

BELGIUM: BICYCLE TOURISM CONTINUES TO GROW IN POPULARITY



In Europe more and more tourists are getting on their bikes for short or long trips, driven by the desire for more sustainable travel. In Belgium, cycle routes and certified accommodation are multiplying in the hope of capturing this new and booming market of bicycle tourism.

Recognized by their adventurous looks, bicycle tourists travel through the cities and countryside, with panniers and GPS attached to their bikes. **They pedal for two or three hours, stop at the local bistro, visit local attractions, and then leave, some in search of overnight accommodation.** Experts point out that since the health crisis, there has been an unprecedented increase in their numbers.

Although statistics are still lacking in Belgium, several studies in neighboring countries confirm the growing popularity of bicycle tourism. In Germany, more than 3.9 million people cycled through the country in 2021 (+500,000 compared to 2020). In the same year, they were 3 million in the Netherlands (+500,000), while the number of cyclists passing through France's cycle routes has continued to rise since 2016, stabilizing in 2021, after a 28% jump between 2019 and 2020.

Behind this renewed interest in bicycle travel, there are certainly health restrictions in times of pandemic, but also the desire to travel differently. For many, discovering the country and its population, spending active vacations and traveling in a sustainable way are the main motivations.

In 2022, more Belgians than ever before (+25% in one year) consulted the "eurovelobelgium" web portal, which lists the 17 long-distance cycle routes in Europe (EuroVélo), five of which cross Belgium.

From the adrenaline-seeking sportsman to the stroller in search of authenticity, the profiles of the cyclo-tourists are varied: families with children, sometimes young, couples in their thirties or sixties powered by electric assistance, solo travelers, groups of friends...

To attract these new customers, the tourism sector is adapting. While Flanders is multiplying its thematic itineraries, Wallonia is promoting its 1,500 km of Ravel, its network of node points, its nine regional itineraries and the passage of three EuroVélo.

Not to mention the success of the "Bienvenue Vélo" label, awarded in the south of the country to more than 760 hotels and restaurants, accommodations and tourist attractions offering facilities for cyclists.

In 2022, the Brussels region has also given a boost to the sector, with the finalization of the signposting of its network of nodes and the route of EuroVélo 5 in the capital. Some thirty "Bike Friendly" lodgings welcome travelers and their bikes.

Will bicycle tourism, revived during the pandemic, succeed in establishing itself in the long term? "All the indicators show that the trend will continue," says Pauline Bellefontaine of Visit Wallonia. "In view of the investments in the three regions and in most European countries, we can

predict an increase in the number of bicycle tourists in the coming years," confirms Charlotte Massagé, of ProVélo.

While Germany is currently the world's leading destination for bicycle tourism, France is aiming to take its place and the Netherlands is making significant investments to promote bicycle tourism. At the crossroads of these different destinations, Belgium has a window of opportunities.

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