

6. Dinant shows you how beautiful Wallonia can be



Dinant is one of Belgium's most beautiful cities. It's quite touristic but not as crowded as Bruges or Brussels – except maybe in high summer. It's not as big as those cities either... "Dinant? Two streets, that's all" an inhabitant once told me, and he was actually quite right. Chances of getting lost are practically non-existent. The river Meuse flows right through Dinant. This city feels very open and welcoming.

Dinant has a train station. If you come by car you can park in the streets, on Sundays it's free. There's also a parking lot near the citadel (just follow the directions "citadelle") but in order to get down to the city you have to take the cable lift or walk down the steps from the citadel, which is only possible if you pay entrance to visit the citadel.

The most important attractions of Dinant are the main church (the "Collégiale") and the citadel. There's a cable lift that starts near the church and takes you to the citadel, or if you feel up to it, you can walk the 400 steps up. The price is the same.

A visit to the church is free. Sometimes organ recitals are held. Note that there's a mass on Sundays at 11 am during which you can't visit the church. There are small folders available inside with descriptions of the most important things to see.

The citadel is a museum, both about the citadel itself and the arms of those days. In its present form, it was built by the Dutch, between the defeat of Napoleon (1815) and the independence of Belgium (1830). After it ceased having military function, it was sold. At first there were plans to turn it into a zoo or a casino and to put a big statue on top of it. Fortunately, none of these plans were realised and the citadel became an interesting museum.

City walk, part 1: the best known side of Dinant – to the Rocher Bayard and back

We start this walk at the Collégiale. This church, the bridge and the citadel define the face of Dinant. The church was built in the 13th century, after a previous church was destroyed by a rock that had fallen on it. About 30 people were killed in this accident. One portal of the roman church remains, as we'll see on the second walk.

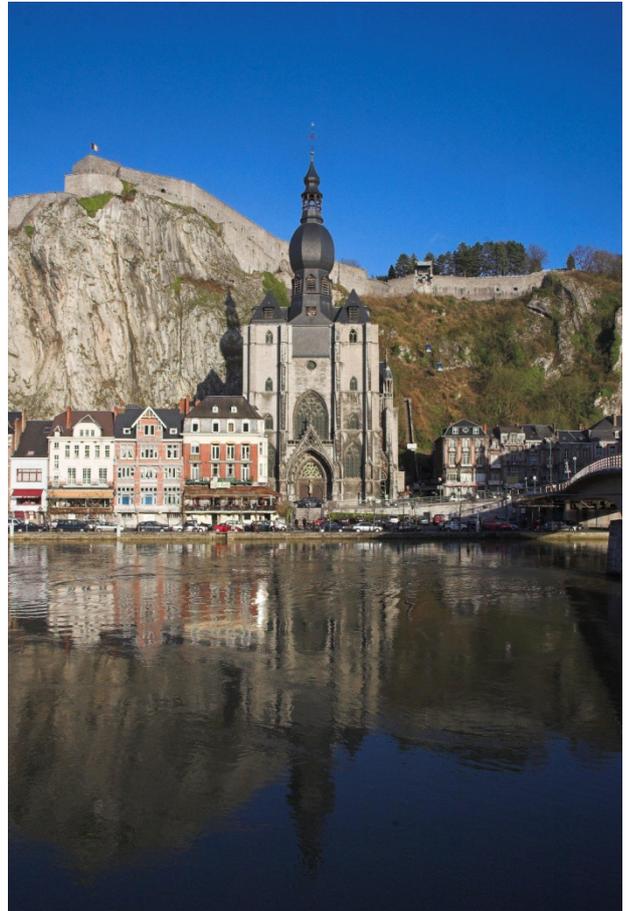
The bridge dates from the 1950s and it was dedicated to Charles de Gaulle, who was wounded in Dinant during the First World War. A bridge over the Meuse in Dinant was constructed as early as in the 11th century. Parts of the oldest bridge are on display at the citadel museum.

Go to the square right next to the church where the cable lift to the citadel operates. Turn your back to the church and walk into the Rue Grande, Dinant's main shopping street. Here, you'll find bakeries selling the famous couque de Dinant, a very hard biscuit made only of honey and wheat flour and baked at extremely high temperatures. This recipe originates from one of the many sieges of Dinant, when there was nothing else than honey and flour available to prepare something edible. For a couque de Rins, sugar is added. It's recommended not to try to bite pieces off, but to break them off and chew them slowly. Because the couque is so hard, many different pretty shapes can be made.

Turn into the first road on the left, the Rue en Rhée. Notice the old houses and particularly the Maison de la Pataphonie. It has a beautiful half-timbered façade. The Maison is an interactive museum with all sorts of improvised and unlikely musical instruments.

At the end of the street you'll see the palace of justice. Pass the front of it and continue as close to the rocks as possible. You arrive at a beautiful square with the entrance to the long abandoned amusement park (with a "cave" that goes all the way up to the level of the citadel) Mont-Fat. I have been told the park has been sold but very little has happened with it. Cross the square away from the rocks, cross the Rue Grande and go straight ahead to the Rue Wiertz, named after painter Antoine

Wiertz who had his workshop here. Take a look at the door of number 3, you'll see an indication of the level of a 19th century flooding of the Meuse. This sort of indications can be found here and there on houses and churches in Dinant.



Definitely Dinant: the river Meuse, the church, the citadel and the bridge

Turn sharp left at the end of the street into the Rue de la Barque, left into the Rue des Fossés and then almost immediately right into the Rue des Trois Escabelles, another picturesque old street. This brings us to the Place St-Nicolas where you can play table tennis or table football if you've brought a little ball with you. Now continue along the main street, the Rue Leopold, to the Place d'Armes. The casino on this square immediately draws everyone's attention, but the prison next to it might be more interesting to visit. At the corner you'll see "Speed Limit – Strictly Imposed" painted on the wall. These words date from the Second World War!

An even more moving mark, from the First World War, is to be seen at the big red house. Numerous stones are chipped by the bullets; which is not surprising knowing the Germans would kill every man they could find in Dinant during the war. More than 600 men were shot here, because German propaganda led the soldiers to believe that practically everybody was fighting for the French. Only in 2001 did the German government acknowledge this as a massacre and they apologized for the false accusations and the deaths.

Continue along the main road (Rue Leopold, Rue Daoust, Rue des Rivages) to the Rocher Bayard, the split rock. Legend has it that the horse Bayard split this rock with one of its mighty hooves as it jumped over the river

Meuse to bring its masters to safety. A more realistic vision is that this rock was probably split with dynamite by soldiers of Louis XIV to facilitate access to the city. There are two commemorative plaques near this rock; one in honour of King Albert I who climbed the rock. Don't be mistaken: the king didn't fall to his death from this rock – the fatal fall happened some years later in Marche-Les-Dames, near Namur. The other plaque indicates where the battle of the Ardennes or the battle of the Bulge came to a halt for the Germans. An exploded jeep blocked the road and the Germans couldn't get past.

Here, we turn around and go down to the river, the Meuse. Follow the river back to the Charles de Gaulle bridge.

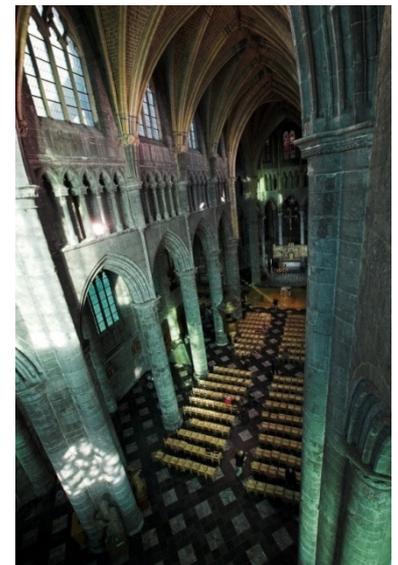
City walk, part 2: to Leffe and back, with splendid views

With the river right behind you and facing the main entrance of the church, walk to the left side of the church and see if you can distinguish the Roman portal. You'll also notice the street level was about 60 cm lower in those days. This explains why some of the rings to tie horses to are so close to the ground. Don't think horses were smaller in those days, the street was just lower. It was heightened to prevent damage by the frequent flooding of the Meuse. The different water levels are indicated on some of the pillars in the church. If you add up the values of all the capital letters (as Roman numerals), you get the year of the flood – note that a U counts as a V. For example: ULTIMa frebrVarll hVC VsqVe asCenDlt aqVa ("on the last [day] of February the water rose up to here"): add V + L + I + M + V + I + I + V + C + V + V + C + D + I + V = 5 + 50 + 1 + 1000 + 5 + 1 + 1 + 5 + 100 + 5 + 5 + 100 + 500 + 1 + 5 = 1784.

Continue along the church to the Rue Sous-Les-Roches ('street under the rocks') to the church of St-Pierre. In this street a huge rock of about 500 tonnes fell on several houses and cars on 16 October 1995. Luckily, nobody was killed. The rocks are now supported with concrete and nets were used to cover them. We pass the small St-Pierre church. If you face the church, look at the house on the right. There's a painted advertisement for Sunlight

soap. It was painted on in the 1930s when the church was still in ruins after the first world war. The church was rebuilt and the advertisement isn't in plain sight anymore.

We continue along this street until we see directions on the right, for the old city walls ("anciens vestiges"). It's a bit of a climb but the view is worth it. Judging by the remains of camp fire and barbecue sites and empty bottles, this is a place where



Inside the Collégiale

people come to have a party in summer. You could continue along the path and down a somewhat dangerous descent you'd get back to the city and would have to redo a bit of the walk, but it's best to turn around and go back to the Rue St-Pierre. Continue until you get to the St-Georges church. Next to the door you'll find even more indications of water heights.

Continue along the Rue Gustave Poncelet and take a right at the end, to the Leffe abbey.

Leffe is a well-known abbey beer. It's brewed by AB Inbev, so there's no more brewing activity in the abbey. The abbey can be visited in summer. Contact the tourist office or the abbey in advance to make reservations if you want to be sure. Opposite the abbey is a museum on Leffe beer but that's not very interesting unless you're a real Leffe enthusiast.

Now turn around and go to the Meuse river. You'll see the locks to regulate the height of the river, and you might see cormorants as well. On the opposite bank, high up, are the ruins of Crêvecoeur, in Bouvignes. You can read more about it in part 3.

Follow the river Meuse back towards the centre of Dinant. Take a left at the Rue St-Jacques where you'll see the Sax fountain. Indeed, the inventor of the saxophone was born in Dinant and worked there. He is, however, buried in Paris. If you take a right facing the fountain, you walk into the Rue Adolphe Sax and you'll see a statue of Sax on a bench. A Sax museum (finally) opened just recently. Oh, and if you're curious about it: Sax is buried in the Montmartre cemetery in Paris. In case you're wondering where the Dinant cemetery is: it's outside the city, on the road to Philippeville.

The Rue Sax leads you back to the Collégiale.

Part 3: Bouvignes, a worthwhile climb

Bouvignes was the rival city of Dinant for a long time. Both had copper industry. Dinant belonged to the prince-bishopric of Liège and Bouvignes belonged to Namur. One of the cruelest passages in this rivalry was the taking of Dinant by Charles the Bold in the 1400s. The people of Bouvignes insisted upon throwing Dinant townspeople in the river Meuse, tied back to back two by two.

The ruins of the Bouvignes castle also have a sad story. During a siege by the French, the Bouvignes army had to retreat. The lords of the castle were killed. When the French set out to conquer the castle, the three ladies of the castle jumped down from the castle arm in arm, to a certain death.

In the end, Bouvignes had to lay the thumbs to Dinant, and now it's even part of the city of Dinant.

Opposite the church of Bouvignes, there's a direction for "Ruïne de Crêvecoeur". This is an exhausting but beautiful walk towards the ruins of the castle. Entry is free, there is no gate or fence. Chances are, you'll be alone there. It's not what you'd call a tourist trap. There isn't much left of the castle itself, don't expect too much, but the sight towards Dinant

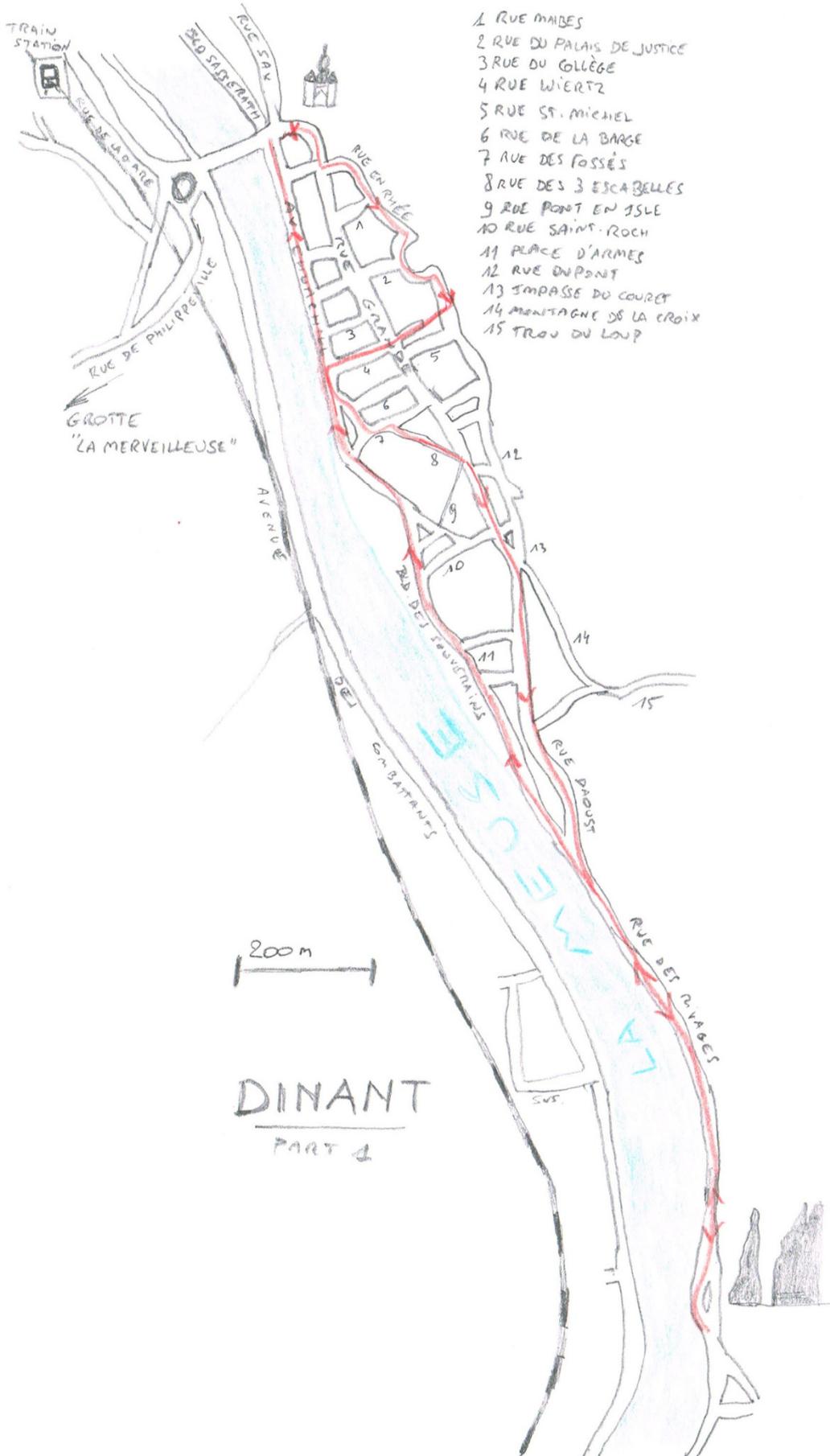
is wonderful. Top tip: on July 21st, it's one of the best places to watch the fireworks. The youngsters of Bouvignes know this too.

Be careful: if you plan to climb back down after dark, bring a strong flashlight or chances are you'll break your legs.

There's an alternative that's less exhausting and better suited if you're in a hurry or plan to go to the ruin after dark. Just drive past the Bouvignes church and follow the road uphill. It becomes narrower as you go up. On the right hand side, there's a parking space – drive slowly or you'll pass it. It's just a small opening in the woods where a dozen cars can park. From there, you walk into the woods (the path starts practically opposite where you entered the parking lot) and follow the path until you reach the ruins. This path is almost horizontal and you reach the ruins within a couple of minutes. A flashlight is still necessary after dark!

Update: construction is being undertaken to consolidate the ruins. It is possible to walk around the fence, but you do so at your own risk!

Bouvignes is only 10 minutes by car from the centre of Dinant. Bus 31 goes from Dinant's train station to Bouvignes eglise (church), but only on weekdays!



Around Dinant

There's a lot more to see in the Dinant region. These are some of my personal favourites:

- **Grotte La Merveilleuse** (Rue de Philipeville 142, a 15 minute walk or a five minute drive from the city centre), a cave with many beautiful stalagmites, stalagmites and curtains. No kitsch lighting here, just the bare necessities to accentuate the natural beauty of the cave. You have to follow the guide, and guided tours start every hour on the hour – but check the website or call to make sure about opening times. If you want to take photographs with a tripod, you can ask whether you can stay behind and go up with the next tour if you want some more time.



Somewhat more industrial: the Brasserie du Bocq

- **Château de Freÿr** (Freÿr 12, Waulsort), **Chateau de Vêves** (Noisy 5, Celles) and **Jardins d'Annevoie** (Rue des Jardins 37a, Annevoie): there are some quite impressive castles around Dinant. Don't imagine things like Versailles though. These castles aren't really near the city centre and in different directions. You have to take a bus or a car to get there. There are influences of French, Italian and English gardening in the Jardins d'Annevoie. You can't visit the castle interiors there. The Freÿr castle interior can be visited – they are quite stately. The Vêves castle is really a dream castle and it can be visited.

- **Brasserie 'La Caracolle'**, (Côte Marie-Thérèse 86, Falmignoul): In the small town of Falmignoul you'll find one of the weirdest breweries in Belgium. It dates from the 1800s and little has changed since then. The brewing kettles are heated with wood fires, and the bottling facilities are a bit of a diy job, to say the least. There are spider webs on the ceiling everywhere. No, that's not the work of a styling department – it's the work of spiders. Details (in French) are on their website, <http://www.brasserie-caracole.be>.

There's also the **Brasserie du Bocq** (Rue de la Brasserie 4, Purnode), a somewhat more industrialised brewery – although I find the more industrial breweries less interesting to visit.

Some interesting websites:

<http://www.patrimoinemosan.net/> Patrimoine Mosan, about the little tell-tale signs of history. Only in French. Click on the computer guy image to access the site with interesting studies of painted advertisements, architect's signatures etc. Look at "Les Grattoirs", so you'll finally know what these metal rings were for. (If you don't understand French: it's for scratching the dirt – or in cities: horse droppings – from your shoes before entering.)

<http://www.dinant-tourisme.com/> The official website of the tourist board. In English as well. Many more addresses and things to see and to do.