



Belgium: A country to discover



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Belgium

There's just something about Belgium. Maybe it's the friendly and welcoming people who, with three official languages, still find it easy to converse in English, the country's fourth - unofficial - language. Maybe it's the stunning architecture decorating the quaint cobblestone squares. Or perhaps it's the incredible cuisine found in the vast array of restaurants where each meal seems better than the last. Energetic and carefree, the overall mood in Belgium is infectious, calling all of us to live as Belgians and enjoy life to the full.

Well situated between France and Holland, the Kingdom of Belgium encompasses all the best that Europe has to offer in a small area. Within the span of one day you can take a romantic cruise down a canal in Bruges, hunt for diamonds in Antwerp, enjoy waffles on the beach in Ostend, frolic at a festival in Binche, get lost in a castle in Namur, discover antiques at an outdoor market in Liege, and explore a fine-art museum in Brussels. A dense train network connects all of Belgium and makes navigation simple and comfortable for travellers.

Often called the Essence of Europe, Belgium is both multicultural and multilingual. Flanders in the north, a flat region criss-crossed by canals, is proud of its medieval art cities of Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent. To the south in Wallonia, you will find the rolling hills of the Ardennes, countless castles, and the cities of Liège, Namur, and Tournai. The city of Brussels is one of the world's great cosmopolitan capitals, home to both the European Union and NATO, as well as a wealth of international trade and finance companies.

Belgium's history has always been linked to both commercial and cultural exchange and much of its character is due to its role as the great meeting place of Western Europe. It would be difficult to name a European country which has not wanted to stake its claim in Belgium at one time or another. Traces of the Austrians, Spanish, French and Dutch can still be seen in its architecture and in the lifestyle of its people. You will see superb examples of art and architecture past and present - Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque and Art Nouveau.

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Brussels

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Geographically, Brussels is ideally situated: thanks to high-speed trains such as Thalys and Eurostar, Paris (1h20), London (1h50), Cologne (2h20) and Amsterdam (2h40) are just around the corner.

Capital of Europe

Brussels is the federal capital of Belgium. It is also home to many national and foreign companies, the main Belgian political institutions and many European institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Ministers). Brussels is both the political and administrative centre of Europe.

It is also known for its squares, monuments and magnificent museums.

Art & Architecture

- The Grand'Place - a UNESCO World Heritage Site: The impressive main square with the town hall and surrounding alleyways and old houses is one of the finest in the world. Described by Victor Hugo as "the most beautiful square in Europe", it is a stunning example of 15th century (Hotel de Ville) and 17th century (the guild houses) architecture.
- The Atomium: The 103-metre representation of an iron crystal built for Expo '58, is a classic piece of 20th century design. Recently restored in preparation for its 50th birthday, it's a great place to visit for panoramic views of the city.
- Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium: The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium hold some 20,000 paintings, sculptures and drawings. They consist of the Museum of Ancient Art (XV - XVII century), the Museum of Modern Art (XIX - XX century), the Wiertz Museum and the Meunier Museum.
 - Museum of Ancient Art: Paintings by the old masters of the southern Netherlands make up an essential part of this collection (Rogier van der Weyden, Petrus Christus, Dirk Bouts, Hans Memling, Jérôme Bosch, Bruegel, Pieter Paul Rubens, Jacob Jordaens, Anthony van Dyck).
 - Museum of Modern Art: Designed by the architect Roger Bastin and opened in 1984, the Museum of Modern Art showcases a wide collection of Belgian and foreign works of the 20th century from Fauvism through to the present day (Magritte, Delvaux, Ensor).
- BOZAR – Palace of Fine Arts: An Art Deco masterpiece by Victor Horta, the Palace of Fine Arts is one of the jewels of Belgium's cultural and architectural heritage.
- Musical Instruments Museum – Old England Building: While the entrance is Art Nouveau, the rest of the building is in perfect harmony with the neoclassical style of the Place Royale. The museum's extraordinary collections in particular stand out.
- Belgian Centre for Comic Strip Art: This is the Kingdom of the Smurfs, Tintin, Lucky Luke, Spirou, Gaston Lagaffe, Spike and Suzy and plenty of other paper heroes! One of the major Brussels tourist attractions and a superb example of Art Nouveau architecture.



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Art Nouveau in Brussels

At the turn of the 20th century, Brussels went through a period of unrivalled effervescence. The Art Nouveau style burst onto the scene in 1893 courtesy of two architects, Victor Horta and Paul Hankar: the Tassel House and Hankar's own private home were the first tokens of a new aesthetic. Hundreds of houses as well as schools, cafés and shops rivaled for originality. Brussels became a European capital of Art Nouveau, alongside Vienna and Barcelona.

Gastronomy

With more Michelin stars per head of population than anywhere else in the world, Brussels is a great place to set aside all diet plans and indulge.

Design

Brussels always has been and always will be a multicultural city. It is the place to be for talented and creative designers: it is an exuberant and surrealist place to live and offers a dynamic working environment. Before they completely fell under Brussels' spell, many designers chose to attend internationally renowned schools such as La Cambre, or for interior design, the Hogeschool Sint-Lukas, the CAD, the Royal Academy for Fine Arts of Brussels or Saint-Luc.

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Flanders

In a country so steeped in culture and history, it's little wonder that the whole of Flanders is literally dotted with beautiful old relics, architecture and a proud heritage of fine art.

Antwerp

Belgium's second largest city is also its most hip and has always been creative: in the 16th and 17th century, it was the great masters such as Pieter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck while in the 20th and 21st century, its fashion designers such as the world-famous Antwerp Six have made their mark.

- City by the water: The Port of Antwerp is the second largest port in Europe and one of the 10 largest ports in the world.
- World Diamond Centre: "Antwerp quality" and "Antwerp cut" are international trade terms synonymous with perfect processing and flawless beauty. Visit the Diamond Museum.
- Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal: Right in the heart the city, next to the Grote Markt, this is Belgium's largest Gothic cathedral. It contains some amazing triptychs and 'The assumption of the Virgin' by Pieter Paul Rubens.
- Rubenshuis: The work of local artist Pieter Paul Rubens can be seen in various locations around Antwerp, his home is the city's top tourist spot.
- City of fashion-makers: As a fashion city Antwerp owes its reputation to the pioneers of the fashion movement, the so-called 'Antwerp Six': Walter Van Beirendonck, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs and Marina Yee. Since 2002, Antwerp has also had its own fashion centre: the ModeNatie. The high point of the Antwerp fashion season is the yearly fashion show staged by the Antwerp Academy, which draws more than 6,000 international visitors.
- Plantin-Moretus Museum: Close to the heart of the city, this gem is Antwerp's finest museum and, to date, the only museum ever to be put on UNESCO's World Heritage List. The former home of printing pioneer Christophe Plantin.

Leuven

Less than a half hour train ride from Brussels, Leuven is home to Belgium's oldest university. As a result, roughly half of the city's 90,000 inhabitants are students, who give the city a lively, informal air.

- Grote Markt: Including the Stadhuis, built between 1439 and 1468, which is one of the most splendid Gothic buildings in the world and the Cathedral of St Pieterskerk, do make time to pop into Cafe Gambrinus, a local institution since 1896, for a coffee or beer.
- *Groot Begijnhof/Grand Béguinage* (Great Béguinage): During the Crusades many women were left behind whilst their husbands, fathers and brothers went off to fight the Holy Wars. For protection and company so-called *begijnhoven* or *béguinages* were built to house these women. Today, the *Great Béguinage* houses students and lecturers from the University.
- Oude Markt: This square is jam-packed with places to drink and is known by locals as 'the longest bar in the world'.

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The Coast

The Flemish coast is something of a secret: along 67 km of pristine coastline lie 14 resorts, each with their own distinct style and character.

Bruges: UNESCO World Heritage City

The heart of Bruges, surrounded by an almost continuous ring of canals, is the best preserved example of medieval Flanders. Bruges is also known as 'the Venice of the North', and is the most popular tourist destination in Belgium.

- Beguinage: Part of the World Heritage Site that covers all the Flemish *béguinages*, this one is still used for its original purpose, to house single women; unbelievably picturesque, white terraced houses surround a central green that is awash with daffodils in early spring.
- Belfry Tower: Considered a symbol of Bruges' medieval power, it is worth climbing the 366 steps of this 80-metre-high tower for views over the city. Also part of a World Heritage Site that encompasses all the belfries of Belgium and France.
- Groeningemuseum: The city art museum renowned for its Flemish Primitives dating to the 15th and early 16th century; artists include Hieronymous Bosch, Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling.

Ghent

Ghent has some fine historical monuments such as the medieval castle of the Counts of Flanders. Its 900-plus listed buildings are testament to the fact that not only did it survive the World Wars pretty much intact, but also that it was a very wealthy city in medieval times, having been Europe's leading cloth producer and largest city outside Paris.

- Gravensteen: This formidable 12th century medieval castle has been beautifully restored and is still partially surrounded by the moat.
- St. Baafskathedraal and Belfry: The late Gothic cathedral contains several paintings by Rubens and Bosch as well as one of the world's great art treasures, Jan and Hubert Van Eyck's stunning 20-panel altarpiece, Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. The views from the 14th century belfry are breath-taking.
- Design Museum: A great range of decorative arts, dating from the 17th century to the modern day, undoubtedly the best design museum in Flanders.
- Canal Trip: From the canals of Ghent the city's many listed buildings can be admired.

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Wallonia

Wallonia probably has the world's largest concentration of castles.

The landscape of this region was once described by Ernest Hemingway as, "something out of a Grimm's fairytale." But it's no fairytale - it's Wallonia, also known as the Ardennes. Wallonia is abundant in abbeys, citadels, parks and gardens, castles and culture. The historic towns of Wallonia bubble over with pretty squares, interesting battlefields, outdoor markets, museums and restaurants serving regional specialties such as country ham and Trappist beer brewed locally. The countryside of Wallonia is composed of woodland, moors, vast fields cut off with hedges and grasslands, all dotted with springs, streams, waterfalls and lakes with the River Meuse as a bonus. Adventure is easy to find with hundreds of miles of signed pathways for walking and hiking, cliffs for climbing, streams for kayaking, greens for golfing and wide open skies for hot-air ballooning.

Namur

Only a short distance from Brussels, Namur, the capital of Wallonia, is increasingly attracting attention. Around the city, a whole region of great charm is opening up to the world. Easily reached by road, air, rail or waterway, the heart of Namur is a pedestrian zone. Namur Citadel: This is one of the most impressive fortified towns in Europe. You can visit by tourist train or on foot with a guide and can penetrate the mystery of one of the biggest underground networks ever built by man, dubbed the "termites' nest of Europe" by Napoleon.

Liège

The town of Liège sits proudly at the confluence of the rivers Meuse and Ourthe. It boasts several historical monuments, including the famous Palace of Prince-Bishops. Visitors to the Fiery City of Liège often comment how much it reminds them of Rome. This is not surprising considering that the city is shaped by hills and criss-crossed by stairs and rising alleyways. Busy metropolis, prestigious arts centre – Liège is full of contrasts.



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Tournai

This 2,000-year-old town likes to flatter itself with its origins which in turn led the town through very different eras. It's the city of the Kings: Childeric, Clovis, Philippe Auguste, Louis IX, Henry VIII, Charles V, Louis XIV, all of whom have left traces of their glorious or transitory reigns in its institutions and stones.

Overshadowed by its monuments, the Cité des Cinq Clochers (the town of the five towers) welcomes and invites you to its many festivities, during which over and over again life pulses through this exceptional spot of Picardy on the borders of Belgium's Walloon provinces.

Spa

The town of Spa gave its name to all spas and was the watering hole of the entire European aristocracy in the 18th and 19th centuries, including Tsar Peter the Great who was cured of a severe form of indigestion by the waters of Spa. As the name implies, Spa has an environment of relaxation, health and enjoyment. Whether you're watching the exciting races of the Grand Prix, rolling the dice at the amazing Spa Casino, or just getting a deep-tissue massage at one of the many spas, you will never be bored in this city.

Often referred to as the Pearl of the Ardennes, Spa is an attractive Belgian town in a wooded valley surrounded by undulating hills and countless rivers and springs. With a fascinating and lengthy history, Spa was described as The Cafe of Europe in the 18th century due to its noteworthy flow of cure-seeking visitors. Today, Spa continues to grow its rich potential by seamlessly combining historic charm with modern conveniences. This makes Spa a perfect travel destination.

Beautiful Villages

Nestling in valleys, dominating ridges or straddling rivers, the villages of Wallonia await your visit. From one village to the next, you will appreciate the charm of our countryside, the flavours of our rustic cuisine, our warm welcome and a quality of life which makes Wallonia the ideal location for a day-trip, a weekend or a longer holiday.

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