

Travel the Benelux

WWI Belgian army makes a stand at Diksmuide

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A quiet and serene place today, De Dodengang (loosely translated from Dutch as the Trenches of Death), just outside of Diksmuide, Belgium, was the scene of squalor, suffering and death during World War I. The Diksmuide trenches were held by the Belgian army against determined German forces for more than four years.

More than 60,000 Soldiers lost their lives there, hence its grim name. In 1914, Belgium was almost completely overtaken by the German army. King Albert I gave the order to maintain the line of defense in Diksmuide. This place, where regiment after regiment of the Belgian army fought by turns, was the heart of the opposition to the Germans.

To stop the German advance to the Belgian coast and to France, Belgians blew up dikes on the Ijzer River, flooding the surrounding area in 1914. However, because the land there was so high, it didn't flood and this area had to be guarded.

Both sides built fortifications there. Slowly, the Belgians extended their trenches to the north, toward a German observation post. The Germans extended their trenches to the south, until both sides were only yards apart.

Filled with mud, lice and rats, the trenches were a Soldier's hell. Life was rigorous in the trenches where Soldiers were extremely vulnerable and under constant assault by mortar attacks. Belgian Soldiers manned the trenches for three days straight, then got three days rest in a camp in the rear of the combat zone before a return to the trenches.

The Trenches of Death remained the heart of the Belgian opposition until the successful offensive called the Battle of Flanders began Sept. 28, 1918.

The preservation work done on the trenches makes it difficult to experience the conditions of the time. The place is quiet, clean and orderly

with the sandbags reinforced with concrete. You can walk through a remaining section of the trenches and visit a museum at the site. The museum has uniforms, guns and other artifacts recovered from the trenches after the war. Photographs and films tell the story of what happened there.

Inside the museum, a small plaque proclaims: "Here our army held the invader in check."



(From top) World War I weapons are on display at the museum. • Visitors walk through the preserved trenches Saturday, Oct. 31, 2015. • A view of the trenches from a bunker. • A Belgian army uniform can be seen at the museum.



Essentials for your visit

The site is about a mile from Diksmuide, Belgium. Open daily April 1 to Nov. 15 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Open Tuesday through Friday Nov. 16 to Dec. 24 and Jan. 5 to March 31 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Last entry: one hour before closing.) Admission: €4 (by card only).

The museum is accessible, but the trenches cannot accommodate a wheelchair.

Outside the gate