

By Starliner to Belgium

A winner at the National Coach Tourism Awards 2014, Parrys International is in the top flight of UK coach tour operators. But what actually happens on a Parrys tour? Stuart Render reports

It's 6.30am on a cold Monday morning in December and I'm standing on the forecourt at the offices of Parrys International, the Cheslyn Hay, West Midlands-based coach tour operator.

To one side of me is the modern office building and workshops built in 1999. To the other side, gleaming in the reflection of the yard's bright lights, and promising a welcome haven from the cold morning air, is a 14-plate Neoplan Starliner coach.

I'm booked to travel on Parrys' four-day 'Continental Christmas Markets' tour, my comprehensive joining instructions advising me that my feeder coach is due to depart at 7am.

Customers for today's tour departures are arriving by car. Some are



The Starliner picks up the group in the centre of Lille



Bruges chocolatier Sophie de Cock



Coach tourism professionals at every turn – the Parrys crew of Amy Evans and Mike Hall

being dropped off, others are being directed to an area of secure parking by apprentice mechanic Jon Hughes. It's a valuable opportunity for him to take time out from looking after the fleet to engage with customers.

Over by the Starliner, which carries the name *City of Birmingham*, coach crew, and husband and wife team, Tom and Louise Reynolds are welcoming customers. They've been with Parrys for 13 years and, as courier and driver, are smartly turned out in Parrys' trademark black and red uniforms.

Today, Parrys has five departures with tours heading for Cornwall, Thursford, Scotland and two to Belgium, one staying in Bruges, and my own tour, staying in Ypres.

A feeder system allows the company to offer 11 pick-ups across the West Midlands. Today, all the tours, with the exception of Scotland, will interchange at Hopwood Park services on the M42 south of Birmingham.

City of Birmingham is operating the Bruges tour, but is also the main feeder coach for clients starting their journey at the garage. The company aims to keep the length of time a customer spends on a feeder coach down to a minimum. So, rather than have us arrive earlier, and have a longer journey, we're to travel on Tom and Louise's coach.

Louise ticks my name on her sheet and I board. Parrys endeavours, whenever possible, to give passengers the same seat number for both feeder and tour coach. It's a small point, but adds to the seamless journey experience.

At 6.55am, with 22 passengers aboard, we leave the garage and head off to join the nearby M6. On this feeder we have just one intermediate stop on the journey to Hopwood Park; at Frankley Services on the M5.

Tom delivers a safety announcement using a hands-free stalk microphone.

The Monday morning traffic heading towards Birmingham slows us down to a crawl, so there's time to take note of what the coach has to offer.

The Starliner (OU14 SSV) is a 14m tri-axle. It carries 48 seats, a standard configuration that Parrys uses across its fleet of Neoplans and Van Hool Astrons.

Seats carry a black leather and blue fabric mix, with Parrys' burgundy

featuring in the side edging. Seat numbers are embroidered into the seat back. Each seat has a three-point belt.

In the back of the seat, above the fold-down tray and magazine pocket, is the 'in seat' entertainment system. It's an innovation that's still rare on touring coaches, introduced by Parrys back in 2010 and first fitted as part of the specification for the relatively short-lived Diamond Class brand.

The system is supplied by Funtoro, with the screen fitting into a recess in the back of the seat. Each seat reclines, although not enough to compromise the person sitting behind. Aisle seats can also move sideways, but as doing this can severely restrict aisle access for the courier, it's not something mentioned in the passenger briefings, and I never see any passenger using it.

The joining instructions remind the reader that "due to the entertainment system on board our coaches it's not possible to put bags underneath the seats. Please use the overhead lockers."

In the seat pocket is a laminated card carrying safety information, and a menu for on-coach refreshments. At the top of the card is an image of the Starliner. Separate cards are produced for Parrys fleet of Van Hool coaches.

There are three TV screens located above the aisle. One is permanently fixed to the front bulkhead above the windscreen, and two are built in to the roof of the passenger cabin, dropping down as required. On our feeder journey the screens are deployed and are showing Sky News.

The screens also drop down when the driver uses the stalk microphone, a dash-mounted camera giving passengers an unusual view of their chauffeur.

Blue LED 'mood' lighting in the roof is supplemented by standard white fluorescents above the side windows. The aisle floor is on a level with the seats, except in the middle of the coach where it slopes down in a dip to reduce the step height leading down to the sunken toilet. The aisle is edged with additional blue LED strips.

At the rear of the coach is a full width galley area with ample storage areas, a water heater, and, perhaps unusually, a full-size teapot. The Parrys specification doesn't include an oven or microwave.

A curtain can be drawn across the entrance to the galley to reduce light

and noise disruption to the passengers sitting at the rear of the coach.

The Starliner is undoubtedly an impressive vehicle, both in its external and internal styling. However, there's one design element that raises a few eyebrows. The large front passenger windscreen carries a heavy tint to avoid passengers, and the crew, being fried in sunny weather. Today though, on a gloomy December morning, the tint has the effect of making everything seem even more gloomy. The side passenger windows are also tinted, although not to the same degree.

As we make slow progress along the M6 towards the M5 junction, Louise makes her way through the coach taking drinks orders. On Parrys' continental tours the currency of choice is the euro, although sterling will be accepted. Tea, coffee and hot chocolate, all priced at €1, are served in a Parrys-branded Styrofoam cup, with lid, and delivered to each passenger on a tray.

Once on the M5 the traffic eases and we're soon pulling up at Frankley services to collect two passengers. We leave at 7.40am, Tom giving a welcome to our fellow travellers and updating us on our expected timings at Hopwood Park. However, we soon encounter heavy traffic on the M42 which gives us a further delay of 20 minutes.

As we approach the services, we get an explanation from Tom about what's going to happen. Louise then thanks us all for travelling with Parrys International and wishes those of us transferring to another coach an enjoyable onward journey. It's the first of many positive touches, with Parrys keen to ensuring the feeder journey is seen as part of the tour, not just an add-on.

Arriving into Hopwood Park services there's a Parry's 16-seat minibus already parked on the dedicated coach park. But in short order, and testament to the scheduling of the feeder coaches, especially in light of the heavy traffic, the three other Starliners arrive and park up.

With passengers now mostly inside the services, the drivers of each of the five vehicles unload luggage (each carrying a pre-printed and clearly readable label) and take it round to the onward tour coach. Passengers returning to the coach park identify their tour coach, aided by a small Hanover Systems LED destination display fitted to the top of the lower windscreen. They then identify their luggage, which is now neatly lined

up alongside each coach, and the driver stows it safely in the coach.

Passengers are then welcomed by the courier who checks their names against the manifest and points them towards their allocated seat.

My own bag is now lined up alongside *City of Wolverhampton* (OU14 SSV) displaying 'Ypres Belgium' on the display. My new driver, Mike Hall, has a steady flow of passengers identifying their bags. We say hello, I point to my bag, and watch as he stows it safely in the coach.

Walking to the front of the coach I meet Amy Evans, my courier for the tour. As she ticks my name on the manifest we realise that we've met before – in the coach park in the Austrian resort of Mayrhofen in 2010 when I was travelling on tour with Johnsons Coaches of Henley-in-Arden



The Funtoro 'in seat' entertainment console



Brussels' Place Sainte Catherine is the location for the main Christmas market chalets

(*Coach Monthly*: September 2010).

Amy (32), who took business studies at university, has been with Parrys as a courier for eight years. She holds a PCV licence and acts as a second driver on tours and as a feeder driver. This trip to Belgium is one of her last as a full-time courier as she's been promoted to reservations manager, a role that will see her spending less time on the road.

Mike (over 21) became a driver in 1986, moving to Parrys in 1990. After taking time out to help bring up his family, he rejoined Parrys in 2007.

I take my seat (45) at the offside rear of the coach, immediately in front of the galley area. We have a total of 43 passengers. Across the aisle are Mr and Mrs Evans from Dudley, regular travellers with Parrys who, they tell me, always request seats 47 and 48. In front of us are two free double seats. A young girl in her twenties and a smattering of forty-somethings remind me that Christmas market tours do attract a different age profile.

At 8.55am Mike guides *City of Wolverhampton* smoothly out of Hopwood Park and we head onto the M42, destination Ypres.

Amy is soon on the microphone, welcoming us and introducing Mike. A short safety video, produced by the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK, is played on the monitors. It's nicely done and reinforces Parrys' professionalism.

Amy has a natural and professional delivery. At regular points through the tour she tells us what we need to know, clearly and concisely. She runs through the basic operation of the 'in seat' Funtoro entertainment system. While the system is booting up, she comes round to distribute the free headphones. The system is mostly intuitive, but might confuse a non-tech-savvy passenger. However, Amy is on hand to help.

As we head down the M40 towards the M25, heading towards Folkestone and Eurotunnel Le Shuttle, I plug the headphones in and bring up the home screen. There are eight options: movie; music; photo; games; TV/SatNav; information; maps; and instructions. In one of the menus I find Parrys' own promotional video, highlighting products and services. It's accompanied by some classic, and apposite music tracks, including Queen's *Don't Stop Me Now* and *Holding Back the Years* by Simply Red.

As we navigate the southern section of the (clear-running) M25 the

roof-mounted monitors drop down to show a feed from the driver's sat-nav showing our position.

At 12.10pm we pull up at check-in at Eurotunnel's Folkestone terminal. We're soon through and parking behind *City of Birmingham* in the coach park. We have 30 minutes here, time to visit the passenger terminal, now complete after its major refurbishment.

At 12.45pm we're back on the coach and heading off to catch our allocated 1.20pm shuttle departure. French border control isn't interested in us today and we move on to the final check-in booth. In short order we're following *City of Birmingham* along the lanes towards the shuttle ramps.



Not for the faint-hearted!
City of Birmingham squeezes onto Le Shuttle



Safety announcements on
the drop-down screen



A surprisingly quiet
December afternoon
at Lille's Marché de Noël

I ask Amy and Mike if it's always this easy. They smile, and tell me that at busy times, even though you've passed through every other part of the process on time, you can sometimes find the train you are booked on either cancelled or retimed. However, they point out that when it runs smoothly, the whole process appears seamless to clients.

Eurotunnel say that deviations from the schedule only happen in exceptional circumstances, but it's clearly a concern for the Parrys' crew.

Both Starliners are held at the top of the shuttle ramp for several minutes before being called down to the platform. Getting a 14m coach onto the shuttle is 'cosy', and there's little room for error, but Mike (and Tom in front) make it look easy.

Eurotunnel says that departures can be altered depending on traffic flows. It seems quiet today which might explain why we leave at 1.06pm, 15 minutes ahead of schedule. It takes 35 minutes to cross, the movement of the train resulting in a very slight rocking movement when you're sitting on the coach.

At 2.46pm local time we drive off the shuttle at Eurotunnel's Cocquelles terminal and start our short journey to Ypres.

The Funtoro boots up and I experience a rather surreal moment, watching *Have I Got News For You* as we cruise along the French, then Belgian roads.

We pull up outside the 3* Novotoel Ieper Centrum (Novotel Ypres) at 4.10pm. Amy has already briefed us about what will happen when we arrive. She also points out that we are responsible for our own bags, but that she and Mike will help if anyone requires it. No-one does.

We wait on the coach while she goes to reception. The Novotel is geared up for groups and the keys are already waiting for her. We leave the coach, collect our bags that Mike has lined up by the coach, and our keys from Amy, and head for our rooms.

It's a very quick turnaround for me because I'm going with Amy and Mike to see where the coach is to be parked.

The Novotel is located in a street that leads off from Ypres main square, and close to the famous Menin Gate. It's very convenient for the

passengers, but it's a narrow cobbled street, and not ideally suited for a 14m leviathan! As we leave the hotel, a 90° left-hand turn tests Mike's driving skills to the limit, but he does it in one (and does so on each morning).

Major roadworks are affecting the normal coach parking bays so Mike parks up in a marked area a few hundred yards from the railway station. It's a 15-minute walk back to the hotel through the streets of Ypres.

At 6.45pm, after a wash and brush-up, I'm back in the hotel lounge area. Mike and Amy have stayed in uniform. They tell me that this makes it easy for customers to identify them should there be any questions. It also makes them clearly identifiable to hotel staff. By the time I meet up with them they have already worked with the hotel staff to set out the tables in the restaurant in twos, fours and sixes. As passengers come down for dinner, Mike and Amy allocate seating. The same seats are kept for each of the three nights, although as new friendships are made, a number of 'twos' become 'fours'! Tables carry Parrys branding, using professional looking 'Reserved' cards supplied by Amy.

Dinner is in buffet style, with food being regularly topped up. After dinner there's just time to walk the short distance to the Menin Gate for the 8pm 'Last Post' act of remembrance.

Day 2 – Lille Christmas Market

Today we have a free morning before departing at 12noon for Lille. The group takes a leisurely breakfast in the same area as dinner last night. Tables are allocated on a first come, first served basis, with the cheerful hotel staff noting your room number and taking you to a free table.

After breakfast there's an opportunity for me to meet with

Miet (pronounced 'Meet') Vervenne, the hotel's enthusiastic group reservations co-ordinator, and the contact for tour planners.

Over a coffee in the lounge area she tells me that she's been with Accor since 2000, and at the hotel since 2008. The hotel opened in 2001 and offers 116 standard rooms. Miet explains that standard means a twin room, one bed being a double, and the other being a sofa bed that's made up and ready when the guests arrive.

She says that the hotel is more leisure-based than corporate and she understands the needs of groups arriving by coach. Weekends are peak times for the hotel so enquiries about weekday bookings are welcomed.

"It's important for me to understand exactly what the tour planner wants," she says. "We ask them what time they want meals. If there are any concerns, we take action there and then."

The hotel, which is simply and tastefully furnished, has an ongoing programme of room refurbishments. The public areas are smart, with the restaurant area having had a make-over in 2014.

There's a refreshing enthusiasm here for groups. If you want to find out more, email Miet at H3172-RE@accor.com or telephone 00 32 57 42 96 00.

It takes an hour to travel to Lille. As we approach our drop-off point in front of Lille Flandres railway station, Amy briefs us on timings and where the market can be found. She has another important piece of information for us.

"If you'd like a hot drink waiting for you when you get back on the coach later, fill out the form I've left on your seat," she says. "Tell me what you would like and how you would like it."

We leave the coach and Mike and Amy take it away to park up on the

edge of the central area. A ferris wheel (think York or Manchester) takes up a good chunk of the Grand Place. A short walk further on and we arrive at the Place Rihour, now transformed into the Marché de Noël de Lille. The market has been operating for 25 years and brings together more than 80 of the ubiquitous wooden huts, sorry, chalets, presenting a range of artisanal products. Perhaps because it's all concentrated in one area it doesn't seem particularly large, and the gloomy weather doesn't help. It's also surprisingly quiet. However, a large cup of hot pear juice with calvados soon gets the cockles warmed.

On this visit there's plenty of time to explore the centre of Lille, including the modern Euralille shopping complex next to the station.

At 4.30pm *City of Wolverhampton* hoves into view and we climb into the warmth of its welcoming interior. As promised, Amy has hot drinks ready to serve. It's a welcome touch.

Back at the hotel and there's a 30-minute window from 6.30pm to 7pm during which we can come down for dinner. This, together with the hotel's commitment to keeping the buffet regularly topped up, prevents the traditional mealtime rush.

Day 3 – Brussels and Bruges

A busy day today and we leave the hotel just after 9am. The Starliner has interior mood lighting, sometimes blue dots, sometimes full length displays. Occasionally there's a rainbow effect as the system goes through a self-checking process. This morning we have the dots, complemented by low level, easy listening music. The combination of this gives a gentle and relaxing start to the day. The Funtoro stays resolutely unbooted!

While the passengers may be relaxed, Amy is busy serving drinks.

A debate ensues among those of us at the rear of the coach about just how many kilometres she must walk in the course of a tour. We never arrive at an answer.

Her default system is to serve passengers from the front of the coach first. Those of us at the back question this! However, it seems it's easier to approach passengers from the front rather than surprise them by appearing from over the shoulder behind. Seems plausible!

Brussels Christmas market forms part of a city centre winter event called Plaisirs d'Hiver (in French) or Winterpret (in Flemish). There are around 250 chalets, fairground attractions, a ferris wheel, carousels and an ice rink. As we approach the drop-off point Amy hands out an event

Day 4 – Eurotunnel and home

It's a morning 'at leisure' and last minute shopping. By 10.45am Mike has the coach parked outside and is starting to load luggage. At 11am we're ready to depart – but there's a problem. The highways department has chosen today to dig up the narrow cobbled street outside the hotel making the 90° turn even more challenging. The good news is that Amy has already spoken to the workmen. As we prepare to leave she goes to the man driving a small digger. He gives a cheery wave and reverses the digger along the road and out of the way.

It's still a tight turn and Amy walks in front of the coach to guide Mike through the remaining gap. It all works well and we're soon

quality that shows. If I had to make any suggestions it would be to say a map of Lille and Bruges would be useful."

Returning to our coach we find *City of Birmingham* parked next to us. Both coaches will now travel together for the remainder of the journey to the West Midlands. The shuttle moves off at 2.33pm. 35 minutes later and we're leaving Folkestone to head for the West Midlands. "If you're continuing on this coach,



48 seats in a 14m coach gives valuable extra legroom



Rear steer helped the Starliner negotiate the tight corners of Bruges



Parrys presentation was immaculate throughout. Mike uses the facilities in Bruges



Amy prepares hot drinks for the returning group



Bruges market place had been taken over by an ice rink, ousting the Christmas market chalets from their traditional home

map that shows a walking route through the city centre that combines the chalets and other attractions.

The drop-off point is in one of the herringbone coach parking bays on the Rue du Cardinal Mercier, a short walk from the famous Grand Place and close to the Central Station. There's no parking charge, but it's first come, first served with many coaches arriving, dropping off and then having to move on to park up.

We have two hours, just long enough to wend our way through the busy streets towards the main part of the Christmas market that fills Place Sainte Catherine. It's an impressive line-up of wooden huts, with the imposing church of Saint Catherine at one end, and the ferris wheel at the other. Amy's map comes in very handy.

At 1.40pm we leave Brussels for Bruges, arriving at the Bargeplein on the southern edge of the town at 3.10pm. This is a dedicated coach drop-off and pick-up point with a 30-minute maximum waiting period. From here, it's a 15 to 20 minutes walk to the market square.

Parking is now at the large, dedicated coach park a few hundred metres away. There's barrier control and a hose for washing coaches down. Parking is €13 for up to four hours, €20 for up to 11 hours and €25 for 24 hours.

Leaving Mike and Amy to clean the coach I walk through the cobbled streets to the centre. Bruges needs little introduction, but there's no doubt that its charm offers a unique visit. The market place has been commandeered by a large ice rink, reducing the space for the Christmas market chalets, a move that, according to comments, hasn't been universally welcomed. It may not be a huge market, but it's the whole town centre experience that appeals here. I call in at Chocolatier Van Oost at Wollestraat 11. Established in 1900 this family-run business sells an extensive range of reasonably priced artisanal chocolate made on the premises. I leave with a dent in the bank balance.

By 5pm the coach is back at the pick-up point, Amy and Mike welcoming us, and our bags of chocolate, back to the coach with the now familiar welcoming drink. We leave at 5.25pm and are back in the hotel an hour later.

heading out of Ypres.

But there's another problem, and this one is more serious.

It's a cold morning so the heating on the Starliner has been turned up. It's very effective, and my fellow passengers are feeling very cosy.

Then we realise that the combination of efficient heating and a coach full of chocolate may not be such a good idea. Mike takes action and a crisis is averted.

We arrive at the Eurotunnel terminal at Coquelles at 12.45pm. At French Border Control Mike is asked to open up all the external locker doors, but it's a quick check and all is in order.

But as any regular user of Eurotunnel Le Shuttle knows, it's UK Border Control where the delays can occur. Today it seems we may be in luck. At 12.56pm, as we pull up, there's just a single coach in front of us, this one operated by Winn's Coaches of Northallerton. A customs official wearing a hi-viz, and a smile, tells us to wait while the passengers off the coach in front clear the customs hall. Then it's our turn. Perhaps someone has said something, because all the customs officials are smiling too. We're out the other side, back on our coach and moving off to the coach park by 1.08pm. At 12 minutes from start to finish, even Mike and Amy are surprised.

Compared to the passenger terminal at Folkestone, Coquelles is small. Refurbishment of the toilets is taking place, and a major refurbishment of the whole terminal is understood to be in the pipeline.

I speak with Paul and Marie Wilkinson, from Dudley, and in their late 50s, who are trying out a coach tour for the first time.

"We were looking online for a short break and the Parrys tour popped up," says Paul. "My wife has friends who've travelled with Parrys before and they recommended it. We're really enjoying the trip and the crew are very good. We'd certainly try this again with Parrys."

Friends Judy Ashurst and Peter Markey from Solihull, and both in their 60s, are regular coach tour travellers with experience of Shearings and Johnsons. This is Peter's fifth trip with Parrys, and Judy's fourth.

"It's the little touches that make the difference," says Peter. "For example, having the drinks available when we get back on the coach. It's the

leave something on your seat to show it's taken," says Amy, as part of her briefing as we approach Hopwood Park services. "If you're travelling on the other coach, you can sit in any seat that has nothing on it. If you're travelling on the minibus you can sit anywhere."

As we pull up in the coach park at 6pm, later than planned because of delays on the M25, there's a spontaneous round of applause for Amy and Mike. It is well deserved.

This time the interchange is smaller; just the two Belgium tours and a 16-seat Mercedes Sprinter minibus. Our coach is to drop off at Dudley, Wolverhampton and the garage. *City of Birmingham* is to drop off at Great Barr, Walsall, Lichfield and the garage, and the minibus is to drop off at the NEC and Stafford. This time, because both coaches are due back at the garage within a few minutes of each other, those of us heading back to the garage are staying on our own vehicles.

The interchange process now kicks in again, with our drivers moving luggage around, but still waiting for transferring passengers to identify their bags before loading them into the vehicles. While passengers are away from the two coaches, something else happens, something I've not seen before. The two couriers, Amy and Louise, have the vacuum out and are giving their respective vehicles a tidy up. By the time my fellow travellers return from the services, each coach looks immaculate.

"We're welcoming some new customers onto our coach," says Amy. "It's important for us to present the vehicle at its best."

As we leave at 6.30pm, now with 39 passengers, Amy goes through her welcome and briefing. As we approach each of our drop-off points she offers a warm thank you to departing clients. At 8pm on the dot we arrive back at Parrys garage in Cheslyn Hay.

Mike pulls into the yard and turns the coach so that it parks in exactly the same position as it was when we boarded four days ago. This means passengers alighting are protected from cars and other traffic moving around the yard. Once empty, Mike reverses the Starliner round to the side of the yard. As I'm putting my bags in the boot of my car, *City of Birmingham* hoves into view, and carries out the same parking manoeuvre.

I say thank you and goodbye to Mike, Amy, Tom and Louise. It's been an excellent trip.

➤ *Coach Monthly* would like to thank Dave Parry and his team at Parrys International for their assistance in making this article possible.

Tour summary

Title:	Continental Christmas Markets – Ypres
Duration:	4 days
Price:	£275pp DBB
Hotel:	Novotel Ieper Centrum
Crossing:	Eurotunnel Le Shuttle

COACH MONTHLY SAYS ➤

Parrys International is generally regarded as being one of the best coach tour operators in the land. Compare it with other top flight operators and the differences are likely to be small. However, the opportunity to experience a Parrys tour at first hand revealed a commitment and attention to detail throughout. As two of Parrys customers say, it's the little touches that make the difference. But there's more to it than that. It's the continual professionalism shown by Mike, Amy, Tom and Louise – and by association, all the team at Cheslyn Hay. Dave Parry is committed to excellence, and it shows. He's good at what he does, and, as you can read in our exclusive interview with him on page 22, he makes money. It's a winning combination. It leaves just one question. Is a Parrys tour the perfect coach tour? Of course not. As Dave himself would say, there are always opportunities to improve. But based on the experience of four days with the team, and focusing on the things that really matter, it's hard to see what those improvements might be.