

Hainaut & Brabant-Wallon



With the exception of Waterloo, Wallonia's western provinces of Hainaut and Brabant-Wallon are largely overlooked by foreign visitors. After the hubbub of the country's more touristy spots, this little corner of French-speaking Belgium is refreshingly ordinary.

Two cities in Hainaut make excellent exploration bases – choose between Mons, the province's capital, or Tournai, one of Belgium's oldest settlements. With good timing, your own wheels and a passion for beer, don't miss Brasserie à Vapeur, a steam-driven brewery close to Tournai. Nearby, too, are the giants of Ath. Halfway between Mons and Charleroi is Binche, where the Gilles (local men) take centre stage during carnival. Move north into Brabant-Wallon and there's Nivelles with its impressive Romanesque church. Close by are the haunting ruins at Villers-la-Ville and, to the north, the great battlefield of Waterloo.

Back in Hainaut, Charleroi is a city on the edge – its heavy industry long gone and its future uncertain. This area's unappealing landscape gradually gets better the more you descend into the Botte de Hainaut (Boot of Hainaut), a chunk of land that extends into France. The Boot is an extension of the forested Ardennes and contains a slab of Namur province, included in this chapter for convenience. The little towns of Couvin and Chimay are the focal points, both accessible by public transport. Keep in mind that accommodation is thin on the ground in this southern quarter and advance planning might be wise in summer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Carnival Capers** The Gilles of Binche (p223)
- **History Buffs** The battlefield of Waterloo (p225)
- **Dance Demons** The avant-garde Charleroi/Danses (p226)
- **Evocative Ruins** The Cistercian abbey (p225) at Villers-la-Ville
- **Dragon Slayers** Mons' La Doudou (p222)
- **Art & Art Nouveau** The Musée des Beaux-Arts (p219) in Tournai
- **Steam Blower** Brasserie à Vapeur (p51), Pipaix
- **Big Weekend** The giants of Ath (p222)



■ PROVINCES: HAINAUT (CAPITAL MONS), BRABANT-WALLON (CAPITAL NIVELLES)

■ LANGUAGE: FRENCH

TOURNAI

pop 67,300

As provincial towns in Wallonia go, Tournai (Doornik in Flemish) is decidedly pleasant. Situated on the Scheldt River (known as L'Escaut in French), just 10km from the French border and 80km from Brussels, its air is distinctly French and it offers a gaggle of great museums plus one of the country's finest cathedrals.

Together with Tongeren in Flanders, Tournai rates as Belgium's oldest city. It started life as a Roman trading settlement known as Tornacum but, unlike Tongeren, it has little to hark back to these times. The rest of its history is as chequered as Belgium's – the counts of Flanders as well as the French, English, Spanish and Austrians have all had a hand in ruling it

over the centuries. In the 5th century it was the relatively short-lived capital of the Merovingians, a Frankish dynasty that reigned in France. Their most celebrated king, Clovis, was born here in 465. In the early 14th century, in Henry VIII's time, it had a brief spell as an English city, but five years later was sold back to France. The city, in 1521, was then swallowed by the Hapsburg empire, after which it became an important tapestry-making centre.

Information

Internaute (☎ 069 84 67 43; info@internaute.be; Rue du Château 63; per hr €3; ☎ 11am-midnight) Funky internet bar.

Office du Tourisme (☎ 069 22 20 45; www.tournai.be; Vieux Marché aux Poteries 14; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-

Fri, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat, 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Sun) Catch the 20-minute movie (in English; €2) tracing Tournai's history.

Post Office (Rue des Chapeliers)

Sights

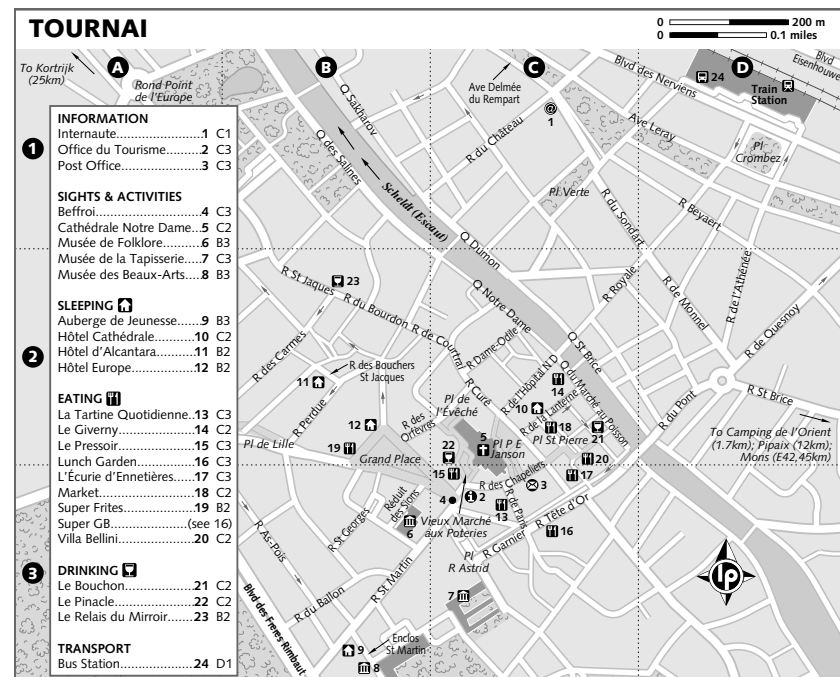
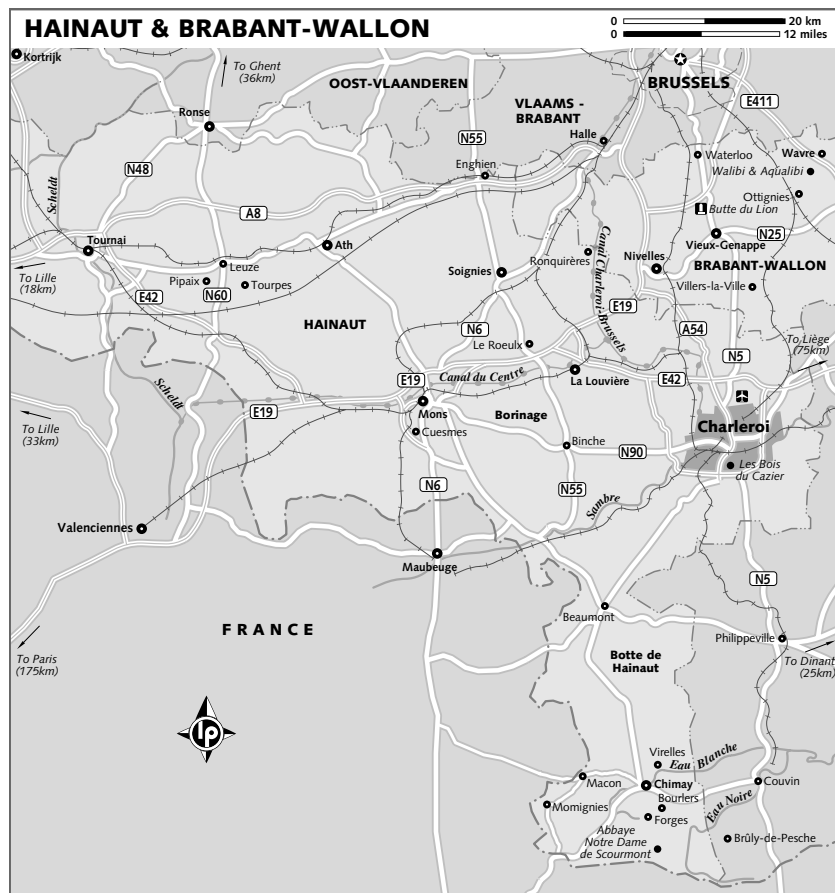
The five towers of the striking but sober **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (Our Lady's Cathedral; Grand Place; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-4pm Nov-Mar) have long been the trademark of Tournai's skyline. Completed in the 12th century, it's an enormous Romanesque affair but its fine proportions are difficult to appreciate as it's encrusted by buildings on all but one side. Pummelled by a freak tornado in 1999, parts of the World Heritage-listed cathedral are still off-limits to tourists due to major works to realign the towers.

Worth seeking on the outside is the **Porte Mantile**, a two-tiered Romanesque archway adorned with carvings. Better still is the west façade, festooned with carvings from the 14th to 17th centuries and, due to the relative protection, not nearly so weathered. Inside, the **trésor** (treasury; admission €2; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5.45pm Mon-Fri, 2-4.45pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-4pm

Mon-Fri, 2-4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) is loaded with religious bits and pieces.

Tournai's 72m-high World Heritage-listed **Belfroi** (belfry; Grand Place; admission €2; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Mar-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Feb) is Belgium's oldest, dating from 1188. It was built to house a bell given to the city as a symbol of freedom by the king of France during one of Tournai's bouts of independence. Some 257 steps lead up to it.

The **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 069 22 20 43; Endos St Martin; admission €3; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon, Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar) is housed in an airy building designed by Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta. The impressive collection includes paintings and sculptures by local, national and international artists. Of the local works, look out for those by Louis Gallait (1810-87), whose enormous canvas *La Peste de Tournai* is a harrowing account of the plague of 1092; considerably more enchanting is *En ballon* by Roméo Dumoulin (1883-1944). Tournai's best-known artist, Rogier Van der Weyden (also known as Roger de la Pasture) is also well represented. Other artists of note include



Pieter Breughel the Younger, Jacob Jordaens and French impressionist Edouard Manet, who painted the serene *Argenteuil*.

The **Musée de Folklore** (☎ 069 22 40 69; Réduit des Sions; admission €2.50; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon, Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar) is a rabbit warren of fascinating relics from Tournai's past, including religious *brocante* (bric-a-brac) and old posters. The museum also keeps a *jeu de fer* table (see below) for posterity.

Tapestry lovers should not miss the **Musée de la Tapisserie** (☎ 069 84 20 73; Place Reine Astrid; admission €2.50; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon, Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar). In the 15th and 16th centuries Tournai was one of Belgium's most important tapestry-making cities, and this museum contains a handful of enormous works from that time as well as contemporary pieces. On the top floor, pop into the restoration room to see revamping techniques.

Festivals & Events

Triennale de la Tapisserie (☎ 069 21 64 34) International tapestry festival, held every three years. The next is June to September 2008.

Jeu de Fer World Championships Annual folkloric gathering held on the second weekend in September. Hundreds of participants gather on the Grand Place to contest this so-called 'game of iron', which melds billiards with curling and boules (an outdoor game using big metal balls that's popular in the south of France).

Sleeping

Camping de l'Orient (☎ 069 22 26 35; Vieux Chemin des Mons; camp sites per adult/child/tent €3/2.50/2.50) Part of the huge Aqua Terra swimming complex, 2km from the train station. Bus W stops out the front.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 069 21 61 36; www.laj.be; Rue St Martin 64; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42) Modern and pleasant hostel around the corner from the Musée des Beaux-Arts. It's a 20-minute walk from the train station – take bus 4 (direction Baisieux).

Hôtel d'Alcantara (☎ 069 21 26 48; www.hotelalcantara.be; Rue des Bouchers St Jacques 2; s/d from €75/85) Not the most expensive hotel in the city but certainly the most charming. This discreet four-star abode has attentive service and 15 well-priced, modern rooms set behind a pleasant courtyard. Families are welcome.

Also recommended:

Hôtel Europe (☎ 069 22 40 67; www.europehotel.be; Grand Place 26; s/d €50/65) Few cities in Belgium have

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Super Frites (☎ 069 21 60 66; Grand Place 46; frites €3; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tiny *friterie* (chip shop) whose *frites* (fries) are by no means super, but the location warrants the name. Down a beer and *frites* on the terrace while storm clouds brew behind the city's trademark towers, and this humble café will transform into Tournai's most dramatic eatery.

hotels right on their main square – it's worth suffering this hotel's drab décor for its sublime spot.

Hôtel Cathédrale (☎ 069 21 50 77; www.hotelcathedrale.be; Place St Pierre 2; s/d from €105/116; ☎) Comfortable hotel close to the river.

Eating

La Tartine Quotidienne (☎ 069 23 35 88; Rue de Paris 7; light meals €8; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Fri) Rustic café doing salads, quiches and sandwiches, and where no two chairs are alike. The ivy-clad courtyard out the back is perfect in summer.

L'Écurie d'Ennetières (☎ 069 21 56 89; Ruelle d'Ennetières; mains €12-15, 3-course menu €24; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Wed-Sun) Occupies a renovated old building in the river quarter of the city and does affordable French cuisine.

Le Giverny (☎ 069 22 44 64; Quai du Marché au Poisson 6; mains €13-20, menus from €40; ☎ closed Mon, lunch Sat & dinner Sun) Down by the river, this refined restaurant occupies an old bakery and has two sections, one with authentic tiling. A lovely eating space and great classic French food.

Le Pressoir (☎ 069 22 35 13; Vieux Marché aux Poteries 2; mains €15-23, menu from €45; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Fri) Arguably the city's best restaurant, tucked away next to the cathedral and serving innovative French cuisine.

Also recommended:

Lunch Garden (☎ 069 54 57 46; Rue Tête d'Or 669; plat du jour €5; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11.30am-9pm Sun) Self-service cafeteria.

Villa Bellini (☎ 069 23 65 20; Place St Pierre 15; pizza €7-10, pasta €8-12) Pleasant interior and good Italian fare.

Super GB (Rue Tête d'Or 669; ☎ 8am-8pm) Supermarket.

Market (Place St Pierre; ☎ Sat) Food market held during the morning.

Drinking & Entertainment

Tournai's nightlife hubs are Quai du Marché au Poisson, the nearby Place St Pierre and, of course, the Grand Place.

Le Pinade (☎ 0475 83 49 65; Vieux Marché aux Poteries 1; ☎ 11am-11pm Tue-Sun) Overlooking the cathedral, this tavern is great for a cool beer on a shady terrace during a hot afternoon.

Le Bouchon (☎ 069 21 54 36; Quai du Marché au Poisson 23; ☎ 3pm-1am Tue-Sun) Tiny pub with a nautical theme and patrons who cling like barnacles to the side of the bar. Note the disgusting things preserved in bottles above the counter.

Le Relais du Miroir (☎ 069 21 10 79; Rue St Jacques 15; ☎ 2pm-1am Tue-Sun) Atmospheric pub with an enormous fireplace and a billiard table out the back.

Getting There & Away

Tournai's **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) is 900m from the heart of the city, the Grand Place. There are regular trains to Mons (€6, 30 minutes), Brussels (€10.70, one hour), Kortrijk (€4.30, 40 minutes) and Ypres via Kortrijk (€7.80, one hour).

AROUND TOURNAI

For details on **Brasserie à Vapeur** and **Brasserie Dubuisson**, two local breweries in nearby Pipaix, see p51.

MONS

pop 91,200

Calling all dragon slayers. Once a year Mons (Bergen in Flemish) shakes off its workaday role as the capital of Hainaut to take on one of Belgium's most riotous battles, the Lumeçon (see boxed text, p222). For the rest of the year this outwardly humdrum town is simply a likeable place, built on a hill, and dotted with interesting sights and more than its fair share of great eateries.

Historically, Mons is associated with war – it was here that the battles that marked the beginning and end of WWI for the British were fought. During WWII the American liberation campaign had its first victory here. Since 1967 Mons has been home to the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe (Shape), which employs some 8000 Americans and NATO officials and is based 5km north of town.

To the Brits, Mons is often best remembered for the Angels of Mons, a legend that arose in 1914 based around a host of heavenly archers. Ex-Genesis guitarist, Steve Hackett, evoked the fable in more recent times with his song 'Clocks – The Angels of Mons'.

Information

Maison du Tourisme (☎ 065 33 55 80; www.pays demons.be, in French; Grand Place 22; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6.30pm Sun Nov-Mar) Don't miss the 15-minute video (in English) introducing the town.

Sights & Activities

Ensure good luck by making straight to the 15th-century **Hôtel de Ville** (Town Hall) on the **Grand Place** where you'll find a small iron **monkey** that beckons to be stroked.

From the Grand Place, head up Rue des Clercs to Mons' World Heritage-listed baroque **beffroi** (belfry), a black-domed gilded affair standing amid gardens from where there's a good rooftop view.

A few streets further west is the **Collégiale St Waudru**, a 15th-century church of huge proportions and home to the Car d'Or, a gilded chariot from 1781 that's festooned with cherubs. It used to carry the remains of St Waudru during La Doudou (see boxed text, p222).

Decorative arts is the theme of the **Musée François Duesberg** (☎ 065 36 31 64; Square Franklin Roosevelt 12; admission €4; ☎ 2-7pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun), located opposite St Waudru church. The late-18th-century clock collection gets a big tick.

Two of the town's principal museums, the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 065 40 53 06; Rue Neuve 8) and the **Musée du Folklore** (☎ 065 31 43 57; Rue Neuve), are expected to reopen by the time you read this, following restoration.

Sleeping & Eating

Mons is stuffed with restaurants, but is light on accommodation. While away the evening on the Grand Place or Marché aux Herbes, both lined with informal cafés.

Auberge de Jeunesse du Beffroi (☎ 065 87 55 70; www.laj.be; Rampe du Château 2; dm/s/d/f €17/30/44/74; ☎ ☎) Modern hostel located at the base of the belfry. Its attractive tiered design makes good use of the sloping terrain, and the inner courtyard has a bend-over-backwards belfry view. It's family friendly, and the good facilities include a kitchen, restaurant and bar, and free parking.

Hôtel Ibis (☎ 065 84 74 40; www.ibismons.be; Blvd Charles Quint 27; s/d/t €68/68/80) Chain hotel with a handy location opposite the train station.

Hôtel Infotel (☎ 065 40 18 30; www.hotelinfotel.be; Rue d'Havré 32; s/d from €75/85) Respectable midrange hotel with modern décor, though you may need to don sunglasses before entering your room. Just footsteps from the Grand Place.

LA DOUDOU

Known locally as La Doudou, **La Ducasse** (www.ducassedemons.be) is Mons' biggest annual shindig. Even King Albert and Queen Paola turned up in 2006, and the event has made it onto Unesco's World Heritage list. Held on Trinity Sunday (3 June 2007, 18 May 2008 and 7 June 2009), it begins with the morning's **Procession du Car d'Or**, which sees the remains of St Waudru, a 7th-century female miracle worker and the city's patron saint, paraded through town in time-honoured tradition. But the jamboree's highlight comes at lunchtime on the Grand Place with the **Lumeçon**, a legendary battle between good and evil in the form of St George astride his black horse against a 9.4m-long wicker-work dragon. Lesser characters include St George's sidekicks, the Chinchins, and, on the dragon's side, some *diable* (devils). Join the crowd as it surges forward to grab sheaves of brushwood from the 200kg-dragon's tail – life-threatening stuff, really – or watch from the sardined sidelines.

L'Excelsior (☎ 065 36 47 15; Grand Place 29; mains €15-20; ☞ from 9.30am) Long, wood-panelled bistro that faithfully reproduces Belgian classics. Good also for some lesser-known regional beers.

Sel & Sucre (☎ 065 59 05 07; Rue de Nimy 6; 3-course lunch/dinner menu €17/35; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Modern little resto just off the Grand Place, where the young chef is noted for his spontaneous cooking.

La Cinquième Saison (☎ 065 72 82 62; Rue de la Coupe 23; mains €20-30, menus from €30; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Relatively new addition to Mons' range of fabulous eateries. This classy little place does French/Belgian cuisine in style, served in just one small room (or on an even tinier courtyard). Dig around down the end of a cobbled alley to find it.

Devos (☎ 065 35 13 35; Rue de la Coupe 7; mains €28-32, menu gastronomique €75; ☞ closed Wed & dinner Sun) Re-fined establishment serving seasonal French/Belgian haute cuisine.

Also recommended:

Camping du Waux-Hall (☎ 065 33 79 23; Ave St Pierre 17; camp sites per adult/child/tent €3.40/2.20/2; ☞ year-round) Camping ground just outside the town centre on the road to Binche.

Sandwicherie Henri (☎ 065 36 18 68; Grand Place 1; baguettes €2-2.70; ☞ 9am-10pm) Pumps out enormous filled baguette sandwiches.

Market (Marché aux Herbes; ☞ 6am-2pm Fri & Sun) Fresh produce.

GB Express (Rue d'Havré 16) Supermarket.

Getting There & Around

Mons' **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) and neighbouring **TEC bus station** (☎ 065 38 88 15) are at Place Léopold, 700m from the Grand Place. Regular connections include to Brussels (€7.80, 45 minutes), Charleroi (€5.40, 30 minutes) and Tournai (€6, 25 minutes).

Free public **minibuses** (☞ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) shuttle every 15 minutes between the train/bus station and the Grand Place.

AROUND MONS

The area between Mons and Charleroi is known as the Borinage. This unappealing sprawl of factories, chimneys belching black smoke and old slag heaps was Belgium's industrial powerhouse up until the decline of the steel and coal industries in the 1970s. Among these former coalfields is the **Maison Vincent van Gogh** (☎ 065 35 56 11; Rue du Pavillon 3; admission €2.50; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), in the village of **Cuesmes**, a few kilometres southwest of central Mons. Van Gogh lived in this house in 1879 and was inspired to start seriously drawing after watching the local miner's toil. The house accommodates reproductions of his work. From Mons' bus station take TEC bus 20 (€1.30, 10 minutes, hourly).

Sixteen kilometres east of Mons is **Binche**, a grim little town that bursts into life once a year for one of the world's most unusual carnivals (see boxed text, opposite). If you're around at this time, it's a must. Otherwise, get a feel for what it's about at the **Musée Internationale du Carnaval et du Masque** (☎ 06 433 57 41; Rue Saint-Moustier 10; adult/child €6/3.50; ☞ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Sun-Thu, 2-6pm Fri & Sat). From Mons, TEC bus 22 goes to Binche (€3.25, 40 minutes, every 30 to 40 minutes).

Ath, 21km northwest of Mons, is famed throughout Belgium for its **Procession of the Giants**, held on the last weekend in August. Enormous World Heritage-listed models with biblical and folkloric connections wind through town to the Grand Place, where two of the giants wed. The **Maison des Géants** (☎ 068 26 51 70; www.maisondesgeants.be; Rue de Pintamont 18; admission €2.50; ☞ 10am-noon & 1-6pm Tue-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Fri Oct-Mar) intro-

CARNIVAL CAPERS

Carnival is a fabulous way to experience Belgium's love of folklore and pageantry. Steeped in religious traditions, festivities trace back to the Middle Ages and include goings-on that defy modern imagination.

Locals batten down the hatches and visitors come prepared for a bruising at **Binche** (www.carnalvaldebinche.be, in French; ☞ 3-5 Feb 2008, 22-24 Feb 2009), Belgium's most bizarre carnival celebration and recently World Heritage listed. On Shrove Tuesday local men, known as Gilles, stomp around to the ominous beat of drums while wearing strange green-eyed masks and shaking sticks to ward off evil spirits. After lunch the Gilles slow dance through town, decked out in all their finery, including enormous ostrich-feather headdresses, and accompanied by local lads laden with baskets of oranges. From here things get messy as the crowd is pelted with oranges to bless the forthcoming summer. No matter how tempting, don't hurl one back – it's a gift! Despite what you may think, carnival in Binche is actually a serious celebration, taking months of preparation and involving strict rules of conduct. The rituals surrounding it date back hundreds of years and the Gilles' costumes, some of them 150 years old, are thought to be modern-day interpretations of the elaborate, Inca-inspired dress worn by courtiers at a feast to honour Emperor Charles V in 1549.

Carnival at **Malmédy** (www.malmedy.be; ☞ 3-5 Feb 2008, 22-24 Feb 2009) is known as *Cwarmé* and it's held over several days from the Saturday before Shrove Tuesday. The focus is Sunday's parade, which is dominated by the Haguète, masked characters who wander around wielding *hapes-tchâr*, great extendible wooden pincers that fly out and grab bystanders around the throat. So the story goes, these exceedingly useful implements were originally designed to feed lepers. The Haguète immobilise bystanders, then force them to their knees and make them demand forgiveness. For what? Who knows, but if you were caught around the throat by a pincer-wielding figure wearing a pirate hat stuffed with ostrich feathers and draped in a blood-red cape, you'd probably make amends without asking too many questions. (For information on the town of Malmédy, see p258.)

To top it off, there's the three-day Laetare at **Stavelot** (www.laetare-stavelot.be; ☞ 1-3 March 2008, 20-22 March 2009), based around the fourth Sunday in Lent. Legend has it that this festival dates back to the 16th century when the principality's Prince Abbot forbade local monks from taking part in festivities. The local people reacted by wearing white costumes recalling the Benedictine's habit. Whatever its origins, local students revived tradition soon after WWII, and today the festival's big event is a colourful street parade full of floats and oompapa bands. Bringing up the rear are the highlights, the Blancs Moussis, a brotherhood of local men clad in white cloaks and capes and each sporting a mask with an extravagantly long red nose. These characters emit sinister half-grunt, half-laugh noises while stuffing confetti down women's clothes, dangling smelly dried herrings in people's hair and beating up bystanders with dried pigs' bladders! (For information on the town of Stavelot, see p257.)

Now, really, whoever said Belgians were boring?

duces their world. Brussels-bound trains from Mons stop in Ath (€3.60, 15 minutes).

NIVELLES

pop 24,100

The ancient town of Nivelles (Nijvel in Flemish) grew up around its abbey, founded in 648, and is still presided over by a magnificent and unusual church. About 35km northeast of Mons, it's Brabant-Wallon's main town and, if nothing else, makes a pleasant and convenient pit stop en route to the ruins at Villers-la-Ville. It's also an easy day trip from Brussels (30km away).

The **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 067 84 08 64; www.tourisme-nivelles.be; Rue de Charleroi 25; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-

Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is housed under the arcade just off the main square.

The **Collégiale Ste Gertrude** is Nivelles' only sight. This Rhineland Roman-style church was built in the 11th century as the abbey church and is named after the first abbess, daughter of Itte the abbey's founder. Successively altered and repaired (some 19 fires over the centuries as well as WWII bombing) means it's now a hotchpotch of styles, but it's impressive nonetheless.

The church contains fine sculptures by 18th-century artist Laurent Delvaux, including a lavish oak-and-marble pulpit. Look out, too, for the old wooden chariot that is used

to carry Ste Gertrude's shrine in the town's age-old annual procession (late September or early October). The crypt, an archaeological site and the treasury can all be visited.

The church's history is so varied that it's well worth taking a 1½-hour **guided tour** (admission €5). Tours can be arranged at the small office inside the church; if you want to be sure of an English-speaking guide, telephone the tourist office in advance. Tours are held at 2pm Monday to Friday, and 2pm and 3.30pm Saturday and Sunday.

Overnighters will find **Hôtel du Commerce** (☎ 067 21 12 41; fax 067 84 17 04; Grand Place 7; s/d €35/65, mains €14-18, menu €27) has basic rooms and a good, well-priced restaurant.

Nivelles is on the Brussels-Charleroi railway line, and there are hourly connections to Brussels (€4.70, 20 minutes) and Charleroi (€3.80, 20 minutes). The train station is a 10-minute walk from the town centre.

WATERLOO

pop 29,000

Waterloo lies 18km south of Brussels in Brabant-Wallon and is easily visited on a day trip from the capital. It's one of Belgium's main tourist attractions, with hundreds of thousands of visitors coming each year to look out over the plains from the Lion of Waterloo – the site of the battle on 18 June 1815 that changed the course of European history (see boxed text, opposite).

Reactions to the various sights are generally divided into two camps – history and war buffs find it exciting, others may wonder why they came. The most important sights are spread over several kilometres, making it tedious, but not impossible, to get around without your own transport (for more details, see opposite). Many of the displays have both feet firmly in the 19th century, though this will change once the site's €20 million facelift, announced in 2006, is completed.

The best place to start a visit is at the **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 02 352 09 10; www.waterloo-tourisme.be; Chaussée de Bruxelles 218; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar), in the village of Waterloo. The helpful staff will know the state of play regarding the facelift – what's open and what's not.

Sights & Activities

Opposite the Waterloo tourist office is the **Musée Wellington** (☎ 02 354 78 06; www.museewellington.be; Chaussée de Bruxelles 147; adult/child €5/2; ☎ 9.30am-

6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar). Wellington spent the eve of the battle in this old inn and it was here that his aide-de-camp, Alexander Gordon, died. It contains well laid-out exhibits, including battle plans, weapons and personal effects. An audio-guide takes you around.

From here proceed to the battlefield, some 5km south of Waterloo centre, where a clutch of sights compete for the attention of visitors. The first stop is generally the **visitors centre** (☎ 02 385 19 12; www.waterloo1815.be; Route du Lion 254; adult/child/concession €5/3.35/4.20; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar). This place is slated to be torn down as part of the site's facelift, with an underground memorial to be built instead.

Rising behind the visitors centre is the **Butte du Lion** (Lion's Mound; admission €2; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar), a 40m-high mound marking the site where the allies' William of Orange (who became King William II of the Netherlands) was wounded. Women carting baskets of soil took two years to build the impressive mound, constructed soon after the battle at a time when the Dutch ruled Belgium. It's usually possible to climb the 226 steps to the massive bronze lion at the top.

Next to the visitors centre is the **Panorama de la Bataille** (Battleground Panorama; ☎ 02 384 31 39; Route du Lion 252; adult/child/concession €5/3/4; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar), a domed building with an elevated gallery containing a circular painting (110m in circumference) of the battlefield. Painted by Louis Dumoulin, it dates from 1912 and is one of the world's last such panoramas. Brace the cold to see this slice of history.

Opposite the Panorama is the **Musée de Cires** (Wax Figures Museum; ☎ 02 384 67 40; Route du Lion 315; adult/child €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Nov, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Dec-Mar), a dreadful waxworks museum with 50-year-old mannequins that should be melted.

The last sight, the **Dernier Quartier Général de Napoléon** (Napoleon's Last Headquarters; ☎ 02 384 24 24; Chaussée de Bruxelles 66, Vieux-Genappe; adult/child €2/1; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 1-5pm Nov-Mar) is 4km south of the visitors centre in Vieux-Genappe. Napoleon spent the night before the battle at this former farmhouse, which now accommodates some relevant memorabilia, such as his camp cot. The Brussels-Charleroi bus 365 passes by every two hours – ask for details at the Waterloo tourist office.

Eating

Le Pain Quotidien (☎ 02 354 59 90; Chaussée de Bruxelles 139; breakfast €7.70; ☎ 7am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 7am-4.30pm

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

On 1 March 1815 the legendary French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte landed in the south of France after escaping from the island of Elba, where he'd been imprisoned following his abdication the previous year. Despite defeat at Trafalgar, being driven out of Russia and the dissolution of his empire, Napoleon quickly reignited his peoples' passions. The major European powers declared war, and chose Brussels as their base. The Duke of Wellington's allied force of British, Belgians, Dutch and Germans began assembling in Brussels in April, backed by a Prussian army commanded by Marshal Blücher.

Napoleon knew he had to attack swiftly and decisively against such an alliance. On 15 June he crossed into Belgium with 130,000 men – a force larger than either opposing army – took Charleroi and continued towards Brussels. His strategy was to prevent his opponents joining forces. On 16 June he struck the Prussians at Ligny. Believing them to be fleeing, he turned his attention to Wellington, whose troops were assembling at Waterloo, a defensive position just south of the capital.

At sunrise on Sunday 18 June the two armies faced off, just 1500m apart. Wellington's force of 68,000 were lined up on a ridge facing south; Napoleon's 72,000 men had an uphill battle.

Due to heavy overnight rain, the start of the battle was delayed to allow the ground to dry out. At 11.30am the French attacked, moving round to the west to a farm at Hougoumont that was vital for the defence of Wellington's right. The assault failed, and by 1pm Napoleon had word that the Prussian army was not routed, but in fact just 6km away and moving in fast. Napoleon detached a force to meet it and at 2pm he sent a massive wave of infantry to attack Wellington's left, a confrontation that also proved indecisive.

At 4pm the French cavalry charged Wellington's centre but were unable to break through the infantry formations. By early evening, with the Prussians arriving to the east, Napoleon ordered his Imperial Guards, the army's best soldiers, to break through Wellington's centre. It was a desperate last-ditch effort – the guards had to slog uphill through mud churned up by the cavalry's previous attempt and were mown down by the opposing infantrymen from their protected high-ground position.

At 8.15pm Wellington stirred his men into a full-scale advance and within minutes the nine-hour battle that cost the lives of 15,000 men was over. Napoleon was forced to abdicate and spent the rest of his life in exile on St Helena. The emperor's defeat spelt the end of France's military prowess in Europe and of its rule in Belgium.

Every year or five (there's no set schedule), the famous battle is replayed on the battlefield at Waterloo – check with the tourist office for the next re-enactment. For armchair travellers, *Waterloo – The Hundred Days* by David Chandler is an illustrated account of this decisive battle.

Sun) Good for an informal bite (see boxed text, p103) before setting off to the main cluster of sites south of Waterloo village. It's diagonally across the road from the tourist office.

Getting There & Around

Catch TEC bus W (Map pp76-7) from Ave Fonsny at Brussels' Gare du Midi; ask the driver for a day card (€6). This ticket will get you to Waterloo, around most of the sights and back to the capital. Bus W runs every half-hour from Brussels and stops outside the Waterloo tourist office/Musée Wellington (40 minutes). After visiting Musée Wellington, catch bus W to the vicinity of the visitors centre. Ask either the bus driver or the Waterloo tourist office for a bus timetable.

VILLERS-LA-VILLE

pop 9400

The ruined **Abbaye de Villers** (☎ 071 88 09 80; Rue de l'Abbaye 55, Villers-la-Ville; adult/child/concession €4.50/2/3.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar) has no equal in Belgium. About 15km east of Nivelles (and 25km south of Brussels), it awaits discovery in a forested dell and is unquestionably Brabant-Wallon's most engaging site. The local **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 071 87 98 98; www.villers.be; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon & Tue, 10am-6pm Wed-Sun) occupies a small building next to the ruins.

The abbey was founded in this isolated spot by a small religious community – an abbot and a handful of monks – in 1147. It was St Bernard who ruled that his followers should settle in a beautiful location in a peaceful valley. The community flourished, and by the

13th century, when the bulk of the buildings were constructed, it had attracted several hundred devotees, owned a vast tract of land and had fulfilled its aim of living self-sufficiently under Cistercian rules. It continued to thrive, initiating another burst of building activity in the 18th century. But in 1794 French revolutionaries plundered the monastery; four years later it was sold off and in the 1850s a railway line was built through the site. Today evocative ivy-clad ruins are all that remain.

The church is the most striking feature, but it's also possible to make out the old warming room (the only part of the complex to be heated in winter), brewery and kitchen. The hilltop chapel offers the best view.

For a bite to eat, there's **Le Cigalou** (☎ 071 87 85 54; Ave Arsène Tournet 47; mains €13-16, menus from €20; ☞ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Wed-Sat), a rustic restaurant about 800m from the ruins.

Getting here without a car is an adventure. Villers-la-Ville is on the Brussels–Ottignies–Charleroi railway line and there are hourly connections from Brussels (€5, one hour) or trains every two hours from Charleroi (€3.60, 30 minutes). From Nivelles (€6.40), get a train to Charleroi and take another train from there – it'll take about 1½ hours all up to get to the ruins (and you'll need to time it properly in order to get the train connection in Charleroi).

The Villers-la-Ville train station is 1.6km from the ruins. Turn left out of the train station and continue until reaching a T-junction. Turn right and then simply follow the main road to the ruins.

CHARLEROI

pop 200,600

Born of coal, iron and glass, the city of Charleroi is a modern-day metropolis at the heart of the Pays Noir (Black Country). It flanks the formerly coal-rich Sambre Valley and was the powerhouse of the steel industry up until the 1970s. Today a blackened industrial landscape with belching chimneys greets visitors arriving by train. Although the area around the main train station, Gare du Sud, has been revamped, you only have to cross the Sambre River en route to the city centre at Place Charles II to find run-down streets and a desolate air.

Charleroi has a couple of worthwhile museums that can easily be seen as a day trip from Mons (36km away) or Brussels (55km). On arrival, pick up a city map from the **Pavillon du Tourisme** (☎ 071 31 82 18; www.charleroi.be; Gare du Sud;

☞ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) on the square in front of Gare du Sud.

The **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 071 86 11 34; Place Charles II; admission free; ☞ 9am-12.30pm & 1.15-5pm Tue-Sat) is on the 2nd floor of the Hôtel de Ville. It's home to an excellent collection of works by artists who were born or have lived for a time in Hainaut. Though this may at first seem rather limiting, the province was the birthplace of Pierre Paulus, René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, and attracted artists such as Constantin Meunier, Félicien Rops and James Ensor. Lesser-known local artists include François Navez (1787–1869) and Jean Portaels (1818–95). Upstairs is an exhibition devoted to Jules Destrée, a key socialist politician who fought to improve local working conditions. In all, it makes for a fascinating collection.

To explore Charleroi's industrial heritage, head south of town to the new museum complex, **Le Bois du Cazier** (☎ 071 88 08 56; www.leboisducazier.be; Rue du Cazier 80, Marcinelle; adult/child €5/4; ☞ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun). This converted mine site at Marcinelle opened in 2006 to mark the 50th anniversary of an underground mining accident that killed 262 miners. The complex incorporates three sections – glass, industry and the Marcinelle tragedy. Charleroi was once a world centre for glass production but, as with steel and coal, market changes forced its decline. The industry section involves plenty of old machines, some of which are brought back to life, as well as landscaped walks up old slag heaps. To get there, take bus 52 (10 minutes) from Gare du Sud.

Charleroi's international reputation stands on its avant-garde dance company, **Charleroi/Danses** (www.charleroi-danses.be). One of the jewels in Belgium's cultural crown, it was directed until 2004 by Belgian choreographer Frédéric Flamand. His departure to the Ballet National de Marseille in France saw the company in limbo for a year or so, but it's now headed by a four-prong artistic team whose collaboration has already proved a success. The company performs at its Charleroi base, **Les Écuries** (☎ 071 20 56 40; Blvd Pierre Mayence 65), as well as in Brussels (see p109) and abroad.

A light-lunch option is **Le Pain Quotidien** (☎ 071 32 27 82; Blvd Tirou 79; soups €3-5; ☞ 7.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 7.30am-3pm Sun; ☞), relaxed and ideal for a bowl of soup or a sandwich (for more details, see p103).

For more serious dining head to **L'Opéra Bouffe** (☎ 071 33 17 57; Rue de la Régence 10; menus €45-

75; ☞ closed Sun & Tue dinners), a top-notch restaurant one block north of Place Charles II.

Charleroi's main train station, **Gare du Sud** (☎ 02 528 28 28), is a 15-minute walk from Place Charles II. Half-hourly trains run to Brussels (€7.80, 55 minutes), Mons (€5.40, 30 minutes) and Nivelles (€3.70, 20 minutes). To Villers-la-Ville (€3.60, 30 minutes) there is one train every two hours.

Charleroi airport (www.charleroi-airport.com), sometimes called Brussels-Charleroi, is 6km north of the city and is serviced by budget airlines (eg Ryanair) from Ireland, Britain and European destinations. Construction of a new terminal started in mid-2005, and is expected to take a couple of years. A bus (€10.50 one way) connects the airport with Brussels' **Gare du Midi** (p115) train station. Bus A or 68 runs from Charleroi airport to the city's Gare du Sud train station.

BOTTE DE HAINAUT

The oft-overlooked Botte de Hainaut (Boot of Hainaut) extends south from Charleroi and kicks on firmly into France. Geologically it's an extension of the Ardennes, though the landscape is more gentle and the hills an undulating mix of farms and, to a lesser extent, forests. The Boot is shared by Hainaut and Namur provinces, but travelling through here you'll soon see it has little in common with the rest of industrialised Hainaut. Throughout the years it has remained a forgotten sliver of Belgium and today attracts Flemish families in search of a quiet roost for the summer holidays.

The main points of interest for tourists are Couvin and Chimay. The former is easily accessed by public transport, as it marks the end of the railway line from Charleroi. Chimay is accessible by bus from Couvin.

Couvin

pop 13,400

Couvin is a tiny town that lives more and more from its tourist pull. It's actually part of Namur province and is the Boot's southern base for exploration, just 11km from the border with France. It was close to Couvin that Hitler set up a command station in WWII. The town straddles the Eau Noire, a fast-flowing river that separates the picturesque Old Town from the modern hub at Place Général Piron.

The **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 060 34 01 40; www.couvin.be; Rue de la Falaise 3; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) is at the base of the old town.

SIGHTS

There's little to do in Couvin itself, except wander the streets of the Old Town or duck into the **Cavernes de l'Abîme** (☎ 060 31 19 54; Rue de la Falaise; adult/child €4.80/2.80; ☞ 10am-noon & 1.30-6pm Jul-mid-Sep, Sat & Sun only Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct), a series of caves accommodating a prehistoric display and a sound-and-light show.

The area's main sight is the **Grottes de Neptune** (☎ 060 31 19 54; Route de l'Adugeoir 24; adult/child €7.50/4.50; ☞ 10am-noon & 1.30-6pm Apr-Sep, Sat & Sun only Oct-Mar), 3km north of town in the hamlet of Pétigny. Here guided visits (45 minutes) follow the underground course of the Eau Noire, and include a 20-minute boat ride. The caves are extremely popular in summer and people queue for hours. They're located 500m off the main road; there's no public transport from Couvin.

Those with a car may want to go back in time to WWII when Hitler established his **Grand Quartier Général Allemand** (German Headquarters; ☎ 060 37 80 38; Place St Méen, Brûly-de-Pesche; adult/child €4/3.50; ☞ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sun Easter-Sep) at Brûly-de-Pesche, 8km south of Couvin. Hidden deep in the forest close to the French border, the Nazi leader only commanded from here for a few months in 1940, but in so doing he put the site on the map. Two pavilions and an underground bunker take visitors on an eerie journey.

SLEEPING & EATING

Maison St Roch (☎ 060 34 67 96; maisonsaintroch@hotmail.com; Rue de la Gare 34; d €52; ☞ closed end Sep-mid-Oct) B&B located in a lovely townhouse on the main road opposite the train station. The four rooms are a tad old-fashioned – pink curtains and floral designs – but they're big and comfy, and the atmosphere is friendly. It's a good overnight halt for families, as there's a separate kids' bedroom with a bunk bed. The maison's small restaurant (three-course menu €40; closed Monday and Saturday) does regional French/Belgian cuisine.

Au Milieu de Nulle Part (☎ 060 34 52 84; Rue de la Gare 10; s/d €58/70; mains €14-22; ☞ bistro lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) This B&B and bistro offers sober rooms at the back of its cosy, twin-salon bistro. Rooms have a view of the garden and river, while in the bistro the décor's mix'n'match with a heavy accent on roosters and dried flowers. It's located halfway between the town centre and the train station.

Brasserie Jeanne (☎ 060 34 59 41; Place Général Piron 2; mains €14-20, 3-course menu €25; ☞ lunch & dinner Fri-Sun; ☞) Subtle décor, a large terrace and a good selection of Belgian meals, including

dishes made with beer-based sauces, are the salient features of this split-level brasserie.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Couvin's train and bus station sits at the end of the railway line from Charleroi (€6.70, 65 minutes). The station is a five-minute walk from Place Général Piron – head straight along Rue de la Gare.

Chimay

pop 9700

The picturesque town of Chimay, 14km west of Couvin, is most often associated with the Trappist beer brewed here by local monks. The town slopes gently down a hillside to meet the valley of the Eau Blanche River; its hub is the Grand Place, close to which sit a few interesting sights.

The **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 060 21 18 46; www.ville-de-chimay.be, in French; Rue de Noailles 4; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun Jul–Aug, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun Apr–Jun & Sep, 9am–noon & 1–4.30pm Mon–Sat Oct–Mar) is in the heart of town, located in a picturesque old stone tower.

SIGHTS

The grey-stone **Château de Chimay** (☎ 060 21 44 44; Rue du Château 18; admission €7) overlooks the river valley on the western side of town and was home to the De Croy family, the town's medieval rulers. It was built in the 15th century, but was gutted by fire in 1935. Faithfully rebuilt, today it hosts occasional classical-music events. One-hour guided tours are held at 10am, 11am, 3pm and 4pm from Easter to October.

The only other sight within the town is the **Collégiale des Saints Pierre et Paul**, a 16th-century church where many of the De Croy family are buried.

The **Abbaye Notre Dame de Scourmont** (☎ 060 21 05 11; Rue du Rond Point 294, Forges) is home to Chimay's Trappist monks. The abbey is 9km south of town and sits on a gentle hill overlooking farmlands and woods. It's not open to visitors but you're free to wander around the peaceful gardens and cemetery and into the abbey church. Beer has been made at the abbey since 1862, but it's now bottled in a modern plant in an industrial estate 5km east of Chimay.

Kids will enjoy **La Grange aux Papillons** (☎ 060 21 99 89; Rue de l'Estree 4, Virelles; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am–5.30pm May–Sep, closed Mon May, Jun & Sep), a

tropical butterfly garden located a few kilometres outside town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Though there's only one option in town, there are several good accommodation possibilities in the countryside, but you'll need a car.

Le Petit Chapitre (☎ 060 21 10 42; Place du Chapitre 5; d/ste €70/95) An over-the-top B&B that offers Chimay's only accommodation. It's a small, red-stone turreted building on the square behind the church and has four rooms and one suite, all decked out in antiques and flamboyant furnishings – read gold filigree and lacquered furniture. Each room is different – the blue room with its stained glass is a favourite.

Auberge de Poteaupré (☎ 060 21 14 33; www.chimay.com; Route de Poteaupré 5, Bourlers; s/d €76/82) A big place very close to the French border, 9km south of Chimay. It's real attraction, rather than accommodation, is its status as official watering hole for Chimay beers. It also contains a shop (open Tuesday to Saturday) selling the three brews plus other local products, like cheese and honey.

Hostellerie du Gahy (☎ 060 51 10 93; fax 060 51 30 05; Rue du Gahy 2, Momignies; s/d €77/90; ☎ Mon–Fri) A delightful place – a converted 300-year-old dairy farm – with six lovely rooms and superb intimate dining, all handled by the wonderfully vibrant owner and chef, Réjane Bouillon. It's 12km southeast of Chimay, in the village of Momignies.

Gîte Rohies (☎ 060 51 23 46; bernardjacquelot@hotmail.com; Place Falleur 9, Macon; apt Mon–Fri €215, Sat & Sun €100) Offers two modern, fully furnished, self-contained apartments in a renovated building. It's in the farming hamlet of Macon, 8km east of Chimay.

Also recommended:

Camping de Chimay (☎ 060 21 18 43; Allée des Princes 1; ☎ Apr–Oct) Close to the town centre, on a plateau next to the river.

Aux Armes de Chimay (☎ 060 21 10 21; Grand Place 35; mains €12–20) Decent local cuisine is served up in this Grand Place setting.

Market (Grand Place; ☎ Sat) Fresh produce; held during the morning.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Chimay's bus station is a five-minute walk from the Grand Place. From here, bus 60/1 runs to Couvin (€1.50, 40 minutes, 10 times daily), from where there are trains back to Charleroi or Brussels.

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