

Understand Belgium & Luxembourg

BELGIUM & LUXEMBOURG TODAY266

Getting on with getting on as Belgium quietly decentralises and scandal ripples through the Grand Duchy.

HISTORY268

New nations with historic Low Country legacies of creative genius and entrepreneurial verve, not to mention playing host to other people's wars.

THE BELGIAN PEOPLE 278

The linguistic to-and-fro of this pious but progressive, increasingly multicultural people never fails to fascinate, .

CREATIVE CUISINE280

Moule-frites and *waterzooi*, third wave coffee and Luxembourgish whites: getting the most out of the menu.

BELGIAN BEER.....283

From Trappists and Abbey brews, to pale ales and lambics, there's a beer for everyone. And a glass for every beer!

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE.....286

Van Eyck and Van Dyck, Breugel and Rubens meet art nouveau flourishes, comic-strip heroes, conceptual jokesters and some of Europe's best DJs.

Belgium & Luxembourg Today

Belgium's unique and tumultuous history has bequeathed its citizens a multilingual state. While this is a source of great cultural richness, and a two-destinations-for-the-price-of-one bonus for travellers, it's also increasingly the cause of tension and political rifts within the country. Luxembourg, the world's only remaining grand duchy and it's most wealthy (it has the highest GDP per capita of any nation), has had its genteel wrist slapped for its controversial taxation regime; it also finally fell into step with its European neighbours by legalising same-sex marriage in 2014.

Best in Film

Two Days, One Night (2014) Factory life in Wallonia's industrial heartland.

Rust and Bone (2012) A gritty tale split between the Côte d'Azur and Belgium.

L'Enfant (2005) A petty crook coming to grips with fatherhood in Liège.

Reste Bien Mec! (2008) Unlikely hip-hop comedy from Luxembourg.

Les Barons (2009) Comedy set in Brussels' North African community.

Girl with a Pearl Earring (2003) Belgian and Luxembourgian cities stand in for Vermeer's Delft.

Man Bites Dog (1992) Cult crime mockumentary.

Best in Print

A Tall Man in a Low Land (Harry Pearson; 1998) A decade or so old but still the funniest, most insightful Belgian travelogue.

The Belgians: An Unexpected Fashion Story (Oscar van den Boogaard; 2015) From the 2015 exhibition of the same name, the ultimate overview of the country's fashion industry.

King Leopold's Ghost (Adam Hochschild; 1998) Both biography and comprehensive account of Belgium's Congo history.

Flanders: A Cultural History (André de Vries; 2007) An anecdote-packed cultural history of Flanders' cities and countryside.

Wilderness Days

Belgians went to the polls to elect a new government in what proved to be a historic election in 2010. With no grouping of parties managing to form a workable coalition, the country coasted along with only a caretaker leader for a record-smashing 541 days. The final compromise was extraordinary (and extraordinarily Belgian). 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.

On paper the main reason behind this was the seemingly arcane issue of splitting the Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde electoral/judicial 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

Let's Stay Together

For a while, a split felt almost inevitable, with political debate no longer centring on the degree of autonomy but rather around the concept of confederalism, but ever-surprising Belgium failed to explode. That said, the threat of 'bye-bye-Belgium', as Francophone satirists have dubbed a possible Flanders-Wallonia divorce, has not disappeared.

State reforms put into place from 2012, leading up to the 2014 election, gave more autonomy to regions and communities, making Belgium one of the most decentralised countries in Europe. This, along with a new five-year term and simultaneous elections at all levels of government, made the 2014 elections particularly high stakes, the losers facing five long years in opposition. No more was this so than in the highly volatile, splintering world of Flemish politics.