



Palace of the Dutch queen, one of the places the writer visited. (Inset) Bakyawa in a train to Brussels

# Lost in city of Brussels

By Jennifer Bakyawa

I kept staring at the long but thin trees, green fields and occasional farmhouses as I travelled from Weesp station in the Netherlands to my next destination.

Among other things, I noticed that the conductor had started the routine of checking and stamping passengers' tickets.

"The next stop should be Bussum North," I meditated. "After Bussum, it will be Bussum Zuid (south), where I will disembark and walk for two minutes to the Bastion Hotel".

Radio Nederlands Training Centre (RNTC) had booked us in the Bastion for the six weeks as we attended a short course in Internet journalism.

I had been there for a few weeks and felt confident that I knew how to get around. So when the conductor asked for my rucksack and pulled out some money from my money purse.

It was not there! All I could see was a white strip of paper, which didn't in anyway resemble a train ticket. I panicked.

I emptied the purse of all its contents, but the ticket was nowhere to be found.

I checked my pockets, and all places that I could, but didn't find anything.

I was returning from Brussels where I had spent a weekend with a friend and his family.

The Dutch were having a public holiday and that meant we wouldn't be

back in class until Tuesday.

I was not ready to spend three days in the Bastion watching TV or rushing to Amsterdam to shop. So I thought I would rather revisit Brussels than dwell on the same scenes in Hilversum, Bussum and Amsterdam.

Adam had agreed that I could drop in for a few days. I had hoped to return to my host country with no more terrible experiences.

"I swear I bought a ticket," I told the conductor.

"I know you did," he gaffed, as though in sympathy.

"This couldn't be happening to me," I thought wildly. "Why had the Brussels trip turned awful?"

Adam had agreed to meet me at the train station in Northern Brussels. I expected him to be at the platform when I disembark, but he wasn't there.

I was exhausted. I had spent the day touring Paris with four friends. We had collected money and one of us who had a vehicle drove us to the enchanting city, taking photographs with the Eiffel tower in the background.

I reached Southern Brussels late in the afternoon. Adam had asked me to board a train to Northern Brussels where he and his family lived.

Getting to the train station had been a hassle. Very few people speak English in Belgium. After several attempts to get directions, a middle-aged guy rescued me. He too did not know English but when I mentioned station, he got my hand and we walked there together.

I mumbled the few French words I

knew to appreciate the good turn. The man grinned, his teeth tainted with too much smoking.

Two nuns told me where to disembark from in Northern Brussels, but Adam wasn't waiting for me as scheduled.

I wanted a telephone to ring him so I contacted the help desk and the guy behind it directed me to the telephone on the wall. I put in five euros but the coins got stuck in the machine.

Damn it. I couldn't ring. The next phone was only for emergency.

I walked out with some crazy hope that I would find him on the street, but he wasn't there! I approached a young man sitting at the bus stop and asked him where I could find a telephone. He was a British on holiday.

He handed me his mobile phone. I rang twice but Adam's phone was on voicemail.

The young man who lent me his phone asked me to wait for five minutes and try again, but even after that I was not able to get my contact.

I thanked him and walked down the street to find another telephone.

I approached three Congolese women and a man and asked them where I could find a telephone. They answered in French. Bah! My French did not exceed 'bonjour' or 'merci'.

"Why was I wasting the last few precious minutes of daylight talking to people who were answering back in French?"

They dragged me to a restaurant, hoping to find help for me there. It was a posh restaurant. The waiter couldn't

help so they apologized and left. I thanked them and continued treading the streets, my heavy rucksack on my back; a cream cotton satchel on my shoulder and a jean jacket around my waist.

Suddenly, I saw man in a phone booth. I hurried anxiously. As if on cue, he stepped out, apologising that it was not working.

What was it with phones in this country; not working? I wanted to scream.

I went back to the train station where I was safer inside than on the streets. Darkness was approaching fast.

At last I found a working telephone and was able to reach Adam on his cell phone. He promised to collect me in 30 minutes. He had to board a train from Antwerp (Northern Belgium) to reach me.

I perched myself up on one of the station windows, put my luggage behind my back and rested my head on the wall. I was no longer afraid of being lost in a foreign country. I had successfully gone through that hassle and now I couldn't find my ticket. The ticket man stripped a yellow sheet from his book and handed it to me.

"That will be 13 euros madam," he said dispassionately.

I paid it, but felt cheated. I had bought a ticket from Amsterdam at six euros and fifty cents and here I was paying a fine for the same journey.

I later found out that I had used a ticket machine which also accepted credit cards. It must have got confused. Damn machines.