

# Belgium

**Belgium** is a low-lying country on the North Sea coast in Western Europe. With the majority of West European capitals within 1,000 km of the Belgian capital of Brussels, and as a member of the long-standing international Benelux community, Belgium sits at the crossroads of Western Europe. Its immediate neighbors are France to the southwest, Luxembourg to the southeast, Germany to the east and the Netherlands to the north.

Location	
	
Flag	
	
Quick Facts	
<b>Capital</b>	Brussels
<b>Government</b>	Federal Parliamentary Democracy under a Constitutional Monarch
<b>Currency</b>	Euro (EUR)
<b>Area</b>	30,510 km <sup>2</sup>
<b>Population</b>	10,379,067 (July 2006 est.)
<b>Language</b>	Dutch (official) 60%, French (official) 32%, German (official) less than 1%, 8% bilingual Dutch-French
<b>Religion</b>	Roman Catholic 75%, Protestant or other 25% - most people are not practicing religious.

<b>Electricity</b>	220/50Hz (European plug)
<b>Calling Code</b>	+32
<b>Internet TLD</b>	.be
<b>Time Zone</b>	UTC +1



Map of Belgium

## Regions

Belgium consists of three regions, listed from North to South:

- **Flanders:** northern, Dutch-speaking region
- **Brussels:** within Flanders, bilingual region of the capital: Dutch, French
- **Wallonia:** southern, French-speaking region incorporating a small German speaking region in the east near the German border.

## Major Cities

- **Brussels** - Belgium's capital and the unofficial capital of the EU. Nice but small historic centre and several museums of interest.

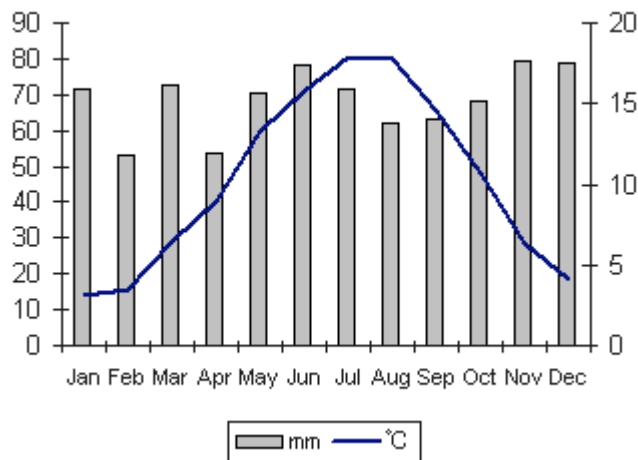
- **Antwerp** - Belgium's largest city, with a giant cathedral, medieval streets and artistic heritage
- **Liège** - largest city of Wallonia, along a wide river, beautiful cityscape with hiking and resorts in the nearby hills
- **Bruges** - The world's biggest city in the 14th century, now arguably the largest historic centre in Europe and one of the most beautiful (and popular)
- **Dinant** - Small town in a stunning natural setting, a popular spot for adventure sports such as canoeing and rock-climbing, best visited in winter
- **Ghent** - a perfect mixture of Antwerp and Brugge: a small cozy town with canals, yet with rich history and lively student population
- **Leuven** - a small town dominated by one of Europe's oldest universities
- **Mechelen** - a small medieval town with a nice historic district around the cathedral
- **Ypres** - once one of the largest cities in the Low Countries, now best known for its destruction during the First World War, marked by memorials and cemeteries

## Other destinations

- **Flanders Fields Country**
- **Fondry des Chiens**
- **The Pajottenland**
- **Binche**

## Understand

Belgium is a densely populated country trying to balance the conflicting demands of urbanization, transportation, industry, commercial and intensive agriculture. It imports large quantities of raw materials and exports a large volume of manufactured goods, mostly to the EU.



Rainfall and temperature

## **Climate**

Temperate; mild winters, cool summers; rainy, humid, cloudy.

## **Terrain**

The coastal plains are flat in the Northwest, rolling hills cover the central part of the country, and in the Southeast are wooded hills and fertile valleys of the Ardennes.

## **History**

Belgium became independent from the Netherlands in 1830. It was occupied by Germany during World Wars I and II and has many war graves near the battle zones, most of them are around Ieper (in English archaically rendered as Ypres, with Yperite another name for mustard gas due to intensive use there in WWI). It has prospered in the past half century as a modern, technologically advanced European state and member of NATO and the EU. Tensions between the Dutch-speaking Flemings of the north and the French-speaking Walloons of the south have led in recent years to constitutional amendments granting these regions formal recognition and autonomy.

## **Electricity**

Electricity is supplied at 220 to 230V 50Hz. Outlets are CEE7/5 (protruding male earth pin) and accept either CEE 7/5 (Grounded), CEE 7/7 (Grounded) or CEE 7/16 (non-grounded) plugs. Older German-type CEE 7/4 plugs are not compatible as they do not accommodate the earth pin found on this type of outlet. However, most modern European appliances are fitted with the hybrid CEE 7/7 plug which fits both CEE 7/5 (Belgium & France) and CEE 7/4 (Germany, Netherlands, Spain and most of Europe) outlets.

Travellers from the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Italy, Switzerland and other countries using 230V 50Hz which use different plugs simply require a plug adaptor to use their appliances in Belgium.

Travellers from the US, Canada, Japan and other countries using 110V 60Hz may need a voltage converter. However, some laptops, mobile phone chargers and other devices can accept either 110V or 230V so only require a simple plug adaptor. Check the voltage rating plates on your appliances before connecting them.

## **Get in**

### **By plane**

Brussels Airport (also known as Zaventem due to the town in which it is mainly located) is Belgium's main airport, IATA code BRU. It is not located in Brussels proper, but in surrounding Flanders. The airport is the base of the national airline **Brussels Airlines**,

<http://www.brusselsairlines.com/com/splash.aspx>, which was founded when SN Brussels Airlines and its low budget sister company Virgin Express, merged in March 2007. All other full-service airlines use BRU, as well as budget carriers such as **Vueling** <http://www.vueling.com/> and **Sky Europe**. <http://www.skyeurope.com/en/>. There is a train (2.90 €) running every 15 minutes to Brussels centre taking 25 minutes, some of them continuing to Ghent and West-Flanders and a bus line number 12 and 11 (3 €) every 20 to 30 minutes to Place Luxembourg (European Parliament) district. The bus stops at NATO and Schuman (for the EU institutions) on its way to the centre. There are also two trains per hour to Leuven, taking 13 minutes. A taxi to the centre of Brussels costs around 20 € (as of 2004) when booked in advance, otherwise around 30 €. Taxis bleus: 02 268 0000, Taxi Brussels: 02 411 4142, Taxis verts: 02 349 4343.

There are two other airports in Belgium with scheduled flights. **Ryanair** <http://www.ryanair.com/site/EN/> and Wizzair <http://wizzair.com/> fly to **Charleroi** (aka (CRL), about 60km away from Brussels. <http://www.charleroi-airport.com/doc.php?nd=o29&tid=29&lg=2&docid=1&site=1>, You can get to Brussels Gare du Midi on the Ryanair coach in about an hour (€10.50 each way). If you're going to any other part of Belgium, ask at the Ryanair ticket desk for a combination bus+train ticket via Charleroi Sud station (€10 each way if bought in the airport, but more expensive in stations).

However, if you are really stuck, it is not unusual for taxi drivers to take credit cards. The price of a taxi ride to Brussels is a set fare (approximately 95 Euros as of May 2006) and you can check with the taxi driver if he will accept your credit card(s) or not.

Antwerp Deurne Airport (ANR) has some business flights, including **VLM's** <http://www.flyvlm.com/emc.asp> reasonably priced link to London City airport. Other airports include Oostende, Liège and Kortrijk, but they only handle freight and charter flights. <http://www.antwerp-airport.be/>

Flights to airports in neighboring countries, might be worth considering, especially to Amsterdam Schiphol, which has a direct rail link to Brussels and Antwerp. [www.schiphol.nl](http://www.schiphol.nl)

## By train

There are direct trains between Brussels and:

- Amsterdam, Luxembourg (normal trains, running every hour)
- Paris, Köln/Cologne, Amsterdam (**Thalys**) <http://www.thalys.com/>
- Lyon, Bordeaux, Paris-CDG airport and many other French cities (TGV Bruxelles-France). <http://www.voyages-sncf.com/leisure/fr/launch/home/>
- London (**Eurostar**) all tickets from London allow you free onward travel within Belgium; all tickets to London include free travel from any Belgian train station to Brussels South, where Eurostar departs. <http://www.eurostar.com/dynamic/index.jsp>

- Frankfurt, Köln/Cologne (**ICE**)  
[http://www.bahn.de/p/view/international/englisch/international\\_guests.shtml](http://www.bahn.de/p/view/international/englisch/international_guests.shtml)
- Berlin, Hamburg (**night train**)  
<http://www.nachtzugreise.de/nachtzugreise/view/index.shtml>

They connect with domestic trains at Brussels' Gare du Midi/Zuidstation, and with all Eurostar or ICE and some Thalys tickets, you can finish your journey for free on domestic trains. For all high-speed and sleeper trains, you need to book in advance for cheap fares, either online or using a travel agency.

You might want to check the TGV connections to Lille too. The trains from the rest of France to Lille are more frequent and usually cheaper. There is a direct train connection from Lille Flandres to Ghent and Antwerp. If your TGV arrives in Lille Europe, it will take a 15 min walk to the Lille Flandres railway station.

Plan your trip with the **Deutsche Bahn timetable**. It has all domestic and international connections across Europe. <http://reiseauskunft.bahn.de/bin/query.exe/en>

Smoking is never allowed in Belgian trains.

## By car

Major European highways like the E-19, E-17, E-40, E-411 and E-313 pass through Belgium.

## By bus

You can get to Belgium from all over Europe on **Eurolines** coaches. International busses have stopovers in Antwerpen, Brussels north-station, Leuven & Liege.  
<https://webapp.eurolines.be/Eurolines/>

## By ship

There are overnight ferries to/from Zeebrugge from Hull in England and Rosyth in Scotland, but they are not cheap. There's also a vehicle-only daytime service from Oostende to Ramsgate in England.

## Get around

Being such a small country (300 km as its maximum distance), you can get anywhere in a couple of hours. Public transport is fast and comfortable, and not too expensive. Between larger cities, there are frequent train connections, with buses covering smaller distances. A useful site is Info TEC, which has a door-to-door route planner for the whole country, covering all forms of public transport (including train, bus, subway and tram).  
<http://www.infotec.be/index.aspx?PageId=631734022642174032>

A look on the map may suggest that Brussels is a good starting point to explore Antwerp, Gent, Brugge, Namur and Leuven on day trips. Antwerp is popular among those who want to be in a cosmopolitan place, and Ghent is tops with those who like a tad more provincialism. Liège is beautiful, but too close to Germany to be a good base for day trips. Mechelen is considered boring by tourists, but has a very good brand new youth hostel next to a train station with trains to everywhere else every 30 mins.

To do some local sightseeing, especially in Flanders, a lot of infrastructure is prepared for bikes. Bikes can also be rented virtually everywhere. In the country side of Wallonia, mountain bikes are available, and rafting is popular along the border with Luxembourg.

## **By train**

Most of Belgium is well connected by train, run by NMBS (SNCB in French) with most of the main routes passing through Antwerp, Namur or Brussels. This is where you'll arrive on international trains, and both can be reached by train from Brussels airport or by coach from Antwerp or Charleroi airport. Transfers are very easy. Note that all Eurostar & ICE and some Thalys tickets allow **free same-day transfers** by domestic trains to any other Belgian station. Also, there are Thalys trains from Paris directly to Gent, Brugge and Oostende with no need to switch trains in Antwerp or Brussels. From London (by Eurostar) you need to switch in Brussels for Antwerp, Leuven or Gent, but for Brugge, you can already switch in Lille (France) with no need to make the detour via Brussels. Both in Lille and Brussels the staff are very helpful, though seldom willing to smile. <http://www.b-rail.be/main/index.html>

The lines are rather punctual and most of the trains are quite modern and comfortable.

Normal fares on Belgian trains are cheap compared to Germany or the UK, with no need nor a possibility to prebook or reserve. 2nd class fares don't go much higher than €20 for the longest domestic trips, and 1st class always costs 50% extra. Trains can get very full during the rush hours, so you might need a 1st class ticket to get a seat at those times. You can buy normal tickets online or in stations, but not usually in travel agencies. If you want to buy a ticket on the train, you have to warn the train conductor and a supplement may be charged. In the train station, you can pay with cash money or credit card. Not buying a ticket can cost you up to €200. Tickets are cheaper during the weekend (only to and fro). <http://buy.b-rail.be/eTicketing/ETicketOrdering/>

Normal tickets are sold for a designated day, so there is no extra validation when you step on a train.

The cheapest option if you're planning several train trips is a **Go Pass**, which gives you 10 single 2nd class trips (including train changes if necessary) for €46. It's valid for a year and can be shared with or given to other people without any restrictions. The only problem is you have to be younger than 26, but there's a more expensive version for older people called a **Rail Pass**. This costs €71 for 2nd class or €109 for 1st. When using these passes make sure you have filled in the line before you get on the train (strictly speaking:

before you enter the platform). The train conductor can be very picky when the pass is not correctly filled in. However, if you address train station staff before boarding, they will be glad to help you. <http://www.b-rail.be/nat/E/tarifs/passes/go/index.php>, <http://www.loughrigg.org/b-rail/full1.gif>

The NMBS website has a **searchable timetable** with delay information, and a fare calculator. **Check out this map of Belgian railroads and stations** and another one that is **more detailed** but not printable. <http://hari.b-holding.be/Hafas/bin/query.exe/en?> , <http://www.loughrigg.org/b-rail/full1.gif>, [http://www.b-rail.be/nat/N/common/netcard\\_flash/index.php](http://www.b-rail.be/nat/N/common/netcard_flash/index.php)

Please note that train schedules usually change around December 10. Those changes are usually limited to introducing a few new train stations and adding a few regular lines. No lines have been discontinued in a very long time.

### **By bus/tram**

Buses cover the whole country, along with trams and metro in the big cities. Most routes cover short distances, but it's possible to go from city to city by bus. However, this is much slower and only slightly cheaper than taking a train. There's also the Kustram, running along almost the whole Flemish seaside from France to the Netherlands - definitely worth a trip in summer! <http://www.dekusttram.be/>

Within cities, a normal ticket for one zone never costs more than €1.50, and there are various travel cards available. Note that different companies - MIVB in Brussels, De Lijn in Flanders and TEC in Wallonia, provide local transport and outside Brussels they don't accept each others' tickets.

Most tourists will not need the bus companies, as it is much more user-friendly to take trains between cities and go on foot inside them. Only Brussels and Antwerp have a subway, but even there you can make your way around on foot. The historic center of Brussels is only about 300 by 400 meters big. Antwerp's is much bigger, but there a ride on a horse-pulled coach gives a better view than the subway.

### **By car**

Belgium has a dense network of modern toll-free motorways, but some secondary roads are in poor condition in the French speaking areas. Signs are always in the local language only, except in Brussels, where they're bilingual. As many cities in Belgium have quite different names in Dutch and French, this can cause confusion. For example, Mons in French is Bergen in Dutch; Antwerp is called Antwerpen in Dutch and Anvers in French; Liège in French is Luik in Dutch and Lüttich in German, and so on. This even applies to cities outside Belgium; driving along a Flemish motorway, you may see signs for Rijsel, which is the French city of Lille or Aken, which is the German city of Aachen.

Drivers in Belgium should also be aware of the "priority from the right" rule. At road crossings, traffic coming from the right has the right of way unless otherwise indicated by signs or pavement markings. You're most likely to encounter such crossings in urban and suburban areas. Observant visitors will notice a lot of cars with dents along their right sides! Drive defensively and your car will avoid the same fate.

In Belgium the motorway signs are notoriously inconvenient, especially on secondary roads. There is no uniformity in layout and color, many are in bad state, placed in an awkward position or simply missing. A good roadmap (Michelin, De Rouck, Falk) or a GPS system is recommended.

## **By thumb**

Belgium is a great place for hitchhikers. Just ask for a lift! Having cardboard signs with towns' names on it can really help to get a quick lift.

- Leaving Brussels: Heading South (e.g. Namur) get to the underground station named 'DELTA'.

Next to it you have a huge 'park and ride' and a bus stop. Hitchhiking near the bus stop should get you a ride in less than 5 minutes during traffic hours.

- Heading to Ghent/Bruges: Good spot near the Shopping Mall called 'Basilix' in Berchem-ste-Agathe. You can reach this place with the bus N°87.

An alternative spot to go to the north is in Anderlecht, near the Hospital Erasme (Underground station Erasme.)

- Heading to Liège/Hasselt: Take the pre-metro to the station 'Diamant' in Schaerbeek. When leaving the station you should see a lot of outgoing cars just below you. Just walk and follow the road signs mentioning 'E40'. You should arrive in a small street giving access to a road joining the E40 (the cars are leaving a tunnel at this point). Just hitchhike on the emergency lane at this point, in the portion near the tunnel. Cars should still be riding slowly at this point and see you are visible to them, so it's not that dangerous.
- Leaving Louvain-la-neuve (university) to Brussels (north) or to Namur (south), stand at the roundabout next to exit/entrance "8a" near to "Louvain la neuve-centre" road signs. Quick lift guaranteed. Avoid exit 7 or 9, since they have far less traffic.

## **Do**

- **Carnival de Binche** - Three days in February the town of Binche is transported back to the 16th century for one of the most fantastic festivals of the year. Highlighted by music parades and fireworks, the climax of this event is when the Gilles appear on the Grand Place and throw oranges to the spectators. UNESCO

along with its renowned Gilles has classified this infamous festivity as part of the world's cultural heritage.

- **Rock Werchter** - 3rd July - 6th July 2008, Werchter.
- **Dour festival** - "European Alternative Music Event" - 12-15 July 2007 - Dour.
- **Atomium** built for the 1958 Brussels World Fair (Expo '58, it is a 335 foot tall representation of an atom. More precisely, it is symbolic of a unit cell of an iron crystal magnified 165 billion times. Nine steel spheres 54 feet in diameter connect via tubes with elevators 105 feet long.
- **Gentse Feesten** - 14 July - 23 July 2007. Huge, ten day long street festival in the historical center of the city of Ghent. The biggest street festival in Europe, with theater, music in all genres, techno parties, and so on - Gentse Feesten

## Talk

Belgium has three official languages: Dutch, French and German. However, English is widely spoken by the younger generations. Speaking foreign languages (French, English and German) is more common in Flanders than in Wallonia. You will find that some older people do speak English but it is less likely.

Please note that although Belgium has three official languages, that does not mean that all of them are official everywhere. The only official language of Flanders is Dutch; Brussels has both Dutch and French as its official languages. The only official language of Wallonia is French, except for the eastern cantons (including the town of Eupen and its surroundings) where the official language is German.

## Buy

- **Belgian chocolate:** A long tradition has given Belgian chocolate a superior refinement process that is recognized worldwide.
- **Textiles** in Bruges
- **Designer fashions** in Antwerp
- **Jewelry** in one of Antwerp's many jewelry shops

## Eat

Belgium is famous for its good cuisine and Belgians like to go to restaurants frequently. However as a small country in the centre of western Europe, many others influence not only by the surrounding countries, but the cuisine also. This is also emphasized by many foreigners coming to this country to make a living here, for instance by starting a restaurant. <http://www.belgo-restaurants.co.uk/> will help you find almost any restaurant in Belgium, comments and appreciations must not be taken literally.

<http://www.visitbelgium.com/food.htm> You can find all types of restaurants:

- **French/Belgian:** A traditional Belgian restaurant serves the kind of food you will also find in the best French restaurants. Of course there are local differences: at

the coast (in France as well as in Belgium) you have a better chance to find some good seafood, like mussels, turbot, sole or the famous North Sea shrimps. In the southern woods of the Ardennes (remember the battle of the Bulge?), you are better off choosing game or local fish like trout.

- English/German/Dutch: You won't find them in Belgium.
- American: There are McDonald's or look-alikes in every town. The Belgian variant is called "Quick". You may also find a local booth serving sausages, hot dogs or hamburgers. Try it: the meat tastes the same, but the bread is much better. And what about real American restaurants? See the previous chapter.
- Mexican: Only in the cities and rather costly for medium quality.
- Chinese: They have a long tradition of restaurants in Belgium. Rather cheap, but for an acceptable level of quality.
- Greek/Spanish/Italian: Like all over the world, nice, rather cheap, with a good atmosphere and typical music (Greek: Choose meat, especially lamb) (Spanish: Choose paella and tapas) (Italian: Choose anything).
- Japanese/Thai: You usually only find them in the cities and they are rather expensive. But they give you great quality.
- Arabic/Turkish/Moroccan: Rather cheap, with a variety of local dishes, especially with lamb, no fish or pork or beef.
- And many, many others! Belgium offers a wide selection of international restaurants.

#### General rules:

- Belgium is a country, which understands what eating is all about, and can be a real gastronomic paradise. You can have a decent meal in about every tavern, from small snacks to a complete dinner. Just pop into one of those and enjoy it. You really are going to ask, why isn't this possible in other countries?
- If you want to eat really well for not too much money, ask the local people or the hotel manager (that is, supposing he does not have a brother restaurant-manager) to give some advice for a good restaurant.
- There is a price for everything: expensive food like lobster or turbot will always cost a lot of money at any restaurant. But you can also find some local and simple dishes, rather cheap and still very tasty (e.g. sausages, potatoes and spinach).

#### **Specialties**

A number of dishes are considered distinctly Belgian specialties and should be on every visitor's agenda.

**Mussels** are a firm favorite and a snack of *mosselen met friet* (mussels and fries) are to Belgium what fish and chips are to England. The traditional way is to cook them in a pot with white wine, then eat them up using only a mussel shell to scoop them out. The top season is September to April, and as with all shellfish it's best not to eat the closed ones. Belgium's mussels always come from nearby Holland. Imports from other countries are looked down at.

Despite the name, **French fries** (*friet* in Dutch, *frites* in French) are proudly claimed as a Belgian invention. Whether or not this is true, they certainly have perfected it — although not everybody agrees with their choice of **mayonnaise** over ketchup as the preferred condiment. Every village has at least one *frituur/friterie*, an establishment selling cheap take-away fries, with a choice of sauces and fried meat to go with them.

**Waffles** (*wafels* in Dutch, *gaufres* in French) come in two types: a light and airy variety that Americans are more familiar with, or a heavier variety with a gooey center known as *Gaufres de Liège/Luikse wafels*. They can be found at stands on the streets of the cities.

Last but not least, Belgian **chocolate** is famed around the world. Famous *Chocolatiers* include Godiva, Leonidas, Guylian and Neuhaus, but arguably the best stuff can be found at tiny boutiques in the Flemish cities, too small to build worldwide brands.

## Drink

For young people, Belgium can be heaven, when you connect Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Leuven you can see that they all are in very short distance from each other. In this little region, you will find the most clubs, cafés, restaurants per square mile in the world !! Even Ibiza can't compete with this. A good starting point is Leuven or Ghent because of the many students and young people. You can expect a wide variety in music appreciation, going from jazz to the better electronic music. Just ask around for the better clubs and there you will most likely meet some music fanatics who can show you the better underground parties in this tiny country.

## Beer

Imagine you've only been drinking red and yellow lemonade with a bit of alcohol thrown in all your life, and then suddenly you are introduced to the best varieties of wine available. This is what it can be like for people from countries like the US or other ones, which mostly have industrial production blond lagers on offer, who then come to Belgium and are introduced to what is arguably the richest beer culture on the planet.

Like other European countries in medieval times, beers were brewed in a huge variety of ways with many different ingredients, apart from the standard water, malted barley, hops and yeast many herbs and spices were used. Monasteries often did this activity, each

developing its particular sort. For some reason uniquely in Belgium many of these monasteries survived almost into modern times, and the process was handed over to a local commercial brewer if the monastery closed. These brewers would often augment the recipe and process slightly to soften the taste to make it more marketable but the variety survived in this way. These beers are called **Abbey beers** and there are hundreds and hundreds with a range of complex tastes unimaginable until you've tried them.

Less than 10 of the original monasteries still make beer, this according to traditional methods going back to the Middle Ages. These monasteries make **Trappist ales** and in order to carry this badge of honor the monastery has to abide to strict rules regarding only using the best natural ingredients and only traditional, non-mechanized brewing processes. These amazingly rich and complex beers are truly artisan products in that sense, and can confidently be considered the best in the world.

Belgium offers an incredible diversity of beers. The most well known mass-produced ones are Stella Artois, Duvel (literally: the Devil, beware, 8.5%!), Leffe, Jupiler (plain standard beer), Hoegaarden (white beer). The names given to some beers are pretty imaginative: eg Verboden Vrucht (Forbidden Fruit), Judas, Delirium Tremens. Warmly recommended are also Kriek (sweet or sour cherry beer) and, for the Christmas season, Stille Nacht (Silent night).

## Sleep

Belgium has many fine hotels, but the best are located in Antwerp, Brugge, Gent, Leuven and the rural Ardennes region of Belgium. Gent and Leuven are bustling college towns, Brugge is touristic yet still very authentic, medieval and quiet at night, with small guest houses and family businesses greatly outnumbering the few chain hotels. Antwerp caters both to businessmen and tourists. This influences the atmosphere in hotels. Brussels hotels receive mostly diplomats, Eurocrats and conference-goers, which makes Brussels more expensive, both in terms of hotels and restaurants, and (especially) souvenir shops.

## Budget

If you are traveling in Flanders by bicycle or by foot, there is a list of 220 addresses where you can stay at private homes with bed and breakfast for no more than € 17 per person per night, although you must also pay € 9 for membership of this scheme. It is called **Vrienden op de fiets**. <http://www.vriendenopdefiets.nl/>

## Learn

Education in Belgium is compulsory between the ages of 30 months (perhaps unique in the world) and 18 years. Private home education is possible, though very rarely applied. The different stages of education are the same in all communities:

- Basic education (Dutch: *basisonderwijs*; French: *enseignement fondamental*), consisting of
  - Pre-school (*kleuteronderwijs*; *enseignement maternel*): -6 years
  - Primary school (*lager onderwijs*; *enseignement primaire*): 6-12 years
- Secondary school (*secundair onderwijs*; *enseignement secondaire*): 12-18 years
- Higher education (*hoger onderwijs*; *enseignement supérieure*)
  - University (*universiteit*; *université*)
  - Polytechnic (*hogeschool*; *haute école*)

Each region has organized education. (Dutch-speaking Flanders on the one hand, French and German speaking Wallonia on the other) and the small federal district of Brussels has schools run by both the Flemish and Walloon authorities. Both states recognize independent school networks, which cater to far more students than the state schools themselves. Most Belgian students go to a Flemish catholic school. However, every independent school needs to follow the official state curriculum, and Catholicism in Flanders has long been extremely liberal anyway.

## Work

Having one of the highest Labour taxes in Europe, Belgium is struggling to reposition itself as a high-tech country. In that struggle, Flanders is quite ahead of Wallonia, in contrast to the previous decades, where Wallonia's steel industry was the main export of Belgium. Highly skilled people will have the most chance to find work, and knowing multiple languages (Dutch, French, English and perhaps German) is almost a standard requirement. Interim offices providing temporary jobs are flourishing in a search to avoid the high Labour taxes.

Belgium has one of the highest tax rates in the world. An employer who pays a salary about 1500 euros a month actually pays another 1500 euros or more in taxes. Where does this money go to? It goes to a social network, which is envied around the world. People only pay a small charge for healthcare, public transport is sometimes free of charge, and so on... And the budget for education, arts and culture is really enormous. The budget for defense is however very tiny.

## Stay safe

Except for certain neighborhoods in central Brussels and the outer edge of Antwerp (the port and docks), Belgium is a safe country. Belgians are somewhat shy and introvert, but generally helpful towards strangers in general. For those landing in Charleroi and Liège, those are the regions that boast the highest criminality rate in Southern Belgium. But if you keep an eye on your belongings, and don't wander alone at night, nothing really serious can happen to you.

Muslims and people of North African ancestry may experience mild forms of resentment, a problem that is particularly acute in Brussels and Antwerp.

Always use your common sense, of course. Don't walk in empty streets in the middle of the night, showing off your expensive equipment or jewelry.

Marijuana laws are quite lenient, with small amounts only punishable by fines.

## Stay healthy

In the winter, like most other European countries, only influenza will cause you a considerable inconvenience. No inoculations are needed to enter or leave Belgium.

## Respect



**WARNING:** *Mein Kampf* and other symbols of Nazism, including material questioning the extent of National Socialist crimes or praising its actions, are forbidden in Belgium, under the Negationismewet. The penalty is a prison sentence of up to one year, or a fine (the maximum is €2,500). Foreigners are not exempted from this law.

The Belgian attitude towards life is one of humility, and being proud of what's given to you. A real Belgian patriot is very hard to find. The country shares virtually all its history with the Netherlands, of which it seceded only in 1831, and also with France, which ruled its southernmost regions until Napoleonic times.

A few sensitive points:

- Belgium has a Catholic history but is easily as open minded as e.g. the Netherlands, and foreigners are easily forgiven for their wrongdoings. But with most of the people it is not a problem to comment on religious topics as most people are not in the least religious.
- Most Belgians do not like to discuss their wages or their political preferences. Especially when people talk about politicians they oppose they may be very unwilling to disclose who they actually support.
- Depending on who you talk to, talking about right-wing politics may spark heated discussions. Flanders especially is very polarized between the far right (the second largest party, 20% of the vote) and all other parties, which are more liberal-leaning.
- Also be careful about commenting on Flemish identity, it could cause some trouble. Do not mistake patriotism, even Flemish nationalism, for far right sympathy as many Flemish nationalists are actually quite liberal and cosmopolitan.

- Language is a very contentious issue, and is the subject of endless political wrangling. Although many people in Flanders speak and understand French reasonably well, you may wish to avoid approaching people in French unless you speak no other language; English is preferable. On the other hand, Dutch is not widely understood in French-speaking Wallonia. To speak French in Flanders is sometimes considered as offending.

## Contact

Belgium has a modern telephone system with nationwide cellular telephone coverage, and multiple internet access points in all cities, free in most libraries. Also in multiple gas stations, NMBS/SNCB train stations and diners on the highways there is wireless internet access available.

For more info see: [www.wikitravel.org](http://www.wikitravel.org)

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