

# Hainaut & Brabant-Wallon



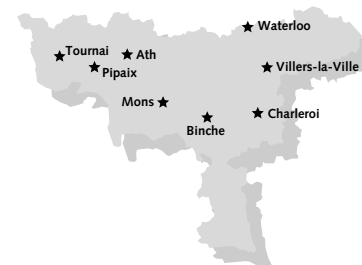
With the exception of Waterloo, Wallonia's western provinces of Hainaut and Brabant-Wallon are largely overlooked by foreign visitors. After the hubbub of the country's more touristy spots, this little corner of French-speaking Belgium is refreshingly ordinary.

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

