

# Travel the Benelux

## Visit Abbaye de Villers, a beautiful ruin

by **Tim Clark**

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The great Cistercian Abbaye de Villers was founded in 1146 by 12 monks from the Abbey of Clairvaux, France, who were sent out to start a second abbey. At its peak in the mid-13th century it housed 100 monks and 300 brothers living within the abbey walls. The abbey flourished as a cultural and religious center in the Middle Ages. Most of the ruins still standing date from that time.

The abbey suffered the fate of many ecclesiastical buildings in Belgium; it was wrecked by Protestant iconoclasts in the 16th century and plundered by the French Revolutionary army in 1794. The result is the largest set of church ruins in Belgium.

Charles Houart bought the site in 1820 and allowed a railroad to be built right through the grounds. In 1893, the Belgian government stepped in and purchased the abbey to conserve the site. The abbey was named an Exceptional Heritage Site of Wallonia in 1972.

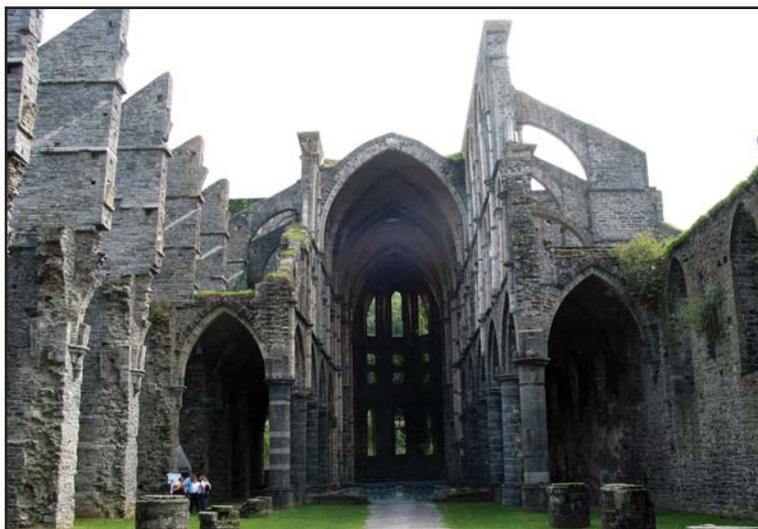
Much of the architecture of the monastery is still standing. You can explore the cloisters, the dormitory and brewery. The jewel of the site is the majestic ruins of the Cistercian church. The church, which took 70 years to build, was completed around 1300.

A spectacular location to snap some photographs, take a walk or paint a picture. The history and romance of the abbey have inspired artists for years.

Abbaye de Villers is the home of many cultural events throughout the year, including Night of Choirs every August, when six choirs perform concerts among the ruins followed by a fireworks show. Art exhibits, outdoor theater and conferences are also held here. A St. Nicholas event is scheduled for the afternoon of Dec. 2 starting

at 2 p.m. with a hunt among the ruins for his missing miter and a chance to make a customized shoe for St. Nicholas to leave presents in on Dec 6.

You can pick up an audio guide in the visitors center to help you understand what you are seeing and learn about the daily life of the monks who lived here from the 12th to the 18th century. A new visitor center is under construction and set to open in spring 2016.



The impressive Cistercian church ruins at Abbaye de Villers. Photos by Jean Grandmont



**Essentials for your visit**

Rue de la Abbaye 55  
1495 Villers-la-Ville, Belgium

**Open:**

Nov.1 to March 31: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
April 1 to Oct 31: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
Closed Tuesdays and Dec. 24, 25, 31 and Jan. 1

**Admission:**

Adults €6  
Children, senior citizens €5  
Children ages 6-12 €2.50  
Children ages 5 and under free  
Audio Guide €1.50

Outside the gate