

Last Best News (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2015/02/um-graduate-to-lead-alumni-on-belgian-beer-tour/>)

UM graduate to lead alumni on Belgian beer tour

By: **ED KEMMICK** | February 4, 2015



Photos courtesy Belgian Beer Me!

Ford “Stu” Stuart, shown here on a previous trip to Belgium, will be taking UM alumni on a Belgian beer tour this June.

It sounds like the set-up for some kind of joke: People pay Ford “Stu” Stuart to drink beer.

Stuart is also a stand-up comedian, but the beer thing is no joke. And this summer, in a partnership with the University of Montana Alumni Association, Stuart will be leading UM grads on a beer tour of Belgium.

He promises it will be a well-rounded experience.

“There’s quite a bit of culture in there, too, with visits to World War I sites and some abbeys,” he said. “The platform is beer, but we’re going to explore history and culture.”

Stuart has been leading beer tours to Europe since 2008 as an outgrowth of his deep appreciation of Belgium and its beers. He was raised in Michigan, but his family moved to Anaconda when he was 16. Stuart graduated from Anaconda High School in 1982.

He earned a journalism degree from UM in 1986, then worked in public relations for a few years while living in Seattle. The craft-beer movement was just taking off in Seattle, and like a lot of other people Stuart discovered how satisfying real beer could



There is a specific glass for each Belgian beer, designed to enhance the taste and presentation. Pictured here is Tripel Karmeliet at Brewery Bosteels during the Bruges Beer Festival Tour of Belgium.

and to meet the people who made it.”

Soon he was teaching a Belgian beer appreciation class at the Associated Students of the University of Washington Experimental College. Meanwhile, he had also started doing stand-up comedy. He eventually moved back to Michigan, where he did comedy at various hotels on Mackinac Island for 19 years. He would do 80 or 90 shows a summer, which brought in enough money that he could dabble in comedy the rest of the year while indulging in his passion for travel and beer.

He had grown so knowledgeable about Belgium and Belgian beers that more than a few people suggested he start leading tours. That led to the formation, in 2007, of Belgian Beer Me! (<http://www.belgianbeerme.com/>), his tour company. On his first tour early in 2008, he said, “it was me and three other people driving around in a Volvo station wagon.”

The tours became increasingly larger and more sophisticated, to the point where he branched out in 2010 and started Bamberg Beer Me! (<http://bambergbeerme.com/>), to lead beer tours in Bamberg, Germany, as well.

We’ll let Stuart tell us about Belgian beers first.

“The attraction of Belgian beer is basically two words,” he said: “taste and variety.” In a country barely one-sixth the size of Montana, there are roughly 1,200 different beers made by about 150 breweries.

be.

And then a girlfriend introduced him to Belgian beer via a bottle of Chimay Red Label. It changed his life.

“It tasted like no other beer I’d had before,” he said. “That really piqued my interest.”

He continued to try new Belgian beers and to learn all he could about them, and in 2004 he made his first trip to Belgium, “to see where this great beer came from

A conjunction of factors made Belgium such a center of beer. It was too far north to grow grapes, but it was a good place for growing hops and barley. And for many centuries it was safer to drink beer than it was to drink water. And unlike Germany, with its beer purity laws limiting ingredients to water, hops, barley and, later, yeast, Belgians were free to experiment with sugar, spices, fruits and herbs, resulting in a seemingly endless variety of ales.

Belgium is also rich in monasteries, Stuart said, and brewing “was one of the few indulgences they were allowed, so they got very good at it.”



Stuart, far right, with a group of beer hunters in Bruges, Belgium, as part of Stuart's Great Zythos Beer Festival Tour.

Monks had long used beer sales to sustain their monasteries and philanthropic activities, and they were also literate in a mostly illiterate world, so they could pass down detailed accounts of recipes and techniques. It also helped that lots of French monks took refuge in Belgium during the French Revolution, bringing their own beer-making skills with them.

Finally, the Belgians also developed “bottle conditioning,” meaning they added extra yeast and sugar to their bottled beers so they would continue fermenting, resulting in tastier, higher-alcohol beers.

The result is often nothing short of euphoria, Stuart said: “I don't care how bad a day you're having. If you have a Belgian beer, your day will be better.”

As for Bamberg, Germany, located in the area of northern Bavaria known as Franconia, Stuart said it has the highest concentration of breweries in the world and “is one of the last bastions of Old World beer culture.”

Most of the breweries make fresh lager beers, often sold only in one or perhaps two villages. Few of them bottle their beer, often selling it in wooden kegs. Bamberg is best known for its *rauchbier*, or smoked beer.



The ancient sign that welcomes you to the Trappist Abbey and brewery of Orval.

It generally takes some getting used to. As Stuart said on his website, “At first, they may taste like drinking a glass of beef jerky, but as your palate matures and adjusts, you begin to appreciate the qualities of this unusual, smoky, ancient beer style.”

Smoked beers used to be more common, Stuart said, but Bamberg remains one of the few places in the world that still makes them.

“People say, ‘What’s new in Bamberg?’ And I say, ‘Absolutely nothing,’” Stuart said.

Stuart has made a name for himself in the beer world. “Belgium Beer Me! was the only U.S.-based beer tour company that made the past two editions of the “Good Beer Guide Belgium,” and in 2013 he was featured (<https://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/audio/radio/programs/program-327>) on “Rick Steves’ Europe,” a travel show on public radio. (Stuart’s segment starts a little after the 14-minute mark in the show.)

The UM alumni tour was suggested Stuart’s college friend, Bill Johnston, who now heads the alumni association. Johnston thought it would be an interesting event for former UM students, and part of the proceeds will benefit the association.

Stuart will be taking as many as 24 people. His job, besides sharing his knowledge of Belgian beers, is to make sure his fellow travelers experience as much fun and as few hindrances as possible.

As he says on his website, “Belgium has a lot of obstacles that can get in the way of a good beer tour, such as weird holidays, language barriers, cultural differences, detours, rail strikes, airport strikes, etc. Knowing how to anticipate these obstacles and knowing what to do when they cannot be anticipated is key.”

Flemish, which is similar to Dutch, is spoken in the north of Belgium and French is spoken in the south. Stuart, who studied German in high school and college, said he has enough language skills “to be polite, and I can read a menu pretty well.” He also

has coach drivers fluent in multiple languages.

Stuart has been a home brewer for 10 years, but now that he's traveling regularly to Belgium and Germany, he finds it's not necessary to brew as much as he used to.

"I've got a special suitcase," he said, which he carts to Europe empty. "It's a big plastic box with foam holes for 12 big bottles of beer."

Details: Here's a [description](#)

(<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DNdYZJV9RY4Aqa71cYLCjmMviOU9-ApMZQBVxjoJx7s/edit>) of the Montana Alumni Association beer tour of Belgium, set for June 14-20. For more information or a registration form, write to Stuart at stu@belgianbeerme.com.

