

Inside the laboratory of European integration



The *anciens* of the College of Europe share a common heritage – an unforgettable experience of living and learning in Bruges. Ex-student **Dana Spinant** reports

EVERY Brussels insider has heard of the 'Bruges mafia'.

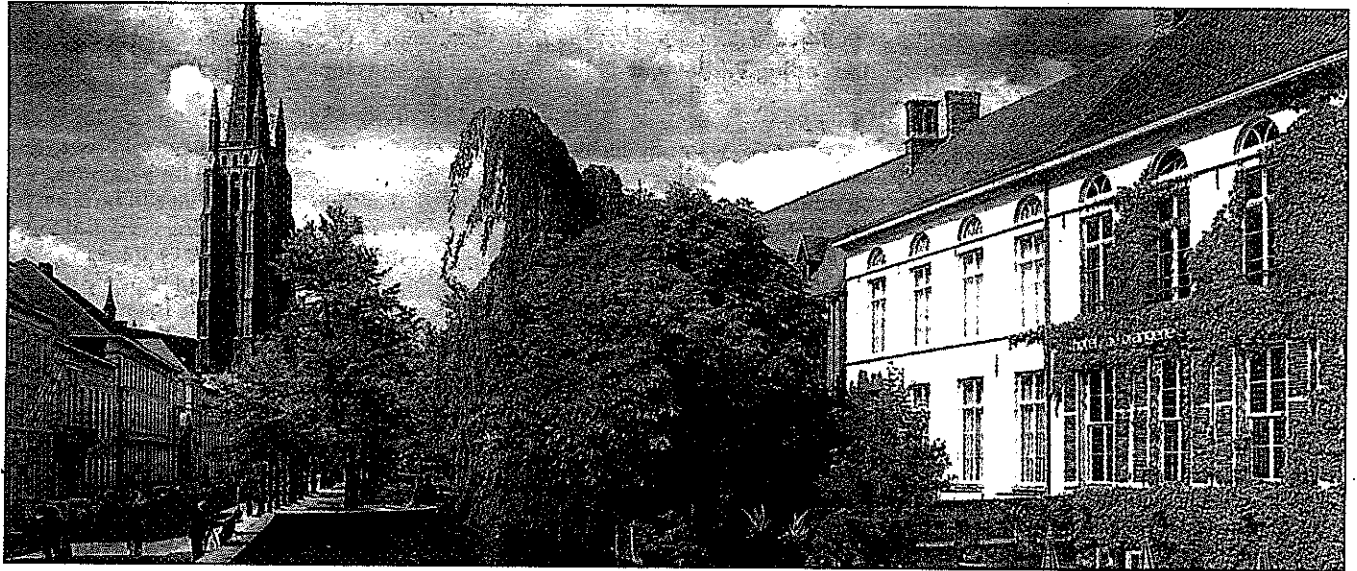
Despite the somewhat negative connotation, members of this mafia are proud to be part of a network based on a romantic, common past – that of studying at the College of Europe in Bruges.

But in Brussels, in particular, this shared experience resonates in the present and almost certainly the future: sooner or later, *anciens* of the college are certain to bump into each other in the capital of Europe.

Bruges is largely seen as the nursery of European civil servants, or 'Eurocrats', though its former students are increasingly penetrating the private sector in Brussels, especially in consultancies or law firms.

Without doubt, a diploma from Bruges is the classic route to getting a foot on the EU career ladder.

The college is the oldest European institution, set up in 1949 after the Hague Congress. Before Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman had the idea of pooling the production of coal and steel and creating the forerunner of today's European Union, the visionary founders of the college decided to gather young Europeans for one year to study, reflect and get to know each other.



Classic route: the College of Europe in Bruges, pictured to the left, is known as the nursery for European civil servants

As a former student and teaching assistant at the College, I know the success of the 'Bruges formula' is built on the solid academic programme, rooted in the experience of practising policymaking; but, above all, on its melting pot of nationalities, languages and life experiences.

A mere ten months at the college can have a galvanising impact on so many lives thereafter.

Students can choose to read European law, politics or economics; all have to take 'cross-departmental' courses to ensure they get the global picture on Europe and the world. I remember that one course where we simulated tough negotiations among member state ministers to agree a new EU budget: it was just like the real thing at the Council of Ministers.

It's a packed programme of study, which transcends national styles. Some 140 globetrotting professors from Berlin, London, Washington and Warsaw come to

Bruges to lecture or simply to chat with the students, breaking down national barriers along the way. But the most precious source of learning in Bruges – something which no well-stocked library or online learning can match – are your fellows.

The college's 375 students are of 40 different nationalities, each one speaking between three and seven languages. It is truly a laboratory of European integration. During those ten months, you 'test' Europe by interaction with its citizens.

It's not all serious stuff, either: sometimes it's the offbeat things that stick in the mind. If you ever thought of the Germans as obsessive followers of rules and regulations, think again. One unforgettable image is that of a German student careering down a wrong-way street on his bicycle with two female passengers. (He'd had a few drinks). The loquacious Irish, however, lived up to their reputation, prone as they were to chattering feverishly over breakfast, and

one could rely on the French colleagues to share the secrets of vine *dégustation*. Socialising with such diverse young people – and living next to each other in college residences – is what makes the Bruges formula unparalleled.

But the college does not only lead to a professional meeting of minds, it can also galvanise one's private life.

The number of Bruges students who end up married or living together represents 30% of the students' number (and, yes, I've contributed to that figure). Surely no other college or university can compete with that.

More than 6,000 people across Europe have enjoyed this experience in Bruges or, more recently, at its sister campus in Natolin, Poland. Some of them have become ministers, Commissioners, ambassadors or civil servants.

But none will forget the year that they discovered most about what it is to be a European.