

# Noord Brabant & Limburg



The Dutch southeast belies most clichés about the Netherlands: tulips, windmills and dykes are scarce. Noord Brabant is primarily a land of agriculture and industry peppered with a few pleasant towns, including Den Bosch. It's also home to the Netherlands' most popular tourist draw, De Efteling theme park, and the biggest street fair in Benelux, the Tilburgse Kermis.

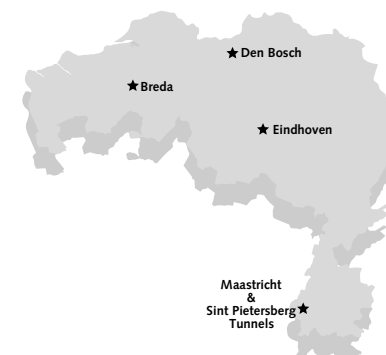
Meanwhile, Limburg is home to beautiful Maastricht, contender for the title of Finest Dutch City, as well as – drum roll – hills. It also hosts Europe's biggest art sale, the European Fine Art Foundation show.

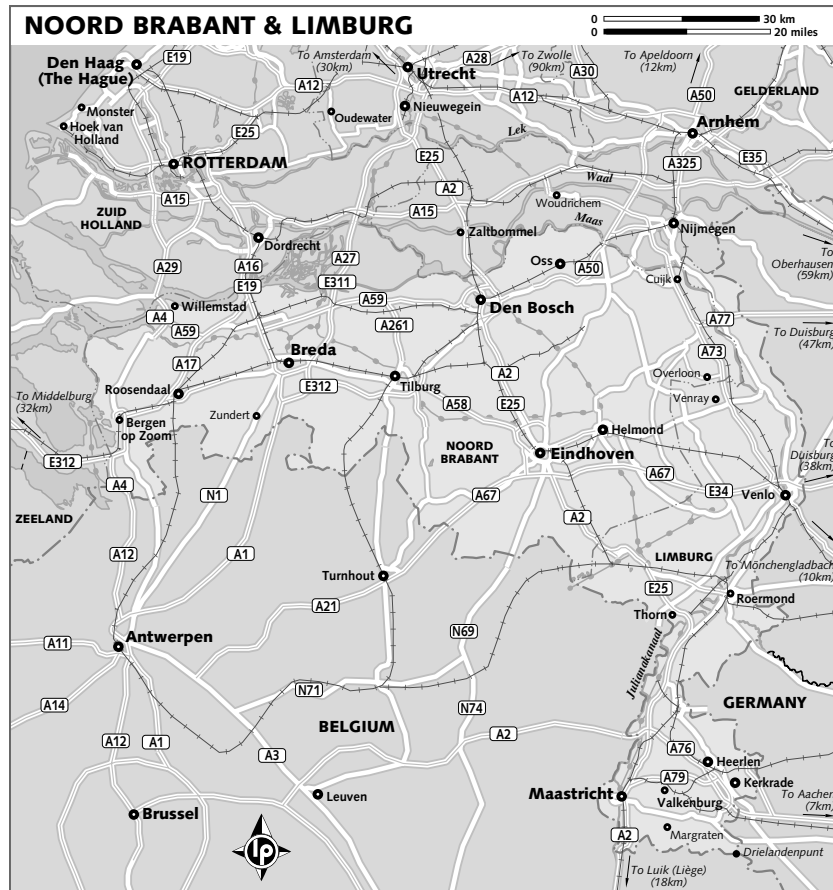
Neither province has its roots in the asceticism of the north, a fact made obvious during *carnaval*, when the streets fill with fireworks, bands and impromptu parties. And both provinces' proximity to Belgium and all those indulgent Catholic monasteries – most of which doubled as excellent microbreweries – mean there are many chances to imbibe.

In fact, the Dutch call the southeastern lifestyle *bourgeois*: like the epicurean inhabitants of Burgundy in France, people in these parts love to eat and drink heartily.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Thrill to the rarefied vibe in **Maastricht** (p278), a world apart from the north.
- Scare yourself silly in the tunnels at **Sint Pietersberg** (p280).
- Take it easy in laid-back **Den Bosch** (p272).
- Admire European modern art at Eindhoven's **Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum** (p274).
- Do the day-trip thing in lovely **Breda** (p275).





## NOORD BRABANT

The Netherlands' largest province spans the bottom of the country from the waterlogged west to the elevated east. The towns here have mostly transformed from wealthy medieval fiefdoms to laid-back shopping, student and tourism precincts. Den Bosch is the main city and, along with Breda, is an interesting place to spend the day.

Despite its size, Noord Brabant won't hold you up. It's primarily a land of agriculture and industry, peppered with a few towns pleasant and engaging enough to use as way stations on your pilgrimage to Limburg or beyond.

### DEN BOSCH ('S-HERTOGENBOSCH)

☎ 073 / pop 134,000

This sweet old town has a top-notch church, a good museum, outstanding cafés and restaurants, and atmospheric streets that make for plenty of enjoyable strolling. The official name of the town is 's-Hertogenbosch (Duke's Forest), but locals call it Den Bosch (*den boss*). It's the birthplace of the well-known 15th-century painter Hieronymus Bosch, who took his surname from the town.

#### Orientation

The town's pedestrianised centre is based around the Markt, 600m east of the train station.

### Information

**Bosch Medicentrum** (☎ 699 20 00; Nieuwstraat 34) Regional hospital.

**Library** (☎ 612 30 33; Hinthamerstraat 72; internet per hr €3; ☎ noon-4pm Mon, Tue-Sat 11am-8pm)

**Post office** (Kerkstraat 67; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

**Tourist office** (☎ 09001122334; www.regio-vvv.nl; Markt 77; ☎ 1-6pm Mon, 9.30am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat)

### Sights & Activities

The main attraction is **Sint Janskathedraal** (☎ 613 03 14; www.sint-jan.nl; Choorstraat 1; admission free; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-4.30pm Sun), one of the finest churches in the Netherlands. It took from 1336 to 1550 to complete, and there's an interesting contrast between the red-brick tower and the ornate stone buttresses. The interior is also of interest, with late-Gothic stained-glass windows, an impressive statue of the Madonna, and an amazing organ case from the 17th century.

Unfortunately, Protestants destroyed the cathedral's paintings in 1566. Thankfully, two by Bosch remain.

Take the opportunity to climb the 73m **tower** (admission €3.50), with its carillon and great views.

The **Stadhuis** (town hall) was given its classical baroque appearance in 1670. There's a statue of Hieronymus Bosch at the front of the building.

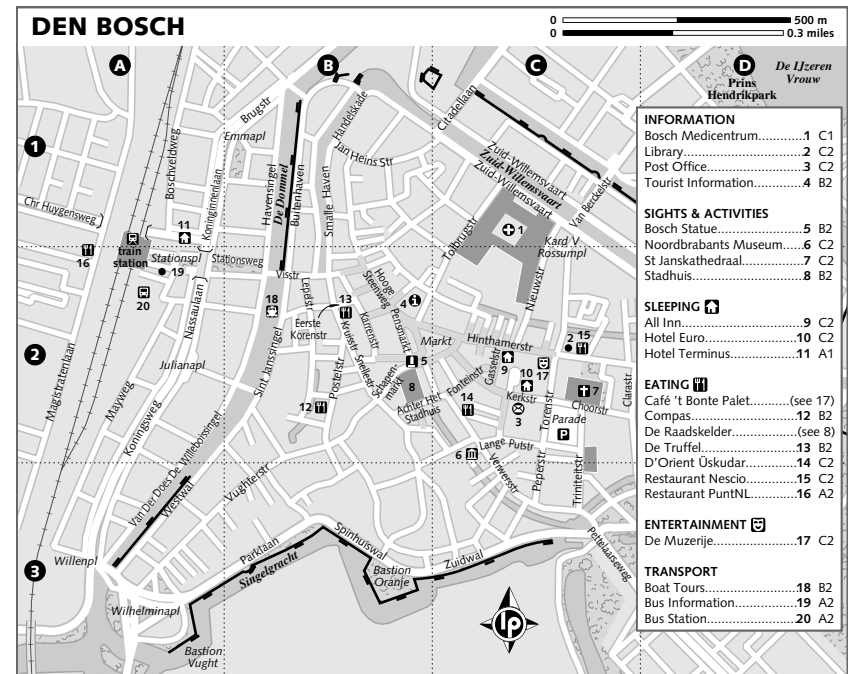
The **Noordbrabants Museum** (☎ 687 78 77; www.noordbrabantsmuseum.nl; Verwersstraat 41; adult/child €6.50/3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat), in the 18th-century former governor's residence, features a sculpture garden and exhibits about Brabant life and art, including drawings and other work by Bosch.

**Boat tours** leave from the canal by Sint Janssingel. Check the tourist office for times.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Terminus** (☎ 613 06 66; fax 613 07 26; Boschveldweg 15; s/d €31/60) As its name suggests, it's close to the station. The simple, brightly coloured rooms are decent enough, plus there's an appealing bar (well, the owners call it a 'folk pub') and regular live folk music.

**Hotel Euro** (☎ 613 77 77; www.eurohotel-denbosch.com; Kerkstraat 56; s/d from €65/85) This business hotel



is part of a chain, but it's still got a certain degree of warmth, even if the rooms are draped in chintzy corporate pastels. The location is central and next to a warren of great cafés and eating houses.

**All Inn** (☎ 613 40 57; Gasselstraat 1; s/d from €35/50; ☹ closed Aug & carnaval) On the lovably shabby but clean side. Note: midnight curfew.

### Eating & Drinking

Try the local speciality, a heart-failure calorie-free known as the *Bossche bol* (Den Bosch ball). It's a chocolate-coated cake the size of a softball, filled with sweetened cream.

**De Truffel** (☎ 614 27 42; www.detruffel.com; Kruisstraat 37; mains €10-25; ☹ dinner) Located in a restored warehouse, De Truffel serves top-notch Mediterranean food in a relaxed atmosphere. Try this: whole roasted trout with browned almonds and a stuffed potato. Now that's attention to detail you don't see everywhere.

**Restaurant Nescio** (☎ 610 09 00; www.nescio-restaurant.nl; Hinthamerstraat 80; dishes from €4; ☹ dinner) Nescio only serves appetisers, the idea being to emphasise taste via concentrated, small portions, as well as the notion that to sample several experiences is preferable than one main one. Try fancies such as the 'preserved Oriental duck bolts' or ask the chef for a 'wild card': be sure to tell him your boundaries (no bulls' penises, for example) and let him surprise you.

**Compas** (☎ 614 20 20; Postelstraat 79; mains €12-18; ☹ lunch & dinner) Perched on a little square a few streets behind the Markt, this is a very charming and classy little option. Expect Mediterranean food with an oh-so-delectable flourish and sense of panache.

**Restaurant puntNL** (☎ 623 44 55; www.restaurantpunt.nl; Magistraatelaan 100; mains €7-15; ☹ lunch Tue-Sun) If this relaxed place was any more Dutch, it'd rust. Try local favourites such as roasted aubergine with sugary *stroop* (syrup), grated radish, chopped chives and giant shrimp – just the kind of taste clash that is favoured here. Wash it down with *jenever* (Dutch gin) or elderberry juice and you'll be wearing clogs in no time.

**Café 't Bonte Palet** (☎ 613 25 32; Hinthamerstraat 97) Talk about quirky: the front window of this little hole-in-the-wall bar is stuffed with all kinds of trinkets including miniature carillons, toy cars, tiny theatrical sets, and the crowning glory: an Asterix triptych. There's sometimes live music.

Other options:

**De Raadselder** (☎ 613 69 19; Markt 1A; ☹ Tue-Sat 10.30am-5pm, dinner Sun 5.30-10.30pm) A 16th-century Gothic cellar kitchen/restaurant right under the town hall. The ambience is nothing short of inspirational.

**D' Orient Üskudar** (☎ 614 20 20; Verwerstraat 3; mains €8-15; ☹ dinner) Great Turkish food; lots of goats cheese throughout.

### Entertainment

**De Muzerije** (☎ 614 10 84; Hinthamerstraat 74) This all-in-one venue features different kinds of theatre, dance and film.

### Getting There & Around

The train station is new and brimming with services, including a good grocery store aimed at travellers. Lockers are on the concourse over the tracks. Sample fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	12.70	60	2
Maastricht	18.00	90	1
Nijmegen	6.80	30	4
Utrecht	7.50	30	4

Buses leave from the area to the right as you exit the station.

A bicycle shop is located below the station.

### EINDHOVEN

☎ 040 / pop 209,286

A mere village in 1900, Eindhoven grew exponentially thanks to Philips, founded here in 1891. During the 1990s the electronics giant found it was having trouble recruiting employees to work in its home town; it solved the problem by moving to Amsterdam, although its research and engineering arms remain here. That sums up the fortunes of this huge industrial town: while it's not the most thrilling place, it's not without merits.

Electronics aside, Eindhoven is best known for its football team, PSV, who routinely dominate the national league.

There's a **tourist office** (☎ 297 91 00; www.vvveindhoven.nl; Stationsplein 17; ☹ 10am-5.30pm Mon, 9am-5.30pm Tue-Thu, 9am-6.30pm Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) next to the train station.

Eindhoven's main attraction is the excellent **Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum** (☎ 275 52 75; www.vanabbemuseum.nl; Bilderdijkstraan 10; adult/child under 12 €8.50/free; ☹ 11am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun, until 9pm

Thu). With a wonderful, first-rate collection of 20th-century paintings – including works by Picasso, Chagall and Kandinsky – it almost, but not quite, matches the greatness of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam or the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

There's a unique nightlife district, **Het Stratumseind**, where more than 30 cafés, bars and restaurants within a single stretch of street make it one of the most concentrated such areas in the country. There are many options, and obviously bar-hopping is easy to do.

**Eindhoven Airport** (www.eindhovenairport.nl) is 6km west of the centre, and aimed at business travellers.

The train station is at a junction of lines to Amsterdam, Maastricht and Rotterdam.

Sample fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	16.70	90	2
Maastricht	14.10	80	2
Rotterdam	15.30	70	2

### TILBURG

☎ 013 / pop 198,000

With one of the highest ratios of students in the Netherlands (almost 15% of the population), you'd expect a more progressive vibe. But Tilburg, a former textile town, is in flux, now that the mills have closed due to foreign competition, and its centre bears the scars of unfortunate 1960s urban renewal schemes (think East Berlin).

People generally make a beeline to Tilburg in the middle of July, when the **Tilburgse Kermis** (Tilburg fair; www.tilburgsekermis.com) takes place for close to two weeks. Basically an enormous street party, it's a massive celebration of street fair and street fare. Rides, beer, bad music, sugary treats, stalls offering stuffed prizes for games of 'skill'... It's the biggest fair in Benelux, and for that reason alone it's remarkable.

### DE EFTELING

Near Tilburg, in the unassuming town of Kaatsheuvel, is **De Efteling** (☎ 0416-288 111; www.efteling.nl; Europalaan 1, Kaatsheuvel; admission €26; ☹ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, until 9pm 10 Jul-27 Aug), the biggest domestic tourist attraction in the Netherlands. This 'Dutch Disneyland' pulls more than three million visitors annually, proving its 40-year history as a family favourite is undiminished

by the emergence of newer competitors such as Flevoland's Six Flags.

All the usual suspects are here: huge, scary rides, walk-through entertainment with animatronic robot models, scenes from popular stories and fairy tales, live shows performed by 'talent', sticky hands, crying kids...

There's on-site accommodation – the website provides full details.

To get to De Efteling, take bus 136 or 137 from Tilburg or Den Bosch train station.

### BREDA

☎ 076 / pop 167,908

Lovely Breda has a wealth of attractions: interesting streets, flower-filled parks and a stunning main church. Its present peace belies its turbulent past, where its proximity to the Belgian border meant it has been overrun by invading armies many times.

The town centre is 500m south of the station through the large, leafy park, the Valkenberg.

There are two **tourist offices** (www.vvbreda.nl; Grote Markt ☎ 09005222444; Grote Markt 38; ☹ 10.30am-5.30pm Wed-Fri, 10.30am-5pm Sat; Willemstraat ☎ 09005222444; Willemstraat 17; ☹ 1-6pm Mon, 9am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) and a **post office** (☎ 522 55 20; Willemstraat 30; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1.30pm Sat) further down from the Willemstraat tourist office.

### Sights & Activities

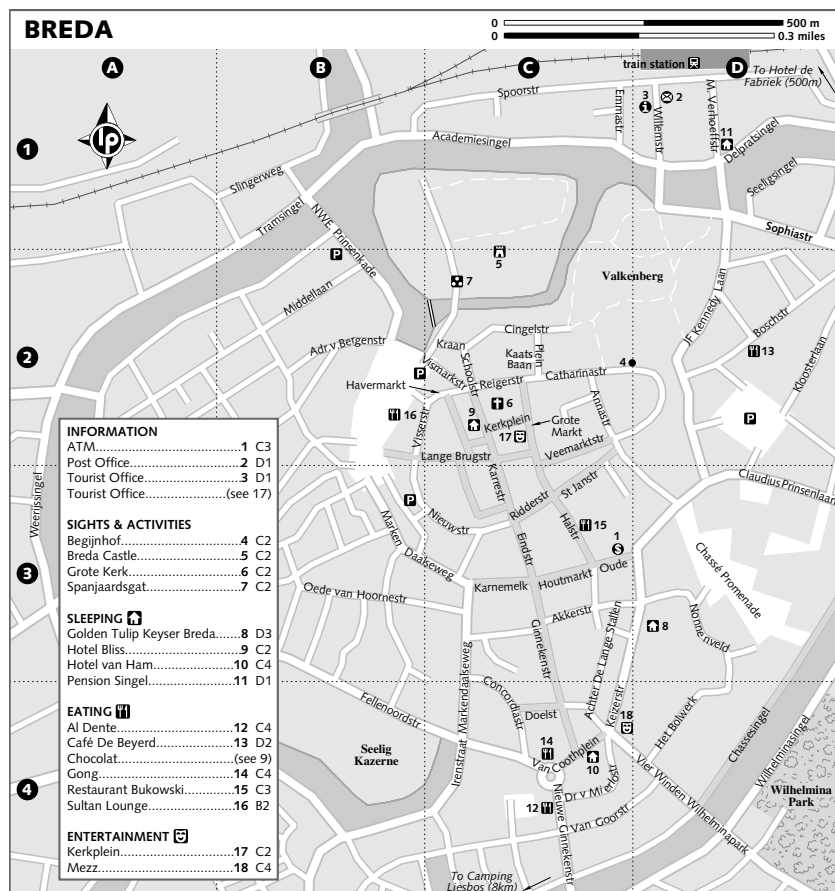
The **Valkenberg** (Falcon Mountain) is the huge park between the station and the centre. Hunting falcons were trained here for royalty. On the south side is the 12th-century **Begijnhof**, a home that sheltered unmarried women. Breda has wonderfully preserved examples of these homes, which were found throughout the Netherlands.

The **Breda castle** is worth a quick look (though note that you can't go inside); approach from the south and you'll also see the **Spanjaardsgat** (Spanish gate), a reminder of just one of the various incursions the town has endured.

The **Grote Kerk** (admission €2; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) recently emerged from years of restoration, its now-gleaming white stones free of grime. This beautiful Gothic church was built between the 15th and 17th centuries.

### Festivals & Events

The **Bloemencorso** (www.bloemencorsozundert.nl) is a huge annual parade of gorgeously decorated,



multicoloured floats – each one of them constructed entirely from flowers – that passes through the streets of Zundert, 20km southwest of Breda. It takes place in early September.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Camping Liesbos** (☎ 514 35 14; www.camping-liesbos.nl; Liesdreef 40; sites €8; ☞ Apr-Oct) If you're a camper, this place is your best bet. Take bus 10 or 111 (direction: Etten-Leur) to the Boswachterij Liesbos stop.

**Pension Singel** (☎ 521 62 71; pensionsingel@planet.nl; Delpratsingel 14; per person €25) Simple but charming singles and doubles. It's a short walk from the station.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Bliss** (☎ 533 59 80; www.blissshotel.nl; Torenstraat 9; ste from €112.50) This funky new designer hotel is head and shoulders above the rest of the Breda competition. The spacious, comfortable suites are filled with the kind of interior-design touches that will make you feel like a mover and shaker: interesting art; angles and planes; retro-futurism bisected with industrial chic; bold reds mixed with deep browns.

**Golden Tulip Keyser Breda** (☎ 520 51 73; www.hotelkeyser.nl; Keizerstraat 5; r from €79) Although it's part of a chain, the Golden Tulip Keyser Breda (say that 10 times fast after a few ales) sets itself apart by its attentive staff – its strongest asset. Rooms are standard business-hotel types, with all the trimmings. Prices plunge on weekends.

**Hotel van Ham** (☎ 521 52 29; hotel.van.ham@hetnet.nl; Van Coothplein 23; s/d €45/65) John and Sylvia van Hooydonk are the proud proprietors of this charming hotel, which is also home to a delightful café-restaurant. It's in a building that's been a prominent meeting point for more than 100 years. The rooms are OK, but the bar is grand.

**Hotel de Fabriek** (☎ 581 00 08; Speelhuislaan 150; s/d €65/80) This is a laid-back, quiet place with comfortable rooms.

## Eating

**Sultan Lounge** (☎ 520 30 50; www.sultanlounge.nl; Haven 10; mains €11-18; ☞ dinner) OK, you know what to expect with a name like this. An 'Arabian Nights' feel spread over two floors is reflected in the décor and the attitude: the ground floor has tables and chairs, upstairs has cushions and a lounge. Eat your Middle Eastern kebabs, tapas, *tajines* (slow cooked stews), dolmades and spiced, stuffed aubergines on either level.

**Chocolat** (☎ 533 59 75; Torenstraat 9; mains €15-30; ☞ lunch & dinner) Part of the Hotel Bliss complex (opposite), Chocolat is as classy as the accommodation, with its Frenchified menu delivering the goods: hares, truffles and croquettes feature prominently, as does veal and fine wine.

**Restaurant Bukowski** (☎ 529 75 55; www.restaurantbukowski.nl; Halstraat 21A; mains €16-22; ☞ lunch & dinner) Bukowski's slick *haute cuisine* is a real treat, presented in an informal, though elegant setting. The duck breast, pan fried and served with a vegetable purée of beets, artichoke and carrots plus honey-thyme sauce, is a clear winner.

**Café De Beyerd** (☎ 521 42 65; www.beyerd.nl; Boschstraat 26; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) The Beyerd is a highly regarded beer café, with more than 122 brews. It's also the perfect place to try some *bitterballen* (small crumbed, deep-fried pureed meatballs) or other typical beer-accompanying snacks.

Other options:

**Al Dente** (☎ 520 43 33; Nieuwe Ginnekenstraat 20; mains €11-18; ☞ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Excellent Italian fare.

**Gong** (☎ 521 66 96; www.restaurantgong.nl; Van Coothplein 24; mains €16-20; ☞ dinner) Great Asian and Pacific Rim fusion cuisine.

## Entertainment

There's a concentration of places around the Havermarkt, mostly of varying quality.

**Mezz** (☎ 515 66 77; www.mezz.nl; Keizerstraat 101) This armadillo-shaped nightclub has a great bar and cool staff to match its eclectic programme – everything from drum 'n' bass nights to Latin swing and rock.

**Kerkplein** (www.kerkpleinbreda.nl) A bangin' club, located right behind the Grote Kerk on Kerkplein, that stays open well into the morning.

## Getting There & Around

The train station has all the usual services. Some fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	18	110	4
Den Bosch	6.80	33	2
Roosendaal	5	17	2
Rotterdam	8.50	32	3

Buses leave from the area to the right as you exit the station.

A bicycle shop is right next to the station. For information on a 52km bicycle route, the Baronie Route, which begins and ends at Breda, see p73.

## SLOT LOEVESTEIN

Near the tiny, beautiful little walled town of Woudrichem you'll find the 14th-century castle, **Slot Loevestein** (☎ 0183-44 71 71; www.slotloevestein.nl; Loevestein 1; adult/child €6.30/4.80; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun May-Sep; 1-5pm Sat, Sun & Wed Oct-Apr). The ancient keep is wonderfully evocative, perhaps more so for the difficulty involved in getting there. It's been a prison, residence and toll castle, though more recently it has hosted a varied calendar of cultural events (check the website). It's best accessed by the ferry from Woudrichem, which stops right out front.

## WEST NOORD BRABANT

Near the border with Zeeland, Noord Brabant more closely resembles its soggy neighbour: canals and rivers crisscross the land, and everything is absolutely flat.

**Roosendaal** is a major rail junction for lines north to Rotterdam, south to Belgium, east to Breda and west to Zeeland.

**Bergen op Zoom** was plundered at various times by the Spanish, French and even the British. The results are a hodgepodge of buildings and styles. It's an unremarkable place except for one week

a year. If you want to see the aftermath of a real party, show up on the Wednesday after Shrove Tuesday. Bergen op Zoom's *carnaval* is the most raucous west of Maastricht, drawing revellers from throughout Europe who basically go on a four-day bender.

## LIMBURG

This long and narrow province at times barely seems part of the Netherlands, especially so in the hilly south. There are all sorts of amusing notices on the A2 motorway into Maastricht warning drivers of impending 'steep grades' that would be considered mere humps in other countries.

## MAASTRICHT

☎ 043 / pop 121,573

Make no bones about it: Maastricht is utterly beautiful. The Crown Jewel of the south – maybe even the entire country – it's about as far from windmills, clogs and tulips as you'd want. Much of the Netherlands has a 'samey' feel to it, but here there are Spanish and Roman ruins, cosmopolitan food, French and Belgian twists in the architecture, a shrugging off of the shackles of Dutch restraint. Even the landscape's different: there are actually hilly streets and what passes for mountains ringing the centre. Unsurprisingly, many locals see themselves as a sophisticated breed apart from the north; by the same token, earthy northerners see posh Maastricht as having an identity crisis – are these people Dutch or what?

Spanning both banks of the Maas river, with a host of pavement cafés and lovely old cobblestone streets, Maastricht is renowned for world-class dining and an elegant atmosphere that's exquisitely addictive. Hemmed in between Belgium and Germany, it has a pan-European flavour: the average citizen bounces easily between Dutch, English, French, German and Flemish (maybe more). Appropriately, the city hosted two key moments in the history of the EU: on 10 December 1991, the 12 members of the then European Community met to sign the treaty for economic, monetary and political union; they reconvened the following February to sign the treaty creating the EU.

No Netherlands itinerary is complete without visiting Maastricht. If you're heading this

way by rail or road to Belgium, you'd be doing yourself a disservice to bypass this wonderful town.

### Orientation

The centre of Maastricht is quite compact, bisected by the Maas river. The area on the east side is known as Wyck, and to the south of here is Céramique. It's about 750m from the train station to the Vrijthof, the cultural heart.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Plantage Boekhandel** (☎ 321 08 25; Nieuwstraat 9) Good selection of travel and English-language books.

#### INTERNET ACCESS

**Centre Céramique** (☎ 350 56 00; Ave Céramique 50; free internet; ☎ 10.30am–8.30pm Tue & Thu, 10.30am–5pm Wed & Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 1–5pm Sun) Contains the library, as well as earthenware displays and a scale model of Maastricht.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Academisch Ziekenhuis Maastricht** (☎ 387 65 43; P Debyelaan 25) A huge academic hospital just east of the MECC exposition centre.

#### POST

**Post office** (☎ 329 91 99; Statenstraat 4; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1.30pm Sat) There's another post office at Stationsstraat 60.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

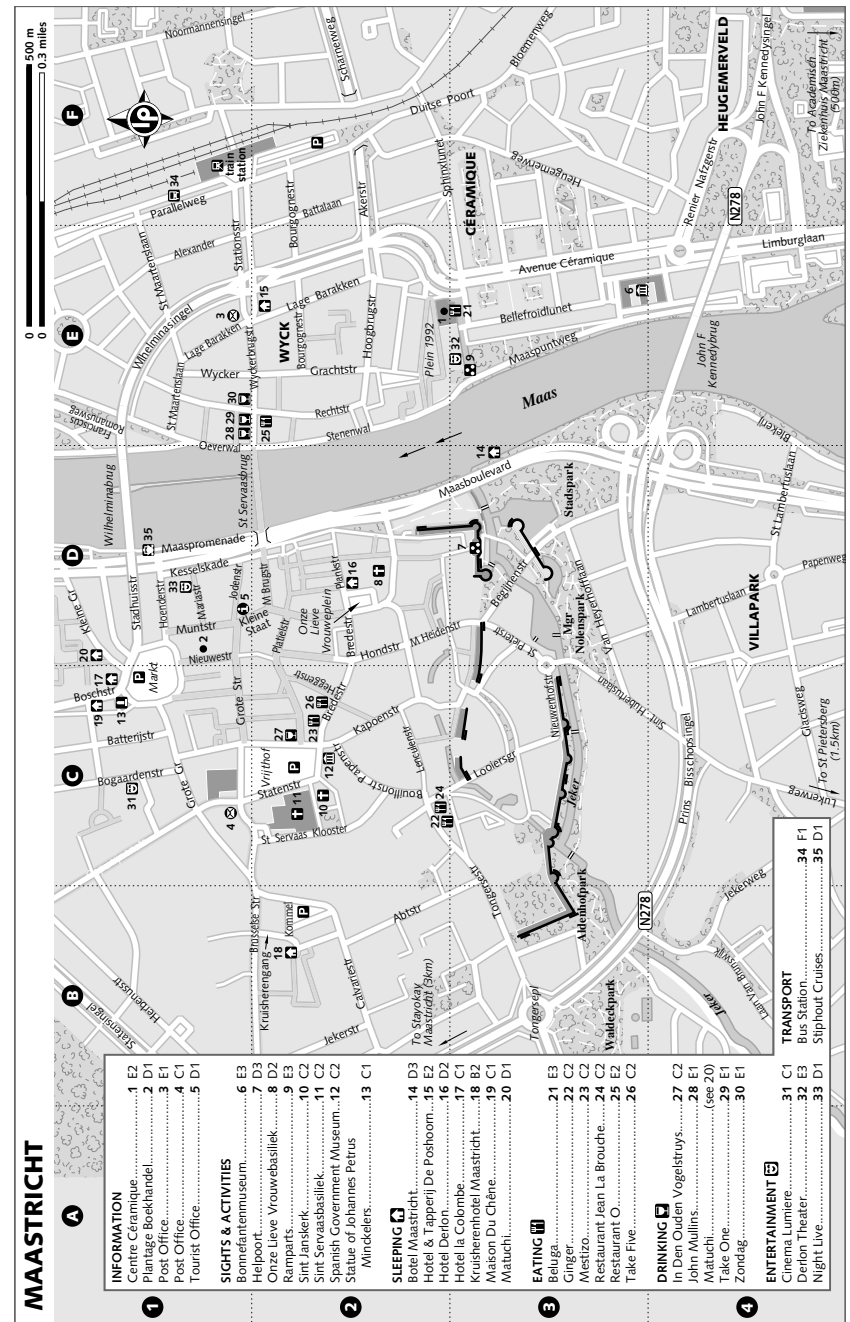
**Tourist office** (☎ 325 21 21; www.vvmmaastricht.nl; Kleine Staat 1; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm Sat, 11am–3pm Sun)

### Sights & Activities

Maastricht's many delights are scattered along both banks of the Maas, but it's always a pleasant stroll from one side to the other. There's so much historical information to digest around the Vrijthof while strolling the beautiful streets winding through and around it. There are also some great museums and remnants of the medieval city in the Wyck district.

#### BONNEFANTENMUSEUM

The **Bonnefantenmuseum** (☎ 329 01 90; www.bonnefantenmuseum.nl; Ave Céramique 250; adult/child under 12yr €7/3.50; ☎ 11am–5pm Tue–Sun) features a 28m tower that's now a local landmark. Designed by Aldo Rossi, the museum opened in 1995, and is well laid-out with collections divided



into departments, each on its own floor: Old Masters and medieval sculpture are on one floor, contemporary art by Limburg artists on the next. A dramatic sweep of stairs beckons visitors to both floors.

Space is devoted to special exhibitions and shows, of which there are usually four annually, two following classical/historical themes, two on more contemporary material. It also espouses an ongoing commitment to solo exhibitions by young and emerging artists, and is the patron of the major biannual Vincent Van Gogh Award for Contemporary Art in Europe. Temporary exhibitions are revelatory, such as the recent 'Travellin' Light' show, focusing on Dadaist lineages.

From 2006 until 2008, while Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum is undergoing renovation, the Bonnetmuseum will display Rijksmuseum classics from the southern Netherlands, Antwerp and Bruges.

### VRIJTHOF

The large square of Vrijthof is surrounded by lively cafés and cultural institutions. It's dominated by **Sint Servaasbasiliek** (admission €2; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, Sun Nov-Mar), a pastiche of architecture dating from 1000.

**Sint Janskerk** is a small 17th-century Gothic church, one of the most beautiful in the Netherlands. A remarkable red colour, its photographs beautifully. Climb to the top (€1.15) for gorgeous views.

The 16th-century **Spanish Government Museum** (☎ 321 13 27; www.museumpaaansgouvernement.nl; Vrijthof 18; admission €2.50; ☎ 1-5pm Wed-Sun) is where Philip II outlawed his former lieutenant Willem the Silent at the start of the Eighty Years' War. The exhibits feature statues and 17th-century paintings.

### STREETS, SQUARES & BRIDGES

The best way to see Maastricht is to just stroll. Streets not to miss include those south and east of Vrijthof: you'll be rewarded with a medieval labyrinth punctuated by interesting shops and cafés.

**Onze Lieve Vrouweplein** is an intimate café-filled square named after its church, the **Onze Lieve Vrouwebasiliek** (treasury adult/child €2/1; ☎ 10am-5pm), which has parts dating from before 1000 and may well be built on the foundations of a Roman cathedral. There is a separate treasury area that houses gaudy jewels and riches; these you can see for a small and worthwhile fee.

The statue at the north end of the **Markt** is of **Johannes Petrus Minckelers**, who holds a flaming rod – he's the chap who invented gas light.

The busy pedestrian **Sint Servaasbrug** dates from the 13th-century and links Maastricht's centre with the Wyck district.

### FORTIFICATIONS

At the end of Sint Bernardusstraat, the **Helppoort** is the oldest surviving town gate in the Netherlands (1229). The remains of 13th-century **ramparts** and fortifications are across the Maas in the new Céramique district. Much of Maastricht is riddled with defensive tunnels dug into the soft sandstone over the centuries. The best place to see the tunnels is **Sint Pietersberg**, a Roman fort 2km south of Helppoort. This is a really beautiful area, pastoral and peaceful – the fort is an arresting sight peering over the charming hillside – and it's a very relaxing walk from town. If you must, take bus 29, which goes past the fort from Vrijthof.

The Romans built the **Northern Corridor System Tunnels** (see the boxed text, opposite) throughout the hills over a period of 2000 years; at one stage, the tunnels extended under the Netherlands-Belgium border. Thirteen species of bats have been found living below the surface.

The tourist office leads spooky, thrilling, and educational **cave tours** (☎ 321 78 78; €3; ☎ 3.30pm daily Jul-Aug & school holidays) – this experience is highly recommended. Although tours are supposed to be conducted in Dutch, ask for Kitty, an extremely knowledgeable, English-speaking guide.

### Tours

The tourist office can arrange all manner of walking tours and cycling expeditions.

**Stiphout Cruises** (☎ 351 53 00; Maaspromenade 27; adult/child €6/3.75; ☎ daily Apr-Oct, Sat & Sun Nov-Dec) runs boat cruises on the Maas. On certain days there are day-long round-trip cruises to Liege in Belgium (adult/child €18.95/11.25), although you can get a one-way ticket.

### Festivals & Events

Three events stand out from the busy Maastricht calendar:

**Carnaval** Celebrated with greater vigour in Maastricht than anywhere else in Europe save Venice (Italy) and Sitges (Spain). The orgy of partying and carousing begins the Friday before Shrove Tuesday and lasts until the last person

### GOING UNDERGROUND

The Romans developed the Sint Pietersberg tunnels by quarrying soft marlstone at a painstaking rate of just four blocks per day, creating an underground system that provided refuge during the numerous occasions when Maastricht found itself under attack. During WWII, for example, the tunnels housed a well, a storeroom, a chapel, a kitchen and a bakery – even a pen for livestock.

The component called the Northern Corridor System Tunnels is an amazing feat of pre-industrial engineering: at one stage there were 20,000 separate passages, adding up to a length of 200km and stretching past the Belgian border – until the French blew up a large chunk of it, thinking they were under the Roman fort of Sint Pietersberg. Instead, the French army only succeeded in entombing hundreds of their own men. There are prehistoric fossils of fish and other creatures down here, a reminder of an inland sea that once held sway.

Walking through the tunnels is an eerie experience and you'll feel a deep chill, not only from fear of ghosts but also because it's extremely cold and dark, perfect for growing mushrooms – which some people do. People hiding down here during sieges would often die of exposure.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the tunnels is the graffiti from throughout the ages. You can see generations of drawings on the walls, everything from ancient Roman stick figures to wartime depictions of movie stars like Bette Davis, to '70s hippy nudes (the tunnels were barred from general access from the '80s on, before Dutch rappers could lay down some murals).

The VVV guides like to play little tricks, asking your permission first to ensure you won't completely freak out. A favourite is to take your gas light away from you – the guide then walks around a bend until they and all available light completely disappears into a black hole. You are then left in the stillest, thickest, heaviest darkness imaginable – a blackness you can literally feel. You are then asked to make your way to the guide, using your sense of touch to follow the curves of the wall.

As our favourite guide, Kitty, loves to relate, this little game can make grown men cry. When a Swedish, all-male TV crew filming a documentary on the tunnels took up the dare, Kitty took away all the lights and disappeared around a corner, asking them to feel their way around the bend. But they couldn't do it and all three broke down in tears.

'But once you were mighty Vikings' Kitty admonished, 'and now you cry like babies.'

collapses sometime on Wednesday. *Everything* stops for *carnaval*.

**Preuvenemint** As befitting its culinary reputation, each year Maastricht hosts this foodie festival, which takes over the Vrijthof for four days, with 40 stands featuring the best food and wine from all over the region. It's called the largest 'open-air restaurant in the world'.

**European Fine Art Foundation Show** (TEFAF; www.tefaf.com) Europe's largest annual art show is held in late March at the cavernous MECC exposition centre, just south of Céramique. More than 200 exhibitors converge on Maastricht offering masterpieces to those with a few million euros to spare. The event is open to the public.

### Sleeping

Maastricht is a popular weekend destination throughout the year, so reservations are a must. The tourist office has a list of private rooms travellers can book.

### BUDGET

**Stayokay Maastricht** (☎ 346 67 77; www.stayokay.com/maastricht; Dousbergweg 4; dm from €24; 📞) On

the perimeter of a nature reserve, a 3km walk from the town centre. Take bus 11 (Monday to Friday) or 8 or 18 (Saturday and Sunday) from Maastricht station to the Dousberg stop.

### MIDRANGE

**Matuchi** (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34; s/d €50/65) These rooms, above the supersmooth bar of the same name (p282), are elegant, minimal and stylish, and surprisingly large for the price range. All include flat-screen TVs for your supine pleasure.

**Maison Du Chêne** (☎ 321 35 23; www.maastrichthotel.com; Boschstraat 104; s/d from €40/58) In an elegant 1855 building, the Maison's rooms are very clean and the brasserie on the ground floor is class and a half. Beware: it's right on the Markt, which can make for a noisy Friday or Saturday night. Ask for rooms at the back.

**Hotel la Colombe** (☎ 321 57 74; www.hotellacolombe.nl; Markt 30; s/d €61/80) Also on the Markt, in a simple, white building, la Colombe has rooms that are equally unadorned, but all have a TV

and bath. This unassuming but friendly hotel has a decent café.

**Botel Maastricht** (☎ 321 90 23; Maasboulevard 95; s/d €37/58; ☑) Two barges lashed together make up the Botel, the smaller vessel acting as an exemplary deck for beer drinking when the sun's out. Inside, rooms are narrow and port-holed for that sea-dog feel, but comfy enough. There's a neat little shipshape bar inside.

**Hotel & Tapperij De Poshoorn** (☎ 321 73 34; www.poshoorn.nl; Stationsstraat 47; s/d €57.50/70) This is a good, simple place with a great café.

## TOP END

**Our pick** **Kruisherhotel Maastricht** (☎ 329 20 20; www.chateauhôtels.nl; Kruisherengang 19-23; s/d from €85/145; ☑) This stunning option is housed inside the former Crutched Friar monastery complex that dates from 1483. The publicity calls it a 'designer hotel', but the past hasn't been overwhelmed. Where there are modern touches, like moulded furniture and padded walls, they accent the historical surrounds. The rooms feature flat-screen TVs and wall-length paintings. Sumptuous.

**Hotel Derlon** (☎ 321 67 70; www.derlon.com; Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 6; r from €155; ☑) The sleekly luxurious and smartly suave Derlon boasts slimline and slyly singular rooms and enthusiastic staff, and the breakfast room in the basement is built around Roman ruins. A pampering and luxurious experience.

## Eating

Maastricht has four restaurants with Michelin stars – this is a very classy dining scene. To put this into perspective, Amsterdam, with four times the population, has six such establishments.

## RESTAURANTS

**Beluga** (☎ 321 33 64; www.restbeluga.com; Plein 1992; ☑ lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) With two Michelin stars, Beluga leads the pack. This sleek, angular, elegant designer restaurant not far from the Maas features excellent service and Frenchified cuisine that never fails to impress with its attention to detail. A recent menu sample included lightly steamed sole with pan-fried langoustines and *pommes à la sarine* filled with caviar, butter asparagus and a sour cream and black pepper sauce.

**Restaurant O** (☎ 325 97 47; www.restaurant-o.nl; Rechtsstraat 76; mains €18-21; ☑ lunch & dinner) This (mainly) seafood restaurant wins us over with

striking, stylish decor, and ever-present, ever-tasty aquatic meals. Lobster soup with mussels and shrimps, anyone? Pan-roasted moonfish? There's even a separate *fruits-de-mer* (seafood) menu – grand! Fresh and delightful.

**Ginger** (☎ 326 00 22; Tongersestraat 7; mains €10-20; ☑ lunch & dinner) Super-smooth and healthy Asian noodle soups come to Maastricht. And Ginger's the place to get them. Fabulous, fresh ingredients in a serene and wonderful contemporary setting.

**Restaurant Jean La Brouche** (☎ 321 46 09; Tongersestraat 9; 3-course menu €28; ☑ dinner Mon-Sat) This is classic cuisine in a quiet, lovely part of town. Think white tablecloths and cutlery with a bit of heft to it. If you're a fan of old-style French cooking, give this place a whirl.

**Mestizo** (☎ 327 08 74; www.mestizo.nl; Bredestraat 18; mains €12-19; ☑ lunch & dinner) Need a break from French and Dutch cuisine? Try Mestizo, a very inspired Latin restaurant serving up terrific Spanish and Mexican food. Now, exactly who among us can resist marinated lamb steaks roasted with garlic and chilli? Well, vegetarians, obviously – but there's a reasonable selection for them, too.

## CAFÉS

**Take Five** (☎ 321 09 71; Bredestraat 14; lunch €6; ☑ lunch & dinner) Situated on a quiet street parallel to the cramped terraces of heaving Platielstraat, Take Five combines fusion cooking with a stark interior, chill-out music and engaging staff. Expect live jazz on many nights.

## Drinking

**Take One** (☎ 321 64 23; www.takeonebiercafé.nl; Rechtsstraat 28) Cramped and narrow from the outside, this 1930s tavern is managed to stock well over 100 beers from the most obscure parts of the Benelux region. It's run by a husband-and-wife team who also organise beer tastings and refer to their customers as 'victims'. Relax, though, they'll willingly help you select the brew most appropriate to your tastes. Some of these beers have a huge kick, attaining 10% alcohol volume in some cases. Take One also stocks what's termed the 'world's bitterest beer' – indeed, sucking lemons is milder but less pleasurable.

**Matuchi** (☎ 354 06 92; Kleine Gracht 34) This venue bills itself as an 'Orient Style Lab', but it's a bit more than that: there's a dash of *A Clockwork Orange* in the interior design, mixed with *de rigueur* Arabian themes. All

in all, a hot joint in which to have a cool drink.

**Zondag** (☎ 321 93 00; www.cafézondag.nl; Wyckerbrugstraat 42) Here the cool is a bit more standard: the interior is a little more old-fashioned, though still jaw-achingly hip. Chow down on light lunches, tapas and other bar snacks, as well as musical accompaniment such as live Latin music or breakbeat DJs.

**John Mullins** (☎ 350 01 41; www.johnmullins.nl; Wyckerbrugstraat 50) This superfriendly Irish pub features a very popular but challenging quiz night on Tuesdays. Sample questions might include this: 'What was the first to feature seat belts: cars or planes?' The collective groans can be heard for streets around.

**In Den Ouden Vogelstruys** (☎ 321 48 88; www.vogelstruys.nl; Vrijthof 15) On the main drag, this antique bar is a little bit naughty and a little bit nice. The entrance has big, old, heavy red curtains, and inside there are photos of big, old, heavy men on the wall, big, old, heavy light fittings, and big, old, heavy Trappist beer.

## Entertainment

**Night Live** (☎ 09002020158; Kesselskade 43) A nightclub in an old church that opens after midnight at weekends; eclectic musical policy.

**Derlon Theater** (☎ 350 50 50; Plein 1992) Near the new library, Derlon has drama and music. The café has fine river views from the terrace.

**Cinema Lumiere** (☎ 321 40 80; Bogaardenstraat 40B) Offbeat and classic films are screened on a regular basis at this cinema.

## Getting There & Away

Maastricht Airport is a small facility served by KLM subsidiaries, which have flights to London and connecting flights to Schiphol. It is 10km north of the centre – see p304 for more information.

Sample train fares and schedules:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration (min)	Frequency (per hr)
Amsterdam	26.70	155	1
Rotterdam	25.70	140	2
Utrecht	23.10	120	1

There is an hourly international service to Liege, from where you can catch trains to Brussels, Paris and Cologne.

The bus station is to the right as you exit the train station. Eurolines has one bus a day

to/from Brussels. Interliner has hourly buses to/from Aachen.

## Getting Around

There is car and motorcycle parking in massive underground lots by the river.

A bicycle shop is in a separate building to the left as you exit the station.

## AROUND MAASTRICHT

The hills and forests of southern Limburg make for excellent hiking and biking. The **Drielandenpunt** (the convergence of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) is on the highest hill in the country (323m), in Vaals, 26km southeast of Maastricht. It's an excellent driving or biking destination.

## Valkenburg

☎ 043 / pop 18,000

This small town in the hills east of Maastricht has possibly the most overcommercialised centre in the Netherlands, attracting hordes of tour buses. But away from the town are excellent trails and cycle paths through the nearby forests.

The **tourist office** (☎ 09009798; www.vvvzuidlimburg.nl; Walramplein 5) has a huge selection of maps of the area and can assist with bicycle hire. You might start at the over-restored **castle** (admission €6; ☑ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) above town from where trails radiate out through the countryside.

**ASP Adventure** (☎ 604 06 75; www.aspventure.nl) gives 90-minute guided tours (€22, minimum 10 people) of the networks of caves that riddle the soft sandstone of the hills. There are many options, including riding bikes underground.

Valkenburg is easily reached from Maastricht by train (€2.50, 12 minutes, two per hour).

## Netherlands American Cemetery & Memorial

In Margraten, 10km southeast of Maastricht, the **Netherlands American Cemetery & Memorial** (☑ sunrise-sunset) is dedicated to US soldiers who died in 'Operation Market Garden' and the general Allied push to liberate the Dutch. It's a sombre memorial with row after row of silent white crosses – a stark but necessary testament to the futility of war.

The bus service to the cemetery runs from Maastricht's train station.

## NORTH LIMBURG

Clinging to the Maas river, the northern half of Limburg, barely 30km across at its widest point, is a no-nonsense place of industry and agriculture. **Venlo**, the major town, has a small historic quarter near the train station. Venlo along with **Thorn** and **Roermond** are worth a quick look if you are changing trains for the hourly service to Cologne.

### Nationaal Oorlogs- en Verzetsmuseum

Overloon, a tiny town on the border with Noord Brabant, was the scene of fierce battles between the Americans, British and the

Germans as part of ‘Operation Market Garden’ in 1944. The heart of the battlefield is now the site of the sober **Nationaal Oorlogs- en Verzetsmuseum** (National War & Resistance Museum; ☎ 0478-64 18 20; www.oorlogsmuseum-overloon.nl; Museumpark 1; adult/child €6.50/5; 🕒 10am-5pm), a thoughtful place that examines the role of the Netherlands in WWII.

To reach the museum take the hourly train to Venray from either Roermond (€7.20, 40 minutes) or Nijmegen (€6.20, 25 minutes). Then call a *treintaxi* (see p309) and buy your ticket (€4.10) from the ticket machine. The museum is 7km from the station. Make arrangements with the driver for your return.