

Travel the Benelux

Ancient Belgian city offers history, art

by **Tim Clark**

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Tournai, one of the oldest cities in Belgium, has much to offer a visitor: Interesting history, art and architecture are abundant. Renowned for its cathedral and belfry, which are both designated UNESCO World Heritage sites, Tournai has many historic buildings. The unusually shaped Grand Place, shaped like a triangle rather than the usual square or rectangle, has many fine restaurants and cafés where you can have a drink or meal and enjoy the view of the historic buildings.

Founded by the Romans circa 50 B.C., Tournai has been under the control of Spain, France, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and of course, since 1830, Belgium. Captured in 1513 by Henry VIII of England, Tournai became the only Belgian city to have ever been ruled by England.

Tournai draws its nickname “The City of Five Steeples” from the colossal Cathédrale Notre-Dame. The church, which is undergoing extensive restoration with much of the outside covered by scaffolding, is still worth a visit. The rose window (photo above) set in the west façade is a stunning depiction of the Virgin Mary in the center surrounded by 16 windows portraying the prophets.

Among the treasures of the church are priceless gold and silver reliquary chests encrusted with gems. On the second Sunday of September (Sept.13 this year), the chests are paraded through town in The Great Procession

of Tournai, a religious procession that has taken place every year since 1092.

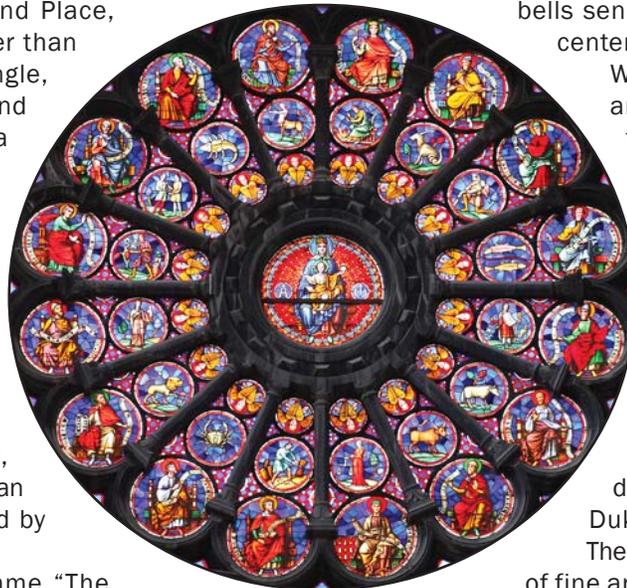
The belfry anchors one end of the square. The oldest bell tower in Belgium, it dates from the 12th century and stands 236 feet high. Its carillon of 44 bells sends melodies out over the city center.

With a symmetrical design and intricately detailed facade the cloth hall stands regally on the square. A splendid Renaissance building from the 1600s, the gilded building was restored in 1998.

A statue of Christine de Lalaing stands in the middle of the Grand Place. In 1581, while her husband, the governor of Tournai, was away, she rallied the troops in defense of the city against the Duke of Parma.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts (museum of fine arts) was designed by the great art nouveau architect Victor Horta. The star-shaped building, topped by glass cupolas, alone is worth a visit just to see the only museum in Wallonia designed by Horta.

In galleries fanning out from a central hall filled with sculptures, you can see an impressive collection of work from the 15th century onward that includes art by many of the greatest Belgian painters and sculptors. Among them are Rubens, Ensor and Tournai native Weyden. International artists-such as Manet, Monet, Lautrec and van Gogh-are also represented.



Outside the gate



The bronze statue of Christine de Laling by Tournai artist Aimable Dutrieux.



The gilded cloth hall and the oldest bell tower in Belgium stand on the Grand Place in Tournai.

From:
Mons: 49 km
Brussels: 98 km
Schinnen: 218 km