WALKER’S GUIDE TO WALLONIA

THE BELGIAN ARDENNES

Great walks, amazing events and places to visit in southern Belgium

AMAZING PLACES

GREAT FOOD & CULTURE

WONDERFUL WALKING

20 PAGES OF GREAT WALKS & PLACES TO VISIT!
Welcome

If you were to draw a straight line on an atlas northward from the Massif Central in France to the North Pole, the only area of high ground the line crosses is the Ardennes, shared between Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany – but mainly belonging to Wallonia, the southern part of Belgium. Not quite a mountain range (the highest point is less than 700 metres above sea level) the Ardennes consists of wild high plains, spectacular rock formations, plunging valleys, dense forests and fast-flowing rivers and streams. These stunning landscapes, combined with history, culture and distinctive cuisine, make the Ardennes an ideal destination for walkers of every age and ability.

Further west, the landscapes of Wallonia are set in a relatively lightly populated region characterised by green, wide open spaces and undulating trails linking attractive, historic villages and towns. Some of the most interesting rambles are described in these pages, along with two long-distance paths designed for seasoned hikers that take several days to complete.

For these reasons – and many more – Wallonia is one of Western Europe’s undiscovered treasures. Dig out your walking boots and waterproofs – and come and discover it for yourself.

Bonne Marche!
“These stunning landscapes, combined with history, culture and distinctive cuisine, make the Ardennes an ideal destination for walkers of every age and ability.”

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EVER HEARD OF Wallonia? It’s okay, you’re forgiven if you haven’t. It’s the southern half of Belgium, and as far as walkers are concerned, the more exciting half. Expect grand castles, pretty rivers, idyllic towns and dense forests. Also awaiting are the famous Trappist beers, delicious potato tartiflette and lots of chips and mayonnaise – the Belgian fast food of choice.

Visit between June and September for the best of the weather. If you’re a risk-taker October is worth a gamble as the whole region transforms into a leafy golden spectacle, though there is a higher chance of rain. If you’re after a last-minute excursion, Brussels is only a short hop across the Channel with Eurostar or a cheap flight away. From the Belgian capital, you could be walking in wonderful Ardennes valleys or forests within hours.

Welcome to Wallonia

With varied landscapes, intriguing culture and a rich heritage Wallonia offers something for everyone.
1. **Parc naturel Hautes Fagnes-Eifel**

2. **Relax in the natural surroundings of Lompret and Blaimont Forest. p12**

3. **DINANT**

4. **FORESTS AND LAKES PAGE 12**

   **The Walk:** Starting from a splendid nature reserve by Lake Virelles, this is a relatively gentle family-friendly circuit.

   **What to see:** Passing through the aesthetic village of Lompret with its grey limestone buildings, this walk also warrants a visit to the nearby Chimay brewery to taste the famous Trappist beer of the region.

5. **THROUGH HILLS AND VALLEYS PAGE 14**

   **The Walk:** Setting out from the Cistercian Villers Abbey, this route can be completed in under three hours.

   **What to see:** Explore the ancient ruins of the 12th-century Villers abbey, which sit on large open grounds featuring a number of beautifully-kept gardens and discover its past grandeur.

6. **LA TRANSARDENNAISE PAGE 16**

   **The Walk:** This demanding yet stunning 155km long-distance walk can be split into seven manageable days.

   **What to see:** Diverse terrain of woodland, valleys and open country. Stop at the village of Redu for a meal, explore the Museum of Walloon Life in Saint-Hubert and see herds of Ardennes horses.

7. **ABBOT TO ABBEY, BREW TO BREW PAGE 18**

   **The Walk:** This trail measures 290km in length and links three abbeys famous for their Trappist ales. Split into two long sections.

   **What to see:** Being the first ‘themed’ long-distance path in Wallonia, this is one for beer lovers. Abbey breweries that make world class Trappist ales are the designated route pitstops.

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**The Walk:** An enjoyable four to five hour walk that takes in two historic castles of Wallonia.

**What to see:** The imposing Chateau de Walzin is unmissable in its rocky seat high above the Lesse river, while the striking Chateau de Veves, with its tall pointy turrets, looks as though it could have come straight out of Hogwarts or Disneyland.
**SHORTER WALK**

**The Highest Point in Belgium**

Around the Auberge ‘La Baraque Michel’ in the High Fens.

- **Liège Province:** 13km/4 hours
- **Start-Finish:** Parking for walkers at the traditional Auberge ‘Baraque Michel’.

**THIS ADVENTUOUS WALK** starts at the ‘Baraque Michel’ and offers a rewarding insight into the unique and varied countryside of the Hautes Fagnes (High Fens). Aside from the characteristic peat bogs, its mysterious oak forests and peaceful river valleys are just waiting to be explored. The trail leads from the Fischbach Chapel at the Croix des Fiancés, (Cross of Fiancés), across a newly-built gravel road through the heart of the Walloon Fagne. It was here, in 1871, that a young couple died in a blizzard having left for Xhoffraix to collect the necessary documents for their impending wedding. Along the River Polleur, bordered by birch and alder, the route leads the walker into some wild countryside. Once you get to ‘Six Hêtres’, a mysterious island of broad-leaved trees at the heart of a pine forest, the route crosses the Fagne of Setay to return to the Baraque Michel, where you can enjoy a tasty meal created using seasonal ingredients as well as home-baked breads and ice creams.

**ROUTE/POINTS OF INTEREST**

From the car park at the Baraque Michel (S) the route heads towards the Fischbach Chapel, originally built to orientate and shelter lost travellers. The route, marked by green rectangles, swings to the right on a gravel road into the Fagne. Shortly after the Croix des Fiancés (1) you arrive at a crossing point where you will turn left onto a lovely path which winds between some gorse bushes and spruce trees and leads to a small bridge spanning the Herbôfaye brook – note that in heavy rain walking here can be difficult without boots. The route continues straight ahead, turns right at a T-junction on an asphalt road, turns right again at a rest area before joining an isolated country road that leads to the Polleur valley. From here, the trail becomes increasingly adventurous, passing a small wooden bridge in a clearing on the right. There, the old fir forest is being enhanced by new peatlands created by re-humidification. Follow the wide country path to the right for about 300 metres, then fork again to the right along a small path. This can get very muddy in wet weather and so, in heavy rain take the main road instead. At a junction directly behind a small wooden bridge, the path forks to the left and soon reaches a point where two large forestry roads cross each other. The route through the forest continues straight ahead towards higher ground. At the third crossing, take the path to the right and go through a forest of fir. The trail crosses the forest path before gently rising to the left and reaching a crossing next to the ‘Six Hêtres’ (2) rest area. At the next crossing the route swings to the right.

“Mysterious oak forests and peaceful river valleys are just waiting to be explored.”

**LA BARAQUE MICHEL**

With seasonal cuisine and the relaxed character of an inn, this restaurant makes for an ideal start and finish location.

**AUTHOR’S TIPS**

After the walk you can eat or spend the night at the auberge – typical of the region in its style and cuisine. At the Botrange Nature Centre – set amid an amazing landscape of turf moors and heather you can relax on route with draught beer at the fireside. Trail maps are also available if needed.
left following a broad forest track, before turning right again as far as the edge of the Fagne de Setay. The path runs along the forest as far as a fenced-off peat bog. At that point it crosses a temporary wooden bridge before turning left again towards the edge of the forest, turning briefly right on an asphalt road before another left turn as far as the ‘Pont de Bèleu’ (3). Here, a pleasant alternative route heads right across La Fagne de Polleur, although this path is sometimes blocked, so it’s better to follow the green rectangles as far as the edge of the forest. At this point, a forestry road turns left, then immediately right, and offers some magnificent views over the peatbogs. Eventually it turns into a dirt road, which makes a left turn to bring you back to Baraque Michel Auberge.

**CHATEAU DE REINHARDSTEIN**

Dominating the Warche valley in the Hautes Fagnes is the fortified Reinhardstein castle, which is well worth a visit.

**VARIED LANDSCAPE**

Trails through the vast High Fens nature reserve feature an array of scenic habitats, including forest, river valleys and wetland bogs.

**PLAN YOUR TRIP**

**CHATEAU REINHARDSTEIN**

Known for: Being a fortified hilltop castle built in black-brown shale which overlooks the deep gorge of the Warche valley.

Info: www.reinhardstein.net

**BAUGNEZ 44 HISTORICAL CENTRE**

Known for: The Battle of the Bulge, this historical centre plunges you back into the winter of 1944 and this dramatic event that took place on December 17th that year near Malmedy.

Info: www.baugnez44.be
Fabulous views in the Ardennes

Escape to the ridges of Frahan.

- Luxembourg Province: 11km/4 hours
- Start-Finish: Parking at Corbion Town Hall (in front of ‘Le Relais’ pub/restaurant)

This highly varied walk takes you first to the Preacher’s Pulpit, a steep overhang above the Semois river and the ruins of Montragut Castle. The remains are sparse, but the views are impressive. The route takes in other great viewpoints before arriving at Frahan, lying at the extremity of a classic Semois meander. On the opposite bank you’ll discover the charming former tobacco-making village of Poupehan. Then you cross the Semois again to begin a final climb to Corbion, renowned for its culture as well as tobacco manufacturing.

ROUTE/POINTS OF INTEREST

From the car park (S) the walk runs first to the left, then right into Rue Paul Verlaine. It continues straight ahead to the Rue Croix de Poupehan, as far as a wooden cross and a rest area. Next it turns left (wooden panel ‘Chaire à Précher’) (1). Then a small path (No 1) goes down to the left between two boulders. Just after the boulders it turns sharply left and returns to the parallel main road, with corresponding signage. Descend on this broad forest track as far as the crossing with the N893. Cross the road and keep going as far as the junction. Turn left at the junction and follow the signs or the wood panel (Crêtes de Frahan). The forest road runs parallel to a stream. At the next turn, continue straight ahead. Upon reaching the next fork, keep going straight alongside the stream – don’t cross the bridge and ignore the wooden panel (Crêtes de Frahan) that indicates a right turn. The two roads lead to the same point, but the one running by the river is by far the prettier of the two. Follow it in the direction of the Semois as far as a small path (white and red GR signage) which climbs to the right. The path bypasses the mountain to rejoin the main road. At a crossing between two massive rocks, the path climbs steeply again (look out for sign No 1). After about 10 minutes you arrive at the highest point, Montragut Castle (2). The path continues to the crest (3) crossing rocks and woods. Just before Frahan, it drops in a series of loops as far as the village. Keep left, pass the church and turn right onto the main road where you will descend as far as the river. Cross the bridge then leave the red rectangle (No 1) and turn right on the path by the Semois towards Poupehan. From here, the signage is unreliable, but stay on the main path and keep straight ahead to arrive at Poupehan (4). Follow the main road to the right and cross the Semois. Cross the bridge, turn left past the Notre Dame de l’Ourthe cave. At the first crossing, turn right back to Corbion.
“The route takes you to magnificent viewpoints … lying at the extremity of a classic Semois meander.”

AUTHOR’S TIPS

The panoramic viewpoint at Frahan is really spectacular and one of the best views in the country so don’t forget your camera! The little houses with slate roofs and the 18th-century church give the village a special atmosphere.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

CHÂTEAU DE BOUILLON
Known for: The oldest and most fascinating remaining reminder of Belgium’s feudal days, this fortified medieval castle sits proudly on a craggy ridge overlooking a sharp loop of the river Semois.
Info: www.bouillon-initiative.be

GODEFROID DE BOUILLON ARCHÉOSCOPE
Known for: Its fascinating dive into the crusades of Godefroid de Bouillon. Relive the First Crusade at the end of the 11th century.
Info: www.archeoscopebouillon.be
Two castles steeped in history
Vêves Château and Walzin Château.

**Namur Province:** 15.2km / 4-5 hours  **Start-Finish:** Parking spaces at Gendron station.

**ROUTE/POINTS OF INTEREST**
Near the Gendron-Celles station car park (S) turn left and take the N910 above the Lesse. On the other side, at a small bend, follow the sign – it will show a blue triangle – downstream as far as Chaleux. You’ll find a bench in front of the ‘Roche à la Chandelle’ perfect for a short rest. To continue, you must cross the railway bridge behind Chaleux. Immediately the path climbs sharply again to cross the bridge over the Lesse. On the opposite bank, follow the signage’s blue triangles to the right and descend as far as the next railway bridge. This short section is poorly signposted and, for one kilometre, is frequently used by horse riders, so it can get very muddy. For a view of the Château de Walzin you have to cross the bridge and stop following the signage. On the left bank, a white/red GR sign leads you to a fork. On the right bank you can see the limestone rocks with a number of caves. The route goes down a lane as far as the water, with a wonderful view over the windmill and the Château de Walzin (1). Then take the same path to return to the railway bridge and cross it again. The marking (blue triangles) then leads you to the left at an old forest house, towards Furfooz. A forest track heads to high ground and a bench overlooking the...
The fairytale castle is a Wallonian heritage site and dates back to the 15th century.

Veves, Lavaux-Sainte-Anne and Freyr Castles

Known for: Three castles within half an hour of the town of Dinant. Veves might belong in a fairytale – a turreted, 15th-century fantasy-like château overlooking the village of Celles. Lavaux-Sainte-Anne has dramatic stone towers and curious, bulbous roofs, while Freyr on a bend of the Meuse river – is notable for its classical, riverside gardens and fountains, a 6km maze and a grove of 300-year-old orange trees.

Info: walloniabelgiumtourism.co.uk

Annevoie Water Gardens

Known for: Its spectacular array of fountains, jets, waterfalls, streams and lakes, this stunning collection of water gardens created in the 1770s by an aristocrat following his travels around Europe. You will feel the strong French, Italian and English influences in the design which, incredibly, was created without any mechanical machinery – all the features are fed by the tree-lined Grand Canal which runs above the estate. Stunning.

Info: www.anneoive.be

Plan your trip

‘needles’ of Chaleux and offers a glorious panorama. An agricultural track then takes you to Furfouz (2). At the crossing, continue straight ahead to the roundabout. The signage changes at this point, and the route follows the yellow triangles (see the information panel at the centre of the village). Level with a farm, the route swings right on a small asphalt path and climbs as far as a junction marked ‘Gratte Cul’. Take the path to the left, pass a telephone post on which the name ‘Vêves’ is painted in yellow. At the next crossing, keep straight on – there’s a superb view over the towers of the Château de Noisy. After arriving at the field, take the road that runs straight ahead between two hedges. At the entrance to the wood, the route makes a big loop to the left and descends on the forest track, as far as a small path to the right which takes you to the Château de Vêves (3). There, first follow the small path which drops down to the village, then the N910 and the signage (yellow triangle) to return towards Gendron. After several hundred metres, the trail descends to the right towards a stream. The marked route turns right onto a road then emerges after a few metres at a sunken path leading to the centre of the village of Gendron. Beware, in wet weather bypass the sunken path on the asphalt road to avoid getting stuck in the mud. In the village, take a right and climb the path as far as the next fork. The route turns right and goes up across a meadow on a track. Finally, it returns to the wood on a path, which can get muddy, before descending on a road towards Gendron station, several times crossing the road which connects the village with the station.

Author’s tips

It’s possible to eat along the way at the cosy and stylish ‘l’Auberge de la Lesse’ at Gendron-Lesse station with a menu featuring delectable local produce. You can hire a kayak at Gendron and go down the Lesse. Or why not finish the day at one of the restaurants in nearby Celles, and visit the Roman church.
Forests and lakes
At the stunning Lake Virelles.

- **Hainaut Province**: 8.1km/2-3 hours
- **Start-Finish**: Parking spaces at ‘Lac de Virelles’ (Lakes)

**HE NATURE RESERVE** around Lake Virelles is the starting point for this hike through the Forest of Blaimont. The family-friendly circuit takes you into a natural landscape away from noise and bustle. The nearby town of Chimay, with its historic center and magnificent castle, is also open to visitors. The region is best known for the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame de Scourmont, and the beers brewed there, so you should definitely allow time to discover more of this area.

**ROUTE/POINTS OF INTEREST**

After the car park in front of the ‘Lac de Virelles’ Nature Centre (S) a path gently descends to the left across a meadow, then turns right into the woods and eventually emerges at the ‘Rue de Lac’, where an information board marks the effective departure point of the route. Here, the remains of an ancient forge (1) are evidence of the metallurgy industry that was prevalent in this region between the 15th and 19th centuries. A path turns sharply to the left and climbs into the wood before rapidly emerging at a forest road which turns to the right after about 500 metres. Then it continues on level ground, straight ahead to a clearing. Keep right on the asphalt road. After crossing an old railway track, go into the wood again at the second junction, turning left on a sunken path. The route continues on level ground, but you can see on your right the deep valley where the path will take you in about 2.5 kilometres. On the outskirts of Lompret, which is easily amongst the most beautiful villages in Wallonia with 17th- and 18th-century houses built from grey limestone, the route continues to the right on the asphalt track. It’s well worth making a small detour through the village of Lompret (2) to see Saint-Nicolas Church and the ancient ruins of a castle. Remains of the AQUASCOPE VIRELLES
Natural beauty combined with an interactive discovery space on the edge of Virelles ponds. © WBT-BRUNO DALLMONT

**AUTHOR’S TIPS**
The nearby Cistercian abbey of Notre Dame de Scourmont is famous for its Trappist beers. Eating opportunities on the route include the unpretentious but tasty homemade menu at ‘L’Eau Blanche’ at Lompret (Rue Gustave Joaris 27) or the largely organic, locally-sourced café ‘Aquascope’ (departure point).

**SHORTER WALK**

**AQUASCOPE VIRELLES**
Natural beauty combined with an interactive discovery space on the edge of Virelles ponds. © WBT-BRUNO DALLMONT

**CHIMAY EXPERIENCE**
An ideal excursion to sample the best beer and cheese the region has to offer.
Stone Age and the Roman era, and the rock formation on the opposite side of the valley, are equally worth a detour, too. The main trail continues briefly on asphalt, then heads to the left, crosses the stream (‘L’Eau Blanche’) in front of a holiday centre to arrive in a small, peaceful valley (here and there the path can become muddy in winter). At a junction, keep right and climb on a forest track up to a high plateau. At the end of the forest, an asphalt path guides you to the right to the village of Vaulx (3). Then it turns right in front of the church and continues as far as the edge of the village before descending to the left into the valley. When level with an asphalt road, the route turns briefly to the right across a bridge. After crossing the stream a path heads left along the riverbank and across a wood in the direction of a viaduct. This 26-metre-high, 135-metre-long construction, crosses the valley of l’Eau Blanche and has eight towering arches. From 1858 to 1950 it carried the railway line between Anor, Chimay, Mariembourg and Hastière. Because of the viaduct’s dilapidation, the route doesn’t go directly underneath it. It continues for several hundred metres before the signage indicates a steep path that climbs to the right and bypasses the viaduct, later reaching the river and finally the old forge where you can return to the departure point and the car park along the same road.
**SHORTER WALK**

**Through Hills and Valleys**

A Walk at Villers Abbey.

**Brabant Walloon Province:** 8.1km/2-3 hours  
**Start-Finish:** Parking available at Villers Abbey.

This well sign-posted walk enables you to discover the cultured landscape of Brabant and the surroundings of the ancient Cistercian abbey of Villers-la-Ville. Alternating between hills and valleys, forests, wide open spaces and cultural curiosities, this is an especially interesting ramble. The route takes you to several old farms, chapels, a windmill, a castle and a church. You can easily extend the walk with the help of a map. Before or after completing the journey, a visit to the impressive ruins of the abbey, which gives you an idea of its past grandeur and importance, is well worth the detour.

**ROUTE/POINTS OF INTEREST**

From the car park in front of the old windmill/baker’s shop (now the ‘Moulin de Villers’ restaurant) first follow the Abbey Road, pass the gate of the abbey and walk on to a crossing with a car park and tavern. From there on the route is waymarked (yellow rectangles). At the crossing, keep left and follow the rue de Quatre Chênes (Four Oaks) – the road goes uphill alongside a wall. From the higher vantage point you can see the imposing entrance to the abbey courtyard to your left, before the road swings to the right and passes two chapels. Eventually you arrive on high ground with a wide open view, and then a crossing called the ‘Quatre Chênes’ (1), where you turn left. At the following junction, take a right towards Marbais and continue straight ahead on the main road. The route then descends along a sunken path as far as a meadow. Cross this meadow, which passes in front of an old swivel gate, and take a small alleyway that leads to a steep path descending towards the Villers Road.

Cross that, and take the bridge (2) to cross to the other bank of the Thyle river – you should see a watermill on the right. Once over the bridge, turn right and climb as far as the (private) château ‘Le Châtelet’. The main path moves away from the bridge and turns sharply left, passes a sunken road and crosses the forest to climb uphill near the village of Rigéèe. Up on the high ground, you come to a crossing. Turn left and walk down a farm track with a glorious view towards Villers (3). The farm track descends towards the River Thyle and a farm, where it turns left into the Rue du Thyle. After several hundred metres, you arrive at the Thyle.

Take the bridge across it, then immediately turn right on to the riverside path. Before the next bridge, the path turns left and you reach the Rue de Sart, in front of the church (4). Cross the road and the church square, then bypass the school and turn left into the Rue Jules Tarlier. Continue straight ahead, passing a school, and keep going past a car park. The signage drops down to the right towards the N275, then turn left. Follow the leftward route for about 100m and take the first turn right into a track. When the track turns left, turn right into a dirt road that leads to the car park.

**AUTHOR’S TIPS**

Next to the impressive abbey ruins stands a private château ‘Le Châtelet’. Fine dining can be had at the ‘Moulin de Villers’ restaurant with a lovely large terrace at the abbey, as well as the casual but friendly ‘Le Chalet de la Forêt’ tavern situated in the basements of a 13th century windmill.

**IMPRESSIVE RUINS**

In grounds that total around 36 hectares, there’s something for everyone to discover at the Villers Abbey ruins.

“Alternating between hills and valleys, forests, wide open spaces and cultural curiosities, this is an especially interesting ramble.”
100 metres and pass under the railway line on the right. The trail climbs right into the Rue des Bougeois up to its highest point (in front of house No 10), where a stepped path turns left. This comes out at the ‘Sentier Pêtre’, which passes in front of fortifications (wooden panel: ‘Sentier Nr 41 Rulette Pêtre’) and an old electricity enclosure. The trail opens into a road, where you will need to turn left. Further along, at the extremity of the bend, turn right on to the forest path. You won’t find any waymarkers at the next crossing because of a construction site, so keep ahead on the main path which, after 600 metres, takes you to the old abbey wall. The path widens and turns right to drop into the Rue de l’Abbaye. Passing through the Porte de Namur, the road leads to the old abbey vineyard (5), then under the railway track back to the car park.

**VILLERS ABBEY**
Known for: Its Cistercian-style abbey (pictured right), founded in 1146, enjoy a relaxing stroll in the beautiful grounds.
Info: www.villers.be

**WELLINGTON MUSEUM**
Known for: Being housed in an old coaching inn where the Duke of Wellington and his senior officers set up their HQ on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo and returned there victorious.
Info: www.museewellington.be
Taking the LONG WAY ROUND

Wallonia has several long-distance routes, which show off some of the finest facets of the region. Here are two popular examples: The ‘Transardennaise’ route with yellow and white route marking signs that link two historic and beautiful towns, while the Trappist Abbeys Grand Randonnée (GR) route, with white and red waymarked signs, connects three abbeys renowned for their delicious and world-class Trappist ales.

MEUSE VALLEY
Panoramic views over several river valleys are a particular highlight of this long-distance walk.

REDU VILLAGE
La Transardennaise takes you through delightful Redu – one of the world’s first book villages and twinned with Hay-on-Wye in Wales.
CREATED IN 1980, the Transardennaise covers 155km (97 miles) between the popular tourist centres of La Roche-en-Ardenne and Bouillon, near the French border. Well signposted throughout, the trail mainly follows farm and forest tracks, passing through woodlands, rolling hills and the picturesque valleys of four rivers: the Ourthe, Lomme, Lesse and Semois.

The central Ardennes, largely consisting of windy moorland and forest plateau, offers genuinely wild walking, with a succession of deep valleys separated by hills often densely forested with beech and oak. Because the valleys run in different directions, there are variations in the local climate, flora and fauna. There are a series of attractive historic villages en route, including Sainte-Ode, Saint-Hubert, Nassogne, Awenne and Daverdisse.

Walkers also get to visit the ‘book village’ of Redu, Wallonia’s answer to Hay-on Wye with about 20 bookshops scattered among the old stables and farm buildings. The trail passes a succession of ruined castles, imposing châteaux, basilicas and churches. To sustain the hungry traveller, this part of Wallonia is notable for its food and drink, such as Ardenne ham, Borquin sausage, trout from the River Lesse and spiced beer (known as la Cuvée de la Jonquille).

Typically, the trek takes a week and is divided into seven sections designed for a demanding but manageable walking days. There are many ascents to contend with; indeed, on some days there’s little or no walking on the flat at all.

SECTION 1: From La Roche-en-Ardenne you immediately get a taste of things to come – a steep forested climb out of the valley. Then comes an idyllic stretch of open country before the trail crosses the valley of the western Ourthe in Sprimont (Sainte-Ode) at the entrance of la Grande Forêt de Saint-Hubert.

SECTION 2: Almost entirely through forest, with demanding ascents and descents. This stretch finishes at Saint-Hubert, notable for the finest basilica in the region and the Museum of Walloon Life.

SECTION 3: A day that features multiple ascents and follows the valleys of three rivers to reach Nassogne – a village with an impressive collegiate church and piazza, along with a history dating back to Roman times.

SECTION 4: An easier stretch through open country with a series of superb views. On this day you’re likely to encounter herds of characteristic Ardennes horses.

SECTION 5: Mostly on level ground as the trail follows rather than crosses the valleys. The first of these, Marsau Valley, is one of the most beautiful. After a stretch of forest, the trail comes to the ‘book village’ of Redu, before you walk past the Euro Space Center at Transinne to finish at Daverdisse.

SECTION 6: Woodland is replaced by meadows in this leg, with shallower valleys and more villages as the trail follows the lovely Our Valley, containing the pretty namesake village and finishing at Paliseul.

SECTION 7: The final stretch features a mix of woodland and open country on the way to the former ducal capital of Bouillon, built on the River Semois and notable for its medieval castle.

THE EASIER WAY: ‘STAR-SHAPED’ ALTERNATIVE

For those who prefer not to haul their luggage across the hills and valleys, the walking holiday specialist Europ’Aventure has created a less arduous style of Ardennes hike, with five circuits measuring between 17 and 27km in the lovely Ourthe and Laval valleys. Much of the walking is done on forest trails, each named after one of the many varieties of mushroom that flourish in these parts. Over the five days you criss-cross 24 villages and hamlets, including Lavacherie, Tillet, Amberloup and Sprimont. You start and finish each day in the village of Sainte-Ode, halfway between Bastogne and St Hubert, and transferred to and from each ‘loop’ by Europ’Aventure. Depending on your budget, you can choose between a room in a table d’hôte or hotel. www.europaventure.be
The Trappist Abbeys Grand Randonnée (GR) is the first ‘themed’ long distance trail in Wallonia: a hike of 290 kilometres linking three abbeys famous for their Trappist ales. This is a daunting pilgrimage by any standards, and even the most experienced walker would be hard-pressed to complete the journey in one trip.

So, the Association of GR Hiking Trails has divided the lengthy trail into two sections, with Rochefort Abbey wrapping up the first leg and launching the second. It’s perfectly fitting that this remarkable route, celebrating and combining both the monastic life and the ‘good life’, should be situated in Wallonia – a traditionally religious region but a beer-loving one too, where three of the world’s 12 authentic Trappist beers have been brewed for centuries.

SECTION 1: Scourmont Abbey to Rochefort Abbey (174 kilometres/108 miles)

The GR starts at Scourmont Abbey located on a windswept plateau about 10km south of Chimay. The Cistercians founded their monastery in 1850, and the abbey gardens, farm, brewery and cheese factory became the hub of the community. The Trappist ale, which earns its label by being made ‘in a spirit of social solidarity and charity’, is no longer brewed on the site. The modern brewery is some distance away, but you can try the abbey’s ales and cheeses at ‘L’Auberge de Poteaupré’, a restaurant/brasserie about 500 metres from the main building. The Auberge is reminiscent of an old pub with its warm and lively atmosphere but where Trappist beers and local cheeses are honoured.

The magnificent gardens are open to the public and worth a visit, as is the ‘Chimay Experience’ next door, where you can learn how the monks still use centuries-old techniques to produce their organic beer and cheese.

The trail itself begins in classic Ardennes countryside; woods, thick forests, steep climbs, sudden descents and dramatic high cliffs above rivers and streams. Being an official GR path, the signage is consistent, with white-and-red or yellow-and-red marking lines on rocks, trees, poles or walls.

Early highlights of the walk are passing through Chimay, the viewpoint over Frasnes and a short but rewarding foray over the border to the pretty French village of Hierges. Back in Belgium, after tackling the wild Hermeton valley, you reach the winding rivers Meuse and Lesse. This is just a snapshot though, there’s not enough room here to describe the walk in detail, but you can get more information by referring to the online guide at www.grsentiers.org or by contacting our London office.

Near the end of the first section of the GR, you arrive at the world-famous limestone caves of Han-sur-Lesse – but we have walking to do, so save the caves for a future trip and press on to journey’s end: Rochefort Abbey. The monastery is nearly 800 years old, and although it’s not open to the public the Cistercian monks are visible in the community, selling their produce and using the profits to help the disadvantaged. Production of their ales is strictly limited to ensure the quality stays at a high standard, and after walking for four or five days you’ll be keen to find out whether it deserves its reputation?

“A hike of 290 kilometres linking three abbeys famous for their Trappist ales.”
SECTION 2: Rochefort Abbey to Orval Abbey (116 kilometres/72 miles)

At a push, fit, experienced walkers can complete the second section of this GR in three busy days. Or, if they prefer to pause here and there and savour the ever-varying scenery and panoramic views it will take four. Highlights on this shorter but no less demanding leg include the fast-flowing River Lesse, peaceful forest tracks, sudden thigh-busting climbs and dips, an essential pit-stop at Florenville and arresting views over the sinuous tree-fringed Semois. It is a trail that is at times understated but in other places it’s awesomely dramatic and always verdant, natural and surprising.

The trail finally winds its way down to a deep valley housing Orval Abbey founded in 1132 by a Benedictine order, but now the bustling home of Cistercian monks – and more accessible to the public than the two other Trappist monasteries en route. Most of the Orval complex was destroyed during the French Revolution, but it was rebuilt in the 1920s and 1930s according to the original plans.

Among its many attractions are a natural spring/fountain steeped in legend, a medicinal herb garden, and a museum in its 18th-century cellars, which displays art works and a model of how the abbey looked before the revolutionaries ransacked the place. The abbey shop sells Orval cheese, bread and – naturally – the famous beer made by the monks which is sold for charitable causes.
“Wallonia is one of Western Europe’s undiscovered treasures. Dig out your walking boots and waterproofs – and come and discover it for yourself.”