

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Europe

# Mons struts its stuff

Big plans are afoot for Belgian town's year as a European capital of culture

BY SUZANNE MORPHET  
Special to Stars and Stripes

Imagine walking down a sidewalk and seeing what appear to be hundreds of books flying out of the second-story window of a university building.

Or wandering through a maze of 8,000 sunflowers.

How about taking part in a 16th-century banquet in a European chateau of the same vintage?

If you go to Mons, Belgium, next year, you'll discover all this and more as the city launches a host of events to celebrate its status as cultural capital of Europe. (Mons is one of two cultural capitals selected by members of the European Commission for 2015; the other is Plzen, Czech Republic.)

Founded on a hilltop in the seventh century, Mons boasts a stunning cathedral, a Baroque belfry and a large and lively main square.

But Mons is best known as a place scarred by war. Germans occupied the city for four years during World War I, and it was shelled heavily during World War II. Memorial tourism has been the main draw for visitors. That will change in 2015.

"Mons is a city of revival, of energy," Marie Noble, deputy artistic commissioner of Mons 2015, told journalists when the year's cultural program was recently unveiled.

Here's some of what's in store for visitors.

## Vincent van Gogh

Before Vincent van Gogh began to paint, he lived in the coal-mining region that's now part of the larger municipality of Mons. It was here, in the area known as the Borinage, that van Gogh gave up his dream of being a pastor to become an artist.

One of the major exhibitions of Mons 2015 is "Van Gogh in the Borinage: The Birth of an Artist." The exhibit is curated by Sjraar Van Heugten, former director of collections at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It includes some 70 paintings from international collections, drawings and seven original letters from van Gogh. Van Heugten says no previous exhibit has examined so extensively the beginning of van Gogh's career as an artist in the Borinage.

"Van Gogh set out with ideas that he remained true to for the rest of his career," he said. "It shows a remarkable mind-set and determination, and we see themes in his career that last from the first days to the very last."

The exhibit runs Jan. 25 to May 17 at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Mons.

Film buffs won't want to miss



PHOTOS BY SUZANNE MORPHET/Special to Stars and Stripes

The main square of Mons, Belgium, is covered in cobblestones now, but come July, it will be decorated with 8,000 sunflowers in tribute to Vincent van Gogh, who spent two years in the city. It's part of a yearlong program of events marking the city's status as one of two cultural capitals of Europe for 2015. The other is Plzen, Czech Republic.



The current owner of the Marcasse mine, where Vincent van Gogh observed unfavorable working conditions, wants to put letterboxes like this one throughout the property, where copies of the artist's letters can be read or broadcast.

an exhibition (Feb. 21 to May 17 at the Frigo des Anciens Abattoirs) that recalls the 1955 shooting of "Lust for Life" by Hollywood director Vincente Minnelli and starring Kirk Douglas as van Gogh. The movie was shot in the Borinage using locals as extras.

Local historian Filip Depuydt takes guests on a fascinating two-hour walking tour (vangoghborinage.canalblog.com) of the neighborhoods where van Gogh lived and preached, and where he went underground to observe

the horrible conditions miners worked in. Included is a stop at van Gogh's former home in Colfontaine, now being restored as an artists' retreat. It's where he wrote letters to his brother Theo, including the one from Boxing Day 1878 in which he said, "I cannot tell you how picturesque the hilly countryside looks in the thaw, now that the snow is melting and the black fields with the green of the winter wheat are again becoming visible."

Van Gogh also would have been familiar with the Grand-

Hornu, another former coal mine in the area, and now a UNESCO World Heritage site, that is unusual for its stunning neoclassical architecture. Some of the scenes from "Lust for Life" were shot here.

And that maze of 8,000 sunflowers in the main square in Mons? It's also a tribute to van Gogh, of course, and will be staged the last week of July.

## Napoleon

Next year marks the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated, about 12 miles south of Brussels.

Napoleon's reign and legacy are fodder for two exhibitions at Mons 2015. The first, "One Number, One Destiny. At the Service of Napoleon," looks at conscription and the social and

cultural changes brought about by the French ruler (June 13-Sept. 27 at the Mons Memorial Museum). The second exhibition, "Bonaparte, Protector of the Arts," which opens Sept. 21 at Mons' Musée Francois Duesberg, features many works made at his imperial factories.

## Art everywhere

Organizers of Mons 2015 want to surprise visitors with art spilling onto the streets. They have invited artists from around the world to make their mark on the city. Case in point: "River of Books," an installation by Spanish artist Alicia Martin. An avalanche of books cascades out a window at the University of Mons, prompting passersby to reflect on the future of knowledge in a digital age.

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