

# Welcome to Belgium & Luxembourg

*Fabulously historic yet flush with the shock of the new, these compact, gentle and decidedly multilingual little countries are packed with great, big, wonderful surprises.*

## Unexpected Riches

Belgium's exquisite medieval towns are home to a bounty of Unesco sites, but there are many other attractions, including happening big cities, caves, kayaking, industrial locations and sandy North Sea beaches. The region was a crucible of European painting and has remained astonishingly creative ever since. Revel in the strange, affecting beauty of the Flemish Primitives, the voluptuousness of Rubens, the sinuous curves of art nouveau and the country's great contemporary scene. Popular culture is also a hoot: comic strips and fashion have dedicated museums, and Belgium's carnivals are some of the world's weirdest and wildest.

## Battle Scars

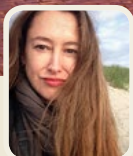
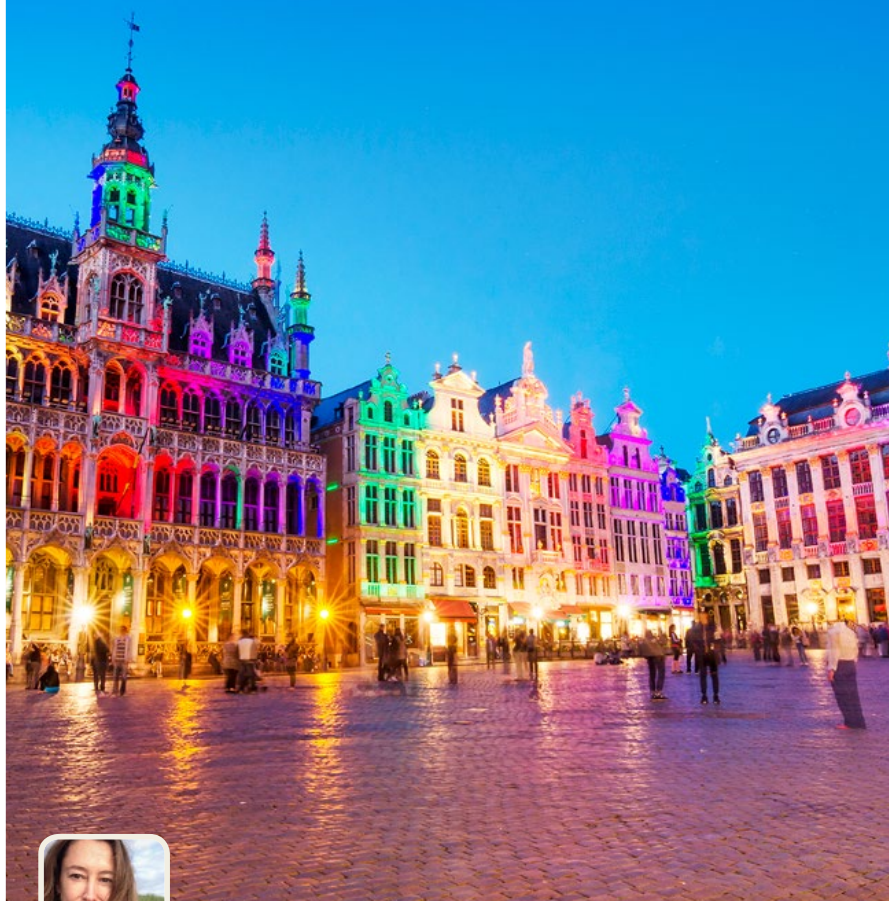
Belgium's cities and fields bear the scars of centuries of invasion, siege, conquest, assimilation and resilience. Site of some of the most brutal conflicts of modern history, the country draws visitors looking to understand, remember and mourn. The battlefield where Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, the many towns and frontlines of WWI, as well as the less commemorated, but no less significant, WWII sites – all have museums and memorials that sensitively honour the dead and keep their stories alive.

## Town & Country

Belgium is both tiny and a place of distinct contrasts. The historic 'art' cities of Flanders seduce visitors with medieval belfries, magical market squares and step-gabled houses overlooking pretty urban canals, all interspersed with superb museums and galleries. And they're all close together, seamlessly interconnected by regular public transport. Head south and much of Wallonia is profoundly rural: impressive caves, castles and bucolic valleys to explore and lots of outdoor fun to be had in the wooded hills. Luxembourg falls somewhere between the two, its small but sophisticated capital encircled by magnificent castles and pretty hill villages.

## Chips, Chocolate & Beer

Pack your elastic-waisted pants. Belgians serve up a remarkable range of edible specialities, including the world's most luscious chocolate. Jumbo mussels in a briny, winey broth are served with crispy, twice-fried *frites*. Then, of course, there's the beer. Brewing is an almost mystical art in Belgium and many ales are still created in the traditional manner: in monasteries. Meanwhile, Luxembourg has the world's highest number of Michelin stars per capita and keeps all comers in a celebratory mood with an ever-flowing supply of local Moselle bubbly.



## Why I Love Belgium & Luxembourg

By Donna Wheeler, Writer

My childhood bedroom in Sydney was decorated with postcards of Van Eyck Madonnas, but it wasn't until a couple of decades later, during one of Europe's coldest winters, that infatuation turned to love. My first impression of Antwerp was one of sheer wonder, the guildhalls of Grote Markt glinting as snow fell at the Christmas markets, and the dimmed, richly cosy interiors of the Rubenshuis and the Museum Plantin-Moretus. This sense of quiet magic has accompanied each subsequent visit, whether it's to galleries or gigs in Ghent or for family time in a 17th-century farmhouse.

**For more about our writers, see page 320**