

11. A peek into France: Lille



From Ghent, Lille is less than an hour by car. From Brussels, you can take a Thalys train there. Lille is one of the major cities in the Nord-Pas de Calais region, also known as French Flanders. It used to be part of Flanders until the 1600s, and many town's names have a Flemish ring to it: Hondschoote, Godewaersvelde, Buysseure... The Flemish lion can be found in several places, but people do speak French – or the local Ch'ti dialect – here.

The film *Bienvenue Chez Les Ch'tis*, a feel-good comedy, was filmed in this region. It was one of the biggest film hits ever in France. I don't know whether it exists with English subtitling.

One weekend in September the Braderie de Lille takes place with a city-wide fair and flea market.

The Champ de Mars near the citadel is the easiest parking lot in town, especially on Sundays. Your sat nav might know it as Avenue du 43ème Régiment d'Infanterie. On Sundays you don't have to buy a parking ticket and there's usually lots of space. A visit to the citadel is worthwhile but you have to make a reservation or be at the tourist office in time (see <http://www.lilletourism.com>). Contact them for details. The citadel is still an active Nato distribution centre so you'll probably get a guard along with the group. Photography may or may not be allowed, depending on the guard and depending on the mood of the military personnel – it's probably okay if you stick to the architecture, which alone is worth the visit.

In the park surrounding the citadel there's a well-kept zoo. Entrance is free.

A practical guide describing five walks through the city and detailed information on architecture and history can be bought at the tourist office. The city walk below is distilled from that guide.

By the way: don't mistake Lille, France for Lille, Belgium! Apparently it's a common sat nav user error.

If you're looking for a change of scenery for evening supper, you might consider visiting one of the restaurants on the *Mont des Cats* in Godewaersvelde. It's half an hour's drive from Lille. The terrace of the *Auberge du Mont des Cats* (<http://www.montdescats.com/>) has a stunning view.

A city walk in Lille

*Park at or go to the Champ de Mars. Visit the zoo first if you have planned to do so. Then cross the water at the Pont de la Citadelle, the bridge at the entrance of the Champ de Mars parking. Cross the road and turn left. Turn right at the next intersection, the Quai du Wault. The water in the middle is one of the last witnesses of Lille's harbour in the city. Nowadays harbour activity here is moved more to the west. On the left an old convent functions now an expensive hotel. Walk past the water and through the park. In the park, there's a statue of Marshal Foch, the commander of the French army at the end of World War I. At the end of the park you come across a touching statue of a woman singing a lullaby to a child. It depicts the famous lullaby *Le P'tit Quinquin*, which is almost considered an anthem in the region.*

At the end of the park, cross the road and turn left. Turn right at the first junction and follow this road (Rue de l'Hôpital Militaire) past the St-Etienne church and the Collège des Jésuites. Take the first road on the left, and then quickly the next road on the right. This is the Square Morisson. Continue in the Rue des Fossés and keep an eye out for the trompe-l'oeil paintings on a couple of houses. Turn into the street on the left, the Rue de la Vielle Comédie, which ends on the Place Rihour. On this square, you'll immediately notice a glass pyramid, permitting light into the metro station. Lille is one of the first cities to have a fully automatic metro – there are no drivers! On the square, you'll also face a war monument, and next to it the Palace Rihour, where the tourist information service is centred. In fact, what you see are the remaining parts of the Palace, built in the 15th century. The chapel and a staircase are all that survived a fire in 1916.

Now, walk through the Rue Rihour, the first street on your right side, with all the restaurants. You arrive at the very colourful and beautiful Place De Gaulle or Grand'Place, the real city centre. On your right side you see the Théâtre du Nord. The centre of the square is claimed by a column with a goddess on top. This monument was erected in 1845 to

commemorate the siege of the city by the Austrians in 1792. The goddess holds a "boute-feu" (to ignite cannons) in one hand, while pointing the other to an inscription with the words of the mayor of Lille who refused to give up the besieged city. You can still see cannonballs in the fronts of some of the houses around the Grand'Place.

Walk to the beautiful red and yellow building, the Vieille Bourse (Old Stock Exchange). Actually, I should say "buildings". This is a square of 24 narrow houses and shops. It dates from 1652-1653. On most days people play chess and sell second-hand books here. Walk through and around the Vieille Bourse and go around the back. Another beautiful



square reveals itself, with the Opera, the Chamber of Commerce (with the tower), and an inevitable number of restaurants. Pass the front of the Chamber of Commerce, and turn right into the Rue de la Grande Chaussée. Turn right again into the Rue des Chats Bossus, and turn left on the little Place du Lion d'Or, into the Rue de la Monnaie. On the right side you find the old Hospice Comtesse, an old hospital. If you have an hour or so to spare and you like old buildings it's worth the entrance fee. Turn left into the Rue au Peterinck, then left again to the Place Aux Oignons, and straight on to the cathedral, the Notre-Dame de la Treille. Walk around it and you'll be surprised when you get to the front. Construction of the cathedral started in 1854 but as money was tight it was never finished the way it was intended. There's a model inside that shows something like the Notre-

Dame in Paris, which was the way it was conceived. Finally, in 1999, the building was finished with a thin marble façade. It might look strange from the outside, but it's magnificent inside when the light falls through. Don't forget to walk around the back – you get a view of several small houses looking as if they're all out of perspective.

With your back to the cathedral entrance, turn into the street on your left (Rue du Cirque), then turn right into the Rue Basse. Turn left again into the Rue Esquermoise, and pay attention to the architectural details of the houses. This street leads you back to the Place De Gaulle, where you can have a bite to eat or something to drink.

The modern face of Lille, and almost every other noteworthy building in Lille

If you've fallen in love with Lille and you want to see everything, or you have lots of spare time, or you're very into modern architecture, I have a second walk to offer you.

(to come...)