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Douai Travel Guide



Place d'Armes & Belfry, Douai

Introduction

Douai (*Duacum* in Latin, *Dowaai* in Dutch, *Doway* in English, *Douay* in Old French ; pop. 43,000, with suburbs 220,000) is a city on the River Scarpe, in the French Flanders. It is located between Arras, Lille and Cambrai. The metropolitan area with Lens has a population of 553,000.

COPY CODE SNIPPET

History

The Romans built a fortress known as *Castellum Duacum* in 4th century. The region was absorbed soon after in the early Merovingian kingdom based in nearby Tournai (=> see History of the Franks).

From the 9th century, Douai was part of the County of Flanders, and was disputed by the King of France until 1369. It was granted its first charter in 1188.

In 1384, the town became a possession of the Dukes of Burgundy, then passed into the possession of the Habsburg family in 1477.

The Catholic University of Douai was founded under the patronage of Philip II of Spain from 1560 to 1562 to thwart the Protestant Reform. It became the most important university of the Southern Netherlands after the older University of Leuven, in present-day Belgium.



industry, particularly wool imported from England.

Douai did not become part of France until Louis XIV's annexation in 1667-8. The city was almost completely destroyed by successive sieges from 1710 to 1712.

Douai acted as the *chef-lieu* (regional capital) of the *département du Nord* from 1791 to 1804. Afterwards, [Lille](#) got that privilege.

The university was suppressed during the French Revolution and its libraries's holdings transferred to the municipal library, most of which were destroyed by bombardments in 1944.

A new university of the same name was founded in the middle of the 19th century, but was transferred to [Lille](#) in 1887. Nowadays, the Law Faculty of the [University of Artois](#) is located in Douai.

Attractions

The old town developed around the area known as *la fonderie*, because of the former **canon foundry**.

The Belfry

One of the most important monument is the *beffroi* ("belfry"), symbolising the rights and privileges of the citizens in the Middle Ages. This one was erected in 1380, replacing an earlier wooden structure. A carillon was added in 1391, and other embellishments until 1475. Victor Hugo, visiting Douai in 1837, praised the local belfry as the handsomest he had ever seen.

An identical copy of the belfry was added to the townhall in the 19th century to give it its current symmetrical aspect. The bells were melted by the Germans in 1917 to be used as ammunition. New ones were made in 1924, including one nicknamed *Joyeuse* (joyful) weighing 5500 kg and sounding the note "F", another one named *La disnée* weighing 2400 kg with a "A" pitch, and a newer *La Nouvelle Victoire*, added in 1954, and which 1600 kg sound a "B". The carillon now has 62 bells ranging on 5 octaves.

Other sights

The old **fortifications** are part of the charm of the city. Don't miss the *Porte de Valenciennes* ("Valenciennes Gate"), built in 1453, the *Porte d'Arras* ("Arras Gate"), and the *Tour des Dames* ("Ladies' Tower"), erected in 1426.

Douai has its lot of (very) old churches. The oldest is the *Collégiale Saint-Pierre* ("St. Peter's Collegiate Church") constructed around 1012 by the Count of Flanders. Its tower was rebuilt between 1513 and 1687, and the rest of the edifice between 1735 and 1750. The blend of Gothic and Classical style contribute to its unusual look.



Belfry & townhall, Douai



St Peter's Collegiate Church, Douai



Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai



Church, has a history going back to 1175 and is adjacent to the ramparts. Archeological findings revealed the remains of a Franciscan convent, as well as the old Saint Ame Collegiate Church (950-1798) under Saint Ame Square.

The city **theatre** dates from 1783, and was frequented by illustrious people such as Paganini, Liszt, or Napoleon Bonaparte. It incorporated new technologies as soon as they were invented (gas lighting, electric lighting, electronics...) and is still a highlight of cultural life in Douai.

Douai is rich in beautiful townhouses and palaces. The French government has started renovating the city's historical heritage since 1984. A good example is the Louis XV-style *Hôtel d'Aoust*, a pure architectural marvel.

Another recently renovated edifice is the **court of justice**. It is housed in an old refuge of Marchiennes Abbey, which was converted into the Parliament of Flanders in 1714. The original Gothic style of the building was preserved, except for inner court and the front façade, rebuilt in the 18th century in the Neo-classical style.

The *Musée de la Chartreuse*, housed in the Flemish Renaissance-style *Hôtel d'Abancourt-Montmorency*, has a superb collection of fine arts, ranging from the 15th to the 19th century.

Other must-see include the Renaissance *Hôtel de la Tramerie*, the 17th-century *Salles d'Anchin* (the surviving part of the Jesuit college), and the immense Neo-classical *Hôpital Général*.

Gayant Festival

Douai is famous for its festival known in French as *Les fêtes de Gayant*. It is held the weekend following 5th July, from Saturday to Monday.

Five giant puppets are carried around the streets in music to the delight of the onlookers. The tallest, *Monsieur Gayant*, is 8.5 m high and weighs 370 kg. *Madame Gayant* (also known under the name of Marie Cagenon) is 6.25 m tall for 250 kg. Their three children Jacquot, Fillon and Binbin, are respectively 3 m, 2.8 m and 2.2 m. The parents are carried by 6 men each, while a child only require 3 pairs of arms.

The festival originated in 1530 (around the same period as the carnival of Binche, across the Belgian border), and was dedicated to St-Maurand, the patron saint of Douai. The children did not appear until 1720. Banned by the Church in 1770, the festival started again in 1801. The modern costumes were designed in 1821.

How to get there

Douai is located near the junction of the A1/E17 and the N455, about 50 km from Lille, and 25 km from Arras. The N43 connects it to Cambrai (25 km).

Douai is a major railway junction, 15 to 20 min away from Arras, 30 to 45 min from Lille, 30 min from Cambrai or Valenciennes. Trains to Belgium require a change at Lille.

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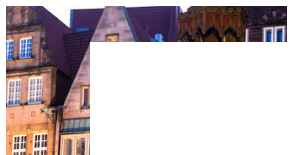


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