

# THE COASTAL BAROMETER



Westtoer

*By looking at indicators, we try to find out whether the coastal policy pays enough attention to people, nature and economic development.*

## THE QUESTION:

### WHAT IMPACT DOES WWI STILL HAVE ON THE COAST?

#### WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE FIGURES FOR COASTAL MANAGEMENT?

You may not realise it, but the First World War still influences the appearance of many places nearly 100 years on. Along the Belgian coast there are still many traces to be found of the Great War: bunkers, memorials and other sites. The war past still has an attraction for visitors. WWI tourism has increased considerably over the past few years. And the impact of the diverse commemoration activities and initiatives is noticeable on the Belgian coast as well, specifically in the hospitality industry and the development of certain activities.

#### WHAT ARE THE RESULTS? WHY THIS RESULT?

##### *Battlefield tourism is crucial to the Belgian Westhoek area*

With over 340,000 WWI tourists a year, WWI tourism accounts for no less than 30% of the total turnover for the Westhoek

*Places outside the Westhoek area where WWI tourists who go on daytrips to the Westhoek area stay (in %). Source: Study by Westtoer: Oorlog en Vrede in de Westhoek (2006)*

|   | Individual visitors | Groups |
|---|---------------------|--------|
| West coast (De Panne, Koksijde, Nieuwpoort and Middelkerke)             | 37,3%               | 13,4%  |
| East coast (Bredene, De Haan, Blankenberge, Zeebrugge and Knokke-Heist) | 1,7%                | 6,3%   |
| Ostend  | 5,0%                | 5,9%   |
| Greater Bruges (excluding Zeebrugge)                                    | 17,6%               | 37,8%  |
| France  | 11,3%               | 14,3%  |

tourism industry (2011). WWI tourism does not just generate flows of visitors to the Westhoek area, it is also an important economic driver. The number of day trippers and the number of long-term tourists are both rising and create a turnover of 136 million EUR in this region. In 2012 the number of WWI tourists was estimated at 359,000. This figure is expected to increase over the coming years up to approx 400,000. A small part of these tourists combine visits to several WWI memorials with a stay on the Belgian coast. The majority of individual WWI tourists who go on a daytrip to the Westhoek area and who stay in another location than their own residence stay on the Belgian west coast (37.3%), in Greater Bruges (17.6%) or in nearby France (11.3%). Groups, on the other hand, spend the night most often in Greater Bruges (37.8%) and to a lesser extent in France (14.3%) and on the Belgian west coast (13.4%).

#### *Commemoration projects on the Belgian coast supported by Flanders*

Flanders organises several commemoration projects on the coast. Currently, three 'coastal' projects receive support from Flanders:

- In **Ostend**, visitors can become acquainted with the city's WWI past through a digital experiential walk and cycling route along the war heritage.

- **Nieuwpoort**, which played a key role during WWI, focuses on the De Ganzepoot site. The visitor centre located here allows visitors to relive the story of the flooding and understand the role of the sluice complex. Visitors are invited to explore

other WWI heritage in the region and the centre can serve as a base for visiting other tourist attractions in Nieuwpoort and the surrounding area. The new visitor centre and the King Albert I Memorial will be presented as one attraction in the future.

- **Blankenberge** invests in signposted walking and cycling routes.

#### WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BRING?

Ypres and the rest of the Westhoek area will be besieged in a figurative sense by tourists and visitors during the commemoration period. Hotels in the Westhoek area will often be fully booked, and visitors will frequently be forced to spend the night on the Belgian coast. Research has shown that many individual visitors in particular will stay on the Belgian west coast and make trips to the WWI heritage in the Westhoek area from there. This is also often the case with (school) groups. Good interaction in the field of accommodation management with the west coast municipalities is therefore essential. In addition, it would be advantageous to develop package deals and certainly also special offers collectively.

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#### Sources

- Fassaert J., N. Vandepitte N. & S. Gheysen (2008). Toeristische valorisatie van erfgoed uit de eerste wereldoorlog in de Westhoek met het oog op 100 jaar Grote Oorlog (2014-18).



■ A working drawing of the planned "De Ganzepoot" visitor centre below the Albert I Memorial in Nieuwpoort, which will host an exhibition on the inundation. Construction will start shortly (Patrick Vanleene)