

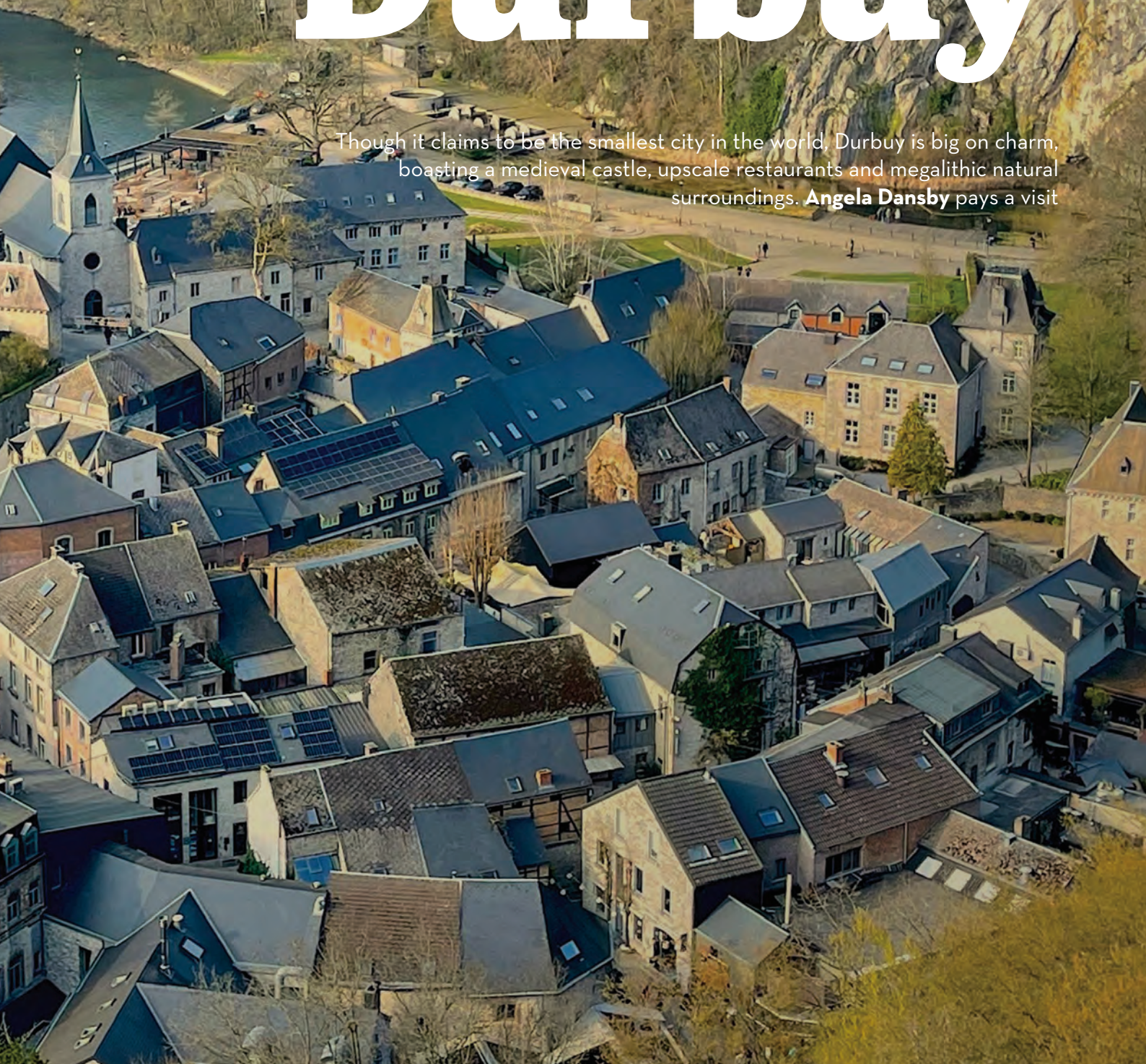




WEEKEND BREAK

# J'aime Durbuy

Though it claims to be the smallest city in the world, Durbuy is big on charm, boasting a medieval castle, upscale restaurants and megalithic natural surroundings. **Angela Dansby** pays a visit





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A decade after Sandra Kim won the 1986 Eurovision song contest for Belgium with her pop ditty ‘J’aime la vie’, a local television personality, Rob Vanoudenhoven, came up with the pastiche. Called ‘J’aime Durbuy’, it extolled the tiny city’s quaint cobblestoned streets and medieval heritage, and proved almost as popular as the original.

Satire aside, Durbuy is very easy to love. Located in the province of Luxembourg, it is technically a municipality, covering an area of nearly 157 square kilometres with a dozen districts, including larger Barvaux, lively Bomal and picturesque Wéris. But its medieval centre is only 550 metres squared with 40 permanent residents, who are vastly outnumbered by tourists most of the year.

Indeed, since the 1970s, Durbuy has used the touristic slogan “the smallest city in the world”. That makes Durbuy the city easy to see in a single day, though its broader municipality and surrounding countryside easily justify a weekend. Nestled on the Ourthe River in the Ardennes forest, Durbuy has upscale hotels, restaurants and shops to rival Knokke.

## Smallest medieval city

Durbuy’s history harkens back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century and its name is commonly thought to mean “houses at wood and water.” It developed around Durbuy Castle, built on an elevated limestone rock and first documented in 1078.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the counts of Luxembourg integrated Durbuy into their military defence system due to its strategic position near the confluence of the Ourthe and Aisne

ivers. In 1331, John of Bohemia (aka John the Blind), who was both Count of Luxembourg and King of Bohemia, officially gave city status to Durbuy and put ramparts all around it. At that time, a city was defined by its economic and administrative importance, rather than its population size or geographic area.

Since then, Durbuy has shrunk, thanks to conflicts and wars: the army of France’s Louis XIV smashed the walls and the castle in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it was also heavily damaged in the Second World War.

Durbuy’s historic centre contains well-preserved medieval architecture with shops, cafés and restaurants housed in centuries-old buildings. The showpiece is Durbuy Castle, or the Château de Durbuy, occupied by the D’Ur-sel family since 1731, which was destroyed and rebuilt several times over the centuries. Located along the Ourthe River and facing an old mill wheel, it is strikingly beautiful but closed to the public (in 1944, it was used by American liberators as a hospital; the billiard room had an operating table in it).

The Durbuy History & Art Museum (DHAM) is the most colourful building in the city, coloured in red paint that was originally made from waterproof ox blood to protect against humidity. Dating back to 1380 (the 1718 engraving on its façade refers to one of several renovations), the covered market of the former Halle aux Blé, or Wheat Hall, is a rare Belgian public building made from timber. Previously used as a court, barracks, school and tourist office, the building is now classified as one of Wallonia’s exceptional heritage sites. It has audio guides with the history of Durbuy.



Left: the charming hotel/restaurants. Right: view of the castle from the garden





DHAM was set up in 1988 and showcases art on three floors in both permanent (water-colour painter Marcel Lucas) and temporary (currently Liège glass sculptor Louis Leloup) exhibitions.

Other medieval points of interest in Durbuy are the former Récollet monastery and convent from 1630 and a related parish church of St. Nicholas. Rue Daufresne de la Chevalerie, named after a poet-troubadour, is the only street still paved with pebbles from the Ourthe River. The bridge next to Durbuy Castle was once a drawbridge and features a cross with three dates on it, denoting the number of times it was rebuilt.

## Ardennes eats

Durbuy must-taste items are Ardennes smoked and dried ham, goat cheese, dandelion flower jelly, honey and local beers. Two-hour guided tours include a tasting of these local products and are available in English and Belgian official languages.

Confiturerie Saint Amour has a shop on its namesake street, which sells its own jams, jellies, honey, condiments, confections, plant extracts, herbal teas and body care products plus local beers. It also has a workshop atop the hill overlooking Durbuy where you learn about making jams. Boucherie Bodson from three generations of butchers specialises in dried Ardennes ham and sausages as well as sells local cheese, such as Chèvrerie d'Ozo.

Durbuy's medieval centre has its own beer, Marckloff, and several in its broader municipality, including Durbuy, Durboyse and Durbuy Z. Marckloff, produced by Count Jean-Michel D'Ursel in Durbuy Castle, is named after 16<sup>th</sup> century brewer Philip Marckloff.

Durbuy is also home to several excellent restaurants, many serving dishes made with local ingredients such as wild boar, pheas-

ant, trout and hare. The city's cuisine centres around meat-based dishes and flavourful sauces.

## Earthly delights

Roche à la Falize, also known as Rocher d'Omalus (named after Belgian geologist Jean-Baptiste d'Omalus d'Halloy) is a massive, limestone anticline, a structural trap of rock layers folded over time into an arch. Part of UNESCO-recognised Geopark Famenne-Ardenne, it is more than 300 million years old. Visitors can climb to the top of it for panoramic views of Durbuy and its countryside. The anticline also has a small cave, which can only be seen, not visited, due to a reflecting pond.

Place Hanyu, adjacent to Roche à la Falize, is named after Japan's smallest city, twinned with Durbuy (Japan's Emperor Tsugu Akihito inaugurated Place Hanyu in 1999). It includes a pond with submerged stone wheels, a wooden jetty and water jets, representing past occupations of woodcutting, milling, boating and washing by hand, respectively.

Across from Place Hanyu is an 18-hole miniature golf course that illustrates different facets of the Durbuy landscape.

Parc des Topiaires features over 250 sculpted topiary plants depicting figures and animals, including a four-metre-high sitting elephant that was transported from the Netherlands by helicopter. It also has a garden with medicinal and aromatic plants, exhibitions about biodiversity and by local artists, a shop and a terrace café. Tickets can be bought in combination with other nearby sights such as Radhadesh Castle in Petites-Sommes, Grottes

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The massive, limestone Roche à la Falize





View of the castle from the watermill

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de Hotton (Caves of Hotton) and Ta Maison des Mégalithes (Your House of Megaliths) in Wéris.

Le Petit Train, which departs across from the Durbuy tourist office, is the only way to access a lookout tower atop the hill above Durbuy. The views are spectacular and well worth the ride, which passes the Durbuy Green Fields ‘glampground’ and Adventure Valley.

## Outdoor Adventures

Visitors to Durbuy can enjoy a variety of outdoor activities, including hiking, cycling, kayaking and fishing thanks to the Ourthe River, surrounding forests and kilometres of scenic trails. E-bikes rentals are available, while Durbuy Horse Riding and Elevage de Durbuy offer horseback riding.

Adventure Valley, owned by Flemish entrepreneur Marc Coucke (see box), has outdoor and indoor fun for visitors of all ages and skill levels: mountain biking trails, ropes courses among trees, zip lines, a slide, freefall, jump, a human maze (Le Labyrinthe), rock climbing, bowling, laser game, fast tag and an escape room.

Durbuy Green Fields is like an extension of Tomorrowland electronica festival with fairytale decor, DJs, animations and a padel centre.

## SEE

Here are the annual special events in Durbuy municipality:

**Fête de la Musique:** A free music festival in June with live music of various genres throughout Durbuy, other cities in Wallonia and Brussels

**Flammes:** A torchlit, theatrical wandering performance through the forest of Bomal, starting at Bomal Castle, recounts local history, August

**Mystery Forest:** October-November sound and light show in Adventure Valley Durbuy

**Christmas Market:** From late November to early January, Durbuy’s festive market features a variety of stalls selling crafts, decorations and Belgian treats

**Durbuy Rock Festival:** A May music festival featuring a variety of Belgian and international bands on Friday and Saturday, Bomal-sur-Ourthe

**Gertrude en Bière:** A May beer festival with 11 Belgian breweries offering tastings on the beautiful grounds of Domaine de Villers-Sainte-Gertrude

## SAVOUR

**La BRU’sserie:** Part of the Sanglier Hotel, this modern, stylish restaurant with an open kitchen features international four- and six-course menus by famed Belgian Chef Waut Bru

**Le Clos des Récollets:** Features contemporary, fine cuisine with three- to five-course menus in an elegant atmosphere

**Le Fou du Roi:** Located in a beautiful, historic building, this romantic restaurant run by a couple features fine French cuisine with Italian influences

**Le Grand Verre:** Michelin-starred restaurant created by Chef Wout Bru with decor inspired by Dadaist painter-sculptor Marcel Duchamp

**Le Victoria:** Features ‘bistronomic’ cuisine with wood-fired grill specialities and local products in a cosy atmosphere that includes an open kitchen, seasonal garden and heated terrace

**La Gourmadine and Marilia:** Sell artisanal, homemade ice cream and gelato, respectively

## SIP

**La Brasserie Ardenaise:** Offers regional beers on tap and by the bottle with indoor and outdoor seating

**La Calèche:** A brasserie with a cosy terrace to enjoy local beers and more

**Desirée:** A tearoom that’s great for an afternoon coffee inside or out along with delicious pastries

**Sept by Juliette:** Offers unique and classic cocktails, specialising in gin and tonic, plus

has tapas, sharing platters and casual eats

**La Vieille Demeure:** Based in a 17<sup>th</sup> century building, this three-generation brasserie and tearoom has a large terrace and offers a range of teas, coffees and light bites, specialising in crêpes

## STAY

**Le Clos des Récollets:** A charming three-star boutique hotel with simple rooms and inside-outdoor restaurant, including breakfast with **homemade jams** and Ardennes **ham**

**Hotel des Comtes:** Just across the Ourthe River, this peaceful, historic hotel offers colourful rooms and a buffet breakfast, plus a bar and a large terrace

**Maison Caerdinael:** Three modern, boutique hotels, including Le Victoria (13 rooms), Hôtel Lea (12 rooms) and Les Chambres du 7 by Juliette (four rooms), which share a restaurant (Le Victoria) with a garden and terrace

**Saint-Amour:** A four-star hotel with 14 unique rooms and a restaurant and pizzeria

**Sanglier Hotel Durbuy:** Formerly Le Sanglier des Ardennes, this five-star hotel in the heart of Durbuy offers elegant rooms and

suites as well as a spa, four upscale restaurants and a private dance club

## SHOP

**Bon Bon Chic:** Old-fashioned candy and confectionery store that sells famous Leopold (raspberry-flavoured) cuberdons

**Boucherie Bodson:** From three generations of butchers, this esteemed establishment specialises in dried Ardennes ham and sausages

**Confiturerie Saint-Amour:** Specialises in local food and personal care products, including its own jams, jellies, syrups, balms and massage oils made from regional fruits and flowers, such as dandelion flower jelly

**De l'Art en Mains:** A gift shop selling handmade crafts by Belgian artists, including jewellery, accessories, hats, decorations and more

**Durbuy Dogs Stars:** Dog and cat owners will find many things they never knew their pet needed at this shop entirely dedicated to furry friends

**L'Épicerie de Durbuy:** At the entrance to the medieval centre, this foodie shop sells its own gin and local beers

## Couckeland in Durbuy

Flemish multimillionaire Marc Coucke has invested so much in Durbuy that the city is sometimes called 'Couckeland'. He says his goal is to promote tourism there while "keeping all of its authenticity and charm."

Coucke, 58, owns several companies in Durbuy through his investment firm Alychlo (a contraction of his daughters' names Alysée and Chloé). "We want to make it the place in Belgium where people feel the happiest and inspired. It's for all ages, all budgets, families, friends and companies," he says.

Originally from Merelbeke near Ghent, Coucke earned €620 million when he sold his pharmaceutical company Omega Pharma for €3.6 billion in 2014. His first purchase in Durbuy, with business partner Bart Maerten, was La Petite Merveille (LPM) amusement park just outside the city, which they turned into Adventure Valley. Today, LPM includes Five Nations Durbuy Golf Club, 'glampground' Green Fields, The Labyrinth human maze, Durbuy Music recording studio, LPM for Kids (camps and events), and LPM Academy.

In 2017, LPM bought the 75-year-old, five-star hotel Le Sanglier des Ardennes, mod-



Marc Coucke, overlooking Durbuy

ernising it while retaining its original exterior as well as expanding it under and across the street. It now includes a wellness centre, shops and four restaurants (Le Grand Verre, La Bru'sserie, Wagyu and Limoni e Tartufi).

Coucke's multiple investments in Durbuy could be paying off: he boasts the city is now the second most popular tourist destination in Wallonia after Pairi Daiza zoo (of which Alychlo owns a significant share).

Besides Durbuy, Alychlo's investments include the Dutch ski slope chain SnowWorld, Belgian amusement parks in Walibi and Bellewaerde, Knokke's luxury Hotel La Réserve, football club RSC Anderlecht and the former Quick-Step cycling team.