

# Travel the Benelux

## Valkenburg celebrates Christmas season

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Located in the Dutch province of Limburg, Valkenburg has been a tourist destination since the 1800s. Set in an area of natural beauty, the city still retains its historical charm. The ruins of Valkenburg castle overlook cozy restaurants, fine hotels and interesting boutiques offering a wide variety of products and gifts.

Christmas season, the city really shines. Famous for its two Christmas markets in caves, Valkenburg goes all out for the holiday. Signs of Christmas are everywhere – from decorations over the streets to a lineup of chocolate St. Nicholas’s in the candy store to twice-weekly Christmas parades. Wednesdays at 7 p.m. and Saturday at 7:30 p.m., floats, dancers and other entertainers move through the center of town in the parade.

Protected from the elements and with a steady temperature of 50 F, the caves offer a great place to hold a market. A profusion of lights, trees and decorations turns the caves into a festive wonderland. Along with the vendors, a new Christmas scene awaits around every corner. You can get a lot of your Christmas shopping done in the caves where vendors offer a diverse range of merchandise from ornaments to pottery. If you have questions about the merchandise, don’t be shy about asking the vendor. Most Dutch speakers also speak English. Both caves have cafés where you can take a break from shopping and enjoy a coffee, hot cocoa or, if you prefer, a glass of wine or beer.

The town cave (Gemeentegrot in Dutch) and the velvet cave (Fluwelengrot in Dutch) are within easy walking

distance of each other. If you tire of shopping, you can view murals and sculptures from the 17th and 18th centuries in the larger of the two caves, the velvet cave.

The ruins of the castle of Valkenburg sit above the velvet cave. Through the centuries, the castle has been besieged, destroyed and rebuilt. After being destroyed in 1672 by William III, the castle was never rebuilt. A secret passage was discovered between the castle and the cave that allowed the knights of the castle to come and go undetected during battles.

Beatrix of Valkenburg was raised in Valkenburg castle. Considered by many to be one of the most beautiful women of her time, she was 15 when she married the 60-year-old Richard of Cornwall, one of the wealthiest men in Europe.

Outside the gate



**Gemeentegrot (town cave)** - Open Monday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Sundays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Dec. 23 from noon to 6 p.m.

**Fluwelengrot (velvet cave)** - Open Sunday through Thursday from noon to 7 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Dec. 23 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.