

Wallonia: Belgium's French-Speaking South

By Jerry Soverinsky

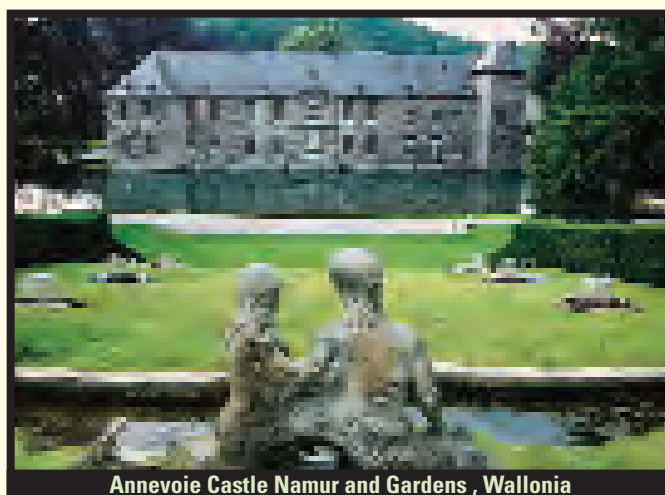
Most Americans visiting Belgium focus on Brussels and the Dutch-speaking area to its north, Flanders. The country's southern French-speaking region, Wallonia, has remained a far less popular travel destination than the area that includes Antwerp, Bruges, and Ghent. But it is certainly no less appealing, as my recent visit confirmed. Combining many of the attributes of Europe's most popular destinations, French-speaking Wallonia merits serious consideration for an extended, dedicated stay. For no matter your interests—culture, recreation, history, leisure, or even education—Wallonia harmoniously incorporates all into a diverse and easily accessible region filled with bustling cities and sleepy small towns, all nestled into a countryside dotted with castles and gardens.

Where in the World

Wallonia's superlatives begin with its most striking features: Standing in sharp contrast to the flat, non-descript Flanders region, Wallonia is literally bursting with vibrant, eye-pleasing natural beauty. With a seemingly endless expanse of rolling hills, bubbling streams, gushing waterfalls, and forested woodlands, it is indeed worthy of Ernest Hemingway's declaration that it is "something out of a Grimm's fairytale."

Culture

Those in search of cultural diversity will be well-rewarded with a stay in Mons. It was here (actually, it was in Cuesmes, 3 miles away) where Vincent Van Gogh lived in in 1879, gaining inspiration from the people and scenery, subjects of some of his earliest drawings. Today, Mons is filled with historical and architectural treasures: its central square, one of Europe's finest, seamlessly integrates a range of architectural influences from the 15th through 20th centuries; its 17th century Belfry, a Unesco world heritage site, rings traditional melodies four times each hour while providing Mons with its iconic skyline; the Francois Duesberg Museum, housed in a former bank, showcases rare clocks, gilded bronzes, and bindings, one of the world's most unique collections; and the 15th century Sainte-Waudru Collegiate Church, filled with the works of Belgian architect-sculptor Jacques Du Broeucq, houses one of Europe's finest collections of religious goldsmith, with pieces dating from the 8th century.



Annevoie Castle Namur and Gardens , Wallonia

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All are integrated into a small-town feel, with bountiful cafés, shops, hotels, parks, and gardens providing the perfect infrastructure and backdrop from which to base an extended weekend of exploration.

www.paysdemon.be

Castles and Gardens

No visit to Belgium would be complete without its castles. One particularly impressive example is the Castle of Modave, situated an hour's drive southeast of Brussels in Modave.

Perched majestically on a rocky plateau 200 hundred feet above the Hoyoux River Valley and offering stunning views of a nearby 1,100 acre nature reserve, this 13th century complex is a brilliantly maintained French-style castle. Self-guided audio tours accompany visitors as they discover the history and architecture of this Wallonian treasure. Open April 1-November 15, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Closed Mondays. Visit www.modave-castle.be

Garden lovers will be well-served with a visit to Wallonia. Roughly 60 miles east of Mons, the Gardens of Annevoie are a treasure trove of meticulously landscaped greenery. This 18th century masterpiece of landscape architecture harmoniously incorporates elements of French, Italian, and English gardens, all gracefully coexisting among dozens of waterfalls, basins, ponds, and trees. Open daily, April through October, 9:30 am-5:30 pm (extended summer hours).

About \$10 per person. www.jardins.dannevoie.be

History

Any visit to Wallonia should include a stop at the **Ardennes American Cemetery and Memorial**, the final resting place and memorial to 5,328 military dead and another 462 missing soldiers whose remains were never recovered or identified. A massive stone memorial, bearing an American eagle on its façade, memorializes the dead, the majority of whom died in World War II during the 1944 Battle of the Bulge. There's an onsite chapel and large marble murals that depict military battles and activities, and a knowledgeable staff is on-hand to answer questions

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The art-and-culture aspect could perk your clients’ interest in several or many of Germany’s 33 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Included on the list are cathedrals (Cologne, Aachen, Speyer, Trier and Hildesheim, for instance), as well as beautifully preserved old-town quarters (as in Regensburg, Bamberg, Goslar, Quedlinburg, Lübeck and Stralsund-Wismar), plus scenic river valleys (the Middle Rhine and, in Dresden’s vicinity, Elbe meadows and vineyards) as well as Martin Luther memorials (in Wittenberg and Eisleben).

Visitors have plenty of chances to admire important works of art exhibited in Germany’s museums and galleries. Four such showings, for your clients’ picking and choosing: 70 Lucas Cranach masterpieces, **Frankfurt’s Städel Museum** (Nov. 23-Feb. 17); same riverfront museum for Albrecht Dürer engravings, woodcuts and etchings (Sept. 27-Jan 6); Paula Modersohn-Becker centennial retrospective, **Kunsthalle Bremen** (Oct. 13-Feb. 24); expressionist paintings by Max Beckmann, **Pinakothek der Moderne** in Munich (Sept. 15-Jan. 6).

Shifting our report to next year’s theme brings Würzburg to mind, because of the prince-bishop’s lavishly **Baroque Residenz Palace**. Dresden’s **Residenzschloss** amounts to a double attraction: the restored Renaissance edifice and its amazing Green Vault, displaying goldsmiths’ and silversmiths’ treasures. Worth visiting, too: Stuttgart’s mid-city palace gardens, nearby **Ludwigsburg Palace**, Hannover’s **Royal Gardens of Herrenhausen**, the flowery Dessau-Wörlitz garden kingdom in ex-GDR Saxony-Anhalt, Essen’s **Stadtgarten** (complete with symphony hall and opera house) and tropical blossoms covering Mainau, at Bodensee (Lake Constance) island on Germany’s southwestern rim.

Size-wise, Munich’s Englischer Garten (surrounding a zesty Bavarian beer garden) just about matches Manhattan’s Central Park. So are west-side Berlin’s Charlottenburg palace and Potsdam’s Sansouci palace and park, 18th-century home and playground of Prussian royalty’s Frederick the Great.

For more information, contact the **German National Tourist Office** (GNTO), **800-631-1171** (New York City) or **310-545-1350** (Los Angeles).

A website designed exclusively for the travel trade—www.germany-extranet.com—gives agents access to brochures and sales aids, listings of specialized tour operators, itineraries, marketing themes, updated schedules of trade events and a database of downloadable photos.

For consolidator airfares and tour packages to Germany, see pages L10-11 of the Listings Section.

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and escort relatives to graves and memorials. The cemetery is in Neupre, 12 miles southwest of Liege; about an hour’s drive southeast of Brussels. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. www.abmc.gov/cemeteries/cemeteries/ar.php

Well-deserving of its three-star Michelin Green Guide rating, the **Caves of Han**, 75 miles south-east of Brussels, are massive networks of interconnected caves whose nearly 10 miles of carved-out limestone “rooms” and “galleries” housed mankind dating from the Neolithic period. Massive stalagmites and stalactites (some reaching over 15 feet) populate the caves, accessible via tram and boat. Guided tours (the only way to access the caves) cover nearly two miles (by foot) and climb 400 steps. Hours vary by season; admission is about \$14.50. Visit www.grotte-de-han.be

Spa and Relaxation

Looking for rest and relaxation? Wallonia practically invented the word, with the town of Spa providing—what else—therapeutic spa treatments.

Since the 14th century, Spa’s nearby hot springs have attracted travelers in search of the water’s purported curative properties. Today, its Thermes de Spa offers therapeutic treatments in a contemporary, full-service facility. Admission to the baths costs about \$25; hydro- and physiotherapy treatments are priced a la carte. Open daily, 10am-9pm (Friday until 10 p.m., Sunday until 8 p.m.). Visit www.thermesdespa.com

Continuing Education

For those in need of acquiring foreign language expertise, CERAN Lingua International, just 5 miles from Spa, offers intensive language instruction in a resort-like atmosphere. The 24/7 CERAN immersion approach, where students study, eat, and socialize with their instructors in their chosen foreign language, has earned it a reputation as one of Europe’s best. In fact, it’s the same school where the Belgian Princess Mathilde went to learn Flemish after she married Prince Philippe in 1999. The school provides French, Dutch, German, and Japanese instruction. One-week classes begin at \$3,175, which includes instruction, room, and board. Visit www.cerean.com

Getting Around

Like much of Europe, Wallonia’s major sites can be covered easily by either train or car. Even at its most distant points, you’re never more than a 100-mile drive—most of which can be covered by both fast-paced highways or more leisurely country roads—from your destination. For information on **Wallonia**, visit www.opt.be or contact the **Belgian Tourist Office** at 212-758-8130; www.visitbelgium.com

For consolidator airfares and tour packages to Belgium, see pages L7 of the Listings Section.