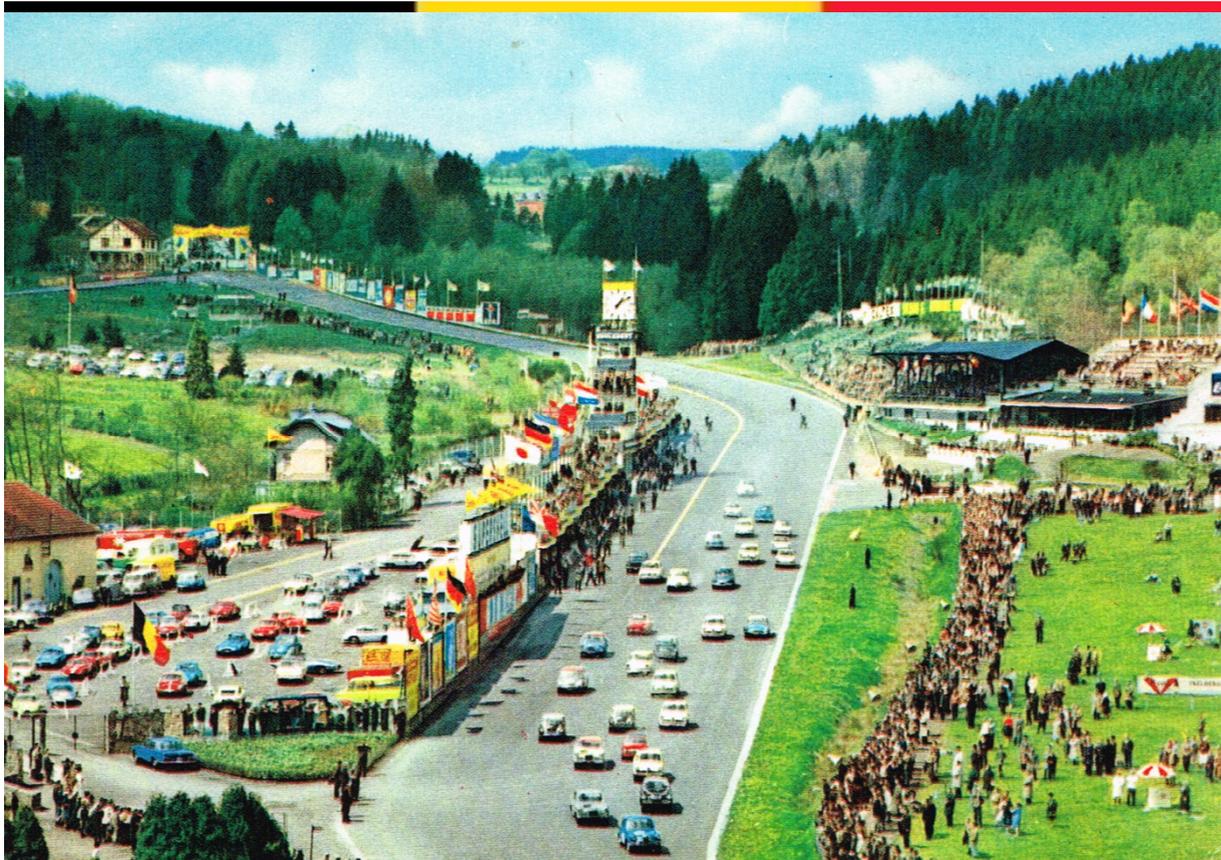


## 10. Spa-Francorchamps and Coo, a splendid time for everyone



The Spa region, located in the province of Liège, has been very touristic for a long time. It offers a number of possibilities, something for everyone. There's the Spa-Francorchamps race circuit, best known for its Formula 1 Grand Prix. This is where Michael Shumacher won his first F1 race ever. There are other races as well, sometimes even for free. Then there's a racing car museum in Stavelot, so car lovers, buckle up! In the Spa baths, you can have a relaxing day, adventure seekers and children will have their fun in Coo. And the Hautes Fagnes are Belgium's finest piece of nature.

This region is best visited by car. There is some public transport available but it's far from the easiest way around. In your own car you will enjoy some of the twisty roads through the region and you might be persuaded to think you are a racing driver yourself. Watch out for police radars though. On racing days parking near the circuit might not be free. Especially during the Formula 1 weekend you might consider taking a shuttle bus from a nearby town - most of the time this is cheaper.



The Wanne castle

If you want to explore the region for several days or you're passing and looking for a place to sleep, I wholeheartedly recommend the Château de Wanne. This ancient castle farm was converted to a sort of youth hostel (although it's not a member of the youth hostel organisation) and the prices are low - you pay around 15€ per person per night, and that includes a breakfast! Furthermore, the twisty roads that lead to Wanne are great fun for the enthusiastic driver, and the forests that surround it are a treat for those who love nature walks. Their website isn't available in English, but you can always send them an e-mail. See <http://www.gitesdetape.be/nl/gites/wanne>.

## The Spa-Francorchamps circuit

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The Spa-Francorchamps racing circuit was laid out in the early 1920s. It consisted of public roads, and up until 2000 a major part of the circuit was a public road. Nowadays, a new road goes around the circuit. The track started out at around 14km but over the years it has been shortened to about half that length. It's an attractive racetrack because it has some challenging bends and some steep rises, part of the natural hilly environment.

The most popular race here is the Belgian Formula 1 Grand Prix. Tickets are hugely expensive, ranging from a good 100€ for basic access to over 500€ for a seat. What most people don't know is that there are other races here too, and some of them are free. The calendar can be found on <http://www.spa-francorchamps.be/en/calendar-meeting.php?lg=en>. The coloured dots indicate whether entrance is free or not. There are track days as well, everything can be found on the website.

If your holiday in Belgium should coincide with one of the races here, it's an event not to be missed. On other days, the circuit might be accessible to visitors as well. It's always worth a look if you're interested. If your significant other or offspring are opposed, there's an alternative for them - read on!

\*\*\* (PIT BRASSERIE?)

## The Stavelot car museum

In the lovely village of Stavelot, you can't miss the buildings of the former abbey. It houses the tourist board for the region and a couple of museums. The most interesting one is in the basement. Here, you'll see race cars from almost every era in racing. All of the cars on display have at one time or another been around the Spa-Francorchamps circuit. It's not the cheapest of museums at around 8€, but for this price you are allowed to visit the other museums in the abbey as well - although the history of the region or the temporary exhibitions might not seem all that interesting to you. The car museum alone is worth it - you'll spend more than an hour there if you're interested, because there are lots of explanatory panels, each with an English translation.



the Stavelot car museum

As a side note: the restaurants in Stavelot are good, and most of them have a menu card in English.

## Coo, for young and old adventure seekers

Coo is one of Belgium's oldest touristic villages. **The Coo waterfalls** are well known in the country, but most people are disappointed when they see them. They are 15m high, so don't expect the Niagara Falls! You can take the stairs to the bottom of the falls, and only then you realise that they are quite high and a tad impressive. They were man-made - that is, the monks of the Stavelot abbey dug out the shortest route, bypassing a meander in the river in the 15th and 17th century.

The old meander is still there, it serves as the lower basin of a **hydro-electric power plant** that can be visited. For those interested in mechanics and technology, it's worth the detour. The Coo plant is actually a means of "storing" electricity: the water is pumped up to the higher basins during the night when power is cheap, and during peak times it can be released and the pumps act as generators. The efficiency is about 80% which doesn't seem all that high, but here you have the equivalent power of a nuclear power plant, ready for use in 2 minutes time! And if you're still in doubt: no, the electricity generated here does not qualify as "green". The water is only a means of storing the energy that comes from other power plants that are not necessarily green.



The lower basin and one of its dams in the morning

The adress is Sur Les Fosses, Coo, but your sat nav might get confused as Sur Les Fosses refers to a couple of streets. Just take the main road from Coo to Trois-Ponts - that is, with your back to the falls, go right at the big intersection. The plant is at the end of the first street on the right just after you drive under a railway bridge. There's a white sign with "Centrale de Coo".

To visit the plant, park near the closed boom barrier where you can't drive any further. Notice the turbine wheel at the entrance. Walk past the barrier and go on

to the helicopter landing site some 500m further. Look for the entrance to the visitor's gallery, open from 8am to 4pm daily. Entrance is free, you get to see the top of the turbines and a maquette of the plant, along with some very informative posters (in French, Dutch and German only, unfortunately). If you have the time, it's funny to stop by the lower basin in the morning and then again in the evening. The difference in water height is several meters.

In the centre of Coo is the **Plopsa Coo Amusement Park**. The name Plopsa is a blend of Plop and Samson, the names of the most popular characters in children's programmes in Flanders and probably Belgium. Samson is a talking dog - a hand doll - and Plop is a gnome. They were both created by Studio 100 and clever merchandising has ensured the founders of Studio 100 a place among the richest Belgians. This amusement park is guaranteed fun for children. For teenagers and adults, the nearby **Coo Adventure** might be more to the liking. The activities range from mountainbiking and survival to shooting and karting - you can even rent a Ferrari there. A word of warning though: if you rent it during a racing weekend at Spa-Francorchamps, the superfast sports car might end up in a traffic jam and your expensive fifteen minutes might be ticking away while you're looking at the rear of some eighteen year old battered Lada going the same speed you are. I've seen it happen...

Of course Coo has some splendid walks to offer as well. All in all, if you want to go to the races and your family doesn't, just drop them off in Coo and neither of you will be disappointed.

### **Spa, the mother of all spas**

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Since the middle ages the water of Spa has been known for its curing quality and by the 16th century the city had an entire infrastructure for receiving the guests that hoped to have their illnesses cured over the course of a couple of months. Spa was visited by kings and noblemen, but also people like Descartes, Justus Lipsius, Jacques Tati, general Patton, and even Casanova.

A cure consisted of walking, drinking lots of water (16 to 20 glasses each day) and taking warm baths in the water from the region, rich in carbonic acid. Of course, there was entertainment needed as well. Spa still has a casino and there were concert halls, ball rooms and so on. Emperor Joseph II called Spa "the café of Europe".

You may notice the city has lost some of its grandeur. If you want to have a quick glance at the small city find a parking spot along the main road. Along this road, called Rue Royale or N62, you can't miss the Casino and the old bath house next to it. Here, people could take their warm baths in the source water. They're no longer in use and their destination is unknown. The building was designed by the same architect as the stock exchange in Brussels.

Walk between the Casino and the old bath house, up the steps and then to the left. Soon, you'll see the impressive late 19th century church of Spa. It can be visited. When you come out of the church, go right and take the street on the right to get back to the main road and the Pouhon Pierre Le Grand (Peter The Great source). This kiosk-like building was constructed to allow the guests to drink the water in a comfortable place. You too can drink the source water the guests had to drink for their cure here. It's absolutely not the same as the bottled Spa water that can be bought everywhere. That water also comes from around this city, but from different sources. The tourist office is in the Pouhon Pierre Le Grand building as well.

In the park on the other side of the street are a couple of pretty buildings with a gallery in between them. On Sunday morning, there's a flea market here. This is where the cure guests used to meet and come to play games.

This is Spa in a nutshell. There's a city walk that's a little more elaborate in the tourist office's brochure that can be downloaded on their website. Bear in mind that the starting point is the building in the park - this is where the tourist office used to be before it moved to the Pouhon.

## The Hautes Fagnes, the most impressive and desolate piece of nature in Belgium

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As for the **Hautes Fagnes**, there are two possible courses of action. One possibility is to stop at the Baraque Michel (if you want to find it in the sat-nav: the commune is Jalhay, the street is also called Baraque Michel), the Signal de Botrange or Mont Rigi and make a short walk there. The walks are indicated and you can't get lost; all you need to do is to follow the majority of the tourists. The second possibility is to buy the map in case you love walking. It costs around €8 and available in most tourist offices or at the Signal de Botrange. If you can read a map you can figure out your own walks and get away from most of the other tourists who stay close to their cars. I suggest you walk from the Baraque Michel to the place they call Noir Flohay (it's indicated on the map) and then through the Grand Bognard to the Hell or Hill river. If you follow this upstream you'll get back near Baraque Michel. This walk will take an entire day.

The great thing about the Hautes Fagnes is that you can make beautiful walks there any time of the year, even in rainy weather. The fens can get fairly desolate and paths tend to become swampy during wet seasons. Make sure you bring good walking boots and warm clothes knowing it's one of the coldest parts of Belgium. At night there's only little or no light at all, so it's important to get back to your car before it gets dark. Bring a flashlight in case of emergency.

Langlaufen (Ski de Fond in French) is a very popular winter sport. It's a bit like walking on skis. The tracks are opened from the moment there's but a few centimeters of snow. It can get very crowded but if you like busy places you might want to give it a try.

