

BEST OF BELGIUM

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The Complete Travel Guide
Through Expat Eyes

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About the Author

Angela Dansby is an American-Belgian, Brussels-based, world-travelled lifestyle journalist and communications consultant. What began as an expat's 'one-year experiment' more than a decade ago has turned into a lasting love affair with Belgium, making her one of the country's proudest citizens.

For about 20 years, Angela has been a part-time journalist specialising in travel, culture and gastronomy. In 2022, she launched a tourism column about lesser-known Belgian cities in *The Brussels Times Magazine*, the country's leading English-language print publication. She has also written about Belgium for national and international media; her BBC.com story about Oostduinkerke's shrimp fishers on horseback even won a top journalism prize.

Angela has walked about 1,000 km through the cities featured in this guide—from tiny Durbuy, old Tongeren and German-speaking Eupen to every corner of Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges. Moreover, she enjoys bringing travel destinations to life with a lens as well as a pen; hence, all photos in this book are her own (except at right).

Through this insider's guide, Angela invites you to discover Belgium's most remarkable places, hidden gems and authentic experiences across the country.

From the Author

A million thanks to my Belgian partner Rob Vanoudenhoven, who accompanied me to many destinations in this book and provided invaluable cultural insights, as well as to my father, William Dansby, for his eagle-eyed proofreading. I am also very grateful to the staff of city tourism offices and affiliated tour guides for their latest and greatest information. And hats off to the Borgerhoff & Lambrichts lifestyle team for believing in this English-language travel guide.

The book covers 32 cities of touristic interest in full (denoted by red titles), including some surrounding sites, and specific attractions in another 60 destinations. But apologies, it could not fit everything.



Credit: Michael Chia, Brussels



Land of World-Class Culture, Heritage and Scenery

 [focusonbelgium.be](https://www.focusonbelgium.be)  11,825,550

Belgium is a small country that makes a big impression. With varying topography from coniferous forests to sandy beaches, sometimes four seasons in one day, and more castles and comic artists per square kilometre than anywhere else, Belgium is amazing and unique. It is also gastronomic, ranking third globally for the most Michelin-starred restaurants per capita and area, and known for the world's best chocolate, waffles and fries. It even has vending machines with fresh bread nationwide!



Moreover, Belgium is linguistically divided by region—Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and bilingual Brussels-Capital Region—offering **three unique cultural experiences in one!** Plus there is a German-speaking community within Wallonia, which makes German the third official language in Belgium. As some say: ‘three languages, one rain’.

This is more factually ‘reign’ as the country has been united by a monarchy since 1831.

For its size, Belgium is one of the most UNESCO-recognised countries in the world. It boasts **16 UNESCO World Heritage Sites**, including collective listings for 33 belfries, 43 funerary and memory sites of the First World War (Western Front), and five ancient and primeval beech forests. Belgium also has **16 listings of Intangible Cultural Heritage**, including beer culture, processional giants and dragons, jousting stilt walkers and a medieval carnival with flying oranges. Many of these UNESCO-listed treasures are freely accessible, too.



Belgium offers a range of nationwide perks that make exploring both easy and affordable. Many museums are free the **first Sunday of the month** and the nationwide **museumPASS-musées** offers year-long entry to more

than 260 participating museums. Each September, Belgium joins Europe-wide **Heritage Days**, unlocking hundreds of institutions for rare visits not normally allowed. From Christmas and neighbourhood markets to folkloric festivals and city fireworks, Belgium's social calendar is packed with open-air events. For example, each 21 July, **Belgian National Day**, the entire kingdom turns into a festival ground. And shoppers benefit during the **regulated sales months** of January and July.

Free public access to nature—not a given everywhere—includes national and municipal parks for endless exploration. The largest, **Forêt de Soignes** or **Zoniënwoud** (Sonian Forest), stretches more than 5,000 hectares across all three regions as one of Europe's most beautiful, centuries-old forests. Hiking, cycling and themed walking routes are also widely available at no charge from regional and city tourism offices. The density, quality and variety of these networks, including meticulously signposted and long-distance trails, make Belgium stand out. It's one of the few countries where world-class culture, heritage and landscapes remain remarkably accessible and free. Several cities feature **Totemus** app trails—interactive treasure hunts highlighting local heritage, nature and culture.

Belgium's **SNCB/NMBS** railway offers 30–40 per cent discounted fares on weekends and public holidays,



free train travel for children under 12 and—with the **Train+ pass**—40 per cent discounts on off-peak fares plus capped rates to all destinations at any time. **Blue-bike** is a sharing system for docked bikes and e-bikes in 200 cities nationwide, complemented by several operators of free-floating e-bikes and e-scooters in select cities.

Want to get to know Belgium better? This insider's travel guide will open your eyes to undiscovered gems throughout the country within and well beyond the major tourist sites. It is geographically comprehensive, **covering all ten provinces**—each anchored by its capital, then unfolding outwards to other destinations of tourist interest in order of increasing distance. The book promotes experiential and sustainable tourism while using space wisely: Listings subject to change (where to eat, drink, shop and stay) plus annual special events are available online for free per destination at **wowbelgium.com** so they can be updated regularly.





AMONG THE WORLD'S MOST INTERNATIONAL CITIES

🌐 be.brussels 🧑 1,256,000



The Brussels-Capital Region wins you over with *bonjour*, *hallo* or 'hello', reflecting its official bilingual status (French-Dutch) and English-uniting, multilingual expat population of nearly 40 per cent. Representing 180 countries and hosting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it is one of the most international and diplo-



matic hubs in the world. It is also the de facto capital of Europe as home to most European Union institutions.

Ironically, the Brussels-Capital Region is predominantly francophone, even though it lies geographically within Dutch-speaking Flanders as a politically and administratively distinct entity. Its City of Brussels—one of its 19 municipalities, each with its own mayor—is capital of both Flanders and the French Community of Belgium to which the Brussels-Capital Region and Wallonia belong. Phew!

Practically referred to as Brussels, the bustling capital region hosts plenty of festivals, concerts and folkloric events. (An opera at its La Monnaie theatre even sparked the Belgian Revolution in 1830, leading to the country's creation, with Brussels as capital ever since.) Public art is everywhere, from comic murals to outdoor sculptures and Art Nouveau facades, plus there are well-spaced green escapes. Much of the city centre is pedestrian-friendly and the region's metro, tram and bus network makes getting around easy otherwise.

Recommendations on where to eat, drink, shop and stay as well as key annual events are listed at [wowbelgium.com](https://www.wowbelgium.com).



BRUSSELS

Belgium's Cultured, Quirky Capital

🌐 visit.brussels 🧑 1,256,000

Often overshadowed by larger Northern European capitals like Paris and Amsterdam, Brussels (*Bruxelles* in French and *Brussel* in Dutch) is an underexplored gem with far more to it than politics and policy. It has international flair, striking good looks, unique charm, culinary depth and endless culture. Like Belgians themselves, Brussels is modest and understated, but it captures the hearts of those who take the time to get to know it.

UNESCO TREASURES

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Brussels' **Grand Place** dazzles with gilded former guild houses and the strikingly asymmetrical **Hôtel de Ville** (City Hall), whose mismatched wings—built decades apart—reflect the city's quirky character. The City



Hall impresses with its 96-m spire, arcades and richly sculpted facade. Add night lights, especially in December with a sound-and-light show, and the Grand Place becomes magical.

The **Major Town Houses of Victor Horta**—widely regarded as Belgium's most famous architect—include Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde and the Maison and Atelier Horta (Horta Museum). They are Art Nouveau masterpieces defined by open plans, flowing lines and masterful use of light. Hôtel Solvay stands out for its lavish, fully Horta-designed interiors.



All of the interiors can be toured with the exception of the privately owned Hôtel Tassel.

Also in private hands, **Palais Stoclet** is an Art Nouveau–Art Deco gem with marble cladding, geometric gardens and a distinctive tower crowned with bronze figures. About 4 km from the city centre, it is worth a trip for architecture buffs.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO-listed **Belgian beer culture** flows well in Brussels. Brewing traditions date back to Gallo-Roman times and the Middle Ages, which were later associated with the legendary 'King of Beer' Gambrinus. Today, Brussels celebrates this heritage at **Belgian Beer World** in the former stock exchange, with interactive exhibits and a rooftop tasting bar overlooking the city. Each September, **Belgian Beer Weekend** transforms the Grand Place into an open-air bar with more than 500 beers from some 50 breweries. The city is also home to around 65 craft brewers, including **Cantillon Brasserie et Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze** that's famed for gueuze—dubbed the 'Champagne of Brussels'—and educational tours. Plentiful classic pubs round out the scene.

Heritage also lives on in pageantry via UNESCO-recognised **processional giants and dragons**. Every summer, the spectacular **Ommegang** proces-

sion recreates Charles V's 1549 entry into Brussels with 1,400 costumed performers, musicians, horses, giants and stilt walkers of all heights parading from the Sablon district to the Grand Place, culminating in a torchlit finale. Processional giants also star in **Meyboom**, a lively 1 May celebration marking the arrival of spring.

ARCHITECTURE

MEDIEVAL

The Middle Ages endure in fragments of Brussels' two defensive walls and a picture-postcard cathedral. Remains of the first wall are the 13th-century **Tour Anneessens** and sections along Boulevard de l'Empereur and Rue de Viller, while the main gate of the second wall is well preserved at the storybook **Porte de Halle**, which houses a museum on medieval Brussels. In the city centre, **Cathédrale Saints-Michel-et-Gudule** impresses with twin towers and a white-stone Gothic facade—long associated with royal weddings and state funerals.

ROYAL

The city's ceremonial heart is the **Palais Royal**, a grand neoclassical palace with formal gardens and opulent interiors, including the emerald jewel-beetle-covered Salle des Glaces. Though not the royal residence, the palace is only open for visits from 22 July to early September.



Meanwhile, the boulevard in front hosts year-round festivals. Beneath the palace lies another in ruins: the excavated **Coudenberg**, once home to Burgundian dukes.

Across the Parc de Bruxelles, the imposing **Palais de la Nation** houses the Belgian Parliament, visitable on 21 July (Belgian National Day) or by guided tour.

In the centre, the elegant **Galleries Royales Saint-Hubert** (1847) dazzle with a soaring glass roof, while the richly decorated **Passage du Nord** features caryatids and allegorical sculptures.

On the city's northern edge, the **Serres Royales de Laeken** are monumental greenhouses surrounded by a Chinese pavilion and Japanese pagoda within the royal residential estate. The greenhouses are open for tours three weeks each spring.

MONUMENTAL

The triumphal **Arc du Cinquante-naire**, rising above its namesake park, is crowned with bronze statuary and



flanked by sweeping colonnades—Brussels' answer to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

On Rue Royale, the **Colonne du Congrès** commemorates Belgium's first national congress and World War casualties with an eternal flame for an unknown soldier. Nearby, the magnificently restored Grand Hotel Astoria reopened in 2024 as the **Corinthia Grand Hotel Astoria Brussels**, reviving Belle Époque splendour beneath a rectangular stained-glass roof.

The monumental **Palais de Justice**—the world's largest courthouse—dominates the skyline with a large gilded dome. Situated on Place Poelaert, it is under restoration until 2035. In the centre, **La Bourse**, now home to Belgian Beer World, impresses with grand halls and ornate detail. Archaeological remains are visible in **Bruxella 1238** below street level inside and out.

ART NOUVEAU

Few cities display Art Nouveau like Brussels. Beyond its UNESCO-listed

Horta town houses, the style flourishes across the city in richly crafted facades and interiors. The former Magasin Old England houses the **Musée des Instruments de Musique**, turning wrought-iron and bow windows into a visual symphony. **Maison Ciamberlani**, home of the Argentine Embassy, stands out for its myth-laden sgraffito, while **Maison Cauchie** boasts some of Belgium's finest examples of the technique. The slender **Maison Saint-Cyr** dazzles with vivid green ironwork, **Maison Hannon** has impressive floral motifs and stained glass, and **Maison Autrique**—Horta's first town house—showcases his pioneering use of iron and glass. All can be toured inside except Maison Ciamberlani.

ECLECTIC

The stately **Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie** exemplifies 19th-century grandeur with a neoclassical colonnade, lavish red-and-gold interiors and richly painted ceilings. Blocks away, the protected **Maison de Goude Huyve** charms with stained glass, orange brick, blue stone accents and white colonettes.

MODERN

The striking **Europa** building, where the Council of the European Union and European Council meet, pairs glass and rust-toned steel with a glowing, lantern-like timber interior.



At Tour and Taxis, **Gare Maritime** reimagines a former freight terminal as an award-winning, sustainable hub, blending historic steel and stone with timber walkways and solar panels.

Rising above the city, the iconic **Atomium**, built for Expo 58, is Brussels' beloved emblem: a monumental stainless-steel molecule offering panoramic views from its exhibition and restaurant spheres.



ART AND CULTURE NATIONAL TREASURES

The **Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique** comprise six institutions,

four clustered around Place Royale and two in former artists' studios. Within the same complex, the **Musée Old-masters** holds the country's richest collection of Flemish Primitives; **Musée Fin-de-Siècle** focuses on Belgian art from the late 19th century to the First World War; and the **Musée Modern** spans European art from the late 18th century to today. Neighbouring **Musée Magritte** takes you into the surreal world of painter René Magritte. Elsewhere, **Musée Antoine Wiertz** and **Musée Constantin Meunier** present Romantic and social-realist works in the artists' former studios.

In Parc Cinquantenaire, the **Musée Art et Histoire** traces global civilisations from Egyptian antiquity to Asian cultures. Newer galleries are dedicated to Belgian Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

ART DECO

Designed by Horta, **BOZAR** is Brussels' flagship Art Deco venue for exhibitions and performing arts, complemented by a two-Michelin-star restaurant and summer rooftop terrace. Across



the city, the **Van Buuren Museum & Gardens** combine sumptuous interiors and a distinguished art collection with sculpted gardens and a labyrinth, while **Villa Empain** impresses with sleek lines, polished stone, an iconic pool and rotating contemporary art exhibitions.

CONTEMPORARY

Along the canal, **KANAL–Centre Pompidou** is set to reopen in late 2026, transforming a former car factory into a major centre for contemporary art and architecture. In the city centre, the **Banksy Museum** explores the mystique of the anonymous street artist through large-scale murals. Street art spans the city—from Isaac Cordal's mini men to Invader's pixelated works and Bonom's monumental murals. More discreet are rooftop and park sculptures, such as *In the Cloud* on a rooftop and *Les Passions Humaines*, Jef Lambeaux's provocative marble relief housed in a Horta-designed pavilion in Parc Cinquantenaire (limited opening hours).

A lively contemporary scene is anchored by galleries in the Sablon district and along Rue Haute and Rue Saint-Georges, bolstered by international fairs such as **BRAFA**, **Art Brussels** and the **Affordable Art Fair**. **Les Halles Saint-Géry** combines rotating exhibitions with a buzzing food hall, while the **Korean Cultural Center Brussels** offers contemporary art

shows and culinary workshops. Even governmental organisations have impressive contemporary collections: The **Brussels-Capital Region Parliament** displays works by Belgian artists, the **Vlaams Parlement** doubles as a light-filled gallery for Flemish art and **VISITWallonia** displays rotating works related to the region.

COMICS AND POETRY

Brussels honours comics like few other cities. The **Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée**, housed in a Horta-designed building, celebrates Belgian icons like the Smurfs, Tintin and Lucky Luke. The **Parcours BD** turns the city into an open-air gallery of some 40 murals and each September, the **BD Comic Strip Festival** adds to the mix. Brussels' long-awaited **Musée du Chat et du Dessin d'Humour**, inspired by contemporary Belgian cartoonist Philippe Geluck, will open as early as late 2027 near the BOZAR.

In Anderlecht, the **Musée Maurice Carême** preserves the home and work of the beloved Belgian poet.



HISTORY AND POLITICS

In Brussels, nearly one in ten residents works for an EU institution, giving it a distinctly international vibe. Learn about the EU's history at the free **Parlamentarium** and other aspects of continental history at the nearby **House of European History**. The **European Parliament** offers free guided tours with advance booking. On **EU Day**, the second Saturday of May, usually closed EU buildings—including the European Council and EU Commission—open their doors to the public.

At Parc Cinquantenaire, the **Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History** charts global mili-



tary and social history complete with rooftop views. Opposite is **Autoworld** with international car models spanning 130 years.

Belgium's own institutions are equally approachable. The **Federal Parliament** offers public tours, while the nearby **BELvue Museum** covers contemporary Belgian history and democracy through interactive exhibits. The **Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles** on the Grand Place traces the capital's evolution. In Molenbeek, **La Fonderie** explores Brussels' industrial and labour history in a former foundry.

RELIGIOUS RELICS

Brussels' Gothic showpiece, **Cathédrale Saints-Michel-et-Gudule** has a soaring nave, flamboyant carved



pulpit and richly coloured 16th-century stained glass. Its archaeological crypt reveals Romanesque foundations and its treasury preserves notable reliquaries.

The 15th-century **Notre-Dame du Sablon** enchants with a Gothic facade, radiant stained glass and a striking black-and-white chapel housing a Baroque mausoleum. Tucked behind the Grand Place, the largely 14th-century **Église Saint-Nicolas** contains notable artworks, including restored altarpieces.

Dominating the western skyline, the massive **Basilique Nationale du Sacré-Cœur** combines Art Deco monumentality with panoramic views from its dome. In Schaerbeek, the distinctive **Église Royale Sainte-Marie** stands out for its octagonal plan, striped stonework and light-filled central dome, showcasing 19th-century eclecticism.

FASHION AND SHOPPING

Brussels has a diverse shopping scene. **Avenue Louise** and **Toison d'Or** host international brands alongside Belgian names such as Diane von Fürstenberg, Natan and Caroline Biss, while **Rue Antoine Dansaert** and **Rue des Chartreux** champion independent designers. For refined browsing in the city centre, the **Galleries Royales Saint-Hubert** and **Passage du Nord** house elegant boutiques, many featuring Belgian-made goods. Book lovers

should not miss the restored **Galerie Bortier**.

The daily **Marché aux Puces de la Place du Jeu de Balle** (flea market) in the Marolles district features vintage and estate sale items—some worth haggling over—and antique shops line adjacent Rue Blaes. VISITWallonia and VISITFLANDERS have shops promoting regional craftsmanship, and businesses bearing a **royal warrant** or the **Brussels Expertise Labels** (BEL) signal exceptional quality.

GASTRONOMY

Brussels' gastronomic reputation spans from food truck waffles to Michelin-starred dining. National staples—chocolate, waffles, speculoos, fries and mussels—complement more than 30



starred restaurants while a growing cocktail scene adds swankiness. Flagship kitchens reinterpret Belgian craftsmanship with seasonal produce, balanced by relaxed neighbourhood brasseries and wine and beer bars. **Wolf Food Market Brussels** combines 17 restaurant stands and two bars for a taste of the city. For something different, the **Tram Experience** pairs a chef-curated menu with a moving city tour and foodie events such as the **EAT Festival** showcase local flavours.

Chocolate is central to Brussels' identity—the praline was invented here in 1912—and artisanal makers such as **Frédéric Blondeel**, **Benoît Nihant**, **Mary** and **Pierre Marcolini** elevate the craft to bean-to-bar artistry. **Belgian Chocolate Village** and **Choco-Story Brussels** offer tastings and workshops. Some of Belgium's best chocolatiers come together at Easter time for the annual **Bel'Œuf** at Hotel Amigo, creating spectacular giant chocolate eggs.

Street life completes the picture: caramelised Liège and crispy Brussels waffles, speculoos from **Maison Dandoy** and frites—explained at the kid-friendly **Frietmuseum Brussels**—served properly with mayonnaise. Weekly markets add local colour, from Place du Châtelain and Place Luxembourg to Place Flagey's Sunday oyster ritual and the Moroccan flavours of Gare du Midi.

MUSIC NOTES

Brussels resonates with music at every scale. Fans of Jacques Brel can explore his life and legacy at the **Fondation Brel**, while the **Musée des Instruments de Musique** showcases more than 1,000 instruments—from ancient lutes to early synthesisers—enhanced by an immersive audio guide. Several concert venues attract top talent.

The city's calendar is equally rich. Highlights include the internationally renowned **Queen Elisabeth Competition**, global sounds of **Couleur Café**, citywide free concerts during **Fête de la Musique**, and genre-spanning **Listen! Festival**, **Brosella Festival** and **Brussels Jazz Weekend**, which turn venues and public squares into open-air stages.



FESTIVAL FEVER

Beyond music, Brussels revels in celebration, hosting some 20,000 events a year. Standouts include **Belgian National Day** (21 July), when parades, concerts and fireworks animate the royal quarter, and the biennial **Tapis de Fleurs**, which carpets the Grand Place in August with nearly a million begonias. Winter highlights include **Plaisirs d'Hiver** (Winter Pleasures) with a 250-stall Christmas market and light show, while February's **Bright Brussels** bathes the city in magical luminous installations.

Living traditions add colour year-round. **Belgian Pride** fills the streets each May, and October's **Nuit Blanche** opens galleries and museums for a city-wide night of culture.

CURIOSITIES

Brussels embraces eccentricity, with more than 100 museums and a taste for the unusual. Quirkier highlights include the open-air **Musée du Réverbère** charting the city's street lighting; **Clockarium**, home to an extensive collection of Art Deco ceramic clocks; and **Illusion Brussels**, which bends reality with distorted mirrors and gravity-defying rooms. In the city centre, the trio of peeing statues—**Manneken Pis**, **Jeanneke Pis** and **Het Zinneke**—remain beloved oddities, with Manneken Pis famed for more than 1,100 costumes displayed at **GardeRobe MannekenPis**.



Hands-on traditions and offbeat views add to the mix: a **crossbow guild** near Place Royale recalls medieval pastimes, while a **Ferris wheel** by the Palais de Justice offers sunset panoramas. Puppetry lives on at the historic **Théâtre Royal de Toone** and for quieter reflection, the monumental tombs of **Cimetière de Bruxelles** and **Cimetière de Laeken** trace the lives of notable Belgians.

OUTDOOR OASES

Despite its urban buzz, Brussels offers abundant green refuge. In the city centre, the terraced **Mont des Arts** combines formal gardens with postcard views, flanked by cultural landmarks. Nearby **Square du Petit Sablon** charms with seasonal planting and statues of

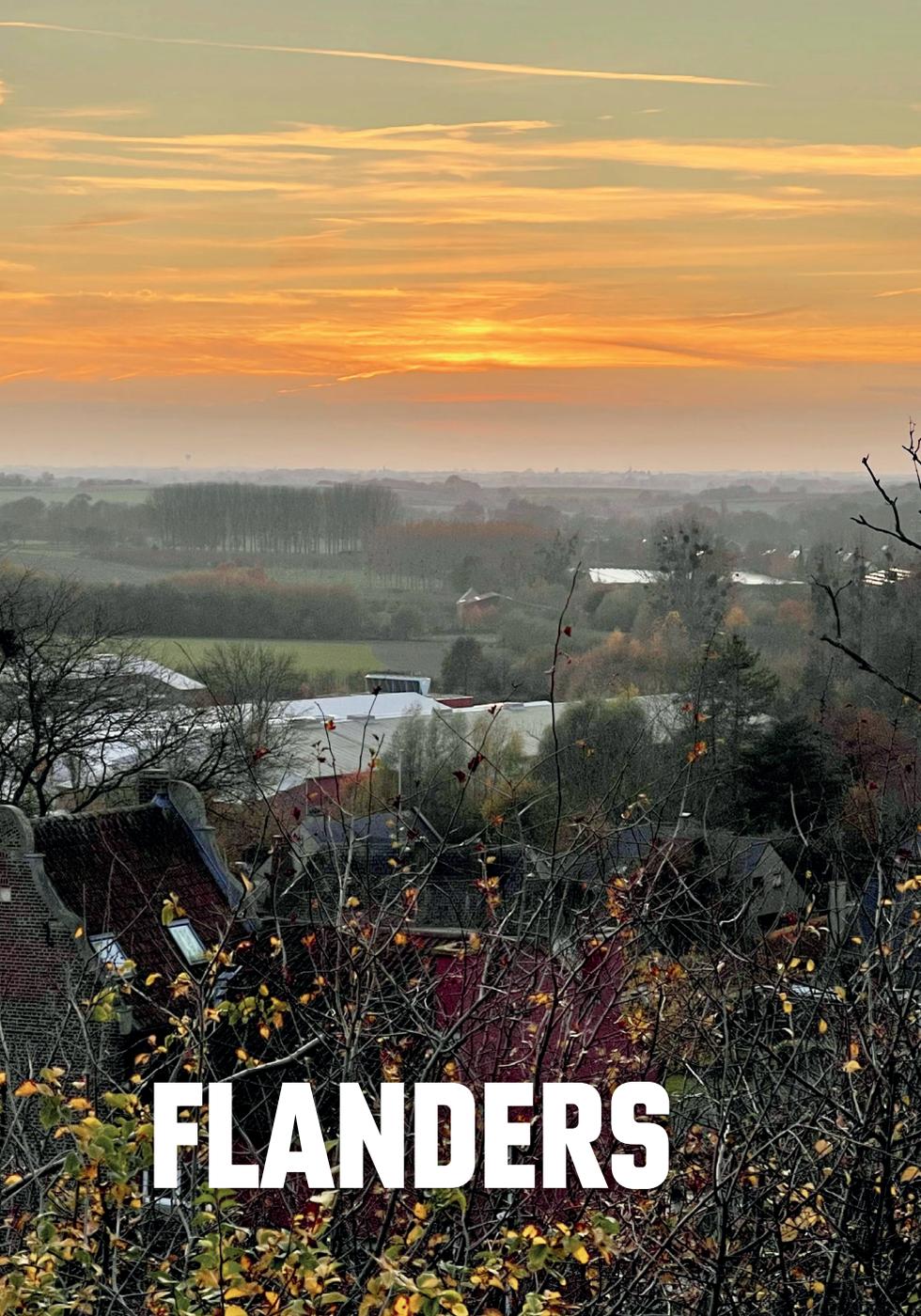
historic Belgian figures. **Parc de Bruxelles** invites leisurely promenades amid fountains and kiosks.

In the European Quarter, **Parc Léopold** provides a tranquil escape behind the Parliament, and **Square Ambiorix** stands out for its heroic statue and surrounding Art Nouveau and eclectic mansions. Further south, the **Étangs d'Ixelles**—two ponds lined with weeping willows and elegant terraced houses—and the former **Abbaye de la Cambre** with shadowy cloisters and Versailles-like gardens offer serene walks. Just a few streets away, the vast **Bois de la Cambre** offers trails, pedal and rowing boats, and an island restaurant.

On the city's edge, the **Forêt de Soignes** forms a vast green lung of UNESCO-recognised beech woodland, threaded with paths and dotted with the medieval **Rouge-Cloître** and its nature reserve. Up to 10,000 bright green parakeets—the outgrowth of a 1970s zoo release—add flashes of colour throughout the city's parks.

CITY PERKS

The **Brussels Card** grants access to 48 museums, discounts and maps—with optional public transport and hop-on hop-off bus add-ons—for 24, 48 or 72 hours. The city also has **Villo!** docked bike-sharing system and several operators of free-floating e-bikes and e-scooters.



FLANDERS

DUTCH-SPEAKING NORTHERN POWERHOUSE

 [visitflanders.com](https://www.visitflanders.com)  6,865,000

Accounting for 60 per cent of the Belgian population yet only 44 per cent of its land space, Flanders is shaped by flat landscapes, medieval heritage and culture influenced by centuries of international trade. It is a region of open horizons with polders, dunes, waterways and villages connected by one of Europe's densest networks of hiking and biking routes. Flemish architecture is unmistakable, from stepped gables and ornate guildhalls to brick towers and UNESCO-listed beguinages. Most cities are anchored by a **Grote Markt** (Grand Market Square) and **Stadhuis** (City Hall).

Flanders has a deeply ingrained culture of craftsmanship and creativity. Breweries range from monastic to

experimental; chocolatiers and textile-makers guard age-old traditions; and designers and artists continue a long lineage of innovation. The region is efficient and industrious—yet still convivial and obsessed with good food.

Then there is the North Sea coast belonging only to Flanders, where seaside resorts and wide beaches offer breezy escapes. They are connected by the world's longest tram line, **De Kusttram**, a scenic 67-km track along the entire coastline from Knokke-Heist to De Panne.

Flanders also has a fantastic roster of folkloric festivals, cycling classics and contemporary cultural events. **Open Monumentendag** (Monuments Day) on the second Sunday of September opens hundreds of heritage sites throughout the region at no cost. Several Flemish cities even indicate where there are free public toilets via the app **HogeNood** (HighNeed).

Belgium's vibrant north, Flanders is largely flat but never dull, historic yet innovative and a must on any Belgian itinerary.



Recommendations on where to eat, drink, shop and stay as well as key annual events are listed at [wowbelgium.com](https://www.belgium.com).





WEST FLANDERS

BRUGES

UNESCO-listed 'Venice of the North'

 [visitbruges.be](https://www.visitbruges.be)  120,000

Bruges (*Brugge* in Dutch) is one of Europe's best-preserved medieval cities and the cradle of the Flemish Primitives, who transformed Western painting. Its remarkably intact historic centre is defined by Gothic architecture, romantic canals, cobbled streets and art treasures. Named European Capital of Culture in 2002 and gaining global attention thanks to the movie *In Bruges* (2008), the city also excels in beer culture and gastronomy—an irresistible blend of heritage and pleasure.

UNESCO HERITAGE

Bruges boasts seven UNESCO recognitions, exceptional for a city of its size. Its historic centre, belfry and beguinage are World Heritage Sites, while Belgian beer and carillon cultures—well represented in the city—and an annual religious procession are

inscribed as Intangible Cultural Heritage. Bruges also appears in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register for Hanseatic League archives preserved at its Gruuthusemuseum.

Bruges' historic centre is celebrated for its extraordinary state of preservation and visual unity, marked by Gothic brick architecture. The city is also UNESCO-listed as the birthplace of the Flemish Primitives, whose masterpieces are scattered throughout museums and churches.

The turreted, 83-m **Belfort van Brugge** dominates the city's skyline. Its 366 steps lead past a former treasury and clockwork to sweeping views. Its bells contribute to Belgian **carillon culture** with concerts on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday (11 am–12 pm) and certain summer evenings, best heard from the rear courtyard.

The double-layered Basiliek van het Heilig-Bloed safeguards a cloth



said to bear Christ's blood in a crystal vial, carried annually since 1304 during the **Heilig Bloedprocessie** (Procession of the Holy Blood) on Ascension Day. During the Calvinist era, relics were outlawed so the vial was hidden in a house on Wollestraat, now marked by a plaque.



Founded in 1245, **Begijnhof Ten Wijngaarde** is Bruges' sole surviving beguinaige, housing nuns and unmarried women. Its whitewashed houses, church, liturgical centre and sprawling courtyard garden—carpeted with spring flowers—create a serene retreat daily until 6.30 pm. Just outside, white swans glide along a canal as legendary city symbols.

UNESCO-recognised **Belgian beer culture** runs deep in Bruges, which has its own brew—Brugse Zot ('Bruges fool', a medieval nickname for locals)—two breweries, the **Bruges Beer Experience**, autumn **Brugs Bierfestival** and countless beer venues. The **Beerwall** at 2be displays more than 1,000 Belgian beers and their unique glasses in a covered pas-

sageway of a historic mayor's house. **De Halve Maan** brews on site and famously pipes beer to its bottling plant (fake pipes are displayed at its entrance; the real ones are hidden), while **Brouwerij Bourgogne des Flandres** blends beer. Both offer tours, tastings and terraces.

ARCHITECTURE

Bruges' architectural gems largely date from its 14th–15th-century golden age, clustered around the Markt and nearby Burg squares. On the Markt, the **Provinciaal Hof** opens its glorious neo-Gothic chambers to the public, including artful displays, a 360-degree video and cafe. Opposite is the **Huis Bouchoute**, one of the city's oldest civic buildings, with an unusual flat roof topped by a wind compass and gilded globe. Facing the belfry is a colourful row of step-gabled guild houses whose 'crafts' are now eating and drinking. The lace-like **Historium** (also the Visit Bruges office) recreates Bruges' heyday through immersive storytelling, ending with stellar views of the Markt.



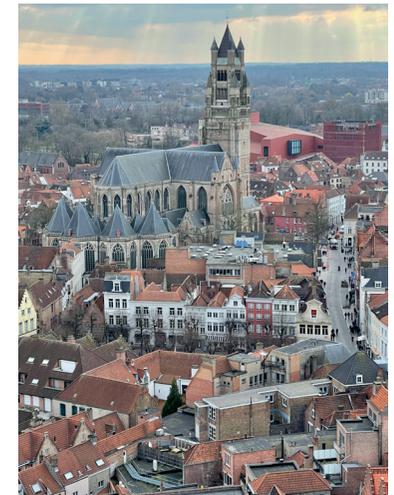
Burg square is dominated by the elegant 1376 **Stadhuis, Basiliek van het Heilig-Bloed**—bi-level with a dark, Romanesque lower chapel and gilded, Gothic upper chapel where the revered relic is stored—and **Brugse Vrije** (Liberty of Bruges), former law courts housing a monumental wooden mantelpiece carved for Emperor Charles V. The connecting **Blinde-Ezelstraat** (Blind Donkey Street), with gilded elements, is one of Bruges' most photographed passageways.

Close by stand the **Koninklijke Stadsschouwburg**, a 19th-century Baroque theatre, and the former **Sint-Janshospitaal** from the 12th century, among Europe's oldest surviving hospital complexes. **Lucas Huys**, a striking black timber mansion relocated from Brussels, faces Koningin Astridpark.



Across the city are more than 40 surviving **godshuizen** (almshouses)—whitewashed cottages that once housed the poor, elderly and widows—including picturesque **Sint-Josef en De Meulenaere**. (Since March 2026, their courtyards are no longer accessible.) They were sponsored by wealthy families in exchange for daily prayers—'pay to pray' so to speak—and their names on facades.

Bruges' four medieval gates mark historic entrances, with **Kruispoort** (Cross Gate) famously used by Charles V and Napoleon. Other rare survivals include two 16th-century wooden facades on **Genthof** and **Kortewinkel** streets; about 30 original guild signs throughout the historic centre; and two 13th-century pillars near the **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk** (Church of Our Lady).



ART AND CULTURE

Bruges' art scene spans centuries in the space of a stroll. The **Gruuthusemuseum** presents Burgundian splendour in a 15th-century palace with an oratory chapel overlooking Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk and a balcony facing the picture-postcard **Bonifaciusbrug** (Boniface Bridge). The museum displays applied arts and luxury items, notably tapestries and sculptures.

Nearby, the **Groeningemuseum** traces six centuries of art from Jan Van Eyck to René Magritte, complemented by sculptures and a white gazebo in the serene **Arentshof** garden. Just next door, the modern glass **BRUSK** will complement the museum as an international art exhibition centre from May 2026.

Hof Bladelin displays 15th-century furnishings, art and everyday objects while the nearby **Poortersloge** (Burghers' Lodge)—once an art school and a safe haven for rescued masterpieces during wartime—hosts rotating contemporary exhibitions.

The **Museum Sint-Janshospitaal** paints a rich history of art and healing. It hosts a major Hans Memling collection, the immersive *Closer to Memling Experience*, Gothic art and medical instruments alongside a historic **Apotheek** (Apothecary), herb garden and free weekly harp concerts. Across town, **O.L.V. ter Potterie**, a former infirmary-convent, houses art, reli-

gious artefacts and medical instruments from centuries of care.

At the belfry's base, **XPO Salvador Dalí** displays more than 300 works by the surrealist painter. Further out, the **Kantcentrum** preserves the city's lace tradition, including a 'Handmade in Bruges' quality label, while the **Diamantmuseum Brugge** delves into the city's brilliant role in diamond cutting.

Contemporary culture thrives at the **Concertgebouw Brugge** performing-arts centre, which offers a self-guided art-and-architecture **Concertgebouw Circuit**, ending on its rooftop with sweeping views. *Colonnade*, a walk-through labyrinth of 100 columns, stands in northern Baron Ruzettepark.

RELIGIOUS RELICS

Gothic churches are a force in Bruges. The best known is the medieval **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk** with a 115-m brick tower and flying buttresses. Its **O.L.V.-kerk Museum** has a coveted Michaelangelo sculpture of *Madonna and Child*, once stolen by Napoleon and Hitler (famously recounted in *The Monuments Men* movie). The sculpture was gifted by a wealthy family to the church in exchange for the right to be buried in it (a practice from which the term 'stinking rich' evolved). The church also has a stunning Baroque interior with black-and-white flooring and mausoleums of historic figures



such as Charles the Bold and Mary of Burgundy.

Other notable churches include 13th-century **Sint-Jakobskerk**, fortress-like **Sint-Salvatorskathedraal**, frescoed **Jeruzalemkapel**, Baroque **Sint-Annakerk** and **Sint-Gilliskerk**, where great Bruges artists like Memling are buried. The city is also dotted with elegant corner Madonnas like a treasure hunt.

CANALS AND WINDMILLS

Bruges' canals define and reflect its image. Plentiful boat tours glide through a vast network of canals past medieval facades. **Rozenhoedkaai** (Rosary Quay) is the most 'Instagrammable' spot in the city.

Marked by the old **Poertoren** (Gunpowder Tower), the **Minnewa-**



ter (Lake of Love) is a photographer's dream with a romantic bridge, castle, park, swan-filled waterways and stunning reflections. Restaurants and terraces invite lingering.

Four historic windmills remain along the former city walls; two are still operational, including the visitable **Sint-Janshuismolen**. The ramparts, **De Vesten**, form 26 ha of green space with a 7-km walking and cycling path linking old city gates and a striking red bridge.



GASTRONOMY

Bruges embraces Belgium's culinary traditions of beer, chocolate, waffles and fries. The **Bruges Beer Experience** explains beer styles, brewing processes and food pairing. **Choco-Story Brugge** traces chocolate's journey from cacao beans to pralines and offers workshops, while **The Chocolate Line** features 'tree to bar' chocolate, avant-garde pralines and visible production behind glass walls. **Otto Waffle Atelier** specialises in lace-shaped oat waffles and the **Frietmuseum Brugge** chronicles the history of Belgian fries.

Dining ranges from classic Flemish fare, such as *stoofvlees* (stewed beef) and *mosselen-friet* (mussels and fries), to refined international cuisine in Bruges' plentiful restaurants, often in historic settings. Free drinking-water points throughout the city complement tastings.



CURIOSITIES

The **Torture Museum—De Oude Steen** and **Museum of Witchcraft** explore darker chapters of Bruges' history, while **Lumina Domestica** enlightens with 6,000 lamps charting the history of illumination.

Old fire alleys along canals are a throwback to the time human bucket chains tried to extinguish burning houses.

Tucked away between the old Vismarkt (Fish Market) and Rozenhoedkaai is **Huidenvettersplein** (Tanners Square), where medieval leather was treated with urine. Take a break on one of its cafe terraces and look for architectural details that recall this past.

CITY PERKS

The **Musea Bruges Card** grants 72-hour access to 13 museums, including many of the above, the **Volkskundemuseum** (Folk Art Museum in renovated workers' houses about 19th-century life) and **Gezellehuis** (former house of Guido Gezelle, a 19th-century Flemish poet).

Visit Bruges offers guided tours on foot and by bike, photography workshops and free walking routes via its own app. **Horse-drawn carriage tours** and **hot-air balloon rides** offer different sightseeing perspectives.

For fewer crowds, visit the historic centre before 11 am or in November, January or February.

KNOKKE-HEIST

'St. Tropez' of the North

 knokke-heist.be  32,400

Often associated with wealth and glamour, Knokke-Heist has Belgium's highest density of art galleries and second homes per square kilometre and ranks among the country's leaders for the most restaurants and luxury cars per capita. Yet it is equally rich in nature from North Sea beaches to dune ridges and vast polder landscapes. A year-round resort, it is a place to see and be seen but also to hide.

DISTRICTS

The municipality comprises the coastal towns of **Heist** and **Knokke**, village **Duinbergen** and inland hamlets of **Ramskapelle** and **Westkapelle**. Together they form five districts: the towns and village; **Het Zoute**, the most exclusive part of Knokke; and **De Polders**, low-lying landscapes enclosed by dykes that include the hamlets.



Fashionable Knokke is the lively heart of the resort. British-inspired Het Zoute concentrates luxury shopping, dining and accommodation, while Duinbergen ('Dune Hills') is characterised by white villas, orange-tiled roofs and laid-back charm. Former fishing village Heist remains relaxed and family-friendly. De Polders offer wide green spaces, including Zwin Natuur Park.

FUN IN THE SUN

Around 75 per cent of Knokke-Heist is open space. Its 11-km, sustainable **Blue Flag beach** is lined with traditional white cabins and some 20 beach bars (April–October). Dress codes, sound restrictions and seasonal dog rules are strictly enforced.

Water sports are offered by the **Royal Belgian Sailing Club (RBSC)**, **Surfers Paradise** and **River Woods Beach Club** in Het Zoute, plus **Lake-side Paradise**, **Beachclub Anemos** and