

## **Explore mesmerising Valkenburg**

**This small laid-back town in the hilly south of the Netherlands offers lots to do and see – above and underground.**

We're passing the green hills of Limburg, the most southern province of the Netherlands. Belgium and Germany are nearby. The train stops at the town of Valkenburg, situated in a valley cut out by the small river Geul.

On entering the railway station, built in the shape of a small castle, I find a pleasant cafe. It's the oldest existing station building in the country, the waiter tells me, built from marlstone – marl is something I will hear lots more about during my visit here.

At the Tourist Information Office in the town centre, another beautiful, light yellow-brown marlstone building, I meet Karin. This cheerfully, smiling lady dressed in white and blue and with a wealth of knowledge about Valkenburg has been guiding people around town for 36 years.

"Valkenburg was the first town in the Netherlands to have tourist visitors," she says proudly, and then explains that a railway network was opened in 1853 between the cities of Maastricht and Aken in Germany connecting Valkenburg. "From then on, everyone could visit – and not just the happy few who had their own cart and carriage."

### **Middle Ages**

At the terraces, people drink coffee and tea and enjoy Limburg vlaai, the local fruit pie. "People know how to enjoy life here," Karin smiles. The town name likely refers to 'valken', Dutch for falcons – which were popular among the nobility for hunting with in the Middle Ages – and to 'burcht', a fortress.

We approach the Geulpoort, one of the city towers, and glimpse a ruin in the distance – the only castle situated on a hill in the Netherlands. The city towers and the castle were destroyed by the Dutch troops in 1672 to chase away the French occupiers, Karin explains. They have recently been restored and, in some cases, completely rebuilt.

We cross a small footbridge over the small, fast-flowing small river. My guide points at the stairs leading to the river. "In the past, cattle came to drink here, and women did the laundry, and of course caught up on local news." Next, we pass the Roman-Catholic Saint Nicolas and Barbara Church, which Karin tells me, dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Stubborn**

She points at the bronze statue of a bock. "It represents the typical stubborn nature of Valkenburg locals, and refers to the story of a mythical gang of 18<sup>th</sup> century robbers who rode through the sky on the backs of flying goats."

We walk along the Den Halder park and under another skilfully rebuilt gate, the Grendelpoort. We pass many restaurants, boutiques and large, old advertisements painted on the walls. Dutch department store Hema is housed in another beautiful marlstone

building. In the past, the theatre was located here, Karin says. "When Valkenburg was liberated after the war in 1944, Marlene Dietrich performed here."

I'm having difficulty keeping up with Karin, who despite being almost twice my age, walks a lot faster than me. She suggests a break and a coffee at Aan de Linde opposite the Den Halder castle. "This used to be a dance hall. Many couples have met each other here."

### **Underground art**

My guide has told me some interesting stories about the caves and the 250 kilometres of underground corridors beneath the town. In the afternoon, I head to the Gemeentegrot, the Municipal Caves. Like the other caves here and in the rest of the country, this is not a natural cave, but has been carved out by people.

You can choose between a 45-minute walking tour or a 30-minute train ride. Like in the other caves, it stays 12 degrees Celsius here all year round. "Marlstone has been mined here ever since the Roman times more than 2000 years ago," driver Ruud explains to the group. He points at the scratches on the walls caused by carts being pulled by horses carrying the marlstone.

Dim lights reveal the large number of charcoal drawings and sculptures of animals, castles, members of the royal family and prominent citizens. "Local artists started creating them at the end of the nineteenth century," says the driver. The rooms we're passing now were used as shelters during the Second World War.

"We've reached the deepest point at 72 metres below the surface," the guide says. "We're now driving under the spa and some houses." He then shows us which direction to walk in to reach the Cave Experience. In the distance, Michael Jackson sings 'Leave me alone' (see the 5 senses - Sound).

### **A special night**

It's now time for dinner, and following the Tourist Board's advice I rent a bicycle and head to Château St. Gerlach. The fifteen-minute ride takes me through a beautiful green, hilly nature area along the river. The castle, originally a cloister, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is surrounded by attractive gardens dotted with sculptures. Inside there are stunning, traditional rooms with antique furniture and books.

At the end of the evening, I have tasted seven small, delicious, French-inspired dishes, all prepared creatively and with the best ingredients. "All vegetables and fruits come from our own garden," the waiter says proudly. "The honey too, our chef is also a beekeeper."

I spend the night in De Oude Molen, located in a central, white painted watermill building, dating back to 1700. There is just one guest room, which is enormous and includes a modern kitchen and a living room with designer furniture. Parts of the old mill are still visible in the room and also next door, which creates a special atmosphere.

### **Climbing and relaxation**

The next morning, I climb the hill to the 11th century castle ruin. On the top is a photogenic wrought iron wind vane depicting Archangel Michael and the dragon. Below is the Velvet Cave, a labyrinth of tunnels with paintings, inscriptions, sculptures and a chapel, which the castle's inhabitants could use in case of danger.

Next, I walk further up the Cauberg, a steep 133.7-metre-high hill – high for Dutch standards, and the scene of a yearly cycling race. It's time for some relaxation and I enter the Thermae 2000 spa to enjoy the 32-degree Celsius mineral water.

More information: <https://en.vvvzuidlimburg.nl/>

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## An enchanting fairy tale in Valkenburg

If you're in town between 16 November and 6 January, you can experience the lively and enchanting Christmas spirit. CNN has called Valkenburg one of the best places to have a Christmas vacation, and it has been chosen European City of Christmas for 2018 by the non-profit Christmas Cities Network.

At Santa's Village at the central Theodoor Dorrenplein, you can sample sweet snacks typical for this time of year and admire the giant Christmas tree decorated with more than five thousand twinkling lights. Next, visit the atmospheric Christmas markets in the Municipal Caves and the Velvet Cave. Here, and at Santa's Gift Factory on the Daelhemerweg, you can find unique gifts, such as local crafts made of marlstone, wood and metal.

In the Museum Roman Catacombs, a replica of the one in Rome, and in MergelRijk you can also experience the festive atmosphere with Christmas miniatures and statues. At Winter Wonderland in the Wilhelmina cave at the cable car, you can marvel at underground winter sculptures. The Fairytale Forest, loved by children year-round, is decorated in Christmas style too.

Don't miss the Christmas parade with illuminated floats, Christmas songs and dancing groups on Wednesday and Saturday evenings. You can also attend one of the many magical Christmas concerts.

More information: [www.kerststadvalkenburg.nl/en/](http://www.kerststadvalkenburg.nl/en/)

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## 5 senses – Taste

### **Delicious regional products**

Valkenburg is part of the province of Limburg, which has a distinct culture. You can enjoy many regional delicacies here. At the Tourist Board, you can buy a wide choice of honey, jams, juices, chocolate and more. Try a 'Limburgse vlaai', a sweet, fruit flan at a cafe, or ask for other regional dishes.

## **5 senses – Sound**

### **Music at the Cave Experience**

After the tour in the Municipal Caves, you can enjoy the Cave Experience. This sound and light spectacle consists of two fascinating shows played in sequence. At the ‘I want my MTV show’, you’ll hear pop music from different periods while watching the accompanying videos projected onto the 10-metre-high cave walls. The ‘Cave Art’ show brings artworks to life, from art made by our ancestors 30,000 years ago to modern pieces accompanied by music.

## **5 senses – Touch**

### **Soft outside, hard outside**

Touch the marlstone inside and outside a cave and feel the difference. Because of the high humidity (96-98%) in the caves, the marl is much softer inside. The stone is formed from billions of shells and sea animals with a chalk skeleton that lived here when this region was still a tropical sea 60 million years ago. In Limburg many castles, farms, cloisters and houses have been built by this material.

## **5 senses – Sight**

### **Sand and marl sculptures**

In MergelRijk, you can walk through an atmospherically lit system of corridors. On the way, you’ll see beautiful marl statues and sand sculptures, both life-size and in miniature. You’ll hear many interesting stories and facts about marlstone and the caves. There’s also a Fossil and Mine museum. In the cave workshop, you can make your own marl drawing or sculpture, a nice souvenir. Afterwards, enjoy a drink or bite at the underground Daelhemergroeve restaurant.

## **5 senses – Scent**

### **Smells bad, tastes good**

Typical for the region is the ‘Rommedoe cheese’, also called ‘Herve kaas’ or ‘stinking cheese’. It has a strong taste, so it’s best combined with other types of cheeses, something sweet or the local bread specialities. The locals have been preparing this special cheese since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Get it from a delicacies shop called Lokaal 02, located at Irmengardpassage 2 in the centre.