

15 Best Things to Do in Douai (France)

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On the Scarpe River, Douai is a city that has reinvented itself many times. Up to the 1700s it grew rich trading wool, which was packed onto barges along the Scarpe. Then later, under French rule things got more sophisticated as the Parliament of Flanders and the judiciary moved to the city, furnishing Douai with sublime 18th-century architecture.

In the 19th century coal mining and metallurgy took over, and the largest mining museum in France is now a few minutes outside the city. One character who has been here throughout all this is Gayant, a tall ceremonial puppet that is paraded with his family during the city’s festival at the start of July and is Douai’s most famous resident.

Lets explore the **best things to do in Douai**:

1. Musée de la Chartreuse

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Source: [flickr](#)

Musée de la Chartreuse

Douai's museum of fine arts has an astonishing set of painting and sculpture by masters from France, Italy and the Low Countries.

There are pieces by Delacroix, Courbet, Sisley, Boudin, Veronese and Jacob Jordaens, as well as several large polyptychs by the Gothic Douai-based painter Jehan Bellegambe.

Those are a few of the must-sees, but there are 10,000 works in all, presented in chronological order in a glorious setting.

The complex of galleries are a former Carthusian monastery, which itself was adapted from a 16th-century Renaissance mansion.

2. Douai Belfry



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Douai Belfry

Medieval watchtowers like this one have pride of place in cities in Northern France and parts of Belgium.

So much so that they're listed as a collective UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Douai's belfry is from 1380, and while it has a severe appearance at its lower levels, the uppermost floors bloom with exuberant turrets and gold weathervanes and finials.

Victor Hugo sang its praises when he passed through Douai in 1837, and raved about the carillon of 62 bells, which still plays a little tune at quarter past and quarter to every hour.

There's also a brief concert at 10:45 and 11:45 on Saturday mornings, as well Monday evenings at 21:00 in the summer.

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3. Musée Archéologique Arkéos





Source: [megalithic](#)

Musée Archéologique Arkéos

This archaeology museum has assembled 40 years worth of finds from digs in and near Douai, and put them on show in a modern home that was unveiled in 2014. The artefacts range from prehistory to the middle ages and these bones, ceramics, glass items and tools paint a clear picture of life here at different stages in the past.

And using this information the museum has also laid out a sizable archaeological park, which reconstructs scenes from around Douai in the year 1000: There's an abbey, feudal motte with a wooden keep, a poultry yard and various shops and dwellings.

4. Centre Historique Minier de Lewarde



Source: [entreprises](#)

Centre Historique Minier de Lewarde

This colliery in Lewarde operated from 1931 to 1971, and after it was decommissioned it was picked to be a museum and show mine.

It is the largest museum of its kind in France, and sheds light on a compelling period in the region's not too distance past.

You'll descend deep into the mine to feel firsthand what it would have been like for people who had to do this every day.

Artefacts and mining equipment are displayed in the main hall, where former miners are happy to share their recollections.

Meanwhile most of the facilities like the infirmary, bathroom/showers, lamp-shop and administrative offices are exactly as they were when the mine shut down.

5. Palais de Justice



Source: [douais-tourisme](#)

Palais de Justice

The Parliament of Flanders moved to the site of a former monastery by the Scarpe in 1714, laying the tracks for Douai to become the judicial city it is today.

Both the Nord-Pas-de-Calais Court of Appeal and the Nord Court of Assizes are here.

On weekends in summer you can arrange tours of the interior, and it's worth it to see the Grand'Chambre of the Flanders Parliament.

This was completed in 1762 with fine murals, sculpted wooden pilasters and gilded plasterwork.

One former inmate of the prison by the water was Eugène François Vidocq, a criminal turned criminalist, who set up the first ever private detective agency and helped conceive the French police department.

6. Douai's Fortifications



Source: [flickr](#)

Porte de Valenciennes

The city's defences were mostly dismantled after 1891 to allow Douai to build healthier, more spacious neighbourhoods.

But several pieces survive and you could keep these in mind as you make your way around the city.

The chunky Porte de Valenciennes is probably the most remarkable, dating from 1453 and made from sandstone.

It's a large, square structure with three passageways (two of which were added in 1880 to allow road traffic) surmounted by an old guardhouse.

Louis XIV passed through this gate in 1667 after Douai has surrendered to him.

The Porte d'Arras is a smaller gate from the 1300s, with two circular towers, while the Tour des Dames is sandstone tower from 1425 in the park of the same name.

7. Collégiale Saint-Pierre



Source: [omondouvelo](#)

Collégiale Saint-Pierre

You have to see this church, if only to gauge its awesome scale.

The Collégiale Saint-Pierre goes back to the 16th century, but the original Gothic building was starting to collapse in the 18th century.

So everything except the bell-tower was rebuilt in the French Classical style in just ten years from 1740 to 1750. That quick construction brought a rare sense of harmony to the architecture, and there's some sublime decoration inside, including two marvellous 19th-century organs.

But the big story is the sheer size of the place.

At 112 metres, it's the longer than any other religious building north of Paris.

8. Old Douai Boat Tour



Source: [wikipedia](#)

Scarpe River

Since Douai and the Scarpe River go hand-in-hand you could step down to the Embarcadère du Palais de Justice on Place de Pollinchove in summer.

At the wooden dock are motorboats waiting to take you on a short cruise of the old city, where there are minor monuments, relics of waterfront industry and elegant riverside houses.

An experienced guide will fill you in on 2,000 years of Douai's history, pointing out the importance of every bridge, wharf, warehouse and lock.

9. Small Sights around Douai



Source: [flickr](#)

Hôtel du Dauphin

You can keep investigating Douai on foot to see the big changes that happened here in the 18th century when the judiciary arrived.

Many sophisticated homes were built around this time, like the Hôtel du Dauphin on Place d'Armes, now housing Douai's tourist office.

See also the Louis XV Hôtel d'Aoust, which became the seat of the Administrative Court of Appeal in 1999. On a different tack there's the Fonderie des Canons, which is a garden containing the vestiges of a 17th-century arsenal and cannon foundry.



Directly opposite is Hôtel Romagnant, the graceful 17th-century house of the artillery commissioner.

10. Les Fêtes de Gayant



Source: [amis-hom-arts](#)

Les Fêtes de Gayant

Douai wouldn't be the same without its family of ceremonial giants, which are huge effigies that are carried around the city in processions for three days at start of July.

The largest, Gayant was born in 1530, and unlike in other cities in the region Douai neglected to give him a name, just calling him "Gayant", giant! He was later joined by a wife, Marie Cagenon, and three children, Binbin, Fillon and Jacquot.

They make their annual appearance on the first Sunday after July 5, and the 8.5-metre Gayant needs to be carried by six men hidden under his robes.

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11. Terril des Argales





Source: [chevrettesduterril](#)

Terril des Argales

A slag heap might not be everyone's idea of a nature walk, but the Terril des Argales is special.

This was the largest heap in all of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, deposited on marshy ground, and it slowly sank under its own weight.

When this happened water was forced to the surface, creating a beautiful mosaic of ponds and meadows by accident.

The heap is now a reserve where nature is taking over: The waters abound with fish, and every now and again you'll spot a lizard scurrying over the schist.

There's a five kilometre trail to help you get your head around how an industrial site can be converted into a pure natural landscape.

12. Parc Jacques Vernier



Source: [kidzou](#)



Open in the summer, this adventure park is a place for kids to cut loose on timeless sunny days.

There's a large lake bordering the Scarpe where you can hire pedalos, family rowboats and even low-powered motorised "karts nautiques" for bigger kids.

Then on dry land there's even more, starting with four "trampo-elastiques", which are trampolines with a bungee-rope harness letting kids jump seven metres in the air in total safety.

Kids can also don harnesses and helmets to tackle the "acrobranche" course, a series of obstacles several metres off the ground.

While adults may be happier hiring a four-seater pedal car and taking and coasting around the lake's perimeter.

13. Château de Bernicourt



Source: [lesanciennesducti](#)

Château de Bernicourt

A few minutes up from Douai, in Roost-Warendin, is a noble Louis XV-style chateau built in 1743. It was a stately home up to the early-1900s when the property was taken over by Douai's mining entity.

The property was used to house mining executives and employees up before being bought by the commune and turned into a museum.

The period furnishings have long been removed, and instead there are galleries revealing scenes of daily life at the start of the 20th century.

You can browse a blacksmith forge, a classroom, a shoemaker's workshop, all with original tools and furniture.

14. Day Trips



Source: [flickr](#)

Lille

One of the handy things about being in a conurbation is there are a lot of other exciting places a short distance away.

Lille, Lens and Arras roughly half an hour by car Lille should be your first port of call for its big city atmosphere and delightful Flemish architecture, epitomised by the Vieille Bourse (old stock exchange) in the Mannerist style.

Lens is a former mining town reborn as a cultural destination, and in 2012 opened a branch of the Louvre.

Arras meanwhile is more dainty, with two gorgeous squares enclosed by rows of Flemish gabled houses, and a 15th-century Gothic belfry.