



BELGIUM



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Belgium falls through the cracks. It's nestled between Germany, France, and Britain, and it's famous for waffles, sprouts, and endive—no wonder many travelers don't even consider a stop here. But many who do visit remark that Belgium is one of Europe's best-kept secrets. There are tourists—but not as many as the country's charms merit.

Ten million Belgians are packed into a country only a little bigger than Maryland. At 830 people per square mile, it's the second most densely populated country in Europe (after the Netherlands). This population concentration, coupled with a dense and well-lit rail and road system, causes Belgium to shine at night when viewed from space, a phenomenon NASA astronauts call the “Belgian Window.”

It's here in Belgium that Europe comes together: Where Romance languages meet Germanic languages, where Catholics meet Protestants, and where the new Europe is growing, sprouting from the seed planted 40 years ago by the Benelux union. Because of Belgium's international importance as the capital of the European Union, more than 25 percent of its residents are foreigners. Belgium flies the flag of Europe more vigorously than any other place on the continent.

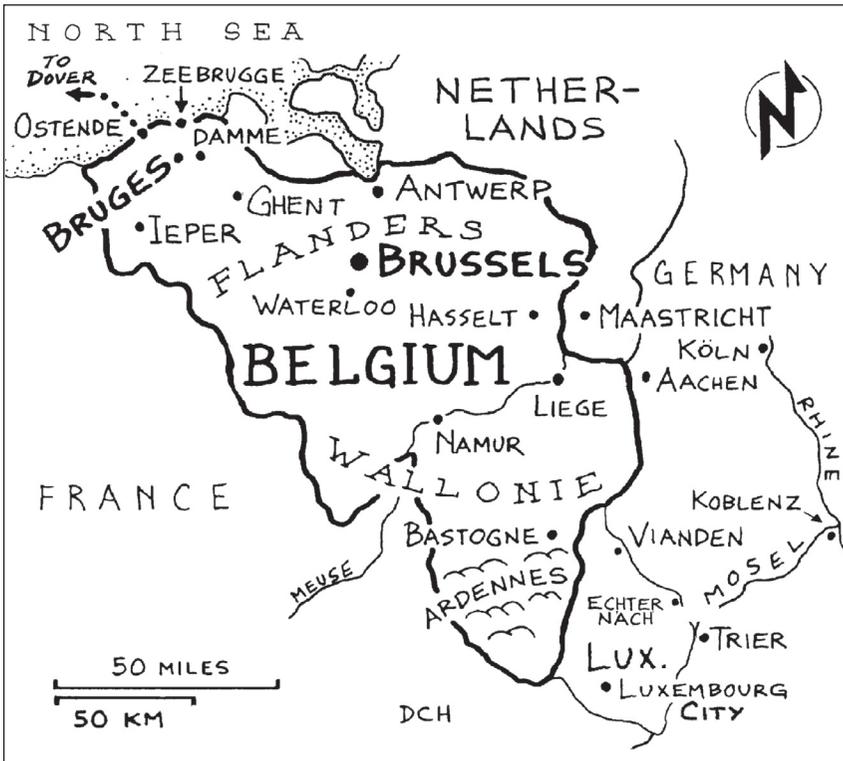
The country is split between the French-speaking Walloons in the south and the Dutch-speaking Flemish people (60 percent of the population) in the north. Talk to locals to learn how deep the cultural rift is. Belgium's capital, Brussels, while mostly French-speaking, is officially bilingual. The country also has a small minority of German-speaking people.

With all this diversity, English bridges the gap—it's almost universally spoken in Belgium, especially in the Flemish half (Dutch-speaking,

How Big, How Many, How Much

- 12,000 square miles (a little larger than Maryland)
- 10 million people (830 per square mile)
- €1 = about \$1.20

Belgium



including Bruges). But if you want to win points, learn a couple of key Dutch words: “hello” is *hallo* (hol-LOH), “please” is *alstublieft* (AHL-stoo-bleeft), and “thank you” is *dank u wel* (dahnk yoo vehl). For language help in French-speaking Belgium (including Brussels), see page *TK and the “French Survival Phrases” near the end of this book.

Belgians brag that they eat as much as the Germans and as well as the French. They are among the world’s leading beer consumers and carnivores. And yes, they really do eat waffles here. While Americans think of “Belgian” waffles for breakfast, the Belgians (who don’t eat waffles or pancakes for breakfast) think of *wafels* as Liège-style (dense, sweet, eaten plain, and heated up) and Brussels-style (lighter, often with powdered sugar or whipped cream and fruit, served in teahouses only in the afternoons 14:00–18:00). You’ll see waffles sold at restaurants and take-away stands.

Bruges is the best first bite of Belgium. It’s a wonderfully preserved medieval Flemish gem that expertly nurtures the tourist industry, bringing the town a prosperity it hasn’t enjoyed since 500 years ago, when—as

one of the largest cities in the world—it helped lead northern Europe out of the Middle Ages.

ACCESSIBILITY IN BELGIUM

Access for people with disabilities is generally good in Belgium, particularly in public spaces, though English-language publications and English-speaking organizations are in short supply.

The **Belgium Tourist Office** will provide information to help you plan your visit (220 E. 42nd St. #3402, New York, NY 10017, tel. 212/758-8130, fax 212/355-7675, www.visitbelgium.com, info@visitbelgium.com).