

Major Belgian Cities

Brussels

The Brussels-Capital Region is the capital of Belgium and home to over one million residents. This very busy, international city is one of the most important cities in Europe. It is often called the capital of Europe even though it is not as well known as some cities in larger European countries. The ultra-modern city of Brussels is where the headquarters of NATO, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and other important world organizations are located.

The splendor of Brussel's history is evident in its magnificent 17th and 18th century architecture. Two of its better known historic sites are The Grand Place and the Cathédrale Sts-Michel et Gudule. The Grand Place, a market square, is the number one tourist destination of the city and is where the impressive gothic Hôtel de Ville stands, surrounded by 17th century guild houses. The Cathédrale Sts-Michel et Gudule, another gothic masterpiece in Brussels, is also Belgium's national church. A more recent addition to Brussels is the Palais Royal. Construction of this building began in the 1820s and is now home of the Belgian monarchy. The outstanding architecture, lavish interior and beautifully landscaped exterior of the Palais Royal all reflect the prominence of Brussels.

Bruges

With its scenic canals, Bruges is often called "the Venice of the north" and is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Belgium. Lining these charming canals are medieval buildings that Bruges is well known for. In no other European city has the look and feel of medieval times been so well preserved. Even the narrow medieval streets and winding lanes have been maintained. The enchanting medieval streets and architecture of Bruges all pay tribute to the glory days of the city when it was a center of international cloth trade, a commercial center for north-west Europe and one of Europe's most urbanized areas. Following the medieval era, the city continued to flourish for 200 years as a major European city. Evidence of Bruges' historical wealth and importance can still be seen in its historic mansions, churches and public buildings.

Antwerp

During the Middle Ages, Antwerp was a thriving center for European cloth trade as well as the main port of the Duchy of Brabant. Later, in the sixteenth century Antwerp was a city known for having wealthy citizens with grand, luxurious homes, many of which still stand today. The city of Antwerp still thrives today as a center of commerce and as the main city of Flanders. A high level of cargo shipping and oil refinery traffic passes through Antwerp's port, the second largest port in Europe. The city of Antwerp is also the center of the international diamond trade and is often called the diamond center of the world. Half of the world's diamonds eventually pass through this city. Located in the historic district of Antwerp is the largest cathedral in Belgium, the Cathedral of our Lady. This Gothic cathedral dates back to 1352 and was completed in 1518. Inside the cathedral are several triptychs by Antwerp's most famous citizen, Baroque painter, Peter Paul Rubens. In addition to the cathedral, are several other places of interest such as the Grote Markt (an old market square), the Stadhuis (town hall), the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (a modern art museum) and the Diamond Museum. Another interesting place in the city is the Antwerp Zoo, founded in 1843 and home to over 4000 animals.

Belgium

History

In its early history, the area now known as Belgium was part of a region called the Low Countries. By 1st century AD, Romans occupied the area. Roman occupation continued until the 5th century AD when the land was taken over by Germanic Franks. The collapse of the Frankish Carolingian Empire in the 9th century resulted in a breakup of the area into small provinces. Among other provinces were the Duchy of Brabant, the County of Holland, the County of Flanders and the Bishopric of Liège. In 1369, the daughter of the Count of Flanders married Philip, Duke of Burgundy. This union brought the provinces under control of the Burgundians. One century later, the death of Mary of Burgundy resulted in the Spanish Habsburg Emperor Maximilian taking control of the provinces. Conflict between Dutch citizens in these provinces and the Spanish Habsburgs eventually led to a revolt that escalated into The Eighty Years' War. Following this war, the northern provinces broke away and formed the United Provinces while the southern provinces (modern day Belgium, Luxembourg and Northern France) remained under Spanish rule. Attempts by France to take control of the southern provinces led a series of both Franco-Spanish and Franco-Austrian wars during the 17th and 18th centuries. Although Belgium was occupied by the French following the French Revolutionary War in 1794, the area was reunified with the Low Countries after the fall of the French Empire in 1815. The Belgian Revolution in 1830 resulted in the country's independence and in 1831, King Leopold I was crowned King of Belgium. Since then, Belgium has remained an independent country.

Modern Belgium

Since the Middle Ages, Belgium has always been one of the richest countries in the world. The historic churches, town halls, and museums showcasing its art are evidence of Belgium's historic wealth. Belgium prospered during the half century before World War I as well when it was the fourth strongest economic power in the world. Through high industrial production and its central position in Western Europe, allowing for international trade, Belgium has always been able to maintain its economy. Current statistics show that Belgian workers are the most productive in the world, producing 20% more per person than the next highest country and well above the leading industrial countries of Japan, Germany and the USA. Some of the major industries of Belgium include steel and chemical manufacturing as well as chocolate and exceptional quality beers.

Modern Belgium is often called the unofficial capital of Europe. Following occupation by the Germans in World Wars I and II, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands came together to be the founding members of NATO and the European Union. This very international country is now the headquarters for these two organizations in addition to other major international associations.

Belgium and its People

Belgium is home to over 10 million people who live in an area of around 11,700 sq miles (30,000 sq kilometers), giving Belgium one of the highest population densities in Europe. Culturally, this population is divided by an invisible border running east and west through the country. This division is most evident in the languages spoken in each area. Citizens of northern Belgium, also known as Flanders, speak a dialect of Dutch called Flemish. Belgians who live in the south, an area known as Wallonia, speak French and call themselves Walloons. Belgium's capital city, the Brussels-Capital region, is one where both Flemish and French are spoken.

While divided by their languages, a majority of Belgians have a love of their country and high quality of life. Studies and statistics show that Belgium is one of the best places in the world to live and ranks among having the highest quality of life in the world. This is due to the country's excellent healthcare, housing, education and infrastructure. Results of international polls often show that Belgians tend to be at the top of lists of people most likely to be satisfied with their lives and least likely to emigrate to another country. In addition to this, Belgium is known for its excellent food and restaurants. Belgium's restaurants have received even more Michelin stars than the entire country of France.