

OOSTENDE



by Elena Galani

Ostend / (Dutch:
Oostende [ostnd])_

a coastal town at the
west end

Eleni Galani
helenegalani@gmail.com
www.elenigalani.com





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There is a painting of James Ensor currently at the MOMA in New York City. It is called «The baths at Ostend». It depicts a thriving coastal town in Belgium during summertime, full of life. Hundreds of people of all ages swim carefree in the sea.

I probably have known Ostend long before I visited it. It was through the eyes of this Belgian painter - a pioneer of surrealism- who lived here all his life. Years ago I came accross one of his artworks hanging on the walls of a museum. He mostly enjoyed painting masks and skeletons. There is a feeling of sadness in these «carnavalesque» paintings, which contradicts the joyfull atmosphere of «The baths at Ostend».

I arrived at the central railway station of this small provincial town at the West coast of Belgium the day in which the emergency alert measures in Brussels were imposed, following the terrorist attacks in Bataclan theatre in Paris. The metro sublines were shut down, very few people travelled by train.

Brussels Central/ Ghent/ Ostend: the itinerary lasts 1h30m. The sea is very close to the central station. An old ship, in the square right outside, welcomes the visitor to the harbor area.

During winter Ostend changes dramatically: it is transformed into a deserted area, a decadent resort patiently waiting for the sun. I read now that James Ensor used to follow the same itinerary every day in this old coastal town. All his life. I can almost see him strolling along the endless shore, alone. Even in winter. Ostend means «the west end». Why was it ever called that way?

"The harbor of Ostend expanded as the traffic connections with the hinterland were improved. In 1838, a railway connection with Brussels was constructed. Ostend became a transit harbor to England in 1846 when the first ferry sailed to Dover. It was then occupied by German forces and used as an access point to the sea for submarines and other light naval forces for much of the duration of World War I".

I wonder what happened to the people who once passed by here... Did they start a new journey? For which unknown trip did they sail? Does the word «end» contain even a slight promise for a beginning? It probably did for James Ensor - he therefore never left. This may happen in coastal towns: proximity to the sea offers an illusive impression of freedom. An artificial sense of continuity, like dots at the end of a sentence (...) -and so does Ostend. But what if this «Ost end» is in reality a dead end?

Can one really ever tell?



















































