



Countries in Brief - Belgium

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Sending an assignee abroad? Then, the IGM country profiles should be of interest to you. This month we profile **BELGIUM**.

"Wherever men are staunch and free, there shall she keep her fearless state; and homeless, to great nations be the home of all that makes them great." from Belgium, *La Belgique ne regrette rien* by Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

This is a country which is a miniature of Europe with a unique, multi-lingual culture incorporating the best of its various regions. Its architecture and lifestyle reflect Spanish, French, Austrian and Dutch influences. Belgians are generally hard-working people; the country has one of the highest productivity rates in Europe. However, they take their leisure time just as seriously, hence lunchtimes lasting one to two hours, and annual holiday leave of four to six weeks are the norm. Generalizing the national traits of a country is always difficult, but especially so in the case of the Belgians, given their rich and complex history. The Flemish and Wallonians are each proud to possess their own unique identity. Brusselaars/Bruxellois have yet another profile, as does the smaller German community to the East of the country. Folklore is an important part of their culture and tradition, and it is celebrated year round with carnivals, festivals and processions.

The Kingdom of Belgium has been a constitutional monarchy since 1830. It is a small country, less than 12,000 square miles, with a population of almost 10.3 million. One of the UK's closest neighboring countries, Belgium is bordered in the north by the Netherlands, in the east by Luxembourg and Germany, and in the south by France. It shares its western coast with the English Channel/North Sea. Two main rivers run through Belgium--the Scheldt and the Sambre/Meuse. West of the Sambre/Meuse, Belgium's geographical landscape is mostly flat and fertile. In the east, it consists of hills and forests. The three official regions of Belgium are Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Cosmopolitan Brussels is the capital city.

Belgium has a strategic location in central Europe. It serves as the residence of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and is a center for international finance. Belgium is also a centre for manufacturing and production. From machinery and chemicals to high-quality food products, diamonds and jewellery, Belgium is a leader in exportation. Other major industries include automobile assembly, biotechnology, steel, petrochemicals, fashion and transportation. All business sectors are multi-lingual.

Belgium's climate is similar to that of England, with summers slightly hotter and winters slightly colder. The warmest months are April to September. Overcast and rainy days are common in all seasons, and it rains on average 220 days out of the

year. Average annual rainfall in Brussels is 33 inches (84 cm). Temperatures in the eastern part of the country are a little more extreme.

The country consists of two primary language groups--Dutch-speaking Flemish and French-speaking Walloons. English has become a common third or fourth language in both regions, with German spoken in the east.

As one may suspect, there are several problems created by having more than one official language. Aside from the slight confusion created by the bilingual road signs in Brussels, the names of towns are distinctly different in French and Dutch. The country is trying to diminish the confusion by posting street and city names in both languages.

The people of Belgium, like most continental Europeans, are somewhat reserved, especially at first contact. However, international travel and employment are reducing the general degree of formality. Once you've become acquainted with your Belgian counterparts, however, you will be treated with genuine warmth.

Belgians have a great respect for privacy; therefore, you should always call before making a visit. Never arrive at a social event, such as a dinner party, without a gift. Wine drinking is prevalent and a great topic of conversation. Another good topic of conversation when conversing with Belgians is their cultural heritage, of which they are extremely proud.

When in Belgium, expect to do a lot of handshaking. Men, women and children greet each other with a quick, light handshake, and shake hands when taking leave. Friends, relatives and close business colleagues are greeted on first name terms, usually accompanied by two or three kisses.

Belgium is known for its arts scene. Modern ballet is acclaimed and very popular in Brussels, and Belgian theatre is an extraordinary mixture of French realism and German grotesquerie. Brussels has about 30 different theatres with productions in French. The most popular and established theatre is the National Opera (the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie) in the centre of town near the Grand Place.

Belgian cuisine echoes that of France, but with some distinct, flavourful variations. As a rule, Belgian cuisine is quite rich; locally produced meat and dairy products dominate the traditional culinary fare. A wide variety of Flemish stews and casseroles abound, many featuring meat of some kind stewed in beer. *Stoemp*, a mashed-potato-and-vegetable staple, appears in many guises, sometimes as an accompaniment to locally produced sausages. Shellfish, such as mussels and oysters, appear frequently on menus; "mussels and chips" is the Belgian variation on the British "fish and chips" and can be found everywhere.

Brussels is described by many as a dessert lover's dream. Besides its famous chocolate production, Belgium is known for its pastries, which are sold at sidewalk cafés and markets around the city. A countless number of these sidewalk cafés provide quick, inexpensive meals, as do bars and pubs.

If a stay in Belgium is approached with an open mind, it will certainly be rewarding and enriching. The majority of expatriates reside in the Brussels region, which because of the huge international community, is an easy place to integrate.