who have brought us into this world and have known us for all our life are no longer there, so what is our place in this family when we become elders, who do we look to for support? Adults who have lost a parent will often talk of the intense loneliness they feel and some describe themselves as “orphans”, remembering the feelings and fears of early childhood.

MOVING ON

The death of an older person is not often recognised as having the impact that the loss of a young life has, and there may be the expectation from friends and colleagues that the bereaved person should move on more quickly than they may feel able. In the face of death and loss many people struggle to find

words to support the bereaved person and it may be easier to avoid contact or steer conversation away from emotionally difficult areas. This can be confusing and hurtful and, even if words are hard to find or clumsily expressed, it is so much better to acknowledge loss than to ignore it.

There is no shame in sorrow, it is natural and necessary

MOURNING AND GRIEF

Understanding and accepting death takes time, even when decline and illness have been present for some time. Ceremony and ritual is common in all societies to mark the passage from life to death. Mourning is a process that allows the expression of loss and grief and, in many societies, brings families and communities together to find a shared experience of sadness. There are many different ways of

mourning, and most are determined by cultural, religious and family customs and expectations. There is a human need to make meaning of the loss and acknowledge

the relationship which has now ended.

In our increasingly secular culture it seems harder for people to find meaning or solace in religious ritual, and there has been a move away from funeral rites that grieve loss, to ceremony to celebrate the life of the deceased.

Both have their place and both can have elements of mourning but there is a risk of holding sorrow at bay by focusing on life and not on death. Celebration of life may be a more reflective experience, which needs time, where as grief is present and vivid and needs expression. If religious or community rites feel uncomfortable it is possible to find a meaningful way to

grieve; make your own way, find the family sound for grief – whether this is words, songs, pictures, meals, plants – whatever works. There is no shame in sorrow, it is natural and necessary.

MILESTONES

As time passes there may be sorrow for the family milestones that will be missed: new births, weddings and celebrations, as well as the personal family meanings – spring bulbs growing, summer light, whatever it may be.

There may be sorrow for things that have been said or done and for those that have been left unsaid; for the questions left unasked.

Death rarely comes neatly with all the loose ends tied up. Death resonates with all the most profound human experiences we have: a bit messy, confusing and full of emotion. The death of a parent leaves a legacy as well as a template for how we might move on. 🕯

workout

Pilates explained

With 36 manuals and eight videos devoted to Pilates to her name, Master Instructor **Kelly McKinnon** opened Belgium's first Pilates studio Corpus Studios in 1999 and also introduced the disciplines Gyrotonic, Gyrokinesis and CoreAlign to this country; photos by **Virginie Morel**

Just about everyone has heard of Pilates, but ask around and few people know what it really is. An American thing that film stars do to keep slim? A girly thing that no self-respecting athlete would want to do? A therapy thing for people with injuries?

Pilates is a movement system which can benefit young, old, injured, and the superfit: the deepest muscles close to the joints are challenged and developed to provide support, strength, mobility and awaken the nervous and respiratory systems.

Joseph Pilates (1883-1967) created the exercises drawing on his experience of years in sport, boxing, circus arts and modern gymnastics.

The recent explosion of Pilates in Europe has largely focused on "mat" classes to be found in just about any self-respecting gym. Yet many of today's mat Pilates enthusiasts may not be aware that there is another extremely important dimension to Pilates based on mechanical apparatus designed and developed by Joseph Pilates himself.

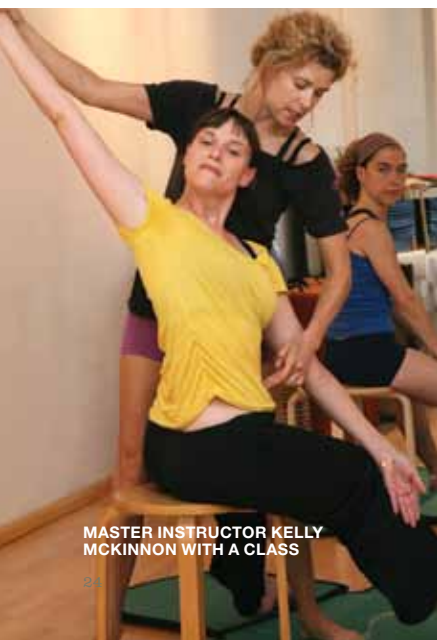
VERSATILITY

The mat is only one segment of a true Pilates "Hour of Power". Traditionally, Pilates challenges the body in its many relationships to gravity. The extraordinarily versatile apparatus offers endless possibilities to work the body on a moving base, against the resistance of springs and in different positions, from the horizontal to the vertical, building core strength, suppleness and stability, whether the goal is simply a healthy body or competitive sports.

Pilates is not a therapy. If you are broken, visit a doctor, physiotherapist, or chiropractor. But too often people injure themselves, and go to a doctor or osteopath and then right back to the fun sport they started with, and in no time at all end up back in the fix stage. The key is an adequate foundation which Pilates and other disciplines such as Gyrotonic, Yoga or Feldenkreis can provide.

Eventually everyone passes through the fix stage – bodies need maintenance – but regularly performed cognitive foundation exercises make for the most efficient working body. A healthy body delivers a healthy heart and respiratory system, which leads to a healthy mind and spirit.

Pilates offers a wide range of exercise possibilities and working with specially designed equipment is especially beneficial for sport-specific training, for tennis and golf players and dancers. It can also strengthen backs, buttocks and >



MASTER INSTRUCTOR KELLY MCKINNON WITH A CLASS



thighs, hips, the upper back and shoulders and tackle neck problems, frozen shoulders and much more. At whatever age, it helps keep its practitioners agile with lean, strong, and defined muscles. And Pilates can radically improve the quality of life.

QUALITY OF LIFE

I have one client who had a back operation and has several herniated disks. He was in pain simply from brushing his teeth. I took him on with the condition he committed to three classes a week. Two years later this person rides a bike to class and downhill skis again, is able to play with his children and enjoys the benefits of a healthy body.

As the trainer it is my responsibility to understand the implications of damage to the spine, and factor this into my programming. Each client has to respect the reality of his or her own body, but quality of life can be improved 100 percent. But remember that only an experienced teacher of many

years should be working with the seriously injured and then only after suitable physiotherapy and with the green light from a doctor.

THE IDEAL TEACHER

A certified instructor should have undergone a Pilates education with exams, apprentice hours, instruction in anatomy, pedagogical programming for Pilates - and they should be someone who knows how to teach. Unfortunately, there are a great many Pilates teachers out there who cannot tick all of these boxes. How do you know if your teacher is safe? A good teacher is attentive and teaches the student, not the exercise. My personal recommendation is to look for a teacher who does not work out themselves during the class, but constantly checks the student's body position and execution of the exercise. Look for a teacher who has a plan for you, an objective in each class, and a strategy for your development; a teacher who is informed about the individual needs of their students, and who offers modifications to exercises when necessary to meet these needs. Make sure you choose an instructor who knows their limits and who teaches a class with only as many students as it is possible to control safely.

MUSIC AND VIDEOS

Pilates videos are useful once you have had some face-to-face instruction and understand the concept; they are not a great place to start. There are different schools of thought, but as far as music is concerned, I would rather use breathing to give rhythm to the exercises. Pilates is about control and concentration, and if I want to give it my full attention I am personally better off without the distraction of music. Music has its own rhythm and emotion and but so does breathing.

Concentrating 100 percent for one hour of cognitive exercise relaxes the parasympathetic nervous system. Our lives are so over-stimulated that to have an hour to focus only on oneself is a real pleasure. And it can be fun. ☺

It helps keep its practitioners agile with lean and strong, defined muscles



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Be More

Investing in Belgium

Belgium may have been spared a downgrade in its credit rating, but financial journalist **Laura Cohn** warns it is probably too early for investors to buy back into Belgian debt

Nearly two years ago, Jon Corzine, the former Goldman Sachs chief and New Jersey Governor, made a big bet that European bonds would bounce back because he did not believe any eurozone country – other than Greece – would really default on its debt obligations.

But Corzine was spectacularly wrong.

It's not right to put Belgium in the same basket as Greece and Italy and Spain

The company he headed, MF Global, collapsed late last year, along with the rest of the eurozone bond market.

Another casualty of the swoon has been Belgium. With debt levels close to 100 percent of its economic output – the highest in the eurozone, except for Greece and Italy – and a swelling budget deficit, Belgium has seen investors dump its bonds. In mid-January, the country's 10-year bonds were yielding above 4.5 percent, close to euro-era highs.

OVERSOLD

But have investors oversold Belgium? In other words, did Corzine make the right bet, but at the wrong time?

Belgium's economic fundamentals certainly do not look like they belong to a country with bond yields at nearly five percent which is close to where the debt of Spain, wracked with one of the Continent's worst housing bubbles, now trades. In fact, some experts say Belgium has been getting a bum rap.

"It's not right to put Belgium in the same basket as Greece and Italy and Spain," says Mathias Van der Jeugt, a Brussels-based fixed-income strategist at the Belgian bank KBC.

Even the credit rating agency Standard & Poor's, which downgraded nine eurozone countries in January, seems to agree. S&P not only spared Belgium from a downgrade, but it praised the diversified, open Belgian economy and the government's history of paying off its debt.

"The (decision) reflects our view of the

country's wealthy, export-oriented, and competitive economy, a strong track record of fiscal consolidation since the mid-1990s, a high national savings rate, and a net external creditor position," S&P wrote.

Van der Jeugt said the country's sky-high savings rate of 17%, the highest in the euro area, is particularly important. A strong household savings rate means a country can raise money to pay off its debt domestically, rather than rely on the fickle nature of

international investors.

Belgium also has the benefit of being close to Germany, Europe's strongest economy and Belgium's biggest trading partner. Serving as a contractor to German industry has helped prevent the Belgian economy from slipping into a recession. In addition, Belgium has finally formed a government after 18 months.

WARNING SIGNS

But there are also warning signs for anyone thinking of investing in Belgian bonds. Burned by weakness elsewhere in Europe, the economy is now forecast to contract in the first part of this year before growing again next year.

Analysts don't think it will be a deep

recession, but the longer the eurozone crisis carries on, raising questions about leaders' commitment to tackle high debt

levels throughout the currency zone, the greater the chance the crisis further weighs on the real economy.

"The big risk is that the euro area problems drag on," says Jens Høj, senior economist and head of the Belgian desk at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

in Paris. "That creates a lot of uncertainty, and investors hate uncertainty."

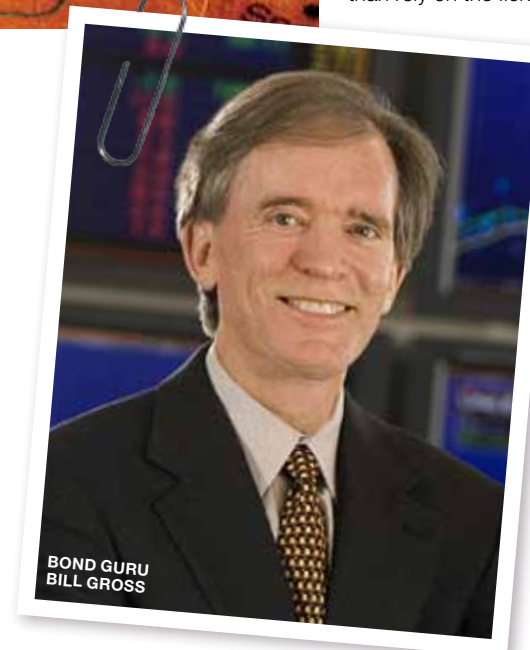
For that reason, it's probably too early for investors to buy back into Belgian debt. Indeed, bond guru Bill Gross, who runs the world's largest mutual fund at the Newport Beach, California-based investment firm PIMCO, warns investors to focus on US sovereign bonds this year and avoid high-yielding European bonds, which, in his view, have "trap-door possibilities".

DOWNGRADE

S&P also warned Belgium could get worse. "There is at least a one-in-three chance we could lower the rating again in 2012 or 2013," it wrote, adding that the slowing economy could undermine Brussels' ability to pay down its debt. "A downgrade could occur if general government debt net of liquid assets were to increase above 100 percent of GDP... owing to rising economic and fiscal pressures."

Government bonds have traditionally been the province of conservative investors, such as pension funds and those near retirement who want a safe place to put their money. For investors in that category, Belgian bonds are now probably anathema. Only those with a stomach for high risk should be thinking about dipping back in. ●

Government bonds have traditionally been the province of conservative investors



BOND GURU
BILL GROSS

Made in Belgium



On top of the world:
Hooverphonic lead singer
Noémie Wolfs

© Charlie De Keersmaecker

On top of the world

After little more than a year with the Belgian rock-pop band Hooverphonic, lead singer Noémie Wolfs is gaining popularity and a widespread following. Behind-the-scenes photos by **Blandine Lejeune**

Tall and slender, with a self-confidence that belies her 23 years, vocalist Noémie Wolfs arrives for the *Together* cover photo shoot flushed with the success of winning Best Band category at the annual Music Industry Awards. It's an overcast, windy winter day in Brussels and freezing cold, so the warmth of the palatial Hotel Metropole is a welcome relief.

With *carte blanche* from the hotel management, photographer Charlie De Keersmaecker and the stylist go hunting for a location to take photographs, and Wolfs bends over a bathtub to wash her hair while the hairdresser and make-up artist unpack

the tools of their respective trades.

"I'm very proud of the award," says Wolfs. "We won it for everyone who works with us, and it's a great compliment to get an award so soon in our first year together."

PLATINUM

Long having enjoyed international success, Hooverphonic has survived several reincarnations since forming in 1995, the most recent being the addition of Wolfs after band members Alex Callier and Raymond Geerts set out with the risky objective of replacing the former lead singer who left to start a solo career. Of more than 1,000 applicants from all over the world, only Wolfs – with >

Behind the scenes
at the *Together*
cover shoot



Noémie Wolfs dons wooden bracelets and shoes by designer Céline De Schepper

exceptional talent, but no musical background or experience – met expectations. Hooverphonic released the single *The Night Before* at the end of October 2010 to introduce Wolfs to the world, and the album of the same name came out a month later. It went platinum in Belgium shortly after its release.

"I really liked Hooverphonic's music, but I didn't expect to get anywhere," says Wolfs of the selection process.

PLANNING

Born in the Flemish village of Scherpenheuvel-Zichem, Wolfs says she has a "great bond" with her family, her only complaint being she no longer has the time to see them as often as she would like. Another big difference is organisation and planning and being told where she should be and when she should be there. "It controls your life completely, which is okay because I really am a chaotic person, so I need people who are organised." If she has a complaint, it's about "a lot of waiting around" between arriving at a venue, sound checks and performing, which she puts down to "being a really impatient person". Another disappointment has been the travel, which has so far included gigs in Russia. "You know you are going to play somewhere exciting like Moscow, but you also know you are not going to

see anything while you're there, which is really frustrating."

She misses old friends, and has found it difficult to keep up with them – "It is sometimes hard for them to understand that I am working all the time – my weekends are Monday and Tuesday" – but appreciates the new friendships she has formed, although there is currently no 'significant other' in her life. "I have 13 men in my band – I don't have time for anyone else right now."

TEAMWORK

The photographer wants Wolfs on the balcony of the hotel room so he can shoot against the skyline; stylist Amke Rijkenbarg unpacks clothes borrowed from the collection of designer Céline De Schepper, while Wolfs has her make-up applied by Hassan Benabid of Giorgio Armani Cosmetics. This is a team that is used to working with each other, hairdresser Juliette Girard discussing the merits of eating breakfast as she manoeuvres hairdryer and curling tongs. "Frosties for me," reveals Wolfs.

"I always like to work with Noémie," enthuses Armani's Benabid. "She has a very porcelain skin, and her looks fit beautifully with our brand."

Comments Wolfs: "A year ago, I was not at all into make-up and hair; now my friends ask me for advice." And then: "I feel like Lady Gaga," she quips, as outsize >

Of more than 1,000 applicants from all over the world, only Wolfs met expectations



Stylist Amke Rijkenbarg arranges Wolfs' pose



Noémie Wolfs:
I have realised
my dream

© Blandine Lejeune

wooden bracelets are threaded onto her arms, before braving the cold and standing on the parapet of the balcony overlooking the entrance of the hotel – not for the vertiginous.

“I love playing dress up. If I had to do this every day – that would be boring,” says Wolfs of the shoot. “It is fun to do, like, 20 times a year but not every day – I would make a terrible model. The most interesting aspect of this job is that you can do different things every day.”

After several hours of preparation, the actual photo shoot is over in a matter of minutes, yet in that short time Wolfs has attracted the attention of passers-by on the ground below. “They were shouting things like ‘You should wear a helmet,’” she giggles.

SOLD OUT

Tickets for a planned series of concerts at home in Antwerp in March and April are proving so popular – two nights have sold out – that extra concerts have been added. Fans will be treated to the best of 15 years of Hooverphonic backed by a 42

piece orchestra. “We’ve got strings and trumpets – the whole shebang,” says Wolfs. One of the prerequisites to her joining Hooverphonic was her ability to reinterpret the back catalogue.

Aware that she hasn’t had to struggle in the music industry to make it big, she says: “It is bizarre that I have realised my

dream early on,” revealing it was actually also her father’s childhood dream to become a famous rock star. Wolfs is also mature enough to recognise that her life is privileged in relation to other musicians and bands. “I used to think musicians didn’t work as hard as everyone else, but that is not true. It is more fun, but we work just as hard.” She pauses, and adds in a rush: “Singing is something I need to do; it is my whole life, it means everything to me, it is like breathing. If I lost my voice it would be a disaster – I would rather go blind than deaf.”



Hooverphonic is in concert at Antwerp’s Queen Elizabeth Hall March 6, 7, 8 and April 27, 28, 29 – visit the website for details: www.hooverphonic.com

Brand-new on the block

Up-and-coming graduate fashion designer Céline De Schepper is well on the way to having her own fashion label, says **Delphine Stefens**



With her fine features, clear skin, intense sparkling blue eyes and lush red lips, Céline De Schepper’s striking looks are reflected in the clothes and accessories she designs, such as those sported by Hooverphonic lead singer Noémie Wolfs on the cover of this issue.

Originally from Sint-Niklaas, De Schepper (23) lives in Brussels where she studied fashion design at the city’s renowned La Cambre School of Visual Arts, graduating last year from the five year curriculum with her collection *Sadness Is a Colour* shown at La Cambre’s annual student fashion show.

ETHNIC AND EXOTIC

This is an ultra feminine collection of constructed garments with a dash of drama and an ethnic and exotic feel to them; shades of brown dominate with touches of orange, yellow or green. Broad shoulders are balanced by long trains and accessorized

with leather corsets, jewelled collars, and chunky wooden belts, bracelets and shoes. No wonder, then, that it won the annual prize offered by the Brussels concept store Hunting and Collecting. As well as winning a medal, items from De Schepper’s collection were displayed in the shop’s window in *Rue des Chartreux* and she was given the opportunity to develop pieces for retail.

FLOWERS AND FRUIT

With work experience for Viktor & Rolf under her belt, an enthusiastic De Schepper says her prints are inspired by wood marquetry and marble and she draws further inspiration from the style of nonagenarian fashion icon Iris Apfel, and the flower and fruit displays on Mexican altars as photographed by Tomás Casademunt.

This promising young designer was also approached by the niche fashion firm JOPA Editions to conceive a collection of accessories; once again, De Schepper chose to work with leather and wood. Pieces from her limited edition *Would You Like* are for sale through the JOPA gallery.

www.celinedeschepper.be



CÉLINE DE SCHEPPER

Céline De Schepper's
prints are inspired
by wood marquetry
and marble



Made in Belgium



Céline De Schepper: an
ultra feminine collection
of constructed garments
with a dash of drama



Jo De Visscher

Belgian fashion knows no borders

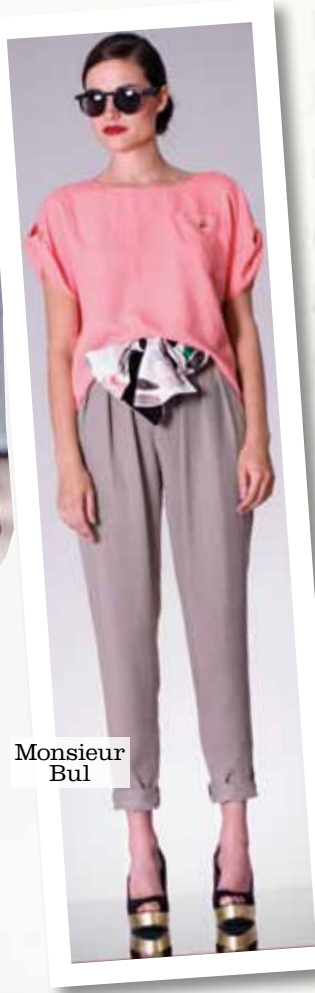
During the past 30 years Belgian fashion designers have emerged on the world scene as a force to be reckoned with



Scapa



Natan



Monsieur Bul



Joanne Vanden Avenne



Gigue

Hampton Bays

Caroline Biss



Olivier Strelli



Annemie Verbeke



Made in Belgium

Check out the clothes by Belgian designers on these pages and spot summer's hottest fashion trends: black and white or simply white on its own, geometric, iridescent, lace, modern retro, pastel, bold and animal prints and transparent – there's something for everyone.

If it's too cold to go shopping, try visiting www.ledressing.be a website devoted entirely to Belgian fashion. Also worth checking out is the Smets Premium Store at 650-652 Chaussee de Louvain, the most recent fashion and design outlet to arrive in Brussels. Specialists in top level fashion and design, the store offers private underground parking, a café, wine bar and restaurant. Or shop online at www.smets.lu.

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The face to a cosmetics artist is like a painter's canvas

Let's face it

Tips and tricks from top make-up artist Hassan Benabid, the National Face Designer for Giorgio Armani Cosmetics. Photos by **Blandine Lejeune**

When he describes how to apply make-up, Hassan Benabid explains that the face to a cosmetics artist is like a painter's canvas to which colour, light and shade are added.

"The trick is not to create a mask," he says. "The object is to make women feel good, to accentuate their femininity."

Benabid recommends using a shaped foundation brush to apply foundation rather than fingers or a sponge. Before that he applies a base using a fluid silicone primer which lasts for up to 12 hours and keeps make-up looking fresh. He always sets foundation with a dusting of powder. Concealer goes on top of foundation, not underneath.

It might sound like a lot, but the layers are light and don't look or feel heavy. The Armani foundation he uses – semi-mat Designer Lift – comes in neutral shades to match the wearer's skin tone. The product has become highly popular with professional make-up artists for its ability to cover imperfections, while leaving skin looking natural. Never test foundation colour on the back of the hand, says Benabid; the best place is the skin just above the eyebrow. If there's no

difference between that and skin tone, then it is the right colour. Strong colour is used only to accentuate the wearer's best feature.

Make-up brushes are an expensive item, but can last ten years if they're properly looked after, according to Benabid. "Wash them regularly in cold water using shampoo," he advises. "Hot water melts the glue and the hairs fall out."

Benabid goes for false eyelashes when lighting is likely to be harsh. "Strong light on the eyelashes makes them look smaller, whereas false eyelashes make the eyes look bigger and normal, and that's better than a lot of mascara."

A Belgian national, born in Holland of Moroccan-Spanish parents, and with a background in interior design, Benabid was approached by Giorgio Armani himself to join the company. "Make-up always fascinated me," he says. "I am a very creative

person, and I think I have found the perfect marriage between me and the brand." Obligated to stay up-to-date with whatever is the current look, he says: "We create something new each season to match the fashion with the perfect make-up look." ☺



Hassan Benabid on cosmetics: the object is to make women feel good



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Made in Belgium



Changing the face of time

A Belgian industrial designer has built a new type of watch using groundbreaking technology. Having known him since childhood, fashion writer **Delphine Stefens** has decided to “kiss and tell”...

How do you write about someone you have known since your were a toddler? Someone you (and your older sister) made out with as a teenager? Someone whose brother you (but not your older sister) have also kissed? Whose sister happens to be a very dear friend? Whose mother was your teacher and whose father went to school with yours? You start by dishing the dirt, hoping to get him and his incredible talent the attention it deserves.

Benoît Mintiens who's 40 this year is now happily married with two beautiful children. He is handsome – think Robert Redford – and, as far as I can remember, used to be a real pain in the neck. But I suppose that is something you put up with when you know you are dealing with genius. Not that it was always obvious back in the days when he had terrible spelling and had to redo three years of high school. But he was also witty and those who knew him believed >

INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER
AND WATCHMAKER
BENOÎT MINTIENS

in him. Did I mention he can also be disarmingly charming?

MODEL SHIPS

As a teenager, he used to build model sailing ships. Not the kind you buy in bits and glue together; no, he actually designed the ship itself, which for someone like me who had to resit nearly every mathematics and physics exam is a sheer wonder. I remember being present for the launch of one of the early models and the air of euphoria as it floated and then actually sailed. It came as no surprise that Mintiens later chose to attend Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts; after graduating as an industrial designer, he joined the design firm Enthoven Associates where he is a senior consultant.

Nowadays he no longer builds model ships in his spare time, but watches. It all started in the mid-noughties when a friend asked him to design a diamond watch for men. Mintiens set out to use the diamonds for their functional qualities, having them display time by channeling light emitted by LEDs. The project ended with the discovery that Tag Heuer was working on a similar project. But Mintiens was captivated and started investing his free time and savings in designing a new kind of watch using groundbreaking technology, with the intention of reinventing the face of a watch and how we read time.

NUCLEAR HIGH-TECH

Designing the watch was one thing, getting it to work quite another. Not wanting the Swiss watchmaking industry to get wind of the project before he could secure a patent, it took Mintiens two years of hard labour, turning to Belgian and Dutch aerospace and nuclear high-tech when pieces he needed were unavailable. In 2009, he launched the brand *Ressence* – the name stands for renaissance de l'essentiel (re-birth of the basics) – to produce his ZeroSeries, its logo reminiscent of the emblem of Antwerp, his home town.

Mintiens turned down offers to buy his idea

What is so special about *Ressence* apart from the fact that it was conceived and developed by an industry outsider who, true to his trade, believes form must follow function, is the display and underlying technology. Mintiens wanted to do away with traditional overlapping watch hands and evolved a way to work on one single plane. The watch face is a revolving disc with a fixed hand indicating minutes and three smaller discs – with hands indicating hours, seconds and am/pm – that revolve independently around a virtual axis “like the moons of Saturn”.

The face becomes a functional mechanical element in its own right.

When Mintiens triumphantly presented his three prototypes to the watch and jewellery industry's annual world show in Basel two years ago, he

generated a lot of buzz but turned down offers from well-established brands wanting to buy his idea, explaining he was having too much fun. Having established the necessary contacts to produce components, fifty watches were soon in the making. Last autumn, Mintiens launched the *SeriesOne*, another 150 watches that now carry the Swiss Made label and assembled in Geneva.* Asked about the key to his success, Mintiens comments: “Five percent inspiration and 95 percent hard work – and thinking outside the box.”

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Made in Belgium

Modern icons

Co-director of a family-owned art gallery, **Edouard Mazel** has united two young Belgian photographic artists in the exhibition *Made In Belgium*

The work of artists Jimmy de Bock and Bruno Timmermans is both original and innovative, fitting in with a long Belgian tradition of surrealism and self-deprecation. De Bock's reflections on society are channelled through photographic images of famous cultural buildings, while Timmermans works with photographs of modern celebrities.

The cult of surrealism, which continues to influence Belgian creativity, is the key to understanding de Bock's work. His buildings move, but people remain static. His pictures are the result of hundreds of static and dynamic shots that have been digitally recombined. He also reveals 'infra colours' – present in buildings, but

invisible to the naked eye. His *Tate Modern Inside* reveals emerald green light; the ceiling in *Centre Pompidou* is azure.

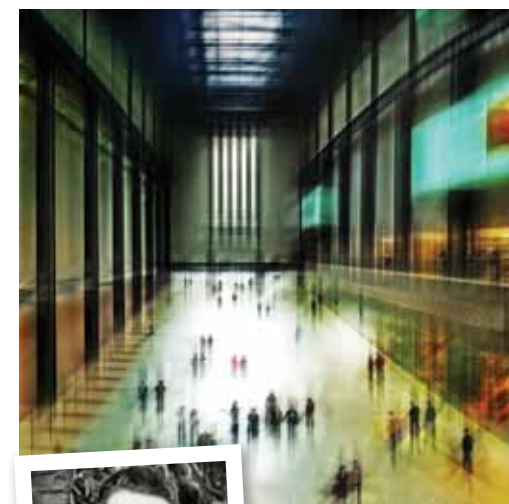
Bruno Timmermans' portraits from his *New Icons* series have also been through the filter of Belgian wit and traditions, and are equally loaded with bold elements and slightly black humour.

His Warhol-inspired gallery of portraits unite leading personalities of the 21st century. Each face has been tattooed with the elements that Timmermans feels have inspired their lives. In the case of Amy Winehouse, the late singer, sadly, sports a headband bearing the legend *Jack Daniels*. On Lady Gaga's forehead, Timmermans has stamped the word 'Queen'.

Until March 10
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ARTIST BRUNO TIMMERMAN'S;
HIS GAGA+ (ABOVE)
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ARTIST JIMMY DE BOCK: HIS
TATE MODERN INSIDE (ABOVE)
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JIMMY DE BOCK, *CENTRE POMPIDOU (ÉTÉ)*
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BRUNO TIMMERMANS,
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LIFE OF LEISURE



View of
Mount Meru,
Tanzania,
taken from
half-way up
Mount
Kilimanjaro
© David Griffiths



CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN: KILIMANJARO

Aiming for the top

At 20,000 feet above sea level, Africa's biggest mountain, Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, is the highest walkable mountain in the world.

Andrew Chaplin recounts his climb to the summit in aid of charity

Kilimanjaro was both a personal challenge and a family holiday as my dad (John) and brother Michael had signed up for the climb as well. My training programme was meant to be two months of intensive gym sessions and long walks. Then December happened and I unwittingly went on the – gruelling at times – mince pie and mulled wine training regime. Come January 5th and our flight out to Tanzania, I had probably done a fifth of what I had hoped to. But, hey, someone in some pub somewhere told me that you didn't need to be that fit to climb Kilimanjaro, so I was obviously going to be fine.

We had chosen to go with The African Walking Company, which meant there

would be other climbers in our group. They turned out to be five Brits, two Canadians and four Americans, a real mixed bag of ages, backgrounds and accents, but all with the shared desire to go walking up the side of a very large dormant volcano. We chose the Rongai route, which is a six-day, five-night climb and one of the more scenic paths, with a good success rate of people getting to the top.

LONG WALK

Once on the mountain we averaged about seven hours of walking a day, except for summit night – and I'll get to that in a bit. Apart from walking through jungle, moorland, scree, snow and clouds, the rest of the time you're either eating, trying to

**Would I do it again?
Absolutely not**

drink five litres of water a day or going to the loo...a lot.

Helping us through all of this we had seven guides and 35 porters who carried everything – our rucksacks, our tents, all the cooking equipment, the toilets – everything. Every morning they would pack up our equipment after we left camp, overtake, and, by the time we arrived at our next destination, be waiting with pitched tents, a cooked meal and endless questions about Wayne Rooney. I don't know how they did it, they're truly amazing.

STAY POSITIVE

It turned out that the random bloke in the pub was right, you don't actually need to be super-fit to climb Kili. But you do need bucket-loads of determination. If and when altitude sickness strikes, you have to know you're going to get through it. This became very apparent on days two and three, when I suffered badly from headaches, nausea and the equivalent of one of the worst hangovers on record. But the guides are there to tell you to keep drinking water and keep eating – you lose your appetite at high altitude – and keep a positive attitude. And that really is the key, keeping positive. That may sound a bit naff to a slightly cynical Brit like me, but it's true, and you need every ounce of Rocky-like self-belief for summit night.

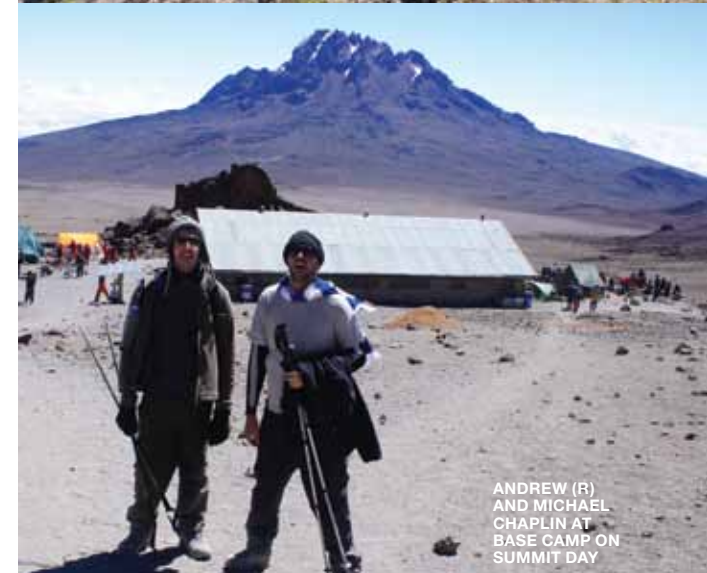
To put it mildly, summit night was absolutely hideous. I can best explain this by outlining the day's schedule:

- 1830 *Finish dinner. Go to bed.
Try to sleep*
- 2230 *Wake up (if you slept).
Have breakfast*
- 2330 *Begin climbing 1,200 metres
to the summit*
- 0630 *Arrive at the summit after seven
hours of walking in sub-zero
temperatures in complete
darkness. Shattered*
- 0645 *Begin the hour and a half walk
around the crater rim to Uhuru
– the highest point (5,895 metres)*
- 0815 *Arrive at Uhuru – delusional,
running on empty, incredibly
emotional. Take some photos. Cry >*

Images © Andrew Chaplin



ANOTHER THREE DAYS TO GO



ANDREW (R)
AND MICHAEL
CHAPLIN AT
BASE CAMP ON
SUMMIT DAY



THUMBS UP FROM THE CHAPLINS AT THE
TOP; L-R: MICHAEL, ANDREW, JOHN.



KILIMANJARO IS A DORMANT VOLCANO

There are six official routes to the top of Kilimanjaro; **David Griffiths** has a few tips for anyone attempting the climb

Having lived in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro while working for the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, I had always thought about conquering this epic beast. The tallest mountain in Africa is a beautiful thing to behold, towering above the plains of the Serengeti as it does, just like in the Toto song. The climb itself is not that bad, until the last day. Due to the altitude, you move up the mountain at a glacial pace for six days – I took the Machame route – then brave the summit – a marathon climb pitting you and your body against your mind, which is constantly asking why on earth you're doing this. I can only describe it as like walking for eight hours in the dark up a black ski run covered in sand. My guide, Emanuel Motta of

Summits Africa, an old friend who I had played rugby with while living in Tanzania, gave me one brilliant tip for the summit climb that I will pass on: many Kili climbers want

to summit at sunrise for obvious reasons. To do so, they have to get up at midnight and climb during the coldest part of the night: and let's be clear about this – it is cold. Thanks to my guide, we instead started our climb at five in the morning and caught sunrise while on the face of the mountain, just as impressive, but with the benefit that on arrival at the summit, we weren't as cold and miserable as every other climber. Instead of heading straight down the mountain like many other parties we passed who were freezing after six hours in the dark and cold, we were able to stay at the summit

for a few hours, and climb the (now receding) glaciers – an incredible experience that will remain with me always. One last tip: take some large body wet wipes to keep yourself nice and clean while on the climb. I won't say any more than that, but you will thank me for it, as will anyone climbing with you. ☺

www.summits-africa.com

DAVID GRIFFITHS: THE CLIMB ITSELF IS NOT THAT BAD, UNTIL THE LAST DAY



Images © David Griffiths

- 0830 *Begin the hour and half walk back round the crater rim*
- 1000 *Begin the three hour climb down back down to camp*
- 1300 *Rest for one hour. Eat lunch*
- 1400 *Do a casual three hour walk to the next camp*
- 1700 *Arrive feeling 90 years old and never wanting to stand up again*

NEVER AGAIN

Seventeen-and-a-half exhausting, intense and draining hours. Was it worth the effort? Yes. Did I feel an amazing sense of achievement when I reached the top? Yes. Would I do it again? Absolutely not. Kilimanjaro was an incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I really do mean the bit about once.

There was much discussion between the people in our group about how we'd report back on our Kili-experience. We said we'd be idiots to recommend it, but then again we were half-way down a mountain, oxygen-starved and completely delusional at the time this discussion took place. With a small amount of hindsight, it is an incredible thing to do, and – in a complete U-turn of what I previously said – I would definitely recommend it. However, it's much harder work than I had foolishly given it credit for, and that big lump of dormant volcanic rock doesn't make it easy. ☹

The Chaplins' Kilimanjaro climb raised nearly €5,000 for The Prostate Cancer Charity. To sponsor them, visit www.justgiving.com/the-charlies. Andrew estimates that flight, climb and equipment for one costs in the region of €3,000 www.africatravelsresource.com

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN: **NEPAL**

To the roof of the world

Known as a hippy hangout in the 1960's, Nepal lost its attractiveness as the result of many years of political upheaval. With tourism on the rise again after a period of relative stability, **Suzette Reed** toured the Himalayan state by motorbike

One of my early memories is riding with my dad on his motorbike; bikes remained a feature of my life in my teens and twenties, but two babies dampened my enthusiasm and I rarely rode when the children were small. But when my husband Martin and his biking buddy Dave came up with a plan to go to Nepal, ride bikes and visit temples, I was ready to take to the road again.

Bikes are a great way to see Nepal, as public buses are generally crowded, uncomfortable and notoriously unreliable, and hiring a car in Nepal is next to impossible. On a bike you can take in the views, stop along the way and absorb the sights, sounds and tastes of Nepali life. Several tour companies offer 'biking with backup' – freedom of the road and local knowledge combined with mechanical and medical support.

We became part of a group of 12 riders, aged from 21 to 60, five Brits and seven Spaniards, the adventure beginning with a medical check by the retired English doctor who accompanied us. Wendy had spent the previous six months touring India by motorbike, so had plenty of experience of the roads, the



ABOVE: THE GROUP OF BRITISH AND SPANISH RIDERS MADE FREQUENT STOPS IN SMALL VILLAGES

bikes and the bumps and scrapes we were likely to encounter.

After a day and a half experiencing the chaos, colour and confusion of Kathmandu, acclimatising and doing the tourist sights, taking in the Hindu temples and Buddhist *stupas*, we headed for the medieval walled town of Bhaktapur to pick up the bikes, Royal Enfield Bullets, traditionally used by the Indian military and police force. They are sturdy, heavy, and sound like an impending thunderstorm.

The first day's journey took us on a stunning ride along the Nepal/Tibet trade >



route, known as the Friendship Highway. Huge freight trucks importing Chinese goods hurtled down the mountain side with scant regard for other vehicles, the roads lined with settlements of refugee Tibetan families. The border bridge has a red line painted across the middle to show where Nepal ends, and China/Tibet begins. Nepal is said to see itself as an ear of corn caught between the two huge grindstones of India and China, and on the Friendship Bridge the fragility of a small, impoverished, and vulnerable state was very evident.

TUMBLE

As we gained height, we experienced our first tumble – and guess who was involved? I was riding pillion with Martin and some scree in the road caused the back of the bike to wobble. We were heading for a vertiginous drop and he over-corrected, hitting the front brake, and we slid slowly and gracelessly into a culvert. The bike fell into the ditch, Martin fell onto the handlebars and I fell onto Martin and toppled sideways onto rocks. He had bruised ribs and my left hand was swelling. The bike had smashed wing mirrors and a broken headlight. Martin got back on but I was ushered into the back-up van following us. Wendy thought I might have a fracture so we headed for a clinic.

Within half an hour my hand and wrist were X-rayed on a rather rickety machine, but it was only a sprain. A nurse applied some topical pain relief and bandaged me up. The cost of treatment came to the equivalent of €6, and I was sent on my



way with my X-rays in a brown envelope. Over the following few days, a few others slid off their bikes but only Dave's wife Wigs had any lasting damage, a fracture to her foot, which meant she has to ride pillion for the rest of the journey.

JUNGLE

We stayed at the Last Resort, a tourist venue 12 km from the border, perched on the edge of a gorge over the Kosi River, and only accessible by a narrow suspension bridge over the river 160 metres below. We spent two days there in posh safari tents on the terraced forest slopes. For entertainment we were offered a range of extreme sports – bungee jumping, white water rafting, and mountain biking. The bungee jump is one of the highest in the world, and travellers make their way here to prove they are alive by courting death. The Last Resort is good on green credentials, with compost toilets and solar powered showers and sauna.

The next day was a sweeping ride to Nagarkot for an overnight stop. On a clear day Nagarkot, at 2,175 metres, has fantastic views of the Himalayas. Rising at 5h30, we reached the Chitwan National



SUZETTE REED SPENT AN ACTION-PACKED 15 DAYS TOURING NEPAL BY MOTORBIKE

Park just in time to watch the sun go down. Chitwan means 'heart of the jungle' and from here you can ride an elephant into the jungle in the hope of glimpsing something rare and wonderful, which in our case included an Indian one-horned rhinoceros and a gharial crocodile, but sadly no tigers.

After two restorative nights in Chitwan we were back on the road heading for the hill towns of Gorkha, Pokhara and Tansen for few a days of exploration. The traffic was lighter, affording us time to watch black kites soaring on the thermals and see the early morning sun hit the snow on the Annapurna peaks, turning them from white to pearlescent pinks and gold. We stopped in little villages for Nepali tea, a sweet and spicy concoction, and snack on pakoras and samosas for lunch. People came to stare at us. Children arrived first, curious and watchful. They put their hands together in *Namaste*, the Hindu greeting. Older men were more interested in the bikes and the protective clothing we were wearing.

RIVER TRIP

Royal Bardia Wildlife Reserve was our final destination. After an overnight stop, we left the bikes and took to rafts. Gliding down the river, we pulled the rafts up occasionally to trek with local guides into the reserve, where we glimpsed elephants, monkeys and deer, and discovered tiger paw prints on the wet



We were told how to escape dangerous animals

sand. Camping overnight on an island, we were generously fed and entertained by local villagers. Two of our group announced their engagement on the trip; the village priest blessed them and they were given an engagement party they will never forget.

Our final day was spent trekking through the reserve and we were told how to escape dangerous animals: elephants – run to the river and cross the boulders (as they find it hard to manoeuvre on them); rhino – climb the nearest tree and rise above their eye level; tigers – stand still. They rarely attack humans, but if they do you've got no chance.

Fortunately none of these techniques needed to be employed and we returned to our camp having seen lots of wildlife without feeling too threatened.

The next day we flew back to Kathmandu with the interestingly named Yeti Airlines, before leaving for home. As we boarded our homeward plane, I looked up at the night sky to see the moon in almost total eclipse, a magical end to an eventful 15 days. ☺

Blazing Trails Tours £1,999; return flight £647, outbound: Jet Airways (Heathrow-Mumbai-Kathmandu); inbound: Gulf Air (Kathmandu-Bahrain-Heathrow) www.blazingtrailstours.com

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN: **MONGOLIA**

What are YOU doing this summer?

Need a break from the Greek debt crisis? European summits not keeping your heart rate up? Join the starting grid of the Mongolia Charity Rally 2012, urges charity trustee **David Griffiths**

This summer, the Mongolia Charity Rally, an epic 15,000 km charity road trip from London to the ancient Mongol capital of Ulaanbaatar, will be winding its way through Belgium on the way to Mongolia via a host of countries including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Russia. The annual charity event, run by international aid charity Go Help, encourages its charity ralliers to take part in the event using ambulances, motorbikes, and commercial vehicles that

are donated on arrival to Go Help, for use in its ambulance project or to support the many worthwhile projects pioneered by this innovative charity.

Last year, Go Help linked up with the London Ambulance Service to take possession of seven ambulances that were slated for decommissioning in the UK. Following a launch from Horse Guards Parade in central London, the rally teams set out on the adventure of a lifetime, covering a quarter of the surface of the globe to deliver the ambulances to Mongolia, where they have found a new lease of life serving hospitals, orphanages and other facilities where they are badly needed.

EUROPE TO ASIA

Teams can take any route they like to make it to Mongolia, though most like to head south towards Turkey. After crossing the land bridge between the European and Asian continents, teams typically head for Istanbul for a couple of days of R&R following the long drive from London. After a Turkish bath or two, they then have a choice between heading across Turkey to Iran, or driving north to Georgia, winding their way along a route set on the edge of treacherous cliffs



framing the Black Sea, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful driving experiences on earth. The path then traverses the Georgian mountains to Tblisi, and into the oil state of Azerbaijan. A ferry from Baku goes to Turkmenistan, where teams can link up with other charity ralliers who drove through Iran.

And this is where the real fun starts. This is the testimony from one of the 2011 ambulance teams fresh back from Mongolia: "Arriving in Turkmenistan by ferry was like something out of a Bond movie," recalls Stacey. "As the ferry docks in Turkmenbashi, a Caspian Sea port with rocky crags surrounding it that make it look like the surface of the moon, you are approached by a phalanx of customs and immigration officials dressed in Soviet-era uniforms with massive mushroom hats."

Having cleared immigration and customs, teams move forward to Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan: vast, new, shiny, Soviet-style buildings, no doubt built using the proceeds from the country's enormous natural gas reserves. And not a person in sight – until, as the Charity Rally team members describe, they were arrested: "We were standing on a patch of grass, filming this enormous pedestal, could have been a hundred feet high, topped with a gold statue of the late Turkmen leader, that rotates to face the

It is the adventure of a lifetime, and anything can happen

sun," they recalled. "We're not quite sure whether the statue was some secret Austin Powers style rocket, or whether we were just done for standing on the grass, but either way, we were whisked off to the local police station." On arrival, the team sat around for what seemed an eternity, to finally be confronted with a jovial police chief, not unlike Chief Wiggum in *The Simpsons*.

Uzbekistan follows Turkmenistan on this epic journey, with teams winding their way along the infamous Silk Route, taking in ancient cities like Samarkand and landmarks such as the Blue Mosque, a building dating back to the 14th century. After that, it's on to Kazakhstan. "Borat doesn't really do the country justice," observed one of the ralliers. "It's an amazing place, the size of Western Europe. And it takes a long time to drive across it."



Arriving in southern Russia, teams take in cities like Barnaul and drive through Russian dacha land: wealthy Russians keep scores of holiday homes in this pristine wilderness, where white water rafting rides costs €5 – safety optional. The drive through southern Russia is short, but it takes teams into the Altai >



mountains, the gateway to Mongolia and the highlight of the trip.

MONGOLIA

This is what the team had to say about it: "Driving into Mongolia was, simply put, amazing. You would be driving along a dirt track and then be confronted by a mountain. No road up it, no road around it, and so you just put your ambulance in low gear and over you go. We also had to drive through rivers with no bridges, the water so deep that the wheels of the ambulance were submerged – madness, in hindsight, but brilliant, simply brilliant".

It isn't all fun and games though.

"The Mongolia Charity Rally site has a disclaimer when you sign up; it reads: 'You may die'. That really brings it home. It is the adventure of a lifetime, and anything can happen. We were fortunate; the worst breakdown we had was fixed pretty easily, and the only casualties were



our stomachs after the local Mongolian mechanic refused to fix our vehicle unless we spent the night with his family, drinking Mongolian vodka – lethal, by the way – and eating goat meat served with Yak's milk."

CHINA

Arrival in Ulaanbaatar isn't the end of the trip. Participants hand their vehicles over to Go Help so they can start a new lease of life, and then teams catch the train to Beijing on the trans-Siberian railway. "Crossing the Gobi desert on a train was magical. Entering China, the tracks wind their way in and out and under the Great Wall, it's quite a sight. Chinese station masters salute the train as it goes through. It's just a different world." The teams finally end up in Beijing, a modern contrast to the month spent traveling in rural wilderness.

"You don't need to know anything about cars, or have been in the Scouts, to take part. This trip is for everyone. There was one guy we met, an American doctor, who was 88 years old and driving his ambulance on the Mongolia Charity Rally. The experience will stay with us forever. Anyone considering it should take the plunge, not only will they not regret it, but it will change their lives for the better. There's still plenty of adventure to be had in this world, you just have to go out and live it." ☺

For further information visit mongolia.charityrallies.org or email Go Help at info@gohelp.org.uk

The Mongolia Charity Rally site has a disclaimer when you sign up; it reads: 'You may die'



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Journey to an oasis

With an award winning beach, rave reviews and a reputation for excellence, **Lauren Omahen** discovers Mazagan Beach Resort is the epitome of Moroccan luxury and the go-to destination for an exotic vacation

Envisage lush gardens and picturesque villas, the crash of water as it meets the beach, the scent of jasmine tingling the senses. Picture swimming pools surrounded by palm trees, with parasols providing soothing shade from the sun. Ranked the top hotel in Morocco by *Voyages & Hotels de Reve*, Mazagan Beach Resort won the organisation's Oscar for best location in 2010, its beach rated the ninth most beautiful in the world by French daily *La Nouvelle Tribune*.

The real treat lies just beyond the resort's walls in the natural beauty of the land

NATURAL BEAUTY

Surrounded by striking Moorish architecture, arches adorned with intricate geometric shapes leading to roomy courtyards dressed with flowers and mosaic tile fountains, guests are

instantly put at ease by friendly and attentive staff. The resort's 500 rooms and suites are vibrant with colour, contemporarily furnished in traditional dark wood, and equipped with generous bathrooms, each with a full size tub as well as a walk-in shower. The roomy accommodation offers spectacular views across the Atlantic Ocean, overlooking lagoons, a golf course, patio, pool and gardens. Boasting 11 bars and restaurants, spa, nightclub, and casino, it is easy to understand why Mazagan is considered Morocco's finest luxury getaway. But the real treat lies just beyond the resort's walls in the natural beauty of the land.

Located 90 km south of Casablanca by the ocean, Mazagan is completely secluded. A chain of hotels and a slew of tourists surround most vacation hot spots, but Mazagan is its own oasis on a

beach that stretches for miles. For those looking to escape the stress of overcrowded destinations, look no further than this Moroccan gem.

ECO-FRIENDLY

Adventure enthusiasts will rejoice at the selection of water sports and other outdoor activities including horse riding, camel riding, quad biking, and mountain biking. If a relaxing round of golf sounds more appealing, the 18-hole golf course overlooking the ocean is challenging as well as eco-friendly. Designed by Gary Player, the South African golfer and eco-enthusiast, it is built on the natural contours of the land and features Platinum Paspalum grass that thrives on salt water. Player ensured that existing dunes and vegetation were maintained in their natural state during the construction of the course. The golf course is not the only green initiative at Mazagan: more than 2,308 trees and 1,324 palm trees have been planted, and developers continue to add greenery to the grounds.

For some serious pampering, try an afternoon at the resort's spa to rejuvenate mind, body and soul. The Mazagan Signature Treatment combines ESPA therapy techniques with Moroccan nourishing oils and mineral-enriched mud for the ultimate experience. And really, what could be better than indulging in a spa treatment while gazing at the sandy beach and crystal clear water? ☺



A variety of packages start at the equivalent of €182 per night for a king size room, including breakfast for two adults and two children, free airport transfers, free access to three Kids' Clubs, and free access to the casino and night-club. Full board packages are also available, and suites range from €1,832 to €3,683 per night. Check the website for current special offers.
www.mazaganbeachresort.com
www.espaonline.com



A good night's sleep in London

Editor **Patricia Kelly** was a guest of the Sofitel St James in London



What is it about marriage that persuades the Anglican clergy to attempt stand-up comedy? My goddaughter's wedding in London was no exception, with the vicar so intent on delivering excruciating one-liners in advance of the bride's arrival, he forgot to both deliver his address and introduce the first hymn. The upshot was he married an otherwise happy couple with almost indecent haste, the advantage being that we were all in and out of a freezing cold church in the middle of January – one next to the River Thames where (according to the vicar) Henry VIII married Jane Seymour – within 45 minutes.

SO TO BED

After an evening of champagne and ceilidh – Scottish dancing to the uninitiated – it was a relief to take the weight off my feet and collapse into bed. And what a bed: I think it was the feather top-mattress that contributed to one of the best night's sleep I can remember for a long time. The other night I can remember was the night before in the same bed. The beds at the Sofitel are so popular that the hotel chain markets them and the bedding under the trademark "SoBed".

SPACIOUS

Most London hotel rooms are so tiny only one person in a room is permitted to move at a time. Here, the room and bathroom were large enough to comfortably enable my daughter – her flat

being the location for the bridal party's departure for the church – to join me and her father to get dressed for the wedding without anyone getting in anyone else's way.

We'd arrived the previous afternoon to discover that it made sense to invite daughter and goddaughter to join us at the hotel restaurant for dinner while the groom was out with his mates, rather than join them at the flat to make buttonholes for the following day. To be honest, it didn't take much persuasion and all doubt was dispersed when they read the menu, a delightful mix of French and British ingredients and cooking. Ever had British snails? The charcuterie bar at The Balcon is an innovation and a revelation, serving cured meats from locations across the British Isles. A knowledgeable waitress – a native Francophone with good English like many of the front-of-house staff – provided sensible and affordable advice on the wine list. We managed to escape with a bill for around €250 which included pre-dinner drinks in the St James bar – modeled on Coco Chanel's 1920's Paris apartment – main courses for four people, wine, beer, water and pudding for two. Not bad for Central London on a weekend.

CROWN ESTATE

Located at the bottom of Regent Street in Waterloo Place on the corner of Pall Mall and almost opposite Jermyn Street, the Sofitel St James is ideally located for shops – most of them open on Sunday – and London's West End theatres. Grade

II listed and owned by the Crown Estate it was originally the home of the bank Cox & Kings; the Sofitel's adjoining Spa – the current customer trend favours a spa weekend – was also formerly a bank. So I may inadvertently have stumbled across a solution to the economic crisis: let Sofitel take over the banks – or, at least, the buildings that house them. ☺

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Dress to impress

The Antique Café in the Belgian seaside resort of Knocke-Heist is the cool location for this fashion shoot; antique hunters can browse and buy or simply sip coffee in the fabulous surroundings



LEFT leather jacket, dress and scarf Dolce & Gabbana
RIGHT dress and scarf Dolce & Gabbana; leather and fur jacket Burberry; dress Dolce & Gabbana

PHOTOGRAPHER Yvan Barbera
STYLIST Jean-Jacques Tumba
MAKE-UP Virginie Wolfs
LOCATION Antique Café, Knocke-Heist
MODELS Odile and Lara



Dress Prada



STANDING dress Prada
SEATED coat Burberry



STANDING silk
dress Dolce &
Gabbana
SEATED dress
Dolce & Gabbana



Dress Miu Miu; scarf
and mittens Mia Zia



LEFT scarf, fur hat Dolce & Gabbana; tunic Paul
RIGHT coat Burberry



TOMMY
HILFIGER



CHRIS
JANSSENS



LEVIS



TWIN
SET

FEELING blue

Denim never seems to go out of fashion, and yet again features heavily in this year's look for summer – but there's something for everyone.



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CELINE DE SCHEPPER BY JOPA



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Brussels celebrates good taste

This is set to be a year of culinary delight in Brussels with the advent of Brusselicious 2012, a year-long gourmet festival. **Hughes Belin** has the mouth-watering details

The most original New Year's card this year was undoubtedly the one sent by Christos Doukeridis, the Brussels Region's Minister for Tourism. Made of potato flour, it was edible, a reminder that this year is dedicated to showcasing the great gastronomic traditions of the Belgian capital.

Themed exhibitions started last year with *A Table!* (dinner is served) at Tour & Taxis, a look at food from field to fork and ways of improving the journey; in March an exhibition on the five senses at the Natural Science Museum will run until September, and the dinosaur gallery will be transformed into a venue for meals created to explore the senses.

All year long, chefs and cooks will make Belgian cuisine accessible to both inhabitants of Brussels and its visitors. Dinners will be organised almost monthly to shed light on different aspects of the city's cultural life: in March the commemoration of the *Banquet des Misérables*, the legendary dinner organised by the publishers of Victor Hugo's famous book; in May the 90th birthday of Belgian jazz musician Toots Thielemans; a medieval banquet in July to celebrate *Ommegang*, the annual re-enactment of Charles V's arrival in Brussels in 1549; a giant mussels and chips lunch on the urban beach at *Bruxelles-les-bains* in July; and a comic strip dinner combined with a sound and light show is planned for the *Place Royale* in September – to list but a few.

CELEBRITY CHEFS

The Omnivore Food Festival, launched in France in 2003, goes on a global tour for the first time and stops off in Brussels in March with master classes and demonstrations by prestigious chefs. The 5th edition of *Goûter*

Bruxelles week in September, organised by the Brussels chapter of the slow food organisation Karikol, will focus on the city's vegetable gardens and its "good soil right under the cobblestones".

There'll be competitions to reward the best chefs – *Bocuse d'Or Europe* in March, a world cooking contest involving chefs from 20 countries – and the most creative barmen will take part in the Black Russian Cocktail Challenge.

SEE BRUSSELS AND DINE

Starting on Valentine's Day, Michelin-starred chefs will feed those who can afford a two-hour dinner in a specially decorated tram which will travel through the Capital's tourist spots from Tuesday to Sunday every week throughout the year – even at €75 a head, booking well in advance is recommended. Yet more expensive, at about €150 per person, is Dinner in the Sky, a weekly event during the month of June. Choose a location from between the Atomium, the *Parc du Cinquantenaire*, the *Palais Royal* or *Bois de la Cambre*, the dining table suspended high in the sky from a crane. With diners strapped to their seats, dinner will be served by a celebrity chef for 22 guests at a time.

BELGIAN SPECIALITIES

The Belgian capital hosts some of the best outlets for Belgium's renowned specialities, from fries and mussels to chocolate and beer. Promoted year-round in bars and restaurants, it will be impossible to miss artist creations of outsize Brussels sprouts, chocolate bars, mussels, pints of beer and cones of chips in the streets. Brusselicious already has its own special brew too, a vintage faro-type beer – low alcohol and sweet – sold at

quality outlets. Maps have been printed to guide foodies through the city's jungle of specialities: *fritkots* (stands selling fries), sweets, markets, chocolate, gourmet Brussels, sustainable gastronomy and world food.

Throughout the year, several restaurants will offer Brusselicious menus using three seasonal Brussels ingredients. In select hotel bars, the "Bubbles in Brussels" campaign will give customers an opportunity to taste three champagnes before ordering their favourite. Hotels will also be serving up Brusselicious breakfasts featuring bread rolls, waffles, pastries, crackers and other traditional fare.

GASTRONOMIC FESTIVALS

Additionally, smaller gastronomic festivals will be held in Brussels throughout the year: a mini Belgian wine fair on April 15 and Brussels Wine Week in September, the Belgian Beer Weekend (end August-early September), the Brusselicious festival (September), the Thai Food Festival in Stockel (September), the first World Beer Show (November), and Chocolate week (November).

Foodies can cherry-pick from a number of events run by individuals, professionals and institutions in association with Brusselicious, including a giant egg hunt in the city parks on Easter Sunday, picnics in the parks during the summer, neighbourhood dinners in Watermael-Boitsfort, and university seminars on the linguistics of eating and history of gastronomy. Last but not least, renowned Belgian chef Pierre Wijnants will award a prize for the best attempt at updating traditional specialities. *Bon appétit!* 🍴

www.brusselicious.be

Grape expectations

Belgian wine is becoming increasingly popular, according to wine critic Klara Slovo

Dinner party chat: "The wine's delicious! What is it?"

"It's a Chardonnay."

"Lovely! My favourite. Where's it from?"

"Belgium."

Sounds unlikely? Not any more, at least not to wine lovers in the know. **Mig's World Wines** does a roaring trade with a white sparkling wine made the same way as Champagne, 100 percent **Chardonnay**, at €14.80 last season. That's half the price of any of the basic well-known brands from France such as Laurent Perrier, Veuve Cliquot, Roederer, and the like. The only problem is Mig – and his customers – can't get enough of it. If you are one of many fans of **Cuvee Rufus** from **Vignobles des Agaises**, you'll have to wait until the next release, in June. Place your order now.

DEMANDING MARKET

Mig, who has long specialized in New World wines in his shop on *Chaussee de Charleroi*, added Belgian wines to his range about 10 years ago, reflecting the quality of what was on offer on a demanding market. When I first came to Belgium over 20 years ago, there were some producers in Flanders making good quality wines, mainly from German varieties such as **Muller-Thurgau**. The

result was far better than those I had tasted from Germany, where that variety is popular because it is easy to grow in unpredictable weather for bulk wines. Here in *Haageland*, it was altogether more racy.

Since then, more producers have been making their mark, in both the north and the south of the country. There are over 80 of them, carrying on a centuries-old tradition. Wine was first grown in what is now Belgium some 1,200 years ago. The vineyards suffered climate change (cold) that shrank them, and their location made them incur collateral damage in a succession of wars. Vines were ripped up for firewood, or to make way for orchards or just plain vegetables in a country not

Expect to pay over €8 for your Belgian wine

naturally endowed with favourable conditions for growing the raw material for one of the world's favourite psychotropic substances.

WEATHERPROOF

Now producers are making a range of high-quality wines from both top international varieties such as Chardonnay, and from those less well known to the public, but valued for their weatherproof characteristics.

They are not cheap. If you are a BOGOF (Buy One, Get One Free) kind of drinker, best stick to the supermarkets

which always have something good on offer. Expect to pay over €8 for your Belgian wine. You will be rewarded with wine that somebody in rural Belgium cares a lot about. Growers here have to go that extra mile to produce a premium product in such a hostile environment.

Among Mig's best sellers are another 100 percent Chardonnay, from **Wijnkasteel Genoels-Elderen**, at €14.40; a white that is a blend of Muller-Thurgau and **Auxerrois** from **Domaine de Mellemont** at €8.20; and a blend of **Dornfelder** and **Zweigelt** making a low-tannin, easy-drinking red that can be served slightly chilled from **De Kluizen** at €8.40.

WINE BOOK

Top sommelier **Eric Boschman** recently teamed up with other wine experts to produce the first serious book on the state of play on Belgium's wine, called *Vignobles de Belgique* (Editions Racine).

It is a work in progress, they stress, encouraging readers to go out and try some local wine made by producers who are far more open-minded than those in a certain neighbouring wine-producing country we know all too well. There

are *belles decouvertes* out in them there fields of Flanders and Wallonia.

One could interpret the words 'Belgian wine' as 'wine made by Belgians', in which case there's a good story to tell about Belgians that liked Bordeaux's **Pomerol** and **Saint Emilion** wines so much they decided to go out there, buy a few

chateaux, and get wine made exactly the way they like it for the market back in Belgium. **Vieux Chateau Certan**, run by the **Thienpont** family, is one of these. **Hugh Johnson**, highly-respected author of a yearly pocket guide, thinks it is far better value than neighbouring Petrus, one of the best-known and most expensive red wines in the world.

So next time you hear someone laugh at the very idea of Belgian wine, give them a glass of Rufus, or **Vieux Chateau Certan**, and watch their face. ☺

*Mig's World Wines,
43 Chaussee de Charleroi, B-1060 Brussels,
T.+32(0)2 534 7703*

Vignobles de Belgique by Eric Boschman,
Kris Van de Sompel, Marc Vanel,
Editions Racine

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Forthright Firth

Actor Colin Firth on his stellar career and latest film; by **Federico Grandesso** with additional reporting by **Lauren Omahen**

Picture a young boy of five years old, full of character and determination, dressed in satin trousers and a white frilly shirt. This was Colin Firth's stage debut as Jack Frost; it certainly would not be his last moment in the spotlight. "I got the attention right there," Firth says. "It doesn't sound very noble to do something just because you have attention. I think that is a driving force in any performer, and then we try to ennoble it with various other agendas. That's what made me apply to drama school and want to become an actor."

HARD SCHOOL

Firth attended the National Youth Theatre in London and later enrolled at The Drama Centre. The young Firth dreamed of facing big challenges. "I chose The Drama Centre because it had a reputation as a hard school, and I thought my resolve should be tested. Either you bend under pressure or you respond to the challenge. I can be very lazy and complacent unless I'm pushed so I knew I'd be weeded out very quickly if I was making a mistake," he explains. He says the key to his success was first to recognise his weaknesses, and then find ways to overcome them.

Firth's talent and versatility came to the fore in the popular TV adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and made-for-TV-movies including *Conspiracy* and *Tumbledown*. But his big breaks in film came with supporting roles in Antony Minghella's *The English Patient*, and John Madden's *Shakespeare In Love*, both Academy Award winners. Madden wanted Firth to take the lead role in *Shakespeare In Love*, "but after five minutes we looked at each other, and we both realised I wouldn't be the best choice," Firth recalls.

OSCAR

Firth's career took a dramatic turn when he met former Gucci fashion designer-turned director Tom Ford. The meeting led to Firth's role as George Falconer in Ford's film *A Single Man*, which won him the Volpi Cup for Best Actor at the Venice film festival as well as a BAFTA for Best Leading Actor in 2010. The following year, Firth won an Oscar for Best Actor for his remarkable interpretation of Britain's King George VI in *The King's Speech*.

CIRCUS

In his latest role, Firth joins an all-star cast in *Tinker, Tailor,*

Soldier, Spy. Based on the best-selling novel by John Le Carre, Firth plays Bill Haydon, who emerges as one of five senior figures after a power shift within the Circus, the name Le Carre gives to the higher echelons of the British secret intelligence service. Although it is not a leading role, Firth has a profound attachment to his character. "He's seen as having a kind of glamour.

I can be very lazy and complacent unless I'm pushed

Lawrence of Arabia, I think, is how he sees himself," Firth says. "He is a figure who has a kind of

dashing, rather cavalier desire to do things perhaps not quite according to the rules."

The story is about a group of men who, on the one hand, are united by their work, yet on the other are all individuals with their own secrets, all looking and watching each other. "Many, many years ago, I remember somebody misinterpreting the Le Carre novels as very much boy's stuff without any emotion," Firth says. "And I think that couldn't be further from the truth." Fans of Firth may now judge for themselves: after a long wait – the film was released in September last year – *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* has been showing in Belgian cinemas since early February. **Q**

COLIN FIRTH AS BILL HAYDON
IN THE SCREEN ADAPTATION
OF JOHN LE CARRE'S
TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY
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Edgy and elegant

With nothing but praise for its style and high horsepower, **Anthony Healey** waxes lyrical about the 2012 Audi R8 sports car

The body is a perfect marriage between curvaceous arcs and razor-sharp edges for an elegant, futuristic look, a true beauty. The front of the sports car maintains the classic Audi look with curved hood and LED high beam and low-beam lights, surrounded by a halo of 24 LED daytime bulbs. This signature style combines innovative design and technology, adding a new breed to the Audi line.

The grill stays true to Audi style with horizontal and vertical blades in all black; beneath the headlights, the lateral side blades resemble wings. Six-spoke cast aluminum wheel rims add another edge to the body's sleek design.

As the car zooms past them, observers left in its wake will be captivated by the rear of the R8. With two generous air vents beneath the rear LED lights, the winged side blades make it look as if it is ready to take flight. The dual angle-eye rear lights resemble rings of fire. But beneath its appealing exterior, drivers will find that beauty in the case of the Audi R8

is more than skin deep.

Inside features a race-inspired, driver-oriented cockpit design. With the entire cockpit tilted towards the driver, the interior design maximizes performance for both car and driver. The multifunction racing-style steering wheel provides easy access to CD, radio, navigation and voice control functions.

Audi has finished off with excellent comfort and luxury, with leather seats, dash, and door linings. The seats feature ten-way power lumbar support and heating features to take the edge off of a long journey in the cold. The car also includes a DVD-based Audi navigation system with real-time traffic as well as the Audi parking system with rearview camera and ultrasonic parking sensors.

Set low to the ground, the R8 hugs the road and manoeuvres with ease. With adaptive suspension, drivers can adjust between 'normal' and 'sport' mode and the car continuously adapts to road conditions and driving style.

It isn't all about looks and power. The fuel injection system provides increased >

**Observers left
in its wake
will be
captivated by
the rear of
the R8**



performance and fuel efficiency, with a precise amount of fuel fed directly into the engine cylinders. This technology ensures more complete combustion, thus diminishing waste and increasing power.

This two-seat supercar is available in a variety of trims and engine size, including: 4.2 Coupe, 4.2 Spyder, 5.2 Coupe, 5.2 Spyder and GT 5.2 Coupe. The R8 has three engines available for 2012: the base 430-horsepower R8 4.2, the 525-horsepower R8 5.2 and the

whopping 560-horsepower R8 GT. But most reviews agree that the 4.2 model performs well and is best in its class.

For anyone interested in buying an exotic sports car, the Audi R8 is an excellent alternative to its competitors, the Lamborghini Avnetador, the Ferrari FF and the Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG, with an impressive blend of performance and luxury, not to mention a comparatively modest price tag. 📞

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Going native

Many expatriates come to Belgium on short-term contracts, yet a large number of them end up staying here for good. **Emma Portier Davis** reviews a book with their interests at heart

A group of six retirees, who dub themselves The Brats (Brussels Retired Expats), has penned the ultimate guide for anyone planning to spend their twilight years in Belgium.

Retiring in Belgium – A Guide for Expats doesn't provide all the answers but it poses questions on all aspects of retirement.

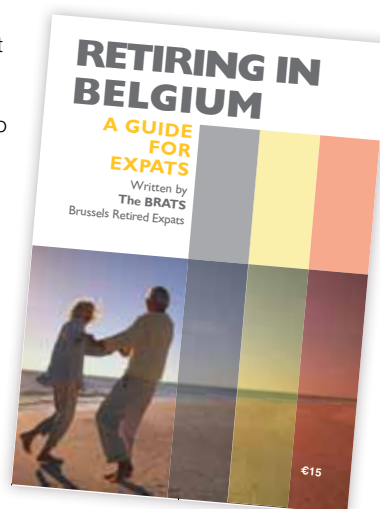
This is not just a guide to managing one's finances, information that ultimately has to be sought out, as the authors urge, from a specialist who will provide advice tailored to your circumstances. The authors ask how you plan to spend your retirement, and even how you feel about dying in Belgium.

PENSIONS

It's also relevant for younger adults as the looming pensions crisis is already prompting governments to tighten their belts and postpone state payouts to a later age. The authors caution that it's never too early to plan ahead – maybe you are planning to bring over Mum and Dad.

We're told by the pro-EU lobby we can live, earn and retire where we like and still claim a pension in this single market. But it's not as easy as all that, as the book explains. Who pays your state pension? Depends on where you have lived. Will your private pension be subject to taxation? Yes, possibly.

A question universal to pensioners is



Who knew the Belgian state could tax you on 100 percent of a deceased spouse's wealth if you didn't have the foresight to draw up a marriage contract?

how to spend their time. The authors give some useful suggestions for places to study, volunteering opportunities and social activities in Belgium as well as tips on semi-retirement and the tax implications.

Large sections of the book are devoted to questions of estate planning and a summary of the tax traps for expats. Who knew the Belgian state could tax you on 100 percent of a deceased spouse's wealth if you didn't have the foresight, as almost all Belgians do, to draw up a marriage contract?

HEALTHCARE

The authors give a potted guide to healthcare in Belgium, pointing out some of the peculiarities of the system here, such as the law permitting euthanasia – how will you feel about that if you end up terminally ill here?

Parts of the book seem to be more a passion of the authors and peripheral to the specifics of retirement. Witness the entire chapter on how to become more technology-savvy: clearly a benefit for any retiree but perhaps not worthy of such lengthy treatment.

This and the authors' summary of where to live in Belgium could have been flagged within other chapters as topics for further reading. Notwithstanding, this is a must-read starting point for

anyone, of any age, who is contemplating going native. ☺

Retiring in Belgium – A Guide for Expats: €15 (all proceeds to charity) is available from Community Help Service Belgium (www.chsbelgium.org) and the British Charitable Foundation (www.bcfund.be)

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What's on BELGIUM

Where to go and what to do – here's our selection of upcoming events

MUSEUM NIGHT FEVER 03.03.12

Mark your calendars for the ultimate cultural experience in Brussels, *Museum Night Fever*. Winner of the Brussels Tourism Award for "New in Brussels" in 2008, this offbeat programme features a refreshing mix of exhibitions, concerts, performances, fashion, workshops and DJs. The evening will feature 20 different museums, as you've never seen them before with a contemporary and unconventional twist. Even after the museum's doors have closed, the fun will continue with after-hours parties. For art, music and museum lovers, this is the ultimate night out.

Sat 19h-1h

Brussels Museum Council,
Galerie du Roi 15, B-1000 Brussels
www.museumnightfever.be

ARS MUSICA 01.03.12 – 03.04.12

Discover *Ars Musica*, the classical music festival, focusing on the music of today. Cultural institutions from Brussels invite national and international ensembles to collaborate in a spirit of creativity and open-mindedness. Although most concerts take place in Brussels, guests have the option of attending concerts in Antwerp, Bruges, Liege and Mons as well. With over 50 concerts and events, and a combined audience of 20.000 people, this is a festival music-lovers will not want to miss.

www.arsmusica.be

EURANTICA 22.03.12 – 01.04.12

This Fine Art and Antiques Fair will be at the Brussels Expo Place at the Heysel. For ten days, antique dealers from 150 Belgian and foreign galleries will display a wide range collector items including furniture, paintings, sculptures, tapestries, glasswork, jewellery and much more. This year, *Eurantica* feature more new participants from Belgium, Luxemburg, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and Italy.

Thur-Fri 14h-19h; Sat-Sun 11h-19h

Brussels Expo Place, Heysel, B-1020 Laeken
www.visitbrussels.be

LA MAISON DES MAITRES CHOCOLATIERES BELGES

"The House of the Master Chocolate-makers" showcases ten artisans from the three regions of Belgium, with a unique approach to creating the finest chocolate. Visitors can attend a Discovery of Chocolate workshop where companies, groups or individuals can learn how to turn their passion for chocolate into a business. This is also an unforgettable venue for parties of 10 to 50 people with incredible views of the Grand Place. And it's never too late to discover the pleasure of chocolate.

Mon-Sun 10h-22h

Demonstrations for individuals:

Sat-Sun 16h, in English,

Demonstrations for groups available

upon request, all languages

Grand Place 4, B-1000 Bruxelles

www.visitbrussels.be



CY TWOMBLY PHOTOGRAPHS 1951-2010 29.04.12

This exhibition presents more than 100 Polaroid photographs that were selected in cooperation with the veteran American artist himself prior to his death in July last year. Snapped with his Polaroid camera, the images were not available to the public until the '90s. The collection ranges from still-life images of flowers and brushes, to snapshots of his studio and museum interiors, details from his paintings and views of ancient temples and landscapes. The photographs reveal themes that have remained constant throughout Twombly's work. Several paintings by Twombly are displayed as well as the cinematic portrait "Edwin Parker" by British visual artist Tacita Dean as a tribute to the late artist, Edwin Parker being his given name and Cy a childhood nickname.

Palais des Beaux Arts, Rue Ravenstein
23, B-1000 Bruxelles

www.visitbrussels.be

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What's on INTERNATIONAL

Where to go and what to do – upcoming events in other countries

THE EUROPEAN INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL

30.03.12 – 01.04.12

Featuring hundreds of the best independent filmmaking talent from around the world, this festival takes place in Paris with a mission to bring worldwide attention to European independent filmmakers. It attracts a large audience of major studios, agents, production companies and a cinema-loving public. With more than 80 films competing and representing more than 25 countries.

*Cinema 7 Parnassiens, 98 Blvd du Montparnasse, 75014 Paris, France
www.ecufilmfestival.com*



THE STUTTGART SPRING FESTIVAL 2012

21.04.12 – 13.05.12

Europe's largest spring festival opens with a traditional keg-tapping. There is plenty to see and do, and the attractions include a Ferris wheel and water rides. And, of course, the family friendly atmosphere would not be complete without the aroma of sweet almonds and cotton candy. A glittering fireworks display is held on the night of the last Sunday.

*Stuttgart, Germany
www.stuttgarter-fruehlingsfest.de*



TIM BURTON EXHIBITION 07.03.12 – 05.08.12

First shown in New York in 2009, this exhibition is coming to Paris. Featuring 700 works, including drawings, polaroids, and storyboards dating from the beginning of Burton's career as a teenager in California drawing for Disney, all the way to his neo-gothic fantasies as a Hollywood filmmaker, it gives a never-before seen insight into the filmmaker's incredible career.

*La Cinematheque Francaise, 51 rue de Bercy, 75012 Paris, France
www.cinematheque.fr*

THE DESIGN MUSEUM: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN 28.03.12 – 01.07.12

Instantly recognisable by their glossy red soles, French designer Christian Louboutin's shoes are an incredible mix of fashion, craftsmanship and sculpture. A London museum will show 20 years of design and inspiration, including lace-up boots, studded sneakers and bejewelled pumps. There will also be a section dedicated to the shoes designed for 'Fetish', an exhibition at *La Galerie du Passage* in Paris, which combined Louboutin's designs with photography by the acclaimed artist David Lynch.

*10h-17h45 daily
Design Museum, 28 Shad Thames,
London SE1 2YD, England
www.designmuseum.org*

FLORIADE 2012 05.04.12 – 07.10.12

This is a World Horticultural Expo held in the Netherlands every ten years and will feature daily cultural programs including music, dance, theatre and graphic art. With 66 hectares of parks and 40 hectares of showgrounds, and surrounded by flowers, trees, fruit and vegetables, visitors are encouraged to be at one with nature and discover how it influences health, mood and general well being.

*Venlo, The Netherlands
www.floriade.com*

WORLD SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

23.04.12 – 27.09.12

This is a spectacular country-wide celebration of the playwright William Shakespeare, produced by the British Royal Shakespeare Company in collaboration with leading UK and international arts organisations. Theatre companies from all over the world will visit the UK to perform their own interpretation of Shakespeare's work. The Globe, the recreation in London of Shakespeare's own theatre, is mounting all 37 of his plays. The festival will feature thousands of artists in almost 70 productions, plus other events and exhibitions including performance workshops.

www.worldshakespearefestival.org.uk



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JPC MOTOR S.A., 7000 Mons, Mr Julien Bronchart, Tel 065 32 78 46, julien.bronchart@jpcmotor.be

DE SMET BRUSSELS, 1620 Ukkel-Drogenbos, Mr Guy Herzezel, Tel 02 333 80 23, guy.herzezel@desmetbrussels.be

S.A. LOUIS BRUSSELS N.V., 1030 Brussels (Schaerbeek), Mr Andy Manuka, Tel 02 7438174 diplomat.sales@garage-louis.be

STERCKX N.V., 1640 Rhode-St-Genève, St Genesius-Rode, Mr Philip Van de Walle, Tel 02 359 94 85, philip@sterckx.be
1500 Halle, Mr Yves Tielemans, Tel 02 363 15 35, yves@sterckx.be

Le Chat caption competition

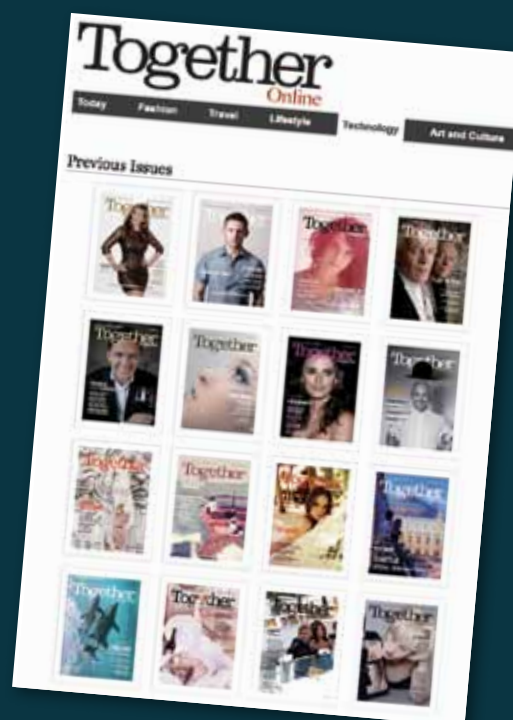


The winner of our December competition to find a caption for this Le Chat cartoon is **Kerstin Jansson**; the winning caption is reproduced inside the speech bubble by kind permission of Le Chat artist **Philippe Geluck**

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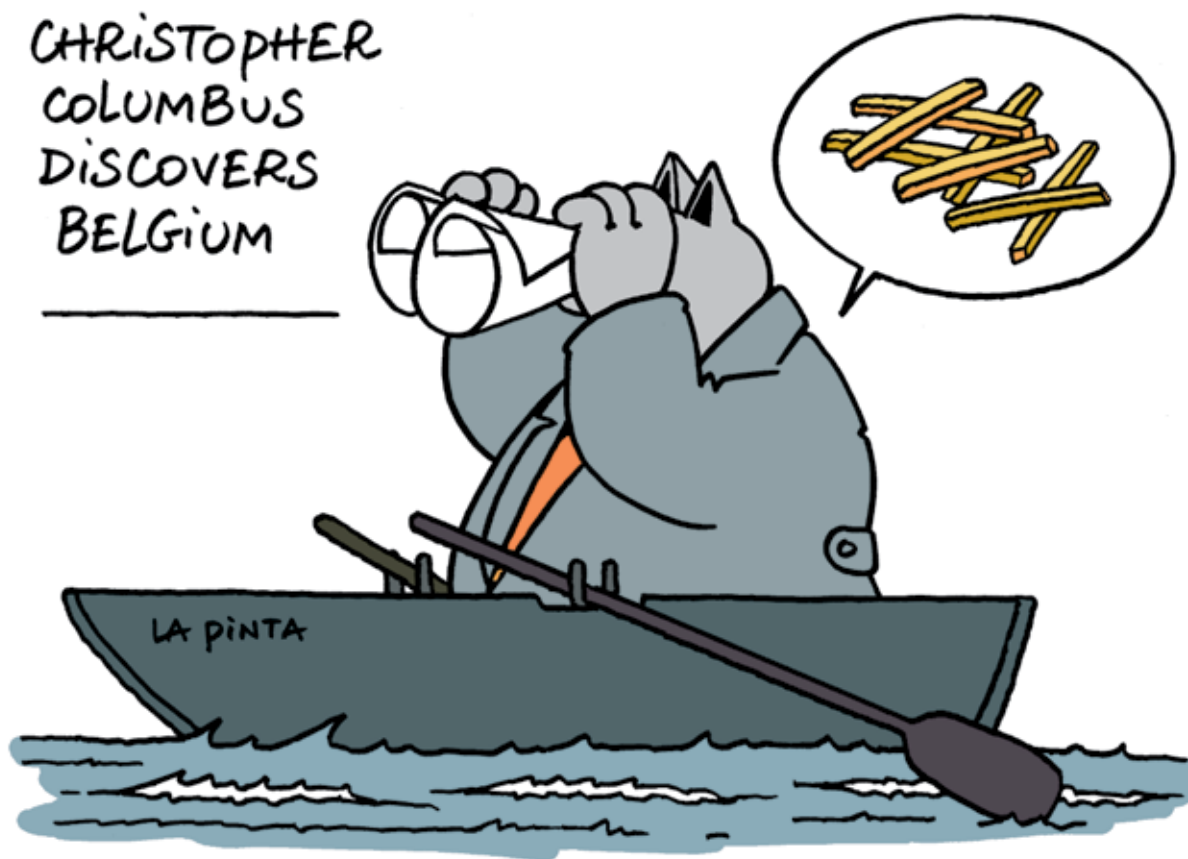
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