METZ, CITY OF ART

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The busy traveller never makes a stop in Metz; he just uses the town as a staging post to exchange trains... direction Paris. However, Metz is a city that can fill a long, leisurely weekend with history, architecture and many tasty treats; it is a city where you should stay not five minutes waiting for the next connection, but at least five hours, why not five days? And since we have spoken of trains, let us start by visiting the Metz's railway station.

Having been built during the occupation of the Lorraine by the German empire, but somehow keeping in line with its initial plans as a construction "art nouveau", the Metz railway station gives us the impression of a modern style medieval castle. We leave the station and walk down to the centre of the town, along old houses decked out with flowers, and leafy gardens and streets that tell us that Metz is not only considered a city of art but also France's second green city.

The place in front of the town hall becomes a flowering carpet in spring, and the pleasant view of flower beds displayed everywhere in the city gives the visitor an extraordinary feeling of peace and serenity. During the warm summer evenings, a sound of music echoes in the streets of Metz, the city being the stage for music entertainment such as *Son et Lumière* at the Swan Lake. The city is an invitation to leisurely walks through the small old streets or to shopping around for the best deal, since Metz has since the Middle Ages been very busy in the commercial activity and was a more important place for trading exchanges in those old days than Paris or Frankfurt.

However, Metz is above all a city of art and history old of more than 3000 years; according to the archaeological findings brought to light in the course of this century at the "Saint-Croix" hill, the site had been occupied already at the end of the Bronze Age.

The church of *Saint-Pierre-aux-Nonnains*, France's oldest church, is now part of Metz's cultural centre. It was a Benedictine abbey in the VII century; and the remarkable set of sculptured stones from the chancel are displayed at the museum. The church was built on a Roman basilica of the IV century, and this reminds us that Metz was an important Gallo-Roman city, called *Divodurum Mediomatricorum* - after the Celtic tribe of the *Mediomatrics* who occupied the site - before becoming the capital of the Frankish kingdom of Austrasia, and afterwards the birthplace of the Carolingian empire.

Also erected in the place where a Roman building previously existed, the Metz cathedral is a great achievement in Gothic style, having however gone through some changes and additions in the course of time since its construction in the 13th century; its beautiful stained glass windows were designed by famous artists, among them Herman de Munster, Theobald de Lixheim and even Marc Chagall.

Dating back as well to the 13th century are the *Cloître des Récollets*, a Franciscan monastery which is now the headquarters of the European Institute of Ecology, and the *Chapelle des Templiers* - one of the very few circular churches existing in France - with beautiful wall paintings and stained glass windows of a more recent period.

These are however not the only vestiges of the Middle Ages you can find in Metz. Together with the ruins of the medieval town wall along the river Seille and the *Porte des Allemands* - an extraordinary example of defensive architecture - the reconstructed *Porte Serpenoise* bears witness to the old city gate which was destroyed when the *Citadelle* was erected. And in the *Place Saint-Louis*, the patrician houses look at us from the height of their very many centuries of existence, leaving in the air the noise and smell of the ancient markets held in the place.

But our knowledge of Metz's medieval past would not be complete without a visit to the Middle Ages section of the *Musée de la Cour d'Or*, where history and art mix up together for the pleasure of the visitor, and among all the treasures our eyes are offered to contemplate, the unique wooden painted ceilings of the XIII century which belonged to the *Hôtel du Voué*.

In Metz, there is always something going on every month, and the best-known festivity is the *fête de la mirabelle* - the festival of the cherry-plum - that takes place at the end of summer. This small yellow-skin fruit is somehow a "mascot" to the town, and the oldest mention of it dates back to the 16th century when king Charles IX visited the city and was offered a dessert made with this fruit; nowadays, there is a variety of other products on the market made from this fruit, and the *mirabelle* schnapps is a very "digestive" example.

A lot more should be said about Metz, about its monuments of classical style like the church of Our Lady or the *Place d'Armes*, and those of a more recent and even contemporary period as it is the case of the *Arsenal*, a military building of the XIX century nowadays transformed into a concert hall. We hope that these few lines will excite your curiosity for visiting the city and discovering it yourselves and if you like poetry, just remember that Paul Verlaine was born in Metz on the 30th March 1844 and though he did not live there for long, he was inspired by his birthday town when writing his poem " Metz " in the anthology "Invectives".

Metz is a big town, but the distances are never too large; after walking around you will for sure have the time of entering a "bistrot" for a drink and a well-deserved break.

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