



Stuttford Van Lines Country Guide for

Belgium



Country Guides: Courtesy of Overseas Moving Network International (OMNI)

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1 CONTACT ADDRESSES

Location: Western Europe.

Time: GMT + 1 (GMT + 2 from last Sunday in March to Saturday before last Sunday in October).

Embassy of Belgium in the UK

103-105 Eaton Square, London SW1W 9AB, UK Tel: (020) 7470 3734/35 (general enquiries) or (09065) 508 963 (recorded visa information; calls cost £1 per minute) or 540 777 (automated telephone appointments bookings service; calls cost £1.50 per minute). Website: www.diplobel.org/uk Opening hours: Mon-Fri 0900-1300 and 1400-1700.

Office de Promotion du Tourisme in the UK (Belgian Tourist Office Brussels & Wallonia)

217 Marsh Wall, London E14 9FJ, UK Tel: (0906) 302 0245 (calls cost 60p per minute) or (0800) 954 5245 (free brochure request line; toll-free in UK) or (020) 7531 0391. Website: www.belgiumthelaceto.be

Toerisme Vlaanderen in the UK (Tourism Flanders - Brussels)

Flanders House, 1a Cavendish Square, London W1G 0LD, UK Tel: (020) 7307 7730 (travel trade and press only) or (0800) 954 5245 (brochure request line; toll-free in UK) or (0906) 302 0245 (live operator; calls cost 60p per minute). Website: www.visitflanders.co.uk

Embassy of Belgium in the USA

3330 Garfield Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008, USA Tel: (202) 333 6900. Website: www.diplobel.us Consulates General in: Atlanta, Los Angeles and New York.

Belgian Tourist Office in the USA

220 East 42nd Street, Suite 3402, New York, NY 10017, USA Tel: (212) 758 8130. Website: www.visitbelgium.com

2 OVERVIEW

'Nothing but beer and chocolate?'

A land whose specialities include ubiquitous beers and delicate chocolates, Belgium is often perceived to be dull. The image that it's simply a staid haunt for business executives and Eurocrats, or the gateway to the rest of Europe, reinforces the idea. But Belgium is a prime destination if you're interested in countryside, culture and history, served up alongside a huge proportion of highly acclaimed restaurants serving everything from haute cuisine to moules-frites or Belgian waffles. Easy to travel around, this pocket-sized country is divided by the Flemish north (Flemish-speaking) and the Walloon south (French-speaking). Brussels, the capital, is the heart of the country and the European Union. Expanding outwards from the brilliant Gothic architecture of the Grand-Place, this cosmopolitan city contains numerous interesting museums and many fine eateries. The Manneken Pis statue is the place to pose for a photograph and laugh incredulously at others doing likewise. Ostend, in the north, is a popular seaside resort with a long sandy beach, bustling harbour and shops to explore. With its canals and cobbles, thirteenth-century Bruges is one of Europe's finest examples of a medieval town and home to some



impressive art collections. Antwerp is renowned for diamonds and throughout all these towns it's difficult to escape the bars and pavement cafes. The south holds great appeal for outdoorsy types the forested Ardennes is a nature-lover's paradise cut by rivers and gorges where walking opportunities abound. How dull is that?

Sharon Harris

3 GENERAL INFORMATION

Area: 30,528 sq km (11,787 sq miles).

Population: 10 million (UN, 2005).

Population Density: 341 per sq km.

Capital: Brussels (Bruxelles, Brussel). Population: 970,000.

GEOGRAPHY: Belgium is situated in Europe and bordered by France, Germany, Luxembourg and The Netherlands. The landscape is varied, the rivers and gorges of the Ardennes contrasting sharply with the rolling plains which make up much of the countryside. Notable features are the great forest of Ardennes near the frontier with Germany and Luxembourg and the wide, sandy beaches of the northern coast, which run for over 60km (37 miles). The countryside is rich in historic cities, castles and churches.

Government: Constitutional monarchy. The Kingdom of Belgium was established in 1830. In 1993, Belgium became a federal state comprising three autonomous regions. Head of State: King Albert II since 1993. Head of Government: Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt since 1999. Recent history: The country is a hereditary constitutional monarchy with a bicameral Parliament comprising the 150-member directly elected Chamber of Representatives and the 71-member Senate. Both chambers are elected for a four-year term. The political landscape in Belgium is complicated by the fact that each of the main political parties is split into two with one section representing the Dutch-speaking Flemish community and the other the French-speaking Walloons. A successful coalition must successfully balance the interests of both. In May 2005, the Government survived a confidence vote, enabling it to shelve a dispute over the voting rights of French-speakers in Dutch-speaking areas around Brussels. Months of negotiations over the issue had failed, sparking a political crisis. The far-right Vlaams Blok, which wanted Flemish independence and campaigned on an anti-immigration platform, increased its share of the vote substantially in regional and European elections in 2004. However, the High Court later ruled that the party was racist and stripped it of the right to state funding and access to television. The party was subsequently reconstituted under a new name, Vlaams Belang, Flemish Interest.

Language: The official languages are Dutch, French and German. Dutch is slightly more widely spoken than French, and German is spoken the least.

Religion: Mainly Roman Catholic, with small Protestant and Jewish communities.

Electricity: 220 volts AC, 50Hz. Plugs are of the round two-pin type.

SOCIAL CONVENTIONS: Belgians will often prefer to answer visitors in English rather than French, even if the visitor's French is good. It is customary to bring flowers or a small present for



the hostess, especially if invited for a meal. Dress is similar to other Western nations, depending on the formality of the occasion. If black tie/evening dress is to be worn, this is always mentioned on the invitation. Smoking is generally unrestricted.

Passport/Visa

	<i>Passport Required?</i>	<i>Visa Required?</i>	<i>Return Ticket Required?</i>
British	1	No	No
Australian	Yes	No	Yes
Canadian	Yes	No	Yes
USA	Yes	No	Yes
OtherEU	1	No	No
Japanese	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Belgium is a signatory to the 1995 Schengen Agreement. For further details about passport/visa regulations within the Schengen area, see the introductory section, How to Use this Guide.

PASSPORTS: Passport valid for at least three months beyond length of stay required by all except:(a) 1. EU/EEA nationals (EU + Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway) and Swiss nationals holding a valid national ID card. Note: EU and EEA nationals are only required to produce evidence of their EU/EEA nationality and identity in order to be admitted to any EU/EEA Member State. This evidence can take the form of a valid national passport or national identity card. Either is acceptable. Possession of a return ticket, any length of validity on their document, sufficient funds for the length of their proposed visit should not be imposed. (b) nationals of Andorra, Monaco and San Marino, holding a valid national ID card.

VISAS: Required by all except the following for stays of no more than three months within a six-month period:(a) nationals referred to in the chart and under passport exemptions above; (b) nationals of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, holders of BNO (British National Overseas) passports and 'look-alike' passport holders of British Overseas Territories (except Gibraltar), plus British Indian Ocean Territory, Henderson Islands, Pitcairn, Ducie & Oeno and the St Helen Islands and dependencies, Brunei, Bulgaria, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Hong Kong (SAR), Iceland, Israel, Korea (Rep), Macau (SAR), Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Romania, Singapore, Uruguay, Vatican City and Venezuela;(c) nationals remaining within the airport on transit, except for the following nationals, who always require an Airport Transit visa: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Congo (Dem Rep), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Syrian Arab Republic, if not possessing a valid residence permit for the EU member states or Andorra, Canada, Iceland, Japan, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland or the USA.

Types of visa and cost: A uniform type of visa, the Schengen visa, is issued for tourist, business and private visits. All visas cost either £25.90 (short stay; up to 90 days) or £37 (long stay).

Note: Spouses and children (under 18 years) of EU nationals receive their visas free of charge (enquire at Embassy for details). The original marriage certificate, the spouse's passport and the



birth certificate(s) for the child(ren) must be produced. Additional documents may also be required.

Validity: Short-stay (single- and multiple-entry): usually valid for six months from date of issue for stays of a maximum 30 or 90 days per entry. Transit (single- and multiple-entry): valid for a maximum of five days per entry, including the day of arrival. Visas cannot be extended and a new application must be made each time. Schengen collective visas are also available for group visits, subject to rules and regulations.

Application to: Consulate (or Consular section at Embassy); see Passport/Visa Information. The consulate operates an appointment system and all applicants must make an appointment before attending the visa section (tel: (09065) 540 777; for those who reside in the London area. For those not leaving in the London area, applications can be made by post and a self-addressed special delivery envelope for return of passport must be enclosed with the application). Travellers visiting just one Schengen country should apply to the Consulate of that country; travellers visiting more than one Schengen country should apply to the Consulate of the country in which their longest stay is situated. The Belgian Embassy will only issue a visa if the longest stay of the visit is to Belgium.

Application requirements: (a) Passport or official travel documents valid for at least three months after proposed stay with blank pages to affix visa stamp. (b) Completed and signed application form. (c) One passport-size photo. (d) Proof of sufficient funds to cover stay and to cover return to country of origin/transit to onwards country, plus funds to cover any possible medical expenses. This includes access to at least £38 per day if residing with an individual in Belgium, or £50 per day if residing in a hotel. If applying with a guarantor, the guarantor must have a minimum net income (enquire at Embassy for further details). (e) Valid travel insurance, with a minimum cover of £30,000. (f) Proof of purpose of stay such as a letter of invitation from a host in Belgium, a return ticket or hotel booking. (g) Letter from employer or from solicitor or bank manager if self-employed. If a student, letter from school or college confirming attendance. (h) Stamped, self-addressed registered envelope for postal applications. If visiting friends or family in Belgium, sponsorship from person in Belgium must be submitted along with business letter (with proof that national is a paid employee), providing evidence of sponsor's income, and certified at the Town Hall at which sponsor is registered. (i) Fee payable by postal order only, or cash if in person. (j) Return ticket(s) to country of residence for some nationalities. (k) Documents substantiating the purpose and circumstances of the proposed visit. Business: (a)-(k) and, (l) Invitation letter from overseas business associate.

Note: Nationals may identify a Belgian national or alien residing or established legally, and for a long period, in Belgium, as guarantor for subsistence and medical/travel costs incurred, if national cannot guarantee their own ability to do so. The person acting as guarantor does not necessarily have to be the person who invites the national. If the national chooses to be covered by an undertaking of responsibility, the national must, within six months of the undertaking being legalised, report to the Belgian diplomat or Consular authorities. This rule also applies to nationals exempt from a visa requirement but wishing to gain access to the Schengen states on the basis of an undertaking of responsibility. Consult the nearest Consular section for the list of documents to be submitted that are necessary to legalise any undertaking of responsibility.

Working days required: 48 hours to eight weeks, depending on nationality and resident status, and whether applying by post or in person. Certain nationals must apply in person (contact Consulate or Consular section at Embassy for further details). Visa processing can, on some occasions, take up to three months.



Temporary residence: Persons wishing to take up temporary residence (more than three months) should make a special application to the Belgian Embassy.

Passport/Visa Information: Embassy of Belgium in the UK 103-105 Eaton Square, London SW1W 9AB, UK Tel: (020) 7470 3734/35 (general enquiries) or (09065) 508 963 (recorded visa information; calls cost £1 per minute) or 540 777 (automated telephone appointments bookings service; calls cost £1.50 per minute). Website: www.diplobel.org/uk Opening hours: Mon-Fri 0900-1300 and 1400-1700. Embassy of Belgium in the USA 3330 Garfield Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008, USA Tel: (202) 333 6900. Website: www.diplobel.us

4 MONEY

Single European currency (Euro): The Euro is now the official currency of 12 EU member states (including Belgium). Ten member states joined the EU on 1 May 2004 but have yet to fulfil all the conditions that had to be met by the 'old' member states before adopting the euro. The first Euro coins and notes were introduced in January 2002; the Belgian Franc was still in circulation until 28 February 2002, when it was completely replaced by the Euro. Euro (€) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2, 1 and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

Credit & debit cards: American Express, Diners Club, MasterCard and Visa are widely accepted as well as Eurocheque cards. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available. ATMs are widespread.

Traveller's cheques: Widely accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller's cheques in Euros, Pounds Sterling or US Dollars.

Currency restrictions: There are no restrictions on the import and export of either local or foreign currency.

Exchange rate indicators

Date At time of publishing £1.00 = €1.46 \$1.00 = €0.82

Banking hours: Mon-Fri 0900-1600.

5 DUTY FREE

The following goods may be imported into Belgium by persons over 17 years of age arriving from **non-EU countries without incurring customs duty:** 200 cigarettes or 100 cigarillos or 50 cigars or 250g of tobacco; 2l of wine, 1l of spirits or 2l of sparkling wine or 2l of non-sparkling wine or 2l of fortified wine; 50g of perfume and 250ml of eau de toilette; other goods up to €64.45 or €24.79 for nationals under 15 years (subject to change contact the Embassy for up-to-date information); 500g of coffee or 200g of coffee extract; 100g of tea or 40g of tea extract.

Prohibited items: Unpreserved meat products. Other unpreserved foodstuffs must be declared.



Abolition of duty free goods within the EU: On June 30 1999, the sale of duty free alcohol and tobacco at airports and at sea was abolished in all of the original 15 EU member states. Of the 10 new member states that joined the EU on May 1 2004, these rules already apply to Cyprus and Malta. There are transitional rules in place for visitors returning to one of the original 15 EU countries from one of the other new EU countries. But for the original 15, plus Cyprus and Malta, there are now no limits imposed on importing tobacco and alcohol products from one EU country to another (with the exceptions of Denmark, Finland and Sweden, where limits are imposed). Travellers should note that they may be required to prove at customs that the goods purchased are for personal use only.

6 PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Below are listed Public Holidays for the January 2006-June 2007 period. Jan 1 2006 New Year's Day. Apr 17 Easter Monday. May 1 Labour Day. May 25 Ascension Day. Jun 4 Whit Sunday. Jun 5 Whit Monday. Jun 11* Flemish Community Holiday. Jul 21 Independence Day. Aug 15 Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Sep 27* French Community Holiday. Nov 1 All Saints' Day. Nov 11 Armistice Day. Nov 15 Dynasty Day. Dec 25 Christmas Day. Dec 26 Boxing Day. Jan 1 2007 New Year's Day. Apr 9 Easter Monday. May 1 Labour Day. May 17 Ascension Day. May 28 Whit Monday. Jun 11* Flemish Community Holiday.

Note: *Observed by the respective communities.

7 HEALTH

	Special Precautions	Certificate Required
Yellow Fever	No	No
Cholera	No	No
Typhoid and Polio	No	N/A
Malaria	No	N/A

Other risks: Rabies is present in a small number of animals. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. For more information, consult the Health appendix.

Health care: European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland: If you or any of your dependants are suddenly taken ill or have an accident during a visit to an EEA country or Switzerland, free or reduced-cost necessary treatment is available in most cases on production of a valid European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). The card gives access to state-provided medical treatment only and the scheme gives no entitlement to medical repatriation costs, nor does it cover ongoing illnesses of a non-urgent nature, so comprehensive travel insurance is advised. Note that the EHIC replaces the Form E111, which will no longer be valid after 31 December 2005. Some restrictions apply, depending on your nationality. You will be charged for seeing a doctor or dentist and for prescribed drugs but you can claim back 75 per cent of these costs on provision of receipts. You will have to pay part of the costs of hospital treatment. Ambulance travel is not covered. Sickness Funds Offices (Mutualité/Ziekenfonds) handle reimbursements.



Travel - International

AIR: Following the bankruptcy of Belgium's international carrier, Sabena, in 2001, Belgium's regional airline, DAT (Delta Air Transport), has launched its new European airline SN Brussels Airlines (SN). Fifty-eight European destinations are served as well as others worldwide. For further information, check online (website: www.flysn.com). Several other airlines operate to Belgium.

Approximate flight times: From Brussels to London is 50 minutes and from Antwerp is 50 minutes. From Brussels to Los Angeles is 16 hours and to New York is seven hours.

Main airports: Brussels Zaventem (BRU) (website: www.brusselsairport.be) is 12km (8 miles) northeast of the city (travel time 35 minutes). To/from the airport: The Airport City Express train connects all three main railway stations (Brussels North, Central and South) with the airport, running every 15 minutes, 0600-0000 (travel time 15 to 20 minutes). The airport station is located on level one below the terminal. Other trains also depart frequently for the city and for destinations all over Belgium. Coaches depart from the airport bus station on ground level for major cities in Belgium, France and The Netherlands. Buses run regularly to and from the city and the bus station is located below the Arrivals Hall. Taxis to the city cost approximately €30, and are only available from outside the Arrivals Hall; all licensed taxis are recognisable by their yellow and blue licence emblems. A tip is generally included in taxi fares. Hotel courtesy coaches go to Holiday Inn, Novotel and Sofitel. Facilities: Car parking (website: www.carparkhotel.com or www.worldairportguide.co.uk), car hire, post office, banks, bureaux de change, bars, restaurants, incoming and outgoing duty free shops, medical facilities, computer and fax facilities and conference and business facilities. Brussels South Charleroi (CRL) (website: www.charleroi-airport.com) is 5km (3 miles) from Charleroi and 46km (29 miles) from Brussels. Airlines serving the airports include Ryanair, which operates cheap flights to several European destinations from Charleroi. To/from the airport: Buses depart every 30 minutes to Charleroi (travel time 10 minutes). There are regular coaches and trains to Brussels (travel time 45 minutes). Facilities: Automatic money changer, car hire, cafe, business lounge and duty free shop. Antwerp (ANR) (Deurne) (website: www.antwerpairport.be) is 2km (1.2 miles) east of the city. To/from the airport: There is a regular bus service (no. 16) to Central Station. Taxis are available. Facilities: Outgoing duty free shop, car hire, bank and bar/restaurant. The airport offers three lounges, the Jero Business Centre. There is also an auditorium. Ostend (OST) (website: www.ost.aero), 5km (3 miles) from the city. Facilities: Car parking, car hire, bureau de change, restaurant, bar and duty free shop. Liège (LGG) (website: www.liegeairport.com). To/from the airport: There are taxis and a regular bus service to the centre, 5km (3 miles) away.

Departure tax: Brussels Zaventem: €20.93. Brussels South Charleroi: €13.49. Antwerp: €10. Ostend: €10. Liège: €7.

SEA: Main ports: Ostend, Belgium's largest passenger and car-ferry port (website: www.portofoostende.be/info/index.htm), and Zeebrugge (website: www.portofzeebrugge.be).

RAIL: The Belgium national railway, Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Belges (SNCB) (website: www.b-rail.be), operates frequent day and night trains to destinations in Andorra, Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland and the UK. High-speed trains Trains à Grande Vitesse or TGV operate between Belgium and France, connecting Brussels with destinations in Brittany, on the French Atlantic coast, the Côte d'Azur and the French Alps. Cities that can be reached from Brussels by TGV include Bordeaux, Cannes, Chambéry, Lyon, Marseille, Nice, Perpignan, Rennes and Valence. TGV trains depart from Brussels and need to be booked in



advance. Further high-speed trains are operated by Thalys (website: www.thalys.com), a service jointly run by the the Belgium, French, German and Dutch national railways. The main international Thalys trains link Brussels to Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Cologne (Germany) and Paris (France). Rail passes: The Inter-Rail pass offers unlimited second-class train travel in up to 29 European countries (includes Morocco and Turkey) split into eight zones (A-H). Three different tickets are available: a ticket covering one zone (two to six countries, 16 days' validity), a ticket covering two zones (six to 10 countries, 22 days' validity) and an All Zone Pass (29 countries, one month's validity). Ferry services between Italy and Greece are included. Passengers must be resident in Europe for at least six months before the pass is used. Travel is not allowed in the passenger's country of residence. Travellers under 26 years receive a reduction of about 30 per cent. Children's tickets are reduced by about 50 per cent. Supplements are required for some high-speed services, seat reservations and couchettes. Discounts are offered on Eurostar and some ferry routes. Available from Inter Rail (website: www.interrailnet.com). The Eurailpass offers unlimited first-class train travel in 17 European countries. Tickets are valid for 15 days, 21 days, one month, two months or three months. The Eurailpass Saver ticket offers discounts for two or more people travelling together. The Eurailpass Youth ticket is available to those aged under 26 and offers unlimited second-class train travel. The Eurailpass Flexi allows either 10 or 15 travel days within a two-month period. The Eurail Selectpass is valid in three, four or five bordering countries and allows five, six, eight or 10 travel days (15 for five countries) in a two-month period. The Eurail Regional Pass allows four to 10 travel days in a two-month period in one of nine regions (usually two or more countries). Children receive a 50 per cent reduction. The passes cannot be sold to residents of Europe, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia or the Russian Federation. Available from The Eurail Group (website: www.eurail.com). The Benelux Tourrail ticket offers five days of unlimited travel within a period of 30 days by rail in Belgium, Luxembourg and The Netherlands. The European travelcard Railplus entitles the buyer to a 25 per cent reduction on all international conventional trains, on condition that the journey crosses at least one frontier. There are different Railplus cards available: for young people aged 12 to 25 years, for adults aged 26 to 60 years, and for seniors over 60. For further information, contact Rail Europe (tel: (08708) 302 008; website: www.raileurope.co.uk) or International Rail Ltd (tel: (0870) 751 5000; website: www.international-rail.com). Eurostar: Eurostar is a service provided by the railways of Belgium, the UK and France, operating direct high-speed trains from London (Waterloo International) to Paris (Gare du Nord) and to Brussels (Midi/Zuid). It takes two hours 40 minutes from London to Paris (via Lille) and two hours 20 minutes to Brussels. For further information and reservations, contact Eurostar (tel: (0870) 600 0792 (travel agents) or (08705) 186 186 (public; within the UK) or +44 (1233) 617 575 (public; outside the UK); a £5 booking fee applies to all telephone bookings; website: www.eurostar.com); or Rail Europe (tel: (08705) 848 848; website: www.raileurope.co.uk).

ROAD: There are good road links from most of the European countries. Eurolines (52 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0AU, UK; tel: (08705) 143 219; website: www.eurolines.com) and National Express (Ensign Court, 4 Vicarage Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3ES, UK; tel: 08705 808 080; website: www.nationalexpress.com) run regular coach services from the UK to Belgium. Passes: Travellers can either choose Mini-Pass breaks or book a 15-, 30- or 60-day pass. The six Mini-Passes give travellers the freedom to visit three cities, with prices starting from £55. Travellers can stay as long as they like in each city. Channel Tunnel: Eurotunnel runs shuttle trains for cars, bicycles, motorcycles, coaches, minibuses, caravans, campervans and other vehicles over 1.85m (6.07ft) between Folkestone in Kent, with direct road access from the M20, and Calais, with links to the A16/A26 motorway (Exit 13). All road vehicles are carried through the tunnel in shuttle trains running between the two terminals. Terminals and shuttles are well-equipped for disabled passengers. Passenger Terminal buildings contain a variety of shops, restaurants, bureaux de change and other amenities. The journey takes about 35 minutes from platform to platform and around one hour from motorway to motorway. There are up to four



passenger shuttles per hour at peak times, 24 hours per day and services run every day of the year. Motorists pass through customs and immigration before they board, with no further checks on arrival. Fares are charged according to length of stay and time of year and whether or not you have a reservation. The price applies to the car, regardless of the number of passengers or size of the car. Promotional deals are frequently available, especially outside the peak holiday seasons. Tickets may be purchased in advance from travel agents, or from Eurotunnel Customer Services in France or the UK with a credit card. For further information, brochures and reservations, contact Eurotunnel Customer Services UK, Customer Relations Department, Saint Martin's Plain, Cheriton, Folkestone, Kent CT19 4QD, UK (tel: (08705) 353 535; website: www.eurotunnel.com). For further information about departure times of shuttles at the French terminal, contact Eurotunnel Customer Information in Coquelles (tel: France +33 (3) 2100 6543).

Travel - Internal

AIR: As Belgium is such a small country, there are no internal flights. Bus services operate between Brussels airport to Antwerp, Ghent and Liège; see Travel International section.

RAIL: SNCB operates a dense railway network with regular trains on most lines. On the main lines there are more frequent trains. For more information contact Belgian Railways (tel: (2) 528 2828; website: www.b-rail.be) or Rail Europe (tel: (08708) 302 008; website: www.raileurope.co.uk). Fares: First- and second-class, single and return tickets are available. However, a return ticket is double the single fare and is only valid on the day of issue. Children under 12 travel for free in second class (restrictions apply). Discount travel: Weekend return fares are available from Friday (after 1900) to Sunday for the outward journey and on Saturday and Sunday for the return journey (on long holiday weekends, these periods are extended). A 50 per cent reduction card is also for sale. It entitles the holder to buy an unlimited number of half-price single tickets. Go Pass offers preferential tariffs for 10 second-class trips within one year to people aged under 26. The Rail Pass offers preferential tariffs for 10 second-class trips within one year to people over 26. People aged 65 and over benefit from special tariffs. The EuroDomino pass enables holders anything from three to eight days' extensive travel within a one-month period on the entire rail network of their chosen country. It is valid in 28 European countries and North Africa, including the ferry service from Brindisi (Italy) to Igoumenitsa (Greece). To purchase a EuroDomino pass you must have been resident in Europe for at least six months and a passport number is required at time of booking. It is not permitted to purchase a pass for travel within your own country of residence. To qualify for the youth rates, you must be under 26 years on the first date of validity of the pass. Children aged four-11 years inclusive pay half the adult fares rounded up to the nearest pound. Children under four years travel for free. Seat reservations, couchette and sleeper charges are not included in the cost of the pass and are payable at the normal rate. Passholder fares are payable on some services. Reservation/supplement charges are payable on all trains within Spain. Available from Rail Europe (website: www.raileurope.co.uk/railpasses/eurodomino.htm).

ROAD: There are many different brands of petrol available, and prices vary. Traffic drives on the right. Main towns are connected by toll-free motorways. It is compulsory for seat belts to be worn in the front and back of vehicles. Children under 12 are not permitted to travel in the front seat of a car. A warning triangle must be displayed at the scene of a breakdown or accident. It is compulsory to carry a fire extinguisher or first aid kit in all vehicles. The speed limit on motorways and dual carriageways is 120kph (75mph) with a minimum speed of 70kph (45 mph), on single carriageways outside built-up areas is 90kph (55mph), and in built-up areas is 50kph (31mph). Trams always have priority on roads. Bus: Extensive regional bus services are operated by the bus companies which publish regional timetables. There are long-distance stopping services between towns. Taxi: Plentiful in all towns. The tip is included in the final meter price. If



there are no taxi stands, taxi companies may be telephoned for an extra charge of about €364;2.50. Car hire: Both self-drive and chauffeur-driven cars are available. The minimum age is 23 and the person must possess a valid full licence with at least one year of validity (and which will be required upon collection of the car). Documentation: A national driving licence is acceptable. EU nationals taking their own cars to Belgium must obtain a Green Card. The Green Card tops insurance cover up to the level of cover provided by the car owner's domestic policy.

URBAN: There is a good public transport system in all the major towns and cities, with underground, tram and bus services in Antwerp and Brussels, bus and tramways in Charleroi, Ghent and Ostend and bus systems elsewhere. There is a standard flat-fare system, with discounts for 5- and 10-journey multi-ride tickets. One-day tickets and multi-mode tourist travelcards are also available.

TRAVEL TIMES: The following chart gives approximate travel times from Brussels (in hours and minutes) to other major cities and towns in Belgium.

Road	Rail	Antwerp	0.400.41	Bruges	1.000.53	Ghent	0.500.28	Liège	1.101.22
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8 ACCOMMODATION

HOTELS: Belgium has a large range of hotels from luxury to small family pensions and inns. The best international-class hotels are found in the cities. Grading: The Belgian Tourist Office issues a shield to all approved hotels by which they can be recognised. Hotels which display this sign conform to the official standards set by Belgian law which protects the tourist and guarantees certain standards of quality. Some hotels are also graded according to the Benelux system in which standard is indicated by a row of 3-pointed stars, from the highest (5-star) to the minimum (1-star). However, membership of this scheme is voluntary, and there may be first-class hotels which are not classified in this way. If an establishment providing accommodation facilities is classified under category H (plain hotel with moderate standards of comfort) or above (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 stars), it may call itself hotel, hostel, inn, guest house, motel or other similar names.

FARM HOLIDAYS: In some regions of the country, farm holidays are now available. In the Polders and the Ardennes visitors can (for a small cost) participate in the daily work of the farm.

SELF-CATERING: There are ample opportunities to rent furnished villas, flats, rooms, or bungalows for a holiday period. There is a particularly wide choice in the Ardennes and on the coast. These holiday houses and flats are comfortable and well-equipped. Rentals are determined by the number of bedrooms, the amenities, the location and the season. On the coast, many apartments, studios, villas and bungalows are classified into five categories according to the standard of comfort they offer. Estate agents will supply full details. For the Ardennes region, enquiries should be made to the local tourist office or to Belsud (for contact details, see above under Farm Holidays). Addresses of local tourist offices and lists of coastal estate agents can be obtained from Tourism Brussels-Wallonia/Tourism Flanders-Brussels.

YOUTH HOSTELS: There are two youth hostel associations: the Vlaamse Jeugdherbergcentrale (VJHC) (website: www.vjh.be), which operates in Flanders, and the Centrale Wallonne (CWAJ) (website: www.laj.be), operating in the French-speaking area. The hostels of the former are large, highly organised and much frequented by schools and youth groups; the hostels of the CWAJ are smaller and more informal, similar in some ways to those in France. A complete list of youth hostels and other holiday homes for young people can be obtained from Belgian Tourist Office Brussels & Wallonia or Tourism Flanders-Brussels (see Top Things To Do).



CAMPING/CARAVANNING: The majority of campsites are in the Ardennes and on the coast; many of these are excellent. A list of addresses, rates and other information can be obtained from the Belgian Tourist Office Brussels & Wallonia or Tourism Flanders-Brussels (see Top Things To Do). The local Verblijftaks or Taxe de Séjour is a tax usually included in the rates charged. On the coast during the summer season, a supplement of about 25 per cent is charged on the majority of tariffs. Camping out in places other than the recognised sites is permitted, provided the agreement of the landowner or tenant has been obtained.

Accommodation Information: Horeca Brussels Office (Hotel Association) BP 4, Anspachlaan 111, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 513 7814. Website: www.horecabrussel.be Horeca Wallonia Office Avenue Gouverneur Bovesse 35, B-5100 Jambes, Belgium Tel: (81) 721 888. Website: www.horecawallonie.be Horeca Flanders Office Website: www.fedhorecavlaanderen.be Flemish Federation for Farm and Country Tourism Minderbroederstraat 8, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium Tel: (16) 242 158. Website: www.hoenvetoerisme.be Belsud (Information on Bed and Breakfasts, Self-Catering Accommodation and Farm Holidays) 61 rue du Marché-aux-Herbes, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 504 0280. Website: www.wallonia-tourism.net

Introduction

The anachronistic images of 'boring Belgium' have been well and truly banished over the last decade as the country promotes its key destinations, along with a string of new attractions. Belgium always had a lot more going for it than the faceless political and bureaucratic buildings that litter its capital, Brussels, with a string of engaging cities in Bruges, Ghent, Liège - and Brussels itself - that offer impressive architecture, lively nightlife, first-rate cuisine and numerous other attractions for visitors. Then there is reinvented Antwerp, now a hotbed of fashion and modern design, and the more bucolic charms of the chocolate box beauty of the mountainous Ardennes region to the east, as well as the sweeping sand of the coastline resorts of the western seaboard.

Brussels

Brussels is home to the European Union and NATO, amongst many other institutions, but beyond their facelessness, the city's architecture is a smorgasbord, with the gothic Grand Place the undoubted highlight. Other key sights in Brussels include St Michael and St Gudule's Cathedral and the Mont des Arts park, which links the upper and lower parts of the city. Then there is the elegant Place Royale, built between 1774 and 1780 in the style of Louis XVI, the Museum of Ancient Art and the Museum of Modern Art. The Manneken-Pis, and his less heralded sister the Janneken Pis, are statues that hint at the exuberance and irreverence of the 'Bruxellois', a spirit that reaches its zenith in the city's numerous bars which, along with the 1000 types of Belgian beer, are not to be missed. Among other areas worth exploring are the Îlot Sacré, the picturesque area of narrow streets to the northeast of the Grand-Place; the fashionable boulevard de Waterloo; the administrative quarter, a completely symmetrical park area commanding a splendid view of the surrounding streets; the Grand Sablon, the area containing both the flamboyant Gothic structure of the Church of Our Lady of Sablon and the Sunday antique market and, lastly, the Petit Sablon, a square surrounded by Gothic columns, which support 48 small bronze statues commemorating medieval Brussels guilds. A more modern attraction is the bizarre Atomium, a futuristic, atom-shaped aluminium tower built for the 1958 World Fair. One important out-of-town attraction is the Battle of Waterloo site, 18km (11 miles) to the south of Brussels, commemorating the battle that shaped the future of both Belgium and modern Europe, of which Brussels is now such a crucial hub. The Brussels Card now gives the visitor free access to 30-plus museums and also the use of public transport throughout the Brussels-Capital region, within a 72-hour period. This 'culture pass' is available at all participating



museums - at the six sales offices of the Brussels Public Transport Company (STIB), at certain hotels and at the Brussels International Tourism Office (see Contact Addresses section), costing just €30.

Flanders

ANTWERP: Although still Europe's second-largest port, the city of Antwerp has moved on from its purely industrial past. Today, the inhabitants, or Sinjoors as they are known, are at the cutting edge of fashion and design with countless boutiques and shopping outlets across the city. This energy also surfaces in the trendy bars and hip nightclubs that have now joined the more traditional charms of the beer and gin bars that still pull in the more reserved drinkers. Beyond modern Antwerp the more traditional attractions complement the new, with the impressive Grote Markt, containing the Town Hall and the Brabo Fountain, which commemorates the legend of the city's origin and also the 18th-century Groenplaats, with its Rubens statue. The work of local artistic luminary Peter Paul Rubens surfaces all over Antwerp, most notably at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, home to what is arguably the world's finest collection of his work. The Rubens' House, the magnificent 17th-century house where the painter lived and worked, contains works by the painter and his associates as do many other museums and churches. Antwerp's maritime heritage can be explored on tours of the port and also at the Steen, a 12th-century fortress now housing the National Maritime Museum, that overlooks the buzzing new city of today.

BRUGES: Bruges is a pure picture postcard with a perfectly preserved 'medieval heart' that can be explored from the comfort of a canal boat ride, which takes tourists around the myriad of waterways that lead to the city often being referred to as the 'Venice of the North'. Bruges offers a variety of attractions such as the Lake of Love, which in the Middle Ages was the city's internal port, the 14th-century Town Hall featuring a façade decorated with bas-reliefs and statues of a Biblical nature; the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour, a fine example of 13th-century Gothic architecture and home to many treasures; and the Grote Markt which was formerly the commercial hub of the city. Bruges boasts several good museums, including the Groeninge Museum which houses a comprehensive and fascinating collection of six centuries of Flemish paintings, from Jan van Eyck to Marcel Broodthaers. The Memling Museum, housed in the medieval Saint John's Hospital, is dedicated to the painter Hans Memling. The city is close to some excellent beaches and the fertile Polder region, dotted with abbeys and parks. The year 2002 was a big one for Bruges as its lively cultural and artistic scene was recognised with the award of European City of Culture.

GHENT: Bruges' perennial poor cousin has plenty to offer visitors today, with the lack of tourist crowds an attraction in itself. This old cloth centre was once the largest medieval city in Europe after Paris. The medieval heart of Ghent boasts many historic buildings, including three abbeys. Key attractions include St Bavo's Cathedral, place of Charles V's baptism and home to The Adoration of the Mystical Lamb, the Van Eyck brothers' masterpiece; the Town Hall, where the Treaty of Ghent was signed in 1576; the Castle of the Counts, a medieval castle surrounded by the Lieve canal; the 15th-century Cloth Hall; the medieval town centre with its old guild houses; the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Industrial Archaeology.

THE COAST AND WEST FLANDERS: The Belgian coastline is a largely sandy affair that stretches for 67km (42 miles) from Knokke near the Dutch border to De Panne on the French border, with over a dozen resorts. Bathing in the sea is free on all beaches and there are facilities for sailing, sand yachting, riding, fishing, rowing, golf and tennis. Some of the best resorts are Bredene, De Haan, De Panne, Lombardsijde, Nieuwpoort, Wenduine, Westende and the town of Ostend, where Queen Victoria once took to the waters. Knokke, Middelkerke and Ostend are the liveliest resorts. Visiting the World War I battlefields is an increasingly popular activity, with a



number of sites open with varying degrees of facilities. The killing fields of Ypres are the most accessible with a war museum, monuments, military cemeteries and the battlefields themselves all located around the town.

Wallonia

LIÈGE: Liège opens up the other half of Belgian culture as it is a major city of Wallonia, the French-speaking portion of Belgium. A popular tourist destination, situated on the banks of the Meuse, with many reminders of a colourful and affluent past, Liège was independent for much of its history, ruled over by prince-bishops for 800 years. The view from the Citadel covers the old town, the most impressive part of the city. Liège boasts many fine museums with the highlights being The Museum of Wallonian Life, showcasing the unique culture of Wallonia; the Museum of Wallonian Art; the Museum of Modern Art, displaying the works of Corot, Monet, Picasso, Gauguin and Chagall, to name but a few, and the Curtius Museum, housing a large collection of coins, Liège furniture and porcelain. Liège's most notable buildings are the Church of St James, an old abbey church of mixed architecture, including an example of the Meuse Romanesque style, with fine Renaissance stained glass and the 18th-century Town Hall.

TOURNAI: The second-oldest city in Belgium dates back to the days of the Romans. World War II damaged much of the old town, but the Cathedral of Our Lady (12th century), boasts an impressive Belfry, which is the oldest in Belgium. The Museum of Fine Arts is one of the finest in Belgium, with works by Rubens and Bruegel, while the Natural History Museum is also worth visiting.

THE ARDENNES: This mountainous area is famous for its cuisine, forests, lakes, streams and grottoes. The River Meuse makes its way through many important tourist centres. The town of Dinant, in the Meuse valley, boasts a medieval castle, while its most famous landmark is the Gothic church of Notre-Dame. Annevoie has a castle and some beautiful water gardens, while Yvoir Godinne and Profondeville are well known for watersports. The old university town of Namur, with cobbled streets in its centre, has a cathedral, castle and many museums. Houyet offers kayaking and other assorted outdoor activities. The River Semois passes through Arlon and Florenville; nearby are the ruins of Orval Abbey, Bouillon and its castle, Botassart, Rochehaut and Bohan. The Amblève Valley is one of the wildest in the Ardennes and the grottoes in the Fond de Quarreux are one of the great attractions of the region. Among these is the Merveilleuse grotto at Dinant and the cavern at Remouchamps. There are prehistoric caverns at Spy, Rochefort, Hotton and Han-sur-Lesse.



9 SPORT & ACTIVITIES

Cycling: A new network of cycling paths has been developed in the Ardennes region. Known as RAVeL (Réseau Autonome des Voies Lentes or 'independent network of slow paths'), the system is made up of disused railway lines and old canal towpaths, now reserved and adapted for the exclusive use of pedestrians, cyclists and wheelchair users. It will eventually consist of 2000km (1240 miles) of paths, which will be linked to similar paths in neighbouring countries. For further information, contact RAVeL (website: <http://ravel.wallonie.be>). Flanders, the more northerly and flatter part of the country, is just as well-equipped for cyclists. There are many kilometres of signposted cycling routes. Bicycles can be hired at larger railway stations and can be reserved in advance. They can very often be carried on trains at no extra expense. Many hotels will make arrangements for luggage to be taken to the next destination during cycling tours. Contact the tourist boards for further information (see Contact Addresses section).

Outdoor activities: Although a highly developed country, Belgium has some beautiful countryside. The hilly country in the Ardennes region features forests, lakes and caves. Flanders offers opportunities for coastal and forest walks. For further information about marked trails, contact the tourist boards (see Contact Addresses section). Numerous other activities can be practised, including canoeing, kayaking, horseriding, caving, climbing and fishing. A range of watersports is also available on the coast.

Brewery tours: Belgium is renowned for its hundreds of varieties of high-quality beer. There are beers of all colours and types, brewed using different methods and ingredients – wheat beers, fruit beers, red beers, amber ales and 'spontaneously fermented beers', to mention but a few. Each beer has its own distinctive glass and label. Six kinds of trappist beer, brewed by monks to ancient recipes, are made in Belgium. Some breweries are open to the public. Trappist breweries open to the public include the Bières de Chimay brewery at Bailleux and the Rochefortoise brewery at Eprave. Visits to the Rochefortoise brewery must be booked by fax and confirmed two days in advance. These beers can all be sampled in Belgium's many cafes, pubs and restaurants.

Gastronomy: Belgium's large number of excellent restaurants testifies to the high esteem in which the Belgians place good food. The country has the highest number of Michelin stars per head of the population, and is the only country in the world where US fast food chains have been consistently losing money. The visitor has an array of fine restaurants, sophisticated cafes, and pubs to choose from. Specialist tour operators offer gastronomy trips where visitors can learn how to cook Flemish dishes using local produce and beers.

Chocolate: Belgian chocolate has an excellent reputation. Some chocolate factories are open to the public, though it is often necessary to book in advance. The Chocolate and Cocoa Museum on the Grand-Place in Brussels is open from Tuesday to Sunday (every day in July and August). The Chocolaterie Jacques' museum in Eupen near Liège is open to the public from Monday to Friday. Groups of more than 10 people need to book in advance (website: www.chocolatjacques.be).

World Wars I and II: Flanders contains Passendale and Ypres. These battlefields can be visited, and there are many museums commemorating the war dead and informing the visitor about these terrible events. The In Flanders Fields Museum (tel: (5) 723 9220) is an authority on the region and the impact the war made upon it. In Ypres at 2000 each day, the Last Post is sounded under the Menin Gate. A number of commemorative events are organised by the regional tourist boards.

Entertainment



Food & Drink: Belgian cuisine is similar to French, based on game and seafood. Each region in Belgium has its own special dish. Butter, cream, beer and wine are generously used in cooking. Things to know: Most restaurants have waiter service, although self-service cafes are becoming quite numerous. Restaurant bills always include drinks, unless they have been taken at the bar separately. In the latter case, this is settled over the counter. Under a new law, the majority of cafes now have licences to serve spirits. Beers and wines are freely obtainable everywhere and there are no licensing hours. National specialities: Mussels and chips. Endives with Bechamel sauce. Ardennes sausages and ham are also renowned. Belgian chocolate. Waffles. National drinks: There are over 400 beers brewed in Belgium, ranging from lagers and pilsners through to Lambic, made from wheat and barley, white and fruit beers, to Trappist monastery beers. Fruit beers, such as Kriek cherry beer, are a speciality. Famous names include Stella Artois, Leffe, Hoegaarden, Duvel and Chimay. Tipping: A service charge of 16 per cent is usually included in hotel or restaurant bills, although an additional tip may be left at the discretion of the individual. Cloakroom attendants and porters may expect a tip per item of luggage.

Nightlife: As well as being one of the best cities in the world for eating out (both for its high quality and range), Brussels has a very active and varied nightlife. It has 10 theatres producing plays in both Dutch and French. These include the Théâtre National de la Communauté Française and the Théâtre des Galeries. The more avant-garde theatres include the Théâtre Cinq-Quarante and the Théâtre de Poche. Brussels' dozens of cinemas, numerous discos and many night-time cafes are centred on two main areas: the uptown Porte Louise area and the downtown area between Place Roger and Place de la Bourse. Nightclubs include Le Fuse, Les Jeux d'Hiver and Le You; jazz clubs include The New York Cafe Jazz Club, The Sounds Jazz Club and The Music Village (visit: www.brusselslife.be and www.trabel.com/brussel/brussels-nightlife.htm). Programmes and weekly listings of events can be found in the BBB Agenda on sale at tourist offices. This also covers information on the many festivals that take place in Brussels itself. Tourism Brussels-Ardennes/Tourism Flanders-Brussels should be consulted about folk music or drama festivals elsewhere in Belgium the most famous of which is the Festival of Flanders for classical music concerts. The other large cities of Belgium, such as Antwerp, Ghent, Kortrijk, Leuven, Liège, Mons and Namur, all have similar (though less extensive) nightlife facilities.

Shopping: Special purchases include ceramics and hand-beaten copperware from Dinant; Belgian chocolates; crystals from Val Saint Lambert; diamonds; jewellery from Antwerp; lace from Bruges, Brussels and Mechelen (Malines), woodcarvings from Spa and bandes dessinées (comic-strip books) by a number of talented Belgian cartoon artists from Brussels. Main shopping centres are located in Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Liège, Mechelen, Mons, Namur and Ostend. Shopping hours: Mon-Sat 1000-1800/1900. Department stores often remain open longer, up to 2100 on Friday. Outside main areas, some shops may close at lunchtime.

Business

GDP: US\$316.9 billion (2003). Main exports: Manufactured goods chemicals, diamonds, metals and metal products, foodstuffs and machinery. Main imports: Fuel products, machinery and equipment, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, foodstuffs, and transportation equipment. Main trade partners: Germany, The Netherlands, France and UK.

Economy: The economies of Belgium and Luxembourg have been unified since 1921, when the two Governments signed a Convention of Economic Union; this is distinct from the Benelux Union (which includes The Netherlands) and the EU (Belgium being a founder member of both). The country's traditional industries of steel, motor vehicles and textiles suffered from the recession of the 1980s. While important, these no longer play the central economic role of the past. Coal



mining ceased when the last mine was closed in 1992. Nuclear power accounts for almost two-thirds of Belgium's energy consumption; the remainder is generated from imported fuel products. Manufactured goods and machinery are the largest export sectors, with the major markets inside the EU including France, Germany, The Netherlands and the UK. These are also Belgium's main source of imported goods. Belgium relies particularly heavily on export earnings 70 per cent of GDP is exported, one of the highest proportions in the world. Successive Belgian Governments have been keen proponents of the process of European integration, including the introduction of a single European currency, which Belgium adopted upon its inception in 1999. The Verhofstadt Government has managed to reduce Belgium's high unemployment level to around 7 per cent, while keeping inflation below 2 per cent. Growth is sluggish at present, at just over 1 per cent.

Business Etiquette: Suits should always be worn and business is conducted on a formal basis, with punctuality valued and business cards exchanged. Transactions are usually made in French or English. Office hours: Mon-Fri 0830-1730.

Conferences/Conventions: There is an extensive range of meeting venues throughout the country. In 1994, Belgium was the seventh most popular conference destination, whilst Brussels was the third most popular city.

Commercial Information: Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain Riverside House, 27-29 Vauxhall Grove, London SW8 1SY, UK Tel: (0870) 246 1610. Website: www.blcc.co.uk Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Bruxelles 500 avenue Louise, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 648 5002. Website: www.500.be Voka - Chamber of Commerce Antwerp-Waasland Markgravestraat 12, B-2000 Antwerp, Belgium Tel: (3) 232 2219. Website: www.kvkaw.voka.be Belgian Foreign Trade Rue Montoyer 3, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 206 3511. Website: www.abh-ace.org The Flanders Foreign Investment Office (FFIO) - Headquarters Gaucheretstraat 90, B-1030 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 504 8871. Website: www.ffio.com Flanders-Brussels Convention Bureau Grasmart 61, 1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel: (2) 504 0355. Website: www.meetingpoint.be

10 CLIMATE

Seasonal and similar to neighbouring countries, with warm weather from May to September and snow likely during winter months.

Required clothing: Waterproofs are advisable at all times of the year.

11 HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

History: The area that is now Belgium was part of Charlemagne's empire in the 8th and 9th centuries but, by the 10th century, had achieved independence. The Flemish cloth towns enjoyed great financial and political power, although the area fell again under French control after 1322. A period of instability ended with the accession of Philip of Burgundy in 1419. However, on the death of his son, Charles the Bold, in 1477, the Low Countries passed to the Hapsburgs. The Protestant northern part rebelled against Philip II of Spain in the 1560s; soon the division between the southern provinces (under Spanish control) and the northern United Provinces (the basis of the modern-day Netherlands) became established. The Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, confirmed this position. The region suffered badly as a result of Franco-Spanish conflicts in the



subsequent decades, most notably the War of the Spanish Succession, which took place from 1700 to 1713, resulting in the Spanish Netherlands passing to the Austrian Hapsburgs until 1794, apart from a short French occupation from 1744 to 1748. In 1790, inspired by the events in France, a local rebellion led to the brief establishment of the United States of Belgium, although the country was invaded by France in 1794, remaining annexed until the fall of Napoleon in 1814. The allies subsequently attempted to unite the two Netherlands but a rebellion, in 1830, resulted in the London Conference establishing the Kingdom of Belgium. The late-19th and early-20th century was a period of social and political upheaval, although it was ultimately overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I in August 1914. At the start of the war, King Albert and his army made a stand against the invading Germans; within weeks they were pushed back to a line behind the Yser river, which they successfully held until 1918. The country suffered heavily from the war, not least because much of the fighting was conducted on its territory. The inter-war period saw the forging of the links between Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg, as well as the emergence of the Walloon/Flemish schism within Belgium itself (see below). The country was invaded by the Nazis in 1940, remaining occupied for the rest of the war. King Leopold, hounded by (largely justified) accusations of collaboration with the Nazis, remained in Switzerland after 1945; his nephew Baudouin succeeded in 1951. Belgium was a founder member of the Benelux Union and the EU, while Brussels is the headquarters of both NATO and the EU. Successive Belgian governments have given strong support to the Union and have generally favoured the integrationist policies laid down by the Maastricht Treaty. Belgium also has a relatively small but important colonial legacy in central Africa – the Democratic Republic of Congo (previously Zaïre and before that Belgian Congo), Rwanda and Burundi. The nature of Belgian involvement – Belgian Congo was originally established as, literally, the personal fiefdom of King Leopold – and their precipitate withdrawal from their African territories at the turn of the 1960s, did not augur well for the future of the newly independent countries. And so it has proved. Zaïre, despite enormous mineral wealth, has been ruined by the massively corrupt Mobutu regime, which received consistent support from successive Belgian governments. Rwanda and Burundi, meanwhile, have been repeatedly engulfed by ethnic conflict, most recently and tragically in 1994. Belgian intervention was confined to the evacuation of its own nationals. In general, Belgium epitomises a stable, cautiously progressive Western European liberal democracy. The alliance with the Netherlands and Luxembourg became the Benelux Union in 1958, which, in turn, became one of the foundation stones of the European Community. The principal domestic problem is the continuing tension between the Flemish-speaking north and the French-speaking south of the country, whose inhabitants are known as Walloons. Electoral politics have been dominated by coalitions, as none of the four major parties – the Socialists (PS), Christian Social (CVP), Flemish Liberal Democrats (VLD) and Liberal parties (PRL) – have been able to attract sufficient support to establish a government on their own. In addition, there are several smaller parties that have a significant influence over the outcome of elections – the ecological parties, Ecolo and Agalev, and the extreme right-wing Flemish separatist party, Vlaams Blok, recently renamed Vlaams Belang, Flemish Interest. Coalitions of four or five parties governed Belgium throughout the 1990s. In 1992, Belgium lost its popular and long-serving Head of State when King Baudouin died; his brother, Prince Albert, then succeeded to the Belgian crown. In 1993 (following previous reforms in 1980 and in 1988-89), a new constitutional arrangement came into effect, under which Belgium became a federal state – now comprising the largely autonomous region of Flanders, Wallonia and the bilingual Brussels district. A complicated three-tier system of local government (regional, provincial and communal) now prevails. Two months on from May 2003 elections, the Socialists and Liberals agreed to renew their coalition in government with Flemish Liberal Guy Verhofstad as Prime Minister. Between them, the parties have around two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The Green Party, which was a member of the previous coalition, retained only four seats in the elections. The political landscape in Belgium is complicated by the fact that each of the main political parties is split into two with one section representing the Dutch-speaking Flemish community and the other the French-speaking Walloons. A successful



coalition must successfully balance the interests of both. In May 2005, the Government survived a confidence vote, enabling it to shelve a dispute over the voting rights of French-speakers in Dutch-speaking areas around Brussels. Months of negotiations over the issue had failed, sparking a political crisis. The far-right Vlaams Blok, which wanted Flemish independence and campaigned on an anti-immigration platform, increased its share of the vote substantially in regional and European elections in 2004. However, the High Court later ruled that the party was racist and stripped it of the right to state funding and access to television. The party was subsequently reconstituted under a new name, Vlaams Belang, Flemish Interest. Throughout the years, Belgium has evolved towards an efficient federal system. Five reforms have been necessary to achieve this (in 1970, 1980, 1988-89, 1993 and 2001). In 2005, Belgium celebrates 25 years of federalism and for the first time ever, article one of the Belgian Constitution states that: "Belgium is a federal state made out of communities and regions" (website: www.belgium.be/eportal/index.jsp).

Government: The country is a hereditary constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament comprising the 150-member directly elected Chamber of Representatives and the 71-member Senate. Both chambers are elected for a four-year term.

Travel Advice

Most visits to Belgium are trouble-free but you should be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate international terrorist attacks, which could be against civilian targets, including places frequented by foreigners. This advice is based on information provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK. It is correct at time of publishing. As the situation can change **rapidly, visitors are advised to contact the following organisations for the latest travel advice:** British Foreign and Commonwealth Office Tel: (0845) 850 2829. Website: www.fco.gov.uk US Department of State Website: <http://travel.state.gov/travel>

Top Things To See

The highlight of Brussels, the capital, is most certainly the gothic Grand Place. Pose for a photograph in front of the famous Manneken-Pis and his less heralded sister the Janneken Pis; both statues hint at the exuberance and irreverence of the 'Bruxellois'. Other key sights in Brussels include St Michael and St Gudule's Cathedral and the Mont des Arts park, which links the upper and lower parts of the city. Then there is the elegant Place Royale, built between 1774 and 1780 in the style of Louis XVI. Among other areas worth exploring are the Îlot Sacré, the picturesque area of narrow streets to the northeast of the Grand-Place; the fashionable boulevard de Waterloo; the administrative quarter, a completely symmetrical park area commanding a splendid view of the surrounding streets; the Grand Sablon, the area containing both the flamboyant Gothic structure of the Church of Our Lady of Sablon and the Sunday antique market and, lastly, the Petit Sablon, a square surrounded by Gothic columns, which support 48 small bronze statues commemorating medieval Brussels guilds. A more modern attraction is the bizarre Atomium, a futuristic, atom-shaped aluminium tower built for the 1958 **World Fair. Note:** The Brussels Card now gives the visitor free access to 30-plus museums and also the use of public transport throughout the Brussels-Capital region, within a 72-hour period. This 'culture pass' is available at all participating museums - at the six sales offices of the Brussels Public Transport Company (STIB), at certain hotels and at the Brussels International Tourism Office, costing just €36;30. One important out-of-town attraction is the Battle of Waterloo site, 18km (11 miles) to the south of Brussels, commemorating the battle that shaped the future of both Belgium and modern Europe, of which Brussels is now such a crucial hub. In Antwerp, the more traditional attractions complement the new, with the impressive Grote Markt, containing the Town Hall and the Brabo Fountain, which commemorates the legend of the city's



origin and also the 18th-century Groenplaats, with its Rubens statue. Bruges offers a variety of attractions such as the Lake of Love, which in the Middle Ages was the city's internal port; the 14th-century Town Hall featuring a façade decorated with bas-reliefs and statues of a Biblical nature; the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour, a fine example of 13th-century Gothic architecture and home to many treasures; and the Grote Markt, which was formerly the commercial hub of the city. The medieval heart of Ghent boasts many historic buildings, including three abbeys. Key attractions include St Bavo's Cathedral, place of Charles V's baptism and home to The Adoration of the Mystical Lamb, the Van Eyck brothers' masterpiece; the Town Hall, where the Treaty of Ghent was signed in 1576; the Castle of the Counts, a medieval castle surrounded by the Lieve canal; the 15th-century Cloth Hall and the medieval town centre with its guild houses. Explore the Belgian coastline, a largely sandy affair that stretches for 67km (42 miles) from Knokke near the Dutch border to De Panne on the French border, with over a dozen resorts. Bathing in the sea is free on all beaches and there are facilities for sailing, sand yachting, riding, fishing, rowing, golf and tennis. Some of the best resorts are Bredene, De Haan, De Panne, Lombardsijde, Nieuwpoort, Wenduine, Westende and the town of Ostend, where Queen Victoria once took to the waters. Knokke, Middelkerke and Ostend are the liveliest resorts. Liège, a major city of Wallonia, the French-speaking portion of Belgium, is a popular tourist destination, situated on the banks of the Meuse. The view from the Citadel covers the old town, the most impressive part of the city. Liège's most notable buildings are the Church of St James, an old abbey church of mixed architecture, including an example of the Meuse Romanesque style, with fine Renaissance stained glass and the 18th-century Town Hall. In Tournai, the second-oldest city in Belgium, admire the oldest Belfry in Belgium at the Cathedral of Our Lady (12th century). Located in the Ardennes region, the town of Dinant, in the Meuse valley, boasts a medieval castle, while its most famous landmark is the Gothic church of Notre-Dame. Annevoie has a castle and some beautiful water gardens. The old university town of Namur, with cobbled streets in its centre, has a cathedral and a castle. The River Semois passes through Arlon and Florenville; nearby are the ruins of Orval Abbey, Bouillon and its castle, Botassart, Rochehaut and Bohan.

Tourist Information: Office de Promotion du Tourisme Bruxelles et Wallonie in the UK (Belgian Tourist Office Brussels and Wallonia) 217 Marsh Wall, London E14 9FJ, UK Tel: (0906) 302 0245 (calls cost 60p per minute) or (0800) 954 5245 (free brochure request line; toll-free in UK) or (020) 7531 0391. Website: www.belgiumtheplaceto.be Toerisme Vlaanderen in the UK (Tourism Flanders - Brussels) Flanders House, 1a Cavendish Square, London W1G 0LD, UK Tel: (020) 7307 7730 (travel trade and press only) or (0800) 954 5245 (brochure request line; toll-free in UK) or (09063) 020 245 (live operator; calls cost 60p per minute). Website: www.visitflanders.co.uk Belgian Tourist Office in the USA 220 East 42nd Street, Suite 3402, New York, NY 10017, USA Tel: (212) 758 8130. Website: www.visitbelgium.com

Top Things To Do

The capital Brussels boasts many museums such as the Museum of Ancient Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Comic Strip Museum, the Museum of the City of Brussels - Maison du **Roi (for more information, visit: www.brusselmuseums.be/en/musees/index.php)**. Discover the exuberance and irreverence of the 'Bruxellois', a spirit that reaches its zenith in the city's numerous bars which, along with the 1000 types of Belgian beer, are not to be missed. This energy also surfaces in the trendy bars and hip nightclubs that have now joined the more traditional charms of the beer and gin bars that still pull in the more reserved drinkers in Antwerp, Europe's second-largest port. The work of local artistic luminary Peter Paul Rubens surfaces all over Antwerp, most notably at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, home to what is arguably the world's finest collection of his work. The Rubens' House, the magnificent 17th-century house where the painter lived and worked, contains works by the painter and his associates as do many other museums and churches. Discover Antwerp's maritime heritage by



joining a tour of the port or visit the Steen, a 12th-century fortress now housing the National Maritime Museum, that overlooks the buzzing new city of today. Be at the cutting edge of fashion and design with countless boutiques and shopping outlets across Antwerp. The perfectly preserved 'medieval heart' of Bruges can be explored from the comfort of a canal boat ride, which takes tourists around the myriad of waterways that lead to the city often being referred to as the 'Venice of the North'. Bruges boasts several good museums, including the Groeninge Museum which houses a comprehensive and fascinating collection of six centuries of Flemish paintings, from Jan van Eyck to Marcel Broodthaers. The Memling Museum, housed in the medieval Saint John's Hospital, is dedicated to the painter Hans Memling. The city is close to some excellent beaches and the fertile Polder region, dotted with abbeys and parks. Visit the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Industrial Archaeology in Ghent, which was once the largest medieval city in Europe after Paris. Liège, in Wallonia, boasts many fine museums with the highlights being The Museum of Wallonian Life, showcasing the unique culture of Wallonia; the Museum of Wallonian Art; the Museum of Modern Art, displaying the works of Corot, Monet, Picasso, Gauguin and Chagall, to name but a few, and the Curtius Museum, housing a large collection of coins, Liège furniture and porcelain. Tournai boasts the Museum of Fine Arts, one of the finest in Belgium, with works by Rubens and Bruegel, and the Natural History Museum. Explore the Ardennes, a mountainous area famous for its cuisine, forests, lakes, streams and grottoes. Yvoir Godinne and Profondeville are well known for watersports. Namur has many museums. Houyet offers kayaking and other assorted outdoor activities. The Amblève Valley is one of the wildest in the Ardennes and the grottoes in the Fond de Quarreux are one of the great attractions of the region. Among these is the Merveilleuse grotto at Dinant and the cavern at Remouchamps. There are prehistoric caverns at Spy, Rochefort, Hotton and Han-sur-Lesse. Visiting the World War I battlefields is an increasingly popular activity, with a number of sites open with varying degrees of facilities. The killing fields of Ypres are the most accessible with a war museum, monuments, military cemeteries and the battlefields themselves all located around the town. In Ypres at 2000 each day, the Last Post is sounded under the Menin Gate. A number of commemorative events are organised by the regional tourist boards. Discover Belgium's hundreds of varieties of beer by taking part in a brewery tour. There are beers of all colours and types, brewed using different methods and ingredients wheat beers, fruit beers, red beers, amber ales and 'spontaneously fermented beers', to mention but a few. Each beer has its own distinctive glass and label. Six kinds of trappist beer, brewed by monks to ancient recipes, are made in Belgium. Some breweries are open to the public. Trappist breweries open to the public include the Bières de Chimay brewery at Bailleux and the Rochefortoise brewery at Eprave. Visits to the Rochefortoise brewery must be booked by fax and confirmed two days in advance. These beers can all be sampled in Belgium's many cafes, pubs and restaurants. Enjoy Belgian gastronomy. The country has the highest number of Michelin stars per head of the population, and is the only country in the world where US fast food chains have been consistently losing money. The visitor has an array of fine restaurants, sophisticated cafes, and pubs to choose from. Specialist tour operators offer gastronomy trips where visitors can learn how to cook Flemish dishes using local produce and beers. Treat yourself to a visit to a chocolate factory. Belgian chocolate has an excellent reputation. Some chocolate factories are open to the public, though it is often necessary to book in advance. The Chocolate and Cocoa Museum on the Grand-Place in Brussels is open from Tuesday to Sunday (every day in July and August). The Chocolaterie Jacques' museum in Eupen near Liège is open to the public from Monday to Friday. Groups of more than 10 people need to book in advance (website: www.chocolatjacques.be). Take part in one of Belgium's dozens of yearly carnivals, including those in Binche and Stavelot in which local people dress in various traditional costumes and parade through the streets, and the CAT Festival in Ieper.

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OverviewII

Belgium epitomises a stable, cautiously progressive Western European liberal democracy. The alliance with The Netherlands and Luxembourg became the Benelux Union in 1958, which, in turn, became one of the foundation stones of the European Community. Brussels is the headquarters of both NATO and the EU. Today, the anachronistic images of 'boring Belgium' have been well and truly banished over the last decade as the country promotes its key destinations, along with a string of new attractions. Easy to travel around, this pocket-sized country is divided by the Flemish north (Flemish-speaking) and the Walloon south (French-speaking). Brussels, the capital, is the heart of the country and the European Union. Belgium always had a lot more going for it than the faceless political and bureaucratic buildings that litter its capital with a string of engaging cities in Bruges, Ghent, Liège - and Brussels itself - that offer impressive architecture, lively nightlife, first-rate cuisine and numerous other attractions for visitors. Then there is reinvented Antwerp, now a hotbed of fashion and modern design, and the more bucolic charms of the beauty of the mountainous Ardennes region to the east, as well as the sweeping sand of the coastline resorts of the western seaboard. Belgium is also a land whose specialities include ubiquitous beers, delicate chocolates, moules-frites and Belgian waffles. The principal domestic problem is the continuing tension between the Flemish-speaking north and the French-speaking south of the country, known as Wallonia, not forgetting the capital Brussels. However, throughout the years, Belgium has evolved towards an efficient federal system. Five reforms have been necessary to achieve this (in 1970, 1980, 1988-89, 1993 and 2001). In 2005, Belgium celebrated 25 years of federalism and for the first time ever, article **one of the Belgian Constitution stated that:** 'Belgium is a federal state made out of communities and regions.'

Communications

Telephone: Fully automatic IDD. For operator services, dial 1324. Country code: 32. There are call boxes in all major towns and country districts. Some coinless cardphones and credit card phones are also available. Telecards are available from newsagents, railway stations and post offices.

Mobile telephone: Roaming agreements exist with most international mobile phone companies. Coverage is excellent.

Internet: Internet cafes are widely available throughout the country.

Post: Airmail takes two to three days to other West European destinations. Post office hours: Mon-Fri 0900-1700 (post office hours vary) (website: www.post.be).

MEDIA: Belgian broadcasting mirrors the unique political and linguistic nature of the country. The cultural communities, rather than the federal authorities, are responsible for regulating radio and TV. As a result, Belgium has two separate public broadcasting organisations, with their own regulations, running their own radio, TV and external broadcasting. Some 95 per cent of Belgians receive cable TV, one of the highest take-up rates in the world. The cable services offer dozens



of domestic and foreign channels, including Dutch and French TV stations. The Belgian press is self-regulated by the Federation of Editors - to which all editors of major newspapers belong. A small number of media groups own the main newspaper titles. Press: Principal daily newspapers are La Lanterne, La Libre Belgique, La Meuse, Le Soir (French) and De Morgen, De Gentenaar, De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, De Financieel Economische Tijd, a business publication, (Dutch) and Grenz-Echo (German). There is an English-language magazine, The Bulletin, printed in Belgium. Television: RTBF, the French-language public broadcaster, operates RTBF 1, RTBF 2 and international satellite channels. VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster, offers services such as Een (one). VTM and VT4 are Flemish commercial broadcasters. RTL is a French-language commercial broadcaster. Radio: The network operated by RTBF, the French-language public broadcaster, includes stations such as La Premiere, Radio 21 and external service RTBF International. The network operated by VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster, includes Radio 1, Studio Brussel and external service Radio Vlaanderen International (RVI). Belgischer Rundfunk (BRF) broadcasts in German.