

7. Wonderful Wallonia: three days of fantastic walks



What do you mean, three days? Well, I find it difficult to choose between these three beautiful areas in Wallonia. If you have the time, visit all three. If you don't, try to see which one best fits your schedule. You'll find these descriptions are pretty short, because I'm thoroughly convinced you need to buy the walking map (at 1/25000 or even 1/10000). That way, you can choose and combine in whichever way suits you: long or short walks, steep climbs or asphalt roads, have your pick.

The walking maps generally cost around €8 (that's for a clear topographic map – sometimes there are cheaper maps with less detail and less walks). You can get them at the tourist offices in the cities and villages of the region. You can sometimes order them in advance and have them mailed to you if you visit the regional tourist board's website.

I leave it up to you to pick between these three. St-Hubert is a small but attractive city in the woods, the Chimay region is more of an agricultural region but there are some wonderful rock formations (and I don't mean Crosby Stills Nash & Young) and attractive towns, and the Ciney region is only a little less charming but there is hardly any tourism and you can practice your farmer's golf game between the cows on one of the best courses in the country.

Generally speaking, these areas aren't the best served by public transport and certainly not by train. Especially the travel between small towns can be a painstakingly long journey by bus because the more remote places are only served once every hour, and if you have a stop-over it might really become more interesting to go on foot. Renting a car is always the best option – even if you're going to be walking for most of the day.

Both Couvin and St-Hubert take about 2h30 from Brussels by train. For St-Hubert, you have to go to the Poix St-Hubert station and then take a bus. It's about 9km, the bus takes 13 minutes. In Couvin, the station is within walking distance of the village centre. Ciney is much closer to Brussels but the walks often start in villages about 10km from Ciney so you'll be waiting for buses again.

So there you have it. If you want to enjoy nature walks, it's best to go by car.

Deep in the woods around St-Hubert

St-Hubert, proclaiming itself as the ‘European Capital of Hunting and Nature’, was named after the patron saint of hunters and woodsmen. St-Hubert used to be buried there but his remains were removed during the French revolution. Unfortunately, the abbot who had removed the remains failed to inform anyone of their whereabouts before he died. Once a year the hunting dogs are baptised in the St-Hubert basilica. The city is set in magnificent woods that were once the scene for the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler’s last attempt at stopping the allied forces.

You’ll love the small city of St-Hubert. You can see most of it in one or two hours. Visit the basilica at the Place de l’Abbaye, and the St-Gilles church in the Rue St-Gilles (opposite the abbey square). The former is a magnificently ornamented gothic basilica with a baroque front; the latter is a Roman church, one of the oldest in the country and superb in its simplicity. There’s also a rose garden in the city centre with some 100 different species. It’s free but of course the season has to be right. The famous flower painter Pierre-Joseph Redouté was born in St-Hubert.

If you’re a wildlife enthusiast or a photographer, the **wildlife park** (Parc à gibier, Rue St-Michel 125) is a real treat. There’s a limited number of species – wild boars and different sorts of deer, mainly – but the animals have a large area to move about. It might take a while before you spot the first boar but once you have, you’ll notice many of them in no time. It’s particularly moving when they’ve just had piglets. According to animal rights organisation GAIA (‘Global Action in the Interest of Animals’), this wildlife park is the only one in Belgium to comply with all the legal terms concerning animal welfare. You can take photographs without annoying fences in the background, and you can taste some good beer in the cafeteria. There’s also a children’s farm with goats and the like. You’ll spend a wonderful couple of hours there.

The museum of **Fourneau St-Michel** is nearby. It has several old houses, a church and a school that were moved here to show the old building styles of the region. A visit will take about 2 hours. I highly recommend the walk indicated with the red rectangle. The Al Pêle restaurant serves fantastic one pan dishes.



A view of St-Hubert

Also nearby (about 20km away) is the village of **Redu**. It was on the verge of total abandon in the 1980s until some people came up with the idea to turn it into a “book village”. Today the small village of Redu has more than twenty book shops. Most of them have a good selection of second hand books; the greater part is written in French, some in Dutch, and if you look carefully you might find some foreign language books too. Apart from book shops there are several bars and restaurants to pop in. Most book shops are open in the weekends (some only in weekends), and on Easter Day there’s a book market that attracts even more book enthusiasts (it’s *always* crowded then).

Apart from these things, you’d better take your walking shoes and enjoy the walks. The tourist office is right in the center of St-Hubert, buy a map and start walking through those forests!

The Chimay Region and Viroinval

The region around the old city of Chimay is mainly an agricultural region with relatively large pastures, some forests, and small welcoming villages inbetween. There are some campsites as well but it's nowhere near as crowded with Dutch as for instance the Bouillon region.

Start the day in **Nismes**. It's a very cosy town with an old church. You should definitely walk from the city centre to the Fondry Des Chiens (a rock formation) and if you are the active type, the Roche à Lomme is worth the climb. You'll find these places on the NGI walking map of the area, available in the tourist office. The walk indicated by the red rectangle is about 5km long (1h30), and it can be downloaded here (along with a couple of others): <http://www.viroinval.be/xml/page-IDC-24352-IDD-34643-LANG-fr-.html>

The yellow rectangle walk is about 7km (2h) and a little tougher. Most of the walks are well indicated. You could spend about three days walking if you want to do everything on the NGI map.

There's a **steam train from Mariembourg to Treignes**. The Mariembourg station is used by the volunteers of this railroad, the 3 valleys steam train. See <http://insiteout.brinkster.net/0000064cfv3v/index-engels.asp> for time tables. The Mariembourg SNCB train station is around the corner but there are few trains. Note that sometimes the "Autorail" is used, that isn't a steam train but it's nevertheless fun. In Treignes you have some time to visit the train museum – some of the equipment of the organisation is on display there. There's also an archaeological and an ecological museum. Also nearby is **Hitler's bunker** in Brûly-de-Pesche. Hitler stayed here in 1942 to be closer to the French front. The people of three villages were ordered to leave and a bunker and a couple of wooden houses were erected. The bunker is still as it was, the wood houses were rebuilt and now serve as a museum about Hitler's presence in the village and about the resistance. A resistance shelter was

reconstructed in the woods. This is a quite evocative place for world war II enthusiasts.

It's open every day except Monday from March 31st to September 30th, from 10h30 to 6pm. In July and August it's open every day, in October only on weekends.

If you don't care too much for walking or the weather is bad and you have a car at your disposal, visit **La Grange Aux Papillons** (the barn with butterflies). The passionate owner has a great number of interesting exotic butterflies in this heated hangar. See <http://www.lagrangeauxpapillons.com/> for details.



And finally you should visit **Chimay city and abbey**. Chimay can be reached by bus from Nismes (it takes about 40 minutes!) or by car (which takes about half as long). The city has some welcoming terraces, a castle that's still inhabited by the princess of Chimay who sometimes gives guided tours herself, a church, an old laundry basin and some nice cobbled streets. If you walk around the market place and the castle for about half an hour, you've seen most of it.

The Chimay abbey is some 10km from the city centre. You can only visit part of the abbey itself – the church, the garden and the cemetery. The brewery and cheese factory are not open to the general public. You can,

however, taste all the goodness of the abbey's products at the **Auberge du Potaupré**, about 500m from the abbey. It's not only a bar, a restaurant and an affordable inn. See <http://www.chimay.com/en/en.html?IDC=27> for all the details.

Try the "quadruple degustation", four beers, if you think you can handle it. The bits of cheese you get with the "La totale" are disappointingly small, but you can always order an extra sandwich with cheese.

In the last couple of years, the Auberge has become such a tourist attraction that I'm afraid authenticity and service suffer from it. It's not the cheapest place to buy Chimay cheeses or beers either - a warehouse in a nearby city will save you quite a couple of euros.

The main courses are tasty but you often have to wait quite a while, service can be chaotic, and especially on busy days the food isn't always that well-prepared. You're probably better off in a restaurant in Chimay city.

The Trappist beers: a select group!

I've already mentioned trappist beers more than once. There are only seven trappist beers in the world and six of them are from Belgium. Now what makes a beer deserve the "trappist" logo? First of all, it has to be brewed by trappist monks (also known as Cistercians). They must have control over every aspect of the beer, including its commercialisation. The profits are to go to the workings of the abbey or good causes. Only then is a beer awarded the "authentic trappist product" logo.

You can find the logo on cheese and other trappist products that follow the above rules.

A trappist-style beer that doesn't comply with these rules is often called an abbey-beer. These beers don't have to comply with any rules. Sometimes trappist recipes are used and often the name of an existing abbey is used (with permission of the monks) but sometimes these beers don't have anything to do with the abbey they're named after.



There are seven trappist beers:

- **Chimay**, from the Scourmont abbey near Chimay. They have three beers: the "red", a copper-coloured fruity beer, the "white", an amber-coloured beer, and the "blue", a brown strong beer. The colours refer to the labels and capsules on the bottles. The blue Chimay is my favourite among these three. The Chimay abbey also brews the beer for the Mont des Cats abbey in France. Because this isn't brewed in the Mont des Cats abbey it can't have the trappist logo but the name "trappist" on the label is allowed.
- **Orval**. They only have one beer. It's special, not too strong, and quite bitter. The occasional beer drinker probably won't like it. I love it. This beer can be kept for a long time – some bars even offer the choice of a "young" Orval or an "old" Orval that's kept for at least 3 or 6 months. There is a notable difference in taste, this is not just a hype. The prices that are asked for an "old" beer are sometimes way too high though.
- **Rochefort**. They have three beers, distinguishable by their label and capsule colours but also by their number – this number has a vague connection with the alcohol percentage. The Rochefort 10 is my favourite, it's a very dark beer – almost black.
- **Achel**, from the Achel abbey. Brewing started here in 1852, but in the first world war the brewery was dismantled by the Germans – they needed the copper. In 1998 the monks started brewing again, with help from monks of the Westmalle and Rochefort abbeys. Their beers are easy to drink and appreciate, but harder to find in cafés and bars.
- **West-Malle**. A classic. They have two distinct beers: a brown "dubbel" and a pale "tripel".
- **West-Vleteren**. See chapter 2.
- **La Trappe**, from Berkel, Holland. The Dutch one. They have an entire range of easy going beers. They cooperate with major brewer Bavaria. Because of this, they lost the "trappist" logo for some time, until the contract was changed so that the monks have more to say about the brewing and the sale.

The Ciney region: an unknown marvel

“The Valleys of tastes” is the name of this (not so) touristic region. It’s hardly known, and that’s what makes it so nice. The city of Ciney itself doesn’t have the charm of Dinant or St-Hubert, so it’s not worth the detour. Around Havelange however, there are beautiful walks among farmland, castles and small towns. This part of Belgium is no touristic hot point, so there’s a lot of peace and quiet and authenticity. Sometimes it’s less picturesque than the “real Ardennes” but if you’re looking for a real authentic region that’s not tourist-ridden in summer, this is it.

The funniest attraction of the region is the best farmer’s golf course in the country. Maybe you are unfamiliar with this fantastic sport: it’s like regular golf, but with a clog on a stick, a larger ball, and straight through meadows, sometimes between the cows. In other words: great fun. Don’t wear your best trousers and white golfing shoes though.

The golf course of the Ferme de la Bourgade (<http://www.golffermier.be/>) takes you over

green pastures, mud, a brook... it’s challenging, to say the least. A game will take about half a day. They offer other “farm sports” as well, and there’s a cafeteria and even some rooms and cottages you can rent. It’s open throughout the year but it’s always best to ring or mail in advance if you want to make sure it’s open.

You can buy a hiking map there (7€), or a booklet with a selection of walks, “balades et vous” (2€). Of course, the tourist offices also sell these maps.

One of the most beautiful walks in the area is the Promenade de la Caracole. It starts at the church of Flostoy. It’s 13km long and indicated with a blue rhomb.

Another recommended walk is the walk of the “Chêne au Gibet” (the oak with the gibbet). This one can be started from the Ferme de la Bourgade. It’s indicated with a red rhomb and 16km long.