

Province of West Flanders

info brochure



west-vlaanderen
de gedreven provincie



Foreword

Dynamic regions and metropolises are emerging as pioneers in the Europe of tomorrow. Together with its inhabitants, West Flanders boasts the strength and winning assets to shape that future – to become a prominent province where welfare and well-being go hand in hand.

The people of West Flanders are hard working. We have stood up for ourselves for decades. Now more than ever, the province is streamlining and stimulating such dynamism with one goal in view: a sustainable and dynamic province, one in which it is nice to live, work and relax. A province for all seasons.

As the link between the municipalities and Flanders, the province is in optimal position to develop the region and to put it as fixture on the map of Europe, from the Coast to the West Flemish hills, from the Woodlands to the Kortrijk industrial region, from Westhoek to Zeebrugge harbour.

Our coastal province boasts the right winning assets: as a top recreational area for tourism, culture and sport, as an economic growth region for corporations, SMEs and agriculture, and as a region with a high quality of life.

The province is taking no chances when it comes to capitalising on these winning assets – for the future of the people of West Flanders is too important, and respect for visitors too great. As the pioneer of the 'regional houses' (promotion and development centres) and as a unique knowledge partner, the province is intent on charting and implementing new strategies together with its many allies: an ambitious mission that gives our province a new makeover, and places West Flanders definitively on the map of Europe as an excellent quality region.

Carl Decaluwé, Governor

Guido Decorte, Franky De Block, Carl Vereecke, Bart Naeyaert, Jean de Bethune and Myriam Vanlerberghe, Members of the Provincial Executive

Geert Anthierens, Chief Executive



History

When Julius Caesar conquered the territory of what is today West Flanders, more than two thousand years ago, the area was inhabited by the Morines and the Menapians. These coastal peoples had a reputation of being belligerent, but also stubborn and enterprising. It has been claimed, in fact, that the zest for work and entrepreneurial spirit of the modern inhabitants of West Flanders have been inherited directly from their forebears.

The “gau” (Frankish administrative district) of Flanders is mentioned for the first time in the 8th century, when it still comprised a rather limited territory round Oudenburg and Bruges. From the 9th century, the counts of Flanders started to expand their territories considerably from their stronghold in Bruges. In a few generations, the county of Flanders emerged as an important political entity in Europe at the time. The county comprised the current provinces of West and East Flanders, as well as Maritime Flanders and French Flanders.

It was a prosperous region and a flourishing trade. Bruges, Ypres and Kortrijk demanded greater independence from the French kings – a wish that found expression in fierce warfare. The Flemings won a surprising victory over the French cavalry at the “Battle of the Golden Spurs” on 11 July 1302.

In the 14th century, Flanders was absorbed in the realm of the Dukes of Burgundy.

In the 15th century, Flanders became one of the 17 provinces of the Burgundian Netherlands. In the turbulent 16th century, Flanders came under Spanish rule. This harsh regime led to an armed uprising and a long struggle that lasted more than 80 years. A permanent deputation has existed ever since.

In 1830, West Flanders became part of an independent Belgium.

In the first half of the 20th century, the region was a theatre of two world wars. It was occupied and liberated on two occasions, and many monuments and memorials bear witness to this period.

In the 20th century, West Flanders took flight as an economic powerhouse and an attractive region in Flanders, Belgium and Europe.



One province, two ambitions

The provincial government considers developing and promoting our region as a top priority. West Flanders has a double ambition: to be a government for the entire province and to act as a partner with knowledge and experience, so as to help our region move forward.

Regional government

Our provincial government wants to be close to the people of West Flanders, know what goes on in the different parts of the province, discover what our needs are. Regional workers, regional houses and regional managers provide solutions to help each resident of West Flanders improve. The dynamic regional government coordinates and finances, guides and supervises. Recreation, economic life and quality awareness are already highly developed, but new initiatives with many partners will secure our future.

A partner in knowledge

The Province of West Flanders has a great deal of knowledge in house. Expertise that it makes available to municipalities, organisations, and the people of West Flanders themselves. Continuing personnel training, agricultural research, provincial education and training for various target groups contribute to lifelong learning in our knowledge society. This knowledge transfer is of vital importance for making West Flanders an even more recreational, enterprising region.



One province, three challenges

What do we, the people of West Flanders, do best? Which winning assets can we deepen and capitalise on further in future? How can we make more progress in the decades to come? To make West Flanders even better, stronger, and more attractive, the provincial government is focusing on three spearheads.

Top region for recreation

The people of West Flanders are Burgundians in nature. Enjoyment and hospitality go hand in hand here. The recreational offer and accommodation possibilities on the Coast, Greater Bruges, Westhoek and the Leie Region are unique in Western Europe. A colourful pallet of art cities, museums, war memorials, provincial estates, cycling and walking routes, picturesque landscapes and charming villages, attractions and top events to beguile the visitor.

Enterprising region

Sustainable family entrepreneurship has made our province prosperous. A favourable business climate, education, inducements for tourism and growth opportunities for agriculture, horticulture and fisheries secure our well-being. Our central location in Europe and fine infrastructure and facilities are extra winning assets to make West Flanders a pivot of international trade.

A quality region

Quality speaks to us. The environment as a whole deserves our respect, with a sustainable use of the scarce and therefore valuable space: liveable residential clusters, safe roads, well equipped industrial estates, sufficient agricultural land, valuable nature, open space and a healthy environment. But people too, from toddlers to the elderly, are accorded every care from social services and the rich social life.

Top region for recreation

Tourism

Ten different coastal municipalities glitter like jewels on a crown along the 67-kilometre coastline. Every year, the coast plays host to some 3 million holidaymakers, accounting for 15 million overnight stays. The region's biggest winning asset is its enormous diversity. **The Coast** is ideal for an active experience with nature reserves such as "The Zwin Nature Centre" for strollers and numerous beach clubs and marinas for active water sport enthusiasts.

The Westhoek is a surprising region with expansive polders and green hillocks characterised by the silence of dozens of war cemeteries. This part of West Flanders, tucked between the "Schreve" (the border with France) and the Flemish North Sea Coast, boasts a number of provincial recreational and nature reserves such as The Palingbeek, The Gasthuisbossen and The Kemmelberg. World War I left a trail of destruction through this virgin countryside. Today, it is a pure and above all authentic region with a broad horizon, a rich cultural history and gastronomic delicacies.

Greater Bruges is the green region around Bruges. This region combines an open polder landscape with a rich wooded belt. The many castles and other cultural and historical heritage are certainly worth a visit.

The Leie runs a thread from the French border to Ghent. On the side of West Flanders, nature alternates with a rich industrial archaeological heritage. The Leie Region is the heart of the historical flax industry. The story of flax and other industrial heritage can be discovered in some of the region's many museums.

Recreational cycling network

Our province has an extensive recreational cycling network of no fewer than 5.000 kilometres. It brings you to the finest, often unknown corners of both the coast and the hinterland.





Sport

West Flanders is an athletic province. Inhabitants and visitors can find their fill of countless sport disciplines and associations, from aikido to land yachting. The province moreover boasts an extensive sport infrastructure and facilities. The numerous amateur sports constitute an ideal breeding ground for successful individual top athletes that West Flanders keeps on producing. In addition, various clubs in West Flanders perform extremely well in the most prestigious international sporting events every year.

The Gavers

The Gavers provincial estate in Harelbeke-Deerlijk is the largest green estate in greater Kortrijk. The centrally located Gavermeer is a water sport centre par excellence for sailing, surfing, and angling. Strollers, joggers, horsemen and cyclists can enjoy their favourite sport in the green setting, but nature too takes pride of place.

Culture

West Flanders has a rich artistic and cultural landscape. Fine museums and cultural centres attract thousands of visitors every year. International major exhibitions in Bruges and Ostend have become a concept. Large and small festivals bring a summery atmosphere to the parochial hall or the meadow. Culture, however, is far more than just consumption: it is also experienced creation. Many inhabitants of West Flanders engage actively in plastic arts, music, literature, dance, and the performing arts, perpetuating a rich tradition. The people of West Flanders love their roots and are keen to perpetuate their historical heritage.

Mu.ZEE

With ambitious retrospectives and a rich permanent collection from 1830 to the present, Mu.ZEE in Ostend will win over the heart of every contemporary art lover. The scholarly museum library, creative workshops and educational brochures are extra winning assets.

Enterprising region

The economy

The coastal province is bustling with economic activity. Sectors such as agriculture and fisheries are historically interwoven with the province. But there is also a strong industrial presence and trade and distribution are well developed as well.

The industrial recovery of companies in West Flanders after World War II is enduring. Turnover and exports continue to rise. Expansion, automation and environmental investments are guarantees for the future.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are of great importance for the economic development of West Flanders. This form of entrepreneurship has grown through history. Family owned and operated companies with West Flemish roots still form the cradle of regional growth. They are the engine of West Flanders. Not only are they an important source of employment, but they also underlie the quality of life and wellbeing of the region. West Flanders moreover enjoys a favourable investment climate for companies large and small. So the future remains secure.

The Flemish Coast, Bruges and Westhoek are the traditional magnets of West Flanders. **Tourism** is one of the most important mainstays of the West Flemish economy. The sector keeps registering continuous growth. Furthermore, tourism is expanding ever further over the entire region. Flemings and the international public alike find a full range of day and accommodation tourism in West Flanders. Many tourists come from neighbouring countries, but also from elsewhere in Europe, America and Japan.

The hotel and catering trade provides a considerable labour market. However, related sectors employ quite a number of people, e.g. bike and boat rentals, organisation of events, museums, recreational estates and the entertainment world.

Action for Start-ups

West Flanders is traditionally characterised by strong entrepreneurship. To continue to ensure this in the future, 'Action for Start-ups' was launched. In addition to reception infrastructure at 12 locations within the province, the project provides start-ups with counselling and support through e.g. the Provincial Development Agency (POM) of West Flanders, Unizo, Voka and Syntra West.





Agriculture, horticulture and fishing

West Flanders is the most agricultural province in Flanders, with family embedded mixed concerns and land crops. Livestock breeding, agriculture and horticulture supply quality foods and constitute an important pillar of the countryside in Flanders. The supply of raw materials and processing of agricultural produce led to a sound industry and a source of growing indirectly employment. West Flanders has acquired a unique position at world level on this front.

Fishing is an industry typical of West Flanders. The total value of the fish that Belgian vehicles bring into harbours such as Zeebrugge, Ostend and Nieuwpoort exceeds 62 million euro. Specialised personnel is increasingly called upon for the high-tech fishing vessels.

Inagro

Inagro in Beitem conducts applied research in agricultural techniques, reconversion, environmental protection, organic agriculture, management and business development. The province makes this knowledge available to farmers and horticulturalists by providing information and services.

Education

Education is a relative small sector in West Flanders. There are two provincial educational institutions, the Provincial Institute of Technology (PTI) in Kortrijk and the Provincial Centre for Adult Education (PCVO) in Izegem and Kortrijk.

In addition, the province takes a number of initiatives that contribute to the educational development of the people living in West Flanders. Institutions such as the School for Administrative Law and WIVO offer tailor-made courses for civil servants.

To the Centres for Basic Education, the province provides a consultation platform and opportunities for advancement. Efforts are also being made in higher education through several communication campaigns.

The Provincial Institute of Technology (PTI)

PTI in Kortrijk is a provincial educational institution that provides quality secondary education for regional sectors. Courses on electrical engineering and textiles are on offer on Graaf Karel de Goedelaan campus. The Tuinbouwschool (School of Horticultures) campus specialises in agriculture and horticulture. The most advanced educational tools and thorough advice and guidance ensure that students are bound to find their fill.

A quality region

Nature and environment

The people of West Flanders live in a green and healthy province. They give nature every chance to develop. Unique natural treasures, agricultural landscape management and regional landscapes are winning assets that are appreciated by tourists and the envy of other provinces. Problems with environmental pollution and mobility have honed the environmental awareness of the people of West Flanders who are keen on quality. For them, sustainability is not a vogue word.

Provincial estates or nature reserves can be appreciated fully when they are properly opened up. Visitor centres such as The Palingbeek, The Gavers or Lippensgoed-Bulskampveld, extra reception infrastructure and facilities, attractive leaflets and brochures, give holidaymakers and tourists the feeling that they are really welcome.

The Zwin Nature Centre

On 1 October 2006 the former Zwin bird park became the property of the province of West Flanders. The Zwin plain was purchased by the Agency for Nature and Forests of the Flemish region.

The Zwin is a magnificent nature reserve on the border between Flanders and the Netherlands. At high tide the mudflats and salt marshes behind the beach and the dunes are entirely or partially flooded by the sea. This is how a unique biotope for numerous special plants and birds is created. Thousands of birds come to the Zwin every year to breed, hibernate or look for food. From the seawall surrounding the extensive nature reserve you have a wonderful view of the Zwin tidal area with its tidepools and rills.

Het Zwin is facing major challenges. In addition to the nature restoration works in the natural park as well as the Zwin plain, the new and contemporary Zwin Nature Centre will get a new visitors' centre with a permanent exhibition and a viewing centre. The works will begin in 2013.





Welfare and care

In a prosperous region such as West Flanders, everyone is entitled to well-being, to an absorbing and meaningful life. The people of West Flanders have a reputation of being close-knit by nature, they have a big and caring heart and they look out for each other's wellbeing: young persons, the disabled, senior citizens, the underprivileged, the unskilled, migrants, etc. All those who are vulnerable in society are provided with the best of care. Living together is still an authentic and intense experience, in the nuclear and extended family, the neighbourhood, etc. The rich social life and the many volunteers stand guarantee for a quality of life and the prevention of social isolation.

Provincial welfare institutions

People with a severe disability require permanent supervision and intensive assistance in various aspects of life. Over the past years the province has therefore invested a great deal in its 3 care facilities (De Waaiberg in Gits, 't Venster in Izegem and Ons Erf in Brugge), which together constitute the non-profit organisation UNIE-k.

Provincial North-south Centre

The Provincial North-south Centre in Roeselare is the hub of cooperation for development in West Flanders. Many projects supported by the Province improve the quality of life of people throughout the world.

Town and country planning

Industrial estates, agricultural areas, infrastructure, residential areas and nature reserves are all asserting their rights. They are all making justified claims to the available but scarce space. West Flanders is endeavouring to strike the right balance between at times ostensibly conflicting interests. The people of West Flanders live together in a pleasant environment, with liveable cities and villages, safe roads and cycling paths, well-equipped industrial estates and unique stretches of nature. They handle space with care and are striving for spatial quality.

Water policy

The maintenance of waterways, the prevention of flooding by introducing buffer basins, the installation of water conservation basins for agriculture and muskrat control are the spearheads of the provincial water policy. The province endeavours to strike the right balance between agriculture, the economy, recreation and nature, and cooperates with various partners to that end.

The province of West Flanders ensures the maintenance and management of 1,001 km of watercourses outside the polder area (230,000 ha). Within the West Flemish polder area (100,000 ha) the province funds the maintenance of 700 km of 2nd-category watercourses with 25 pumping stations.

Safety

West Flanders is one of the safest provinces. The region has been spared of serious crime, the police services spare no effort to stave off cross-border crime, while the watchful eye of one's fellow citizens in the neighbourhood information networks enhances the feeling of security. West Flanders is a safe place to live.

Security however also means: being prepared for disasters, providing help in need, keeping traffic under control, protecting vulnerable groups and improving road safety, which remains a point of particular focus. Activities are being carried out throughout the province to improve road safety. In addition, road users are sufficiently informed through campaigns to promote careful behaviour.





External relations

The Province of West Flanders forms an important link between its citizens and Europe. Specific solutions and actions are worked out for each specific area within the region in cooperation with the cities and municipalities, regional platforms, inter-municipal associations or partners. Together with various partners, the province has designed four 'regional houses' that promote greater coordination, cooperation and synergy between the regional partners and the regional initiatives. The province is involved in quite a number of European programmes and is working in close cooperation with neighbouring regions. In addition, the province is also working in cooperation with China and Poland.

Europe Direct

Europe Direct is an active information counter where people who have questions about Europe can obtain free leaflets and brochures on the widest topics and policy areas of the European Union and consult the scientific publications and databases of the European Commission.

Questions?

The Provincial Information Centre Tolhuis, in the centre of Bruges, will be delighted to answer all your questions about the province. The reading room features all sorts of informative leaflets and brochures, and the information shop has in particular tourist maps, art catalogues and various provincial publications for sale.

Provincial Information Centre Tolhuis

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