Quirky Flanders

20 of the region’s oddest or most unexpected activities
Flanders is full of offbeat things to do. They can be surprising, sometimes a little disturbing, but always unexpected. Most are off the beaten track, away from the crowds, in places that are sometimes hard to find.

You might need to ask in a local bar for directions or set off on foot down a muddy track. But it’s worth making the effort to find them, because they tell you something about Flanders that you don’t read in the guide books or learn from Wikipedia.

- Walk barefoot in Limburg
- Visit a bizarre Belgian enclave
- Walk through a forest that was once a battlefield
- Find old Antwerp in a lost Scheldt village
- Follow the Brussels street art trail
- Find the Bruges no one knows
- Take the world’s longest tram ride
- Admire the station that moved 36 metres
- Wander along Mechelen’s lost river
- Visit the world’s most beautiful chocolate shop
- Discover the new Berlin
- Take a foodie tour in the Westhoek
- Explore the dark secrets of a Brabant Castle
- Cycle down the golden river
- Sneak a look at the forbidden sculpture
- Stroll through eccentric architecture
- Take a night walk in Ghent
- Hop on a free bike to explore Ostend’s hinterland
- Walk under the river in Antwerp

Quirky Flanders
WALK BAREFOOT IN LIMBURG

It used to be seen as eccentric and even reckless, but walking barefoot is taking off in Flanders. Some argue that it provides health benefits, but others simply see it as a new way to experience nature.

The best place to try it out is in Limburg province, where the first blotevoetenpad (barefoot path) was created in 2006 at De Lieteberg nature reserve. The 2km barefoot trail lets you experience a range of surfaces, from wooden walkways to sand and even mud.

The route includes a steep hill, a stretch of water and a wooden lookout tower. Kids, not surprisingly, love it.

Visitors’ Centre Lieteberg Zutendaal

VISIT A BIZARRE BELGIAN ENCLAVE

The village of Baarle-Hertog is described as a Belgian enclave within the Netherlands, but it’s a lot more complicated than that. The village, population 2,300, is broken up into 20 little enclaves located inside the Dutch village of Baarle-Nassau. But there are also seven Dutch exclaves within the Belgian enclaves.

The result is a baffling border town with two fire stations, two town halls, a café split between two countries and a house with the living room in Belgium and the bedroom on Dutch soil. Once a den of smuggling, it is now a lively tourist town with a curious split identity.

Northern Antwerp province

www.baarle-hertog.be
WALK THROUGH A FOREST THAT WAS ONCE A BATTLEFIELD

The nature reserve De Palingbeek has woodland trails, farm animals and views of rolling countryside. But this estate near Ypres also has a tragic history. Some of the fiercest battles of the First World War were fought here, leaving behind concrete bunkers, flooded craters and two small cemeteries hidden deep in the forest.

The most striking is Hedge Row Cemetery, a silent, mysterious place that can only be reached on foot along a muddy forest trail. The original cemetery was destroyed by shellfire, and the graves were laid out after the war in a circle. Three former army packs are lined up along the cemetery wall containing objects that soldiers once carried, like gas masks, handkerchiefs and even makeup.

Zwarteleenstraat
Palingbeek, West Flanders

FIND OLD ANTWERP IN A LOST SCHELDT VILLAGE

The strange forgotten village of Buitenland is hard to find. It lies off the main road in a bend of the Old Scheldt. Not many people ever come here, so no one has bothered to explain the strange buildings that don’t look as if they belong.

They were built in 1894 for the World Fair in Antwerp as part of a nostalgic section called Old Antwerp. After the fair was over, most of the buildings were demolished, but a few were rebuilt in Buitenland by a local businessman who owned a basket-making company. The most impressive is a replica of the 16th-century Reuzenhuis.

Near Bornem, Antwerp province
FOLLOW THE BRUSSELS STREET ART TRAIL

The street art scene in Brussels emerged in the 1990s when the city, modelling itself on Berlin, took a more tolerant attitude towards graffiti. Many of the best street artists flocked to the abandoned Kapell-ekerk railway station in the Marollen where the art organisation Recyclart was based.

The artists were given permission to create works in the tunnels that run under the railway viaduct. Here you find striking works by local artists such as Bonom and ROA as well as Greek artist Sonke. From the station, head into the Marollen district where vibrant street art can be found in cobbled alleys off the Hoogstraat.

Ursulinenstraat, Brussels

FIND THE BRUGES NO ONE KNOWS

Millions of tourists head straight for the crowded centre of Bruges, but almost no one walks around the old ramparts. Landscaped in the 19th century, they form an almost continuous green belt around the old city. Here is where to head if you want to escape the crowds.

You might pass the occasional fisherman or a couple riding their bikes, but almost everyone is local. The seven-kilometre trail takes you past city gates, windmills and a wooden crane, with authentic local pubs like De Windmolen providing stops along the way.

Between Bruges train station and Ezelpoort city gate
TAKE THE WORLD’S LONGEST TRAM RIDE

Most visitors say the same thing. The Flemish coast is flat. It’s a long line of apartment buildings. And it always rains. But take a ride on the coast tram and you might see things differently.

The 67-kilometre route is the longest in the world and costs just a few euros for a day ticket. You can cover the entire route from southern De Panne to northern Knokke in a couple of hours, but it is more fun to get off at different stops along the way.

You can wander among the fish shops in Nieuwpoort, drink a coffee in Ostend’s grand cafe Du Parc and walk out to the end of the wooden jetty in Blankenberge. But the best part of the trip is the stretch between the sea and the dunes just west of Ostend.

From De Panne to Knokke

ADMIRE THE STATION THAT MOVED 36 METRES

You might not think Antwerpen-Dam looks different from any other Belgian train station. Located near Park Spoor Noord, it’s a typical Flemish Renaissance brick building standing alongside a railway viaduct. But an exhibition of old photographs in the tunnel under the viaduct tells an astonishing story.

It reveals that the entire station was moved 36 metres in 1907 using an ingenious system of mechanical jacks and rails. The company that carried out this exceptional engineering project hoped that it could sell the technology elsewhere, but the concept never took off, leaving Dam station as a unique experiment.

Damplein, Antwerp

www.delijn.be
WANDER ALONG MECHelen’S LOST RIVER

It’s one of Flanders’ forgotten rivers. The Dijle flows secret-ly between old buildings in Mechelen, but you can track it down at a couple of spots. Begin on Zoutwerf, a former harbour with an impressive renaissance house once owned by the guild of fishermen.

Here you can pick up the Dijlepad wooden walkway that meanders along stretches of water once accessible only by boat. Then head back to the charming cafe De Gouden Vis near the old fish market where you can sit outside on a sunny terrace overlooking the river.

VISIT THE WORLD’S MOST BEAUTIFUL CHOCOLATE SHOP

When Dominique Persoone opened The Chocolate Line in Bruges, people were rather shocked that he used ingredients like smoked eel, fried bacon and cauliflower. But then he was awarded a place in the Michelin guide, and the critics adjusted their opinion.

His second shop occupies two rooms in a former royal palace on Antwerp’s Meir, once occupied by Napoleon’s brother. The chocolates are sold in an elegant room with 18th-century wall paintings, while the ancient tiled kitchen is now a chocolate workshop.

Paleis op de Meir
Meir 50, Antwerp

www.dominiquepersoone.be
DISCOVER THE NEW BERLIN

Set off through the streets of Brussels to check out some quirky art galleries in unusual locations. Begin at Wiels, where edgy art is shown in a former brewery next to the railway tracks. The newly opened rooftop space adds to the excitement of this industrial space.

Head uptown to Poelaertplein where several galleries, including the well-known Jan Mot, have taken over a large building once occupied by a law publisher. Now head through Elsene to Galerie Valerie Bach, where art is exhibited in a former skating rink. End your art tour at Galerie Rivoli where several small galleries such as the popular Xavier Hufkens have taken over a 1970s shopping mall.

TAKE A FOODIE TOUR IN THE WESTHOEK

Some of the strangest food and beer is produced in the rolling hills of the Flemish west country around Ypres. It’s worth checking out the bierpaté sold in local butchers, with each recipe using a different local beer. Some say the best is made by Puydtjes, where they use the strong Sint-Bernardus Abt 12 beer.

Look out also for potjevlesch, literally a “little pot of meat”, made with chicken, rabbit and veal preserved in jelly and served with a bowl of frietjes and a beer. And if you ever find yourself in Poperinge, drop into Bakkerij Sansen to pick up a mazarinetaart. This sweet sponge cake is named after a Cardinal Jules Mazarin, who soaked sponge cake in warm butter and cinnamon sauce to create a sweet, sticky pudding.

www.bamart.be

www.toerismewesthoek.be
EXPLORE THE DARK SECRETS OF A BRABANT CASTLE

The strangely overlooked Gaasbeek Castle lies just outside Brussels in the rolling Pajottenland countryside of Flemish Brabant. Here you can explore dark Neo Gothic interiors, including a dining hall, round tower and luxurious Art Deco bathroom installed by the last countess to live here.

These romantic rooms are often the setting for contemporary art exhibitions on creative themes like sex and death. After a visit, you can wander around the wooded estate, visit the walled vegetable garden and drink a beer in one of the taverns at the castle gates.

Kasteelstraat 40, Lennik

CYCLE DOWN THE GOLDEN RIVER

Once called the Golden River because it flowed among flax fields, the Leie meanders through the flat countryside outside Ghent, passing sleepy villages where Flemish artists once painted. This is a quiet region of cobbled roads, fields of cows and local bars.

Follow the river south of Drongen abbey, heave your bike onto the free ferry at Afsnee and drink a beer in Cafe Sfinx on the other bank. From here, some serious pedalling brings you eventually to the Flemish Renaissance turrets of Ooidonk castle. Ring the caretaker’s bell at the entrance if you want to look around.

It’s then just a few more kilometres to the riverside bar ’t Oud Sashuis, located in an abandoned lock-keeper’s house. The interior is crammed with shipping mementoes, old photographs and dried sausages hanging on strings, while French songs play in the background. Use the numbered cycle route signs, or knooppunten, to plot a route.

www.kasteelvangaasbeek.be

www.fietsnet.be
SNEAK A LOOK AT A FORBIDDEN SCULPTURE

Displayed in a temple designed by the young Victor Horta, Jef Lambeau’s “Human Passions” has not been seen by the public since 1899. But curious visitors peer through the keyhole for a glimpse of this notorious banned relief.

Carved from 17 blocks of white Carrara marble, it features dozens of naked bodies representing human passions such as seduction, suicide, birth, drunkenness and murder. This proved too much for 19th-century sensitivities, and the temple’s entrance was bricked up just three days after it was unveiled.

In 2015 it will be open temporarily to visitors, on Wednesdays and weekends until 25 October.

STROLL THROUGH ECCENTRIC ARCHITECTURE

Take the tram to Antwerp’s Zurenborg district, just a few minutes from Central Station. Here you find some of the most stunning 19th-century architecture in Europe. The main street Cogels-Osylei is lined with buildings in every style imaginable, from mock Greek temples to Art Nouveau.

The exuberance continues in the surrounding streets, where wealthy locals built grand houses decorated with turrets, balconies and painted ceramic tiles. It used to be a forgotten district with few restaurants, but the squares De Dageraadplaats and Draakplaats are now lively urban eating hubs.

Tram 11
Cogels-Osylei, Antwerp

Jubelpark Museum
Etterbeek (Brussels)

www.kmkg-mrah.be
www.visitantwerpen.be
TAKE A NIGHT WALK IN GHENT

Ghent is an atmospheric city after dark thanks in part to an inspiring urban lighting plan. The ancient Gothic buildings like Vleeshuis and Sint-Baaf's are illuminated with subtle lights that bring out the mediaeval details, while spotlights in the pavements create a theatrical effect when anyone walks past.

Start a night walk on Sint-Michiels bridge and follow the waterfront north to Vrijdagmarkt. Then head east to the streets around Sint-Jacobs church.

Central Ghent

HOP ON A FREE BIKE TO EXPLORE OSTEND’S HINTERLAND

Most people struggle to find a parking place at the coast, but Ostend has come up with a smart solution. You can park on the edge of town and then hop on a free bike to get around.

Launched back in 1998, the Park & Bike scheme hands out distinctive bright yellow bikes at three locations. You can be at the beach in a few minutes, or, if you want to be more adventurous, set off on the 30km Groen Lint route around the edge of Ostend.

This takes you on an intriguing route, past a race course, oyster farm, fishermen’s church and across the harbour on a free ferry. Download the route map from the tourist office website.

www.visitoostende.be
WALK UNDER THE RIVER IN ANTWERP

Many people don’t even realise you can walk under the river Scheldt. Just over half a kilometre long, the white tiled Sint-Anna tunnel was built in 1933. You find the entrance in an Art Deco brick building behind the basketball court on Sint-Jansvliet. A creaky wooden escalator takes you down to the tunnel level, where you can walk to the other side in about 10 minutes.

But what do you do once you get across? In the past, people headed along the waterfront to Sint-Anna beach, a little resort that was the height of fashion in the 1930s. Locals still come here to eat in the fish restaurants behind the sea wall, swim in the open-air pool and cycle along the dike towards the Dutch border. But don’t expect beach huts and night clubs.

Sint-Jansvliet, Antwerp

VISIT A MUSEUM WHERE YOU DON’T WANT TO BE ALONE

The strange and haunting Dr Guislain Museum occupies the 19th-century psychiatric institution founded by Dr Jozef Guislain. Visitors can wander through chilling deserted wards still furnished with iron beds and old medical equipment.

One room contains a terrifying mechanical saw used in operations to remove the top of the skull. The temporary exhibitions are always fascinating, as is the extensive collection of outsider art. Almost no one leaves this museum untouched.

J Guislainstraat 43
Ghent
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