

Diest, from
'Begijnhof' to
'Mosterdpot'

HERITAGE WALK



Discover the rich past of Diest, town on the Demer. Here, on the borders of Hageland and the Kempen, a flourishing trade centre with many faces developed. An earldom in the Carolingian Empire, an Orange City until French rule, a fortress town on the frontline, and a beer town during the Austrian period. Follow the clues and walk through a colourful history: from ‘Begijnhof’ to ‘Mosterdpot’.

Stroll through the streets and admire picturesque rows of houses and ancient façades. Here a chapel or a church in rusty ironstone, there a quaint corner with greenery surrounded by walls steeped in history. The historic city centre is one large open-air museum.



3

The walk

**DEPARTURE POINT:
GROTE MARKT (MAIN SQUARE)**

DISTANCE: 7 KM (2 HOURS)

TYPE: CITY WALK – PAVED

**PARTIALLY ACCESSIBLE FOR WHEELCHAIRS AND
PRAMS**

NO SIGNPOSTING

Follow the route in this guide and **stop** at many places of interest. We will tell you the story of Diest, with some **'did you knows'** and **fun tips** along the way.



4

START on the Grote Markt, a pleasant square with an imposing town hall and the Church of St Sulpitius. Turn on your axis and admire the beautiful houses dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, such as the ‘In Den Zoeten Inval’ (No. 6), ‘Het Haasken’ (No. 11), ‘De Roos’, ‘De Gulden Boom’ and ‘De Korenbloem’ (No. 18), ‘Het Huisken van Emmaus’ (No. 22), the ‘Leliekamer’ (No. 23) and the ‘Keyzer’ (No. 24).

1 Het stadhuis (the town hall)

The town hall, a classicist brick building with limestone and bluestone, **was built on the foundations of three medieval buildings**. Today, the Romanesque and Gothic cellars of these buildings are home to the **City Museum of Hofstadt**, named after the former residence of Diest’s ‘baanderheren’ (high-ranking feudal lords) that once stood here.



Did you know ...

... 'baanderheer' derives from 'banner lord'? A banner was a flag carried by a powerful nobleman.

Descend the stairs and enter the **Gothic Hall**, a gem of medieval architecture. The adjoining **Romanesque Hall** is at least one century older, with an authentic barrel vault and substantial columns. The Gilbert Van der Linden Hall contains valuable paintings, while the beguines' room displays the richly varied life of the beguines. The sculpture room and treasury contain religious sculptures and silver, and two **rare Enclosed Gardens** (retable cabinets) from the early 17th century.

Tip Admire the coat of arms on the town hall's pediment, heraldically described as: "In silver with two bars of sable. The shield topped by a crown with five fleurons in gold and held by two griffins of the same. The whole set on a grass mound".



2

Sint-Sulpitiuskerk (Church of St Sulpitius)

6

This place of worship took more than two hundred years to build. A stone in the choir mentions the date 1321, but building works may have begun earlier. Just about every architect of repute worked on it. **Philip William, a Prince of Orange, is buried in the high choir.** In his last will and testament, Philip stipulated that he wanted to be buried either in Breda, Diest, Lons-le-Saunier or Orange, and in the city closest to his place of death. Since he died in Brussels, it was Diest. A crypt was hastily built beneath the choir where he was laid to rest on 1 April 1618. The coffin stood on three iron bars in the burial chamber. His embalmed heart ended up in a separate barrel.

The church's Baroque belfry dates from 1766 and contains the largest surviving Hemony carillon in the world: the Stradivarius of bells and carillons.

Did you know ...

... such a belfry is called a pepper pot in Lier, a saltcellar in Lokeren and a Mosterdpot (mustard pot) in Diest? This is how people from Diest got their nickname: Mostersdchijters (literally translated as 'mustard shitters').

3

Statue of Nicolaas Cleynaerts (1493-1542)

The renowned **Diest humanist** became famous for his pedagogical publications. His books of Greek grammar were reprinted until the 18th century. **Cleynaerts was the first Fleming to immerse himself deeply in Islam and to champion reconciliation between Muslims and Christians.** He set off on a one-man crusade to Fez in Morocco under the motto *verbo non gladio* (by word, not by sword). He garnered little support in Fez or at home, and eventually fled to Granada, where he later died in the Alhambra.

Walk behind the statue of Nicolaas Cleynaerts and climb the Allerheiligenberg (All Saints' Mount) to the Allerheiligenkapel (All Saints' Chapel).

7

4

Allerheiligenkapel (All Saints' Chapel)

The first All Saints' Chapel stood on top of the hill previously called the Kluisberg. After Belgian independence, the chapel had to make way for the construction of a citadel, the final piece of the new defensive belt. The building of the current **neo-classical chapel** began in 1854, 'at the foot of the hill within the ramparts.' The chapel's original statues were moved to the well-guarded treasury of the Church of St Sulpitius. In their place, **more than 160 holy statues** adorn the interior of the quiet chapel where you can light a candle to your saint of choice.



Tip Experience an age-old tradition on 1 November: All Saints' Benediction. To this day, numerous pilgrims come from near and far to the chapel to beg for salvation and healing. They buy an ex-voto, circle the chapel in prayer, attend mass, and then, enlightened and cured, visit the annual fair.

Climb the stairs at the chapel. Here you have a nice view over Diest and the steeples of the Church of St Sulpitius, Kruisherkerk (the Crusaders' Church) and Begijnhofkerk (the Beguinage Church). Once at the top, follow the cobbled road straight ahead to the citadel.

5

Citadel

8

Construction of the citadel began in 1846. It is built entirely of brick. The neo-classical bluestone entrance gate stands out as the only embellishment in a mainly functional architecture. **The citadel formed a pentagon.** However, two city facing façades are partially demolished. **Each side is 190 metres long, with regularly protruding pentagonal platforms** on which defence artillery was deployed.

Did you know ...

... there were paratroopers living in the citadel until 2011?

Tip Is the green gate to the right of the entrance open? Walk through it and continue straight ahead until you reach the hill's edge. Here you have a nice panoramic view of the north of the city. See the street in front of you? It follows the trajectory of the vanished ramparts.



Descend the hill via the stairs or the cobbled road. At the chapel, turn right down the Allerheiligenberg. Then turn left into Keelstraat and then right into Schuttershofstraat. Continue straight ahead until you reach the Kaai (Quay).



6

De Kaai (Quay)

This square was **once an important mooring spot for boats**. Among other goods, they transported grain, fuel, wine and building materials along the Demer River. **Following the expansion of the road network, shipping declined**. In the 1960s, the Demer riverbed in the city centre was filled. The river had become an open sewer and frequently flooded. But **since 2016, the Demer flows through Diest again, and the Quay, its walls and horse staircase were restored**.

Did you know ...

... the name 'Demer' comes from the Celtic Tamara, meaning 'dark water'? The dark colour has nothing to do with pollution or silt, but rather the blackish brown layers of peat at the bottom of the riverbed.

Walk to the end of the Quay and turn left into Demerstraat. Are you standing in front of the bridge? Stop for a second and look to the right.

7

Refugehuis van de Abdij van Averbode (Refuge House of Averbode)



In Refugiestraat, you can see the **Refuge House of Averbode Abbey**. This 16th century building was constructed in brick and sandstone in the traditional **Flemish Renaissance style**. Located within the city walls, the monks safely stored their official documents here and sheltered in turbulent times.

Keep following the Demer. The cobbled road leads you to the rear of Cerckel Park: an ideal place to stop for a rest on one of the benches. Continue walking through the park.

8

Minderbroederklooster (Friars Minor Monastery)

The Order of Friars Minor (or Franciscans) is said to have settled in Diest as early as the 13th century. **All that remains of their monastery is the old entrance gate, anno 1762.** In the niche above the entrance there is a statue of St John in the Brabant Gothic style dating from around 1500. The cemented 18th century house was probably the gatekeeper's lodge. On your walk through the park, did you also notice the orangery and old infirmary? The rest of the monastery has been demolished.

Did you know ...

... the tomb of Anna of Lorraine (†1568) has disappeared? She was first buried in the church of the Friars Minor monastery, where her grave was defaced and desecrated by The Beggars (a confederacy of Calvinist Dutch nobles) a few years later. The city council had Anna reinterred in the Church of St Sulpitius but to this day, no one knows where she lies.

You are now in Michel Theysstraat. This street is a silent witness to Diest's rich brewing past.

Cerckel Brewery

Since 1980, this **19th century porter's house** has been part of our industrial heritage. **The mansion is a reminder of Diest's rich brewing tradition and the many breweries that once stood along the Demer River.** In 1868, Diest had as many as 19 breweries and 23 innkeeper brewers on the banks of the river.

Turn right into Refugiestraat. Walk through the gate and enter the inner courtyard of The Spijker.

9

The Spijker

12



This is the former refuge of the Norbertines of Tongerlo. **Spijker, Spicarium or Speicher means granary.** The refuge also served as a grain store for the abbey in Diest. This explains the many rooflights and skylights. The monks had rights to certain houses in the city from very early on. **House owners paid their taxes not in money, but in grain.** The Spijker is now a hotel.



Leave the park via the same gate and walk around the corner to the right, straight into Oscar Nihoulstraat. Then turn left into Koning Albertstraat. On the opposite side of the road, you will see the Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall).

13

10 Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall)

A building with many faces: **Cloth Hall until the end of the 17th century**, then a slaughterhouse, school, fire station, exhibition space and ballroom. During renovations in the early 19th century, the façade was irreversibly mutilated. The proud belfry leaning against the building disappeared under the wrecking ball, as did the niche containing a Romanesque Madonna. The statue survived and is safe and sound in the Romanesque Hall of the city museum.

Tip To get a better idea of the medieval character of this Gothic hall, take a stroll down Hallestraat to its southern façade on Felix Moonsstraat. Here, the ironstone is decorated with sandstone 'bacon layers'. At the corner of Felix Moonsstraat, you will notice the trunk of a gargoyle below the cornice.

Holle Griet

In front of the Cloth Hall stands a large lady on a low pedestal. This **cannon** weighs **more than five tons** and after **500 years**, it still shows no sign of rust. 'Holle Griet' is said to have only fired celebratory salvos.

Continue down Koning Albertstraat. On the left, you will see the Sint-Elisabethgasthuis (St Elisabeth's Hospital).

11 Sint-Elisabethgasthuis (St Elisabeth's Hospital)

This was the **city's first nursing institution**.

The Groot Gasthuis [Large Hospital] was founded in Webbekom in 1200 and moved to this location

in 1250. In 1619, its management passed to the Nursing Sisters, who named it after their patron saint: St Elisabeth of Thuringia. **The current complex consists of a convent and farm buildings dating from the 17th century.**

The **pharmacy** opened in 1702. The single nave chapel was fully renovated in 1780. Today, the listed building is home to, amongst others, Visit Diest and other city services.



14

Tip Briefly enter the information office of Visit Diest. On the wall there is a large mural of Philip William of Orange-Nassau. An impressive reminder of Diest's past as an Orange City.



Some notable houses from the 17th and 18th centuries

'De Bloempot' (No. 38) is a stately, two-storey Louis XV house. Two old breweries, 'De Drie Kronen' (No. 72) and 'In den Palmboom' (No. 74), lie fraternally side by side. In the pediments you will find references to the brewers' craft in stucco: a straw basket, stirring stick, barrels, shovels ...

15

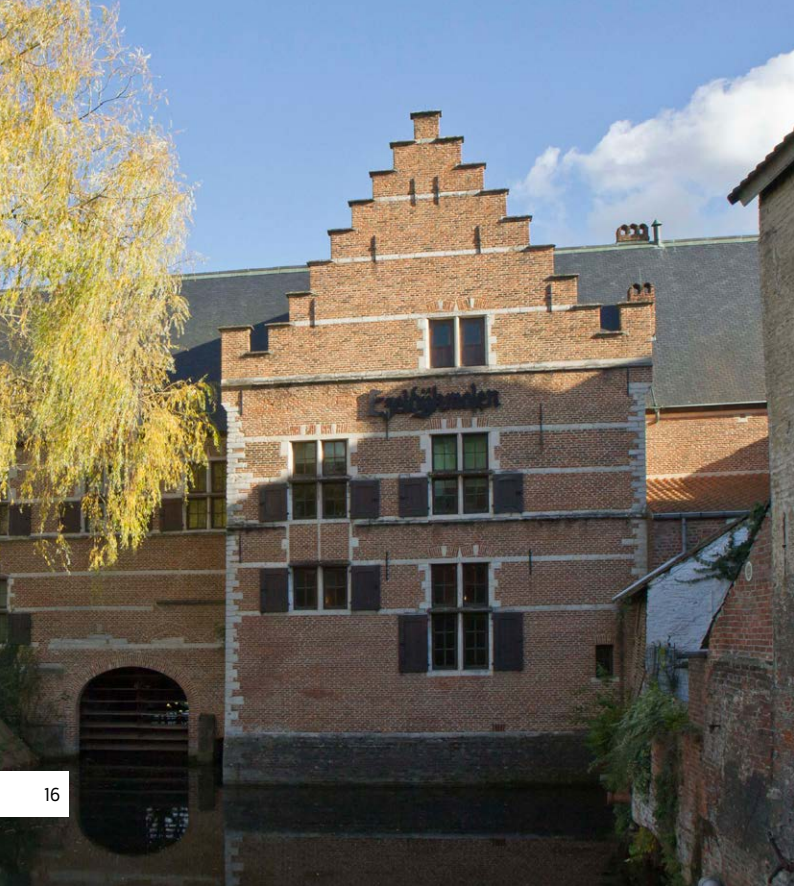
Turn left into Palmboomstraat. This brings you back to Michel Theysstraat. Cross the street and walk straight ahead to 'De Wereld'.

12

'De Wereld' (No. 60)

The stepped gable of this **former brewery** is **crowned with a gilded globe** (hence its name). Next to De Wereld, you can see another beautiful 18th century building with classicist touches.

To the right of De Wereld, walk into Verversgracht. Follow this street until just before the bridge. Turn right and walk along the decking path until you reach the large staircase at Schaffensestraat. Straight ahead you will see the Ezeldijkmolen (Donkey Dyke Mills). Turn right.



16

13 Ezeldijkmolen (Donkey Dyke Mills)

These **watermills** have been part of Diest's townscape for seven centuries. On this spot, two medieval watermills once **milled grain and oak bark for tanning leather**. They were replaced by an imposing Flemish Renaissance-style mill complex in the 16th century. The buildings are in the form of a Latin cross, with stepped gables at the four ends. Now the mills no longer grind. But the locks come in handy to protect the city centre from flooding.

Did you know ...

... the name 'Ezeldijkmolen' refers to the many donkeys that paraded along the banks of the Demer, loaded with grain and oak bark?

Continue walking along Schaffensestraat (keeping the mill on your left). Just before the Wannes Raps restaurant you will see 'De Rode Leeuw'.

14

De Rode Leeuw

(No. 21)

This two-storey, white-painted, brick and sandstone house with a gabled roof **dates from around 1700**. Pilasters frame the arched doorway, below a rectangular window decorated with volutes. Again, a pediment crowns the middle section of the house.

Did you know ...

... Wannes Raps is a book by Ernest Claes? It's about a popular figure who once actually lived ... in Diest!

17

Continue straight ahead until you see a church.

15

Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Church of Our Lady)



What started out as a small chapel evolved into the impressive Church of Our Lady, **consecrated in 1288**. It is a beautiful example of **Early Gothic**, **a rarity in this region**. Its austerity is typical of the period, and there are hardly any decorations on the outside.

The church has three naves, each with four bays, a projecting transept and a straight choir section that opens into a semi-circular apse. Over the centuries, the steeple suffered badly. Only the lowest part remains, encased between two narrow side aisles. The current Baroque entrance porch was built in 1777.

Tip Step inside and admire the beautiful interior dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. Highlights include the pulpit, the monumental high altar and the organ constructed by the renowned organ builder, J. J. Delahaye. At the back of the church, on the right-hand side, is the statue of Rochus of Montpellier standing against a pillar. People used to pray to him to be spared from the plague.

Turn left into Begijnenstraat until you reach the Begijnhof (Beguinage).

18

16

Begijnhof (Beguinage)

Walk through **centuries of silence, piety and past beguine glory**. The Baroque entrance gate from 1671 with heads of angels, festoons, volutes, corrugated columns, and a Madonna in a niche with a shell motif, keeps the city outside

and the beguines inside. The mystical message above the entrance – **‘Besloten Hof. Comt in mynen Hof, Myn syster Bruyt’** (‘Enclosed garden. Enter my garden, my sister, my bride’) – comes from the Song of Songs.

To the right of the main gate, you can see a barred window behind which the beguine porter lived. After the ringing of curfew, she





requested all men to leave with the firm admonition **'All trousers outside'**. Men were not allowed to live in the beguinage, not even the parish priest. His stately residence can be seen to the left of the gate.

Kerkstraat ahead of you **is the oldest street**.

Nothing remains of the medieval cottages that once stood here. They were rebuilt in brick and ironstone in the 17th century. Church, square and infirmary formed the centre of a **chessboard layout**. Most of the buildings are dated with wall anchors or inscriptions.

19

■ **Turn left into Infirmieriestraat.**

Sint- Catharinakerk (Church of St Catherine)

This is a typical beguinage church: long, three-aisled, with a slightly protruding transept and a small, pointed steeple. The opulent interior is in stark contrast to the simple architecture. **The church contains many artworks**, dating mainly from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The monumental building on the beguinage square is the former infirmary, now a cultural centre. Perpendicular to the infirmary is the 16th century chapel. The small rectangular chapel opens onto a three-sided apse, lit by a window in the chancel that can be seen from outside. The stuccowork ceiling dates from the 18th century.



On the corner of Infirmieriestraat is the **Apostelen-convent (Apostles' Convent)** where **twelve young beguines**, preferably poor girls from Diest, lived together with their spiritual mother, the 'Coninginne der Apostelen' [Queen of the Apostles].

Did you know ...

... every beguine was allowed to drink three litres of beer a day? That was the normal ration at a time when drinking water was too dangerous for consumption. However, the alcohol content was considerably lower than today's beer.

20

Exit Infirmieriestraat, follow Kerkstraat to the left and continue walking along Heilige Geeststraat. This turns into Kraaienneststraat. Continue straight ahead and leave the beguinage via Vestenstraat. Turn left and immediately left again into Pesthuizenstraat.

The blind brick and ironstone wall to your left is the back of the beguinage.

Continue walking until you reach the busy Omer Vanaudenhovelaan and cross the road carefully. Follow the avenue slightly to the left, then turn right and walk straight ahead between two water moats. Follow the path to the right and keep the water on your right until you see a beautiful watermill opposite.

17

De Lindenmolen (Linden Mill)



This **18th century vertical mill** was moved from Assent to Diest in 1960. In this type of mill, the entire mill casing hangs from a vertical axis in the frame. This allows the miller to turn the mill so that the blades make best use of the wind. This mill casing is remarkably large compared to similar mills.

Continue walking until you pass De Badmeester tavern. You have now arrived at the Halve Maan.

18

Halve Maan

This domain was **part of the 19th century fortifications around Diest**. Called a ‘Lunette’ [Crescent Moon] in French, it was an advance artillery position designed to keep the enemy far from the city. **When it was transformed into a recreation area, part of the moat became a swimming pool**. In the mid-1960s, the site became the responsibility of the province of Flemish Brabant, which developed it further.

With your back to the Halve Maan, cross the bridge over the ‘fossé’ (trench). Walk back in the direction of Omer Vanaudenhovelaan. Cross the avenue carefully via the left-most pedestrian crossing. You are now walking along Parklaan. Keep to the left and you will notice a ruin on your left-hand side.



19

Sint-Janskerk (Church of St John), or what's left of it.

22

This church was built in the 13th and 14th centuries in the **Gothic style**. It was almost completely destroyed during the religious wars of the **16th century**. The choir section was enclosed by a wall and used for religious services until 1823. After that, the site was used as a municipal cemetery.

Did you now ...

... the ivy that gives the ruin its picturesque look is more than 160 years old? There is also an ancient yew tree that has completely fused with the wrought-iron cross in front of the church entrance.

Continue walking straight ahead until just past the sports fields. Here – via a small opening between two walls – turn right into a path that runs parallel to Sint-Jansstraat. This will lead you into the Warande Park with its distinctive hill.

20

Warande

This was originally a **wooded hill where the lords of Diest erected their castle. After the castle was demolished** in 1512, the **Princes of Orange turned it into a hunting ground.** In 1939, it was



donated to the town by Dr Verstappen. The Warande became a park, with sports fields, an open-air theatre, and a monumental **entrance gate**, decorated **with statues from the former Brussels-North Station.**

Did you know ...

... the Warande is a natural relic hill? It came about in the Tertiary Period when the northern Diestian Sea inundated our regions.

23

Continue walking and follow the path to the left. Just before the path turns into Sint Jansstraat, you will see 'Den Drossaerd' on the right.

21

'Den Drossaerd'

This two-storey, double-fronted house dates from the **last quarter of the 18th century.** It was probably built by **Juan de Paramo, the last 'drossaerd' or deputy of the Lord of Diest.** Constructed of brick and sandstone, the building has a striking central section flanked by pilasters. A bronze statue of the singing **Troubadour**, a **reference to the Union of Orange Cities** (Diest, Breda, Dillenburg and Orange) has stood at the entrance gate since 1965.



Did you know ...

... the original statue of the Troubadour stands in Breda? The two other Orange cities also have a faithful copy of our cheerful musician.

24

Continue walking to the right until you reach the Graanmarkt. On the left, you will notice a monumental building.

22

Hof van Nassau **(Former residence of Nassau)**

This stately home was built in the **early 16th century** by Count Henry III of Nassau. He stayed there on his occasional visits to the city. His coat of arms can still be seen above the two small windows in the monumental, stepped gable. All that remains of this Flemish Renaissance building is **its left wing** with an octagonal tower.

Continue walking down the Graanmarkt. At the crossroads, turn right into Guido Gezellestraat. Just beyond the pretty 18th century facades is the Church of St Barbara, the former Augustin and Crusader's Church.



23

Sint-Barbarakerk (Church of St Barbara)

This 17th century church is known in Diest as the Crusader's Church.

25

Built in brick and ironstone, it is a beautiful example of **'lean' Baroque** with austere decorations. On the façade, you can see two coats of arms: uppermost, that of the Augustin Order and on the bluestone slab above the entrance that of the Crusaders.

Continue walking along Guido Gezellestraat until the next intersection with Ketelstraat. There you will see two remarkable buildings.

24

'Dambord' and 'Fortuyn'



These two monumental corner houses dating from the 15th and 16th centuries are **medieval lattice-work constructions in wood and loam**. They have three projecting floors supported by consoles.

Did you know ...

... the building of projecting floors was a clever trick to save money? Taxes were calculated on land area. So, the smaller a building's ground floor, the fewer taxes one had to pay.

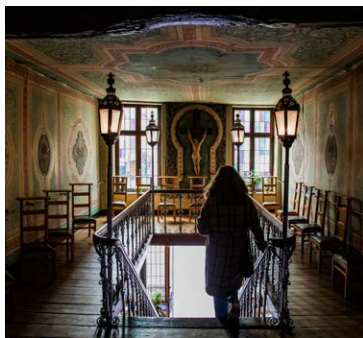
Turn left into Ketelstraat and follow it until the crossroads. Turn right here. This is Sint-Jan Berchmansstraat. The street owes its name to the saint of Diest, John Berchmans, whose birthplace can be found at number 24 on the right.

25

Geboortehuis van Sint-Jan Berchmans **(Birthplace of St John Berchmans)**

26

John Berchmans was born here in **1599, the son of a shoemaker**. After joining the Jesuit Order, he left on foot for Rome to study. He died three years later, aged just 22. Barely a year after his death,



the procedure for his canonisation began. However, he was only declared a saint by Pope Leo XIII on 15 January 1888. Since then, he has been widely regarded as the **patron saint of young students**.

The house of his birth is called 'De Gulden Maan' [The Golden Moon]. The house was converted into a chapel in 1850. In the process, the old façade was modified.

Continue walking straight ahead. This brings you back to the Grote Markt, the starting and ending point of the walk.



Nicolaas Cleynaerts p.7



FORT LEOPOLD

SCHOONAERDE



PARK JAN HEYLEN



7

REFUGEHIJS VAN AVERBODE

8

9

HET SPUKER REFUGEHIJS VAN TONGERLO

11

INFOKANTOOR TOERISME DIEST

12

13

1

2

10

23

24

25

6

3

4

5



CITADEL

STADHUIS

GEBORTEHIJS ST. JAN BERCHMANS

DE KAAI

KAAI

ALLEERHEILIGENBERG

EGIDE ALENUSSTR.

K. MERCIERSTR.

SCHOTLANDSTR.

ENGELANDSTR.

MARK MACKENSTR.

MARK M.

LEUVENSE-POORT

COMMISSARIS

CITADEL BOS

28





BOERENKRIJGPLEIN



BEGIJNHOF

16

15
ONZE-LIEVE
VROUWEKERK



29



20

17



PROVINCIEDOMEIN
HALVE MAAN

21

19



18

22
HOF VAN
NASSAU



SINT-JANSTR.

PARKLAAN

MARIËNDAALSTR.

ROZENGAARD

VERVOORTSTR.

HALVE
MAAN-
STR.

MARIËN-
DAAL-
PLAATS

N. WELTERSTR.

VERVOORTPLAATS

BADSTR.



SINT-ANNASTR.

HASSELSE-
POORT

WILGAARDSTR.

BEVERPOORTSTR.

OUDE BAAN

WILGAARDVELDWEG

MEIDOORNHOF

MEIDOORSTR.

EDUARD ROBEYNSLAAN

MONTGOMMERYSTR.

BERIJNDINGSTR.

NEYSKENS LAAN

HACKENS STR.

KAUTERSHOEK

ARTHUR VAN OOSTSTR.



HAASSELSE STR.

PEETERSSTR.

VERVOORTSTR.

GRANMARKT

HENRI VERSTAPPEN-
PLEIN

VEEMARKT

BRUIDSTR.

ZEVEN WEEËNSTR.

RODE KRUISTR.

GRAUWJUSTERSTR.

BEGIJNEN STR.

FONTEIN-
GANG

BOGAARDEN STR.

ZELDUIK-
TOLEN

LEESTHOF

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Visit Diest, Grote Markt 1, 3290 Diest

translation

Elizabeth Morrison

photography

Jelle Dreesen, Bert Beckers, David Samyn

design

Sanza

print

Atlanta

Visit Diest

Koning Albertstraat 16a
3290 Diest

visit@diest.be
www.visitdiest.be
