





WEEKEND BREAK

Down to Dinant

One of the most picturesque cities in Belgium, Dinant sits under a dramatic, mountainous face and overlooks the Meuse River. Its trail of colourful saxophone sculptures pays homage to the instrument's inventor who was born there. **Angela Dansby** reports on a weekend of sax and the citadel

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Perched gloriously between a stunning sheer limestone rock face and the mighty Meuse river, Dinant can claim to be one of the most Instagram-friendly cities in Belgium. The site of battles down the ages, it is also the birthplace of Adolphe Sax, inventor of the saxophone. And it is a city that hosts adventure, with plenty of hiking and ziplines, as well as kayaking down the Meuse and Lesse tributary.

Nestled in between mountains, Dinant’s name comes from Celtic ‘divo nanto’, meaning sacred valley. It was prosperous and populous in the Middle Ages thanks to locally quarried stone and metalworks, particularly copper. Craftsmen were known as dinandiers and their metalworks dinanderie, which were sold all over Europe. Its thriving market earned it the name Cité des Copères (City of Horse Dealers).

Its glory days abruptly ended in 1466 when France’s Charles the Bald sacked the city, but Dinant was rebuilt by the then-Prince-Bishop of Liège, who created a citadel in 1530 (destroyed by the French two centuries later). By the 19th century, dinanderie fell out of fashion and the metal workshops switched to leather tanneries and playing card factories.

The city was attacked early during the First World War and a young Lieutenant Charles de Gaulle was wounded in the Battle of Dinant on August 15, 1914. German troops temporarily occupied the town, murdering around 5,000 civilians – making Dinant one of eight ‘Villes Martyr’ in Belgium.

Sax appeal

Dinant’s most famous son, Antoine-Joseph Sax, known as Adolphe Sax, was not just the inventor of the saxophone, but many other brass instruments, including the sax-

horn and saxtuba. Although he is buried in Paris, where he patented the saxophone in 1846, he is immortalised throughout Dinant with a life-size statue, street named after him and trail of 34 brightly painted, giant saxophone sculptures representing various countries (maps of the trail are available from Explore Meuse at the foot of Charles de Gaulle Bridge). On Sundays in July and August, saxophone players parade in the streets.

La Maison de Monsieur Sax occupies more or less the house where the inventor was born. It is a free interpretive centre, open every day, presenting information about his life and contributions to music. Brass footsteps along Rue Adolphe Sax leading to the house commemorate famous saxophonists like John Coltrane and Charlie Parker along the way. The International Adolphe Sax Association runs projects locally and abroad, including one of the most prestigious saxophone competitions in the world.

Outdoor adventures

Dinant is a magnet for outdoor exercisers and enthusiasts from hiking and biking to kayaking and rock climbing. Hiking and biking trails crisscross the area, such as Chemin des Planètes footpath from the base of the stunning Bayard Rocher rocky pillar to the top of a cliff where there is a planetarium and the long promenade between central Dinant and the Lesse River. The RAVel network of trails in Wallonia (ravel.wallonie.be) provides a long list of options. Along the Meuse near the stunning vertical shards of Bayard Rock, Bike Nautique rents kayaks and paddle bikes (think stationary bikes atop surfboards).

Further down where the Meuse connects to the Lesse next to an ancient Roman bridge is a larger kayak rental company called Dinant Évasion. This outdoor adventure firm also offers rock climbing, caving, mountain biking, outdoor paintball and a series of aerial challenges, such as crossing the longest rope bridge in Belgium.

For passive adventure, Évasion has a boat called Le Sax that tours the Meuse from April to September. Croisières Mosanes also has boat tours and both companies offer 45-minute and two-hour cruises that provide beautiful views of cliffs and architecture. Croisières Mosanes offers a combo ticket to see the Citadelle (citadel) and Évasion offers a three-hour cruise that stops at the Freÿr castle and gardens in the town Hastière (a stately castle with an interior decorated by 20 generations of residents).

Dinant Nautique rents electric boats by the hour for up to seven people. They are docked in front of the Collegiate Church.



Top: Brass footprint. Above left: Collegiate Church stained glass. Above right: Saxophone sculpture. Previous pages: the citadel and river front

Electric vespas are also available. Horse-back riding in Dréhance village near Dinant can be done year-round except Tuesdays.

Every August 15, the Régate de Baignoires (Bathtub Regatta) attracts contestants and spectators with homemade 'sailboats' made with bathtubs. The amusing competition was started in 1982 by a local chef, Alberto Serpagli, who found and sold about 40 abandoned tubs to execute his idea. Today, about 50 bathtubs compete with unlimited riders who race a kilometre down the river.

South of Dinant are several natural wonders, including the Grotte La Merveilleuse cave in Philippeville, Les Aiguilles de Chaleux (Needle Rocks) in Houyet and Furfooz Nature Reserve and Park. The cave has many stalactites and stalagmites, including some in waterfall shapes. The Needle Rocks, thin mountains in unusual shapes, are near Furfooz, which also has a unique landscape with a series of caves, grottos, viewpoints and ruins.

North of Dinant are the Jardins d'Eau d'Annevoie (Annevoie Water Gardens) in the village of Annevoie, which feature Belgium's only water gardens with dozens of waterfalls, fountains, ponds and pools. This is also the site of the annual Costumes of Venice in May, when people dress up in carnival outfits and parade in the gardens.

Architecture and artefacts

The Collegiate Church of Our Lady, distinctive with its Gothic bulbous bell tower, is like a virtual greeter to Dinant along the Meuse River. It blends in with surrounding cliffs and the citadel above it, which seems to protect it (that was not the case in 1227 when the then Romanesque church was almost destroyed by the collapse of a cliff). Inside the church is one of the largest stained-glass windows in Europe as well as a painting by celebrated Dinant painter and sculptor Antoine Wiertz.

Place Lion has a monument called 'The Triumph of Light' designed by Wiertz in 1862. Behind it is a white building with bright, colourful paintings in spaces for windows and a door. Nearby is a trail to walk up to the 20th century Montfat Tower on a cliff. This tower was a German observation post in World War II, which was damaged by American liberators but restored after the war.

The stately Palais de Justice with a backdrop of mountains is worth strolling by along with the terracotta-coloured Hôtel de Ville which has another bulbous tower and pop-out windows on its façade. It dates to 1700 but was rebuilt like much of Dinant

in the 20th century. On the other side, the town hall courtyard has the most exquisite saxophone sculpture of all made of glass.

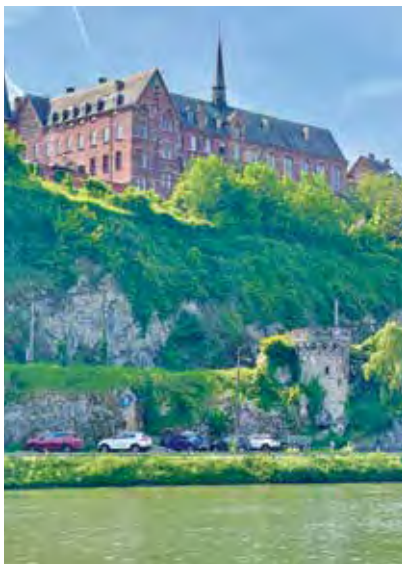
Near the Conservatoire Adolphe Sax is a copper-coloured bandshell, where musicians often perform. Nearby, the tiny Impasse Couret has a handful of old houses and a view of a medieval gateway called Porte Saint-Servais.

The striking Maison du Patrimoine Médiéval Mosan (House of Medieval Heritage) explains the area's history. A working jail, which looks like a heritage building, is nestled amidst greenery near the Grand Casino de Dinant. Across the Meuse River facing the citadel is the imposing Collège Notre-Dame de Bellevue.

Right out of a fairytale, the spectacular Château de Walzin in Dréhance, a sub-municipality of Dinant, is just 8km south. The Château de Vêves in Furfooz National Park and Château Royal d'Ardenne in Houyet, both 10-15km south of Dinant, are other



Adolphe Sax, in front of his home



Left: Maison Leffe. Right: Rocher Bayard

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beautiful castles. Even closer right off the highway is Château de Spontin, one of the few castles in Belgium that still has a drawbridge. Visits can be made upon request.

Military History

The current citadel, rebuilt in the early 1800s by the Dutch, dominates Dinant's landscape atop a high cliff. It can be accessed by a staircase with 408 steps, cable car or car, offering beautiful views from the top. In 1914, French and German troops fought violent battles in and around the citadel, which makes it the perfect location for a military history museum.

The August 23, 1914 Memorial lies along the river on the other side of the citadel in honour of civilians massacred by German troops on that date. Inaugurated in 2014 on the centenary, the long, copper monument replaces one from 1936 in Place d'Armes, which was destroyed by German soldiers in 1940. The new memorial has a cap that mirrors the transept of the Collegiate Church in the background and its dimensions are symbolically 674, the number of civilian victims. On the same side of the Meuse, a sculpture of the late Charles de Gaulle, who was wounded in Dinant in 1914, is at the foot of the bridge dedicated to him.

Regional bevies and bites

Maison Leffe, housed in the chapel of the former Bethlehem Convent near the 1914 Memorial, includes an interactive beer museum, tour about the beer's history, shop and tastings inside and out. A large lawn with beautiful views of the Meuse is a fantastic place to enjoy Leffe beers in the summer. Across the river and town is the

Notre-Dame Leffe Abbey, dating to 1152, which houses Norbertine canons, who offer guided tours. Local craft beers are Dinant and La Croisette de Dinant.

The couque de Dinant, a teeth-breaking hard cookie made of essentially flour and honey, is a local speciality. Bakeries advise not even attempting to bite it, but rather breaking it into small pieces to melt in the mouth like caramels. The couques from bakeries Maison Jacobs and V. Collard are the best known and sold in a variety of shapes from wild boars and grape bunches to of course, saxophones. The couque is rumoured to be adapted from a 15th century recipe (perhaps soldiers then used it as a weapon!) and the dough was moulded in the dinaderie or brassware typical of the once-thriving metallurgy industry. A softer couque called Rins, developed by Dinant confectioner François Rins, who accidentally added sugar, can be eaten.

Another Dinant speciality is flamiche, a savoury tart made with Romedenne cheese, butter and eggs. It's served warm with Burgundy wine, preferably Savigny. Supposedly created by a Romedenne farmer, Flamiche is honoured by the Confrérie Royale des Quarteniers de la Flamiche Dinantaise (C.Q.F.D.). Founded in 1956, this brotherhood aims to "promote the specialties and charms of the Dinant region, as well as regional culinary traditions". A flamiche-eating contest is organised by the C.Q.F.D. the first Saturday in September during its Chapitre du Tournoi in St Nicholas neighbourhood.

Other local foods include Ardennes ham, wild boar and river trout. Such products can be purchased in Dinant every Saturday from 7am to 1pm at a farmer's market along the Meuse River.

BeeTasty in the village Denée 18km from Dinant offers visits by appointment to learn about the life of bees and take part in honey harvesting April to September. Also in Denée, Maredsous Abbey, a benedictine monastery, has a microbrewery and beautiful grounds to enjoy beer, cheese and bread made on site. Guided tours of beer production are available Friday-Sunday. Nearby Warnant Snail Farm has educational visits by reservation.

Caracole Brasserie in Falmignoul 10km south of Dinant makes four artisanal beers, such as Saxo, the old-fashioned way with copper pots over a wood fire. Château Bon Baron, which makes some of Belgium's best wines, offers tours and tastings by appointment in the village Sorinnes 10km east of Dinant. A little further away to the north, Château de Bioul makes wines from organic grapes in its 12-hectare vineyard and offers tours and tastings for individuals from April to September Thursday to Sunday.



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EXPERIENCE

Dinant Jazz Festival: Brings international talent to a stage in the town centre the last weekend of July

Régate de Baignoires (Regatta of Bathtubs): Every August 15, attracts international contestants and spectators, lesbaignoires.be

International Adolphe Sax Competition: Every four years in November, one of the most prestigious saxophone competitions in the world in which hundreds of talented young musicians perform, including finalists in Collegiate Church

Montmartre: An outdoor art exhibition with more than 120 local artists at the end of September

Chapitre du Tournoi: A flamiche-eating contest organized by the Royal Brotherhood of Dinant Flamiches the last Saturday of September

SAVOUR

Le Bouboule: Known for mussels, a casual seafood-oriented restaurant with indoor-outdoor seating, including a riverside terrace

La Broche: An elegant, Michelin-recommended restaurant with fixed menus and wonderful desserts

Le Confessional: Next to the Leffe Abbey, offers French cuisine with “Dinant terroir” and seasonal produce in a family-friendly setting

Le Jardin de Fiorine: A garden restaurant featuring French cuisine with local flavours and a terrace overlooking the Meuse

Le Table d'Antonio: Away from the tourist area along the river, offers local cuisine with fresh seasonal produce

Le Trois x15: Near the train station, features Belgian cuisine in a stone house with a terrace

SIP & SNACK

Le Capsule: A Belgian beer pub with indoor and outdoor seating near the Charles de Gaulle Bridge

Le Cerf Vert: Near the riverside, a pub offering Dinant flamiche and couques as well as local tapas, artisanal lasagnes, quiches and soups

Maison Leffe: A backyard bar featuring Leffe beers and views over the Meuse River

Le Wiertz: A café restaurant offering Belgian cuisine without reservations
Pub St. Roch: A beer bar with a terrace and sometimes live music

STAY

Les 3 Chapeaux: Offers two cottages for 2-4 guests in central Dinant near the river, including equipped kitchens and a backyard

Ibis Dinant Centre: The only hotel along the riverfront in Dinant, a modest but clean three-star option that's very well located, including a terrace overlooking the river

La Garconnière de Wiertz: A fully equipped, stylish one-bedroom apartment

Au Coeur de Dinant: A modern, luxury apartment with town views, a fireplace and inner courtyard that's non-smoking with two bedrooms plus an equipped kitchen

Hotel La Merveilleuse by Infiniti Resorts: Incorporated into the Maison Leffe, a modern, luxury hotel with beautiful views atop a hill

SHOP

A c't'Heure Dinant!: Featuring artisanal Belgian food products, namely beers

Au Village Gourmand: Next door to the above shop, features Belgian spirits and beers

Explore Meuse: Sells local products like couques and candies

L'Empreinte Belge: Features made in Belgium items from decorations and books to accessories, skincare and food

Vergers et Ruchers Mosans: Offers products from a local orchard and beehive



View from the citadel