



Text: Luc Vanthoor (LBH partner Aqua Libra); photographs Luc Vanthoor/Zebra Fotostudio's

IT CAN'T JUST BE A COINCIDENCE, CAN IT?

IT SURELY CAN'T BE A COINCIDENCE THAT LINSSEN YACHTS ARE BUILT IN A REGION WHICH IS A BYWORD FOR HIGH-QUALITY LEISURE PURSUITS. IT SURELY CAN'T BE A COINCIDENCE THAT THE VALUES THAT THE LINSSEN FAMILY HOLDS DEAR ARE REFLECTED IN THE REGION THEY COME FROM.

For over sixty years, Linssen yachts have been built in Maasbracht and one of Maasbracht's key features is that it is situated at the centre of one of the most varied cruising areas in Europe: the Meuse Lakes. With a surface area of 3,000 hectares, it's the largest continuous boating area in Belgium and the Netherlands. An area known for its hospitality, good quality of life and rich traditions.

The Meuse Lakes are situated on the border between Belgium and the Netherlands and separate the two countries for a great deal of their length. They are only (or less than) an hour's drive from cities such as Maastricht, Eindhoven, Roermond, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Duisburg, Antwerp and Brussels.

Since 2012 it has been possible for anyone to explore this region on a Linssen yacht. This is because Aqua Libra Yachtcharter, a partner in the Linssen Boating Holidays network, operates from the De Spaanjerd Marina in Belgian Limburg. Its home port is only three kilometres from the Linssen boatyard as the crow flies. So it's ideal if, for

example, you want to extend your visit to the boatyard by adding a sailing holiday or enhance your holiday experience by visiting your yacht's "birthplace".

RICH HISTORY

It's a region with a rich history. The oldest signs of habitation date from the age of the Neanderthal people and can mostly be found in the south of the province. This region is rich in marlstone caves and is very hilly. You can still visit some of these marlstone caves even today. In the town of Valkenburg you can even ride through the caverns on a little train 70 metres below the ground.

Cities such as Maastricht (Mosa Trajectum), Heerlen (Coriovallum) and Tongeren (Tungria) were founded when the Romans ruled the region. After the period of Roman rule, the region fell under the control of the Franks and became part of the Holy Roman Empire.

The two Limburgs were often the scene of battle in conflicts between dukes and bishops in the Middle Ages,

becoming completely fragmented in the process. It was divided up among the grand dukes of Brabant, Gelre and Gulik and the prince-bishops of Liège and Cologne.

THORN – THE WHITE TOWN

A good example of this is the historic white town of Thorn. The history of this charming small town can be traced back to the end of the 10th century. Over time, Thorn developed into a miniature principality, ruled over by an abbess and twenty ladies of noble birth. The statelet had its own legal system and minted its own coins. Aristocratic young ladies from across the region received a strict and pious education in the Benedictine convent. The arrival of the French in 1794 put an end to Thorn's autonomy.

Thorn is situated next to one of the many gravel lakes along the Meuse. You can moor just three hundred metres from the centre of Thorn, which is an urban conservation area. The town's main attractions are its cobbled streets, the majestic Abbey Church and the "Land van Thorn" museum. You can round off your visit with a delicious pancake enjoyed at one of Thorn's many pavement cafés.

After the Middle Ages, the region around the Meuse came under Spanish and then French rule. French rule came to

an end in 1815 when Napoleon was defeated at the famous Battle of Waterloo by the Prussians, Dutch, British and Hanoverians. From that date, the region became part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The Meuse has always played a very important part in the geographical distribution of the region. For example, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 decided the border between the Netherlands and Belgium on the basis of the distance travelled by a cannon shot, as measured from the Meuse. Even today, the deepest point of the Meuse still forms a substantial part of the border between Belgium and the Netherlands.

THE CREATION OF THE MEUSE LAKES

The Meuse Lakes were created by the extraction of gravel from the Meuse Valley, mainly in the 20th century. The excavation of the gravel deposits, left behind by a glacier during the last ice age, caused large lakes to form, almost all of which are connected to the Meuse. Some gravel lakes are up to 40 metres deep and two to three kilometres across. The towns and villages around the Meuse Lakes quickly discovered their added value in terms of tourism. The lake shores are lined with a number of hotels and restaurants, modern marinas, bathing beaches,



nature reserves and even a few diving locations thanks to the fact that the water is extremely clear. Anglers will find a number of excellent pitches in the region, from which they can fish for pike, pike perch, eel, carp and all species of whitefish.

The Meuse Lakes region is one of a kind because it has “something for everyone”. It is also situated in the centre of Europe, means that it is very easily accessible by land, air or water. You can literally explore “the four points of the compass” from this region. Travel upstream on the Meuse towards Maastricht, Liège, Namur, Dinant and Northern France or set out from Namur via Charleroi through Brussels along the world-famous Ronquières Inclined Plane boat lift. Travel downstream on the Meuse and reach the IJsselmeer or Friesland within three days via the Waal and IJssel. You can also travel further down the Meuse and sail to Zeeland via the Biesbosch nature reserve. Maybe you would prefer the historic canals of Northern Belgium which you can reach via the Zuid-Willemsvaart Canal on its popular Willems Route. If you don't like visiting the same place twice, you can check out a number of round trips mapped out on the website www.aqua-libra.be.

A holiday in the Meuse Lakes region is like a cocktail that you mix yourself. It is up to you to mix the right ingredients in the correct ratios. The main ingredients are history, culture, nature, gastronomy and shopping. You can find history and culture in places such as the former miniature principality of Thorn or the cathedral city of Roermond. Towns such as Maaseik with the oldest pharmacy in the Benelux countries and Maastricht with its 1,660 listed buildings reflect the historical richness of this region. The whole region is dotted with wonderful windmills and watermills, typical farmhouses, castles and many listed buildings where you can experience the historical richness almost at first hand.

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THE MAASLAND TERROIR

Wine lovers can “taste” the Maasland terroir in the wine domains of Thorn or Aldeneyck, both of which are within walking distance of the water. Both domains produce high-quality wines. For example, the Pinot Brut from the Aldeneyck domain was voted Belgium's best sparkling wine in 2012. The whole region is characterised by its culinary riches, with Belgium's versatile beer culture and local produce including asparagus, pike perch and the “Maaseycker knapkoek” cake. For demanding gastronomic connoisseurs, there are exclusive restaurants within walking distance of the water. A total of eleven Michelin stars, spread over nine restaurants, twinkle over the Meuse Lakes region. For example, the 2-star Da Vinci restaurant in Maasbracht is situated along the water's edge, only a stone's throw from the Linszen boatyard.

NATURE CONSERVATION AREAS

Nature lovers can find peace and quiet in nature conservation areas where wild Konik horses and Galloway cattle form part of the scenery. Beavers, swans, herons and over sixty other species of waterfowl are also much in evidence. The two Limburgs have a total of three national nature reserves which are directly linked to the fairway by the famous network of cycle routes.

The Meuse Lakes region is like one big holiday park in which you can spice up your boating holiday with a rich bouquet of leisure pursuits for young and old alike.

Enjoy a Dame Blanche, a Trappist or a Kriekenbier at one of the many open-air cafés along the water's edge with a view of the boats gliding past. Combine your boating holiday with an expedition on the network of cycle routes which connects hundreds of kilometres of cycling pleasure with a series of interchanges. In most of the marinas in the Meuse Lakes region, you can get hold of a bicycle



free of charge or on payment of a small fee. Or let your children or grandchildren hire a canoe or pedal boat from one of the many sailing schools. Have a try at casting a line and catching a fish on the end of your hook. Enjoy the unique atmosphere in one of the region's forty marinas. You can combine your boating holiday with a day's shopping in Roermond or Weert. Roermond is a particular favourite with shoppers from near and far thanks to its Designer Outlet Shopping Centre which is known far beyond national boundaries and attracts 4 million visitors annually. There are moorings in the immediate vicinity of this impressive shopping centre.

LOCKS AND CANALS

There's one lock between Maaseik and Roermond in the Meuse Lakes region. This lock at Linne has a 4-metre drop and is used almost exclusively by pleasure craft. During the tourist boating season, you can count on the assistance of lock stewards as you pass through the lock. If you want to leave the Meuse Lakes region by canal, take the Panheel lock towards Weert or the Maasbracht lock towards Maastricht. These locks have a high drop, but their "floating bollards" make them easy to use. There is little commercial shipping in the region. Only the lock at Maasbracht is used regularly by commercial shipping.

THE WILLEMS ROUTE

Choose the Panheel lock to get on to the Willems Route with many destinations in the Belgian Kempen area or even reach 's Hertogenbosch in one day. This Willems Route, which is mainly known as a very peaceful fairway, is lined with small harbours right next to each other as if on a string of pearls.

During your trip along the Willems Route you should certainly visit the old garrison town of Leopoldsburg, which you reach via the historic Beverlo canal. Lommel, the "glass town", is another stop that should not be missing from your schedule. In Bocholt you will find the largest brewery museum in Europe only five minutes' walk from the harbour. Neeroeteren has a particularly charming little harbour in the middle of the countryside in an old canal branch and, in the old mining town of Maasmechelen, you step straight off your boat into the Maasmechelen Village Outlet Centre. After an afternoon's shopping, you can take in a film at the cinema which is situated next to the shopping centre. Once past Maasmechelen, you reach the most beautiful village in Flanders, Rekem, where you will have an impressive view of Aspremont-Lynden Castle.

LOCK 19, MAASTRICHT

You pass through the manually operated Lock 19 to reach the 't Bassin marina, right in the centre of Maastricht.

From Maastricht you can return to the Meuse Lakes region or continue your journey to Northern France via Liège, Namur and Dinant.

The best thing of all about this cruising area is the fact that it is still little known. There is almost always space in the little harbours and you sometimes believe that you are alone in the world when cruising. The hospitality of the Limburgers is another of the great advantages that guarantee the success of a holiday in this region. This is partly because there is no language barrier. Most Limburgers, particularly those working in the tourism sector, speak German, English and also some French in addition to their mother tongue.

In this article and the accompanying photographs we wanted to show you what's on the menu for this boating area in Belgium and the Netherlands. It's now up to you to select the dishes from this menu and taste them.

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The Meuse lakes

