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Seeing

Belgium

in a week



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Front cover pictures, top to bottom:

Brussels, seen from the Mont des Arts (chapter 5)
Bruges, seen from the Rozenhoedkaai (chapter 2)
Diksmuide, seen from the IJzertoren (chapter 2)
A field near West-Vleteren (chapter 2)

Rear cover pictures, top to bottom:

Fondry des Chiens, in Viroinval (chapter 7)
The city of Dinant (chapter 6)
A green corner of the Hautes Fagnes (chapter 9)
A reconstructed ancient house in the Fourneau St-Michel (chapter 7)

Seeing Belgium in a week

Belgium isn't a big country. You can drive straight through it in a couple of hours. It doesn't have the most impressive tourist attractions in Europe either, and except for Bruges, Brussels, chocolates and beer it's not very well-known internationally. Nevertheless, if you don't care for big tourist traps with lots of tourist shops and tourist arrangements and tourist groups, you'll find some remarkable places. You just have to know where to look.

About this guide

I wrote this guide for two reasons. Firstly, I have often been amazed at the beauty that can be found in our little country, and I've found that these places are often hardly known to the general public. Most people just go to the same places over and over and find them only mildly interesting, while there may be a real marvel just around the corner. To name just one example, the most evocative and well-kept trench of the first world war is the one that costs the least to visit, is hardly advertised and often overlooked, whilst some of the other museums attract busloads of tourists, and they only display some uniforms and ammunition.

I also wrote this book because I personally think that most tourist guides are "you could" books. I mean, they offer information about tons of museums, dozens of city walks, lots of restaurant and café must sees, but it's difficult to choose. I am proposing a "you must" book. Granted, there are some choices to be made but they are limited and I clearly explain why you could choose or leave either one of the options. The "extras" chapter provides you with several distinct possibilities if you have some days left. I hope you won't be disappointed by my "mandatory" view of Belgium. If for some reason you are, please let me know.

I've also written this book from a traveller's perspective. I mean, even if you've been to Paris, Vienna, New York, Moscow, Normandy and so on, you'll probably still be touched by the proposed places and you will remember your trip to Belgium for years to come.

So again, this guide is not a tourist reference book. It does not feature every museum or every attraction and it might even pass rather quickly over some of the typical views. But the places I refer to are my favourite destinations in Belgium. Some of them are rarely mentioned in the typical tourist guides and other places are only briefly referred to while they're probably more interesting than the typical museums and attractions you'll find in any major city. For example, you could spend all day in the Antwerp Zoo ooling and awing over the animals if you want, but I don't think this zoo is very different from zoos in London, Berlin, or any other big city. The Brussels Royal Museum of Fine Arts (like many other museums) hosts a beautiful collection – and if you're an art lover I highly recommend it – but with the Louvre only 2 hours away by train, I'd suggest visiting some more extraordinary places. I mainly focus on special places and sights you probably won't see anywhere



The atomium, a symbol of Belgium

else, but I have nevertheless included most of the main attractions you should see anyway. Of course, this book is far from complete and you might find other interesting things in the many guides that are available on Belgium, but my aim was to narrow the visit down to seven days. This way, you don't have to plow through hundreds of pages to make a selection.

In these seven days, I haven't provided much time to visit museums. To guide you through the most interesting of the very diverse Belgian museums would simply take a second, much thicker guidebook. There are fine and modern arts museums, fashion, beer, photography and diamond museums, castles and mansions, natural history museums and aquariums, war, industrial heritage and religious museums and so on.

A far from complete but up-to-date guide can be found on <http://www.365.be> with details and pricing for museums, zoos and other attractions. If you want to visit museums, take the extra time into account. Some of them only take an hour of your time, others keep you occupied for an entire day.

On a practical note: the background colours I've used are not just to liven up the text.

- a white background indicates general or descriptive information about the places;
- blue indicates information on parking and lodging;
- walks and car routes are highlighted in light grey;
- yellow is for more elaborate information.



In general...

Although Belgium is small, it's still made up of 10 provinces. These are grouped in 3 regions with some degree of independence.



Flanders is the northern part where most people are Dutch-speaking, but English and French are also understood by the majority of people.

Flanders is mainly (sub)urban and thrives on several industries. The Flemish flag depicts a black lion with – if shown correctly – a red tongue and distinct claws on a yellow background. Most of the traffic lights' poles are also painted in black and yellow and this was indeed decided on since these are the Flemish colours. It may be hard to believe, but that's what ministers spend their time (and the tax payer's resources) on.



Wallonia is the southern part. People speak French there, but especially in the more tourist-oriented places

Dutch and sometimes English are also spoken. The flag is a red rooster on a white background. The easternmost part of the province of Liège ('Ost-Belgien', 'les Cantons de l'Est' or 'de Oostkantons') is German-speaking. These parts were "given" to Belgium by Germany as part of the payback after World War I. Apparently, there are some language conflicts between the French and German speaking inhabitants as well, which becomes clear when noticing signs on highways referring to Liège as Luttich or to the German city Trier as Trèves, on which the French equivalent has been removed with black paint. In the same way it happens that French or Dutch names are crudely and ostentatively removed from road signs around Brussels.

Apart from the areas around a few old industrial cities like Liège and Charleroi, Wallonia is mostly rural. Wallonia used to be quite a wealthy region with coal mines and steel industry, but these industries have been slowly disappearing since the 1960s. Today, some regions are still recovering from the loss of these productions, especially the Liège and Charleroi area.



Then there's Brussels. Brussels is a separate region. Put simply, Brussels and its surrounding communities are located in

Flanders, but most people in Brussels are French-speaking (or, more correctly, anything but Dutch-speaking). Because of language laws, this has led to the existence of communities which may consist for 90% of French-speaking people but where the community council has to be held in Dutch, by law.

Naturally, this sometimes leads to hefty discussions. While people in Wallonia, in general, will try to help you if you don't speak any French, it might be different in Brussels. Some French-speaking people will refuse to speak Dutch, and vice versa. Luckily, most people in Brussels also speak English and

that's generally a safe choice of language. The flag of Brussels depicts a yellow iris on a blue background.

The population of Belgium is estimated at about 10 million people. This equals the number of people living in greater London. For other "vital statistics", I suggest you use Wikipedia.

Specialties to try

Most people will know that Belgium is famous for its chocolates, and every major city has Neuhaus and Leonidas shops. There are also less known chocolatiers which are also worth a visit. If you prefer to keep it somewhat cheaper, go to any warehouse and you'll find an extensive range of chocolates, chocolate bars, and tablets. Very popular and not too expensive are the "mignonettes", small chocolate tablets. They were originally made as samples to distribute to the public during the 1958 World Expo but they were so popular they were kept in production – although production has recently been moved abroad.

Buy some "neuzekes" or cuberdons, a cone-shaped candy. You won't find them abroad as they can only be kept for a couple of weeks.



A chocolate shop in Brussels

Beer is another Belgian specialty. Practically every city or town has its own regional beer. There are numerous books about beer so I won't go into much detail. I'll just stick to naming my favourites. Kwak is a sweet beer

with some hints of banana, and it's served in quite a special glass. Duvel is the "standard" heavy beer, it's refreshing in taste but it can hit you like a hammer. Rochefort 10 is a dark, almost black trappist beer. The West-Vleteren beer is special for various reasons – read about it in the chapter about the Westhoek. As for the lagers ("pils"), the main brands are owned by the largest brewing company in the world, AB InBev. I like Jupiler the best. Most cafés only sell one kind of lager of which the brand is usually dictated by the brewery they buy from.

If you like hard liquor you should try jenever; a sort of gin that's typical of Belgium. If you want to appreciate the taste I suggest tasting it pure. All sorts of mixtures with berries and fruits are available but some just taste like flat lemonade. Those are great if you want to get really drunk. If you want to know how jenever is made and which kinds are available you might want to pay a visit to the jenever museum in Hasselt.

As for food, the Belgian cuisine is significantly influenced by French cooking. The "average people's" classic is steak with fries. In Wallonia, trout baked in butter ("truite meunière") is a typical dish, and in autumn and winter game meat is often served. The "civet de marcassin" is wild boar piglet stew which is often reasonably priced. In Flanders, game meat would usually be much more expensive than in Wallonia. On the cheaper side, there are numerous fries shops where

the classic 'fries with stew' ("frietten met stoofvlees") can be purchased.

Belgium also has several restaurants with Michelin stars. Of course, it's best to reserve months ahead and make sure you take an entire menu - one dish often won't satisfy your hunger. A list of star restaurants is on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Michelin_starred_restaurants.

Cheap Souvenirs

If you have to buy souvenirs for the entire family and you want to do it cheap, try one of the [Kringwinkels \(http://www.dekringwinkel.be\)](http://www.dekringwinkel.be) in Flanders or one of the Res-sources shops (<http://www.res-sources.be>). These shops collect things that would otherwise be thrown away – anything from furniture over books to beer glasses, all for very little money. Unfortunately, these websites aren't available in English yet.

Transport

The following trip suggestions will take you through Belgium in about a week's time. As for transport, all the major cities are well-connected by trains – in most cases there will be a train to wherever you want to go once or twice every hour. Even the majority of smaller villages have a nearby train station. Itineraries can be looked up on <http://www.nmbs.be> (it's snbc in French but – thank heavens – it's the same company) and you can buy tickets in advance if you want to. These tickets can also be bought in the railway station where you can ask in which station you should transfer if it's necessary. If you haven't bought a ticket in advance or at the station, you should inform the train conductor before getting on the train, and it might cost a little extra to buy it on the train. Apart from Eurostar trains there's no reserved seating; just make sure you're in the right class. Every compartment has number "1" or "2"



Trout, "Truite Meunière"

both on the inner and outer walls to indicate whether it concerns 1st or 2nd class. Some rush hour trains may be very crowded. Most train services start at about 6 am and end at 11 pm approximately.

There's also a network of buses connecting smaller cities, but some places are very poorly serviced. If you don't have your own car and you want to rent one, I suggest you visit the major cities by train first and then rent a car to go and see the more remote things. The railway stations of Bruges, Brussels or Antwerp are located in the middle of the city, meaning you won't have to worry about traffic or parking when visiting. But if you want to visit smaller villages the train ride might take two or three hours, whereas you could get there in only one hour by car.

Getting around by car is pretty easy most of the time. The country has a lot of motorways (with a lot of speed cameras!) and most roads are in pretty good condition. There is only one place where toll is to be paid and that's the Liefkenshoektunnel, west of Antwerp on the R2. It is mentioned in the Antwerp chapter. You don't have to pass it in everyday traffic.

The typical points for traffic jams are the major city ring roads during rush hours. The Antwerp and Brussels ring roads are to be avoided on weekdays between 7 and 9am and 4 and 6:30pm. On weekends it's clear sailing most of the time. On sunny weekend days the roads from and to the coast may be jammed, especially the E40 and the Ghent region.

Major events

If you like big crowds and big events, here are some of the major yearly events in Belgium. Some of them don't have a fixed date but if you know the name you can google.

- The light festival in Ghent.
- The Carnival of Aalst. This is the biggest carnival in Flanders and probably in Belgium. Big and small groups make festive floats caricaturizing politicians and events of the past year. Of course, getting drunk is all part of the fun.

- The Carnival of Binche. This is a very classic carnival celebration, with the traditional Gilles de Binche.
- Holy Blood procession in Bruges.
- De Ronde Van Vlaanderen. Major cycling event in the Flemish Ardennes. One of the great classics.
- Gentse Feesten, Ghent. Ten days of music and festivities in the streets of Ghent. Some concerts are free, others aren't. Wonderful ambiance in the historic city, although it might get very crowded.
- Werchter festival. 1st weekend of July. The biggest music festival in Belgium. Major international acts.
- Dodentocht, Bornem. A very well-known walking event. You have to walk 100km within 24 hours. Of course, you can also come just to cheer the people that actually do it and run or limp across the finish.
- National holiday, 21st of June. Military Parade in Brussels and fireworks in various cities, including Dinant.
- Belgian Rhythm & Blues Festival, Peer. If you're into blues...
- Graspop Metal Meeting, Dessel. Name says it all.
- New Year's evening fireworks. The ones in Brussels and Antwerp are best known.

Tourist offices

Most cities and even most small towns have tourist offices. They are often on central places like a market square or in a city hall, and they're often indicated with the letter "i". They are comparable to the Tourist Information Centres in the UK or Welcome centres in the US.

Apart from offering you a selection of free guides and sometimes even free city maps, they often have the walking or biking maps of the region for sale. They can also find you a hotel or camping site and provide you with any information about the region you'd like, recommend restaurants or local guides – in short, anything the informed traveller wants. In the bigger cities, they often have English-speaking staff. Don't be afraid to go in and browse through the publications or ask what you want to know.

The tourist offices are government-owned so apart from guided city walks and the like, they offer very little commercial services. This also

means that they don't depend on any commercial firm and that they give you honest and independent advice most of the time.

Websites

Nowadays the internet is the prime source of information about anything – albeit not the most complete or accurate. However, here are some very informational sites.

<http://foto.vanslycken.be> – my own site with lots of photos from Belgium.

<http://www.belgiumview.com/tl3main/> - pictures and information about lesser known sites in Belgium.

<http://www.opt.be> – the website of the official instance for tourism in Wallonia. Partly available in English.

<http://www.365.be> – the larger attractions and museums of Belgium, always quite up-to-date with a short description and opening times. Available in English.

Places to stay

As for your accommodation in Belgium, there's a whole range of places to stay; from youth hostels and campsites (with lots of Dutch people on the latter) to very exclusive hotels – you'll find these on the top locations in the major cities. Youth hostels are generally the cheapest at about €20 per person per night.

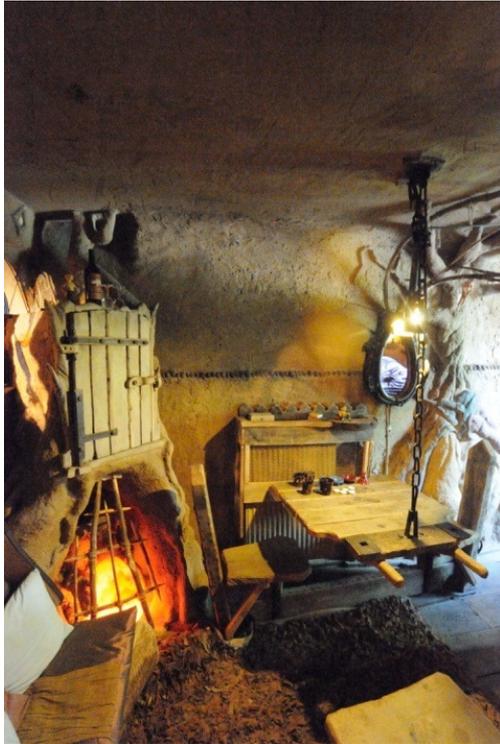
In a youth hostel you typically get a good bed in a clean room for 6-8 people. If you're lucky, you get a large room for yourself at "dorm" price. Most of the youth hostels have "family" or "comfort" rooms if you wish to have some privacy. The Youth Hostels' website: <http://www.vjh.be/>

The Gites d'étape (<http://www.gitesdetape.be>) are an alternative to the youth hostels. Same ambiance, same accommodations, same price, but sometimes more charming. They have houses in Wallonia and Brussels. Unfortunately, their website is in Dutch or French only. Some of their houses are only available for groups, others are open to individuals.

Most of the cheaper hotels are located in Wallonia. Some places in Wallonia have been attracting tourists and travellers for many decades which explains the old-fashioned appearance of some of these hotels. They might be old and a bit worn, and sometimes a number of different rooms share one common bathroom. The walls separating the rooms might be rather thin and in most cases breakfast only consists of bread with some conserves and cheese. However, I personally prefer these cheaper places. I've never come across a dirty room and I don't have any horror stories to tell. On the contrary, these hotels can be very charming as opposed to the impersonal, standardised hotel chains. Cheaper hotels are in the €60 per room per night range. The more luxurious hotels are generally €100 and more per room per night.

Another possibility is staying in "Chambres d'Hôtes," which is comparable to the Bed & Breakfast accommodations in Great Britain. The cheapest rooms are in the same price range as rooms in the cheaper hotels.

If you are looking for something very special, try the Balade des Gnômes ("the gnomes' walk") near Durbuy. I don't think there's anything like it in the world – and certainly not in Belgium. Every room has its own theme, but it's not just a question of some well-chosen accessories – every single thing is imaginative and original – right up to bathroom doors that tumble open hydraulically like on a space-ship and champagne corks as light switches. See <http://www.labaladedesgnomes.be/> for details and reservations. La Balade is located in Heyd, near Durbuy.



Of course, after one night, you'll probably have discovered everything in your room. If you arrive early enough (or leave late enough) you could always ask if you could see some of the other rooms as well. You're in for a surprise!

As La Balade is situated in a quite touristic and beautiful region – a part of the Ardennes – there is plenty to see and do. It probably won't be as impressive as the “obligatory” first seven chapters, but there's enough for a long weekend's outing if you want to be at ease.

The Ourthe & Aisne tourist office website is available in English, so you'll doubtlessly find some fun things to do in the region at <http://www.ourthe-et-aisne.be>.