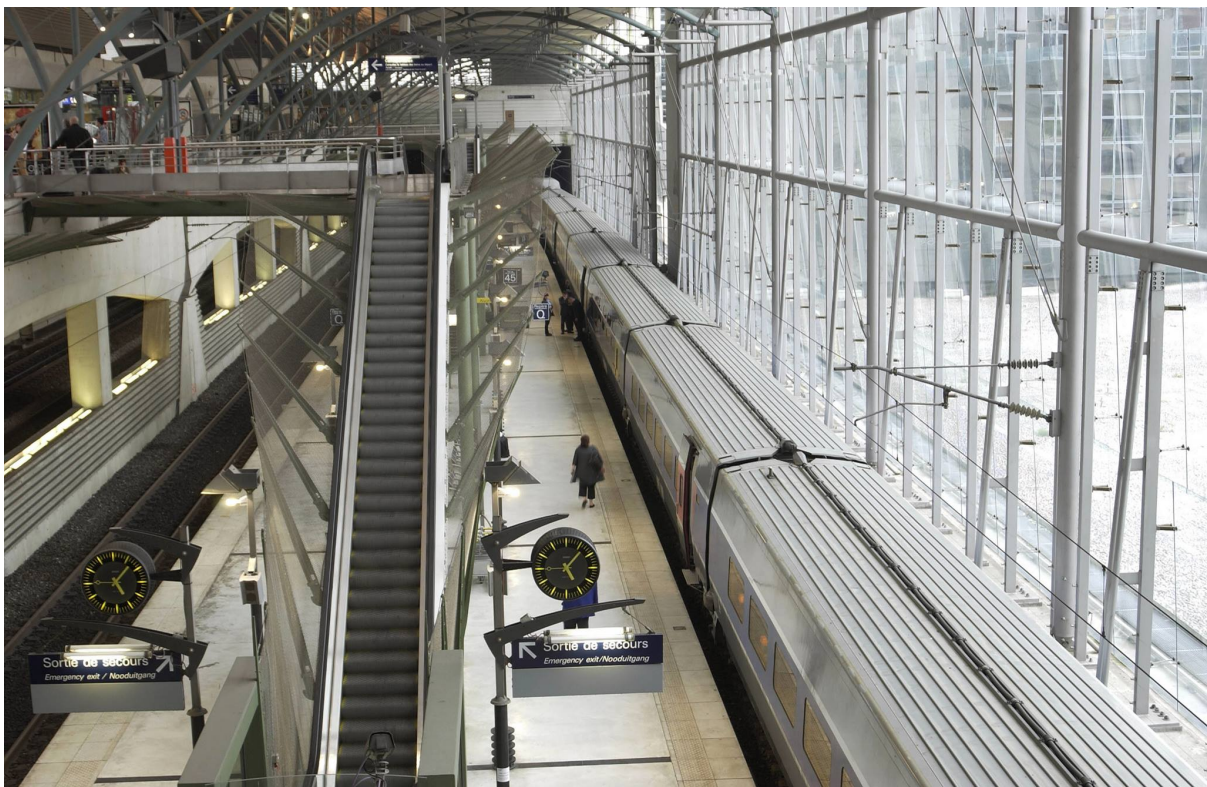


Forget Paris and head to Lille, France's northernmost town for the weekend instead

Sure, Paris is a great city. Home to beautiful, tree-lined boulevards, hundreds of charming bistros serving authentic French fare and impressive, Instagram-worthy monuments like the Louvre and Arc de Triomphe, it is understandable why the world's fashion capital consistently makes it onto most people's "bucket-list" travel destinations.

Yet, you're *seriously* missing out if you travel all the way to France just for Paris, because just an hour away by the high-speed train is the lesser-heard-of Lille, France's 4th largest city. A transport hub to other major cities like London, Brussels and Amsterdam, most travelers treat Lille as a stopover – big mistake! Rich in Flemish influence, this picturesque town looks straight out of a fairy tale, and if you know where to go, can serve up just as much fun and glamour to rival Paris (but with way less tourists). Here is our guide to spending a weekend in this adorable northern town.

Friday



Morning: If you're arriving from Paris, you'll likely end up in Gare Lille Europe, which is next to a massive shopping mall (Euralille) that will easily rival some of the biggest malls in Asia. Skip right past that though, and hop on the Metro (you'll notice they are driver-less) and head to **Palais Des Beaux Arts de Lille** (metro stop Republique Beaux Arts).



This museum is sometimes called the Second Museum of France (after the Louvre), thanks to the 22,000m² of space that the permanent collection takes up. It houses everything from ancient artefacts to paintings and sculpture, and you'll definitely need more than a morning if you want to see everything! We recommend setting aside some time during your stay if you really want to cover everything.

Opening hours: Tues – Fri 10am – 6pm, Sunday 2pm – 6pm. Closed on Mondays.
Tickets: €7

Afternoon: Spend your day wandering around old Lille, and beat the weekend crowds and shop up a storm! **Rue de Monaie**, **Rue de Clef** and **Rue de la Grande Chaussée** are where you'll be able to breakaway from the ubiquitous Zara and H&M retailers. From vintage thrift stores to Louis Vuitton to local designers and street-cool brands like Supreme, you can easily spend a few hours wandering in and out of stores.



If food is more your thing, check out **The Comtesse du Barry** for an exquisite curation of classic French delights, ranging from artisanal chocolate-coated almonds to foie gras imported straight from the south. Here, you can pick ready-packed gift bags or create your own. Just across the street is the chocolatier, **Chocolat de Beussent-Lachelle** that'll send your head into a tailspin thanks to the incredibly vast selection of chocolates! You can certainly choose the selection of chocolate yourself, but if you find your French wanting, there are ready-packed boxes and sacks of highly recommended *orangettes* – strips of candied orange peel dipped in dark chocolate.



Save your appetite for dinner and opt for a crepe (or 10) at **Crêperie Beaurepaire** – one of the city's best creperies where the menu boasts an enormous repertoire of sweet and savoury crepes, all hand-made, of course. Savoury crepes, or *galettes sarasins*, are made from buckwheat flour, which lends the crepes their appetizing, dark brown hue while sweet (sucrées) crepes are made from white flour, and are light as fluffy as air. This author's personal favourites are the Paysanne or Popeye (savoury), to be followed by the Belle Helene (sweet) after.



Evening: Make like the French do and hit up a bar for l'apero (pre-dinner drinks, basically) and enjoy a good ol' Belgian beer. Lille shares its border with Belgium so naturally, you'll find loads of bars serving up endless pints of rich Belgium beer. Keep an eye out for the links of *saucisson* hanging behind the bar too – these thick, cured sausages hail from France and are ridiculously addictive. You'll find many locals snacking on them during happy hour. These are usually served whole and you are expected to cut them yourselves, so don't be surprised!



If you're into games, manga and all things "nerd", definitely stop by **Le Dernier Bar Fin du Monde** (*the last bar before the end of the world*). The 2-storey bar gives nod to your inner geek – think Dr Who's Tardis as the bathroom entrance, elfin script from Lord of the Rings

scrawled above the bar, walls proudly bearing Street Fighter and Astroboy artwork, a glass case full of figurines and even a Harry Potter's cupboard-under-the-stairs drinking nook. The second floor houses a large gaming section where you can play everything Mario Kart to traditional board games – just be sure to give others their turn. Once you're done Instagramming like, everything (and trust us, you will), turn your attention to the booze. The drinks do not disappoint, whether you opt for something from their impressive selection of beers on tap or a fun cocktail from the extensive menu that –naturally– have video game, fantasy and superhero references.



Alternatively, head to **La Capsule**, a spot for serious beer lovers. The English-speaking friendly bartender knows his stuff, and will easily recommend you something to drink from their extensive selection of craft brews (we're talking 10-15 varieties on any given day).



Now that you're pleasantly buzzed and ready to sample local fare, prepare your stomachs, because it takes a hearty appetite to take on local cuisine! The local food is unique to this part of France, and certain dishes you'll certainly not be able to find down south. Alongside classic French dishes like steak tartare, a whole part of their cuisine is based on their Flemish roots and inspired by their Belgian neighbours (yes, that does include fries and waffles). Think dishes that are designed to warm you and your soul – literally! Winter is always coming in Lille, and the town sees only 1-2 months of clear skies and warm(er) weather. Spring, fall and winter usually translates to grey skies and low temperatures, which in my opinion, makes tucking into hearty classics like *carbonade flamande* (beef stewed in stout) not just appropriate, but responsible too.

You can try this classic at **Estaminet Chez La Vielle**, a cozy-meets-funky bistrot with a décor reminiscent of your grandma's apartment. Other must-tries are the *Fricandelle* (a mystery-meat sausage that is typical to the region), *Potjevleesch* (4 types of meat suspended in savoury gelatin) and *Welsh au Maroilles*. Maroilles is a very strong and pungent cheese that is best left for serious cheese lovers only.

Most shops close between 7-8pm in France, and bars anywhere between 12-3am. There are some clubs in Lille, but as the city is also home to one of France's largest student populations, it might not be the kind of scene you're after (although if you are, **Magazine Club** is a decent one). We recommend taking a walk through the town to digest your dinner and see how different the Flemish facades look bathed in golden street light. The city is relatively safe to walk around at night, but as with any European city, keep your wits about you and avoid the usual dark alleys.

Saturday



Morning: Hopefully you are not too hungover to make your way to the very first outlet of the now-world famous boulangerie, **Paul**. While it is likely any boulangerie (bakery) you walk into will be serving up amazing bread and pastries (you *are* still in France), why not have your coffee with a side of history, while watching locals go about their day. Tip: you cannot go wrong with a classic croissant or pain au chocolate dipped in coffee.



Afternoon: part of the beauty of Lille is that you can still find medieval-aged fortifications right in the city center. We're talking about the **Citadel**, a pentagonal structure that dates back to 1667. Around this incredible piece of history, is acres of parks and a running track that makes for a great way to work off all that heavy Flemish cuisine! Put on your running shoes (or rent a bike at one of those public bike stations) and spend an afternoon exploring the grounds. You'll find many locals picnicking or just relaxing on the grass and soaking up the afternoon sun.



If the great outdoors is not your cup of tea, there are plenty of other shops to keep you busy. Lille is home to the largest bookstore in Europe, the **Furet du Nord** where bookworms can easily spend hours roaming the shelves. Located just nearby within the **Vieille Bourse** or "old stock exchange" is an old square that was used for merchant trading back in the day. Today, you'll find a second-hand book-meets-flea market where you'll find everything from decades old wineglasses to postcards and old journals dating back to the 1920s.



Perhaps the close proximity to the UK explains why Lille is home to one of the grandest old tearooms we've seen. **Maison Meert** started as a pastry company back in 1761, and is renowned for its specialties of confectionery and pastries typical to the region such as studded waffles. The store and its impossibly ornate storefront are actually classified as historic monuments, which naturally, would be awesome for the 'Gram. The tearoom located at the back of the shop wasn't added until 1909, and the second tearoom in the 1930s.



Definitely take some time to have some tea (and as many pastries as you can cram) in this temple of grandeur and delicacies – you can be sure they know what they are doing, considering that Meert is one of the oldest pastry shops in the world.



Evening: If you're looking for a spot of dancing and drinks at a lively venue that isn't a club, head over to **Gare St Sauveur**, a converted train station that now serves as an event venue/bar that frequently hosts live music and DJ sets (check their Facebook page for updates). The other buildings within the former train station occasionally hosts interesting exhibitions too, so don't forget to check that out before arriving!



For dinner, tuck into homemade charcuterie and fantastic cuts of meat at **Le Barbier qui fume**. If the weather is fine, try to snag a table along the old street for a charming alternative to a regular dining room! The restaurant serves up wonderful interpretations of classic French dishes and has of course, an exceptional wine list to go along.

End your night at the highly popular **La Piroge**, a funky rum bar that is a favourite amongst locals. In the warmer months, the crowd spills out into the streets in front and behind the bar, so get there early! Not only does the bar have an impressive selection of rums from around the world, they also infuse their own and make some serious cocktails. If you can hold your booze, try the legendary *zazou*, a cocktail with a secret ingredient that no one has been able to pry from the bartenders. According to the locals, this cocktail is so strong that it frequently causes blackouts, so approach with caution...

Sunday



Morning: No matter how many cocktails you've had the night before, set an alarm, because you do not want to miss the legendary **Sunday market at Wazemmes**. This up-and-coming area is a little gritty around the edges and is not as pretty as the old town, but what it lacks in looks, it makes up for in character. The market is one of the largest in France and boasts an eclectic bohemian vibe, selling everything from food to flowers to fabrics. If you're not around for the weekend, the market is also open on Tuesday and Thursday.

Opening hours: Tuesday and Thursday 7am – 2pm, Sunday 8am – 3pm.



Afternoon: It's not a visit to France if you don't have some quiche, a delicious baked tart with a savoury base made of eggs and cream and can also include vegetables, meat and seafood. A staple in French cuisine, the classics are quiche Lorraine (lardons), florentine (spinach) and Provençale (tomatoes). Perfect for both colder and warmer seasons, tuck into a hearty quiche accompanied by a fresh salad at **Esaminet La Pate Brisée**, a bistro in the old town that serves up some of the – arguably– best quiches in the city. They also do gratins and other classic northern dishes, if you need more than a slice of quiche to satisfy your appetite!



Fancy a spot of modern art? Head over to **Le Tripostal**, a former post office that is now a cultural venue that frequently hosts interesting exhibitions, performances, flea markets and workshops. There are also restaurants and bars located within the massive space for when you get peckish. Check out their Facebook page for more information on events and happenings [here](#).

Opening hours: Wednesday – Sunday 10am – 7pm. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.



Evening: Museums always make us hungry, so once you're done wandering, head on over to **Les Compagnons de la Grappe**, a restaurant that is highly popular with the locals, so be sure to make a reservation. Boasting an adorable outdoor terrace with a fairy tale-esque setting and a cozy indoor dining area that looks like a French grandmother's home, the restaurant features a seasonal menu that changes during the summer and winter months. Serving up northern classics and other hearty, stick-to-your-rib dishes, be warned that this is not a place for dieters.

Bon voyage et bonne route!