

& BRUGES ROUGES

Bored of the usual anonymous family hatches? Then check out the Dodge Caliber on a 'Bruges Cruise' in Belgium. It's the perfect antidote to blandness.

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SOME TOUR THE WALLED CENTRE BY HORSE AND CART ALONG COBBLED STREETS, OR BY BOATS ON THE CANALS



The voice that greets us as we enter the wine warehouse is more Croydon than Calais. Indeed the owner proves to be a Brit, one of many

who have crossed the English Channel to find their fortune in the cheap alcohol business. With his help, this traveller, is soon piled high with cases. The owner helps with the loading, it soon transpires that it's because he wants a closer look at our car.

The Dodge Caliber gets you like that. As anyone who has seen Dodge's memorable TV ads will testify, this car is the antidote to bland, not 'cuddly-wuddly' at all. While it wears a badge still new to European eyes, it also stands out from the hordes of anonymous family hatches that drive out of the Channel trains and ferries.

Most hatches go no further than Calais, but not us. Buying supplies is the final act of two days in the company of the Caliber, an annual event that we have dubbed the 'Bruges Cruise'.

Each year, just before Christmas, a group of us take the train to Calais and then the autoroute to Bruges for an overnight stay. We always go in a Chrysler Group car, and this year the choice is simple: the recently launched, headline-grabbing Caliber.

Dodge is all about attitude, and the Caliber has plenty of it. It boasts a swooping, coupe-like profile, yet it stands tall, muscular and proud, towering above others on the road.

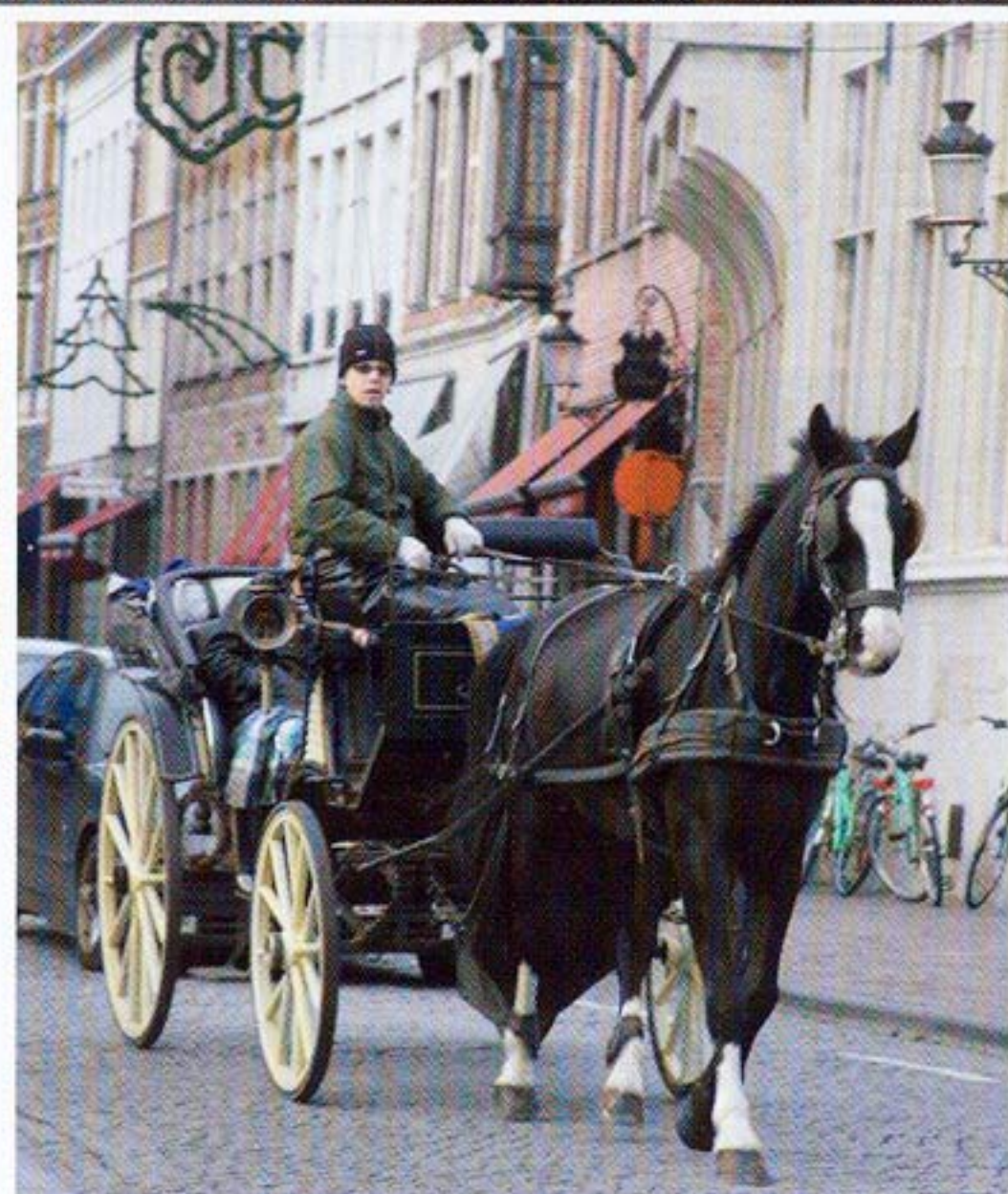
Yet those SUV looks are combined with the practicality and road manners of a five-door family hatch. Whether relying on the 1.8-litre/148bhp or 2.0-litre/154bhp petrol engines, or the 2-litre turbodiesel offering 138bhp, progress is smooth and swift. The handling is impressive too, the wide-tracked, long-wheelbase design and compliant suspension ensuring that the Caliber holds its own.



Not that we get much chance to exploit this prowess on the autoroute or in traffic-heavy Bruges. Instead we enjoy the high driving position, particularly useful as we navigate our way into the city. It's easy to guess when we have arrived – the streets suddenly become very narrow, pavements choked with shoppers, and Sharon, my driving partner, feels for her credit cards as neon-lit designer labels shout at us.

Bruges, however, is not just about upmarket shopping. The capital of Flanders, is also the best preserved medieval city in Europe. Some tour the walled centre by horse and cart along cobble streets, or by boat on the canals. Others visit tiny shops selling the historic Belgian staples of chocolates and silk, while some simply wander the central square and wonder at the surrounding architecture. Two buildings in particular compete for attention, the Church of Our Lady with its 122m-tall spire, Europe's highest brick tower, and the 13th-century Belfort, its 47 bells still regularly played by a bell ringer.

Our base, the Hotel de Tuilerieen, suits the city. Back in the 15th century this cobbled-courtyarded hotel was the residence of a noble Bruges family.



Nestling close to the Den Djiver canal it oozes old world charm.

As time is short, the next morning we are back on the autoroute heading for the hypermarkets, though not before Sharon has had some retail therapy. I need have no fears over space, however, as the Caliber's boot is cleverly designed and very space-friendly. After a diversion through central Calais, we arrive at our very English wine warehouse. The advice of our Croydon friend soon sees the boot swallowing several cases of the vins blanc and rouge, before we head for home.

The Caliber has proven its mettle – it's different, but not too much so, while the boot space is more than capable of swallowing those essential buys from a trip across the Channel. Cheers, as we say in Belgium or Britain... 🍷

Clockwise from top: The Caliber boasts a coupe-like profile yet stands tall and proud; get a different view of the city with a tour by horse and cart; like Amsterdam and Venice, Bruges is criss-crossed with canals. Opposite: The Caliber navigates the narrow bridges effortlessly.