

Introduction

If Belgium's spotlight on the European stage is a little dim, it's only because its people are rarely boastful. This slow-burning country has more history, art, food and architecture packed into its tiny self than many of its bigger, louder neighbours.

A rich and bubbling vat of beer, chocolate, oil paint and bureaucrats, Belgium gives off the heady pong of the bourgeoisie. But stir the pot a little and you'll find an 'artificial state' roughly made up of two parts Germanic Flemings to one part Celtic-Latin Walloons.



Destination Facts

Full country name: Kingdom of Belgium

Population: 10,200,000

Area: 30, 518 sq km

Capital city: Brussels (pop: 970,000)

People: 55% Flemish (of Teutonic origin), 33% Walloons (French Latin) and about 10% immigrants.

Languages: A form of Dutch known as Flemish, and French

Religion: 75% Roman Catholic

Government: Constitutional parliamentary monarchy

King: Albert II

For more information, check out Lonely Planet's extensive range of Europe books (<http://shop.lonelyplanet.com>).

Activities

Outdoorsy types tend to head straight for the Ardennes, Belgium's year-round outdoor playground. Here you can ski in winter and in summer kayak or go hiking or mountain biking (using a *vélo tout terrain*, or VTT) along a good network of forest tracks. Another worthy attraction are the prehistoric limestone grottoes and caves in the area (particularly around the towns of Han-sur-Lesse, Rochefort and Dinant), which offer plenty of scope for subterranean explorers.

'School was where my whole experience was made. It helped me to grow in confidence and become more independent. My family were great. Very caring and I enjoyed being with them. They made me feel like a part of the family.' (Scott McGowan – Belgium 2002-2003)

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Public Holidays

- 1 Jan** New Year's Day
- late March/April** Easter Monday
- 1 May** Labour Day
- May** Ascension Day
- mid-May/mid-Jun** Pentecost/Whit Sunday & Whit Monday
- 15 Aug** Assumption Day
- 1 Nov** All Saint's Day
- 11 Nov** Remembrance Day
- 25 Dec** Christmas Day