

Good Practice Story Meerssen

Introduction

Meerssen has 19,110 residents and consists of the towns of Bunde, Geulle, Meerssen, Rothem, and Ulestraten.

Meerssen was founded in a wetlands area that once formed part of the vast Germanic forests. Its location along the 'Via Belgica', an important Roman trade route between Boulogne-sur-Mer and Cologne, contributed significantly to the growth of Marsna (the Roman name for Meerssen). A 'fiery' visit by the Vikings left everything in ashes, until Charlemagne rediscovered Meerssen as an ideal retreat during his travels and built a country house here.

Meerssen plays an important role in the history of Europe. The history of Meerssen from prehistoric times to the present is extensively described in the 550-page book *In de armen van Maas, Geul en Watervalderbeek* (in the arms of the Meuse, the Geul river, and Watervalderbeek stream), which was published in 2017.

Sustainable coronavirus recovery offensive

The Netherlands has been dealing with the impact of coronavirus/COVID-19 since 16 March 2020. The Municipality of Meerssen has been working in close collaboration with the South Limburg security region and done everything possible to inform its residents about the necessary measures as quickly and comprehensively as possible. These measures can be consulted at <https://www.meerssen.nl/coronavirus/>.

Out of all the various business sectors, the tourism branch has been hit the hardest by this crisis. South Limburg is the oldest tourism destination in the Netherlands and is economically heavily dependent on tourism. This means that the economic damage to the South Limburg tourist sector is of unprecedented magnitude.

In order to come up with a well-crafted and broadly supported recovery offensive for South Limburg as quickly as possible, Visit Zuid-Limburg has been collaborating with Marketing Maastricht to draw up the *Duurzaam uit de Coronacrisis* (sustainable recovery from the coronavirus crisis) exploratory study. The coronavirus and tourism knowledge base can also be consulted at <https://partners.visitzuidlimburg.nl/kennisbank/>.

Meerssen plays an important role in the recovery offensive. The municipality particularly offers options in terms of a better distribution of the number of tourists. Some of the measures of the recovery campaign are aimed at a better distribution of tourists to less busy areas such as Meerssen. In addition, the region is working on an accelerated implementation of the *Visie Vrijetijdseconomie 2030* (Vision for the leisure economy 2030), which was adopted throughout the region this year. For the implementation of the recovery offensive, use will be made of the current administrative Leisure Economy Task Force. An implementation schedule has now been linked to the exploratory study.

The start of tourism

Together with sixteen other municipalities, Meerssen forms the South Limburg region – the southernmost region of the Netherlands and part of the province of Limburg. Because this part of the Netherlands is completely different from the rest of the country in terms of its landscape, with rolling hills and culture with German and French influences, domestic tourism has developed rapidly here since the middle of the nineteenth century. Tourism in this region blossomed by the founding of the first VVV tourist office in the Netherlands in 1885.

Meerssen is a small player on the market as a tourist attraction, as evidenced by the studies commissioned by Visit Zuid-Limburg in 2018 concerning tourist spending in South Limburg, as well as other sources. A tourism survey conducted in 2019 showed that the inhabitants of the Municipality of Meerssen also believe this is the case and say they have a positive attitude towards drawing more visitors to the municipality. This was reason enough for the Municipality of Meerssen to see how Meerssen can be put in the spotlight as a tourist destination and attract more visitors to pay a visit of multiple days, or simply just a day trip, to Meerssen. After all, more tourism means more income, more vibrancy, and more means to fund amenities in the municipality, so that makes Meerssen an attractive place to settle permanently.

DNA

The central regional theme of the marketing and content strategy of our Destination Management Organization Visit South Limburg is '*South Limburg, Source of Europe*'.

Under this central theme Visit Zuid-Limburg wants to intrigue its guests with the unique DNA of the region and with the qualities that make the region stand out from other destinations. We want to realize this by translating this unique DNA into relevant information that will inspire visitors and residents by telling the stories and creating products that will activate visitors and guests.

Each DNA theme is elaborated into a campaign plan that follows the Customer Journey model (see appendix) of Visit Zuid-Limburg. This plan sets out which target groups will be addressed, which products will be developed by or with Visit Zuid-Limburg, which offer (qualities) will be highlighted, and which means of communication will be used.

Meerssen will focus on the following DNA themes:

- The Catholic past
- Wine tourism
- Source of Europe

1. The Catholic past

The Catholic past is one of the most important DNA themes for South Limburg. For this reason, Meerssen has chosen to take the Basilica and the stories around it as a starting point to further build on this theme. Places and buildings only become interesting when people are told the story behind them, a fact that was too often overlooked in the past.

Culture and reflection/spirituality are the guiding principles within the narrative concept.

Cultural heritage

The Basilica is considered to be the most prominent landmark of Meerssen. Anyone approaching Meerssen can see the tower of the Basilica protruding proudly far above the houses. This building is a typical example of

the Mosan-Gothic architectural style. Charlemagne is considered to be the initiator of the construction of the Basilica in 800 A.D. The Basilica is known as the 'pearl of the south', a name that draws many visitors every year. The Basilica also regularly appears as a recording location on national television programmes dealing with themes such as religion and contemplation, contributing to the fame of Meerssen in the Netherlands.

A network called the Friends of the Basilica ('Vrienden van de Basiliek') has been founded for the maintenance of the Basilica.

Octave

During the annual Octave, Meerssen's miracles (the miracle of the fire of 1222 and the miracle of the blood of 1464) that took place in and around the Basilica are commemorated. The opening of the Octave is always held shortly after Pentecost, when processions to and from the Basilica are held over the course of eight days (hence the name 'Octave'). The short devotional tour around the main altar of the Basilica in which pilgrims circle behind the altar and say their prayers is widely known as the '*Meerssener Ganck*'. In addition to the great interest of the inhabitants of Meerssen, the Octave also attracts many visitors from within the wider region every year.

Saint James' Way

Because of the fame of the Basilica and its long history, Meerssen has been included as a place of pilgrimage in the international Saint James' Way, drawing pilgrims from all over the world to the Basilica.

The Saint James' Way is not seasonal and attracts visitors year-round.

Events

Annual events take place around the Basilica, such as the Charlemagne Festival – in celebration of Charlemagne as the founder of the Basilica – and the Basilica on fire festival, a grand, open-air music spectacle all about the history, miracles, pilgrimages, and the associations, clubs, and societies in Meerssen and their traditions.

2. Wine tourism

Meerssen is currently developing a wine route along the three vineyards of Meerssen in order to tell the story of viticulture in Meerssen and showcase the dedication of its local winemakers.

But what is it that makes South Limburg and Meerssen unique in terms of wine tourism?

- South Limburg is one of the few regions in the Netherlands where viticulture is possible.
- South Limburg has the largest area under vines in the Netherlands (32%).
- South Limburg wine received a protected status in 2018 when the European Commission granted it the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO).
- The oldest vineyard of the Netherlands is located in Meerssen on Wijngaardsberg.

3. Source of Europe

South Limburg is seen as the Source of Europe with Meerssen at its centre. Here, the Treaty of Meerssen was signed in 870, marking the birth of modern Europe. In that year, the Carolingian Middle Kingdom was divided between the West-Frankish and East-Frankish Empires.

The foundations of the new Europe, divided into two superpowers, were thus laid. Today, the 'France-Germany axis' still forms the foundation of Europe.

Recent developments: network of walking routes, long-distance hike Rivierpark Maasvallei, and the international Meuse cycling route

In conclusion, we would like to mention the following developments and themes in relation to tourism.

Junction walking trails

South Limburg has a network of walking trails that is marked in the landscape with colourful wooden poles. Following the introduction of the digital bicycle junction system, this physical system will be replaced by a digital system in 2021 called *Knopen Lopen (walking trails: from junction to junction)*. Preparations for this have started in collaboration with the sixteen participating municipalities including Meerssen and Visit Zuid-Limburg. The advantage of this digital system is that its flexible deployment will make the thematization and digitization of the Great Stories of South Limburg, including Meerssen, faster and more effective. In addition, the *system is sustainable because no raw materials are used*.

Important in relation to coronavirus: the rapid realization of 'Knopen Lopen' can lead to guests walking quiet routes, as they can map out these routes themselves by means of pre-defined numbering.

The international Meuse cycling route

The International Meuse Cycling Route follows one of the most important rivers in Europe and is suitable for cyclists of all levels. The route runs from the Langres plateau to Rotterdam via Hoek van Holland and stretches over more than 1,050 km of marked trails and three countries (France, Belgium, and the Netherlands). In the Netherlands, the route continues via Maastricht to Geulle aan de Maas in the Municipality of Meerssen.

For more information visit

<https://nl.eurovelo.com/ev19>

Long-distance hiking in Rivierpark Maasvallei

This 137-kilometre multi-day hike has been specially developed for lovers of multi-day hikes. The walk connects eleven municipalities, including Meerssen, in the Meuse Valley River Park. The route is available both digitally and physically.

For more information visit

<https://www.rivierparkmaasvallei.eu/nl/langeafstandswandeling>