

Battlefield Exploration



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Verdun 1916 - 1918

The battlefields of the Great War are hard to find on most places, except for military cemeteries and lots of memorials. The battlefields of the Verdun area, however, are still quite intact. Very rapidly after the war the French authorities decided to turn the battlefields into huge woods. Lots of the remains of trenches, bunkers, shell holes and ammunition can still be found in those woods today.

The 1916 battle of Verdun was without doubt the bloodiest battle of the Great War. Poor weather delayed the beginning of the German attack until 21 February, but the Germans enjoyed initial success after a terrifying hurricane bombardment that lasted 10 hours. The Germans were successful, capturing Fort Douaumont in the first three days of the offensive. Afterwards the German advance slowed, despite many French casualties. After the British launched the Battle of the Somme, the German offensive was reduced and the French could begin to recapture the lost terrain. When the battle ended on 19th December the lines were about the same as when it started. The longest battle of the Great War, lasting 303 days, was one of the most costly battles in human history: 377,231 French and 337,000 German casualties, or about 70,000 casualties a month.

This tour is best combined with the tour to the Chemin des Dames. Accommodation can be organised in Reims or Verdun then.

The Tour

DAY 1

Your professional battlefield guide will come pick you up at your accommodation*.

From Ypres we'll drive along the motorway to the Verdun area. The first stop will be the very interesting **Mémorial de Verdun**, the museum that perfectly explains about the Battle of Verdun. The museum received a complete make-over for the 2016 commemorations and was opened by French president François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on 29th May 2016. The museum tells the story of the 1916 battle of Verdun through an exceptional collection of artefacts, photos and film footage. Walking from the museum you'll be visiting the ruined village of **Fleury**. The village was completely destroyed during the heavy artillery shelling and was not rebuilt after

the war. Nature has taken over now, but you can still see the remains of some of the buildings and a memorial chapel.

Next onwards to the **Fort de Douaumont**, the fortress that was heavily shelled during the 1916 battle. German troops took the fortress, but the French were able to recapture it after bloody fighting.

The main cemetery of the Verdun area is the **Douaumont Cemetery** and **Douaumont Ossuary**. The ossuary is a memorial containing the remains of both French and German soldiers who died on the Verdun battlefield. Through small outside windows, the skeletal remains of at least 130,000 unidentified combatants of both nations can be seen filling up alcoves at the lower edge of the building. On the inside of the ossuary building, the ceiling and walls are partly covered by plaques bearing names of French soldiers who died during the Battle of Verdun. A few of the names are from fighting that took place in the area during World War II, as well as for veterans of the Indochina and Algerian Wars. The families of the soldiers that are recognized here by name contributed for those individual plaques. In front of the monument, and sloping downhill, lies the largest single French military cemetery of the First World War with 16,142 graves. It was inaugurated in 1923 by Verdun veteran André Maginot, who would later design the Maginot Line. The ossuary was officially inaugurated on 7 August 1932 by French President Albert Lebrun. Lunch in Douaumont.

We will also visit the **Trench of Bayonets**. In June 1916, this entrenched position was part of a salient west of Fort Douaumont, which the Germans desperately wanted to take. On June 12, Germans unleashed a hailstorm of iron and lead upon French positions. The attack caught the French by surprise. The 137th Regiment of French infantry was annihilated almost to the last man. French teams exploring the battlefield in 1920 uncovered the clues of the horrific fate of this regiment. One of the trenches was discovered completely filled in, with only a neat line of bayonets sticking out of the ground. The bayonets were still fixed to their rifles. A body was found next to each one. The 3rd company of 137th regiment had been buried alive (or were they gassed before they got interred?), almost instantaneously, having died where they stood.

We'll then drive into the historic town of Verdun to visit the **Citadel** at Verdun. Dug out under the citadel of Verdun between 1886 and 1893 and organized to be able to shelter 2,000 men and to nourish them, the galleries played a major role during the battle of 1916. On board of an audio-guided nacelle you will discover the everyday life of the French soldiers during the First World War. From the bakery to the hospital, from the kitchen to the barrack rooms, follow the footsteps of the soldiers who waited to go to the front or who came from the front. In one of these casemates you will witness the ceremony of 10th November 1920 during which the Unknown Soldier has been chosen, which is the highest gesture of a whole nation for a from then on symbolic place. All along the visit, audio-visual archives and documents relate France's entry into the war in 1914 and the big fronts of the conflict. A zoom on the year 1916 places the battle of Verdun into the international context.

Accommodation and dinner to be organised in Verdun.

DAY 2

Your guide will pick you up at your accommodation in Verdun at 9 am. From Verdun we'll drive to the left bank of the River Meuse to visit the memorial at **Le Mort Homme**, the memorial based on the famous order of the French commander General Philippe Pétain: "they shall not pass!".

Next onwards to the **Butte de Vauquois** to see the remains of trenches and underground shelter. The hill of Vauquois was for both sides of strategic importance, because who was on the hill, could overlook the whole area eastward of the Argonne forest and thus had insight over supply routes and the enemy's rear. When no ground could be gained above ground, they took the war underground. Many mine craters still show the scars of that underground warfare.

From Vauquois onwards to see the **American Memorial at Montfaucon d'Argonne**. The location of the memorial, built on the German frontline and German bunkers, is simply stunning. The ruined cloister still features as perfect background for the American Memorial.

At **Romagne-sous-Montfaucon** we'll visit the largest American cemetery in Europe: the **Meuse-Argonne American cemetery** contains the graves of 14.246 soldiers who lost their lives in the 1918 offensive. Nine Medal of Honour recipients are buried here.

Next onwards to **Châtel Chéhéry** to retrace the footsteps of **Sgt York**. After his platoon suffered heavy casualties, Alvin York assumed command. Fearlessly leading 7 men, he charged with great daring a machinegun nest, which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat the machinegun nest was taken, together with 4 German officers and 128 men and several guns.

A bit further, well hidden in the woods, we'll visit the **Abri du Kronprinz**, a set of German bunkers, used as headquarters by the Crown Prince during the battle.

Back to Ypres. End of the tour at about 7.30 pm.

** When accommodated in the Ypres area, there will be no extra charge for the pick-up and drop-off at your accommodation. If you want to be picked up from other places (like Bruges, Ghent, Lille, Arras, ... et cetera), there will be an extra charge for the extra mileage.*

Practical Information

- » **Departure** from your accommodation in Ypres at about 7.30 am; back in Ypres by 7.30 pm the next day.
Other departure points (Bruges, Ghent, Lille, Brussels, Reims, ...) are possible, but may result in an extra charge.
- » **Tariff:** € 695 (with a maximum of 7 participants).
 - > If more than 7 participants, tariff will be depending on the coach tariff.
 - > In the price is included: transportation with minibus and professional guide/driver.
 - > Extra entrance fees to be paid during this tour: Mémorial de Verdun: € 11 p.p.; Fort de Douaumont & Fort de Vaux: € 6,50 p.p.; Ossuaire de Douaumont: € 6 p.p. and Citadel Verdun: € 9 p.p.
- » **Walking:** only short distances from the car to the actual sites. Never more than 500 yards.

**Want to add a specific site to the itinerary? Or want to combine several itineraries?
Please let us know, and we'll provide a quote!**

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