

Starting next month, you will have an opportunity to have your travel questions answered in the Mac-a-zine travel section.

The Molecular Brilliance of Belgium

Story by Dawn M. Wayand



Some might describe it as an "oversized abstract sculpture". Upon seeing it on my trips to Belgium over the past three years, I could only describe it as something seen in the old cartoon series, *The Jetsons*, or the movie, *Minority Report*. But the Atomium, located near Bruparck in Brussels, Belgium, is more than just a futuristic apparition - it is a spectacular monument symbolizing history of the recovering economy after the Second World War. Built by architect Andre Waterkeyn, the Atomium was conceived to be the Eiffel Tower of Brussels. This monument would be host to the first world exhibition after World War II to take place in 1958. Economic conditions had improved since the previous exhibition in 1935 and the world was motivated and readily accepting of new technologies and the belief in atomic power. It took 18 months to design and another 18 months to construct.

Standing at 102 meters in height and weighing 2,400 tons, the aluminum-coated structure represents an iron crystal with its nine atoms, magnified 165 billion times. Each sphere's surface measures 240 square meters and has a diameter of 18 meters. Each tube is approximately 10 feet wide and getting from one pod to another is accomplished by a series of staircases and escalators harbored in the connecting tubes.

Many people wonder what's inside these strategically placed pods. I hadn't the foggiest clue as to even a guess before I visited, but was definitely delighted by what I saw once I finally had. The first year I went, I thought it was just some abstract piece of art and didn't know I could actually go inside. The second year, I had a long list of things to see in Brussels and didn't have the time to go inside, thinking, "How exciting could it really be?" However, this last December I went in since it was raining as well as snowing outside and because I knew I couldn't pass it up for a third year in a row.

The ground floor pod was the entrance and gift shop area. In the center, was an elevator claiming the top lift speed in Europe at five meters per second, where an assistant would take visitors to the top pod. The first floor of the top pod houses an observatory with an amazing panoramic view of Brussels.

The second floor was a cafe bearing the unintentional looks of a golf course: the carpet, hunter green, the furniture, white leather seated low-to-the-ground. A



music DJ was playing hip-hop music and behind him was a screen demonstrating how he used his equipment to make the music. The very modern looking bar offered service of all sorts of beverages, including alcohol.

Each of the other pods also had more than one level and encouraged visitors to enter a universe where music, colors, humor and emotion are the main themes. All of the walls in each pod on each level were full of bright contrasting colors and swirling designs which subsequently spilled into the walls of each shoot housing the stairs and escalators between them.

Some examples of the running exhibits in December 2003 were a few rooms with black and white movies showing

the construction of the Atomium, a room with all the old publications and documents pertaining to the Atomium, including the bank note which was signed to obtain the funds for its construction. Also showcased was a room with a display of each pod separately cased in glass which openly showed a miniature replica of what was inside each pod.



Several rooms contained circular-based subjects such as a bouquet of single color hot air balloons hanging from the ceiling in one room and a cluster of colorful planets hanging from the ceiling in another. Touring the Atomium is definitely a journey taking visitors far from reality, and in my case, it was a great stop out of the rain!

Across the way from the Atomium monument is Kinepolis, a major movie complex with 28 screens plus an IMAX theater as well as the Mini-Europe Park, which is a collection of mini-models of popular monuments located in all of the countries affiliated with the European Union.

Keep looking for more exciting "Travel Tips" and answers to your questions in future issues from Dawn M. Wayand.

