



Eupen season

Often overlooked, the German-Speaking Community of Belgium is a linguistic area with a parliament, flag and fascinating history. **Angela Dansby** savours the sights, focusing on its largest town, Eupen

Who knew about the German corner in Belgium? Located on the eastern border within the French-speaking Wallonia region, it represents 3% of the country's geography (854 square kilometres) and just 0.7% of its population (nearly 80,000). Yet it has practically the same legal status as the French and Flemish communities thanks to smart politicking in the 1960s when Belgium divided linguistically. Since 1970, the German-Speaking Community (GSC) has been officially recognised in the Belgian constitution.

Known since 2017 as Ostbelgien (East Belgium in German), it has nine municipalities, based in two parts: northern Eupen and southern Belgian Eifel. While Eupen is one-third the physical size of the Belgian Eifel, it has considerably more people with the town of Eupen, the GSC capital. The Eupen part also has more history and culture as it was mostly spared during World War II. However, Eifel, namely the town of St Vith – or Sankt Vith in German – was almost destroyed, with only the 14th-century Büchelturm tower still standing today.

While the GSC kept the German language, a few foods and certain Rhineland traditions (carnival and the Christmas market) from its heritage, it has taken the best of neighbouring regions and countries, according to locals (the East Belgians are said to “work like Prussians and live like the French”). Most speak all three official Belgian languages with some with English on top, creating Belgium's thickest linguistic melting pot.

The town of Eupen is home to the GSC parliament, government and German language media, including GrenzEcho daily newspaper (founded in 1927 as a pro-Belgian voice in the area after the First World War) and BRF radio and television. Just 1.5 hours' drive or train from Brussels, Eupen is easy to access (Sankt Vith is an hour's drive from there), and near enough to the towns of Malmedy and Liège as well as Monschau and Aachen in Germany.

Parks and Recreation

The GSC is a nature lover's paradise with nearly 35,000 hectares of woodland and moorland covering 40% of its territory. The most famous part of this natural playground is the High Fens

(Hautes Fens in French, Hohes Venn in German) wetlands, with hikes accessible all year-round. Within the Wallonian part of the High Fens lies Signal du Botrange, the highest point of Belgium with a staircase on top of a mound that's great for taking photos.

The Hertogenwald forest next to the High Fens near the Weser Dam (Wesertalsperre in German), which offers hiking, biking and cross-country skiing, includes the former 17th-century hunting lodge Haus Ternell. RAVeL hiking and biking routes provide local directions. Next to the Weser Dam is a fantastic 14.5km forest and water trail that goes around Lake Eupen, an artificial reservoir created when the Weser River was built in the 1930s. The Wesertalsperre Eupen visitor centre includes a restaurant with magnificent views of the dam (a drink there is highly recommended) and the highest man-made climbing wall in the region.

Near the Warche Dam is another artificial lake, Bütgenbach – named after its nearby village – which is ideal for water sports: boats and floating water bikes can be rented in the summer from the Worriken tourist centre. Nearby VENNtastic Beach has a 150-metre sandy stretch for sunbathing. Lake Bütgenbach also offers recreational facilities on and off the water, including a climbing wall, high ropes course, ziplining, mountain biking, archery, badminton, trampolining and a signposted 11km hiking trail around the lake.

In between Eupen and Bütgenbach lakes is pristine Robertville Lake, also named after its local village. At the foot of the Hautes Fens, this lake is known for its extraordinary purity. Swimming and boat rentals are ideal there. A bonus is the nearby Burg Reinhardstein, a medieval castle hidden in an enchanting forest, which has a daytime restaurant. And if the weather turns, Experience Factory Eupen offers one of the biggest indoor go-carting circuits in the world with a 1.1km track.

Unusual Tours

Four kilometres from the town centre of Eupen, the 63-metre Weser Dam offers a one-hour tour inside its walls that takes visitors down 400 steps from the top of the dam to its base, revealing various monitoring instruments along

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Left: Eupen. Right: Vesdre Dam

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the way. The tour began after the devastating July 2021 flood – when the Weser River went from under 0.6 metres above sea level to nearly three metres within a few hours – to explain the dam’s role in it.

A water treatment plant next to the dam also offers a one-hour tour, taking visitors through several steps of drinking water purification. Both tours must be booked at least two weeks in advance via EupenLives.be tourism bureau.

The Eupen Moorenhöhe close to Eupen’s centre offers a panoramic view of the lower town, while Sankt Vith in the Belgian Eifel has a 6.6km historic promenade of its life before 1945, beginning near Büchelturm tower.

Art and architecture

The imposing GSC parliament, a former sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, offers guided group tours Monday to Friday 8-13h. Citizens can also attend parliament plenary sessions.

The Eupen City Museum provides a history of the town from its 1213 roots as a parish to a booming textile manufacturing town in the early 1800s: there were 60 cloth manufacturers and 1,500 shearers in Eupen at that time, largely because Weser River water was perfect for washing textiles.

Elaborate architecture emerged during its rich textile heyday: the marketplace is surrounded by grandiose former houses of the aristocracy. Other impressive baroque examples are the office buildings of the GSC government and Minister-President Oliver Paasch. A notable architectural outlier is a Prussian building with yellow bricks, a unique dormer (pop-out window) and a shapely roof.

The 18th-century church of St Nicholas, with its high, charcoal-coloured double spires, is Eupen’s focal point. Inside is a baroque high altar and a gilded, wooden pulpit that hovers like a giant crown above pews. By contrast, down the street is a small but attractive 19th-century Protestant Church of Peace in neo-Gothic style.

Guided 1.5-hour tours of Eupen’s historic centre are available from the Tourist Information Office in the stately Rathaus (City Hall).

Eupen’s museum of contemporary art, IKOB, promotes the regional art scene with four temporary exhibitions a year focused on trends in art and society.

Food and drink

While most of the region’s food has more French than German influence, there are a few inherited restaurant dishes like schnitzel and some unique local specialities, notably the town’s iconic Eupener pilsner beer, Eupener Kloster tröpfchen liqueur made with 31 herbs from the region and Eupener Platz, a large brioche-like pastry with raisins and pearl sugar. Ironically, Eupener beer is now brewed in the Flemish town of Haacht as the original brewery was turned into residences. Ternell’s restaurant offers its take on German weissbier (white beer) and the Vilbas brewery offers pale ale.

Additional craft beers include Peak (near Signal de Botrange), Damian (Raeren) and Myday (Grain d’Orge). Radermacher distillery in Raeren makes whiskies, gins, rum, liqueurs and aperitifs: founded in 1836, it is Belgium’s oldest distillery and offers individual tours on Saturdays and Sundays.

Nearby towns

Malmedy, once in the East Cantons, is a charming town with several annual folkloric events, notably carnival and the Feast of Saint Martin. It makes for a lovely day trip or overnight stay. Malmedy’s Daft Music Studios, used by the likes of Stromae, Hooverphonic and Jef Neve, offers hotel rooms and a glampground.

Monschau, a picturesque, medieval German town with criss-cross-timbered houses and cobblestone streets, hosts one of the most beautiful Christmas markets in the region.

EXPERIENCE

Christmas Market (Weihnachtsmarkt): About 70 chalets sell original products around a large Christmas tree in the **Klötzerbahn** each third weekend in December (this year's 51st edition will be Dec 15-17).

Eupen Carnival (Karneval): From the Thursday before Lent to Shrove Tuesday each year, this five-day carnival is Cologne-style, featuring a 17th-century-inspired Rosenmontag Procession with hundreds of carriages and costumed groups (a clothed clown sculpture near Columbus Café pays homage to this event).

East Belgian Music Marathon: With as many bands (40+) as kilometres, this entertaining marathon each June makes runners forget the distance.

HAASte Töne?! Annually the third weekend of August (Aug 2-4, 2024), this **international street theatre festival** includes aerobatics, satirical mime, explosive fire artistry, poetic musical theatre and open-air competitions.

St. Martin's Procession (Sankt Martinzug): Each Nov 11, there is a march with people holding torches and lanterns, horses and "Roman soldiers" culminating in a huge bonfire and raffle.

SAVOUR

Antoine: Serves "modern gastronomic cuisine" with regional products in tasting menus of 4-6 courses.

Arti'Choc: Modern brasserie with a country home atmosphere that's only open on weekends and must be booked six weeks ahead.

Fine Food: In Hotel Sleepwood, this restaurant lives up to its name with à la carte



St Nicholas church



The carnival clown sculpture

and four-course menu options made with local ingredients.

Le Couleur Rouge: A high-end French restaurant with an Asian twist, extensive wine list and red highlights in its décor.

L'Imprévu: On the outskirts of Eupen's historic centre, this gourmet restaurant offers three- and four-course fixed menus.

SIP & SNACK

Brasserie Ratskeller: Charming café and bar with striking stained glass over the bar and indoor-outdoor seating.

Café Columbus: Popular hangout and sports bar with local drinks and a large terrace.

Haeserhof: A favourite pub among locals with Old World charm.

Kelleter and **Kockartz:** Bakeries that sell the local pastry called Eupener Platz, a large brioche with raisins and pearl sugar.

Ternell's: Casual, tasteful eatery with local beers, regional specialities and a garden that caters to hikers and bikers.

STAY

Hotel Sleepwood: A boutique hotel in central Eupen with 16 “rustic-chic” rooms made of wood and clay with option of half-board.

Haus Langesthal: A beautiful bed and breakfast in a stately 1790 mansion surrounded by greenery.

Schloss Weims: A 14th-century castle renovated into a charming three-room bed and breakfast amidst manicured bushes.

Eupen Inn: A guesthouse surrounded by nature with four rooms and an apartment that includes breakfast.

Kloister Heidberg: A 38-room business and event centre in a restored convent from 1700 that’s within walking distance of the train station. Mainly for groups, individuals can book if rooms are available during a group stay. Offers free organ concerts five Sundays a year.

SHOP

K’do & Delice: Features regional food products and gift baskets.

Tourist Info Eupen: Located in the stately City Hall (Rathaus), sells local food products and beers.

Why there is a German corner in Belgium



Left: GSC Parliament President Charles Servaty. Right: The GSC executive

“We are proud to be German-speaking Belgians,” says Charles Servaty, president of the Parliament of the German-Speaking Community (GSC). He notes that they were the last to become Belgian but the first to say they’re Belgian. “We feel not only as German-speaking people but also belonging to Belgium.”

While the GSC lies in Liège province in Wallonia, it has considerable autonomy – and its own parliament as of 1984 to oversee areas like culture, education, local heritage, employment policy and municipal financing.

French is the GSC’s second language, while Dutch is also taught in school, so most residents are trilingual in all official Belgian languages. They are also outside the Flanders and Wallonia rivalry, allowing German-speaking Belgians to joke that they are the most Belgian of all.

These Belgians are also the newest, with the GSC (then known as the cantons of Eupen and Malmedy or East Cantons) only joining the country in 1920 per the Treaty of Versailles. New Belgians in Eupen and Malmedy were sent letters asking if they wanted to leave, but only 270 civil servants did and they subsequently returned to Germany. The remainder stayed, even though many sympathised with their former country.

Tensions in the area remained until the Second World War when Germany seized the GSC and drafted men from the area

to fight for Hitler. Allied troops liberated the East Cantons, but the Battle of the Bulge destroyed a large part of the Belgian Eifel and around Malmedy. And the men forced to fight for Germany were ostracised when they returned.

In addition to flip-flopping between Germany and Belgium, the East Cantons were previously part of the Duchy of Limburg (Eupener Land), Duchy of Luxembourg (Belgian Eifel), France (1794-95) and Prussia (1815 Congress of Vienna to 1918).

The East Cantons got special status when a 1966 law recognised Belgium’s four linguistic areas, followed by the creation of three cultural communities (German, French and Dutch) in 1968-71. In 1970, the German Cultural Community (it became the GSC in 1983) was given its council, which became known as a parliament in 2004. In 1990, it even got a flag: it has a red Limburg lion and nine blue Gentiana flowers to represent its municipalities.

The GSC is slowly taking on more regional competences, “progressing step by step, not too fast,” Servaty says. “It is going as far as possible while staying united.”

Moreover, with so many influences over time due to wars, trade and annexation, GSC residents are particularly open-minded. “We are a region where everyone likes to spend holidays,” Servaty says.