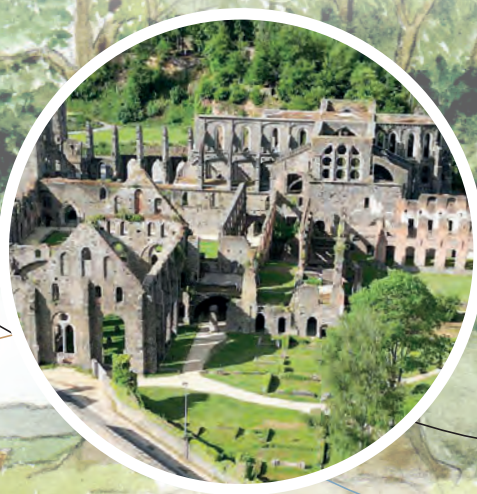


Travels in the lands of the abbey

Around Villers Abbey



Routes to explore in a new way, between past and present

This is more than a travel journal, it is an invitation to explore Villers Abbey, its surrounding area (Pays des 4 Bras) and its wonders. It is the first leg of a tour that also takes in Clairvaux Abbey in the Champagne region of France and Alcobaça Abbey in Portugal. This account told in the words of Eva, a curious hiker in search of escape and history, brings new inspiration through walks, bike rides and encounters while discovering and exploring the territory and becoming totally immersed in it.

She tells of her encounters on her travels in Cistercian lands, describes the landscapes and experiences, and reports the information picked up along the way. You just need to change your outlook to go travelling... and adopt a new rhythm to develop your connection with the world.

This guide is an initiative of the Cistercian Territories project led by GAL Pays des 4 Bras, in partnership with Villers Abbey and two other European territories, in France (GAL Côte des Bar) and Portugal (Leader Oeste).

Supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, Europe is investing in rural areas with Wallonie-Bruxelles International and the Walloon Brabant tourist office.

Chief editor: C. Delcour, President of the non-profit organisation Pays des 4 Bras, 2023. Design: StudioPiet

Content: C. Rossez, J. Rigaux

Illustrations (watercolours): M. Deru

This brochure has been carefully written. GAL Pays des 4 Bras is not responsible for changes and/or inaccuracies in the information presented here.

Find out more: cistercian-territories.com



Start of the tour

As a child, I was transfixed by the magic of old stones, in awe of ruins that, as if suspended in time and space, seem to hold a piece of eternity. There is something inspiring about walking through sites brimming with history, from the smallest to the largest. You cannot help but think about the imagination behind them and the genius that permeates them. This sense of amazement has never gone away.

This year I am embarking on my tour of Cistercian lands. Nine centuries on from the first Cistercian abbey, Cîteaux, I am setting out to explore a living and multi-form heritage which is unique in its genre.

The Order of Cistercians has established considerable heritage across the whole of Europe. Formed at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries, the order developed at astonishing speed to reach more than 2,000 abbeys for men and women. Each of them spread out over its territory from which it drew its own resources and crafted its guiding principles.

From wet valley floors to vast fertile areas, the heritage left behind by the White Monks still remains to this day.

It can be found on a visit or a scenic walk, as you stroll along a pathway or stop off on a terrace, as you enjoy something to eat or drink...

I chose the old Villers Abbey, recognised as the most complete Cistercian construction in Europe, as my starting point. An account of travels in rural lands with history, quiet and sensory pleasure.



© LDV Production



Videos:
"On Cistercian paths"

The clips can be found online.

*An abundance of woods,
valleys and water.*

*Huge abbeys, places
of spirituality, culture,
art and contrasts.*

*Historic remains, lands,
mills and granges scattered
here and there.*

*Where the beauty of
the landscapes combines
history and natural
treasures, where Cistercian
expertise and spirituality
are still going strong.*

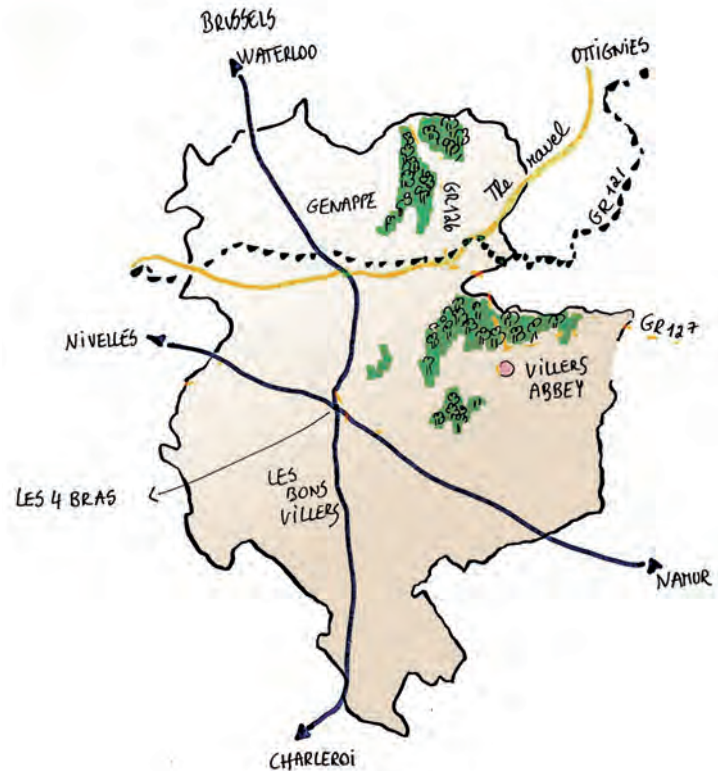


Contrast of landscapes

My first incursions into the Villers lands were back in my childhood when we would go there as a family in summer.

We'd go to see a show. A moment where time stood still, in an exceptional place where the stones told a story. The old Villers Abbey left an impression on my childhood with its remnants of architecture thrusting upwards into the sky. All around are rock and woods. I cannot wait to go back there and explore the surrounding territory.

The Pays des 4 Bras and its contrasting landscapes, between past and modernity. Within easy reach of the capital, Brussels, it offers a taster of the Ardennes, with shale valleys and pine trees growing in its sandy soil.



This discreet territory had its heyday in the Middle Ages, under the aegis of powerful abbeys and local seigniories.

Nature lovers and families will enjoy the hundreds of walks taking in villages steeped in history with their long-standing churches and large tenant farms isolated in the countryside.

It is also a hiker's paradise, at the crossover of three national hiking trails, and a Mecca for mountain bikers. With sport, culture, heritage and beautiful landscapes, there is much to explore. It is also a good starting point for visiting Belgium.

Three days does not do it justice. There is barely time to sound it out, to get a sense of this territory's soul and discover a few local gems before hitting the road again. Enjoy the present moment without thinking too much about the next. My travels will be able to continue where I left off...



© WBT - Arnaud Siquet

*“I remember the cool of a summer”
evening in Villers.*

Day 1

The unmissable Villers Abbey

Here I am at my first stop. The remains of the Cistercian abbey come into view as you round bends on streets and paths which all seem to converge towards them.

Concealed by the surrounding forest, the monumental ruins emerge from the marshy floor of the Thyle Valley.

Villers Abbey was built over the river, in a stone quarry. I can see why the Cistercian monks chose this place to set themselves up.

In this inward-facing landscape, 650 years of monastic life gave way to ruins. Although the abbey has not been reconstructed, it has got a new life. Previously closed to the outside world, the site now welcomes crowds of visitors within its walls.



© Abbaye de Villers

*“ Villers Abbey, built over the river Thyle.
I would dream of jumping on board the next train,
if only for the view! ”*



Not only tourists. It is part of the landscape and residents of the surrounding areas hold a special relationship with it. School groups, couples, families and friends all come for visits.

Artists and poets too. With exhibitions, concerts, popular shows, festivals and workshops, the old abbey is keeping up with the times.

The site is open for visitors throughout the year, seven days a week. I gave myself two hours to do a full tour, including a leisurely stroll. I start out by the old mill bakery and its visitor centre. After a wonderful introduction to the Cistercian world, the smells and colours of the gardens set the pace of the visit. They encourage me to slow down and take time to admire the architecture with the Cistercian austerity and romanticism of the ruins.



“ *The abbatial church with its extraordinary acoustics and famous oculi, also known as ‘windows to the soul’.*
Sharing a moment of childlike glee and letting your imagination go, game book in hand. ”



ABBAYEDEVILLERS

- A 30-hectare site
- 50,000m² of preserved walls
- 5,000m² of Roman vaults

Info: villers.be/en

Day 1 — A sea of forest

As I leave the abbey I am offered a multitude of itineraries for walks, horse rides and bike rides proposed by the tourist office. Many of them cross over at a large clearing known as the 'Star' which is a great place to stop for a bite to eat or simply decide on your route. This sets the agenda for what lies ahead as I cross the large forest area of the Thyle Valley: dense leafy woods with bracken and pine trees.

The 'woods runner' route (a.k.a. 'the greatness of an abbey and a forest') involves some steep climbs and, importantly, stunning landscapes. A peacefulness prevails as soon as I enter the woods. The water carves its way through the shale, the trees form a pattern of light on the path and I can hear the gurgling of streams and murmurs of the foliage.

As I reach Chevelipont mill with its lake and water meadows, I think again of the monks and the work that would have been required when they first arrived for the Cistercian project to take root.



“In the Ry d'Hez Valley, water meadows featuring meadowsweet sit alongside alluvial forests”



Binoculars at the ready!

The valleys of the Dyle and its tributary, the Thyle, feature different nature areas included in the Natura 2000 network.

This covers 1,750 hectares in the Pays des 4 Bras. These are protected areas for many species of bird and nature lovers enjoy the countless footpaths that intersect the woods. In spring they are covered by a carpet of bluebells.




© Michael Notte

After a steep climb on the other side of the Thyle, I take a moment to marvel at the prevailing atmosphere in the alluvial forests of Ry d'Hez. Dragonflies, batrachians and all sorts of bird species live here alongside the beavers. I feel privileged to be sharing this rare and precious setting with them.

I am reaching the end of the walk. On the edge of the woods I find the former main entrance to the abbey, the Brussels Gate, a point of contact between two worlds.

"Villers-la-Ville: the greatness of an abbey and a forest"

- 9.5km
- 3 hours 15 minutes

Signposting: 

Starting point:
Villers-la-Ville
tourist office

NGI map available from
the Villers-la-Ville
tourist office or via
the QR code



Day 1 — Drinking the bread of the monks



I need to stop to quench my thirst.
I sit out on the terrace of *Le Bistro de l'Abbaye*, set in the former mill bakery, for a delicious experience - drinking the bread of the monks. Out of the six beers brewed on site, the V contains, more so than the others, a taste of History.

Made from barely, spelt and hops, its recipe is recorded in the abbey archives from the 18th century.

Curious to know more, I try my luck at the microbrewery...
As luck would have it, it's brewing day. There I meet André, a master brewer in his spare time.

His motto: "all work deserves its beer".

In the renovated old building, the Confrérie des Hostieux Moines brews using traditional methods and gives new life to ancestral expertise. That settles it!

I need to come back for the guided tour which is sure to be good.



“Mashing fork”



© beertourism.com

Microbrewery

The microbrewery, just a stone's throw from the abbey, can be visited on reservation.

There are guided tours on the second Saturday of the month from March to November.

More info:
hostieux.org or
villers.be/en

Detour to the abbey farm



A tree-lined path leads from the Bistro to the Farm Gate and goes up to the abbey's former tenant farm.

Isolated on the edge of the plateau, large buildings stand around a huge central courtyard. I learn that this farm owned 184 hectares of land in the mid-18th century.

Formerly set within the abbey enclosure, of which it was a key component, it directly provided for the needs of the monastic community. It is open to visitors who can wander around its gardens and educational orchard.



© D. Belayew

Adventures in the Pays des 4 Bras

A fun walk in the footsteps of Brother Michel.

Young adventurers can pick up an adventure bag from Villers-la-Ville tourist office or the reception of the Abbey.

More info:
relaisduvisiteur.be

Day 1 — Sleeping in a bookshop



© Pays des 4 Bras

“Not far from the bookshop, a house from the early 20th century with its impressive eclectic facade in which the Art Nouveau influence is clear to see.”

I would not have imagined myself staying a night in a bookshop. Bou and Laetitia welcome me into their warm den, packed with books, where children's laughter can be heard.

The house feels alive, the Librairie du Tienne whispers me wonderful stories and my hosts give me good tips on nearby places to visit and restaurants.

It is a highly charming place in which to retire to your room and enjoy the calm and simplicity.

This evening Bou invites me to join them for a drink.



© Pays des 4 Bras

Librairie du Tienne

Info:

Rue du Tienne 21, 1495 Villers-la-Ville
Tel: +32 (0)71 88 89 50

facebook.com/LibrairieduTienne
librairiedutienne@gmail.com

Day 2

— By bike on the Route of Granges



© Pays des 4 Bras

After a plentiful and delicious breakfast, I take the advice of my hosts and set off by bike to explore the surrounding area.

A choice of itineraries gave me the chance to do some serious pedalling across these stretches of countryside in search of heritage and local products. I opted for paths across fields and rural panoramas on the “Route of Granges”.

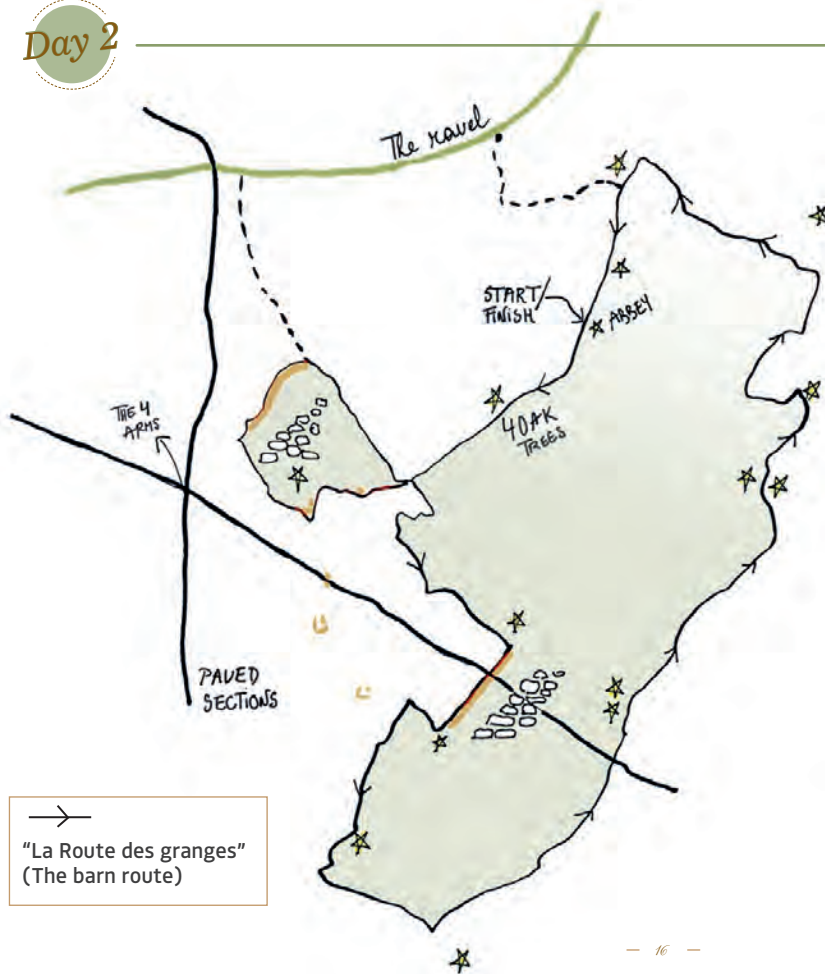
In the Middle Ages and up to its suppression in 1796, Villers Abbey was one of the biggest landowners in the surrounding area. It owned several thousand hectares of land, woods, meadows, fishponds and other uncultivated land for miles around.

Some of its former farming land (granges) are still active to this day, while others have been turned into golf courses, group housing or riding schools.

So I get in the saddle and pedal off to learn about the Cistercians, with large grain cultivations and granges, to discover beautiful landscapes, ancestral farms and flowery villages.

I won't have to check the map too often as I will mainly be guided by the numbered-node cycling network.

Day 2



'La Route des granges' (The barn route)

- 40km (possible to shorten it to 25km)
- 3h30
- Several possible starting points.

Route recommended for electric bikes. Some sections may require dismounting the bike.



Non-signposted itinerary mainly following the numbered-node network.

The 'Route of Granges' cycling itinerary is available via the QR code.



Starting from the abbey site, I take the ancient “drève des Quatre Chênes” (trail of Four Oaks), which runs alongside the surrounding wall and climbs the hillside to reach the plateau. Just like Brother Arnulphe with his cart 800 years earlier, I head towards the ‘Neuve Cour’ (name of the barn) and its two farms isolated in the middle of the countryside, but not without enjoying a few cobblestones.



Revelation, retreat, temptation...

Does the “Route des granges” (the barn route) lead to grape country? Moving away from an alley, on the “chemin de la Taille Loquet” (name of the road), appears the young vineyard of Côteaux des Avelines, nestling on the edge of a Natura 2000 area.

Contrasts

Past Sart-Dames-Avelines, the yellowing grass merges with the wheat fields. In this landscape of golden hues, vast beetroot fields stand alongside a horse farm, the lawns of the greens form an island, another world in the shade of the trees.

I imagine the harvester rubbing shoulders with lawn mowers and golf carts in the distance.

“Four oak trees highlight the road junction. Symbols of longevity, strength, wisdom and masculinity.”



“ Sart-Dames in sight ”

*The Sart-Dames-Avelines water tower,
an architectural treasure from the 1930s,
dominates the horizon and serves as a compass.*



*“In the masonry of the porch,
a reused stone (dated 1652) bearing the coat
of arms of the abbot of Villers and
the words ‘Prudentia et mansuetudine’
‘Prudence and benevolence’.”*

Time for a break. La Bruyère farm has diversified its activities since its foundation by Villers Abbey around 1245. Behind the hedges, the terrace of the brasserie “Le 19e Trou” (the 19th hole) offers a pleasant wooded setting in which to relax among the golfers, at a table or on a deckchair. A welcome break before getting back on the road to Villers-Perwin.

Local products

As I travel through this land of arable crops and grazing fields, where cereals, potatoes, sugar beet and dairy produce are grown, my escapade takes on gourmet allures.

In the little shop at the Warchais farm, the cheeses are available with shallot (my favourite), wild garlic or Provençal varieties.



*“Warchais farm.”
Christine welcomes me with a smile
and the generosity of a cream-maker.*

© Pays des 4 Bras



© Coderm

Between past and present. After crossing the old Bavay-Cologne Roman road, I reach the famous Chassart farms. I can see the extent of their impact on the landscape.

This former barn, whose land covered almost 400 contiguous hectares, became the symbol of the development of the sugar industry in the 19th century, under the aegis of the Dumont family. By 1900, the Dumont family was at the head of nine farms, covering some 1,400 hectares in the region!

Villages in bloom

To reach Mellery, Marbais and its charming square are a must. The atmosphere at “Le Sanglier Bistrot” (the wild pig bar/restaurant), something in between table d’hôtes and bistro, would tempt me to settle in for a bite to eat, but it is still early. I continue towards Mellery and its remarkable buildings, including the former abbey church of Colombier.

During a scenic passage across the plateau, I caught sight of the Sartage farm, with "le domaine du Chenoy" (the Chenoy estate) looming on the horizon. After the Cistercians, the Mosselman family and then the Boël family would own several thousand hectares here, including a large part of the surrounding woods.

Back to Villers

After crossing La Roche, my journey ends along the Thyle. This ride has shown me a lot of the country and has inspired me to prepare my next escapades...



© MTBW



Local gem

La réserve naturelle de
Along with Genappe, the Gentissart nature reserve is one of the gems of Walloon Brabant. Neighbouring Mellery, this former sandpit is the happy vestige of an industrial activity that left its mark on the province's history. An observation post placed outside the site is accessible to anyone who tries their luck at catching a glimpse of all the riches of this place on the fringes of human activity, being around a hundred plant and animal species.

Visit possible after reservation

More info:

brabantwallon.be

section « living | environment »

Day 2 — From farm to table

For my second evening, I move a few kilometers away, passing the centre of Genappe, to sit down in the Genappan countryside, which is full of treasures. I make a stopover in Loupoigne where the Indrani Lodge has taken up residence in the old castral farm, backing onto the church, where it houses not only a centre for revitalization, but also a vegetable garden and an orchard...



© Christophe Balestrie

Beer
Onion
yeast

Shallot
Garlic
Onion
Celery

Indrani Lodge

Set in a renovated medieval farmhouse, Indrani Lodge offers a range of accommodation options (including green seminars) and activities, from yoga classes to massages and relaxation sessions.

More info:

Chem. de la Waronche 1,
1471 Genappe
Tel : +32 (0)67 79 02 43
indranilodge@gmail.com
indranilodge.com



© Pays des 4 Bras

"ELEMENTS @Indrani" is one of those restaurants that makes your mouth water even before you walk through the door. The discovery of the menu (there is only one) is punctuated by little pieces of paper being turned over. I let myself get caught up in the guessing game, confused by the original pairings, enigmatic flavours and forgotten vegetables.

Revitalized by my evening, it is time to return to my accommodation. I settled in a magnificent garden belonging to Anne-Sophie and Jean, who have converted a former artist's studio into a charming cottage.

“
*A peaceful night and
a bucolic interlude in
a former artist's studio,
in the middle of
a garden full of poetry.*
”

L'Atelier accommodation

Gîte capacity : 4 travellers

Minimum 2 nights

More info:

Chaussée de Promelles 24,
1472 Vieux-Genappe

Tel : +32 (0)477 85 49 44

annesophie.vanderbeck@gmail.com

Day 3 — Cheesy stopovers



© MTBW

From my experience the day before, I've kept a few culinary memories written on small pieces of paper. A new invitation for me to go and meet food artisans. The Baillerie farm aroused my curiosity.

At the suggestion of the “Relais du Visiteur” (visitors centre) in Genappe, the Dyle valley opens up to me today. I got back in the saddle to join the RAVeL at Fonteny, in the direction of Bousval. The RAVeL, a former railway line transformed into a greenway, is frolicking with

the Dyle. Passing through Genappe, it runs alongside the industrial site of the Sucrerie, which caught my eye. So I concluded that, here too, industrial heritage goes hand in hand with biodiversity.

In Bousval, the heart of the village still beats in the old castle courtyard, which hides behind the church clinging to its slope and cobbled street. At the welcome desk of the Bousval farm, you'll find organic mini cheeses, yoghurts and ice cream. Sitting on an old feeding trough, I slip back into childhood.

On the other side of the Dyle, on the promontory facing Bousval Castle, I'm greeted at the farm by a herd of goats.

At the counter, I see fresh or dried "crottins" (goat cheese), yoghurts and mature cheeses. The milk from around a hundred goats raised by the cooperative is processed on the farm, with the entire chain based on sustainable agriculture practices. From field to plate.

Overlooking the two valleys (Dyle and Thyle), the Try-au-Chêne chapel, also known as Notre-Dame de Hault, is swept by the winds: the view is breathtaking. On either side, lines are drawn and landscapes are carved out, some come alive, others are lulled by the breeze and the sun. All seem to respond to each other.



Day 3

A town in the countryside



© Francisco Deorino Oliveira

Before blasting off for the rest of the programme, I set off to explore the narrow streets of Genappe, the ancient city of Lothier. Although nothing remains of the castle of the Dukes of Brabant, its "grand-place" and some of the town's old façades caught my attention. In the centre, local artists have reappropriated shop windows that are currently being converted.

Not far from a board games pub, my journey halts at a former art deco cinema, "Le Monty", nickname of General Montgomery. A dynamic meeting place where a wide variety of people meet to chat, eat, swap seeds, debate, dance, sing or work. A place where knowledge is shared like the books on the shelves. Le Monty creates encounters.

On certain Friday evenings, the space is transformed into a restaurant: here you can eat the culture of the world. Genappe, a town in the countryside and an unexpected cultural reservoir.

I walk back up to the church, pass it and leave it behind me to go through the door of the 38, a cultural meeting point popular with inhabitants of Genappe and attracting people from far and wide.

Cultural venues in Genappe

Le Monty is a cultural meeting place and collaborative space where TOF Théâtre, renowned for its puppet shows, breathes life into its artistic line.

Info: lemonty.be

The 38 is the cultural, youth and heritage hub of Genappe and the "Pays des 4 Bras" (Land of the 4 arms). With a host of activities, workshops and events, it's bursting at the seams with ideas and action... with lots of gusto and heart.

Info: le38.be

He who drinks good wine, sees God



© LDV Production

“Tasting time. The guided tour combines history, education and sharing... with the privilege of tasting a limited production that has won several awards.”

After a short supply chain brunch at “Chez Madame Oleson” (at Madame Oleson's), I hit the road again for a last glass of sunshine in Villers-la-Ville.

A 30-minute bike ride from Genappe, in the former walled site of Villers Abbey, terraced winegrowing has taken root once again.

In the wake of the Cistercians, the brotherhood of the “Vignoble de l'Abbaye de Villers en Brabant” (the vineyard of the Villers Abbey in Brabant) pampers the twenty acres of vines it cultivates biodynamically.

Passing through the front door of the walled site of “Villers-la-Vigne” (the name of the vineyard), you can feel the passion, energy and atmosphere of the place and those who bring it to life.

Day 3



© Vignoble du château de Bousval

discover a new face of the “Pays des 4 Bras” (Land of the 4 Arms). We are far from Champagne region and its thousands of hectares of vines.

And yet, in this small corner of Wallonia, bubbles and still wines are produced that express the richness of a terroir, between heritage and future. Villers-la-Vigne has inspired many.

This stings my curiosity. It makes me want to go further, but the harvest is not for tomorrow.

The vineyards

The “Pays des 4 Bras” (Land of the 4 Arms) is booming as a wine-growing region! To meet its passionate winemakers and taste its quality wines, I noted several addresses:

Villers-la-Vigne

It is possible to combine the visit of the vineyard with that of the ruins.
villers-la-vigne.be

“Côteaux des Avelines” (hillsides of Avelines)

Wine tour, treasure hunt and quiz in the vineyards for adults and children.
coteaux-des-avelines.be

“Domaine de Glabais” (the domain of Glabais)

www.facebook.com/domainedeglabaais

Castle of Bousval

chateaubousval.be

**See you in September-October
for the grape harvest!**



Leaving the estate, I admire one last time the majestic ruins of Villers and the quiet life that inhabits it at this hour. I savour the serene happiness of an escapade that is coming to an end. I rediscovered the dreamy landscapes of my childhood and discovered the unsuspected riches of the “Pays des 4 Bras”(Land of 4 Arms). My exploration is not over, I'll be back...

My journey continues in search of new routes to discover the Cistercian heritage of Clairvaux Abbey, in Champagne and the Monastery of Alcobaça, in Portugal.

Will you follow me?

Next stop: the Orval Abbey and the Nature Park of Gaume.

Some useful addresses

Tourist information

Tourist Information Office

Rue de l'Abbaye 53, 1495 Villers-la-Ville
+32 (0)71 87 98 98
sivillerslaville@skynet.be
villers-la-ville.net

Visitor centre

Rue de Bruxelles 38, 1470 Genappe
+32 (0)67 77 23 43
info@relaisduvisiteur.be
relaisduvisiteur.be

Walloon Brabant Tourist Information Office

+32 (0)10 56 09 70
info@destinationbw.be
destinationbw.be

Charleroi Tourist Information Office

+32 (0)71 86 14 14
maison.tourisme@charleroi.be
cm-tourisme.be

Tracks

On foot, by bike or on horseback, over 400 kilometres of hiking trails criss-cross the 'Pays des 4 Bras' (Land of the 4 Arms)

Bike rental points

Relais du visiteur / visitor centre:

(see previous page)

Adult electric bikes and unassisted mountain bikes.

Hire by the day or for a 3-day weekend; booking required.

Frasnes-lez-Gosselies sports complex :

Adult electric bikes.

Hire by the hour or for 1, 2, 3 or more days; week-days only and with reservation.

Info:

Rue Jean-Baptiste Loriaux 3A, 6210 Les Bons Villers

+32 (0)71 85 25 82

les-bons-villers.be


Accommodation

Whether you're staying in a bed and breakfast or a rural cottage, in a small medieval house converted into an artist's studio, an old mill or on a golf course, there are over fifty different types of accommodations available in the "Pays des 4 Bras" (Land of the 4 arms).

You can also pitch your tent in a garden, field or pasture.

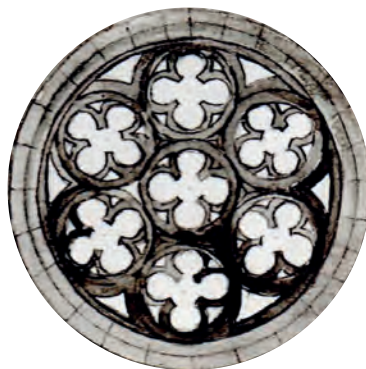
Info:

welcometomygarden.org/explore
warmshowers.org



“Peace of mind is found after you exhale completely”

Quote from Shunryu Suzuki (Zen master)



European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe invests in rural areas. With the support of Wallonie-Bruxelles International, partner municipalities and “la Maison du Tourisme du Brabant wallon” (Walloon Brabant Tourist Office).

An initiative of the “Pays des 4 Bras” (Land of the 4 arms) local action group (LAG) within the framework of the “Cistercian Territories” cooperation project carried out in partnership with the Villers Abbey, the Côte des Bar en Champagne LAG (France) and the Leader Oeste LAG (Portugal).

