



Belgium & Luxembourg

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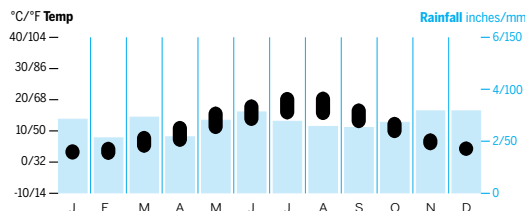
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Why Go?

Stereotypes of comic books, chips and sublime chocolates are just the start in eccentric little Belgium, its self-deprecating people have quietly spent centuries producing some of Europe's finest art and architecture. Bilingual Brussels is the dynamic yet personable EU capital, but also sports what's arguably the world's most beautiful city square. Flat, Flemish Flanders has many other alluring medieval cities, all easily linked by regular train hops. In hilly, French-speaking Wallonia, the attractions are contrastingly rural – castle villages, outdoor activities and extensive cave systems. Independent Luxembourg, the EU's richest country, is compact and hilly with its own wealth of castle villages. The grand duchy's capital city is famed for banking but also sports a fairy-tale Unesco-listed historic Old Town. And from the brilliant beers of Belgium to the sparkling wines of Luxembourg's Moselle Valley, there's plenty to lubricate some of Europe's best dining.

When to Go

Brussels



Pre-Easter week-ends Belgium hosts many of Europe's weirdest carnivals, not just at Mardi Gras.

Feb–Mar Both countries symbolically burn the spirit of winter on the first weekend after Carnival.

Jul–Aug Countless festivals, hotels packed at the coast but cheaper in Brussels and Luxembourg City.

BRUSSELS


POP 1.2 MILLION



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. 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 developments, 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 never gets old.



Sights




Central Brussels

Grand Place SQUARE
( Gare Centrale) Brussels' magnificent Grand Place is one of the world's most unforgettable urban ensembles. Oddly hidden, the enclosed cobblestone square is only revealed as you enter on foot from one of six narrow side alleys: Rue des Harengs is the best first approach. The focal point is the spired 15th-century city hall, but each of the antique guildhalls (mostly 1697–1705) has a charm of its own. Most are unashamed exhibitionists, with fine baroque gables, gilded statues and elaborate guild symbols.

Manneken Pis MONUMENT
(cnr Rue de l'Étuve & Rue du Chêne;  Gare Centrale) Rue Charles Buls – Brussels' most unashamedly touristy shopping street, lined with chocolate and trinket shops – leads the hordes three blocks from the Grand Place to the Manneken Pis. This fountain-statue of a little boy taking a leak is comically tiny and a perversely perfect national symbol for surreal Belgium. Most of the time the statue's nakedness is hidden beneath a costume relevant to an anniversary, national day or local event: his ever-growing wardrobe is partly displayed at the **Maison du Roi** (Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles; Grand Place;  Gare Centrale).

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts GALLERY
(Royal Museums of Fine Arts;  02-508 32 11; www.fine-arts-museum.be; Rue de la Régence 3; adult/6-25yr/BrusselsCard €8/2/free, with Magritte Mu-

seum €13;  10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun;  Gare Centrale, Parc) This prestigious museum incorporates the Musée d'Art Ancien (ancient art); the Musée d'Art Moderne (modern art), with works by surrealist Paul Delvaux and Fauvist Rik Wouters; and the purpose-built Musée Magritte (p73). The 15th-century Flemish Primitives are wonderfully represented in the Musée d'Art Ancien: there's Rogier Van der Weyden's *Pietà* with its hallucinatory sky, Hans Memling's refined portraits, and the richly textured *Madonna With Saints* by the Master of the Legend of St Lucy.

Musée Magritte MUSEUM
( 02-508 32 11; www.musee-magritte-museum.be; Rue de la Régence 3; adult/under 26yr/BrusselsCard €8/2/free;  10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun;  Gare Centrale, Parc) The beautifully presented Magritte Museum holds the world's largest collection of the surrealist pioneer's paintings and drawings. Watch his style develop from colourful Braque-style cubism in 1920 through a Dali-esque phase and a late-1940s period of Kandinsky-like brushwork to his trademark bowler hats of the 1960s. Regular screenings of a 50-minute documentary provide insights into the artist's unconventionally conventional life.

MIM MUSEUM
(Musée des Instruments de Musique;  02-545 01 30; www.mim.be; Rue Montagne de la Cour 2; adult/concession €8/6;  9.30am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun;  Gare Centrale, Parc) Strap on a pair of headphones, then step on the automated floor panels in front of the precious instruments (including world instruments and Adolphe Sax's inventions) to hear them being played. As much of a highlight as the museum itself are the premises – the art-nouveau Old England Building. This former department store was built in 1899 by Paul Saintenoy and has a panoramic rooftop *café* and outdoor terrace.

★ Musée du Costume et de la Dentelle MUSEUM
(Costume & Lace Museum;  02-213 44 50; www.costumeandlacedmuseum.brussels; Rue de la Violette 12; adult/child/BrusselsCard €8/free/free;  10am-5pm Tue-Sun;  Gare Centrale) Lace making has been one of Flanders' finest crafts since the 16th century. While *kloskant* (bobbin lace) originated in Bruges, *naaldkant* (needle-point lace) was developed in Italy but was predominantly made in Brussels. This