

# THE INDEPENDENT WALLONIA

25.10.14



## WALL-TO-WALL ART

*Charleroi's long-standing love affair with graffiti*

P.4

## THE SURVIVOR

*The architecture of Tournai tells a resilient tale*

P.5

## SLICE OF THE CITY

*A whistle-stop tour of the delights of Liège*

P.6

## SLOW FOOD

*Laid-back living and fine flavours in Namur*

P.7

*In association with*



**Belgian Tourist Office**  
Brussels • Wallonia

## MONKEY MAGIC *Mons prepares to welcome the world* P.2



# From medieval to ultramodern

Mons is embracing the future as it prepares for its role as next year's European Capital of Culture, but it's also steeped in intriguing history. *Philip Sweeney* explores its two sides

In the autumn sunshine, the homely red brick and grey limestone capital of the province of Hainaut is in the grip of European Culture Capital Syndrome, as an army of builders races to get the place ready for the magic year of 2015.

Arriving at the railway station, you're in the thick of it. To one side, across an expanse of concrete and cranes, you glimpse the 19th-century statue of King Leopold, the spire of the great church of Sainte-Waudru and the soaring Baroque bellfry. To the other, a swathe of new-build, part of the new technologies park emerging in the wake of Google's pioneering data centre just outside town, cooled by canal water. In the middle, a jumble of steel walkways straddling the rails is transmuting into the spectacular transport hub of the future Mons, courtesy of Santiago Calatrava – the Giorgio Armani of urban regeneration.

As you walk up the low hill towards the centre, you pass elegant townhouses, old-fashioned shops, plenty of dust-sheeted renovation sites, and seemingly half the streets of the centre being re-cobbled in pristine grey stone.

The city's newest luxury accommodation, the Hotel Dream, typifies the new Mons. A former convent with stone-pillared rooms has been kitted out in red leather and black and white ponyskin, a spa, a cocktail lounge and a smart brasserie called Mea Culpa.

Mons, a transport crossroads since medieval times, was once the centre of an important mining and industrial region. It is now busy with universities and cybertechnology, so it has

plenty of municipal grandeur, both new and historic. Yet it doesn't seem to have had a grand hotel. The Hotel Dream is therefore straight in at the top, a convenient five-minute walk through medievally named streets – la Grande Triperie; le Marché aux Herbes; la rue des Clercs – to the Grand-Place, the heart of any sizeable town in Belgium.

The Grand-Place lives up to its name, a field-sized paved expanse bordered by rows of café terraces and a series of magnificent facades. The cafés are a nice and varied selection, from the staid brass-and-moleskin Excelsior to the more bohemian Ropieur. The youth of Mons, incidentally, tend not to frequent the Grand-Place cafés but funkier, cheaper bars down on the Marché aux Herbes. For all Mons' booming student population, the Grand-Place on a Friday night is a model of civilised animation.

The star feature of the Grand-Place, according to tourist literature, is the symbol of the city, a small brass monkey wall ornament which people rub for good luck. Not up on lucky miniature simian-rubbing, I gave the experience a miss. But the building the monkey is attached to, the great 15th-century Town Hall, should absolutely not be passed by – particularly its massive single upper floor, a series of cavernous dark wood-paneled halls divided by low flights of steps, aglow with huge paintings and gilded carving.

From the long balcony of the Town Hall many centuries of dignitaries have overseen fairs, punishments, parades and miscellaneous revelry. The most recent occupant is the town's Mayor, Elio Di Rupo, the bow-tied miner's son



## 'The Van Gogh trail calls at two houses the young Vincent lived in'

who got the Culture Capital gig for Mons. (Until last month he was the country's Prime Minister, until ousted by a fresh coalition.)

One of the chief entertainments nowadays is the annual pageant of the Doudou, Mons' version of the Ducasse carnival wherein a giant figure of Saint George slays the dragon, known as the Doudou. This happens amid Rio-style revelry and wild music from drums and wind instruments strangely reminiscent of Brazil but apparently 100 per cent Belgian.

As part of 2015, the Doudou, which bears the Unesco World Cultural Heritage stamp, will have a new museum. In the meantime, a good way to investigate the cult out of season is to head for the Collegiate Church of Sainte-Waudru. This is a stern Gothic edifice standing on the side of Mons' central hill, surrounded by the ivy-clad mansions of church officials and rich lawyers. Dedicated to a seventh-century canoness and plague-dispeller, this soaring grey cathedral contains magnificent stained glass, fine alabaster statuary, a crypt full of gold and silver ornaments, and a great skull-adorned death clock to remind you of the inevitable in case you're enjoying your holiday too much.

Parked in a corner chapel is the Golden Coach. This magnificent folly, pulled by men rather than horses, is a sort of Walloon equivalent of the Seville Holy Week floats, carrying the gold-casketed relics of Sainte-Waudru towards their annual reunion with Saint George, the Doudou, and a large quantity of the excellent local beer.

From plans so far announced, 2015 will involve a suitably ambitious programme of flagship concerts, splashy exhibitions and big

urban art installations. But it will also more than double the town's permanent museum and gallery stock. Not that there is a shortage: the existing modern art gallery, the BAM, hosts a particularly rich exhibition programme, and its 2015 centrepiece, Van Gogh in the Borinage, promises to be one of next year's highlights.

And across a tree-lined square from Sainte-Waudru, the former premises of the Belgian National Bank contain one of Mons' most idiosyncratic claims to museum fame: the François Duesberg Museum of Decorative Arts. For aficionados of porcelain, it's already a world-class attraction, but an encounter with the eccentric personality of its proprietor raises it to another level altogether.

I had the good fortune to find Baron François Duesberg himself at home. The patron lives in what one imagines to be considerable grandeur up a marble staircase above the shop. I was treated to a fascinating personal tour from the slight, pinstriped figure. He flitted volubly through the gleaming forest of gold ormolu and china ebony, from Meissen clock (one of six made for Napoleon to give to his generals), to an 18th-century African statuette from the beginnings of the *Robinson Crusoe* craze, occasionally complaining that Mons didn't appreciate his treasures.

A little more than a century ago, a young Dutch resident had the same problem. Vincent van Gogh's period as a trainee Evangelist pastor in the mining communities of the Borinage came to end when he was fired for unseemly Christ-like behaviour among his congregation. He went off to Arles and posthumous fame.

*Café society: the city's Grand-Place certainly lives up to its name*

JAN-PETER BOENING/ANIF/CAMERA PRESS

A Van Gogh trail is one of Mons' tourist attractions, calling at two red brick houses that the young Vincent lived in. Both of these properties have been under leisurely repair for an indeterminate period, and the whole Borinage area is rather agreeably under-exploited in industrial heritage terms.

The great model mine complex of Le Grand Hornu has been renovated into opulent gallery and restaurant spaces. But the old miners' villages that surround Mons are mainly poor, unchanged, and therefore authentic. This includes the slag heaps, transformed by nature into densely wooded hills much favoured by riders from the stables which have established themselves in some of the old mining precincts.

Mons' busy 2014, as anniversary setting for many dramatic events of the two World Wars, is merging seamlessly into the programme of 2015. Another man-made hill overlooking farmland at the edge of town bears a brand new stone inscription marking the visit in August of the Duke of Cambridge to St Symphorien Military Cemetery, one of the prettiest and least forbidding of military graveyards, where an elderly gent showing his grandson the grave of the first Victoria Cross recipient congratulated me for being British. Not surprisingly, Mons' war heritage will have its new museum too.

The efficient modern railway system I arrived on – a skeletal remnant of another great slice of Walloon history – appeared to be one of the few things not to have a new museum for 2015, but I wouldn't be at all surprised to find Santiago Calatrava's got an idea or two up his sleeve for that as well.

## TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

### Staying there

Hotel Dream, Rue de la Grande Triperie (00 32 6532 9720; dream-mons.be).

### Visiting there

Collegiate Church of Sainte-Waudru, Rue du Chapitre (00 32 65 87 57 75; waudru.be).  
Musée François Duesberg, Square Franklin Roosevelt (00 32 65 36 31 64; duesberg.mons.be).  
BAM (Beaux Arts Mons), Rue Neuve (00 32 65 40 53 30; bam.mons.be).  
Maison van Gogh, Rue du Pavillon, Cuesmes (00 32 6535 5611).  
Le Grand-Hornu, Rue Sainte-Louise (00 32 6561 3881; grand-hornu.eu)

More information  
mons2015.eu

## Getting there and getting around

French-speaking Belgium is easy to reach from across the UK. The main approach is on Eurostar (08705 186 186; eurostar.com) from London St Pancras, Ebbsfleet and Ashford in Kent via Brussels-Midi. The Belgian capital is 121 minutes from London by non-stop train, and connections from elsewhere in Britain are readily available – Kings Cross is adjacent to St Pancras, while Euston is just a 10-minute walk or one Tube stop away.

**Brussels-Midi** is the main hub for the nation's railways. A ticket to "Any Belgian Station" does exactly what it says. The price starts at £79 return, just £10 more than the fare to Brussels. You can change quickly and easily from Eurostar to **Mons**, **Charleroi**, **Namur** and **Liège**, or anywhere else up to the southernmost station at **Virton**, close to the French border. You simply show the international ticket on the domestic train. Stopovers in **Brussels** are available at no extra cost. You need to continue your journey within 24 hours of arriving in the capital, or – on the homebound leg – begin within 24 hours of your departure time.

**Tournai**, close to the frontier with France, is most easily reached via Lille-Europe, itself just 82 minutes from London. You need to take a 10-minute walk from Lille-Europe to the terminus of Lille-Flandres. From here there are frequent trains to Tournai, taking around half an hour, for a one-way fare of €6.

By air, **Brussels airport** is the main hub, with flights on Brussels Airlines from Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Heathrow and Manchester. In addition, bmi regional flies from East Midlands and Newcastle; British Airways flies from Heathrow; and easyJet flies from Gatwick. The airport has its own station, with a fast rail connection to the capital. Connect in Brussels for destinations in Wallonia.

**Charleroi airport**, also known as "Brussels South", is served by Ryanair from Edinburgh and Manchester. The airport is a short way north of Charleroi city centre. A special Charleroi Airport Ticket offers cut-price bus/train combinations. At the airport near Door 2 there are two ticket dispensers where you can buy a single or a day-return ticket valid to any Belgian station". This ticket covers the bus journey from the airport to Charleroi-Sud station and a train journey onwards.

By ferry, the best access points are **Dunkirk** – served from Dover by DFDS – and **Zeebrugge**, reached from Hull on P&O Ferries. **Calais**, the main French port and terminus for Eurotunnel shuttles, is a short drive away.

The best way to travel around Belgium is by train. Departures are frequent on the main lines, and even branch lines have a regular and reliable service. Reservations are not necessary, except on Thalys or other high-speed services between **Brussels** and **Liège**, which are not covered by the Eurostar deal.

See the excellent English-language website belgianrail.be for details of an extensive range of discount fares – including a Weekend offer of half-price tickets.

Simon Calder



Make tracks: Eurostar goes via Brussels-Midi



Pillow talk: Hotel Dream, the latest luxury bolthole, typifies the new Mons GILDEANGELS

# The city with art at its heart

*Cathy Packe explores the urban canvases, both old and new, of charming Charleroi, Belgium's very own 'mini-Berlin'*

You find graffiti everywhere in Charleroi. On concrete walls, on the pillars that hold up the city's elevated ring road, on the sides of apartment buildings. There are abstract shapes in bold colours, scenes of local history depicting coal miners and other industrial workers, and more recognisable figures, including local and global celebrities. Barely a dreary surface survives in this surprising city: every slab of concrete or brick seems to have been given colour and brought to life with strikingly professional modern design.

Here, graffiti constitutes not vandalism, but art. Not that the people of Charleroi are new to a bit of urban art. Two of their Metro stations are adorned with images of the cartoon characters for which the city is celebrated. Though Tintin belongs to Brussels, a gallery of his cartoon compatriots adorns the walls inside Janson station, while at the next stop, Parc, Lucky Luke is the main character in a cartoon adventure, drawn out on 21 panels along the far wall of the southbound platform.

For a city of barely 200,000 to have a Metro is itself remarkable, but Charleroi has appeal way beyond its scale. It has been described as a mini-Berlin, a place that is edgy, exciting and with a lot happening outside the mainstream. It has a biennial festival of urban arts, whose most recent events have left a permanent mark on the city's exhibition centre. Its façade has been emblazoned with the words "Bisous M'Chou" – an affectionate acknowledgement by the artist Steve Powers of a local term of friendship and greeting. His aim was to create something that the community would identify with and embrace as their own.

While perhaps shocking to some, graffiti is little more than a bolder version of *sgraffito* – a technique dating back many centuries, in which a design is scratched into the surface of a building's façade. It was frequently used in Art Nouveau architecture, an earlier artistic style that flourished in Charleroi.

Once among the most affluent cities in Europe because of its industrial riches – coal, steel, wood and glass – Charleroi, like Brussels, has an impressive collection of Art Nouveau houses in what were once the suburbs inhabited by the affluent merchant classes. The biggest concentration is in Rue Léon Bernus. Monsieur Bernus made his money from the monopoly he held on glass for windows. The Physician's House, at number 40, has many typical features

*Wall-to-wall art: (clockwise from top left) the vibrant work of Sozyone Gonzalez, Sixe Paredes and Poch graces the city's walls*  
ASPHALTER#1 URBAN ART BIENNIAL 2014, CHARLEROI PHOTO: L. ARTAMANOW



## TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

### Visiting there

Museum of Photography, Avenue

Paul Pastur 11 (00 32 71 43 58 10; museephoto.be).

Janson Metro station, corner of Boulevard Paul Janson and Avenue Général Michel.

Parc Metro station, corner of Rue

du Parc and Rue Willy Ernst.

### Eating there

Luxembourg brasserie, Rue du Pont Neuf 41 (00 32 71 31 63 59).

### More information

whybelgium.co.uk; 020 7531 0390

of the style: wrought ironwork, decorative windows with carved bas-reliefs above them on several floors. But as an example of 19th-century *sgraffito*, the red-brick Maison Dorée on Rue Tumelaire is hard to improve on.

No doubt when these houses were first built, the curious came to admire, and perhaps even photograph, the stylish new buildings – just as photographers come now to snap the modern graffiti and record the way the city is changing. And documenting change is one of the goals of Charleroi's renowned Museum of Photography. Since 2010, the museum has commissioned a photographer to explore the local region and interpret it in their own way, at the same time creating a photographic memory of what they have seen. This process has now been incorporated into the framework of the activities that will form part of Mons 2015 in celebration of the choice of this neighbouring Walloon city as European Capital of Culture.

The Photography Museum itself was the initiative of an enthusiast called Georges Vercheval in 1978. He persuaded the city to support him, raised the funds to buy a collection of old cameras, and started collecting pictures. The museum opened officially some nine years later, housed in an old Carmelite convent on the southern outskirts of the city. Built in the 19th century in Gothic style, the rooms around its

central cloisters are now the home to a regularly-changing series of exhibitions; there are always three temporary shows on display. The building has been transformed into a modern exhibition space by the addition of an extension six years ago, which enables the building to house a permanent collection of some 80,000 photos, making it the largest, and one of the most important, museums of its kind.

The permanent galleries are organised in chronological order, and comprise a fascinating chronicle of society, events and the state of the world. The images are varied and often unexpected – as, sometimes, are the photographers. A number were taken by René Magritte, who was born in the area and spent part of his childhood in Charleroi before moving to Paris, and then Brussels, and finding fame in another artistic medium. Intriguingly, a photograph of Magritte himself, taken from behind, shows a man in a long coat and bowler hat, an image frequently found in his paintings.

The earliest photos in the collection, dating from the 1840s, are intriguing for the static nature of the images they portray: posed portraits, scenery which to modern eyes seems flat and lifeless. But as later photos show, the camera can bring a subject to life and give the viewer something to relate to – in much the same way as the best graffiti.

# Belgium's best-kept secret

*Resilient in the face of what the past has put its way, Tournai remains a visual feast. By Philip Sweeney*

Considering the surfeit of building sites, Tournai manages to be a visual delight. And it has solid excuses for its disarray: the combined effects of several dozen sieges, a storm of biblical proportions, two World Wars and a tornado, in roughly that order. There's another misfortune for its inhabitants but a bonus for visitors – it's under-endowed with tourists.

It was the 1999 tornado, the most un-Belgian of weather events, which took out Tournai's greatest architectural prize, the five-towered Cathedral of Notre-Dame. It tilted the huge edifice enough to require stabilisation work that will have sections of it under wraps for at least another decade. It's still partly visitable, and inside there's a nifty model made of clothes pegs which illustrates clearly the distinct halves which make the ensemble one of the most important in Western Europe. One half is Romanesque; the other the newly fashionable (in the 12th century) Gothic.

Tournai itself was once high in the ranks of important European cities. Its vast history is replete with Romans, Merovingians and Spanish, iconoclasts, revolutionaries and Jesuits. It includes a brief English period, occupied by Henry VIII, and a spell as the fourth most important city of France.

Near the Cathedral stands Tournai's second glory: its belfry. It is the oldest in Belgium, and still emits a delicate and mellifluous set of chimes. Beside the belfry is, as you would expect, the Grand-Place. Tournai's main square is actually triangular and extremely functional, with bookshops, banks, florists and pharmacies in addition to the numerous cafés and restaurants. The space is also extremely beautiful, the gilded, step-fronted 17th-century brick façades bedecked with repro guild banners. It's with surprise you realise that most of the buildings are recent reconstructions. The magnificent Draper's Hall was destroyed first by the huge storm in 1606 then a second time by German bombs in 1940. Here and there, date stones indicate a building that dates not from 1650, as it appears, but from 1950. There are also many victims to the later Allied bombardment, aimed at disrupting the German army's retreat through the railway station in 1944.

Tournai's post-war reconstruction was a model of sensitivity, because scarcely a single 1960s monstrosity mars the harmony of the broad, cobbled streets. Blocks of attractive 1950s brick fill gaps discreetly with tastefully old-fashioned shops, often surmounted by spacious looking inhabited apartments. As you



Horta-culture: the Beaux Arts Museum iStockphoto



*Rich in history: the city's belfry is the country's oldest* JANDHONDT

walk further through the quiet surrounding *quartiers*, each named after its church, you pass rows of solid artisans' houses, grander Louis XV developments, 19th-century terraces, and here and there little gems of Art Nouveau.

Tournai's major gem of Art Nouveau is its Beaux Arts Museum, the work of the celebrated architect Victor Horta. It is set behind the town hall in the wooded gardens of the old abbey of Saint Martin. The museum's big attractions include early Flemish and Impressionist works, among them the only two Manets exhibited in Belgium: *Argenteuil* and *Chez le Père Lathuille*. It was with some disgruntlement that I learnt that many of these were in storage to make room for a big exhibition about a children's cartoon character named Martine. An hour later, I was a Martine convert, impressed by the exquisite draughtsmanship of the celebrated Tournai-born illustrator Marcel Marlier, whose vast output will next year have a permanent museum in nearby Mouscron.

The publisher of the Martine books, Casterman, is a local firm that achieved international importance in the world of *bande dessinée*, and the rambling old Casterman complex is now an interesting part of a stroll around the old Saint Jacques district north of the Beaux Arts, a gradually gentrifying grid of historic barracks, butchers' shops, bourgeois houses and former

## TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

### Visiting there

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Enclos Saint-Martin (00 32 69 33 24 31; tournai.be/musee-beaux-arts).

### Eating there

Si Jamais, 9 Grande Place (00 32 69 76 67 29; sijamais.be).

### More information

whybelgium.co.uk; 020 7531 0390

lodgings for pilgrims on one of the Santiago routes which begins at Tournai.

While the Grand-Place is still the main focus of café life, the refurbished quays of the River Escaut, a 10-minute walk away, now offer competition. Bisecting the town through its centre, and once dividing the Dutch northern half from the French south, the Escaut was a transport artery for Tournai. You still see big barges, laden with sand or oil or even containers, gliding slowly past the fashionable new café terraces and under the most easterly of Tournai's bridges – the wonderful 13th-century Pont des Troues.

The bridge's gates were designed to deny river access to the walled city, and unfortunately they're doing it very well to the larger craft today, which is the cause of much controversy surrounding the bridge's possible modification.

This controversy has been energetically entered into by Tournai's newest celebrity resident, the actor Gérard Depardieu, who recently joined the influx of moneyed French buying homes across the border. Depardieu has a wine bar soon to open behind the cathedral, and, meanwhile, can often be spotted *attablé* at the Si Jamais restaurant on the Grand-Place. France's national treasure/public enemy knows his grub, and Si Jamais is one of the best of Tournai's many excellent eating places – another winning dimension to an overlooked city.



Three faces of the city: left to right, a WWI exhibit at Liège Expo; Gare de Liège-Guillemins – SNCB Holding-Eurogare – Santiago Calatrava; La Maison du Pêket. J.NAVIS,20 ANIS EN 14, ©WBTF - JPREMY

## A proud history to explore

Make like a local and enjoy Liège's diversity – from inspiring architecture to great nightlife. By **Cathy Packe**

**E**nlightened, ecclesiastical and elegant: Liège has a proud history as a medieval city, and for a time was one of the richest and most powerful places in Europe. So the striking concrete and glass railway station comes as a surprise. Intended to look like a woman lying on her side, to many it resembles a baseball cap – rounded at the southern end and with a peak to the north. Liège-Guillemins (named after the square that the station dominates) provides an excellent overture for the modern changes that are being brought to this ancient city.

Santiago Calatrava, who designed the station, is not the only renowned architect to come to Liège. Ron Arad has designed the Médiacité shopping mall. The French architect Rudy Ricciotti is transforming the Palace of Fine Arts – a relic of the 1905 Universal Exposition – into a major space for visiting exhibitions. CIAC, as it will be known, is due for completion in a couple of years with a walkway sweeping towards it across the river, connecting it directly to Calatrava's station.

The past glory of Liège is still much in evidence. The Palace of the Prince-Bishops, who governed the independent state of Liège for eight centuries, dominates the city centre. But the cultural focus has moved beyond the sprawling Place Saint-Lambert to the museum quarter, whose finest example is the Curtius, recently renovated to keep up with the changes elsewhere in the city. Once the home of a merchant who made his money from the arms trade, the museum is worth visiting for the interior of the building alone; it also contains collections of local glassware, and art from the Meuse region dating back to medieval times.

### Unpack

The contemporary lobby of the Crowne Plaza, located high up on the Mont-Saint-Martin

### TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

#### Getting there

Express trains leave Brussels once an hour, taking 63 minutes to reach Liège-Guillemins. If you have an Any Belgian Station ticket on Eurostar, it will cover onward travel to Liège on "classic" trains, but not the Thalys service.

#### Staying there

The Crowne Plaza "Les Comtes de Mean" Hotel (00 32 42 22 94 94; crownplazaliège.be) has rooms from €130. The Hotel Neuveice (00 32 43 75 97 40; hotelneuveice.be) has double rooms from €120. Breakfast costs €15 extra. Hotel de la Couronne (00 32 43 40 30 00; hotelhusadelacouronne.be) has rooms from €64.

#### More information

whybelgium.co.uk/liege.php

scarcely does justice to the architectural treasures hidden within the fabric of the hotel. Two 17th-century townhouses have been artfully woven together with the help of modern additions to form Liège's most upmarket accommodation. The Cave bar is an atmospheric spot with a beautifully vaulted ceiling, while the spacious bedrooms are the very model of luxury and comfort (00 32 42 22 94 94; crownplazaliège.be).

#### Think local

The city has been busy converting its resources not only to attract visitors, but to provide varied entertainment for its own residents. The 19th-century Opera House has undergone a three-year refurbishment and the addition of a modern cube to house state-of-the-art technological features; and the theatre has been remodelled to provide more intimate performance spaces. Most striking of all is the Cité Miroir in Place Xavier Neujean (citemiroir.be), where a cultural centre and exhibition space have been ingeniously fashioned out of the former public baths.

#### Eat

The collection of bars and restaurants on the Place du Marché offers an excellent choice of tapas, pasta, burgers or a local brasserie. But a popular local favourite is Le Bistrot d'en Face on Rue de la Goffe (lebistrotindenface.be), which serves an excellent French menu in a warm and lively atmosphere.

If you are still hungry after the main course, they can offer you a Dame Blanche – a mix of vanilla ice cream, hot chocolate and fresh cream. Belgium's best-known contribution to dessert is also the name of one of the many resistance movements that existed in Liège during the First World War.

#### Drink

The local drink is pèkèt, a flavoured gin that is a Walloon tradition. For maximum choice, head for La Maison de Peket on the corner of Rue de l'Épée, where the menu offers 26 flavours, from cherry to chocolate. Or for an evening that continues late into the night, head over to the Carré district, west of the Place de la République Française, for a choice of bars and music.

#### Spend

The retail offering in Liège may initially look unremarkable: there is a branch of the Belgian department store Inno within the Galeries-Saint-Lambert mall, and a selection of smaller, independent shops in the pedestrianised area around the cathedral.

But if you can arrange to be here on a Friday or Saturday morning, then you can breeze around one of Europe's finest flea markets. Les puces de Saint-Gilles spreads out from the church of that name, and is busy from dawn to lunchtime with antiques, books and quite a lot of household junk changing hands.

#### Don't miss

Liège Expo, on the first floor of Guillemins station, is currently showing a First World War exhibition: I was 20 in 14. It is open daily, admission free. While it is scheduled to continue until the end of May 2015, it is expected to be extended. It certainly deserves to be made permanent. This is an ambitious and highly successful representation of the war and its impact on soldiers and civilians. It is brought to life with sounds, video footage and dramatic reconstructions: walking through the homes in a bombed-out street is a thought-provoking experience. Together with Liège in Torment, which is on at the Museum of Walloon Life, this forms the largest First World War exhibit in the world.

## A taste for the slow life

The city's easy-going pace and experimental cuisine make it a delectable choice, **Mary Pembleton** discovers

**T**he statues in Namur's central Place d'Armes are unusual ones. There is no monarch or general on horseback, so often found in main squares. The two bronze characters depicted here are clearly cartoon figures. The smaller, chubbier one has a bulbous nose; the taller man beside him has a Tintin-style quiff and large ears. Below them are two snails, one apparently on a lead, the other caged.

This is a reference to the pace of life in Namur. Some residents of other parts of the country mock the tempo here – even slower than that of a snail, they say. Hence the need to restrain the gastropods: they might otherwise race away. But while snails may want to set the pace for the country, the people of Namur are just enjoying life, and it is the relaxed feel of the place that is a powerful attraction for visitors.

Every Saturday, for example, a fruit and vegetable market takes place on the Place d'Armes. Farmers come in from the surrounding countryside to sell their produce. Sometimes there is a special attraction, too: heritage vegetables, perhaps, or food from a different region. In December, Christmas takes root with one of Belgium's most enjoyable Yuletide markets. A Saturday morning grazing at the market is ideal, followed by a pre-lunch drink in a café close to the nearby theatre; outside, if possible, while the weather is still warm enough, so you can contemplate this fine city.

Namur's rich history and culture are largely a result of its geographical location. It was first settled by the Romans who picked a spot at the confluence of the Meuse and Sambre rivers. In medieval times, a feudal castle was built and a town developed, but with the territory on the far bank of the Meuse in the hands of the German empire, it became an important strategic position which needed defending. A moat and fortifications were constructed around what is now the town centre, and they remained in place until the mid-19th century, when Belgium became a united country.

The citadel lost its defensive role in the early 20th century, but it is still a dominant feature of the town, and is a popular place for an outing on a sunny day. And the banks of the Meuse are now lined with houseboats.

Namur is also on one of the key pilgrims' routes to Santiago de Compostela. Bronze scallop shells, the symbol of St James, can be spotted along the cobbled streets, pointing the way through the town. They make a surprising detour, though, into the Museum of Ancient Arts on the Rue de Fer. Follow the direction of the shell into the main reception and on the right-hand side is a room containing a collection of reliquaries, carved by a 13th-century goldsmith from the nearby village of Oignies. Among these treasures is an exquisite silver foot, decorated with tiny jewels and ornate carving, which – it is believed – contains a piece of bone from St James' own foot.

This find is typical of Namur. Its treasures are not always obvious, but available to any visitor with the curiosity to look for them. Take the Jesuit church of Saint-Loup, for example. Its austere, rather forbidding, façade seems out of place within the narrow streets that make up the town's historic centre. But go inside and discover a breathtaking interior. With its red and black



marble pillars, ornate ceiling and carved wooden confessionals, it is a gem.

Just around the corner, in Rue Fumal, is a museum dedicated to Félicien Rops, a 19th-century painter, engraver and writer whose work lampooned the customs and people of the time: the upper-middle classes and the clergy in particular. Even to foreign visitors, it is obvious that his drawings must have had a powerful impact at the time.

Rops was also – though he kept it quiet – something of a gastronome. He was part of a secret society, Agathopède, whose aim was to champion culinary innovation and experimentation. But his secret is out now, and has been emulated in the latest addition to Namur's restaurant scene, the aptly named Agathopède.

Like the society formed by Rops and his friends, the aim of this new restaurant is to break the traditional boundaries of taste and flavour. A typical meal consists of a number of small courses, each designed around a main ingredient such as sea bass or foie gras, whose flavour is enhanced by small amounts of purée, foam or seasoning to transform it into something completely unexpected. The restaurant is part of a chic new boutique hotel on the banks of the river Meuse, the Royal Snail.

And so it appears that the snails have finally made it to the outskirts of town. They may try to stray further. But they may decide that this is a perfect place to stay, a place to enjoy some imaginative food and from which to venture back into the city and discover some more of its hidden treasures.

*Take your time: the statues in the central square sum up Namur's laid-back approach* FALKENSTEIN/FOTOALAMY

### TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

#### Visiting there

Citadel (00 32 81 65 45 00; citadelle.namur.be). Provincial Museum of Ancient Arts (The Treasure of Oignies), Rue de Fer 24 (00 32 81 77 67 54; museeedsartsanciens.be). Saint-Loup church, Rue du Collège (00 32 81 22 80 85). Félicien Rops

Museum, Rue Fumal 12 (00 32 81 77 67 55; museerops.be).

#### Staying there

Royal Snail Hotel and Agathopède restaurant (below), Avenue de la Plante 23 (00 32 81 57 00 23; theroyalsnail.com). Les Tanneurs Hotel and Grill restaurant, Rue des Tanneries 13 (00 32 81 24 00 24; tanneurs.com).

#### More information

whybelgium.co.uk; 020 7531 0390

**'Christmas takes root with one of Belgium's greatest Yuletide markets'**

