



# Understand Belgium & Luxembourg

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Living the good life at the heart of the EU?

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Centuries of creativity frequently flattened by other people's wars.

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A linguistic love-hate match that could never be boring.

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Abbey-groomed saints and devilish sinners each in a glass of their own.

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Van Eyck to Van Dyck, Breugel to Brusselmans with a happy pinch of Horta.



# Belgium & Luxembourg Today

## Statistics for Belgium/Luxembourg

- » Population: 10.4 million/509,100
- » Area: 30,528/2586 sq km
- » GDP: US\$418 billion/41.3 billion
- » Inflation: 3.5%/3.5%
- » Unemployment: 7.2%/5.7%

## Wilderness Days

In 2010 Belgians went to the polls to elect a new government. But no grouping of parties could manage to form a workable coalition. For a record-smashing 541 days, the country coasted along with only a caretaker leader. The final compromise was extraordinary. The greatest number of votes (17.4%) had gone to the N-VA, a conservative, Dutch-speaking party with Flemish nationalist leanings. Yet after a year and a half of talking, the eventual choice for prime minister was Elio Di Rupo, neither right wing nor Flemish but a socialist, openly gay French speaker. Ah – only in Belgium.

## Will Belgium Split?

On paper the main reason behind this was the seemingly intractable 'BHV' question, a seemingly arcane issue of splitting the Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde electoral/juridical district. But at a deeper level this was seen as a possible 'last straw' in Belgium's apparent drift towards an eventual split along linguistic lines. In the end the BHV division went ahead in July 2012 along with a raft of constitutional reforms sometimes called the Vlinderakkoord/L'accord papillon – or 'Butterfly Agreement' – based on a local-language pun on the word for bow tie (literally 'butterfly knot', *naeud papillon*).

For now, Belgium has failed to explode. But the threat of 'bye-bye-Belgium', as Francophone satirists have dubbed a possible Flanders-Wallonia divorce, has not disappeared. Ominously, the Butterfly Agreement was reached entirely without the participation of the N-VA, a Dutch-speaking party with Flemish nationalist leanings. Many see this as a ploy by which that party's leader, Bart de Wever, is biding his time, refusing to get mixed up in the constitutional changes that, while significant, don't go far enough for some Flemish nationalists.

## Famous 'Belgians'

- » Pieter Paul Rubens – artist
- » Charles Quint – emperor
- » Audrey Hepburn – actress
- » Mercator – map maker
- » Django Reinhardt – guitarist
- » Adolphe Sax – Mr saxophone
- » Eddie Merckx – cyclist

## Sources of Statistics

- » Belgium (<http://statbel.fgov.be/>)
- » Luxembourg ([www.statistiques.public.lu](http://www.statistiques.public.lu))
- » Flanders ([www.vlaanderen.be](http://www.vlaanderen.be))
- » Wallonia ([www.iweeps.be](http://www.iweeps.be))
- » Brussels ([www.brussels.irisset.be](http://www.brussels.irisset.be))

## Top Books

**A Tall Man in a Low Land**  
(Harry Pearson) A decade old but still the funniest, most insightful Belgian travelogue.