**ICONIC***pleasures***Neuhaus**

Galerie de la Reine 25-27
Brussels
+32 (0)2 568 23 00
neuhauschocolates.com

Chocoladehuis Boon

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Hasselt
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chocoladehuisboon.be

CHOCOLATE

Anyone who travels to Belgium is told to bring back some Belgian chocolates. This small country might be obscure, but everyone knows about its chocolates.

The history of chocolate making in Belgium goes back to the 18th century when the aristocracy developed a taste for hot chocolate. The business grew in scale in the 19th century when cocoa beans were imported from Congo.

The Belgian industry really took off in 1912 when pharmacist Jean Neuhaus invented the *praline*. It involved a thin chocolate mould with a sweet, creamy filling. Neuhaus sold his chocolates among his cough syrups in a beautiful gilded shop in the Galerie de la Reine in Brussels. His wife Louise added her own creative touch by designing the folding *ballotin* box. The original shop is still there, minus the medicines.

The large Belgian producers like Neuhaus and Godiva are now global brands owned by giant multinationals. The chocolates are still good, but there's something missing. For an authentic chocolate experience, you need to visit one of the small family-run businesses. You find them in most Belgian towns, sometimes hidden down a quiet side street, like Frederic Blondeel in the Brussels suburb of Koekelberg, or Boon in Hasselt.

The chocolates are often handmade in small batches in a workshop at the back of the shop. They might be based on secret recipes that have been handed down through the generations. The finished chocolates are laid out on trays to let customers pick their favourites. Most people buy 250 or 300 grams. Not too much, because proper chocolates have to be eaten within a week or ten days. All this takes time. It is a craft.



ICONIC

people

Fondation BrelPlace de la Vieille Halle
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fondationbrel.be**JACQUES BREL**

Jacques Brel was a Belgian singer and songwriter who began his career in the 1950s in smoky dives in the centre of Brussels. He sang poetic, melancholy songs about love, death and despair that gained him a huge following in Paris. Most people thought he was French. But Brel was born in 1929 in the Brussels suburb of Schaerbeek. The first Tintin comic came out in the same year.

Jacques worked for a time in his father's cardboard box factory, before moving to Paris in 1954. Holed up in a dilapidated Paris hotel, he scratched a living for several years before he finally made a breakthrough in 1957 with his plaintive chanson *Quand on n'a que l'amour* (If we only have love). Then came *Ne me quitte pas* (If you go away), a desperate love song directed at his mistress.

Brel's performances had an extraordinary intensity as if his life depended on the song. He would sweat and spit on the stage. You can see him at his best in a live recording of his song *Amsterdam* at the Olympia in Paris in 1964.

It all came to an end, suddenly and unexpectedly, in 1966 when he performed for the last time at the Olympia. His fans begged him to stay, shouting "*Ne me quitte pas*". But he was gone.

Brel sailed off to the Marquesas Islands in the Pacific with his mistress called Maddy Bamy. He fell ill with lung cancer, returned to Paris for treatment and died in 1978 in a Paris hospital.

In 2017, the Brussels sculptor Tom Frantzen created a bronze statue of the singer. It stands outside the Fondation Brel in Brussels run by his daughter France and her passionate little team. She has lovingly preserved a collection of recordings, photographs and family mementoes.

The Fondation Brel has also created an audio guide you can use to wander through the streets of Brussels, while listening to Brel's songs. It takes you to the places where he first found his voice.



ICONIC *traditions*



CARNIVAL IN BINCHE

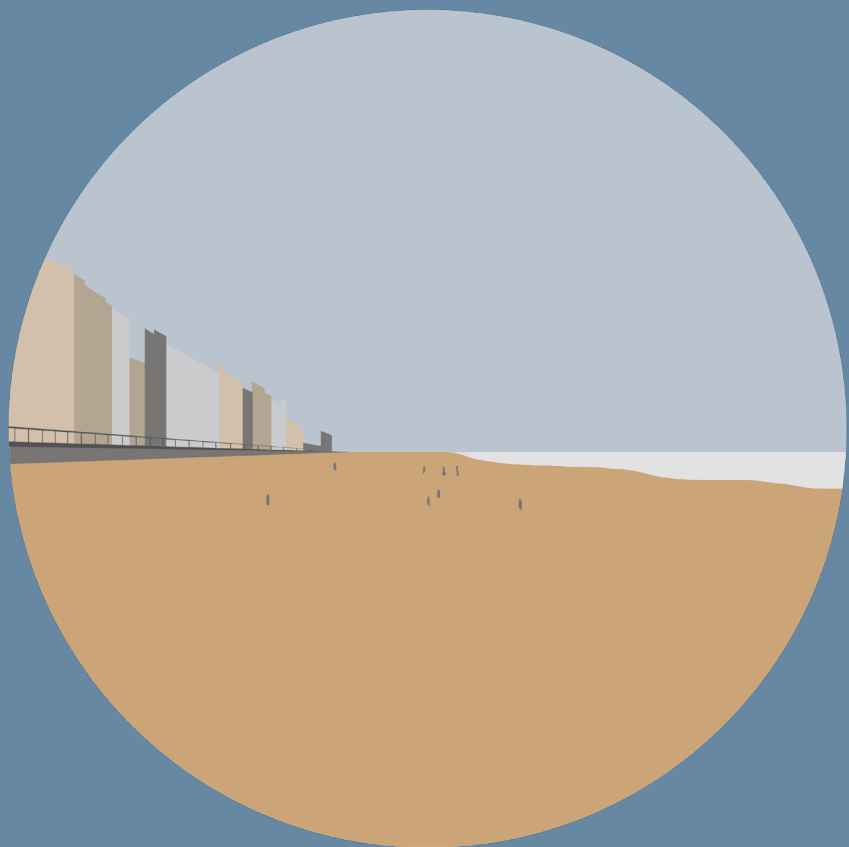
“*Mas bravas que las fiestas de Bains*” – more wild than carnival in Binche, goes an old Spanish saying. And every year on Mardi Gras, local men known as Gilles set out to prove that Binche can still put on one hell of a party by dressing up in costumes and dancing through the streets for hours on end.

The celebrations in Binche are modelled on a fabulous fiesta organised in 1549 by Mary of Hungary for her brother Charles V. Hundreds of Spanish grandees flocked into town dressed in Inca-inspired costumes decorated with stars and moons.

The carnival day begins each year at an ungodly 3.30 am when the Gilles are roused from bed by a drummer standing outside their front door. While the rest of the town is still asleep, the men squeeze into colourful costumes stuffed with fistfuls of straw.

The Gilles are divided into ten carnival societies with cheeky names like the Recalcitrants and the Incorruptibles. They add a sinister touch to their appearance by putting on white masks painted with waxed moustaches and green spectacles. Later in the day, they add huge hats decorated with hundreds of ostrich feathers imported from South Africa.

At the end of the afternoon, the Gilles are handed small wicker baskets filled with blood oranges. Soon there are oranges flying everywhere. They smash into the chicken wire and slam into walls leaving blood-red stains. Nowhere is *mas bravas*.

**ICONIC** *places*

Belle Epoque Centrum
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Blankenberge
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THE BELGIAN COAST

Most people say the same thing. The Belgian coast is ugly. It is just a long line of apartment buildings overlooking a grey sea. They call it the Atlantic Wall (although it is on the North Sea). It rains almost every day, they will tell you. The waiters are rude. The wind blows sand in your face. And so it goes on. No one has a good word to say about the Belgian coast and yet millions visit it every year. Mostly Belgians from Brussels and Wallonia, but also Germans and even a few French. Many Belgians have a family apartment in one of the 13 resorts with a sea view if they are lucky.

The little towns are lively places with restaurants serving mussels, cafes where you can order waffles, souvenir shops that sell beach umbrellas. A few of the beach towns have kept their old romantic charm, like De Haan and Het Zoute. You might even spot an art nouveau villa in Blankenberge or Ostend.

No one pretends the Belgian beach is elegant, except maybe the mayor of Knokke, who has tried to ban picnic boxes, bikinis in the streets and music on the beach. Other resorts are more relaxed. Sometimes ugly. But often charming.



ICONIC

buildings

Groot Begijnhof
Nonnenstraat 13
Mechelen

Begijnhof Antwerp
Rodestraat 39
Antwerp

BEGUINAGES

Beguinares (*begijnhoven* in Dutch) are often hidden behind high walls. It isn't always easy to find the entrance. But that is what makes these places so special.

You can find beguinares in most of the large towns of northern Belgium. These silent walled communities date back to the Middle Ages when they were occupied by single women. The beguines who lived there were religious, but not too saintly. They had their own houses with neat little gardens concealed behind high walls.

The Beguine movement began in the 12th century after the Crusades had killed off a large percentage of young men in northern Europe. Founded by a priest – Lambert le Bègue – in Liège, the movement spread through the Low Countries, northern France and Germany, but it was concentrated in Belgium, which once had 94 beguinares. There are now just 26, including 13 listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Each beguinarage follows a different pattern. The beguinarage in Bruges is a large complex of whitewashed houses overlooking a green space planted with trees. It is beautiful in spring, when thousands of daffodils appear. But it can get overcrowded. And, despite notices calling for silence, it is not very peaceful.

The beguinarage in Mechelen has lost its walls, leaving just a warren of cobbled lanes around an old brewery. The Klein Begijnhof in Ghent is like a secret walled village next to a busy road.

Antwerp's Begijnhof stands on the edge of the busy university quarter, yet almost no one comes here. You could live in Antwerp for years without ever entering the little door at Rodestraat 39. It leads past an empty porter's lodge into a secret garden surrounded by neat 16th-century brick houses.

There are other beguinares in the historic towns of Kortrijk, Diest and Lier. There is even a tiny beguinarage in the Brussels suburb of Anderlecht. Each one feels like a secret village in the heart of a city.

**ICONIC***curiosities***Brasserie Cantillon**

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cantillon.be**Brouwerij****Drie Fonteinen**

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GUEUZE

In the quiet villages of the Pajottenland hills, something strange is brewing. The air is filled with wild yeasts and microbes that cause spontaneous fermentation. The microbes react with a liquid wort made from malted barley that sits in open tanks. On cold nights, the yeasts turn the wort into a beer known as lambic.

The raw lambic is aged in oak barrels for at least three years to create the more complex Gueuze beers. Sometimes local cherries are added to create the sweet red beer known as Kriek.

It's a unique beer. The particular microbes are only found in a small geographical area near Brussels. The breweries are strung out along the valley of the River Zenne to the west of Brussels. The owners often run guided tours at weekends, or there might be a cafe next door where you can try out the beers.

It used to be difficult to find Gueuze and Lambic beers in Belgium. It was a niche taste. Only a handful of cafes stocked it in Brussels. It was easier to buy it in Helsinki or Boston.

Then something happened. Belgians started to appreciate the sour taste of an authentic Gueuze like Cantillon. Young brewers took over some of the old Gueuze breweries outside Brussels, like Brouwerij Drie Fonteinen, and Belgian cafes began to sell these rather peculiar beers. Now it is cool to drink a Gueuze. Even if no one likes the taste at first.



NO GOVERNMENT

It made no sense. Following elections in 2010, Belgium was without a government for 541 days. It was the longest period a democratic country had survived without a government. But the odd thing was that the country seemed to function perfectly well without anyone in charge.

The problem was a hard one to fix. The country has become deeply divided between rich, conservative Flanders in the north and poor, socialist Wallonia in the south. Maybe it could be fixed if there wasn't also a language divide running across the country.

The same problem returned following elections of 26 May 2019. The country entered another long period without a government. It has become almost impossible to form a national government after elections. But this doesn't matter too much, because most of the everyday responsibilities of government are exercised by the regions or even the local communes. It means Belgians can be quite relaxed about the lack of a federal government.

During the 2010-11 crisis, women protested by refusing to have sex, men stopped shaving, and free fries and beer were handed out to mark the day when Belgium smashed the world record for government-free days. It was an absurd situation.

The different political parties finally reached an agreement in 2011, and again in 2020, this time following 493 days of negotiations. It takes time, but a new government is always formed in the end.