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Glamping for Eurocrats

For a romantic weekend in Brussels, John Brunton picks a shiny renovated Airstream caravan parked in the grounds of a quirky 1960s-themed hotel

Glamping in the centre of Brussels? What might that involve? Perhaps a luxury safari tent or yurt in the back garden of someone's city centre house?

But I was reassured to discover that the sole glamping venue in Europe's de facto capital is actually a sleek silver 1950s Airstream caravan, discretely parked in the forecourt of the aptly named Vintage Hotel.

Isabelle and Fabian Henrion have already made a name for themselves as innovative hoteliers: they opened the Vintage a couple of years ago to rave reviews for its fabulous 1960s and 1970s decor, with items they collected from auction rooms and flea markets across Europe.

"We couldn't resist the idea of an Airstream once we discovered a specialist supplier in Nevada ready to ship it here," says Isabelle. "And especially when we learned that it was made in 1959, the same year as our Atomium [the city's iconic steel monument] in Brussels."

Word quickly got around on the web, and glamping enthusiasts started turning up from all over Europe.

"Belgians tend to book for a romantic weekend, often driving up on a classic Vespa, and now we're even getting businessmen during the week - although I still can't get used to a pinstripe-suited Eurocrat stepping out of the caravan in the morning to go off to the Council of Europe."

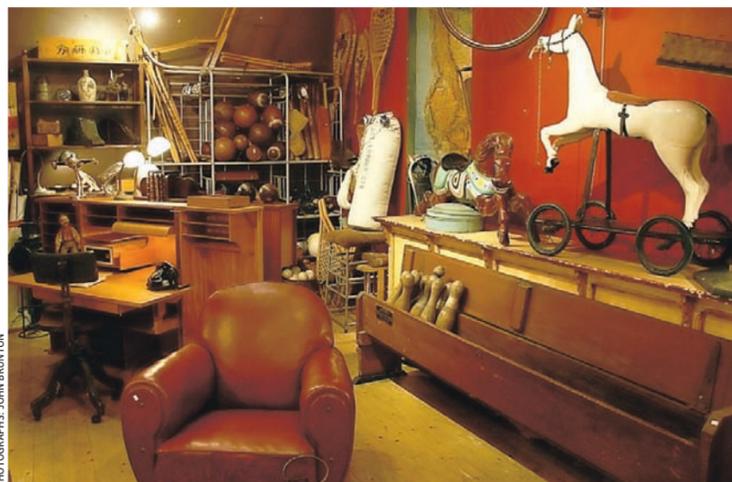
The Airstream attracts attention, both from guests staying at the Vintage - who try to peek through the window - and from curious passers-by on the street.

Getting into the caravan is a bit like opening the hatch of an Apollo spacecraft, though it is of course a lot roomier inside. And the whole place has been renovated in sumptuous



Getting in is a bit like opening the hatch of an Apollo spacecraft

Twentieth-century toys ... (from top) the Airstream on the hotel forecourt, the caravan's sleek interior, and antiques on Brussels' rue Haute



PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN BRUNTON

glamping style. Outside the look is authentic retro - right down to its original name, Hazel, etched on the door - but the interior has been completely modernised, with shower and loo. A huge bed with a fluffy duvet takes up one end; the other is a cute 1950s-style salon, though with cable TV and iPod dock. There is a free tuckbox of Americana goodies - marshmallows, Oreos, M&M's, jelly beans, bubble gum - and efficient heating makes it cosy despite the freezing temperatures outside.

So, with the salon warm, and the blinds down for privacy, we decide to continue the spirit of camping and have an indoor picnic. Just down the road is a Delhaize supermarket, the equivalent of Sainsbury's, perfect for stocking up on Belgian gourmet specialities. We come back loaded with fabulous smoked ham from the Ardennes, pickled herrings, *boulette* meatballs, pungent fromage de Herve and crunchy endives. We add a couple of bottles of Orval Trappist beer and a box of irresistible Pierre Marcolini chocolates, and the bill comes to about a quarter of what a restaurant meal would have set us back.

The evening passes quietly, with only the sound of the odd guest trundling his suitcase across the cobblestones, and in the morning we join the other guests in the funky breakfast salon of the Vintage.

Staying in the caravan definitely gives us an itch for retro shopping, and wandering out on to elegant Avenue Louise, we leave behind the bland couture stores and head to Place du Jeu de Balle, one of Europe's most brilliant flea markets, teeming with tat and bargains. Two roads lead out of the market, rue Blaes, which is a goldmine for vintage clothing, and rue Haute, a paradise for collectors of art deco design, though maybe not at bargain prices. And from there, it is just a 20-minute walk back to the Gare du Midi and the Eurostar.

With most Eurocrats vacating Brussels hotels on Friday many offer bargain weekend rates. The Airstream doesn't fit into that category, but those wanting a truly offbeat weekend may think it is well worth the extra.

● Brussels Glamping, 45 rue Dejoncker (+32 2 533 9980, vintagehotel.be/en/glamping) from €170 a night including breakfast and welcome drink

More stylish new hotels in Brussels



Hotel Saint-Géry

Made in Louise

This newly opened boutique hotel in the swish Avenue Louise district has been created by a family of architects and designers. They have renovated a rambling mansion dating from the 19th century, and made something that resembles a classic Belgravia hotel. For once, the word "boutique" does not imply small; the rooms here could not be more spacious, and they have stylish period wallpaper, big bathrooms and comfy sofas. Breakfast is healthy and copious - gluten-free bread, Ardennes ham, organic eggs with seasonal vegetables - and there is a bar and pool table.

● +32 2 537 4033, madeinlouise.com, doubles from €115

Hotel Saint-Géry

This most recent addition to Brussels' hotel scene is near the Halles Saint-Géry, a historic market hall that hosts everything from art exhibitions to late-night clubbing. The neighbourhood is full of bars and boutiques, and the hotel's restaurant, De Belmonte, has weekend jam sessions. The Saint-Géry used to be a run-down short-stay dive, but has been splendidly renovated, with each room individually decorated by a local artist.

● +32 2 2040620, hotelstgeroy.com, doubles from €100, breakfast €12

Le Berger

Le Berger is in a narrow backstreet just off the chic avenue de la Toison d'Or. It used to be an infamous *hôtel de passe*, a discrete rendezvous for indiscrete liaisons, and the owner, Jean-Michel André, has remained faithful to the erotic associations of the past. The bedrooms are small, dark and intimate, with lots of risqué mirrors and plush velvet furnishings. There is a smart cocktail bar and restaurant on the ground floor.

● +32 2 510 8340, lebergerhotel.be, doubles from €80 JB



Dark and intimate at Le Berger