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## Oostende Tourist Information

By Meredith Booney

Originally a small fishing village, the city of Oostende received its city charter in the 13th century

and now has a population of 91,000 people, the largest population on the Belgian coast. Set half way along the 40 mile Belgian coastline, it became popular as a resort in the 19th century, when Kings Leopold I and II spent their summers there. During World War II the city was badly bombed.

The city is protected from the North Sea by a series of large dikes built in the late 14th century. However, the city often fell victim to invading armies. Its importance as a harbour rose in the 18th and 19th centuries, and a railway link to Brussels was built in 1838. In 1846 it became a transit harbour to England, sending its first ferry boat to Dover. Today, hundreds of passengers travel between Oostende and England in a space of just two hours, which makes it a good weekend resort for British travellers.

Named 'The Queen of the Belgian sea-side Resorts, Oostende boasts a long and sandy beach and is a popular beach resort for locals as well as visitors to Belgium, many of whom come to surf and sail. The old town and fishing harbour are popular attractions, and Oostende has much to offer in the way of shopping, eating and entertainment.

Places of interest:

The twin-towered church of St Peter & Saint Paul, close to the railway station, is a neo-gothic building built of sandstone in 1904-5. It houses the mausoleum of Queen Louise-Marie, Belgium's first Queen, who died in 1850 in Oostende.

The 'Fort Napoleon', north of the city centre, is the only Napoleonic fortress still intact in the whole of Europe. Built by Napoleon during the French occupation in 1810 and completed in 1812, it housed 260 soldiers. In the Second World War it was used as a German barracks.

Between Oostende and Middelkerke, near the beach, lies a large group of dunes known as the 'Raversijde Domain', which is a natural nature reserve. Here also is the 'Atlantikwall', a complex of tunnels and bunkers built by occupying German troops in the First and Second World Wars. Nearby is also an archaeological site of a medieval fishing village from 13th to 15th centuries.

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For garden lovers, the Japanese Garden in the Koningspark is worth a visit and can be found opposite the swimming baths, near the sea wall.

### Things to do:

A walk along the splendidly clean and unspoilt beach, with a swim or paddle in the sea, is one of Oostende's pleasantest activities, but there are plenty of further activities in the centre and close to Oostende.

Oostende has several shopping centres, including the traffic-free Kappellestraat, Adolf Buylstraat and Witte Nonnestraat. Also, at the Alfons Pieterslaan and the Torhoutsesteenweg you can shop all year round. Market day in Oostende is on Thursdays on the Wapenplein, Groentemarkt and Mijnplein.

For those interested in history and culture, Oostende has several museums and galleries to visit. The Museum of Local History holds collections from the Neolithic and Roman times, a maritime section and sections on the two world wars. The Museum of Fine Arts holds works from the Belgian Masters, and at the Museum of Modern Art you can see a wide range of paintings, sculptures and objects from Belgium's recent history. Other places are the Museum Sint-Pieterstoren, the Museum of Religious Arts, the North Sea Aquarium and the Schooner Mercator which is a former Merchant Navy training ship now restored as a nautical museum. James Ensor House is where the famous impressionist painter lived.

One of the most popular places for families with children is the Maria Hendrika Park. Here you will find minigolf, rowing and pedal boats, playgrounds and woodland walks. Refreshments are available at the café.

You can also take a horse-drawn carriage tour around the city, where you will be shown the interesting sights of the city.

### Food & Drink:

Whatever kind of food or restaurant you are looking for you are likely to find it here. Oostende has plenty of restaurants, cafes, bars and taverns both within its lively city centre, and along the promenade. Wherever you go, you will find kiosks selling mussels, fresh fish restaurants, and the ice cream is not to be missed.

There are several bars selling real ale, including the Café Botteltje and the Ostens Bierhuus. Oostende also has a selection of English style pubs.

One of the most popular restaurants in the city is the James Tavern in James Ensor Galerij 34, off Vlaanderenstraat. In its friendly atmosphere, you can sample a wide range of local cuisine, including their specialty, garnaalkroketten, or shrimp croquettes.

Of course, Oostende's best-loved food is fresh fish, and you do not have to look too far to find a wide choice of places specialising in seafood. One of the best fish restaurants is the Old Fisher on the

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Fisherman's Wharf. This has a relaxed but elegant atmosphere where you can sample a wide range of local fresh fish dishes. Another fish restaurant is the David Dewaele, a family-run restaurant serving French cuisine and fish fresh from the North Sea.

### Hotels & Accommodation

Alpha Hotel Hotel Ter Kade Royal Astrid Hotel Princess Hotel Burlington Ambassadeur  
Entertainment:

If you are seeking the local nightlife, the first place to head for is Langestraat where you will find cabarets, night clubs and bars, as well as the famous Kursaal Oostende, one of the largest casinos in Europe. The casino contains gaming rooms, a concert hall where you can regularly hear concerts, operettas and ballet, disco, rooftop restaurant and gaming rooms.

Many of the bars and pubs offer live performances, including jazz, blues or contemporary music. There are English pubs, at least one Irish pub, and, of course, good strong beer.

Between May and September is the racing season and anyone interested in the sport must take a trip to Wellington Racecourse.

Every year in the first week in March, Oostende holds a carnival with a different theme each time and in October there is the annual fun-fair.

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Have you ever been a tourist in the city that you call home? If you are wondering what to do this weekend, why not become a tourist in your own city? It is amazing what you will learn about its history and what it has to offer. So many of us go about our daily routine and never take the time to explore or enjoy our surroundings. It is not that we take our cities for granted it is just that we all get busy with our jobs and our families that we just don't find the time. We don't make it a priority.

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So, how about we all spare some time and start exploring!

If you were a tourist coming to your city for the first time, what would you want to do? Where would you go? Do you know what is so special about your city? To begin with, you may want to go to your local Tourist Information Office or Visitors Bureau to get some ideas. Is there a special exhibit at one of the museums? Is there a bus or boat tour that you can participate in? Is there an event or a festival that is taking place that you would like to attend? Is there a celebration coming up that sounds like fun?

As you research the endless possibilities you will notice that a lot of activities don't even require a lot of money. Some museums are free on certain days of the week. Some other attractions offer discounts during the weekdays and when it is not the typical tourist season.

We have been making a point of visiting the local attractions and participating in events in our city for years. We have toured around our city by boat and by double decker bus. Both tours offered something different but both were highly enjoyable. We have also visited the local museums when special exhibits are on display. Not only did we learn about our country's history but we also learned a lot more about the world. We regularly attend the festivals that are taking place here. Some of the festivals have us trying out new wines, some have us viewing millions of tulips and others have us up on our feet dancing to the music of a live band. And do you know what? We are having an absolute blast.

With all this touring around, we have also grown to love our city even more. We have always been proud to call it our home and we love telling people all about it. But now that we have spent some serious time exploring it firsthand, we have seen what it has to offer. We have found new activities that we didn't even know existed here and we have become well informed of the history of our city. As a result of this we even decided to create a website giving tourists and residents information about this great city that we call

home.

So, we ask you again. What are you doing this weekend? Why not take some time to explore your surroundings? Have a great time and enjoy!

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