



Western Wallonia

LANGUAGE: FRENCH

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Why Go?

With rolling farmland and small woods crowning the brows of low hills, the landscapes of Western Wallonia form idyllic Northern European perspectives. Yet the region's history is unbelievably turbulent: the area has been a battleground for millennia. Fine historic cities, notably Tournai and Mons, have loads to offer, especially since Mons' year as European Capital of Culture in 2015 endowed it with some striking new museums. Waterloo, where the future of Europe was forcefully debated, rejuvenated its museums and opened a smart new exhibition to mark the battle's bicentenary in the same year. Post-industrial cities such as Charleroi are yet to be similarly revitalised, but exploring this region's rural nooks, and discovering its notable beers, quirky corners and riotous festivals, is highly worthwhile.

Driving Distances

Mons	56			
Tournai	89	46		
Chimay	85	58	104	
Mariembourg	76	70	116	20
	Waterloo	Mons	Tournai	Chimay

Tournai

POP 69,800

Enjoyable Tournai (*tour-nay*, Doornik in Dutch) has a memorable Grand Place and one of Belgium's finest cathedrals. Even by local standards, the city has been in the wars, occupied at various points by Romans, Franks, Normans, French, English, Spanish, Austrians, Dutch and Germans. Today it's a lovely place for casual strolling, with a lively bar and restaurant scene near the river.

History

Tournai grew to prominence as the Roman trading settlement of Tornacum, and was the original 5th-century capital of the Frankish Merovingian dynasty. Autonomous from France as of 1187, the city retains two towers (St-Georges and Prends-Garde) from the first 1202 city wall. In 1513 Tournai was conquered by Henry VIII of England – Thomas Wolsey, of *Wolf Hall* fame, was appointed bishop – before being sold back to France in 1519. Just two years later it was swallowed by the Habsburg Empire. Tournai found renewed wealth as a centre for, successively, tapestries, textiles and porcelain, but it was devastated by WWII bombing.

Sights

★ **Cathédrale Notre Dame** CATHEDRAL
(www.cathedrale-tournai.be; Place de l'Évêché; ☺ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 1-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Mar) **FREE** Dominating Tournai's skyline are the five spires of its remarkable cathedral, which survived WWII bombs only for a freak 1999 tornado to compromise its stability. It'll remain a vast building site until at least 2018; what you can see meanwhile depends on the restoration work. Despite the scaffolding, the interior remains a fascinating example of evolving architectural styles, from the magnificent Romanesque nave through a curious bridging transept into an early-Gothic choir whose soaring pillars bend disconcertingly.

The wood-panelled little Chapelle St-Louis is under restoration and its large canvases by Rubens and Jacob Jordaens are currently hidden, but there are some impressive pieces in the **treasury** (Cathédrale de Tournai; admission €2.50; ☺ 1-5.30pm Mon, 10am-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 1.30-5.30pm Sat, 1.30-4.30pm Sun), including a fabulous 'Last Judgement' *châsse* (casket), a chasuble worn by Thomas Becket

and a 22m-long 1402 tapestry that culminates in the plaque of Tournai.

★ Grand Place

SQUARE

Tournai's gorgeous triangular main square is ringed with cafes in fine gable-fronted guildhouses merrily flying guild banners. Kids play in 'dare-you' fountains beneath an axe-wielding statue of Princess d'Espinoy, the doomed heroine who led Tournai's eventually futile defence against a 1581 Spanish siege. The square's grandest building is the gilt-detailed **Halle-des-Draps** (Grand Place 57; ☺ exhibitions only), a former cloth hall whose brick-vaulted interior hosts occasional exhibitions.

Église St-Quentin

CHURCH

(Grand Place 44; ☺ 9am-4pm Nov-Mar, to 6pm Apr-Oct) Église St-Quentin is a hefty Romanesque church with a 12th-century nave, posterior Gothic features and a striking red-tiled roof. When viewed from near here, the cathedral's classic cluster of five grey-stone towers seems to float ethereally above the Grand Place, especially at sunset or at night. Restored after heavy WWII damage, the interior is handsome in light-grey stone but lacks a bit of atmosphere.

Beffroi

TOWER

(www.tournai.be; adult/child €2.10/1.10; ☺ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar) Belgium's oldest belfry is 72m high with a narrow 257-step spiral staircase that becomes even narrower higher up. There's a good multilingual display on the history and significance of belfries as symbols of civic liberties partway up, but otherwise the main attractions are the bells and the views, described by faded signboards. Ask at the tourist office about bell concerts, during which you can climb the tower to see the ringer at work.

Musée des Beaux-Arts

GALLERY

(☎ 069-33 24 31; www.tournai.be; Enclos St-Martin 3; adult/child €2.60/2.10; ☺ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Mar) This airy gallery was designed by art-nouveau maestro Victor Horta. Though the interior and display halls are in need of a pep-up, it has a rich collection, including items by Tournai's best-known artist, the brilliant 15th-century Rogier Van der Weyden (Roger de la Pasture), works by Rubens, Jacob Jordaens, Manet and Monet, a beautiful Suratt seascape, and sketches by Van Gogh