



THE ORIGINAL WILD CHILD

On a journey from Ethiopia to the Ardennes
Mark Stratton travels in the footsteps of
Arthur Rimbaud, France's peerless poet



Escaping the fiery Ethiopian heat near Somalia's border, I seek the shade of adobe-walled lanes to find a magnificent villa with coloured-glass windows and carved wooden eaves. It's here, my guidebook claims, that Arthur Rimbaud resided in the 1880s.

The villa is the Arthur Rimbaud Cultural Centre, Harar's museum dedicated to the French poet. Its contents are threadbare: a few tattered biographies and books of poems alongside Rimbaud's photography, plus a framed letter

complaining to the future Emperor Menelik II about the non-payment for a delivery of 900 guns. But local guide Hailu Gashaw has a confession. "Honestly," he says, "Rimbaud never lived here. This was built in 1908, after his death."

Myths shroud the life of the enigmatic Rimbaud, arguably France's greatest poet and certainly its most controversial. Few physical manifestations remain of the genius enfant terrible, who ripped apart social convention. He cast poetry aside like an unwanted toy, aged 21, to travel

and become a gunrunner in the Horn of Africa. His legacy hovers above French literature, like a brooding cloud crackling with divine lightning.

"The poet of revolt," Albert Camus eulogised; while Graham Robb, in his superb biography, *Rimbaud*, contemporises his legacies as those of: 'symbolist, surrealist, beat poet, student revolutionary, rock lyricist, gay-pioneer, and inspired drug-user'.

It is 125 years since Rimbaud died. My journey to discover the man behind the poetry had begun in reverse:



FACING PAGE: Place Ducale in Charleville-Mézières, home town of Arthur Rimbaud (*inset*);
ABOVE: Asma'adin Gate in Harar, Ethiopia, and (*inset*) the town's museum dedicated to the poet

in Harar, where he lived intermittently between 1880 and 1891, the year of his death, aged 37. But to understand his formative years, I travelled to his birthplace in Charleville-Mézières, capital of the Ardennes *département*.

Rebellious adolescent

Charleville-Mézières is a handsome town on the River Meuse. Its main square, Place Ducale, which dates from 1612, is an imposing Renaissance centrepiece modelled on Place des Vosges in Paris. Rimbaud, however, was never impressed.

“Arthur called Charleville (then separate from neighbouring Mézières) the most idiotic town in the provinces,” says Elisabeth Baudry, a local expert on Rimbaud, who is my guide. “But he was a rebellious adolescent,” she qualifies.

The town has an intriguing – perhaps uneasy – relationship with Rimbaud. On the one hand, it celebrates its prodigal son, dedicating a museum, street names and monuments to him. You can eat Rimbaud pâté and drink Cuvée d’Arthur beer (commercialism he would have

despised). “Yet people see Arthur as either a saviour or the devil,” says Elisabeth. He railed against religion, scrawling ‘*Merde à Dieu*’ all over town, mocked the bourgeoisie and workers alike, laced his poetry with obscenities, and broke taboos such as homosexuality; his later absinthe- and hashish-fuelled behaviour shocked even Paris’s open-minded avant-garde.

Yet he always returned to Charleville-Mézières, says Elisabeth: “For all his behaviour, he had an earthy, hard-working Ardennes character.”

At 12 Rue Bérégovoy, a plaque locates a tiny flat where Rimbaud was born in 1854, raised alongside three siblings by his mother, Vitalie. With an absent military father, they struggled financially and Rimbaud developed another uneasy relationship with his mother, a controlling, religious zealot.

Yet the handsome boy, with searing blue eyes and unruly bouffant hair, flourished academically. From 1861, this precocious prize-winning student at the Institut Rossat was speaking Latin and



writing classical poetry. We visit the institute, now a redbrick library rebuilt in 1877. “He excelled here but his mother was a bigot so she moved him to Charleville College in 1865 because they taught more religion,” says Elisabeth.

Such control drove young Arthur in a direction his mother could not have imagined. By 15, the fledgling poet was tempering classical brilliance with explicit innuendo and grotesque satire. His early verses from 1869-72 – retrospectively grouped as *Poésies* – refer to his time at Charleville, bristling with teenage angst.

The experience of being dragged by his mother to Charleville’s solid neo-Romanesque 19th-century Église ➤➤

Saint-Rémi laid the foundations for his atheistic mocking in the poem *Poor People in Church*:

*They dribble faith, and mouth a stupid
begging love,
Reciting their endless complaint to Jesus –
Who dreams in a yellow glow, far above
Skinny failures and potbellied successes*

Likewise, the bombardment of Mézières, during the Prussian army's onslaught in 1870 against Emperor Napoléon III, influenced Rimbaud. His graphic *The Stolen Heart* remains shocking, even by today's standards, as he imagines being raped by Prussian soldiers; while, in the transcendental *Asleep in the Valley*, a soldier we are led to believe is dozing in meadows actually lies dead:

*The humming insects do not disturb
his rest;
He sleeps in sunlight, one hand on
his breast,
At peace. In his side there are two
red holes.*

In 1871, he wrote one of the most famous letters in French literature, to his tutor at Charleville College, Georges Izambard. Aged 16, he described himself as a born poet who must deprave himself and disorganise all senses to become a visionary. "I'm making myself as scummy as I can. Why? I want to be a poet and I'm working at turning myself into a seer." He coined a truly existentialist statement – *Je est un autre* ('I is someone else') – proclaiming



ABOVE: The park bandstand near Charleville railway station where Rimbaud's parents met;
BELOW: The iron sculpture of Rimbaud in the hamlet of Roche

detachment from everyday emotions and thoughts to write from the perspective of pure thought from within one's inner-self. He had clearly outgrown Charleville.

Café meeting

His opportunity to leave for Paris, his Mount Parnassus, emanated from our morning coffee-stop at Bar de l'Univers: a reincarnation of his haunt, Café Duthorme. Nearby is the railway station from where Rimbaud had unsuccessfully escaped to Paris several times during 1870-71. In this café, where, as Robb describes, 'the foul-mouthed little genius sat... puffing at his pipe and scowling,' he met Charles Auguste Bretagne, who recommended him to the famous Parisian poet, Paul Verlaine.

Verlaine, excited by Rimbaud's lines of 'terrifying beauty', invited him to Paris. Rimbaud departed in September 1871,

taking with him the brilliant *The Drunken Boat*, inspired, Elisabeth feels, by the River Meuse. It metaphorically celebrates his departure:

*I drifted on a river I could not control,
No longer guided by the bargeman's ropes.*

His life, thereafter, was of chaotic wanderlust: driven by contempt, nihilism, self-destruction and shameless sponging off benefactors. He flitted between Paris, London and Brussels throughout 1871-73 with Verlaine, in a homosexual relationship. Verlaine's wife called him a 'doll-faced assassin'. They drank incessantly, wrote prodigiously, and Rimbaud antagonised Parisian literati with lewd, anarchic behaviour. At times, he existed in squalid destitution, remaining unpublished. During a lovers' tiff in 1873, Verlaine – driven to

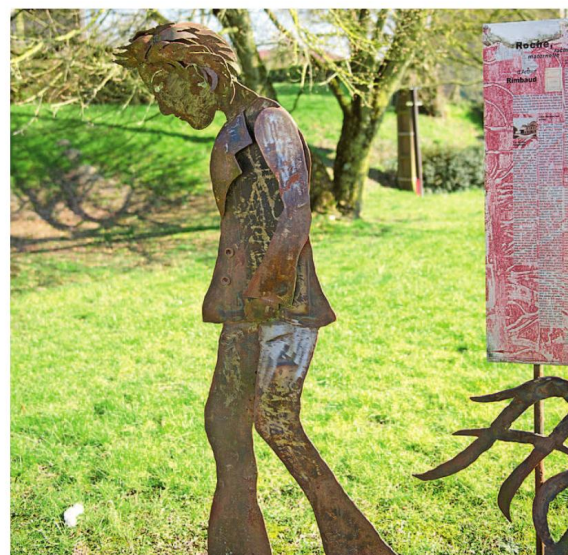
SAME
PLACE,
DIFFERENT
PACE

Take your pick of heritage trails

Away from *Route Rimbaud*, the countryside surrounding Charleville-Mézières offers other themed and signed routes that are perfect for leisurely drives. The Legends Trail is a 2hr-5hr circuit by car, north-west of the town, focusing on mystical fairy tales, including the enchanted Kaolin Park, home to local goblins called *Nutons*.

Rather more tangible is the Fortifications Trail, covering 40km, with more than 20 stops. See two well-known structures along the way: one of Europe's largest medieval castles at Sedan; and the Dinant Citadel, overlooking the Meuse Valley, besieged by Louis XIV in 1675.

The challenge of the Beer Trail is finding a designated driver for the prescribed stops of artisan breweries and some six Trappist monasteries still brewing today. Finally, for those preferring to leave the car in town, the Green Route is recommended for cyclists using minor roads and *voies vertes* from Charleville-Mézières to the Belgian border at Dinant. visitarденne.com/all-access





ABOVE: The poet's suitcase and map in the Musée Rimbaud; **LEFT:** The Maison des Ailleurs at night, with chair sculptures honouring the poet

ensemble of poems and quotations scrawled on clinically lit walls, alongside artwork featuring a sketched Picasso portrait and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic caricature. I was relieved to find a small room of his meagre effects (a suitcase, cutlery, pocket-watch and photographs of him in Ethiopia, *sans* youthful looks) because they added corporeal substance to his mythological elusiveness.

'Rustic purgatory'

The museum has a one-franc copy of Rimbaud's most brilliant work, *A Season in Hell* – his sole vanity-publication – dating from 1873. Five hundred copies were printed but didn't sell. Now they are worth a fortune.

He had abandoned traditional verse, and *A Season in Hell* is a frank, terrifying self-analysis of tortured existence, written in prose that reads like his valediction.

I travel to see the place where he finished it – at his mother's farmhouse in Roche – enjoying a pleasant scenic drive along *Route Rimbaud*, through wooded Ardennes countryside, where abbeys possess roofs resembling witches' hats.

Only one wall remains of the Roche farmhouse where he wrote in what Robb calls 'rustic purgatory'. A little iron sculpture depicts a rakish Rimbaud celebrating the 'hope, despair, and suffering' of *A Season in Hell*. The poem is antagonistic and hisses hellfire:

*One evening I took Beauty in my arms
– and I thought her bitter – and
I insulted her...
I have withered within me all human hope.
With the silent leap of a sullen beast,
I have downed and strangled every joy. ➤➤*

distracted – shot Rimbaud in the wrist and was jailed.

In 1874-75, Rimbaud wrote no poetry. Thereafter, letters to his mother and his childhood friend, Ernest Delahaye, piece together a rootless existence. He worked as a tutor, docker and factory-employee around Europe, before joining the Dutch colonial army, which he deserted in Indonesia. Cyprus and Aden followed, before he discovered Harar where, fluent in multiple languages and the Qur'an, he carved a niche as a successful coffee and arms trader, while trailblazing new trade routes across the dangerous Horn of Africa. His only writings from this period were technical treatises and prosaic letters back home bemoaning his lot. He never found contentment.

Visitors to Charleville-Mézières can

pursue his later life at the Maison des Ailleurs and Musée Rimbaud.

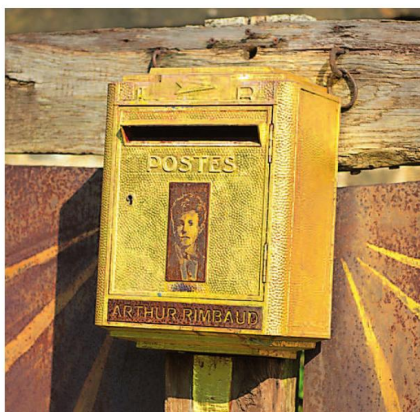
The former is a second-floor apartment overlooking the Meuse, rented by the Rimbaud family from 1869-75. It feels like a surreal visit, with discordant music and projected images of places he visited: such as Ogaden in Ethiopia and Tadjoura in neighbouring Djibouti, which remain obscure even today. "Ailleurs" ('somewhere else') is appropriate," says Elisabeth, "because, whenever Arthur got somewhere, he wanted to be somewhere else."

From this apartment, he could view a 17th-century mill on the Meuse, now the recently redesigned museum dedicated to him. I would urge a prior reading of a Rimbaud biography, better to appreciate the museum's abstract

Some Rimbaud scholars interpret this as his self-imposed excommunication from poetry. Yet another masterpiece, *Illuminations* (a collection of poems published by estranged lover Verlaine), is considered by some scholars to be his farewell to poetry.

Further south along *Route Rimbaud*, at Juniville, is the Musée Verlaine. Situated in the Auberge du Lion d'Or, a lovely timbered house with wattle-and-daub walls, this is where Verlaine dined, drank and wrote every day from 1880 to 1882. From here, he published *Illuminations* in 1881 (without Rimbaud's consent), which ignited a slow burn towards posthumous fame fanned around the 1930s, when Rimbaud was championed by the Surrealist movement.

Inside, amid a fine collection of Verlaine memorabilia, curator Marc Gaillot passionately challenges Verlaine's reputation of playing second fiddle to Rimbaud's stellar greatness.



ABOVE: The letterbox near the poet's grave

"People love Rimbaud but, somehow, it's different for Verlaine. He's the villain. Perhaps because he shot Arthur or was often drunk," says Gaillot. "But he understood the science of poetry. Rimbaud was creative but Verlaine added form and sense to his work. They were poetry's greatest equation together."

When Rimbaud returned from Ethiopia in 1891, it was to have his leg

amputated in Marseille. But cancer had spread throughout his body. He briefly visited Roche and his mother before returning to Marseille, still dreaming of boarding a ship to Africa.

Upon his death on 10 November 1891, his body was brought back to Charleville for a funeral at the Église Saint-Rémi to which nobody was invited. "His mother may have been embarrassed by the boy who disliked God," offers Elisabeth.

My last rite is a 15-minute walk to Charleville-Mézières cemetery. Rimbaud's white tomb lies alongside that of his younger sister, Vitalie, named after her mother. A wilting red rose has been placed on his grave. Nearby is a gold-painted letterbox where, the attendant tells me, Rimbaud still receives around 150 letters each year from around the world. Letters from a new generation of devotees, perhaps experiencing his angst-ridden emotions, yet delighting in how he transformed such feelings into words of incendiary beauty. 🌹

Francofile *Follow Rimbaud's trail in the Ardennes*

GETTING THERE

By rail: Mark travelled from London to Paris with Voyages-sncf. Return tickets start from £58. Single fares by TGV from Paris to Charleville-Mézières cost from £25 (tel: 0844 848 5848, voyages-sncf.com). See page 23 for other travel information.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

Auberge des Moissons
8 Route Nationale
51510 Matougues
Tel: (Fr) 3 26 70 99 17
auberge-des-moissons.com
Hotel-restaurant near Juniville, with fabulous dining based around home-grown truffles. Doubles from €88, menus from €28.

Hôtel Le Château Fort
Porte des Princes



Rimbaud-inspired beers and lemonade

08200 Sedan
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 26 11 00
hotels-patrimoine.fr
Hotel located within Sedan's huge castle. Doubles from €115; menus from €19.90.

Côté Chambres
33-35 Rue du Moulin
08000 Charleville-Mézières
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 56 17 50
laclefdeschamps.fr
Fabulous B&B with Rimbaud-themed rooms, and haute cuisine in the attached La Clef des Champs created by

classically trained chef Christophe Melin. Doubles from €65, including breakfast; restaurant mains from €23.

Le Petit Comptoir
7 Rue d'Aubilly
08000 Charleville-Mézières
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 53 62 02
Centrally located, compact bistro serving inventive cuisine. Menus from €14.

FOR AN APÉRO
Bar de L'Univers
1 Place de la Gare

08000 Charleville-Mézières
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 33 12 34
Sip Cuvée d'Arthur beer at the reincarnation of Rimbaud's former haunt.

WHERE TO VISIT

Maison des Ailleurs
7 Quai Arthur Rimbaud
08000 Charleville-Mézières
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 32 44 65
Visit its exterior at night, with windows lit.

Musée Rimbaud
Quai Arthur Rimbaud
08000 Charleville-Mézières
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 32 44 65
charleville-tourisme.com

Musée Verlaine
1 Rue du Pont Pâquis
08310 Juniville
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 39 68 00
musee-verlaine.fr



Cabaret-Vert Music Festival

Rimbaud's poem *Au Cabaret-Vert* inspired this annual eco-friendly music festival held over a long weekend in summer in Charleville-Mézières.
Tel: (Fr) 3 24 36 12 68
cabaretvert.com

READING

Rimbaud, by Graham Robb (Picador, 2000).
Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works, by Paul Schmidt (Harper Perennial, 2008), from which the English verse translations quoted in the feature have been taken.



TOURIST INFORMATION: Charleville-Mézières, charleville-tourisme.com; Champagne-Ardenne, tourisme-champagne-ardenne.com