

WALLONIA BY BIKE



Legendary rides in French-speaking Belgium

From lush forests and glistening lakes
to stunning architectural landmarks,
Wallonia is a touring treat



01.
Lush forests in Wallonia
© Coralie Cardon

Home to the most diverse and interesting cycle paths and routes in Europe...

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Belgium and cycling go together like hops and beer, cocoa and milk, spokes and rims. A huge proportion of the country's near 11.5m population commute or a long Sunday morning ride with clubmates. Cycling's ever-popular at the professional level, too, with Deceuninck-Quick-Step and Lotto-Soudal dominating the men's WorldTour, and Lotto-Soudal Ladies racing a high level on the women's circuit. Then there's current Belgian stars like Philippe Gilbert, Thomas de Gendt and

rising star Remco Evenpoel. And in the past, you have the likes of Tom Boonen, Johan Museeuw and, of course, five-time Tour de France winner and the world's greatest-ever cyclist Eddy Merckx.

Cycling is popular in all three regions of Belgium: the Brussels-Capital region, Flanders and Wallonia or the Walloon region. But it's Wallonia, the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium, that's filled with arguably the greatest variety and most wonderful cycling the country has to offer. This diversity stems from overturning a misperception,

namely that Belgian cycling is all about pancake-flat riding. Of course, there are routes and rides where the gradient barely tips over 0.5%, which is perfect for sightseeing and a chilled-out day in the saddle. But Wallonia also provides hilly terrain for those of you looking to build stamina and test your mettle.

It's your call. But as you'll discover by reading this exclusive insight into the cycle routes of Wallonia, one of the most family-friendly and tourist options is the RAVeL network. This impressive 1,350km mixture of regenerated railway lines, and recovered and refined towpaths, is popular with all

levels of cyclist but especially families and casual cyclists due to its level topography and lack of motor vehicles.

So the RAVeL network is safe and will leave you feeling revitalised, as will riding around the Wallonia region. As soon as you get on your bike, you'll be immersed in the rich and diverse landscape, from meandering rivers that weave their way through the thousands of kilometres of untouched countryside to pretty villages and vibrant cities. It's all here in Wallonia and there's no better way to discover this beautiful, historic land than by bike.



THE BEST CYCLING ROUTES OF WALLONIA

Please reference the above map for cycling routes around Wallonia to suit all levels

- **Cycle at your leisure**
Leisurely, family-friendly routes
- **Fancy more of a challenge?**
Routes for the more daring
- **For the cycling enthusiast**
Race history, heritage, culture



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BREATHTAKING REGIONAL ROUTES WITH RAVEL

Walloon's RAVeL cycle network is a feat of engineering, linking the most beautiful areas of the region via some truly breathtaking routes. Here's what to look forward to...

Leisurely, family-friendly routes with Freewheel Holidays

01. Stop for a leisurely lunch during the second half of the W1 RAVeL route
© Yuki Ghost

02. The Hospital Notre-Dame à la Rose located in Lessines, birthplace of artist René Magritte © Coralie Cardon



The RAVeL cycling network is the perfect way to discover Wallonia in all its magnificence. Stretching more than 1,350km and featuring 45 different routes, the network utilises disused railway track, byways and canal towpaths that meander through unspoilt villages, historic towns, flowing rivers and even world-renowned cities such as Liège. A simple system of route numbers (W1, W2, W3 etc) and clear signposts make each section easy to navigate. And some routes are linked by intersections known locally as 'Points-noeuds' – so if the whole route is a bit challenging for you, it's easy to put together your own itinerary. Here are four of the RAVeL regional itineraries to give you a taste of what's on offer. They're all family-friendly, fun and unforgettable.

"THE RAVEL CYCLE NETWORK STRETCHES 1,350KM AND FEATURES 45 ROUTES..."

W1: DENDRE AND HAUTS-PAYS GRAMMONT TO LES HONNELLES 72KM

This eclectic route passes the small town of Lessines, the birthplace of the famous surrealist artist René Magritte. It's also worth stopping by the remarkable Hospital Notre-Dame à la Rose, one of the oldest in Europe, which is now a museum. Within, you'll witness the evolution of medicine, surgery and pharmacy from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Your bike will also take you to Beloeil, home to the magnificent Chateau de Beloeil, the moat-protected monument to 14th-century architecture. It's remained the residence of the Prince de Ligne, one of the oldest noble families in all of Belgium, and features some of Europe's finest furniture and art collections. Once the interior's inspired, you can then head outdoors and enjoy the beautiful Baroque gardens, first designed all the way back in 1664.

The second half of the W1 RAVeL route focuses on nature as ponds born from the area's mining past have been revived by fauna and flowers. That coal heritage also brought to life its dinosaur past with 29 complete iguanodons discovered in 1878.

The family-friendly route concludes in the Roisin area that'll delight wine enthusiasts as this is vineyard country. Although Belgium's fermented a reputation for producing world-class beers, it's not solely about the grain. Wallonia's enjoying a growing reputation for its wine thanks to its similar growing conditions to neighbouring Champagne. Enjoy the ride and then taste the delights of this pleasant land.



W3: THE CARNIVAL ROUTE TUBIZE TO CHIMAY 111KM

During the Industrial Revolution, Wallonia was second only to the United Kingdom in industrialisation, profiting from its extensive deposits of coal and iron. Tubize was pivotal to this economic evolution, becoming a hotbed for locomotive engineering.

This manufacturing backdrop soon dissolves as you head south along the Charleroi-Brussels canal, taking in rural landscape and the town of Binche, whose colourful past reaches back to the Middle Ages, the city being officially founded by Yolande of Gelders, widow of Duke Baldwin III from Hainaut. Their son, Baldwin IV, fortified the city, which served as a frontline fortress against France. Binche prospered under Spanish rule but suffered for centuries because of repeated military conflicts between France and Spain. It's now a happy, colourful place with a cheeky edge, its annual carnival welcoming street performers, dancers and musicians, all clad in costumes and wax masks, a must-see if you visit around Easter time.

The woodland excursion ends in Thuin, located in the Belgian province of Hainaut, where you can admire the unique and awe-inspiring hanging gardens. Situated on the southern slope of the Biesmelle Valley, the suspended gardens not only serve an aesthetic role, but in years gone by further fortified the medieval city. This memorable area also features its own vineyard, decorated with stunning artwork.

Your journey proceeds to Beaumont and its 11th-century Salamander Tower, whose decorated history includes a ravaging plague and damaging fire, before reaching its mouth-watering finish line in Chimay where beer and cheese lovingly prepared by the local monks awaits.

03. The Chateau de Beloeil
© Coralie Cardon

04. Chimay Trappist Beer
© Espace Chimay

01.
The Molignée Rail
Bikes and RAveL
© FTPN

02.
Restaurant
© FTLB - P. Willems

03.
Le Château des Thermes
in Chaudfontaine
© Eric Martin /
Figarophoto

04.
Thieu's Historic Canal
du Centre
© Bruno D'Alimonte

05.
Dinant - Meuse - Citadelle
- Notre Dame Collegiate
© Anibal Trejo

**W4:
CANALS, WATERWAYS AND RIVERS
LEERS-NORD TO ANHEE
188KM**

This memorable section of the RAveL network starts in Leers-Nord, which borders the French city of Leers. It's also very near Roubaix, known to cycling fans throughout the worldwide for arguably the toughest one-day race in cycling: Paris-Roubaix. Thankfully, route W4 couldn't be more at contrast with the race known as Hell of the North, the nerve-jangling cobbles replaced by nerve-stimulating canals and countryside.

In fact, tree-lined waterways and numerous bell towers provide a warm Wallonia welcome as you cross the point where two mighty rivers meet, Sambre and Meuse. Along the way you'll experience one of man's greatest aquatic inventions - the boat lifts at the Canal du Centre. Here, four hydraulic lifts overcome a 66m difference where the river basins of the Meuse and Scheldt meet. So revolutionary were the 19th-century feats of engineering that they've been classified a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Route W4 reaches a charming end in the Molignée Valley that flows into Anhee. The Molignée Valley is lit up by the Montaigle Castle that casts protective eyes over the Molignée and Flavion rivers. Originally occupied by a Roman garrison at the end of the fifth century, it expanded over time although much of it suffered at the hands of Henri II in 1554 when fire burnt many parts to the ground. It's now in safe hands, run by The Friends of Montaigle.

**W6:
OVER THE WATER
CHAUDFONTAINE TO ERQUELINNES
164KM**

There'll be a bubbling atmosphere as you leave Chaudfontaine - it's renowned for its hot baths and springs, the water reaching the surface at a balmy 32°C. The warmth will ease cycling limbs, your regeneration taken to the next gear by a balance of calcium, magnesium and fluorine after its 60-year limestone-soaking journey.

That relaxing aquatic theme will dominate your day as you ride alongside the three major rivers of Wallonia - the Vesdre, Meuse and Sambre. Standout towns and cities on the W6 route include Huy, Thuin and Namur, the latter being of special significance as it is the capital city of the Wallonia region. The medieval city is also known as the Gateway to the Ardennes and was crowned by a vast citadel that was once one of Europe's mightiest fortresses.

Namur features in Lonely Planet where the author opines, "Namur's gently picturesque old-town core has much to discover, including architectural treasures from centuries past and small but charming museums, covering everything from the medieval crafts of the Meuse Valley to 19th-century erotic paintings." Its cobblestone lanes are also dotted with cafes, book stores and vintage shops. There's an 18th-century cathedral as well as a historic belfry that's judged by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

"ITS COBBLESTONE LANES ARE ALSO DOTTED WITH CAFES, BOOK STORES AND VINTAGE SHOPS. THERE'S AN 18TH-CENTURY CATHEDRAL, TOO"



BELGIAN BREW WITH INTERNATIONAL FLAVOUR

Two cosmopolitan itineraries with hearts in the Walloon region that also reach out to other countries...

EUROVELO 3: THE PILGRIMS' ROUTE

EuroVelo 3 is otherwise known as The Pilgrims' Route that remarkably weaves its way from Trondheim in Norway to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. That's a stamina-sapping 5,122km. Unless you're round-the-world record-holder Mark Beaumont, however, enjoy the mainly Belgian section that starts in Aachen, Germany, and finishes in Maubeuge, France, taking in Herve Liège, Huy, Namur, Charleroi and lastly Thuin along the way...

01.

Aachen to Herve

Distance: 30km

Climb: 60m

Descend: 85m

Intermediate

Bucolic beauty in the form of seemingly endless meadows and orchards. Enjoy local produce including Herve cheese, Liège syrup and meatballs, ciders and beers brewed in abbeys and served up at old farmhouses and gourmet restaurants.

02.

Herve to Liège

Distance: 23km

Climb: 252m

Descend: 13m

Intermediate

This is a diverse section that guides you from the 'green lung' to the Cité Ardente (Liège) via the unique backdrop of myriad converted railway stations transformed into delectable restaurants and tempting tea rooms.

03.

Liège to Huy

Distance: 36km

Climb: 29m

Descend: 22m

Expert

History and sport unite as you pass Standard de Liège's football stadium en route to the beautiful old town of Huy, synonymous with cyclists for the debilitating Mur de Huy that annually taxes the world's best at Flèche Wallonne.

04.

Huy to Namur,

Distance: 35.6km

Climb: 10m

Descend: 141m

Family

Namur is also known as the Gateway to the Ardennes – it could be seen as a gateway to another world, as a medieval fortress lies beneath 7km of underground passages. The 80 hectares of green spaces are otherworldly, too, stimulating your synapses and clearing the mind.

05.

Namur to Charleroi

Distance: 47.5km

Climb: 24m

Descend: 5m

Family

Old meets new as you pass one of Wallonia's Special Heritage Sites at Floreffe Abbey and soon see the landscape unfold into urban Charleroi. The city straddles both banks of the River Sambre, which gave rise to the area's coal-mining and steel-making industries.

06.

Charleroi to Thuin,

Distance: 21km

Climb: 58m

Descend: 42m

Family

As the Sambre widens, the wildness of manmade industry soon gives way to the beauty of nature's wilderness. These lush, fertile landscapes offer an exceptional variety of flora and fauna, providing a relaxing, scenic background to this section of EuroVelo.

07.

Thuin to Maubeuge,

Distance: 19.5km

Climb: 6m

Descend: 1m

Family

The famous Hanging Gardens of Thuin offer greater climbing and descending metres than the very flat final section, making this perfect for families of all ages. A green and peaceful setting sees you cross the French border to the route's finish line at Maubeuge.



EUROVELO 5: THE VIA ROMEA FRANCIGENA

While the pros do battle with the fearsome cobbles of Roubaix in murky April, you'll enjoy a much more leisurely ride all year round along the Roubaix canal before entering Belgium. Water plays a pivotal role in the 314km-long route as you're directed through Wallonia and Flanders by the accompanying Espierre canal and then the Escaut River.

If the sights and sound of running water gives you a thirst, quench those yearnings in Namur, that is renowned for its tasty white beers and subtly picturesque old-town core.

Leaving the city, you'll continue past the unforgettable gardens of the Freyr Castle and the Citadelle of Dinant and onto the glorious, quiet country roads of Condroz. There you'll suck in the fresh air to power you onto La-Roche-en-Ardenne where you'll discover a rich mix of arable land and dense forests, comprising a near-equal split of deciduous and coniferous forests.

“IF THE SIGHTS AND SOUND OF RUNNING WATER GIVES YOU A THIRST...”

The near-traffic-free remainder navigates its way through idyllic villages of the Ardennes, offering panoramic views that'll live long in the memory. Your mood will be stirred further by the slight rise to Bastogne, the city renowned for a group of GIs resisting the German offensive in the winter of 1944. You'll likely conclude your journey in a contemplative state as you journey through picture-postcard villages before finishing in Martelange, Luxembourg.



TRAVEL IN LUXURY WITH FREEWHEEL

The Transardennaise route links La Roche-en-Ardenne to Bouillon and plunges you into the Belgian Ardennes. It's a magnificent 164km route that you can cover in up to five days without the hassle of carrying your gear thanks to Freewheel Holidays. The trip includes half-board accommodation, road-book, your luggage transported from one hotel to the next and the transfer between La Roche and Paliseul. It's the perfect stress-free cycling holiday for families and friends.

01.
La Roche-en-Ardenne
WW2 Museum
© Olivier Legardien

02.
Sherman Tank at La
Roche en Ardenne
© Olivier Legardien

03.
Beer on the Grand-Place
in Tournai
© Denis Erroyaux

04.
A panoramic view of
Le Tombeau Du Géant
© David Samyn

VARIETY OF THE VENNBAHN

Routes for cyclists more daring with Freewheel Holidays

The Vennbahn self-guided cycling holiday showcases the best the Walloon region has to offer...



02. The Vennbahn trail's suitable for all abilities
© Dominik Ketz

03. Way to Vennbahn
© Dominik Ketz



04. Castle of Reinhardstein is a Vennbahn highlight
© S. Wittenbol

FANCY MORE OF A CHALLENGE?

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The Vennbahn rail trail is a 125km cycle path that forms the heart of a memorable eight-day adventure, which will transport you to beautiful stretches of countryside, historic buildings and unforgettable eateries over eight memorable days. The adventure sees you stop in seven different-but-fantastic hotels with our helpful team taking your luggage from A to B, while you ride, relax and rejuvenate. Here's what lies ahead...



01. Bike hire is available
© Dominik Ketz

DAY 01. Arrive in Maastricht / Gravenvoeren

The first day of your journey starts in this lively and energetic city steeped in history. Enjoy a good night's sleep in one of the three- and four-star hotels you'll be staying in during your trip, before waking up and continuing this extraordinary ride.

DAY 02. Maastricht / Gravenvoeren to Eupen

Distance: 59 or 45km

Your first port of call is the delightful municipality of Raeren where fans of porcelain, china and ceramics can wander around the pottery museum, located in the 14th-century Raeren Castle. Once you've enjoyed your sneak peek into life in Renaissance Raeren, it's time to remount and head to Eupen, a small, predominantly German-speaking region in eastern Belgium. Just ensure your brakes are in good working order as the final 7km into Eupen is all downhill before flattening out at Lake Eupen.

DAY 03. Eupen to Saint Vith

Distance: 59km

This will be one of your most memorable days in the saddle as nearly the entire route is closed to motor vehicles. That means less pollution, more space and a safer ride.

A gradual climb to around 660m above sea level will be rewarded with vast panoramic views of the High Fens. Highlights include the wild daffodil-filled valleys of the Olef, Perlenbach and Fuhrtsbach rivers.

After passing Kalterherberg, renowned for the two-towered church of Saint Lambertus, you'll roll onto the Vennbahn cycle path. From here, it's a gentle ride to Waimes, home to the magnificent castle of Reinhardstein. By now, you'll be feeling hungry - which will reach epic levels soon after as you pass the Montenaer artisanal ham smokehouse. The minimum six months ageing time guarantees some of the finest gammons and sausages in all of Europe. Satiated or not, it's then into the day's hotel stop at Saint Vith.

DAY 04. Saint Vith to Clervaux

Distance: 32 or 50km

No cyclist's trip to Saint Vith is complete without a visit to the Skihutte-Biermuseum. If you're planning an early start, make sure you visit the night before you depart. Inside is an Aladdin's Cave of Craft Ale with the best locally brewed beer, as well as the finest beers from around the world. You can also eat at the museum.

On leaving Saint Vith, you stay on the Vennbahn cycle path with the day's destination of Luxembourg ahead of you. There's still plenty to see in Belgium before then; the Castle of Burg-Reuland, the largest in the Ardennes, is an undoubted highlight. Its lush green setting, provides a serene backdrop for a stroll around this renovated ninth-century fortress.

Shortly after, you cross the border into Luxembourg and reach Troisvierges. At this point, you can choose to catch a relaxing train to Clervaux or head there via an exhilarating section featuring several stiff climbs and breath-taking descents.

DAY 05. Clervaux to Butgenbach

Distance: 65km

You head off from the landmark known as 'tri-point', which is the geographical point at which the borders of three countries meet - Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. (To impress your mates, China has the most tri-points with 16!) The nearby village of Ouren might have a small population - just 129 inhabitants - but it possesses a big wartime past, including the time rioters barricaded themselves in the now ruined Ouren Castle during the Peasants' War.

Leaving Ouren, the route flows into some of the most glorious environs of your entire trip, especially the Our Valley, an unspoiled river valley deep in the south of East Belgium. The valley's characterised by huge swathes of woodland, working farms and charming villages. Continue northwards past Schönberg and ascend to a height of 500m. No sooner will you have recovered your breath than you'll be breathless again thanks to the wonderful views across the valley. It's then onwards to your pitstop for the night: Butgenbach.

DAY 06. Butgenbach to Monschau

Distance: 38km

Six days in, it's time to take it really easy, but that doesn't mean there aren't memorable landmarks as you ride toward Monschau in Germany. Firstly, you'll cross the dam at the scenic Robertville Reservoir before stopping for bite to eat and drink at the lively town of Robertville. Le Petit Mon Rigi is currently ranked number one in Robertville on TripAdvisor. The route then U-turns back to the High Fens and to Kalterherberg.

DAY 07. Monschau to Maastricht / Gravenvoeren

Distance: 60 or 75km bike and 35km train

Time to leave the centre of Monschau and return to the Vennbahn rail trail. After a long descent you'll reach the town of Aachen, once the centre of Charlemagne's empire. From Aachen, it's only a few kilometres to the border with the Netherlands and the Dutch town of Kerkrade, where you board a train to Maastricht. For more information visit freewheelholidays.co.uk/wallonia.

MEANDER ON THE MEUSE

Routes for the more daring with Freewheel Holidays

The renowned International Eurovelo 19 should be on your cycling bucketlist, whatever your experience or ability...



DAY 01.

Arrive in Maastricht

Your cycling holiday begins in earnest in Maastricht. To welcome you, you can refresh with a complimentary coffee or tea and a hearty slice of Limburg pie. The fruit filling and deliciously crusty pastry encasing will tantalise your tastebuds, but marginal-gain cyclists can revel in the fact that the fruit gives you an antioxidant boost while the sugar base will fuel the next week's riding! Bonus note for drivers: you can park your car free of charge at the Novotel.

DAY 02.

Maastricht to Liège

Distance: 36km

The first leg of your cycling holiday sees you leave Maastricht and head to the city of Liège. Along the way you'll follow the River Jeker until reaching the picturesque village of Kanne. Soon after you can enjoy the Lanaye locks in all their historic splendour. This iconic site welcomes 11 million tonnes of cargo each year – and all via a feat of incredible engineering as the locks rise and fall 14m, the most of any lock in Belgium.

DAY 03.

Liège to Namur

Distance: 74km

The second day of riding will see you crank things up with double the distance to conquer. That, of course, means twice the opportunity to savour the very best Belgium has to offer, starting with a warm-up on the section known as the John Cockerill railway.

Cokerill was a Lancashire-born Belgian entrepreneur, who in the 19th century founded an ironworks and mechanical engineering company. The blast furnaces of Seraing may now be long abandoned, but the headquarters remain a constant and awe-inspiring reminder of the making of modern day Liège.

Your return to the saddle will then see you cruise along the quiet back roads past the charming Walloon villages that are just within earshot of the river toward the municipality of Huy. Here, we'd recommend a hearty lunchtime stop to refuel at The Grand Place.

It's then onwards to Namur where you'll find all the industry is soon replaced by magnificent countryside and the beauty of the River Meuse.

DAY 04.

Namur to Dinant/Anhée

Distance: 30km

The RAVeL takes you into Dinant, from the Celtic 'Divo-Nanto', meaning 'Divine Valley'. (The Celts weren't wrong, as limestone cliffs covered by deep green forests that run down to the River Meuse is a sight to behold.) Another highlight is the Collegiate Church of Notre Dame de Dinant that hails from 1227, though its original Romanesque form's since been rebuilt in Gothic style. En route, you'll pass Wépion, whose west-sloping hills and micro-climate means strawberries have been cultivated here for over 150 years. Craft-ale fans can also enjoy their strawberry beer! The water gardens of Annevoie are also worth a visit.

"YOU CAN ENJOY THE LANAYE LOCKS IN ALL THEIR HISTORIC SPLENDOUR"

01.

Cyclists on Wallonia's roads
© Erik Isakson

02.

Refresh with a coffee or tea and a hearty slice of Limburg pie
© Daniel Ingold

03.

Swimming white and grey geese in Meuse river, Namur
© Vadim Nefedov

04.

The Chateau Freyr, dating all the way back to the Middle Ages
© S. Wittenbol

DAY 05.

Dinant/Anhée to Haybes

Distance: 51km

Any haze that descends from enjoying the riverside cafes of Dinant the previous evening will soon lift on arrival at the Chateau Freyr, dating all the way back to the Middle Ages. This Wallonia major heritage site has been destroyed, rebuilt and refined over the years and now features a ceiling covered by Louis XV frescos and a chapel containing a Baroque altar. It's a simply stunning sight. Returning to two wheels, you'll soon cross the border to France and the town of Givet. Then you'll eventually join the Voie Verte Trans-Ardenne – aka Trans-Ardenne bike path – that'll deliver you safely to Haybes (F).

DAY 06.

Transfer to Maastricht

Distance: 150km

Though your time on two wheels has come to an end, there's still time to enjoy breakfast and the sights and sounds of Sedan before, if booked beforehand, you'll return by touring car to Maastricht. To find out more, visit freewheelholidays.co.uk/wallonia.

FOR THE ENTHUSIAST

IF YOU'RE AN ENERGETIC THRILL SEEKER, ONE OF THESE CHALLENGING ROUTES WILL BE RIGHT UP YOUR STREET.



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THE OLD LADY

Race history, heritage, culture with Sports Tours International

Arguably, Liège-Bastogne-Liège made professional cycling what it is today. A race that always promises a war of attrition, here's what's so captivating about the Walloon Monument...

TRY OUT RIDING THIS MONUMENT YOURSELF?

Download the GPX file here: tinyurl.com/lblrout

LIÈGE-BASTOGNE-LIÈGE

Most victories

5. Eddy Merckx (BEL)
1969, 1971-1973, 1975

Most victories by nation

59 Belgium

First winner

Léon Hou, Belgium, 1892

Victories by GB & Ireland riders

Sean Kelly (IRE), 84 and 89;
Dan Martin (IRE), 2013

Liège is a major Walloon city that nestles in the valley of the Meuse, proudly standing astride the Meuse River. Historians are captivated by its diverse heritage – it used to be part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Industrialists look to its steel-making and coal-mining past. Cyclists? It can only be Liège-Bastogne-Liège, also known as La Doyenne or The Old Lady due to it being the oldest of the five Monuments. For those new to cycling, the Monuments are the five classics that are considered the toughest and most prestigious one-day events on the WorldTour, the other four being Milan-San Remo, Paris-Roubaix, Tour of Flanders and Il Lombardia.

Only three riders have won all five Monuments and they're all Belgian: Rik van Looy, Roger de Vlaeminck and, of course, undoubtedly the greatest rider in history, Eddy Merckx. Merckx won a staggering 525 times over an 18-year career but regarded winning Liège as a badge of honour, telling writer Andy McGrath. "At the Tour of Flanders, you have the bergs, the pavé, the wind, but there are more hills in Liège. They are longer and the race is a bit irregular. Luck is less important in Liège-Bastogne-Liège than Paris-Roubaix or the Tour of Flanders."

"KNOWN AS LA DOYENNE OR THE OLD LADY DUE TO IT BEING THE OLDEST OF THE FIVE MONUMENTS"

There was certainly nothing lucky about Jakob Fuglsang's 2019 victory. The Astana rider took the biggest one-day victory of his career, dropping his rivals with 13km remaining and soloing into the record books, despite a wobble on a wet descent 5km before the finish line. "That slide was a scary moment," the 34-year-old said at the time. "But it gave me adrenaline for the final part. It's an amazing feeling to win."

Fuglsang wasn't the only winner as, since 2017, Liège has hosted a women's event, albeit half the distance and rolling out from Bastogne to Liège. The first two editions saw The Netherlands' Anna van der Breggen reign victorious with Britain's Lizzie Deignan second at the inaugural race. In 2019, however, fellow Dutch rider Annemiek van Vleuten grabbed the honours.

01.

A white-nuckle finish © Sports Tours International

02.

Liège is the oldest classic on the calendar © Sports Tours International



CASCADE OF CLIMBS

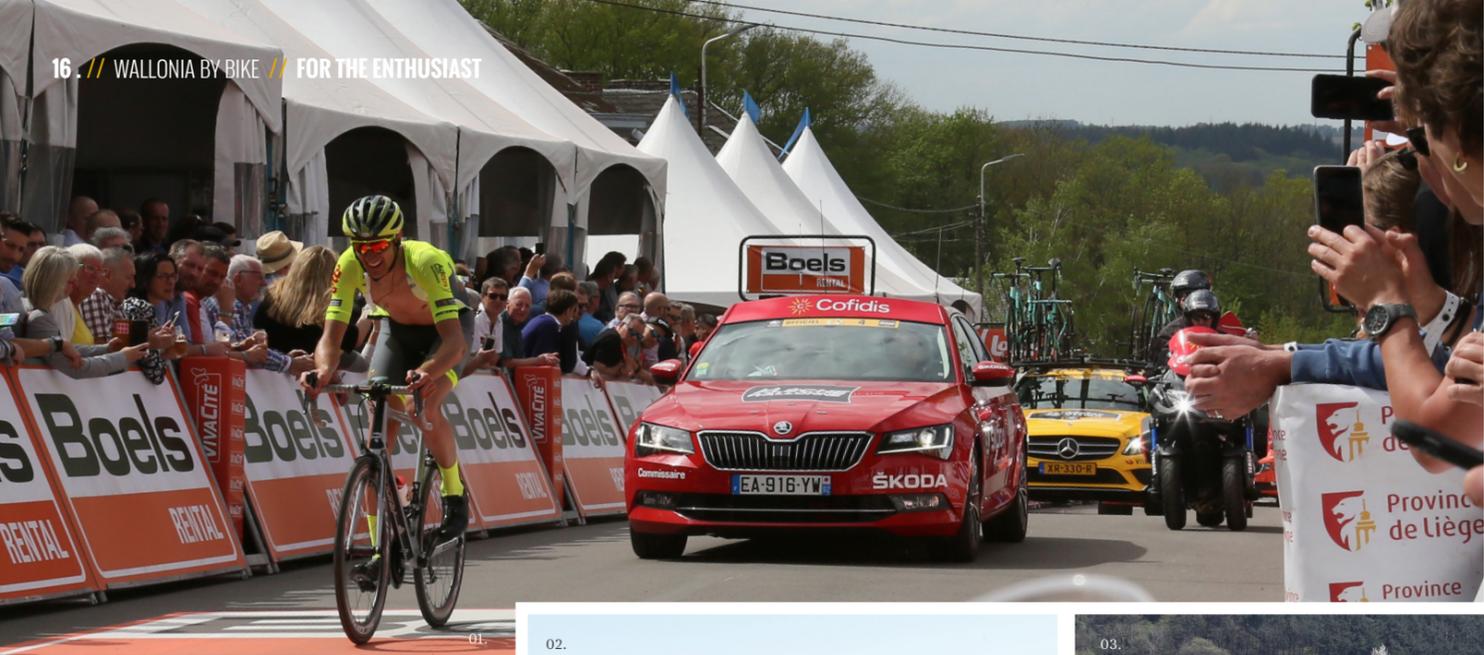
The exact 2020 route is yet to be announced but it'll broadly be identical to the 2019 version. Then, it measured 256km including a ceaseless onslaught of 11 sharp climbs with the most debilitating section unfolding with around 100km to go. Within 12km, the riders tackled Côte de Wanne (2.7km at 7.4%), Côte de Stockeu (1km at 12.5%) and Côte de Haute-Levee (3.1km at 7%) before continuing to the longest climb of the day, Col du Rosier (4.4km at 5.9%). But it's the Col de la Redoute that's steeped in Liège history and has destroyed many a contender's winning dreams. The 2km climb in the municipality of Aywaille averages 8.9% with its steepest ramps hitting 13%. For a long time in the 1980s and 1990s, Col de la Redoute proved the decisive point for breakaways. A more tactically astute peloton means this is less so nowadays but it still possesses the ability to drain and destroy.

Liège's brutality isn't all about distance and climbs – the unpredictable April weather plays a part, too. In 1919, 1957, 1980 and 2016 there was severe snowfall. In fact, when Bernard Hinault won that 1980 edition, he was one of just 21 riders out of over 170 starters to finish the race. His notorious stoicism came at a cost, mind you – he suffered frostbite in two of his fingers that troubles him to this day.

The snow-swept 1957 race also saw two riders declared the winner for the first and only time. Belgium's Germain Derycke was first over the finish line, but he'd crossed a closed level crossing. His lead over second-placed rider Frans Schoubben was around three minutes, but the judges felt Derycke hadn't gained a significant enough advantage to disqualify him so compromised with joint honours!

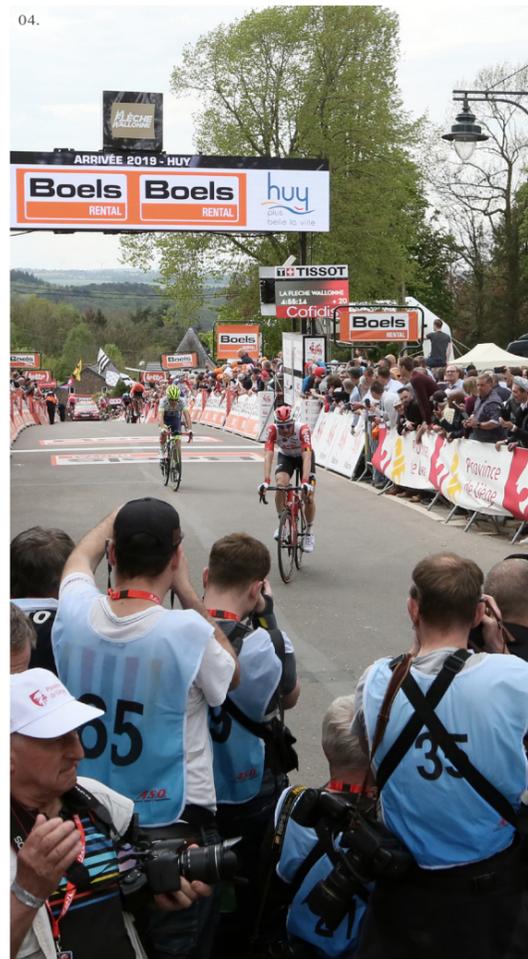
More recently, the main test of attrition's did not come from the weather, or bending the rules, but Alejandro Valverde. The Movistar rider's won here four times – 2006, 2008, 2015 and 2017 – and has two chances to match or better Merckx and co's five victories as the 39-year-old plans to retire in 2021.

If you want to watch, Liège-Bastogne-Liège 2020 takes place on Sunday 26th April – and you can even ride the route as part of the sportive on Saturday. For more info, visit sportstoursinternational.co.uk.



BATTLE OF THE HUY

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La Flèche Wallonne's one of the toughest one-dayers on the calendar – and it's heavily down to the 26% Mur de Huy...

FANCY RIDING THIS ICONIC ROUTE YOURSELF?

Download the GPX file here: tinyurl.com/Flèchewallonne

LA FLÈCHE WALLONNE'S Most victories

5, Alejandro Valverde (ESP), 2006, 2014-2017

Most victories by nation

38, Belgium

First winner

Philemon De Meersman, Belgium, 1936

La Flèche Wallonne is the second of three Ardennes Classics in April, sandwiched between Amstel Gold Race and Liège-Bastogne-Liège. In times gone by, Wallonne and Liège were held on successive days – understandably it was called 'Le Weekend Ardennais' – but organisers ASO (Amaury Sport Organisation, the team behind the Tour de France) suppressed the sadism slightly and gave riders a few extra days recovery.

That's not to say La Flèche Wallonne's a ride in the park. Take the 2019 parcours that the world's best faced beneath blue skies but battling a stiff wind. It reached out to 195.5km, featuring a series of punchy Ardennes climbs that are perfect for the strongest ascenders who also possess the absolute power for a sprint finish.

They also need endurance as, despite a couple of testing climbs early on in the form

of the Côte de Tancremont and Côte des Forges, the majority of ascents come in the final third of the race including the notorious Mur de Huy. In 2019, it featured three times as it kickstarted the 29km finishing circuit that the riders faced twice, including the finish atop the Mur de Huy. Why the Huy legend? Simply put, the 1.3km ascent averages over 9% and reaches a maximum of 26%.

Ireland's Dan Martin loves the Ardennes classics, his wiry frame and ability to fly up short, sharp hills ideally suited to the one-day classic. He won Liège in 2013 and has twice finished runner-up at Wallonne. He's well aware the impact Mur de Huy has on the event's outcome. "It's a climb for strong men," he says, "but it's one I almost look forward to. I even have a photo of me climbing it from back in 2008. Mind you, it looks a little stone age, what with the slightly baggy jersey and archaic bike."

"UNDERSTANDABLY IT WAS CALLED 'LE WEEKEND ARDENNAIS' - BUT ORGANISERS SUPPRESSED THE SADISM SLIGHTLY & GAVE RIDERS A FEW EXTRA DAYS RECOVERY."

IN THE NEWS

While technology's moved on, Wallonne remains as tough as it's ever been. Similar to many races, including the Tour de France, the race arose from a local media mogul looking to boost sales of their publication, in this case the Belgian newspaper Les Sports. This was during the 1930s with the first staging in 1936. Belgian Philemon De Meersman took that maiden victory; in fact, Belgium dominated proceedings until Italy's Fermo Camellini won in 1948.

After Belgium, Italy enjoys the most victories. This race enjoying a special place in the hearts of the tifosi after thousands of Italians emigrated to this area in the 1920s and 30s. They had extra reason to cheer in 1950 when Fausto Coppi, the five-time Giro d'Italia and two-time Tour de France winner, won here.

In recent times, Spain's Alejandro Valverde has dominated Wallonne, winning five times between 2006 and 2017. But the last two editions have welcomed the arrival of a new star with Quick-Step's Julian Alaphilippe racking up two victories, capitalising on his extraordinary ability to kick and kick again.

01. La Flèche is organised by the Tour de France team © Sports Tours International

02. La Flèche hosts both men's and women's races © Sports Tours International

03. The route passes local farmland © Sports Tours International

04. Julian Alaphilippe won the 2019 edition © Sports Tours International

05. Blue skies greet the peloton © Sports Tours International

La Flèche Wallonne also hosts a women's race; in fact, it's one of the most progressive one-day events on the calendar with the debut Féminine event taking place back in 1998, making it the third-oldest women's one-dayer after Trofeo Alfredo Binda in Italy and Emakumeen Euskal Bira in the Basque Country.

Italy's Fabiana Luperni won that first event but The Netherlands has made the race its own in recent times with Marianne Vos winning five times between 2007 and 2013, while Anna van der Breggen's matched her compatriot's quintet of titles, winning every year since 2015. Britain and Ireland enjoys a much more successful record in the women's event than the men's, which they've never won. Nicole Cooke won three times – 2003, 2005 and 2006 – while Emma Pooley tasted glory in 2010.

If you're looking to watch La Flèche Wallonne 2020, it takes place on Wednesday 22nd April. Sports Tours International has official VIP hospitality so you can watch in style. Visit sportstoursinternational.co.uk for more information.



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01.



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