Our Sister City Valognes in France

Our Sister City Valognes (valona IPA, ▶️ listen ), a municipality of about 7000 inhabitants, is located in the Manche department of the Lower Normandy and lies right in the middle of the Cotentin peninsula at about 18 kilometers from the port of Cherbourg. Valognes is accessible by train in less than 3 hours from Paris. Its distance from Sister city Stolberg is approximately 770 km. The journey between the two cities can be made by bus or by car, enjoying scenic places such as the suspension Bridge of Tancarville (completed in 1959, with a central center span of 608 meters the longest bridge built in Europe at that time and still today in France) and the Normandy Bridge finished in 1995. A stopover in the picturesque and beautiful Honfleur, birthplace of the composer Erik Satie, to visit its port and the church St. Catherine, is a must. Returning from France, it is very advisable to head towards Giverny to see the famous gardens of Claude Monet.

Coat of arms

The Valognes Coat of Arms shows a spotted silver lynx leaping to the left on an azure shield. Two golden spikes of wheat are displayed in a saltire pattern above the lynx, as well as one golden spike of wheat on each side of his body. The origin of this coat of arms is unknown.
The original coat of arms may originate back to the 17th century when Valognes officially became the "Versailles Normand" and the French nobility used to complete their education here before appearing at the King’s Court in Paris.

The spikes symbolize wealth and the lynx stands for sagacity, finesse, attitude and mentality of the people of Valognes in the 17th and 18th centuries. "Valognes" wrote Toustan de Billy around 1788, "is the most polite, the most spiritual city in Lower Normandy; it is the Cotentin royal court."

Valognes Coat of Arms under the 1st Empire

During the 1st Empire Napoleon awarded a distinction to Valognes by adding a star to the coat of arms (for being a 3rd tier city; free imperial cities were followed by 1st, 2nd and 3rd tier cities).

History of Valognes

The Roman period

The beautiful country around Valognes looks back upon 2000 years of history. The name of Valognes originates from Alauna, the name of the antique roman district (nowadays Alleaume-lès-Valognes), which was intermittently the capital of the Unelli Celtic tribe before they were conquered by romans in 56 B.C. The antique city of Alauna is mentioned on Roman maps showing the road network of the 4th century – viae publicae- and in the 1st century as a Roman colony on the tin road to the British Islands.

The dense network of roads and ways like a cobweb around Valognes is a testimony of the importance of the former Unelles capital. An aerial view shows a connection with the Cap Levy which might have been its harbor. In the 19th century relics of a port were laid out and are the evidence that a harbor formerly existed in this place. The Cherbourg harbor which is about 18 kilometers from there was built in the 4th century AD.

The Saxons

The defense wall "litus Saxonicum" was erected in the 3rd century; despite of it the city of Alauna was invaded by the Saxons. After a tremendous fire, the inhabitants of Alauna fled and moved to a neighboring hill, where Valognes is now located. Coutances becomes the new capital of the Unelli. The ruins of the Alauna thermae and of a theatre fitting more than 3000 spectators show the important role of the city in the Roman times.

The Francs, the Normans and the Vikings

A slow Christianization of the Normandy started around the year 314. Two bishops were mentioned in Coutances in 511 and in Bayeux in 538. Monasteries were set up in Lieusaint, Nantheuil (by Saint Marcouf) and Hambye. The
Norman conquest in the 9th century destroyed the small cities and many clergymen fled, allowing Paganism to come back for a short period. In the beginning of the Middle-Age the Cotentin Peninsula was devastated by the Salian Francs of the Merovingian dynasty.

The wealth of this area also attracted the Vikings of Northern Europe. At the beginning they took the plundered goods back home, but later-on they settled down nearby the river and started plundering from there. King Charles III, also called the Simple, offered Rollo, the Viking ruler, in the Treaty of Clair-sur-Epte in 911 to legalize the situation. In return Rollo promised to protect the King and to get baptized together with his men.

Late Middle Ages

Philipp II, called Philip Augustus, Capetian King of France conquered Normandy in 1204 after severe battles in which he successively defeated the Kings Henry II of England, Richard Lionheart and John (also known as John Lackland). The Channel Islands (French: Îles Anglo-Normandes or Îles de la Manche) are until today an archipelago of British Crown Dependencies in the English Channel, off the French coast of Normandy. Despite being very strongly walled in the late Middle Ages, Valognes was seized and plundered by King Edward III of England during the Hundred Years' War. King Edward III was the one who founded the Most Noble Order of the Garter with the motto Honi soit qui mal y pense (Middle French: "shame on him who thinks evil of it"); it was one of the two most famous orders of chivalry together with the Scottish Order of the Thistle and the most prestigious one in Europe.

Valognes became the official residence of the dukes of Normandy in 1355 and many catholic religious orders settled down: Franciscans, Capuchins and Benedictines.

Petit Versailles Normand "Little Norman Versailles"

The enchanting city of Valognes became the favourite retreat of the Parisian nobility in the 17th century and about 50 aristocratic mansions were built. Since then it bears the respectful surname of "Little Norman Versailles". Unfortunately only 15 of these palaces survived the war disturbances. They are still preserving Valognes’s elegance and aristocratic touch. Valognes became the capital of the Cotentin Peninsula in the 17th and 18th centuries. The current street alignment dates back to that time and most of the palaces are found in the rue de la Poterie; one next to the other, where they reflect the aristocratic wealth of the 18th century. The very distinguished "Hôtel de Beaumont" is the best evidence with its 50 meters long stone facade which is the most beautiful in the Normandy. Another specific feature is its double "revolution staircaise" with two stairways building a bridge on top of a void, stable without any further architectural reinforcement. It was occupied by Prussian troops in 1815 as an immediate consequence of the Congress of Vienna. The occupants resided in these aristocratic mansions until the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed in 1818, stipulating the immediate withdrawal of the troops and a decrease of war compensations. Another superb hotel to be mentioned is the "Hôtel Ernault de Chantore".

Second World War

In the second half of 1940, Valognes was occupied by German troops and was liberated on June 24th 1944 by the Allied Forces. The core of the city was almost completely destroyed by the American bombs dropped during the Overlord Operation on June 20th 1944. The Saint-Malo Church of the 14th century with its unique late Gothic dome lantern of 1612 was severely damaged. As of June 6th 1944 the Americans and the Germans fought a lot along the Merderet River. The Germans had requisitioned the only forced sterilization camp for Romani women in France located in the Institution Sainte Marie.
A catholic nun and two girls contemplating the ruins of the Saint-Malo Church in July 1944

The city of Valognes holds the War Merit Cross 1939-1945. In the 1950ies Valognes was rebuilt and earned the quality label Town and Land of History. In 2001 the neighboring localities Briquebec and Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte received the same award. This prize replaced the former Ville d’Art denomination repealed in 2005.

Valognes is twin city of Wimborne Minster (East Dorset, a local government district in Dorset) in Great Britain since 1968.

**Town's landmarks**

**The Merderet River**
The Merderet River flows 23 km through Valognes but only 5 km are navigable. Nowadays, it runs underground. During a few centuries, tanners used to make animal skins into leather on its banks and there are still some artisan's houses dating back to the 15th through 17th centuries along the Merderet River; most of them were tanners. "La Parcheminerie”, the manufacture of parchment, is nowadays the domicile of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire – specialized in leather binding official documents, which were edited in large quantities by the royal administration settled in Valognes.

The Merderet meets with the Douve River; both feed the Parc naturel régional des Marais du Cotentin et du Bessin created in 1991 in the south of Valognes. This abundance of water enables a large variety of different natural biotopes existing side by side: heathlands, marshlands, mires and of course the famous hedges known as Bocage. This explains the name Merderet: the word is of Celtic origin "merdwz" (marshland) and "rye"(stream); it means the stream running through the marshlands. It makes the association with Merde (shit) very understandable since the stream also carries fecal material. In 1998 it was the shoot location of the Steven Spielberg movie “Saving Private Ryan”.

**Place du Château**

![View of the Valognes castle before it destruction, drawing kept at the Bbh of Pont-Audemer](http://closducotentin.over-blog.fr/article-le-chateau-de-valognes-67711837.html)

The legend says that Emperor Clovis had a castle built on the current Place du Château. It was destroyed by the Vikings and others Scandinavians people and has been rebuilt as a ducal residence by Duke William I. (William I Longsword). During the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) the residence was fortified with a keep and towers. This residence might have been the second domicile of William the Conqueror who narrowly escaped a deadly attack there in 1047.

**Industries and agriculture**

There are two industrial zones located within the urban city ensuring the economic expansion in the Valognes area. The city's largest employer is AREVA in La Hague which provides the first stage of recycling used fuel taken from nuclear reactors. It is located 25 kilometers west of Cherbourg and employs over 6000 people. It is the leading industrial center of its kind in the world. Valognes is also the loading station for the Castor containers coming from or going to Germany.
Normandy is *par excellence* a horse-breeding country, especially the draft horse race named Percheron.

The Valognes area is mainly characterized by agriculture and the production of milk, butter and cheese. World-famous cheeses like Livarot, Pont l’Evêque, Saint-Paulin or Camembert - to name just a few examples – originate from the Valognes area. Many mill ruins bear testimony to the cereal production until the 19th century. In the same way, idle lime kilns evoke the building’s original use which consisted in producing lime out of lime stones. An additional economic factor is the harvest of fruit trees, especially apple-trees and the production of alcoholic beverages like Cidre, Pommeau and the worldwide-known Calvados, that should always be served before, during and after a meal.

### Assortment of Norman specialities

During a visit in Valognes, it is highly recommended to head to the Musée Régional du Cidre, the Musée de l'Eau-de-Vie et des Vieux Métiers and of course to the previously mentioned Hotel de Beaumont.

### Other tourist attractions

There are many sightseeing spots neighbouring Valognes: Sainte-Mère Eglise, Saint-Vaast-La-Hougue, Barfleur, Mont-Saint-Michel, Coutances, Caen, Bayeux with its tapestry which is actually an embroidery of the 11th century very famous for depicting scenes of the Hastings Battle and the Halley Comet (it has been listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme since 2007). The City of Cherbourg with its harbor, which was the first stop of the Titanic after leaving the port of Southhampton. The naval museum "Cité de la Mer" ("city of the sea") located in Cherbourg Octeille – former site of the transatlantic harbour railway station known as "Gare Maritime" and biggest Art Deco monument of France (the last surviving example of 1930s maritime architecture) – opened in April 2002. In 2006 a cruise terminal was inaugurated and turned Cherbourg into a port of call for ships like Constellation, Celebrity Summit, Queen Mary 2, Costa Victoria, Jewel of the Seas, and Voyager of the Seas among others. The "Cité de la Mer" houses the biggest nuclear-powered submarine which can be visited. It is also easy to travel to the Channel Islands from Barneville-Carteret or Grandville.
Entrance hall of the Cité de la Mer

Another attraction facing Saint-Vaast-La-Hougue is the Tahitou Island accessible by walk during low tide. This island is a paradise for birds and is under nature and environment protection; it features a 21 meter high Vauban Tower listed on the UNESCO’s world cultural heritage since 2008.

The Normandy beaches "Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha, and Utah" have been immortalized in the world history. They are the scene of the Allied Forces landing on June 6th 1944 and beginning a 77 day invasion battle. 156,000 soldiers landed on five different spots along the Normandy coast, killing thousands of people on both sides. Many bunkers, museums and monuments recall the memory of the war victims. Solemn official memorial ceremonies are held every year on these beaches on the D-Day anniversary. Many veterans attend these very touching ceremonies where past enemies have turned into friends. They share their terrible war remembrance of the Atlantic Wall. The Azeville Gun Battery near Sainte-Mère Eglise constitutes an important link of Wall. In this respect, a visit of the Musée Radar in Douvres-La-Delivrance, the Pegasus Memorial and the German Military Cemetery La Cambe with its neighbouring Peace-Garden is highly recommended.

**The Sistercity committee**

There has been active contact between the citizens of Valognes and Stolberg since 1987, which developed into friendships without intervention of the two municipalities or any other authority. Mrs. Elke Becker, then member of the City Council, on the German side and Mr. Hervé Mandin on the French side were very eager to create a sistercity committee. Mrs. Elke Becker became President of the working committee Stolberg-Valognes and Mr. Hervé Mandin President of the Valognes Sister city Committee.

This mutual interest encouraged Mrs. Elke Becker to submit an application to the Stolberg City Council aiming at the conclusion of a Sister city agreement. Her request was first rejected to be then approved later on May 16th 1990. The good news was immediately forwarded to Valognes where the City Council voted unified to go ahead on February 9th 1990. At that time Mrs. Anne Heinis was Mayor since 1983 and she kept this function until the election of Fernand Leboyer in 1995. In 2008 he was succeeded by present Mayor Jacques Coquelin.
The official signing of the Sister city Charter took place on September 23rd 1990 at the Stolberg city council chamber within the frame of the city festival and in July 1991 in Valognes together with a delegation from Stolberg. Wolfgang Hennig was the Mayor (1989-1994 and 1997-1999) in duty. He was followed by Hans-Josef Siebertz (1999-2004). Ferdinand Gatzweiler followed was elected twice from 2004 to 2014. He has been replaced by our present mayor Dr. Tim Grüttemeier. All the mayors have shown a vivid interest in the Sister cities' issues and always strongly supported their progress.

Mrs. Elke Becker was President of the Sister city committee until 2006. It was very important for her to experience cultural exchanges in the art and music fields and she organized many art exhibitions and concerts of classical music without neglecting the culinary aspect. Normandy specialties like oysters, crêpes, galettes and the famous "3 C" (camembert, cider and Calvados) never missed and always enchanted the citizens of Stolberg. Stolberg on the other hand offered hot wine and German delicatessen on the Valognes Christmas Market. Mrs. Elke Becker's counterparts in Valognes were successively Hervé Mandin, Emmanuel Ribot, Françoise Pinchon and Martine Hamel.

Anniversary cake - 10th Sistercity Jubilee celebration in Valognes

The activities of the Sister city Committee went on in 2006 with the newly designated Mrs. Fatima Küsters. One of the memorable projects among others was a trip from Stolberg to Valognes and back for the Citroen 2 CV-Club of Stolberg in the year of its 60th anniversary during the France-Rhine-Westfalian year in 2008/2009, including a meeting with the local VW Club. A highlight of the trip on the way back from Valognes was the visit of the Citroen Museum in Aulnay-sous-Bois nearby Paris.
"2 CV Citroën" 60th anniversary tour in 2008

"2 CV Citroën" 60th anniversary tour in 2008 with the Tancarville Bridge in the background
During the 2010 event Stolberg goes...France many associations and groups from Valognes were invited to come to Stolberg and contribute. The Stolberg people were really subjugated by the great singing and dancing performances of the folkloric group L’Pays d’Valognes wearing traditional Normand costume and headdress. Ornamental Blacksmiths, music orchestras and sports teams (for example the judo club) were a great enrichment. Martine Hamel created and coordinated all these contacts as President of the Sister city association until 2007 when André Aze took over the presidency until now.

Mrs. Fatima Küsters worked very intensively to have a place or monument named after Valognes to celebrate with dignity and honour the 20th anniversary of the Sister city partnership. Her proposal to have the unnamed bridge in the Old Town baptized in "Pont de Valognes" was welcomed and accepted by the City Council. A delegation with Mayor Jacques Coquelin came to Stolberg on November 7th 2010 to attend the ceremony. It was Jacques Coquelin’s first visit in Stolberg. When Mrs. Fatima Küsters moved to China, Dr. Stefan Schmitz took over in 2011 and his first action was to realize the plans of founding the Sister city Association "Partnerschaftskomitee Stolberg-Valognes e.V.". Until then all the work of the Sister city Committee was carried out without any official legitimation; all the activities had been privately financed by the committee members without any legal protection. The official Sister city Association was founded on February 7th 2011 and all the activities from then on have been legally protected. The statistics show that it was a very good step since the association is constantly growing and is currently proud to have more than 80 members.

A few examples of the activities of the Sister city Committee and the Association

Exchanges in sports took place in 2007 when a handball team participated in the Téléthon, a televised fundraising event for the muscular dystrophy charity in France, organized by non-profit institutions. The funds collected in 2007 were destined for research works on mucoviscidosis, an autosomal recessive genetic disorder. Another significant activity was a cycling tour from Stolberg and back performed by the cyclist group from Dorff in 2012, who cycled the 770 km to Valognes in only 5 days!

Student exchanges are a chance for those who wish to experience language immersion and are ready to live in Stolberg for some time. They do internships with the City Council or with companies in Stolberg. German language is taught in the Félix Buhot College but with a declining trend. There are still yearly school exchanges with the Ritzefeld Gymnasium, when students from Stolberg spend a week in Valognes and vice versa. The Stolberg Junior firefighters hold a camp on the Normandy coast every second year and the Valognes Sister city committee always takes good care of them.
Eau de Valognes bottled in Stolberg

The list is quite long and not exhaustive: a unique "Eau de Valognes" was created as a welcome present to be handed over to the people of Valognes when they came to Stolberg; a duck rally racing was launched on the River Vicht and ended under the Pont de Valognes; French classes; cooking classes (French cuisine of course and in particular Valognes specialties); and a must consisting in an initiation to the boule game which is becoming increasingly popular in Stolberg.

First inauguration of the Pont de Valognes Bride in Juin 2010

The 20th anniversary of the Sister city friendship was also celebrated in Valognes in 2011 with the signing of the Sister city document in the context of the "Fête des Crochus et du pur jus" and the transplanting of the Friendship-tree during this festival. The Friendship-tree, an apple-tree, made of metal, bearing 22 apples had been forged by Matthias Peters and students of the Felix Buhot College for the 10th anniversary of the Sister city foundation and was first planted in the Public Garden of Valognes. It started to get rusty very soon and was displaced. Mayor
Jacques Coquelin was very concerned to have this symbol of friendship between Stolberg and Valognes restored for the 20th anniversary in 2011 and planted in a better location, the Parc des Cordeliers.

On January 22nd, 2013 (the 50th anniversary of the Franco-German friendship Elysée Treaty) a real tree was planted next to the metal tree on the initiative of Mayor Jacques Coquelin in the presence of the members of the Sister city Association of Valognes. Everyone there was carrying a symbolic umbrella named „Sur le Pont–Sous la Pluie“ (on the bridge-under the rain) offered to them in Stolberg by the Stolberg Sister city Association in November 2012. The Friendship tree is an admirable symbol for a Sister city relationship and the friendship born and lived by the citizens of the two towns.

**Welcome present : umbrella "Sur le Pont – Sous La Pluie"**

**Impressions**

**Dominique et Jacqueline Le Landais adore singing**
Valognes stand on the Kaiserplatz, Stolberg during the city festival, september 2006

"Stolberg goes France": the folklore ensemble "L’Payis d’Valougnes" on their way to the Stolberg Castle
"Stolberg goes France": the folklore ensemble "L'Payis d'Valouges" performing in the Stolberg Castle
Getting together after a nice tour in the Valognes surroundings

Seafood specialties on the Valognes market place
Visiting a caramel and toffee manufacture

It is not easy to say goodbye!
Information panel about the "Pont de Valognes" in the Burgstrasse street

Homage and thanks

Grateful thanks to all the people from the two cities who have worked for this Sister city friendship and especially to the host families on both sides who contributed to the consolidation of the relationships between the peoples of Valognes and Stolberg. These thanks are extended to the artists of the two cities who contributed in some way to this friendship. To name a few without pretension of completeness: Pierre Iwamura, wrought-iron artist Daniel Masquelier, the folkloric group "L'payis d'Valougnes" on the Valognes side and Matthias Peters, Birgit Engelen, Theo Palm on the Stolberg side. „Last but not least”, this very exciting and fascinating relationship could not blossom without the ideal and actual help of the two municipalities and the local press. Thank you all!

March 2015: Text and translation of Fatima Küsters, board member of the Sister city Association Stolberg-Valognes

No claim on completeness

www.stolberg-valognes.de
Homepage of the Sistercity Association Stolberg-Valognes
http://www.mairie-valognes.fr
Homepage of the City of Valognes
http://www.bocage-valognais.fr
Website of the community of communes of the Valognes Bocage
http://www.encotentin.fr/
Website of the Cotentin tourist information offices
http://www.manchetourisme.com/fr
Website of the Manche Departmental Tourism Committee