Brussels

POP 1,200,000

Best Places to Eat

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➡ Soul Food (p67)
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➡ Saint-Boniface (p68)
➡ Stirwen (p67)

Best Places to Stay

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Why Go?

Belgium's fascinating capital, and the administrative capital of the EU, Brussels is historic yet hip, bureaucratic yet bizarre, self-confident yet unshowy, and multicultural to its roots. These contrasts are multilayered – Francophone alongside Flemish, and Eurocrats cheek-by-jowl with immigrants. And all this plays out in a cityscape that swings from majestic to quirky to rundown and back again. Organic art nouveau facades face off against 1960s concrete disgraces, and regal 19th-century mansions contrast with the brutal glass of the EU's Gotham City. This whole maelstrom swirls out from Brussels' medieval core, where the Grand Place is surely one of the world's most beautiful squares.

One constant is the enviable quality of everyday life, with a *café*/bar scene that could keep you drunk for years. But Brussels doesn't go out of its way to impress. The citizens' humorous, deadpan outlook on life is often just as surreal as the canvases of one-time resident Magritte.

Driving Distances

	Brussels	Antwerp	Liège	Bruges	Arlon
Antwerp	47				
Liège	90	115			
Bruges	115	113	205		
Arlon	187	236	140	283	
Ostend	140	138	230	25	300

History

According to legend, St-Géry built a chapel on a swampy Senne (Zenne) River island back in AD 695. A settlement that grew around it had become known as Bruocsella (from *bruoc,* marsh, and *sella,* dwelling) by 979 when Charles, Duke of Lorraine, moved here from Cambrai. He built a fort on St-Géry island amid flowering irises, which have since become the city's symbol. By 1100 Bruocsella was a walled settlement and capital of the Duchy of Brabant. In 1355 the Count of Flanders invaded and seized Brussels. However, a year later Brussels citizens, led by Everard 't Serclaes, ejected the Flemish. 't Serclaes went on to become a prominent local leader fighting for ever more civic privileges, a stance that finally saw him assassinated in 1388. This caused a furore in Brussels, whose townsfolk blamed the lord of Gaasbeek and took revenge by burning down his castle. Today, an anachronistic statue of 't Serclaes' corpse (at Grand Place 8) is still considered a potent source of luck.

Booming Brussels

Meanwhile, the cloth trade was booming. By the 15th century, prosperous markets filled the streets around the Grand Place, selling products for which some are still named: Rue au Beurre (Butter St), Rue des Bouchers (Butchers' St) etc. The city's increasingly wealthy merchant guilds established their headquarters on the Grand Place, where medieval tournaments and public executions took place in the shadow of a towering Hôtel de Ville.

From 1519 Brussels came to international prominence as capital of Charles Quint's vast Habsburg Empire. But Charles' future successor, the fanatically Catholic Philip II of Spain, was unimpressed with the lowlanders' brewing Protestantism. His Spanish Inquisition resulted in thousands of executions, including those of anti-Spanish Counts Egmont and Hoorn in front of the Maison du Roi.

The City Under Siege

In 1695, Louis XIV's French army under Marshal De Villeroy bombarded Brussels for 36 hours, hoping to divert Dutch attention from its attempts to regain Namur. This was truly catastrophic. Around 4000 houses were destroyed, around a third of the city was reduced to rubble and damage is thought to have been in the order of €5 billion in today's terms. The Grand Place was virtually obliterated, though miraculously the Hôtel de Ville survived relatively intact.

And within five years most of the square's guildhalls were rebuilt, making them even more impressive than they'd been before.

Austrian rule in the 18th century fostered urban development, with the construction of grand squares such as Place Royale. Many of the Upper Town's architectural gems were built during this time and in the brief eras of French and Dutch rule that followed. In 1830 Brussels proved the unlikely starting point of the curious 1830 'operatic' revolt that led Belgium to entirely unexpected independence.

The Congo & Postwar Brussels

In the early 1800s Brussels was home to around 100,000 people. However, the city grew enormously in both population and stature during the next century, greatly funded by Wallonia's industrial revolution along with King Léopold II's plunder of the Congo. While an estimated 10 million people were killed in the Congo, Brussels lavished on itself some of Europe's finest belle époque and art nouveau buildings.

Unlike much of the country, Brussels survived both world wars comparatively unscathed. The city underlined a new era of postwar optimism by hosting the 1958 World's Fair in the shadow of the Atomium. Brussels' growth was further boosted when it became the headquarters of NATO and the EEC (later EU). However, in the city's pursuit of progress and modernism, much fine architecture was torn down to make way for mediocre concrete office buildings, a form of architectural vandalism that's now widely known as Brusselisation. A stint as Cultural Capital of Europe in 2000 finally gave the city the push it needed to start properly protecting heritage buildings and sprucing up neglected neighbourhoods.

◉ Sights

The medieval grandeur of the Grand Place has an immediate wow factor that rarely fails to impress, and numerous excellent museums lie further afield. But much of the fun in Brussels is found simply by wandering the streets, enjoying the bizarre mismatch of building styles, spotting quirky architectural details and dropping regularly into fabulous *café*s (bars) en route.

◉ Grand Place, Bourse & Around

From the spectacular historic centrepiece of the Grand Place, there's lots to explore in the cobbled streets of the Îlot Sacré (once an island in the Senne), around the neoclassical