

TRAVEL MAGAZINE

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# Mons: European City of Culture 2015

*A historic city celebrating art, culture and renewal*



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CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

## EUROPEAN CULTURE &amp; HERITAGE

*part of the celebrations to launch the City of Culture Year*



The medieval city of Mons celebrates its new standing as the European Capital of Culture in 2015 having experienced dramatic political changes from antiquity into modern times.

It has been the scene for many battles amongst Europeans from Roman times, affecting ancient Belgian tribes to its occupations by Spanish and Dutch rulers in the 16th Century. Mons' sufferings continued in the 17th and 18th centuries when French and Austrian armies conquered it, consecutively. The city was fortified again in the 19th century by the Netherlands, before Belgium gained independence in 1830. The agony of its inhabitants prolonged during World War I, when the city witnessed British forces fighting Germans. Canadian forces eventually freed the city towards the end of the war.

The mining city of Mons, which was industrialised in the 20th century, became an important economic center and an easy target during the World War II. The heavy bombardment and the fighting between the Americans and Germans anguished the city again.

The war stories of Mons is opening a new vision of European collaboration, focusing on art and culture. Thirty years ago Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister of Culture and actress, initiated an idea to promote the European city of Culture believing that the concept of a European Union required a deeper attention beyond political and economic partnership.

The program, which was renamed as the European Capital of Culture in 1999, aimed to pump fresh blood in cities in need of urban regeneration. A city designated by the Council of Ministers of the European Union to be the European Capital of Culture organises a series of events with very high European angle to boost cultural and artistic image of the city in order to get social and economical benefits.

The campaign of redevelopment and transformation of the city caught international attention and created wider visibility on the world map, inviting more tourists throughout the year. It seems that the initiative was the best way to resurrect the forgotten cities.

When I arrived in Mons from Brussels, the first thing that caught my eyes was the construction work on the railway station. A major innovative project was delegated to the famous architect Santiago Calatrava to design a station to meet the demand of a new city, combining the historic character of the old town

with the modern part of the city. A walkway will connect it to the new Digital Innovation Valley with many international technology companies. “It is where technology meets culture”, as echoed by the Mons 2015 slogan.

It was expected to be finished in 2015 for the opening celebrations but it appears that it won't happen soon and may in fact take another few years to complete. The train stations are the gateway to enter or leave the city and very important to impress the visitor, but the prospect is positive that this important asset of the city will eventually be completed.

Another setback for the city was the collapse of a modern wooden artpiece designed by Belgian artist Arne Quinze hanging over Rue de Nimy. The €400000.00 sculpture had to be dismantled in December 2014 just five weeks after its installation, due to concerns over health and safety.

The Mayor of Mons, Elio di Rupo, the ex-prime minister of Belgium who recently returned to lead his town is very optimistic. He believes in innovation and moving forward to make Mons beautiful and attract more investors.

*the convention centre at night*



He spoke to the guests, the business leaders, investors and journalists in a reception held on Thursday 22nd January in the newly opened convention center. The Mons International Congress Xperience (MICX) designed by Daniel Libeskind, it is one of many major projects planned for this southern city as the European Capital of Culture in 2015. The well-designed building with a façade of wooden lines and curving walls is a great architectural landmark for ten thousand inhabitants of Mons and the region. It is anticipated to connect the historic town with new innovative cultural and technological developments in the area.

It is scheduled to have five new museums opening in April to highlight the city's cultural dimension as well as many art events planned during this year, which would attract many visitors from all over the world. But the main center of attention is the Van Gogh Exhibition which officially began on the weekend of the opening ceremony in the presence of over 150 European and international journalists.

The recently modernized BAM museum (Museum of beaux-arts – the website is only in French) houses over seventy pieces of Van Gogh's early drawings, paintings and as many as twenty paintings that he copied from other artists. An exhibition entitled, “Van Gogh In The Borinage – The Birth of An Artist”

runs from 25th January to 17th May 2015 which includes many of his letters to his brother. The exhibition's main focus is on the period from 1878 to 1880 when Van Gogh lived as a preacher among the poor miners of Borinage in the south of Mons. The poverty and the living standards of miners influenced and inspired him deeply in picturing the daily life of workers and peasants. His fascination to share his vision with the world forced him to abandon his job as a preacher to become an artist.

*the Belfry dwarfed by the opening celebrations*



Mons has many more attractions to offer to the visitors in its ancient cobbled alleys and hilly roads surrounded with old houses leading to the roof of the city where the 17th century baroque style Belfry tower is located. From this summit, the picturesque town with slate rooftop houses is below your feet. A city filled with a rich cultural background and deeply rooted industrial vision deserves an extravagant celebration beyond words. The organisers certainly knew how to launch their showcase in the opening ceremony to impress visitors with the most beautiful and attractive features.

A year packed with many events started on 24th January with the slogan, “In 2015 I am from Mons, and you?” and the theme of illumination and enlightenment to celebrate the idea of the European Capital of Culture. Despite the cold weather, the central square (Grand Place) was swamped with a large crowd wearing silver ponchos to unify and sing in harmony. The white balloons, light shows and fireworks illuminated the dark night all over the city. The impressive art installations, sparkling shows, events and concerts across the city carried on all night.

In the early morning the white snow covered streets, historical houses and buildings creating a postcard view of the city with a nice, shaded colouring. But it all melted before the events started in the evening. With no further snow or rain, the weather helped the celebration go more smoothly despite it being freezing cold. Place du Parc was decorated with various fire installations, thousands of candles, those candle pots and the rings of fire, magically shining in the square symbolising the theme of the enlightenment. Two artists were also playing very soft and smooth music on a stage lit by more candles. In the street adjacent to the square, a giant octopus shaped instrument was blowing fire all around. The Belgians were very relaxed about health and safety as everybody could get very close to the flames.

There was a large crowd queuing to get into the site of the illuminated Belfry Tower to watch the wired sculptures installation entitled “Once upon a time”. There was George and the Dragon surrounded by an army of fairy tale statues all lit by constantly changing coloured spotlights. Cedric Verdure, a French artist, has used simple wires to create ghostlike models, which invoked the imagination. Cedric has

displayed his installations all over the world and expresses his artistic talent and ideas by dreamy and imaginary forms.

In another part of the old town, Rue de la Poterie, the whole street featured an artistic sound installation titled 'Song Lines' decorated with portraits of Mons singers from all over the world projected over hanging linens

*the acrobat in the Grand Place*



But the main event in the Grand Place was Envolée Chromatique where huge balloons were flying in the sky and large white robotic toys were wandering through the crowd. An acrobat in the sky at the bottom of one balloon impressed the audience with her aqualine moves as she whirled around a white fabric. The show continued with a flying accordionist who continued playing and singing around the square only to be followed by a flying woman as well. The celebration could not have been complete without a huge firework display in another corner of the town and the party did not want to stop. The event was a great success for the organisers. If this is how Mons intends to celebrate its year of culture, then success is assured.

Mons has many more surprises for visitors in 2015.

*Images and story © Mohammed Reza Amirinia.*

For more of Reza's images of Mons and the opening ceremony, click here or go to <http://www.purevisionjourneys.com/belgium>.

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