

# Brussels

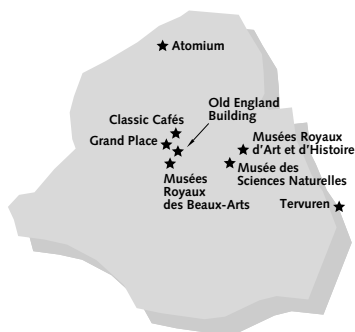


The fascinating capital of Belgium and Europe sums up all the contradictions of both. It's simultaneously historic yet hip, bureaucratic yet bizarre, self-confident yet un-showy and multicultural to its roots. The city's contrasts and tensions are multilayered yet somehow consistent in their very incoherence – Francophone versus Flemish, Bruxellois versus Belgian versus Eurocrat versus immigrant. And all this plays out on a cityscape that swings block by block from majestic to quirky to grimly rundown and back again. It's a complex patchwork of overlapping yet distinctive neighbourhoods that takes time to understand. Organic art nouveau facades face off against 1960s concrete disgraces. Regal 19th-century mansions contrast with the brutal glass of the EU's real-life Gotham City. World-class museums lie hidden in suburban parks and a glorious beech forest extends extraordinarily deep into the city's southern flank. This whole maelstrom swirls forth from Brussels' medieval core, where the truly grand Grand Place is surely one of the world's most beautiful squares.

Constant among all these disparate images is the enviable quality of everyday life – great shopping, consistently excellent dining at all price ranges, sublime chocolate shops and a *café* scene that could keep you drunk for years. But Brussels doesn't go out of its way to impress. Its citizens have a low-key approach to everything. And their quietly humorous, deadpan outlook on life is often just as surreal as the classic Brussels-painted canvases of Magritte.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Europe's most beautiful square?** Ponder the question over a few beers on the gorgeous Grand Place (p76)
- **Big balls** Nine of them arranged like a school chemistry set form the amazing Atomium (p90)
- **Drinkers' delight** *Cafés* ancient and modern, including an inspiring selection of classics scattered around the Bourse (p103)
- **Art history** Old masters and surrealists at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (p82), with its shiny new Magritte Museum annex
- **Art nouveau** The wonderful Old England Building (p82) – one of many art nouveau masterpieces (p82)
- **Dino discovery** Palaeontology comes to life at the magnificent Musée des Sciences Naturelles (p85)
- **Forgotten treasure** Extraordinary riches lurk in the vast Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (p87)



■ POPULATION: 1,081,000

■ LANGUAGES: FRENCH & DUTCH

## BRUSSELS IN...

## One Day

Gape in wonder at the **Grand Place** (p76), Brussels' gorgeous central square. Discover that the **Manneken Pis** (p77) is much smaller than you'd imagined then stroll through the **Galleries St-Hubert** en route to finding his 'squatting sister', the **Jeanneke Pis**. Admire the colourful scene that is the **Rue des Bouchers** (p78), then move on for a seafood lunch in the convivial **St-Catherine** area (p104). Window shop up Rue Antoine Dansaert, exploring the compact, quirky **Fashion District** (p79) then grab a drink in the **Cirio** (p103) or one of the other fabulous classic *cafés* around the **Bourse** (p78). Admire the cityscape as well as the musical instruments at the majestic **Old England Building** (p82), nip across the road to the new **Magritte Museum**, then have a drink in the eccentric **La Fleur en Papier Doré**, where Magritte himself used to booze. Admire the bulky **Palais de Justice** and preen a little as you stroll past the antique shops and pretty people on the Sablon. Have an exotic pita snack in the art nouveau *café* **Perroquet** (p100) or head straight to lively **Délirium Café** (p104) to sample a range of fine Belgian beers. Quickly realise that you should have stayed a week.

## One Week

Buy a 72-hour **Brusselscard** (p76) for three intense pre-paid days of brilliant museums, but remember to start it on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday – otherwise you'll 'waste' a day. With the card in hand don't miss the **Musée des Sciences Naturelles** (p85), **Cinquantenaire museums** (p87), **Africa Museum** (p92), **Chinese Pagoda** (p90) or your free beer at **L'Arbre d'Or** (p77) on the Grand Place. Once the card has expired discover lambic beers at the **Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze** (p91), visit the unique **Atomium** (p90), peruse the comic-strip murals (p81), discover the restaurants, cultural complexities and **art nouveau houses** of Ixelles (p88), bus out to the **Waterloo Battlefield** (p217), and meet up with a **Tof person** (see the boxed text, p87). And all the while, never stop drinking your way through our list of inspirational *cafés* (p102). Santé!

## 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 1229 Brabant's Duke Henri I published the first Brussels charter guaranteeing protection for (and expectations of) the town's citizens. In 1355 the Count of Flanders, then Brabant's neighbourhood enemy, invaded and seized Brussels. However, a year later, Brussels citizens, led by Everard 't Serclaes, ejected the Flemish to considerable jubilation. 't Serclaes went on to become a prominent local leader fighting for ever more civic privileges, a stance which finally saw him assassinated in 1388. This caused a furore in Brussels, whose towns-

folk blamed the lord of Gaasbeek and took revenge by burning down his castle (p113). Today, an anachronistic statue of 't Serclaes' corpse (Grand Place 8, p77) is still considered a potent source of luck.

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 Hapsburg Empire (see p27). In 1549 Charles' future-successor, Philip II of Spain, was welcomed to the city in an incredibly lavish pageant that today forms the basis of the Ommegang (p17). But fanatically Catholic Philip was unimpressed with the lowlanders' brewing Protestantism. His