

Getting Started

There's nothing quite like daydreaming about chocolate shops fit for royalty, linger-as-long-as-you-like *cafés*, and beer menus that simply go on and on and on. But to loose your head in the clouds and arrive in Belgium and Luxembourg with no preparation is inviting challenges. With a good plan, you'll know whether it's your French, German or Flemish that needs brushing up, whether you should you go by train or plane, and where to find discounted accommodation.

WHEN TO GO

There's a reason radio DJs in Belgium love the Beatles' 1969 classic 'Here Comes the Sun'. The weather here is fickle, and when the sun comes out everyone celebrates. To avoid major dampness coupled with biting cold, plan a visit for May to September (late spring to early autumn). For hiking and outdoor pursuits in the Ardennes and Luxembourg, these are certainly the months to go. The disadvantages of this time include considerable crowds at tourist sights in a few places and, depending on where you go, a scarcity of accommodation – Bruges is the most problematic in both these areas. Brussels, on the other hand, is quieter from mid-July to mid-September and, because of this, some hotels cut prices. Discounting is also common on weekends (p98).

The mild winter conditions from November to March usually mean grey, wet days with occasional light snow. Pack the right clothes and you can take advantage of uncrowded museums and plenty of cosy *cafés*.

As a weekend break Brussels, Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Ostend or Leuven are all perfect, and all easily accessible from London on the soon-to-be-even-faster Eurostar (see boxed text, p319) or from other neighbouring countries using the Thalys fast train network (see boxed text, p318). If you can tack on an extra day to your trip, choose Friday not Monday, as many museums in these cities close on Monday, and shops often take Monday mornings off.

You might want to time your trip for a local celebration – use the list on the next page as an initial guide. Both countries are big on festivals (p307), but the lion's share of events take place over summer.

See Climate Charts (p305) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Photocopying important documents – leave one copy at home and take another with you.
- An umbrella – in an average summer it'll hardly dry off.
- An extra jumper for when summer temperatures plunge (p305).
- Your sweet tooth – it's praline paradise (p54).
- An airsick bag – it may be necessary after eating *filet américain* (p58).
- A small change purse to ward off zealous toilet sentinels (p311).
- Nerves of steel – you'll need them on the road (p323).
- A credit card for avant-garde fashions (p114; p197).
- Your favourite hangover cure (p45).
- A sense of humour – necessary when dried herrings are flapped in your face at carnival (p223).

TOP TENS

Festivals & Events

Choose from fun and festivities throughout the year. For more on festivals, see p307.

- Carnival, around February (p223)
- Couleur Café, June (p96)
- Brussels Jazz Marathon, May (p96)
- Luxembourg National Day, 23 June (p307)
- La Doudou, May/June (p222)
- De Gentse Feesten, mid-July (p165)
- KunstenFESTIVALdesArts, May (p96)
- Ommegang, June to July (p96)
- Kroningsfeesten, July 2009 (p215)
- Tapis des Fleurs, August (p97)

Paintings

From primitive passions to Rubens' nudes and surrealists at play, Belgium has a superb artistic heritage.

- *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, Van Eyck (St Baafskathedraal, p161)
- *Secret Player*, Magritte (Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, p83)
- *Masks Fighting over a Hanged Man*, Ensor (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, p183)
- *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine*, Memling (Museum St Janshospitaal, p128)
- *The Descent from the Cross*, Rubens (Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal, p179)
- *Fall of Icarus*, Breugel the Elder (Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, p83)
- *Proverbs*, Breughel the Younger (Rockoxhuis, p180)
- *Sérénité*, Delvaux (Groeningemuseum, p127)
- *Portrait of Maarten Pepijn*, Van Dyck (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, p183)
- *The Three Nights*, Pierre Alechinsky (Groeningemuseum, p127)

Architectural gems

Belgium is full of architectural treasures, including glistening guildhalls, tranquil almshouses and Art Nouveau jewels.

- Grand Place (p69), Brussels
- Old England Building (p83), Brussels
- Begijnhof (p128), Bruges
- Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal (p179), Antwerp
- Galeries St Hubert (p112), Brussels
- Stadhuis (p124), Bruges
- Musée Horta (p87), Brussels
- Belfort (p124), Bruges
- Cogels-Osylei (p184), Antwerp
- Zuiderterras (p193), Antwerp

COSTS & MONEY

Belgium is, on average, slightly cheaper than Luxembourg, except for fuel and bulk purchases of cigarettes and alcohol. In both countries, accommodation and dining will burn the biggest hole in your pocket; though Belgium's exciting fashions, sublime chocolates and speciality beers can all seriously dent the credit card too. Public transport, on the other hand, is cheap – and that, coupled with the diminutive size of both countries, makes getting around a minor expense.

Those staying in hostels, doing a museum, filling up with fast fodder like *frites* (chips or fries) and baguettes and downing a good beer or two can expect to spend from €40 per day. Those opting for hotels with full amenities and midrange restaurants will pay from €120. B&Bs offer excellent value, as do those weekend discounts (p98).

HOW MUCH?**Belgium**

Midrange hotel double
€70-140

Baguette sandwich €3

Kilo of pralines €30-58

Cinema ticket €6

Bike hire per day €10

Luxembourg

Midrange hotel double
€70-140

Baguette sandwich €3.50

Bottle of sparkling wine
€7-15

Cinema ticket €7

Bike hire per day €15-20

Families can minimise expenses by staying at hostels, B&Bs or self-contained guesthouses (p299). Restaurants often have discounted children's meals, usually costing around €8. Also look out for the occasional restaurant offering complimentary children's meals. Keep in mind too that children under 12 travel for free on Belgian trains.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few foreigners have taken up the challenge of penning travel tales about Belgium...and only one man has tackled Luxembourg. Still, what's on offer is well worth reading.

A Tall Man in a Low Land (Harry Pearson) This tale of family travel in Belgium came out a decade ago and is still a hit among visitors. It's full of anecdotes of everyday life, and firmly shines the spotlight on the country's many idiosyncrasies.

Luxembourg & the Jenisch Connection (David Robinson) Fictional tale of an Englishman's holiday in Luxembourg that turns into a murder mystery. It's set during the record-breaking hot summer of 2003.

Neither Here nor There (Bill Bryson) The author's European sojourn took him via Belgium with the result that Brussels and the country as a whole receive detailed scrutiny in two fun-filled chapters.

The Factory of Facts (Luc Sante) Belgian-born but US-raised, Luc Sante returns at the age of 35 to explore the country he left behind. An interesting account of his thoughts and opinions on all things Belgian.

The Poisonwood Bible (Barbara Kingsolver) This excellent novel tells the tale of an American missionary family living in 1950s Belgian Congo.

LONELY PLANET INDEX**Belgium**

Litre of petrol €1.40

Litre of bottled water
€0.80

Bottle of Trappist beer
€3.50

Souvenir T-shirt €13

Street snack – *frites* €2.10

Luxembourg

Litre of petrol €1.15

Litre of bottled water
€0.75

Bottle of Bofferding beer
€2.50

Souvenir T-shirt €15

Street snack - croissant
€1.80

INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is a rich resource for travellers. Research your trip, hunt down bargain air fares, book hotels, check weather conditions or chat with locals and other travellers about the best places to visit (or avoid!).

Belgian Tourist Office (www.visitbelgium.com) The Belgian Tourist Office's excellent US site includes listings of events and general information on the country.

Belgium online in English (www.xpats.com) Belgium's international community provide lots of information, including local news in English and an entertainment agenda, to get travellers started.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Here you'll find succinct summaries on travelling to most places on earth, postcards from other travellers, the best beds to book and the Thorn Tree travel forum, where you can ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back.

Luxembourg Internet Directory (www.luxweb.lu) Good links to almost all Luxembourg-related websites.

Luxembourg National Tourist Office (www.ont.lu) Great for the local lowdown.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

FULL-ON FLANDERS

One Week / Brussels to Ostend

Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges and Ostend. Five cities in as many days. No way you say. But it can be *comfortably* done – thanks to proximity: Antwerp is just 35 minutes from Brussels, Ghent 45 minutes from Antwerp, and so on.

Start with two nights in **Brussels** (p65), Europe's capital. Sip the splendour of the **Grand Place** (p69), one of the world's most beautiful squares, before heading uptown to the Sablon's seductive **chocolate shops** (p113) and an Art Nouveau jewel, the **Old England building** (p83). If you're only here for the beer, look out (p107).

Next up is **Antwerp** (p171). This eclectic port city deserves two nights, longer if you're into restaurants, *cafés* (pubs/bars) and designer fashions. Follow on with **Ghent** (p160), an intimate medieval city that's recently awoken to its inherent charms. Beautiful **Bruges** (p120) mustn't be missed. This picture-postcard city is Belgium's most romantic getaway, though you may need to time things to avoid the crowds. From here it's an easy day trip to **Ostend** (p140), Belgium's best-known beach resort with superb seafood.



This grand tour of Flanders' historic art cities takes in Belgium's best – Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges – with a side trip to Ostend, should you so desire. The route is a neat 185km and, thanks to these towns' intimate proximity, can be covered in anywhere from a week to a month.

THE ESSENTIALS

Two Weeks / Bruges to Vianden

Touring the length and, in parts, breadth of Belgium and Luxembourg is possible if you have a fortnight up your sleeve. Follow the one-week itinerary, but start in Bruges instead of Brussels, and add in **Ypres** (p150) and nearby **Poperinge** (p156). On the frontline in WWI, these little towns hold poignant reminders of life in this corner of Belgium nearly a century ago, and the terrible toll of war.

After Brussels, move onto the Ardennes, Belgium's southern reaches, a world away from the historic art cities to the north. **Namur** (p231) is the gateway and a good overnight stop in order to see the Gothic horde at the tiny **Trésor du Prieuré d'Oignies** (p232). From here head to either **La Roche-en-Ardenne** (p245) to explore smoked hams and little-visited centuries' old limestone caves (p248) at nearby **Hotton**; **Rochefort** (p238) for some easy biking; or **Bouillon** (p241) to combine creepy castles and kayaks. En route to Luxembourg, detour via the **Abbaye Notre Dame d'Orval** (p243) – the closest you'll get to the inside of a Trappist brewery.

Two days in **Luxembourg City** (p268) is ample time to explore the Grand Duchy's captivating capital. Take in **Place d'Armes** (p275), the new **Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean** (p273) and the beautiful **Chemin de la Corniche** (p275). Definitely book dinner at **Breedewee** (p278) – this Corniche eatery has unbeatable views.

Spend your last two days in **Echternach** (p290) and **Vianden** (p283), two small towns in the Grand Duchy's forested north. The latter is Luxembourg's most visited town, crowned by a hilltop castle. The former is steeped in Christian history and is a positively delightful little place to kick back. From Echternach there are fascinating walks in the weird world of the Müllerthal.

The essential two-week, 625km tour of Belgium and Luxembourg. Start with Bruges, Ostend and the battlefields of Ypres, before moving on to Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels. Explore castles and the serenity of the hilly Ardennes, then head to Luxembourg where the Grand Duchy's intimate capital and intriguing countryside await.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

CYCLING WESTERN FLANDERS

Two Weeks / Ghent to Ostend

This cycling tour takes in the oft-overlooked western corner of Flanders. It holds eclectic attractions – historic art towns, bizarre breweries, WWI reminders and the coast – all wonderfully accessible by bike. If you intend picking up wheels in Belgium, good bike outlets include **Mobiel** (p160), **Fietsen Popelier** (p130) and **Biker** (see p169). For general cycling information, see p300.

Start in **Ghent** (p160), a city with as many attractions as Antwerp or Bruges, and a fab range of B&Bs. After Ghent, head south on the LF30 Scheldedelta-route cycle route, following the Scheldt River to **Oudenaarde** (30km; p160), famed for its tapestries. Next day, continue south and take up a section of the **Flanders Cycle Route** (p301) to the effervescent town of **Kortrijk** (35km; p157). The next leg, Kortrijk to **Ypres** (47km; p150) follows the banks of the Leie River before arriving in Ypres with its WWI memorials and the **Ypres Salient** (p153). Ypres to **Diksmuide** (55km; p150) goes via the WWI and hops town of **Poperinge** (p156) and the monastery of **Westvleteren** (p150) with its famous but elusive **Trappist beer** (p47). **De Dolle Brouwers** (p50), a zany brewery at Esen, shouldn't be missed either. Diksmuide to **Veurne** (20km; p149) is an easy cycle, and in Veurne you can stay in a gorgeous hotel (see boxed text, p150). Veurne to **St Idesbald** (10km; p148) brings you to the coast via **De Panne** (p148) and the **Paul Delvaux Museum** (p148). Providing the North Sea winds are not gusting, St Idesbald to **Ostend** (30km; p140) is also a gentle cycle, and once in Ostend you can indulge in seafood delights – don't wimp on the *wollekes* (sea snails; p143).



Saddle up and hit the bike ways of Western Flanders in this 225km two-week cycle tour that takes in lesser-known as well as well-trodden parts of Belgium. From shy Ghent to the calm coast, this tour reveals old tapestry towns, poignant WWI sights, kooky breweries and surrealist art, together with some excellent places to stay.

TAILORED TRIPS

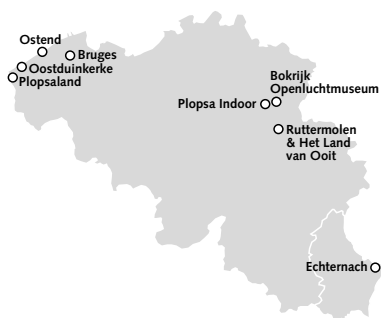
BELGIUM & LUXEMBOURG FOR KIDS

Belgium is dotted with fab theme parks, has excellent child-oriented museums, a sandy coastline that little kids love, plenty of cycling possibilities, easy nature excursions, annual fairs with attractions galore, circuses with live animals (they haven't fallen out of fashion here) and, on an everyday level, a load of high-quality playgrounds. For details on what's available, see p304.

One suggestion is to drop anchor for a week in **Bruges** (p120). Rent a self-contained guesthouse (p133) to keep expenses down, and hang up the car keys – there's so much to see and do that's easily accessible by train (kids under twelve are free). Within half an hour you'll be curling your toes in the sand at **Ostend** (p140). From Ostend catch the **Kusttram** (p145) north and get off at any beach stop along the way, or go south to a quintessential Belgian theme park, **Plopsaland** (p148) near De Panne. With good timing you may even catch the *paardevisser*s (horsefishers) at **Oostduinkerke** (p147).

An alternative Belgian base for families travelling by car is **Ruttermolen** (p215), a self-contained B&B near Tongeren. From here, **Bokrijk Openluchtmuseum** (p212), **Plopsa Indoor** (p211) and **Het Land Van Ooit** (p214) are on the doorstep.

In the Grand Duchy, relax for a week in a medieval tower in **Echternach** (p291) and day-trip it to anywhere in Luxembourg.



WORLD HERITAGE SITES TOUR

Exploring Belgium and Luxembourg by World Heritage sites is a breeze.

Start with **Luxembourg City** (p268) – the entire ancient core of this dramatic city is on Unesco's hit list. Follow up with the 'Family of Man' exhibition in **Clerveaux** (p287).

In Belgium, the charming town of **Diest** (p209) hosts the nation's most beautiful *begijnhof* (a cluster of cottages around a central garden; see p129). In **Kortrijk** (p159) it's even possible to overnight in one of these historic sites.

Brussels (p65) beckons with the amazing **Grand Place** (p69) and the **Musée Horta** (p87), the home of Art Nouveau master Victor Horta. **Bruges** (p120) is another must – this medieval city's whole historic centre is preserved. Next up there's **Ghent** (p160), whose belfry offers fab city views and, like many belfries in Belgium, has made the list.

But to really immerse yourself, take a look at a little corner of Wallonia. There's the Cathédrale Notre Dame in **Tournai** (p219), a huge Romanesque affair that is slowly being realigned after a freak storm a decade ago. In **Mons** (p221), an international committee recently voted to include the city's **La Doudou** (p222) festival on Unesco's list of intangible world heritage. Also proud of this status are the bizarre **Gilles** (p223) from nearby Binche. And not far away in the town of **Ath** (p222), giants are also listed.



The Authors



LEANNE LOGAN

Leanne first tasted Belgium and Luxembourg as a kid in the '70s. Six months of diary writing while cooped up with her family in a campervan around Europe set life's direction. After university came newspapers then a long-awaited one-way ticket out of Australia. Years of exploring different cultures led naturally to Lonely Planet. And if that wasn't prize enough, day one of researching Belgium led her to Geert, a beer-guzzling, chip-loving chap from Antwerp. More than 15 years later, the pair still covers Belgium and Luxembourg, these days with two kids, Eleanor and Gwynevere, in tow. When not on the road, the family nestles down in Barkers Vale in beautiful northern New South Wales, Australia.



GEERT COLE

Geert was your atypical Belgian from the start. As a youngster he liked Brussels sprouts, as a teenager he hated fashion and as an adult he pulled the pin...travelling all over the world instead of building a little red-brick house. But years on the road led to a disturbing discovery – nowhere on earth is founded on beer, chips and chocolate except Belgium. So he returned to his stained-glass studio in home-town Antwerp and, as things would have it, met the love of his life, Leanne. Geert now divides his time between watching wallabies in Australia, the joys of fatherhood and Lonely Planet. The latter satisfies his fix for all things essentially Belgian.

Our Favourite Trip

We've road-tested more Belgian chocolates and beers than is fair in anyone's lifetime, but touring Belgium and Luxembourg as a family was our best trip ever. Travelling with kids reveals a whole new world. With or without munchkins, a week in Bruges (p120) was mandatory – there's so much to see and do within a steeple's fall of this medieval town. Lazy days at Ostend beach (p140) were followed by groovy Ghent (p160), surprising Mechelen (p201) and historic Brussels (p65): read canal rides, zoos, puppet shows and circuses. The Ardennes' calmness called us to La Roche-en-Ardenne (p245), good for kayaking and nearby caves. Luxembourg awaited with chairlifts (Vianden, p283), forest walks (Müllerthal, p290) and dreamy nights in medieval towers (Echternach, p291). Thumbs up to childhood revisited.



LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.

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