

Belgium

Now really! How did Belgium ever get labelled 'boring'? In a country where fine food is mandatory, beer and chocolates unbeatable and café culture common, how could anyone find it dull? And that's without even mentioning Belgium's history, arts, fashion or clubbing.

België to Flemish speakers and La Belgique to the nation's French speakers is an eccentric little country that takes time to know. Don't make the mistake of judging it on day one or, worse still, in the first hour. Granted, you won't be texting about the landscape or all of those little red-brick houses. But hang around awhile (it usually takes only two days) and you'll soon reschedule your travel plans.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 30,000 sq km
- **Capital** Brussels
- **Currency** euro (€); A\$1 = €0.60; ¥100 = €0.67; NZ\$1 = €0.50; UK£1 = €1.48; US\$1 = €0.78
- **Famous for** chocolate, beer, WWI battlefields, tennis greats, *Tintin*
- **Official Languages** Flemish, French, German
- **Population** 10.4 million
- **Phrases** *goeiendag/bonjour* (hello; Flemish/French); *tot ziens/au revoir* (goodbye; Flemish/French); *bedankt/merci* (thanks; Flemish/French)
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 32; international access code ☎ 00; reverse-charge code ☎ 1224





HIGHLIGHTS

- Surrender yourself to sublime chocolate shops and sensual Art Nouveau architecture in the capital, **Brussels** (p114).
- Cycle yourself silly around must-see medieval **Bruges** (p129).
- Get away from tourist crowds at **Ghent** (p125), one of the country's best-kept secrets.
- Be silenced by **Ypres** (p132), a little town with a big place in wartime history.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Time enough to taste Belgium's Big Three – Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp. Start with the capital's Grand Place, followed by the Musée Horta. Train it

to Bruges and within an hour you'll be wandering along canals. Follow Flanders' flat landscape to Antwerp – you'll see the spire of the fabulous Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal well before arrival.

- **One week** Use the three-day itinerary, but add an extra night in both Brussels and Bruges. A day trip to Ypres is also a must. Put your French to practice in the Ardennes towns of Rochefort or La Roche-en-Ardenne – both good chill-out zones.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Belgium's weather is fickle. To avoid major dampness, visit between May and September. 'Wretched' best describes the winter months from November to March – the

days are grey and wet with occasional light snow.

In need of a splurge at discount rates? Brussels is the place to do it – on weekends. Many top-end hotels in the capital cut prices on Friday and Saturday nights to make up for the absence of Eurocrats. We've noted weekend rates in the relevant reviews.

HISTORY

Bruges, Ghent and Ypres were Belgium's first major cities, booming in the 13th and 14th centuries due to the cloth trade. Their craftspeople established powerful guilds (organisations to stringently control arts and crafts), whose elaborate guildhalls you'll see in many cities – the most famous are those on Brussels' Grand Place (p115).

When Protestantism swept Europe in the 16th century, the Low Countries (present-day Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), often referred to as the Benelux) embraced it, much to the chagrin of their ruler, the fanatically Catholic Philip II of Spain. He ordered the Inquisition to enforce Catholicism, a move that led to the Iconoclastic Fury, in which Protestants ran riot ransacking churches, including Antwerp's Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal (p121), Belgium's finest Gothic cathedral. Inevitably, in 1568, war broke out. It lasted 80 years and, in the end, roughly laid the region's present-day borders. Holland and its allied provinces victoriously expelled the Spaniards, while Belgium and Luxembourg stayed under their rule.

For the next 200 years Belgium remained a battlefield for successive foreign powers. After the Spaniards came the Austrians, and, in turn, the French. Napoleon was trounced in 1815 at Waterloo (p120), near Brussels. In 1830 the Catholic Belgians won independence from Holland and finally formed their own kingdom.

The ensuing years saw the start of Flemish nationalism, with tension growing between Flemish (Dutch) and French speakers that has continued to this day.

Then, from 1885 came Belgium's most shadowy period – King Léopold II's rule of the Congo (see p121).

Despite Belgium's neutrality, the Germans invaded in 1914 and the town of Ypres was destroyed. Tours of the Ypres Salient (p133) offer poignant WWI reminders.

HOW MUCH?

- **Midrange hotel double** €80-150
- **Restaurant meal** €15-35
- **Baguette sandwich** €3.20
- **Cinema ticket** €6
- **1 kg of pralines** €30-58

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** €1.40
- **1L bottled water** €0.80
- **Bottle of Trappist beer** €3.30
- **Souvenir T-shirt** €14
- **Frites (fries)** €1.80

During WWII the country was taken over within three weeks of a surprise German attack in May 1940. Controversy over the questionable early capitulation by King Léopold III led to his abdication in 1950 in favour of his son, King Baudouin, whose popular reign ended with his death in 1993. Childless, Baudouin was succeeded by his brother, the present King Albert II.

Although the headquarters of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Belgium kept a low profile on the international arena until the end of the 20th century, when it became best known for poisoned chickens and paedophiles. Sick of mismanagement and neglect, the nation turned to radical political reform and, in 1999, booted out the Christian Democrat party after 40 years in power.

In came Liberal prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, who sought to raise public morale by reinventing Belgium with robust foreign policies and new moral freedoms. Belgium is the second country (following the Netherlands) to legalise gay marriage and euthanasia. In 2003 the country sided with France and Germany against the US-led war in Iraq. During the same year a failed attempt was made to prosecute former US president George Bush in the Belgian courts for war crimes.

In the last year or two things have quietened on the home front. Belgians, it seems, have gone back to sipping a beer while watching their girls slam the greats in world tennis (see p113).

PEOPLE

Belgium's population is basically split in two: the Flemish and the Walloons. Language is the dividing factor, made official in 1962 when a linguistic divide was drawn across the country, cutting it almost equally in half. To the north of the divide lies Flanders (Vlaanderen), whose Flemish speakers make up 60% of Belgium's 10.2 million population. South of the divide is Wallonia (La Wallonie), where French-speaking Walloons make up most of the remaining population. A tiny percentage of Belgians speak German and live in an enclave in the far east, an area known as the Eastern Cantons.

RELIGION

Christianity was established early and today Catholicism reigns supreme – roughly 75% of the population is Roman Catholic. While church attendance has dropped dramatically in recent decades, religious traditions remain strong and influence many aspects of daily life including politics and education. Belgium also has sizeable Protestant, Jewish and Muslim communities.

ARTS Literature

Inspector Maigret fans would know Belgium's the birthplace of Liège novelist Georges Simenon.

Comic strips are a Belgian forte. *Tintin* by Georges Remi, aka Hergé, is unquestionably the best-known internationally, but all comic art is high profile here (see p115).

Hugo Claus' *The Sorrow of Belgium* weaves a story based on Nazi collaboration during WWII.

Music

Jazz is right at home in Belgium. Adolphe Sax invented the saxophone and octogenarian Toots Thielemans still enthralled audiences with his legendary harmonica playing. For information on the Brussels Jazz Marathon, see Festivals & Events (p140).

In the 1950s Jacques Brel took the French-speaking world by storm and is still much loved in his homeland. Also from this era is French rock idol Johnny Hallyday, who maintains ties with his father's home country.

Arno Hintjens is the godfather of Belgian rock. Love or loathe him, Helmut Lotti is

also Belgian (not German), and pumps out crooners.

K's Choice, dEUS, Axelle Red and Hooverphonic are among contemporary names to look out for.

For details about the Concours Musical International Reine Élisabeth de Belgique (Queen Elisabeth International Musical Competition), see Festivals & Events (p139). The best place to catch opera or classical music is La Monnaie/De Munt (p119).

Architecture

Many of Belgium's earliest buildings are on Unesco's World Heritage list. These include mighty belfries such as those in Bruges (p129) and Tournai (p135), many Flemish *begijnhoven* (see Bruges' Begijnhof, p129) and, of course, Brussels' famous Grand Place (p115).

On the flip side, there's little in the way of exciting modern architecture. Swathes of Brussels have gone under the demolition ball to make way for the EU quarter's boring glass buildings. But in other old art cities, designers have realised that modern structures can sit harmoniously alongside ancient, as seen in Bruges' new Concertgebouw (p132) and bOb Van Reeth's Zuiderterras café (p124) in Antwerp.

Not to be missed is Belgium's Art Nouveau architecture, best seen at Brussels' Musée Horta (p115) and the Old England building (p115). Art Nouveau swept across Europe at the end of the 19th century and blended architecture with daily aspects of life. Check out guided tours by the Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaine (p115).

Visual Arts

Belgium's rich art heritage began in Bruges in the late Middle Ages with painters known as the Flemish Primitives. Their works greatly influenced the course of European art and, centuries later, still astonish viewers. Key players included Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling; their paintings are best viewed at Bruges' Groeningemuseum (p129) and Hospitaalmuseum St Janshospitaal (p129), and also at Ghent's St Baafskathedraal (p125).

The greatest 16th-century Flemish painter was Pieter Breugel the Elder, who lived and worked in Brussels. The capital's Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (p115) holds an excellent range of his works.

Antwerp held the cultural high ground during the 17th century, mainly thanks to Flemish baroque painter Pieter Paul Rubens. Some of his famous altarpieces adorn the city's Onze Lieve Vrouwkathedraal (p121).

The 19th-century's James Ensor was a pioneer of expressionism. See his work at Antwerp's Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (p122).

Surrealism, a movement that developed in Paris in the 1920s, found fertile ground here. Works by René Magritte and Paul Delvaux are displayed at Brussels' Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (p115).

Belgium's best-known contemporary artist is the avant-garde Panamarenko. His bizarre sculptures can be seen at Ghent's Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (p125).

Theatre & Dance

Belgium's dynamic contemporary dance scene centres on two companies – **Rosas** (www.rosas.be) in Brussels and **Charleroi Danses/Plan K** (www.charleroi-danses.be), based in Charleroi. To see Belgium's only classical-dance company, the Royal Flanders Ballet, visit the Koninklijk Ballet van Vlaanderen (p125). For information on Brussels' KunstenFestivalsArts, combining theatre and dance, see p139.

SPORT

If it weren't for Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne, there would be almost nothing to say here. But in 2003 Belgium's tennis aces became the world's top two female tennis players – a feat that no other country, except the USA, has managed. Since then the pair has continued to play lead roles in top international tournaments.

ENVIRONMENT

Belgium's environmental picture is ugly and the scene is not getting rosier – the country's two green political parties were catapulted out of government in the last general election (2003). The only nationally protected reserves are the Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve (p135) and the Hoge Kempen in Limburg. Water and noise pollution, urbanisation and waste management are the most pressing environmental issues.

FOOD & DRINK

Belgians love food. They are reputed to dine out, on average, more than any other people

in the world. Expect to pay €14 or less for a main course in eateries listed as budget in this chapter; midrange restaurants charge between €15 and €30; anything over €30 is top end.

Staples & Specialities

Meat and seafood are abundantly consumed and, although there are traditional regional dishes such as Ghent's *waterzooi* (a cream-based chicken stew), the most popular dishes have crossed local boundaries. Brussels' dining scene is eminently international, reflecting its status as the EU capital, but around the countryside things are less diverse.

Belgium's national dish is *mosselen/moules* (mussels cooked in white wine) served in steaming cauldrons with a mountain of chips. Offal is big on menus, and you'll also come across *paardenfilet/steak de cheval* (horse steak) and *filet américain*. Don't be deceived, the latter is not a succulent American steak but a blob of minced beef served raw.

Belgians swear they invented *frietten/frites* (chips or fries) and, judging by the availability, it's a claim few would contest. Every village has at least one *frituur/friture* where *frites* are served smothered until unrecognisable with thick mayonnaise.

A *belegd broodje/sandwich garni* (half a baguette with a prepared filling) is an immensely popular snack food.

And then there's chocolate. The Belgians have been quietly making some of the world's finest chocolate for well over a century. Filled chocolates, or pralines (*prah-leens*), are the nation's forte.

On the drinking scene, beer rules. No country in the world boasts a brewing tradition as rich and diverse as Belgium. And nowhere else will you find the quantity of quality beers offered by this little nation. Somewhere between 400 and 800 beers exist. Try a dark Trappist beer made by monks, potent golden nectars such as Duvel (named after the devil himself) or the acquired taste of tangy, fruity *lambics* (champagne-style beers brewed in and around Brussels). For the latter, don't miss Brussels' Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze (p115).

Where to Eat & Drink

Any place, any time, you'll find honest food being served at much-loved eateries.

At lunchtime many restaurants offer a *dag-schotel/plat du jour* (dish of the day), which often represents excellent value. Also watch for a *dagmenu/menu du jour* (menu of the day). These menus comprise three courses and work out cheaper than selecting individual courses à la carte.

Those here to drink will be spoiled for choice. All cafés serve alcohol and many stay open until the last person leaves. True beer lovers should head to specialist cafés – see right for some highlights in Beer Top Five.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Fear not! Belgium may be carnivore kingdom but vegetarians are catered for, albeit reluctantly at times. Vegans, on the other hand, will go hungry almost everywhere except at Antwerp's zany Lombardia (p124).

BRUSSELS

pop 1,000,000

Defining Brussels (Brussel in Flemish, Bruxelles in French) is no easy task. Walk the streets here, the best way to get around, and you'll soon understand why. Quirky, secretive, surreal – Brussels, like the country it represents, pulls multiple identities into one enigmatic core. Home to superb Art Nouveau architecture, the EU headquarters, shabby suburbs and more restaurants, pubs and chocolate shops than you could possibly visit, Brussels subtly slides under your skin.

ORIENTATION

The Grand Place, Brussels' imposing 15th-century market square, is the city's chief landmark. It sits dead centre in the Petit Ring, a pentagon of boulevards enclosing central Brussels. The city centre is divided into the Lower Town (comprising the medieval core and atmospheric quarters such as Ste Catherine, St Géry and the Marolles) and the Upper Town, home to major museums and chic shopping precincts based around the Sablon and Ave Louise.

East of the Petit Ring is the real-life Gotham City of the EU.

Gare Centrale, Brussels' most central train station, is about five-minutes' walk from the Grand Place; Gare du Midi, where international trains arrive, is 2.5km from the famous square.

BEER TOP FIVE

Bierhuis Kulminator (p124) Over 700 brews in this specialist pub.

De Biertempel (p119) Shop 'til you drop among hundreds of beers.

Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze (opposite) Unlike any brewery you've ever smelt.

't Brugse Beertje (p132) Beer pub known far beyond Belgium's borders.

Westmalle Triple Arguably the nation's best beer. Brewed by Trappist monks at their abbey near Antwerp (not open to visitors) and packs a 9% punch.

Unlike anywhere else in Belgium, Brussels is officially bilingual. Everything – from the names of streets to train stations – is written in both Flemish and French. We have used the French versions.

INFORMATION

Money-changing facilities can be found on and around the Grand Place, at Gare du Midi and Brussels National Airport.

Belgian Tourist Information Centre (☎ 02 504 03 90; www.visitflanders.com, www.belgique-tourisme.net; Rue du Marché aux Herbes 63; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Sat & Sun, 9am–1pm Sun Jan–Feb; ☒ Bourse/ ☒ Gare Centrale) Supplies national tourist information.

Brussels International (☎ 02 513 89 40; www.brusselsinternational.be; Grand Place; ☎ 9am–6pm Easter–Oct, 9am–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun Nov–Dec, 9am–6pm Mon–Sat Jan–Easter; ☒ Bourse/ ☒ Gare Centrale) The City of Brussels' tiny tourist office is located inside the town hall and is usually crammed.

Brussels International – Tourism (Gare du Midi; ☎ 8am–8pm Sat–Thu, 8am–9pm Fri May–Sep, 8am–5pm Mon–Thu, 8am–8pm Fri, 9am–6pm Sat, 9am–2pm Sun Oct–Apr; ☒ Gare du Midi) For visitors arriving by Eurostar or Thalys.

BXL (☎ 02 502 99 80; Pl de la Vieille Halle aux Blés 46; per 15 min/1 hr €1/2; ☎ noon–midnight; ☒ Gare Centrale) Groovy café/bar with Internet access.

Helpline (☎ 02 648 40 14; ☎ 24hr) Assistance line run by Community Help Service.

Hôpital St Pierre (☎ 02 535 31 11, emergency 02 535 40 51; cnr Rue Haute & Rue de l'Abriçotier; ☎ 24hr; ☒ Hôtel des Monnaies) Central hospital offering emergency assistance.

Main post office (☎ 02 226 97 00; Blvd Anspach; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10.30am–4.30pm Sat; ☒ De Brouckère)

SIGHTS

Brussels' magnificent central square, **Grand Place**, tops every newcomer's itinerary. Here you'll find the splendid Gothic-style **Hôtel de Ville**, the only building to escape bombardment by the French in 1695 – ironic considering that it was the target. The square's splendour is due largely to its antique frame of **guildhalls**, erected by merchant guilds and adorned with gilded statues and symbols.

Galeries St Hubert, one block northeast of Grand Place, is a European first and a must-visit. Opened in 1847, this *grande dame* of Brussels' shopping arcades contains an eclectic mix of shops, as well as a cinema, restaurant and cafés. Off one of the galleries is **Rue des Bouchers** (see p118).

The **Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 02 508 32 11; www.fine-arts-museum.be; Rue de la Régence 3; adult/concession €5/3.50; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun; ☒ Parc) houses Belgium's premier collections of ancient and modern art, and is well endowed with works by Pieter Breugel the Elder, Rubens and the Belgian surrealists. To get here, walk up from the Lower Town, or use the metro or tram 92, 93 or 94.

A superb introduction to the Art Nouveau movement is the **Musée Horta** (☎ 02 543 04 90; www.hortamuseum.be; Rue Américaine 25; adult/concession/child €5/3.50/2.50; ☎ 2–5.30pm Tue–Sun; ☒ Horta). It occupies two adjoining houses in St Gilles that Horta designed in 1898. To get here, take tram 91 or 92 from Pl Louise.

The **Musée des Instruments de Musique** (☎ 02 545 01 30; www.mim.fgov.be; Rue Montagne de la Cour 2; adult/concession/child €5/3.50/free; ☎ 9.30am–5pm Tue–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun; ☒ Gare Centrale) boasts one of the world's biggest collections of instruments. It's located in the **Old England building**, a former department store and Art Nouveau showpiece built in 1899 by Paul Saintenoy.

Anyone with even a vague interest in Belgian beers must not miss the excellent **Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze** (☎ 02 521 49 28; www.cantillon.be; Rue Gheude 56; adult/concession €4/3; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat; ☒ Gare du Midi). It's about 800m from Gare du Midi – head to Pl Bara, take Rue Limnander and then cross into Rue Gheude.

An absolutely anonymous, suburban yellow-brick house – that's the façade of the **Musée Magritte** (☎ 02 428 26 26; www.magritte-museum.be; Rue Essegheem 135; adult/concession €7/6; ☎ 10am–6pm Wed–Sun), where Belgium's most famous surrealist artist lived from 1930 to

BRUSSELS IN TWO DAYS

On day one, the **Grand Place** (left) is not to be missed. Neither is **Galeries St Hubert** (left). Head next to the Upper Town for the **Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts** (left), then stock up on pralines at **Pierre Marcolini** (p119) before tramping it to **Musée Horta** (left). By night trawl **Rue des Bouchers** (p118) and then hit the **pubs/cafés** (p118).

On day two, visit the **Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika** (see Léopold II & the Congo, p121). In the afternoon, wind down with a stroll along Rue Antoine Dansaert, home to fashion shops like **Stijl** (p119), then devote time to Brussels' unique *lambic* beer at cosy **À La Bécasse** (p119).

1954. To get there, take the metro to Simonis and then tram 19.

The **Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée** (☎ 02 219 19 80; www.cbbd.be, in Flemish & French; Rue des Sables 20; adult/concession/child €7/6/3; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun; ☒ Botanique) is a tour through the country's vibrant comic-strip culture. It's housed in a Horta-designed Art Nouveau building, and is a 10-minute walk from Grand Place.

Despite being a national symbol the **Manneken Pis** fountain – a little boy cheerfully taking a leak into a pool – never fails to disappoint visitors because of its diminutive size. It's three blocks from the Grand Place, on the corner of Rue de l'Étuve and Rue du Chêne.

The newly renovated **Atomium** (☎ 02 475 47 77; www.atomium.be; Sq Atomium; adult/concession/child €9/6/free; ☎ 10am–5.30pm; ☒ Heyzel) is a space-age leftover from the 1958 World Fair – a model of an iron molecule enlarged 165 billion times. Take the metro or, more scenically, tram 81.

TOURS

Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaine (ARAU; ☎ 02 219 33 45; www.arau.org; Blvd Adolphe Max 55; ☒ De Brouckère), a heritage conservation group, runs tours offering entry into some of Brussels' private Art Nouveau showpieces.

SLEEPING

Budget

Beersel Camping (☎ 02 331 05 61; campingbeersel@pandora.be; Steenweg op Ukkel 75; adult/tent/car €3/2/1.50; ☎ year-round) Small ground in Beersel, south of Brussels. Tram 55 (direction Uccle) stops

modern and old in a self-assured feast for the eyes. It's child and baby friendly, and parking costs €10.

Hôtel Métropole (☎ 02 217 23 00, reservations 02 214 24 24; www.metropolehotel.com; Pl de Brouckère 31; s/d/ste from €330/360/500, weekend r from €120; ☎ ☎ ☎; M De Brouckère) The *grande dame* of Brussels' hotel scene and perfect for a weekend splurge that won't cost an arm or leg. The lavish French Renaissance-style foyer contrasts with the soberly furnished rooms. A regal buffet breakfast is included.

Also recommended:

Hôtel George V (☎ 02 513 50 93; www.george5.com; Rue 't Kint 23; s/d/tr/q €64/75/86/97; ☎ Bourse) This family-run hotel on the edge of St Géry has prices that are a snip for this funky part of town.

Atlas (☎ 02 502 60 06; www.atlas.be; Rue du Vieux Marché aux Grains 30; s/d/tr/duplex €110/125/155/175; ☎ ☎ ☎; ☎ Bourse/M Ste Catherine) Central hotel with kitchen-equipped, split-level duplex apartments; good for families.

EATING

Restaurants of all persuasions abound in Brussels and if they don't make the grade, they don't last. The exception to this rule are those on Rue des Bouchers, a must-see street lined with barking hawkers and tacky tourist restaurants – great for a wander, but eat elsewhere. Rue Antoine Dansaert offers ample choice.

GB Express (Rue au Beurre 25; ☎ 8am-10pm, 8am-9pm Sun; ☎ Bourse) For self caterers, essentials are sold at this little supermarket near the Grand Place.

Easy Tempo (☎ 02 513 54 40; Rue Haute 146; pizza €7-11; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat; M Porte de Namur) Marolles pizza joint with an ultra-friendly crew and a protected wall. The closest metro is Porte de Namur, but it's just as easy to walk the 1km from the Grand Place.

Picnik (☎ 02 217 34 84; Rue de Flandre 109; soup €2-3, dagschotel €8; ☎ 11.30am-4pm Mon-Fri; M Ste Catherine) This tiny organic lunch bar is in Ste Catherine.

Le Perroquet (☎ 02 512 99 22; Rue Watteuu 31; light meals €8-10; ☎ noon-1am; M Porte de Namur) Art Nouveau café in the affluent Sablon. Salads and stuffed pitas, including vegetarian options, are the mainstay.

Comocomo (☎ 02 503 03 30; Rue Antoine Dansaert 19; 3/6/9 tapas €8.50/14/19; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎ Bourse) Relative newcomer Comocomo is an ultra-trendy, modern-day tapas eatery.

Chez Léon (☎ 02 513 04 26; www.chezleon.be; Rue des Bouchers 18; mains €13-20; ☎ noon-11pm; ☎ ☎; M Gare Centrale) Great for families with free Belgian-style meals for under 12s (provided there are two paying adults).

L'Ultime Atome (☎ 02 513 13 67; Rue St Boniface 14; mains €11-20; ☎ 11am-midnight; M Porte de Namur) Just one of many great eateries in this Ixelles backstreet. An eclectic crowd keeps this brasserie buzzing day and night, and there's a wide range on offer, including vegetarian fare.

Taverne du Passage (☎ 02 512 37 31; www.tavernedupassage.com; Galerie de la Reine 30; mains €15-20; ☎ noon-midnight daily Aug-May, Fri-Tue Jun & Jul; M Gare Centrale) Consistently keen service, faithful Belgian meals and a fabulous location inside Galeries St Hubert are the pivotal points of this Brussels institution. Kids are genuinely welcomed.

Bonsoir Clara (☎ 02 502 09 90; Rue Antoine Dansaert 18; mains €17-25; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily; ☎ Bourse) This restaurant is one of the capital's enduring success stories.

Jacques (☎ 02 513 27 62; Quai aux Briques 44; musels €22, mains €15-25; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; M Ste Catherine) A down-to-earth seafood restaurant that has been around for over 60 years. Locals love it.

Comme Chez Soi (☎ 02 512 29 21; Pl Rouppe 23; mains €40-60, 4-course menu from €67; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat; ☎ ☎; ☎ Anneessens) Chef Pierre Wynants' innovative cuisine will bite a good chunk out of your holiday budget, but it'll be worth every cent. Reservations essential.

DRINKING

Café culture is ingrained in Brussels. Hardly a street in the city centre doesn't have at least one pub, café or bar.

Le Roy d'Espagne (☎ 02 513 08 07; Grand Place 1; M Gare Centrale) Sit and sip (pricy beers) the splendour of the Grand Place in this former guildhall. And, yes, those are inflated dried pigs' bladders above your head.

À la Mort Subite (☎ 02 513 13 18; Montagne aux Herbes Potagères 7; ☎; M Gare Centrale) Long café with wood panelling, mirrored walls and brusque service. One of the country's many brews is named after it (the name means 'instant death' but the beer itself is not that strong) and it ranks as one of the city's institutions. A must.

Falstaff (☎ 02 511 87 89; Rue Henri Maus 17; ☎ 10am-2am; ☎ Bourse) Art Nouveau *grand*

café designed by Horta disciple Houbion. Exotic world of mirrors, glass and fluidity.

Goupil le Fol (☎ 02 511 13 96; Rue de la Violette 22; ☎ 8pm-5am; M Gare Centrale) Bastion of French chanteuse...you'll only hear the likes of Édith Piaf and Brussels' own Jacques Brel in this kooky café.

Also recommended:

Le Bier Circus (☎ 02 218 00 34; Rue de l'Enseignement 89; ☎ noon-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 6pm-midnight daily; M Madou) For serious beer buffs.

À La Bécasse (☎ 02 511 00 06; Rue de Tabora 11; ☎ 10am-1am; ☎ Bourse) Come for a jug of draught *lambic*.

ENTERTAINMENT

Get past the cafés and Brussels offers everything from unique folkloric pageants to stunning contemporary dance. The English-language magazine *Bulletin* has a 'What's On' guide with excellent entertainment coverage. Also check *Le Soir* on Wednesday.

Cinemas

Arenberg Galeries (☎ 02 512 80 63; www.arenberg.be; Galerie de la Reine 26; ☎ from 2pm; M Gare Centrale) Remodelled Art Deco cinema located inside Galeries St Hubert. Foreign and art-house films are the staples.

Musée du Cinéma (☎ 02 507 83 70; Rue Baron Horta 9; admission €2.50; ☎ from 5pm; M Gare Centrale) One to make cinema buffs swoon. Two auditoriums: silent movies with live piano accompaniment are screened in one every night of the year; the other is devoted to classic talkies. It's expected to reopen after renovations soon after this book's publication.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Tels Quels (☎ 02 512 32 34; www.telsquels.be, in French; Rue du Marché-au-Charbon 81; ☎ 5pm-late Sun-Tue, Thu & Fri, 2pm-late Wed & Sat; ☎ Anneessens) The group's headquarters is home to a café-cum-information centre, the only meeting place in town aimed at both lesbians and gay men.

Le Belgica (www.lebelgica.be; Rue du Marché-au-Charbon 32; ☎ 10pm-3am Thu-Sat, 7pm-3am Sun; ☎ Bourse) Despite the unassuming façade, this is one of the city's oldest and best gay pubs.

Live Music, Dance & Theatre

L'Archiduc (☎ 02 512 06 52; Rue Antoine Dansaert 6; ☎ 4pm-late; ☎ Bourse) Exclusive Art-Deco bar built in the 1930s and located on one of the city's hippest streets. It has jazz concerts every weekend.

AB (☎ 02 548 24 00; www.abconcerts.be; Blvd Ans-pach 110; ☎ Bourse) Great venue smack in the heart of the city. AB, or Ancienne Belgique, has two auditoriums accommodating international and home-grown bands.

La Monnaie/De Munt (☎ 07 023 39 39; www.demunt.be; Pl de la Monnaie; M De Brouckère) Brussels' premier venue for opera and theatre is also the place to catch contemporary dance by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's innovative company, Rosas. Check their website, www.rosas.be/rosas, for performance details.

Théâtre Royal de Toone (☎ 02 511 71 37; www.toone.be; Petite Rue des Bouchers 21; admission €10; ☎ 8.30pm Thu-Sat; M Gare Centrale) Famous marionette theatre.

Nightclubs

Fuse (☎ 02 511 97 89; www.fuse.be; Rue Blaes 208; depending on DJs admission €3-12; ☎ 11pm-7am Sat; M Porte de Hal) The Marolles house club that put Brussels on the international circuit. Now more than a decade old, its two floors attract some 2000 dancers, all going strong.

Recyclart (☎ 02 502 57 34; www.recyclart.be; Gare de la Chapelle, Rue des Ursulines 25; ☎ Anneessens) An occasional club for those in the know located in a disused train station in the Marolles. Dance nights are listed online.

SHOPPING

Chocolate, beer, fashion, lace and bric-a-brac...Brussels has these and many other lines covered.

De Biertempel (☎ 02 502 19 06; Rue du Marché aux Herbes 56; ☎ Bourse) Stocks 550 Belgian brews plus matching glasses.

Gare du Midi market (☎ 6am-1pm Sun; M Gare du Midi) Brussels' biggest general market sprawls next to the train lines and has a distinctly Mediterranean feel.

Pierre Marcolini (☎ 02 514 12 06; Pl du Grand Sablon 39; M Porte de Namur) For Belgium's most expensive pralines (€58 per kg).

Stijl (☎ 02 512 03 13; Rue Antoine Dansaert 74; M Ste Catherine) The shop that changed this part of the city. Home to top fashion designers, including members of the Antwerp Six (p126).

Place du Jeu-de-Balle flea market (Pl du Jeu-de-Balle; ☎ 7am-2pm; M Porte de Hal) The Marolles' famous *brocante* (second-hand) market.

Manufacture Belge de Dentelles (☎ 02 511 44 77; Galerie de la Reine 6-8; M Gare Centrale) Lace specialist shop inside Galeries St Hubert.

Browse a stately *galerie*, such as **Galleries St Hubert** (M Gare Centrale), or pick up some dried grasshoppers at **Galerie d'Ixelles** (Chaussée d'Ixelles; M Porte de Namur), the pulse of Brussels' African community, located just off Chaussée de Wavre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For details on air services to and from Brussels, see p140.

Bus

The **Eurolines** (☎ 02 274 13 50; www.eurolines.be; Rue du Progrès 80) office is located at Gare du Nord, from where its buses arrive and depart. For information on services, see p141.

Car & Motorcycle

See p142 for information on various car-hire companies.

Train

Brussels three main train stations are Gare du Midi (South Station), Gare Centrale (Central Station) and Gare du Nord (North Station).

Gare du Midi (☎ 02 528 28 28) is the main station for international connections: the Eurostar and Thalys fast trains stop here only. Call the train station for any international and national enquiries.

For more on international train services, including Eurostar and Thalys trains, see p141. For information on getting to other destinations in Belgium, see the Getting There & Away sections throughout the chapter.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The Airport City Express train runs between the airport and the city's three main train stations – Gare du Nord, Gare Centrale and Gare du Midi (one way €2.80). The service runs every 15 minutes from 5.30am to 11.30pm and the trip takes 15 to 25 minutes (depending on the station's location).

A taxi between the airport and central Brussels costs €29.

For details on shuttle buses between Brussels and Charleroi airport, see p135.

Public Transport

Brussels' efficient public-transport system is operated by **Société des Transports Intercom-**

munaux Bruxellois (☎ 02 515 20 00; www.stib.irisnet.be, French only), and comprises buses, trams, metro and *préméto* (trams that travel underground). Single tickets cost €1.50, a book of 10 tickets is €10.50 and a one-day card costs €4. Services run from 6am until midnight.

Taxi

Call **Taxis Bleus** (☎ 02 268 00 00) or **Taxis Verts** (☎ 02 349 49 49). Taxes are officially included in the meter price, so ignore requests for extra service charges.

AROUND BRUSSELS

Leuven

pop 89,700

If you've ever downed a Stella Artois, this is the place from where it came. Leuven (Louvain in French) is Flanders' premier university town, as well as home to the beer that discerning Belgians balk at. The town is within easy striking distance of Brussels by train (€4.30, 35 minutes, five hourly) and its main attractions – a flamboyant 15th-century **Stadhuis** (town hall; ☎ 01 621 15 40; Grote Markt; admission €2) and the **Groot Begijnhof** (Great Beguinage; admission free) – are well worth a day trip.

Leuven is also famed for **Rock Werchter** (www.rockwerchter.be), held for three days over the first weekend of July. Together with Glastonbury (England), this is one of Europe's biggest 'field' rock festivals.

Waterloo

pop 29,000

Waterloo, the battleground where Napoleon was defeated in 1815 and European history changed its course, is 18km south of Brussels. Unless you are a war or history buff, it is fairly staid. What's more, the most important sites are spread out over several kilometres, making it quite tedious to get around using public transport. You'll need to catch TEC bus W from Ave Fosny at Brussels' Gare du Midi train station; ask the driver for a day card (€6).

On arrival, the best place to start is at Waterloo's **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 02 352 09 10; www.waterloo-tourisme.be; Chaussée de Bruxelles 218; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10.30am-5pm Oct-Mar). Bus W stops here and tourist staff will assist with timetables for getting around the area.

FLANDERS

The only thing flat about Flanders is typography. Belgium's Flemish-speaking northern region is the country's powerhouse, home to vibrant cities, historic gems and contemporary culture.

ANTWERP

pop 446,500

Cosmopolitan, confident and full of contrasts, Antwerp (Antwerpen in Flemish, Anvers in French) is an essential stop. Appreciated by art and architecture lovers, mode moguls, club queens and diamond dealers, Belgium's second-biggest city once again revels in fame and fortune.

Orientation

Antwerp's historic centre, based around the Grote Markt, is 1km from the impressive Centraal Station. The two are linked by the pedestrianised Meir (pronounced 'mare'), a bustling shopping thoroughfare. The city basically ends at the Scheldt River, Antwerp's economic lifeline.

LÉOPOLD II & THE CONGO

In 1885 Belgium's King Léopold II personally acquired the Congo in Africa, an area almost 100 times the size of his homeland. Between then and 1908, when the Belgian state stripped the king of his possession, it is estimated up to 10 million Africans died because of starvation, overwork or murder carried out in Léopold's quest for rubber, ivory and other commodities.

A BBC TV documentary, aired in Belgium in 2004, shone this period of history squarely into Belgian faces – and some didn't like what they saw. Outspoken foreign minister Louis Michel retaliated, saying it was biased and didn't take into account the social context of that time.

It is impossible to know for sure the number of people who died. On Léopold's orders, the Congo archives were destroyed. According to Adam Hochschild in his book *King Léopold's Ghost*, the furnaces in the Congo offices in Brussels burnt for over a week. But what is sure is that the booty from this barbarity was enormous. Brussels' landmarks – such as the Arcade du Cinquantenaire – were built on these proceeds. So, too, was the **Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika** (Royal Museum for Central Africa; ☎ 02 769 52 30; www.africamuseum.be; Leuvensesteenweg 13, Tervuren; adult/concession €4/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun). This monumental museum makes for an easy half-day excursion that won't be readily forgotten.

Located at Tervuren, a Flemish-speaking town 14km east of Brussels, the museum houses the world's most impressive array of African artefacts. But up until recently, the permanent exhibition was one big imperialistic showpiece, mirroring views from the 1960s when it was established, but way off centre with current thinking. Since 2001 museum director Guido Gryseels has been overhauling the entire museum, a process due to be completed for centennial celebrations in 2010. In the meantime temporary exhibitions aim to inform visitors that there was more than just one story in the Congo during Léopold's reign.

To get to the museum, take the metro to Montgomery then tram 44 (20 minutes); the fare is covered by a one-day card (€4).

Information

2Zones (☎ 03 232 24 00; Wolstraat 15; per hr €4.50;

☎ 11am-midnight) Cool Internet bar.

Main post office (Groenplaats 43)

Main tourist office (☎ 03 232 01 03; www.visitantwerpen.be; Grote Markt 13; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

St Elisabethgasthuis (☎ 03 234 41 11, emergency 03 234 40 50; Leopoldstraat 26; ☎ 24hr) Central hospital.

Tourist office (Centraal Station; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

Sights

Antwerp's epicentre is the **Grote Markt**, a pedestrianised market square presided over by the Renaissance-style **Stadhuis** and lined by Renaissance-style **guildhalls**, most of which were reconstructed in the 19th century. Rising from a rough pile of rocks at its centre is the voluptuous, baroque **Brabo Fountain**.

Just a steeple's fall away is Belgium's largest Gothic cathedral, **Onze Lieve Vrouwkathedraal** (☎ 03 213 99 51; Handschoenmarkt; adult/concession €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun). Built between 1352 and 1521, it houses four early canvases by Rubens including the *Descent from the Cross* (1612).

The prestigious **Rubenshuis** (☎ 03 201 15 55; Wapper 9-11; adult/concession €5/2.50; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) was the home and studio of Pieter Paul Rubens, northern Europe's greatest baroque artist. Little more than a ruin when acquired by the city in 1937, it has been superbly restored along original lines. Unfortunately, only a handful of Rubens' lesser works are displayed.

To immerse yourself in Rubens, head to the **Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten** (☎ 03 238 78 09; www.antwerpen.be/cultuur/kmska; Leopold De Waelplaats, 't Zuid; adult/concession/child €6/4/free, last Wed of the month free; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun). This fine arts museum houses an impressive permanent collection, from Flemish Primitives to contemporary styles. The best sections are the 17th-century Flemish baroque masters and the section on Ensor. To get here, take tram 8 from Groenplaats or bus 1 or 23 (direction Zuid) from Centraal Station.

Fashion followers must start with Antwerp's mode museum, **MoMu** (☎ 03 470 27 70; www.momu.be; Nationalestraat 28; adult/concession €7/5; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It's located in the much-celebrated **Moderatie** (www.moderatie.com) complex, home also to the Flanders Fashion Institute.

Down on the Scheldt is **Zuiderterras**, a raised promenade built decades ago alongside the city's main dock. It offers a steeped skyline plus an essential pit stop (see p124).

Wander the length of Zuiderterras to arrive at **St Jansvliet**, a small tree-lined square and entry to **St Annatunnel**. This 570m-long pedestrian tunnel, dug under the Scheldt in the 1930s, links the city centre with the **Linkeroever**, or Left Bank, from where there's a fab city panorama.

Zurenborg, about 2km southeast of Centraal Station, is famed for the eclectic architecture found in a handful of streets. The showcase is **Cogels-Osylei**, where affluent citizens went wild a century ago. Tram 11 (direction Eksterlaar) runs along Cogels-Osylei.

Sleeping

To explore the city's burgeoning B&B scene, check out **The Association of Antwerp Guestrooms** (www.bedandbreakfast-antwerp.com).

BUDGET

Camping De Molen (☎ 03 219 81 79; Thonetlaan; adult/car/tent €1.80/12.50; ☞ Apr-Sep) The pick of

Antwerp's two camping grounds, located on the Linkeroever; take bus 81 or 82 (direction Linkeroever).

Hostel Op Sinjoorke (☎ 03 238 02 73; www.jeuighergen.be; Eric Sasselelaan 2; dm/s/d €14.50/29/42; ☞ Jan-Nov; P ☞) This run-of-the-mill HI-affiliated hostel is nearly 3km south of the city centre. To get there, take tram 2 (direction Hoboken).

Den Heksenketel (☎ 03 2267164; www.heksenketel.org; Pelgrimstraat 22; dm €19) The only cheap accommodation in the heart of the city and located on a street with an unbeatable cathedral view. Three simple but fresh dorms are situated above a small folk-music club (concerts Monday, jam sessions Thursday). Take *premetro* tram 2 or 15 to Groenplaats.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

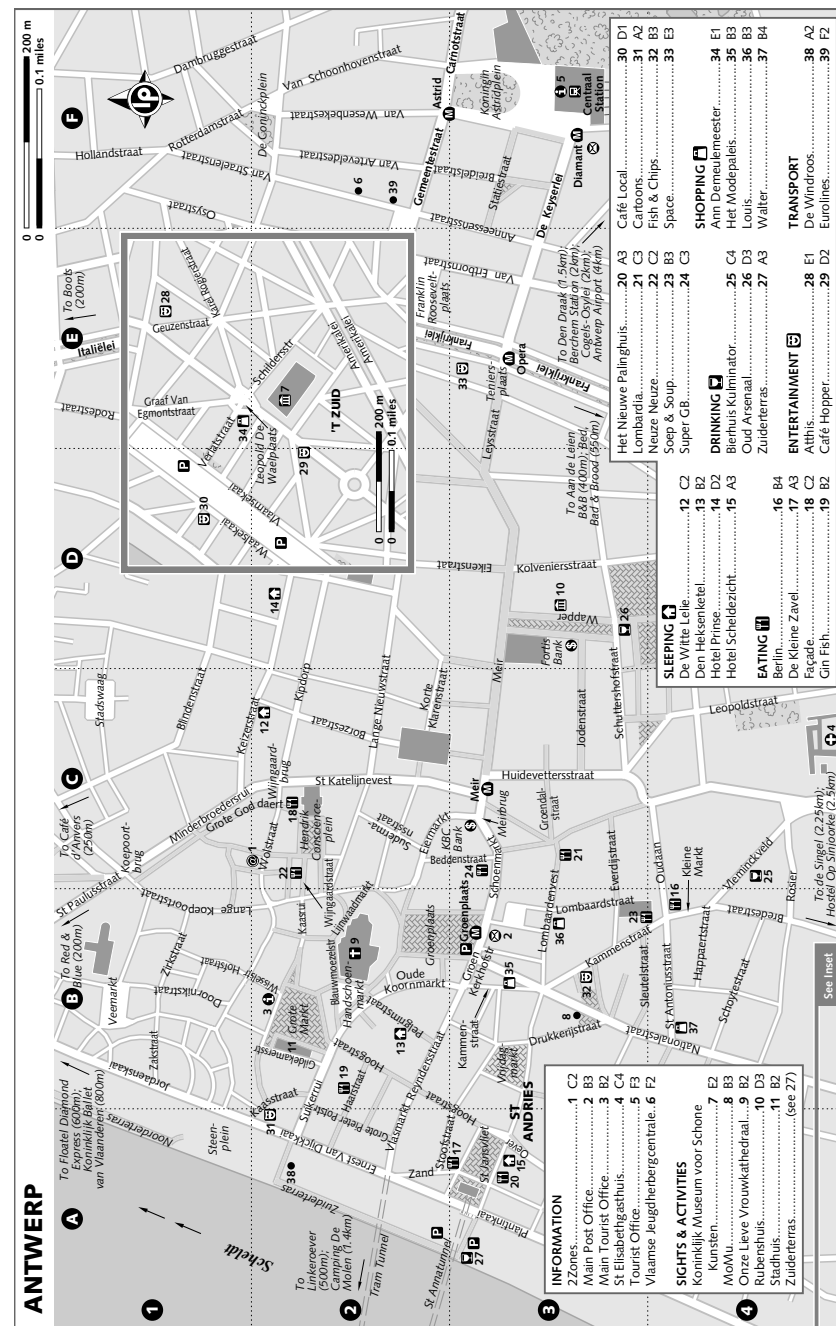
Hotel Scheldezicht (☎ 03 231 66 02; www.hotel-scheldezicht.be; St Jansvliet 2; s/d/tr from €45/65/85; ☞) Quaint old-style hotel, well situated on a tree-lined square in the historic centre. The spacious modern rooms have private shower cubicles, but the toilets are shared. Take *premetro* tram 2 or 15 to Groenplaats.

Bed, Bad & Brood (☎ 03 248 15 39; www.bbantwerp.com; Justitiestraat 43; 2 night-minimum s/d/f €50/60/85) Wooden floors and old-fashioned furniture are the salient features of this spacious and charming B&B. It's 1.5km from the Grote Markt, or take tram 12 or 24 from Franklin Rooseveltplaats (direction Zuid) and get off at the Gerechtshof stop.

Aan de Leien B&B (☎ 03 288 66 95; www.europeholidayhomes.info; Britselei 49 bte 6; s/d €55/62, penthouse €100; ☞) Quality B&B on the top floor of a modern apartment block. With extra euros to spend, go for the penthouse – it's sublime. From Centraal Station take bus 23 to Nationale Bank stop.

Floatel Diamond Princess (☎ 03 227 08 15; www.diamondprincess.be; Bonapartedok; s/d/ste €57/77/139; P ☞) Former 1952 Norwegian passenger ship turned hotel. Though hard to believe, there are 52 cabins on board: all pretty small but pleasantly decorated. It's about 1km north of the Grote Markt – take bus 1 or 13 from the corner of De Keyserlei and Frankrijklei.

Keizerstraat, a quiet backstreet half-way between Centraal Station and the Grote Markt, has several options including **Hotel Prinsse** (☎ 03 226 40 50; www.hotelprinsse.be; Keizerstraat 63; s/d/tr €104/122/140 Sun-Thu, €95/116/140



GAY & LESBIAN ANTWERP

The gay capital of Belgium, Antwerp's long-established nightlife scene attracts dance divas and fetish crowds from far and wide.

Red & Blue (☎ 03 213 05 55; www.redandblue.be; Lange Schipperskapelstraat 11; ☎ 11pm-7am Sat) The biggest (and awarded best) men-only nightclub in this corner of Europe, drawing party queens from outside Belgium's borders to house, techno, rap and soul.

Boots (☎ 03 231 34 83; Van Aerdstraat 22; ☎ 10.30pm-late Fri & Sat) Has the distinction of being the country's most disreputable nightclub, where almost any sexual fantasy becomes reality.

Den Draak (☎ 03 288 00 84; www.hetrozehuis.be, in Flemish; Draakplaats 1; ☎ 3pm-midnight Tue-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) Café and community centre for Antwerp's gay and lesbian community. Located in the Zurenborg – take tram 11 (direction Eksterlaar).

Atthis (☎ 03 216 37 37; www.atthis.be, in Flemish; Geuzenstraat 27; ☎ 8.30pm-late Fri & Sat) Meeting-place-cum-bar for Belgium's longest-running lesbian group. Nearly 30 years old and still going strong.

Fri & Sat; ☎ ☎), an understated hotel where children and babies are most welcome. It's wheelchair accessible and parking costs €10. Also on Keizerstraat, **De Witte Lelie** (☎ 03 226 19 66; www.dewittelie.be; Keizerstraat 16-18; s/d €195/265, ste from €275; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) is a top-end gorgeous boutique hotel. Parking costs €20.

Eating

Super GB (Groenplaats; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Self caterers will find this supermarket in the Grand Bazar shopping centre.

Lombardia (☎ 03 233 68 19; Lombaardenvest 78; light meals €4-8; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Legendary health-food-shop-cum-café that has been around for three decades. The food's all *bio* (organic) and the décor's bizarre. Go for a milkshake (either beastie or vegan), juice, salad or sandwich.

Soep & Soup (☎ 03 707 28 05; Kammenstraat 89; small/large bowl €4.25/5.50; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Buzzy soup bar in trendy St Andries. Five pots of soup, with fresh ingredients, simmer away. Vegetarians can ask to hold the meatballs.

Berlin (☎ 03 227 11 01; Kleine Markt 1-3; dagschotel €9, mains €12-17; ☎ 7.30am-1am Mon-Wed, 10am-3am Fri-Sun) Spacious brasserie in St Andries that attracts an eclectic crowd from jeans-minded teens to the old lady next door.

Façade (☎ 03 233 59 31; Hendrik Conscienceplein 18; mains €9-18; ☎ 11am-10.30pm) Unpretentious restaurant that occupies a quaint pair of houses on one of the city's most delightful public squares. The French/Belgian cuisine is beautifully presented and prices are a snip.

De Kleine Zavel (☎ 03 231 96 91; Stooftstraat 2; mains €20-27; ☎ lunch Sun-Fri, dinner daily) Bistro-style décor and an informal atmosphere

belie this restaurant's standing as one of the most sought-after and reliable eateries in Antwerp, serving inventive fusion cooking, with an accent on Mediterranean flavours.

Neuze Neuze (☎ 03 232 27 97; Wijngaardstraat 19-21; mains €25; ☎ lunch Mon, Tues, Thu & Fri, dinner Mon-Sat; ☎) Dr Seuss would feel right at home here – noses noses everywhere. It serves excellent French-Belgian cuisine.

Het Nieuwe Palinghuis (☎ 03 231 74 45; St Jansvliet 14; mussels around €20, mains €25-32; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun; ☎) Seafood restaurant well known for its attentive service and seasonal food, including mussels.

Gin Fish (☎ 03 231 32 07; Haarstraat 9; 4-course menu incl/excl wine €75/60; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat; ☎ ☎) Sit side-by-side at the black marble counter overlooking the sunken kitchen and engage chef Didier Garnich about his love of fish. Bookings essential.

Drinking

The only thing better in Antwerp than eating is drinking. Small convivial pubs, converted warehouses and *grand cafés* abound.

Oud Arsenal (☎ 03 232 97 54; Pijpelinxstraat 4; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Wed-Mon) Catch the city's most congenial brown café while it lasts. Beers are among the cheapest in town (just €2.50 for a Duvel) and it's one of the few pubs in Belgium to stock Westvleteren Trappist beer.

Zuiderterras (☎ 03 234 12 75; Ernest van Dijkstraal 37; ☎ 9am-midnight) Landmark café/restaurant at the southern end of the riverside promenade and designed by the city's eminent contemporary architect, bOb Van Reeth. Great place to while away an hour or so.

Bierhuis Kulminator (☎ 03 232 45 38; Vleminkveld 32; ☎ 8pm-late Mon, 11am-late Tue-Fri, 5pm-late Sat)

Boasts more than 700 types of beer – just open the menu and point.

Entertainment

Café Hopper (☎ 03 248 49 33; Leopold De Waelstraat 2) Cosy café in 't Zuid that doubles as the city's best jazz venue; performances are on Sunday, Monday and Wednesday.

Cartoons (☎ 03 232 96 32; Kaasstraat 4-6) Art-house movies and quality foreign films are screened in three auditoriums.

deSingel (☎ 03 248 28 28; www.desingel.be; Desguinlei 25) Antwerp's chief venue for classical music, international theatre and modern dance.

Koninklijk Ballet van Vlaanderen (☎ 03 234 34 38; www.kbv.vb; Westkaai 16, 't Eilandje) The Royal Flanders Ballet is the nation's only classical-dance company.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

Buses arrive and depart from the **Eurolines** (☎ 03 233 86 62; Van Straelenstraat 8) office near Franklin Rooseveltplaats. For information on services, see p141.

TRAIN

Antwerp's beautiful **Centraal Station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) is about 1.5km from the historic centre. The station has undergone a massive upgrade in recent years to accommodate Thalys high-speed trains linking Belgium and the Netherlands. Work on the new underground lines is due to finish at the end of 2007. From then on, the journey time between Antwerp and Amsterdam will be about 2½ hours. National connections include IC trains every half-hour to Brussels (€6, 35 minutes) and Ghent (€7.80, 45 minutes), and hourly trains to Bruges (€12.40, 70 minutes).

Getting Around

A good network of buses, trams and a *premetro* is run by **De Lijn Antwerpen** (☎ 07 022 02 00; www.delijn.be). The main bus hubs are Franklin Rooseveltplaats and Koningin Astridplein.

In summer bikes can be hired from **De Windroos** (☎ 03 480 93 88; Steenplein 1a) for €2.50/12.50 per one hour/day.

GHEENT

pop 229,000

Ghent (known as Gent in Flemish and Gand in French) is Flanders' unsung city. Sand-

wiched between Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp, this crisp stylish and well-organised city has long been overlooked by visitors on the traditional art-town hop between Belgium's big three. If you're into exploring Flanders without the tourist hordes, Ghent's the go.

Orientation

The city's medieval core contains not one but three central squares. The westernmost square, the Korenmarkt, is the main hub – it's 2km north of the main train station, St Pietersstation.

Information

Coffeelounge (☎ 09 329 39 11; Botermarkt 6; per hr €2; ☎ 10am-7pm Wed-Mon) Offers Internet access.

Main post office (Lange Kruisstraat 55)

Tourist office (☎ 09 266 52 32; www.visitgent.be; Botermarkt 17; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar)

Sights

Though **St Baafskathedraal** (☎ 09 269 20 45; St Baafsplein; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5pm Nov-Mar) is unimpressive from the outside, formidable queues form to see the **Adoration of the Mystic Lamb** (adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-4.30pm Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-3.30pm Sun Nov-Mar). This lavish representation of medieval religious thinking is one of the earliest-known oil paintings, executed in 1432 by Flemish Primitive artist Jan Van Eyck. It's not to be missed. It's wheelchair accessible.

The 14th-century **Belfort** (☎ 09 233 39 54; Botermarkt; adult/child €3/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Easter-mid-Nov) affords spectacular views of the city and can be climbed either by a lift or, if you're so inclined, stairs.

The **Gravensteen** (☎ 09 225 93 06; St Veerleplein; adult/concession/child €6/2.50/1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Mar), located smack in the heart of the city, belonged to the 12th-century counts of Flanders and is the quintessential castle.

Ghent's highly regarded **SMAK** (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst; ☎ 09 221 17 03; www.smak.be; Citadelpark; adult/concession/child €5/3.80/free, 10am-1pm Sun free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) contains works by Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky and Panamarenko – three of Belgium's best-known contemporary artists – as well as works by international celebrities.

The **Museum voor Vormgeving** (Design Museum; ☎ 09 267 99 99; www.designmuseum.gent.be;

Jan Breydelstraat 5; adult/concession/child €2.50/1.20/free, 10am-1pm Sun free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is one of Ghent's little-known gems, with a mix of furnishings from the Renaissance through to contemporary styles.

Formerly a Middle Ages meat market, the **Groot Vleeshuis** (☎ 09 267 86 07; Groentenmarkt 7; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is now a tasting hall for local products.

Ghent's **Museum voor Schone Kunsten** (☎ 09 240 07 00; www.mskgent.be; Citadelpark) was being renovated at the time of research. In the meantime some of its collection is exhibited in St Baafskathedraal and at SMAK.

Festivals & Events

Time a visit with **De Gentse Feesten** (www.gentsefeesten.be), an annual 10-day festival held in mid-July that transforms the city

into a party of music and theatre. The festival includes **10 Days Off** (www.10daysoff.be), one of Europe's biggest techno parties.

Sleeping

Complete B&B listings and a booking service are organised by **Bed & Breakfast Ghent** (www.bedandbreakfast-gent.be).

Camping Blaarmeersen (☎ 09 266 81 60; camping.blaarmeersen@gent.be; Zuiderlaan 12; adult/tent/car €4.50/4.50/2.50) The only camping ground in the vicinity of the city, this spot is a long way west of the centre. Take bus 9 (direction Mariakerke) from St Pietersstation to the Europabrug stop, then bus 38 or 39, which stops out the front.

De Draecke (☎ 09 233 70 50; www.vjh.be; St Widostraat 11; dm/tw €16.60/42; ☎) This is one of Belgium's best HI-affiliated hostels, occupying

SHOPPERS & CLUBBERS UNITE!

Shop until you drop, dine into dark, then club the night away...that's Antwerp. As an avant-garde fashion capital snapping at the heels of Milan and New York, and the top spot on the clubbing circuit between Amsterdam and Paris, this city's a magnet for shoppers and clubbers alike.

The best known of the city's fashion designers are the 'Antwerp Six' – Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkeberg and Marina Yee. For designer fashions wander Schuttershofstraat and Huidevettersstraat; retro and streetwear groove on in Kammenstraat. Oh, and don't miss **MoMu** (☎ 03 470 27 70; www.momu.be; Nationalestraat 28; adult/concession €7/5; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun); for details, see p122.

Some recommended fashion shops:

Ann Demeulemeester (☎ 03 216 01 33; Verlatstraat 38) Stocks her complete line of men's and women's clothing.

Het Modepaleis (☎ 03 470 25 10; Nationalestraat 16) Headquarters and shop of Dries Van Noten.

Louis (☎ 03 232 98 72; Lombardstraat 4) Great introduction to various Belgian players, including newer designers such as Véronique Branquinho and Olivier Theyskens.

Walter (☎ 03 213 26 44; St Antoniusstraat 12) Van Beirendonck's outlet looks more like an ultramodern art gallery than somewhere to buy clothes.

On the clubbing circuit, Antwerp's scene melds permanent with one-off in a mix that holds both mainstream and alternative. Trance and experimental electronica are big – check out **Noctis.com** (www.noctis.com) to track down clubs, one-off parties or festivals. Alternatively, pick up fliers at **Fish & Chips** (☎ 03 227 08 24; 36-38 Kammenstraat).

A good place to start is **Café d'Anvers** (☎ 03 226 38 70; www.café-d-anvers.com; Verversrui 15; ☎ 11pm-7.30am Fri & Sat). This legendary club does funk and house, disco and soul in a refurbished church in the city's red-light district. Many of Belgium's top DJs started here.

Red & Blue (☎ 03 213 05 55; www.redandblue.be; Lange Schipperskapelstraat 11; ☎ 11pm-7am Sat) is men only on Saturday nights but goes mixed on Friday. **Space** (Frankrijklei 53; admission €8; ☎ 6am-2pm Sat, Mon & Tue, 8am-6am Sun) is the after-club club. Dancing starts when the streetlights go out. **Café Local** (www.cafelocal.be; Waalsekaai 25; ☎ 10pm-late Thu-Sat) is another long-time favourite, previously known for its techno parties but these days preferring salsa and global grooves.

Well-established events to watch out for include **Antwerp is Burning** (www.antwerpisburning.be), a one-night, once-a-year affair combining seven clubs, and **Clubland**, an extravaganza that takes over open fields on the Linkeroever (Left Bank) for a night in summer.

GHENT

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

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AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Engelen aan de Waterkant (☎ 09 223 08 83; www.engelenaandewaterkant.be; Ter Platen 30; s/d/tr €110/120/150; ☒ ☑) The name translates to 'Angels on the Waterside' and, indeed, you'd be hard pressed to find a more angelic B&B in Belgium. Interior designer Ann Willems has created two luxuriously spacious rooms that are beautifully thought out and magically understated.

The B&B is about 1.5km from both the city centre (tram 40 from the Korenmarkt stops about 500m away at Ter Platenbrug) and St Pietersstation (take bus 70 to 79 to the stop Ter Platenbrug).

a renovated warehouse smack in the heart of the city. From St Pietersstation, take tram 1, 10 or 11 to St Veerleplein.

Chambre Plus (☎ 09 225 37 75; www.chambreplus.be; Hoogpoort 31; s/d/ste €65/80/140; ☒ ☑) Gorgeous B&B with a fab location on a pedestrianised street in the city centre. The exotic rooms are complemented by convivial hosts and a gastronomic breakfast.

Hotel Erasmus (☎ 09 224 21 95; www.proximedia.com/web/hotel-erasmus.html; Poel 25; s/d/f €75/95/150, luxury s/d €85/110, breakfast €10) Renovated 16th-century townhouse with creaking floorboards and a medieval ambience.

Eating

Food Market (Vrijdagmarkt; ☒ 8am-2pm Fri) Head to this weekly market to pick up your own supplies.

Souplounge (☎ 09 223 62 03; Zuivelbrugstraat 6; small/large soup €3/4.50; ☒ 10am-7pm) One of the new breed of modern soup kitchens and great for a light, fast meal.

Ethuis Avalon (☎ 09 224 37 24; Geldmunt 32; dag-schotel €8.50, 3-course menu €11.50; ☒ lunch Mon-Sat) Spacious vegetarian restaurant close to the Gravensteen. Inside it's a warren of little rooms, or you can dine outside on a small terrace.

La Malcontenta (☎ 09 224 18 01; Haringsteeg 7; mains €14-20; ☒ dinner Wed-Sat) One of many restaurants located in the intimate Patershol quarter. Stylish Spanish cuisine is served here, and vegetarians aren't forgotten.

Pakhuis (☎ 09 223 55 55; Schuurkenstraat 4; mains €15-25; ☒ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) This huge brasserie-cum-restaurant occupying a re-

stored textile warehouse on a dog-eared backstreet draws young and old alike.

Drinking

Foyer Casa Rosa (☎ 09 269 28 12; Belfortstraat 39; ☒ 3pm-1am Sun-Thu, 3pm-2am Fri & Sat) This gay and lesbian café is run by Holebifederatie, Flanders' biggest gay and lesbian organisation. Check out their website at www.holebifederatie.com (in Flemish) or drop them a line at Kammerstraat 22.

Herberg De Dulle Griet (☎ 09 224 24 55; Vrijdagmarkt 50; ☒ noon-1am) Ghent's best-known beer pub. Local brews include Guillotine (9.3%), Delirium Tremens (9.5%) and the city's strongest beer, Piraat (10.5%).

Pink Flamingo's (☎ 09 233 47 18; Onderstraat 55; ☒ noon-midnight Sun-Thu, 2pm-3am Fri & Sat) Off-the-planet café, where the authentic kitsch décor changes every three months.

't Velootje (☎ 09 223 28 34; Kalversteeg 2; ☒ 9pm-late) Extraordinary pub in the Patershol quarter crammed from floor to ceiling with all manner of junk and riches. Hours can vary.

Entertainment

Culture Club (☎ 09 267 64 41; www.cultureclub.be; Afrikaalaan 174) Dubbed the 'world's hippest club', this class venue is the epicentre of Ghent's clubbing scene. It's northeast of the city centre – take a taxi.

Hotsy Totsy (☎ 09 224 20 12; Hoogstraat 1; ☒ noon-late Mon-Fri, 8pm-late Sat & Sun) The unassuming façade of this bar belies its local standing as one of the city's most popular spots for everything from jazz to poets.

Vooruit (☎ 09 267 28 28; St Pietersnieuwstraat 23) Ghent's main venue for dance and theatre. This impressive building, built in 1912 as a cultural centre for the Socialist Party, is worth a look in itself.

Getting There & Around

The **Eurolines** (☎ 09 220 90 24; Koningin Elisabethlaan 73) office, from where buses arrive and depart, is 100m from St Pietersstation. For details on bus services, see p141.

Ghent's main train station is **St Pieters station** (☎ 02 528 28 28), 2km south of the city centre. Trains run half-hourly to Antwerp (€7.80, 45 minutes), Bruges (€5.40, 20 minutes) and Brussels (€7.80, 45 minutes), and hourly connections to Ypres (€9.50, one hour).

The city's public transport network is operated by **De Lijn** (☎ 09 210 93 11). Trams to

the city centre (1, 10, 11, 12 and 13) depart from the tram station in the tunnel to the right as you exit the train station.

Bikes can be hired from the **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) for €9.50 per day (plus €12.50 deposit), or from **Biker** (☎ 09 224 29 03; Steendam 16; per half-/full-day €6.50/9; ☒ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Fri, until 5pm Sat).

BRUGES

pop 117,000

Touristy, overcrowded and a tad fake. Describe any other city in these terms and it would be left for dead. But not Bruges (Brugge in Flemish, Bruges in French). This Flemish city is Belgium's most popular destination and, despite the crowds, it's not to be missed.

Suspended in time centuries ago because of misfortune that drove the townsfolk away, Bruges is one of Western Europe's most-visited medieval cities and dreamily evokes a world long since gone. But its reputation as one of the most perfectly preserved cities is in part fabrication. While what you see reflects that of centuries ago, much of the architecture dates only to the 19th and 20th centuries.

Orientation

Central Bruges is neatly encased in an egg-shaped series of canals, at the heart of which is the picturesque Markt, the city's central square. The train station is 1.5km south of the Markt.

Information

Coffee Link (☎ 05 034 99 73; www.thecoffeelink.com; Mariastraat 38; ☒ 11am-6pm Thu-Tue) Atmospheric Internet café inside the precincts of the former St Janshospitaal.

In & Uit Brugge (☎ 05 044 46 46; www.brugge.be; 't Zand; ☒ 10am-6pm Fri-Wed, 10am-8pm Thu) Tourist office located inside the Concertgebouw.

Main post office (☎ 05 033 14 11; Markt 5)

Train station tourist office (☒ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-5pm Tue-Sat)

Sights

Bruges' nerve centre is the historic **Markt**, a large square from which rises Belgium's most famous **Belfort** (Belfry; Markt; adult/concession €5/3; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun, last tickets sold 4.15pm). The 366 steps to the top are worth the squeeze.

Smaller but arguably more impressive than the Markt is the adjoining **Burg**. This

square is home to the **Heilig-Bloedbasiliek** (Basilica of the Holy Blood; ☒ 9.30-11.50am & 2-5.50pm Apr-Sep, 10-11.50am & 2-3.50pm Oct-Mar), where a few coagulated drops of Christ's blood are kept and cherished. This phial is paraded annually in the elaborate Heilig-Bloedprocessie (Holy Blood Procession) on Ascension Day (17 May in 2007 and 1 May in 2008).

Belgium's oldest and arguably most beautiful **Stadhuis** (Town Hall; admission €2.50; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) also rises from the Burg. Tours take in the Gotische Zaal (Gothic Hall), with its polychromatic ceiling.

Bruges' prized collection of art dating from the 14th to 20th centuries is housed in the small **Groeningemuseum** (Dijver 12; adult/concession €8/5; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). A controversial make-over of the museum a few years ago means you now need to start in Room 2 – which presents the Flemish Primitives – then backtrack to Room 1 to view things chronologically.

The **Hospitaalmuseum St Janshospitaal** (Mariastraat 38; adult/concession €8/5; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is home to a handful of masterpieces by Hans Memling, plus many works by lesser-known painters of his time. Don't miss Memling's reliquary of St Ursula – the attention to detail is stunning.

The **Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk** (Church of Our Lady; Mariastraat; adult/concession €2.50/1.50; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1.30-5pm Sun) has one remarkable art treasure – Michelangelo's *Madonna and Child* (1504). This small marble statue was the only work of art by Michelangelo to leave Italy during his lifetime. Although pinched several times by occupying forces, it has always been returned.

The **Begijnhof** (admission free; ☒ 9am-6.30pm) was home to a 13th-century religious community of unmarried or widowed women, known as *Begijnen* (Beguines). One of Bruges' quaintest spots, it's a 10-minute walk south of the Markt.

Choco-Story (☎ 05 061 22 37; www.choco-story.be; Wijzakstraat 2; adult/child €6/4; ☒ 10am-5pm) is devoted to telling the story of chocolate, and is Bruges' newest attraction. It's well done.

De Halve Maan/Straffe Hendrik (☎ 05 033 26 97; www.halvemaan.be; Walplein 26; admission €4.50; ☒ 11am-4pm Apr-Sep, 11am-3pm Oct-Mar) is a family brewery offering crowded guided tours (45 minutes) that finish with a beer.

BRUGES

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Tours

Quasimundo (☎ 05 033 07 75; www.quasimundo.com; adult/under 26/under 8 €18/16/free, with your own bike €12; ☒ mid-Mar–mid-Oct) offers excellent half-day bike tours of Bruges and/or the surrounding countryside. Bookings are necessary.

Canal tours (adult/child €5.70/2.80; ☒ 10am–6pm Mar–mid-Nov) are touristy, but what isn't here? Viewing Bruges from the water gives it a totally different feel than by foot. Boats depart every 20 minutes from jetties south of the Burg, including Rozenhoedkaai and Dijver, and tours last 30 minutes.

The clip-clop of hooves hitting cobblestones resounds constantly in the streets of Bruges. **Horse-drawn carriages** (5 passengers €30) leave from the Markt, and their well-trodden route takes 35 minutes.

Quasimodo (☎ 05 037 04 70; www.quasimodo.be; incl lunch adults/under 26 yr €50/40) offers two excellent bus day trips – a 'Triple Treat' tour of Bruges or a tour of the Ypres Salient's famous WWI battlefields (see p132).

Sleeping

Despite an abundance of offerings, Bruges' accommodation scene gets booked way in advance. Reserve early if you want the pick of the crop.

BUDGET

Camping Memling (☎ 05 035 72 50; www.camping-memling.be; Veltemweg 109, St Kruis; tent/car €12/5; ☒ year-round) The quietest local campground is located 2.5km east of the city centre. Take bus 11 from the train station to the Vossensteert stop and walk 400m back in the direction of Bruges.

Snuffel Sleep In (☎ 05 033 31 33; www.snuffel.be; Ezelstraat 47-49; dm/d €15/36; ☒) Funky place that's been around for years. It has basic

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

B&B Dieltiens (☎ 05 033 42 94; www.users.skynet.be/dieltiens; Waalsestraat 40; s/d/tr €50/60/90; ☒) This classical mansion was featured on the first map of Bruges published in the 16th century. Lovingly restored by Koen and Annemie Dieltiens, this B&B has three gorgeous guestrooms with polished wooden floors and subtle warm tones. Inquire also about their studio apartment in a 17th-century house.

but original rooms, friendly staff, a kitchen and a bar. From the train station take bus 3 or 13.

Bauhaus (☎ 05 034 10 93; www.bauhaus.be; Langestraat 135; hostel section dm/d/tr per person €15/18/17, hotel section s/d/tr €26/40/57) Big and bustling hostel with separate budget hotel section next door. A popular hangout for young travellers, though the blue rooms hardly fuel the imagination. The bar's lively and the adjoining café has cheap meals. Take bus 6 or 16 from the train station.

B&B Degraeve (☎ 05 034 57 11; www.stardekk.com/bedbreakfast; Kazemest 32; s/d/tr €33/45/58) Located in a quiet, untouristed part of the city and run by a zany woman who has filled the two spacious rooms with bizarre décor.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

B&B Gheeraert (☎ 05 033 56 27; www.users.skynet.be/brugge-gheeraert; Ridderstraat 9; s/d/tr €50/60/80, 1-night stay extra €10; ☒) Curl around the steep spiral staircase and arrive at the three lofty rooms in this delightful B&B. The two nicest, at the rear, look out over a garden. All have white décor, polished timber floors and a large en suite bathroom. Children and babies (cot and high chair available) are welcome.

B&B Setola (☎ 05 033 49 77; www.bedandbreakfast-bruges.com; St Walburgastraat 12; s/d/tr/f €50/60/80/100, 1-night stay extra €10; ☒) Get away from old world and *brocante* in this mansion dating from 1740. The three 2nd-floor guestrooms have cool, clean vibes, and the woman who runs this place is a charm. Can't get a better location, and the buffet breakfast is fab.

Ter Duinen Hotel (☎ 05 033 04 37; www.terduinenhotel.be; Langerei 52; s/d from €98/105; ☒) Beautifully executed hotel facing a canal about 1km north of the Markt. The neat rooms have a refined, romantic air and the staff are efficient and friendly.

Number 11 (☎ 05 033 06 75; www.number11.be; Peerdenstraat 11; d €115-140, ste €215; ☒) There's no mincing words: this B&B is a stunner. The three rooms – 'Vanilla', 'Grey' and 'Chocolate' – harmoniously blend modern and medieval styles. Ask about the kookiest chandelier you'll ever see.

Eating

From cosy *estaminets* (taverns) to 1st-class restaurants, Bruges has all bases covered.

Passion for Food (☎ 047 740 17 14; Philipstockstraat 39; soup €4-6, salad €6-13; ☒ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon)

Great Mediterranean flavours at this laid-back eatery. Sip a fresh juice on the terrace.

Het Dagelijks Brood (☎ 05 033 60 50; Philipstockstraat 21; snacks €5-11; ☎ 7am-6pm Wed-Mon; ☒) Smoke-free tearoom offering pies and *boterhammen* (sandwiches), plus the essential big table. This Belgian success story now has branches worldwide.

Lokkedize (☎ 05 033 44 50; Korte Vuldiersstraat 33; dishes €8-10; ☎ 7pm-late Wed & Thu, 6pm-late Fri-Sun) One of the city's most convivial *etcafés* (eating cafés) and a great spot for a late-night bite (kitchen open till midnight).

Tom's Diner (☎ 05 033 33 82; West Gistelhof 23; mains €10-15; ☎ 6.30pm-1am Wed-Mon) To the north of the city, a little way out of the tourist centre and all the better for it. Stylish food at very affordable prices. Locals love it.

De Stove (☎ 05 033 78 35; Kleine St Amandsstraat 4; mains €18-28; ☎ lunch Sat-Tue, dinner Fri-Tue) Charming restaurant tucked away on a pedestrian lane. The eight tables are arranged around an old stove, the service is intimate and the food – fish specialities – is excellent.

Also recommended:

Lotus (☎ 05 033 10 78; Wapenmakerstraat 5; meals €10; ☎ 11.45am-2pm Mon-Sat) Excellent lunchtime vegetarian restaurant.

Christophe (☎ 05 034 48 92; Garenmarkt 34; mains €14-23; ☎ 7pm-1am Thu-Mon) Cool late-night bistro.

Proxy/Delhaize (Geldmuntstraat) Supermarket for self-caterers.

Drinking

Herberg Vlissinghe (☎ 05 034 37 37; Blekersstraat 2; ☎ 11am-late Wed-Sun) Someone has been pouring beer at Bruges' oldest café since 1515 – mind-blowing really.

t Brugs Beertje (☎ 05 033 96 16; Kemelstraat 5; ☎ 4pm-1am Thu-Tue) Belgium's most famous beer pub is a tiny place situated on a poky backstreet. About 250 national brews are on offer, listed by brewery.

Top (St Salvatorskerkhof 5; ☎ 9pm-late Tue-Sat, 10pm-late Sun) Cool bar, and one of the few places in Bruges that does dance music after midnight. Opens late and moves until morning.

Bolero (☎ 05 033 81 11; Garenmarkt 32; ☎ 10pm-4am Thu-Mon) The only gay and lesbian bar in town.

Entertainment

Concertgebouw (☎ 05 047 69 99; www.concertgebouw.be; t Zand 34) Contemporary comes to Bruges in the form of this concert hall, the new-

est building on the city's skyline. Opened in 2002 to celebrate Bruges' stint as the European City of Culture, its minimal design incorporates the city's three famous towers.

Cactus@MaZ (☎ 05 071 68 40; www.cactusmusic.be; Magdalenstraat 27) The city's premier venue for contemporary and world music – either live or DJ.

Getting There & Away

Bruges' **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) is about 1.5km south of the Markt. Trains run every half-hour to Brussels (€11.80, one hour) and Ghent (€5.40, 20 minutes), and hourly trains to Antwerp (€12.40, one hour 10 minutes). For Ypres (Ieper in Flemish; €10.10, two hours) take the train to Kortrijk, from where there are hourly connections.

Getting Around

A small network of buses operated by **De Lijn** (☎ 05 956 53 53) covers destinations in and around Bruges. To get from the train station to the Markt, take any bus marked 'Centrum'.

Bruges is great for cyclists. Hire a bike from **Fietsen Popelier** (☎ 05 034 32 62; Mariastraat 26; ☎ 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm Sep-Jun) for €3.50/7/10 per hour/half-day/full day or a tandem for €8/15/22.

YPRES

pop 35,200

Only the hardest are not moved by Ypres (Ieper in Flemish). Ypres and its surrounding area were the last bastion of Belgian territory unoccupied by the Germans in WWI. As such, the region was a barrier to a German advance towards the French coastal ports around Calais. More than 300,000 Allied soldiers were killed here during four years of fighting that left the medieval town flattened. Convincingly rebuilt, the town and its surrounds, known as the Ypres Salient, are dotted with cemeteries and memorials. Unless you've got a car, the best way to visit is by guided tour (opposite).

Information

Post office (Diksmuidsestraat 33)

Ypres Visitors Centre (☎ 05 723 92 20; www.ieper.be; Grote Markt 34; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-Mar)

Sights

Ypres' hub, the **Grote Markt**, is dominated by the enormous **Lakenhalle** (Cloth Hall) with its 70m-high belfry. This hall testifies to Ypres' importance, alongside Bruges and Ghent, as a medieval cloth town. Attached to the eastern end of the Lakenhalle is the Renaissance-style **Stadhuis**, noted for its lovely arcade gallery.

On the 1st floor of the Lakenhalle is **In Flanders Fields Museum** (☎ 05 723 92 20; www.inflandersfields.be; Grote Markt 34; admission €7.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) which honours ordinary people experiencing wartime horrors.

The **Menin Gate** (Meensestraat) is one of the saddest reminders of the town's past. The huge white gate is inscribed with the names of 54,896 British and Commonwealth troops who were lost in the quagmire of the trenches and who have no graves. Every evening at 8pm traffic is halted while buglers sound the Last Post.

Tyne Cot Cemetery, on a plateau about 8km northeast of Ypres, is the largest British Commonwealth war cemetery in the world. Its name comes from the Northumberland infantrymen who tried to take this ridge – they fancied the German bunkers positioned on the hillside looked like Tyneside cottages. In all, 11,956 soldiers are buried here. The cemetery is best visited by guided tour (below).

Tours

Visit on a cold grey day when the lifeless fields are no more than muddy bogs and fog drapes the graves of the dead, and you'll have little difficulty conjuring up the scene of almost a century ago. Two companies offer good bus tours of the Ypres Salient. Book at least a day or two in advance.

Quasimodo (☎ 05 033 07 75; www.quasimundo.com; adult/under 26/under 8 €18/16/free, with your own bike €12; ☎ mid-Mar–mid-Oct) Located in Bruges (see p131).

Salient Tours (☎ 05 721 46 57; www.salienttours.com; 2½/4hr tour €20/25; ☎ Thu-Tue Mar-Nov) Run by an Englishman based in Ypres.

Sleeping & Eating

Jeugdstadion (☎ 05 721 72 82; info@jeugdstadion.be; Bolwerkstraat 1; adult/car €4.50/4.50; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct) Basic campground attached to a youth centre, 900m southeast of Grote Markt.

B&B Hortensia (☎ 05 721 24 06; info@guesthouse-ieper.be; Rijselsestraat 196; s/d €51/61) In the heart

of town with modern, sober rooms. No fuss or bother.

Hotel Regina (☎ 05 721 88 88; www.hotelregina.be; Grote Markt 45; s/d €75/100) Smack on the Markt and overlooking the Lakenhalle, this is Ypres' most atmospheric hotel. The cheaper rooms are old and ordinary; the most expensive ones are large and rustic.

In het Klein Stadhuis (☎ 05 721 55 42; Grote Markt 32; mains €10-15; ☎ daily Jun-Sep, Mon-Sat Oct-May) Smooth, split-level café tucked away in a quaint guildhall next to the Stadhuis. Offers good-value meals day and night.

De Stoove (☎ 047 922 93 33; Surmont de Volsbergstraat 12; mains under €20; ☎ lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Thu-Mon) Just a few streets away from the Lakenhalle, this fish restaurant has a relaxed ambience.

Getting There & Around

From Ypres **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) there are hourly trains direct to Kortrijk (€4.30, 30 minutes) and Ghent (€9.50, one hour). For Brussels (€14.60, 1½ hours), Bruges (€10.10, 1¼ hours) and Antwerp (€16.30, two hours), change at Kortrijk.

Regional buses leave from the bus station to the left outside the train station.

Hire bikes from **Jeugdstadion** (☎ 05 721 72 82; info@jeugdstadion.be; Bolwerkstraat 1; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct) for €5 per day.

WALLONIA

Brush up on your French – you'll need it in Wallonia. Stepping across the linguistic divide into Belgium's French-speaking southern half is akin to entering a different country. Gone are the flat fields and affluent art cities of the north, replaced instead by a rolling forested landscape hiding intimate villages, mighty citadels, patriotic cities and industrial decay. Burrow down in Wallonia's southeastern corner, an area known as the Ardennes, and you'll find ancient castles nestled in river valleys below forested plateaus – all very beguiling.

LIÈGE

pop 185,500

Love or loathe it, Liège (Luik in Flemish) always makes an impression. Sprawled along the Meuse River, about 90km east of Brussels, Liège is the Ardennes' largest city – a gritty place that takes time to know. For

Simenon fans, this is George's birthplace and his primary place of homage (though there's little to see).

The main tourist office is **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 04 237 92 92; www.liege.be; Pl St Lambert 35; ☎ 9am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Oct-May).

Sights

For a city panorama, start with **Montagne de Buuren** (Hors Château), a flight of 373 stairs leading up to a former citadel.

The excellent **Musée d'Art Religieux et d'Art Mosan** (Museum of Religious Art & Art from the Meuse Valley; ☎ 04 221 42 25; Rue Mère Dieu; adult/child €3.80/2; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) is chock-full of well-preserved regional religious relics.

Life as it was for some during the 18th century is depicted in the beautiful **Musée d'Ansembourg** (☎ 04 221 94 02; Féronstrée 114; adult/child €3.80/2; ☎ 1-6pm Tue-Sun). If you've just come from the previous museum, you'll find this rich, Regency-styled mansion wonderfully uncluttered.

The **Musée de l'Art Wallon** (☎ 04 221 92 31; Féronstrée 86; adult/child €3.80/2; ☎ 1-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4.30pm Sun) accommodates art by French-speaking Belgians including surrealists René Magritte and Paul Delvaux.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 344 56 89; www.laj.be; Rue Georges Simenon 2; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42; ☎) To get to this modern HI-affiliated hostel on Outremeuse take bus 4 from Gare Guillemins to Pl St Lambert and change to bus 18.

Hôtel Les Acteurs (☎ 04 223 00 80; www.lesacteurs.be; in French; Rue des Urbanistes 10; s/d €50/65, breakfast €6; (P)) Comfy modern hotel that tries hard to be artistic. It's well located, and buses 1 and 4 stop about 200m away.

As Ouhès (☎ 04 223 32 25; Pl du Marché 21; mains €12-20, menu €25) Liège institution that special-

ises in rich Walloon cuisine. Note the apt logo – a gluttonous man sitting on a mound of hams, sausages and waffles.

Getting There & Away

Buses operated by **Eurolines** (☎ 04 222 36 18; Rue des Guillemins 94) leave 100m from the main train station. See p141 for details on services.

The principal train station is **Gare Guillemins** (☎ 02 528 28 28), 2km south of Pl St Lambert, the city's heart. Train connections include to Brussels (€12.40, one hour, half-hourly), Namur (€7.40, 50 minutes, half-hourly), Spa (€4.30, 50 minutes, hourly), Tongeren (€3.80, 30 minutes, hourly) and Luxembourg City (€32.20, 2½ hours, every two hours).

AROUND LIÈGE

Tongeren

pop 29,500

Tongeren, 20km north of Liège in Flanders, is Belgium's oldest city. The original locals put up considerable resistance under the leadership of Ambiorix when the area was besieged by Roman troops in 15 BC. The **Gallo-Roman Museum** (☎ 01 267 03 30; www.gallo-romeinmuseum.be; in French & Flemish; Kielenstraat 15) has many findings from these times, however, it's closed until spring 2008.

Tongeren is also well known for its Sunday **Antique Market** (Veemarkt) and the elegant **Onze Lieve Vrouwebasiliek** (Basilica of Our Lady; Grote Markt; adult €2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 1.30-5pm Apr-Sep), which is undergoing archaeological excavation but is still worth a visit.

For more information, head to the **tourist office** (☎ 01 239 02 55; www.tongeren.be; in Flemish; Stadhuisplein 9; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Jul-Aug, 8.30am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Sep-Easter, 8.30am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun Easter-Sep).

WORTH A TRIP

There's no bursting its bubble. For centuries Spa, Europe's oldest health resort, has embraced royalty and the wealthy who came to drink, bathe and cure themselves in the mineral-rich waters that bubble forth here. These days a new generation interested in wellbeing is taking to the town's palatial hill-top complex, the **Thermes de Spa** (☎ 08 777 25 60; www.thermesdespa.com; ☎ 10am-9pm). Spend a couple of hours in one of the hydrotherapy pools (€17), or submerge yourself for days.

Spa is 40km southeast of Liège and connected by regular trains (€4.30, 50 minutes). The **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 08 779 53 53; www.spa-info.be; in French & Flemish; Pl Royale 41; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) can help with inquiries.

Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve

The Hautes Fagnes, or High Fens, is a plateau of swampy heath, woods and windswept moors that sweeps over to Germany's Eifel hills. The area is popular with walkers and cyclists.

Start a visit at the **Botrange Nature Centre** (☎ 08 044 03 00; www.centrenaturebotrange.be; in French & Flemish; Route de Botrange 131; ☎ 10am-6pm), located 2.5km from the sturdy stone **Signal de Botrange** that marks Belgium's highest point (694m).

It takes at least 1¼ hours to arrive here on public transport from Liège: take the train to Verviers (€3.40, 20 minutes, hourly) and then bus 390 (€3.60, 30 minutes, five daily) to Rocherath.

CHARLEROI

pop 200,600

A city on the edge – Charleroi, born of coal, iron and glass, flanks the formerly coal-rich Sambre Valley and was the powerhouse of the steel industry up until the 1970s. These days it's surrounded by a blackened industrial landscape with belching chimneys and old slag heaps – hardly fuel for tourists.

The city's **airport** (CRL; www.charleroi-airport.com), sometimes called Brussels-Charleroi or Brussels' South, is 6km north of the city and is serviced by Ryanair flights from Ireland, Britain and several European destinations. Frequent shuttle buses connect the airport with Brussels' main train station, Gare du Midi (€10.50 one way, one hour). Buses arrive and depart from the corner of Rue de France and Rue de l'Instruction near the Thalys exit at Gare du Midi.

Should you want to explore Charleroi, bus A and 68 run from the airport to Charleroi train station.

TOURNAI

pop 67,400

As provincial towns in Wallonia go, Tournai (Doornik in Flemish) is decidedly pleasant. Situated on the Scheldt River (L'Escaut in French), just 10km from the French border and 80km from Brussels, it offers a World Heritage-listed belfry and cathedral, plus a cache of enjoyable museums.

Follow your nose to the belfry to find the **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 06 922 20 45; www.tournai.be; Vieux Marché aux Poteries 14; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat, 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Sun).

Sights

The five towers of the striking but sober **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (Grand Place; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm) have long been the trademark of Tournai's skyline. Pummelled by a freak tornado in 1999, major works to realign the towers mean some parts of the cathedral are still off limits to tourists.

Tournai's 72m-high **belfry** (☎ 06 922 20 45; Grand Place; adult/child €2/1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Mar-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Feb) is Belgium's oldest, dating from 1188. Climb the 256 steps.

The **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 06 922 20 43; Enclos St Martin; adult/child €3/2; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 10am-12 noon & 2-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Feb) is the city's little gem. Housed in a building designed by Victor Horta, it contains paintings and sculptures by local, national and international artists.

Tapestry lovers should not miss the **Musée de la Tapisserie** (☎ 06 984 20 73; Pl Reine Astrid; admission €2.50; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon).

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 06 921 61 36; www.laj.be; Rue St Martin 64; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42) A pleasant, modern hostel around the corner from the Musée des Beaux-Arts. It's a 20-minute walk from the train station: take bus 4 (direction Baisieux).

Hôtel d'Alcantara (☎ 06 921 26 48; hotelalcantara@hotmail.com; Rue des Bouchers St Jacques 2; s/d from €75/85; (P)) Not the most expensive hotel in town but certainly the most charming. Attentive service and 15 well-priced, modern rooms are set behind a discreet courtyard. Parking costs €7.50.

Le Giverny (☎ 06 922 44 64; Quai du Marché au Poisson 6; mains €13-20, menus €40-56; ☎) lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Occupies an old bakery and is a lovely eating space with great French food.

Getting There & Away

Tournai's **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) is about 900m from the heart of town, the Grand Place. There are regular trains to Brussels (€10.70, one hour) and Ypres (€7.80, one hour).

NAMUR

pop 106,200

The capital of Wallonia, Namur (Namen in Flemish) is an excellent jumping-off point

for exploring the forested Ardennes. Some 60km southeast of Brussels, it's a picturesque town, built at the confluence of the Meuse and Sambre rivers and presided over by a citadel that, in times gone by, ranked as one of Europe's mightiest.

The **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 08 124 64 49; www.pays-de-namur.be; Sq Léopold; ☎ 9.30am-6pm) is near the train station.

Sights

What remains of Namur's once-mighty **citadel** (Route Merveilleuse) is slung high above the town on a rocky outcrop. It covers a huge area, though only towers, tunnels and much of the outer walls still exist. Take the **tourist train** (☎ 08 124 64 49; €1; ☎ 10am-5pm hourly Jun-mid-Sep, Sat & Sun Apr, May & mid-Sep-Oct), which departs hourly from the tourist office, for easy access or, alternatively, walk up.

Don't miss the **Trésor du Prieuré d'Oignies** (☎ 08 125 43 00; Rue Julie Billiard 17; adult/child €2/1; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun & Mon), a one-room hoard of Gothic treasures housed in a modern convent. Ring the bell and a nun will guide you.

The **Musée Félicien Rops** (☎ 08 122 01 10; www.ciger.be/rops; Rue Fumal 12; admission €3; ☎ 10am-6pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun) is devoted to works by the 19th-century, Namur-born artist Félicien Rops (1833-98), who fondly illustrated erotic lifestyles and macabre scenes.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Les 4 Fils Aymon (☎ 08 158 02 94; Chaussée de Liège; tent, car & 2 people €6.20; ☎ Apr-Sep) Pleasant camping ground located about 8km east of Namur; bus 12 leaves hourly from the bus station.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 08 122 36 88; www.laj.be; Ave F Rops 8; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42; P ☎ ☎) Attractive riverfront hostel about 3km southwest of the train station. Buses 3 and 4, which both depart hourly from Pl de la Station, stop nearby.

Hôtel Les Tanneurs (☎ 08 124 00 24; www.tanneurs.com; Rue des Tanneries 13; s €45-200, d €60-215, breakfast €10; P ☎ ☎ ☎) Unique hotel situated on a shabby street in the heart of town. Unites modern comfort with 17th-century charm. Book well ahead.

Le Pain Quotidien (☎ 08 122 16 66; Rue du Collège 5; light meals €5-11; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm; ☎) Atmospheric option for a light bite at any time of the day.

Brasserie Henry (☎ 08 122 02 04; Pl St Aubain 3; mains €10-27; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Thu, noon-1am Fri & Sat) Sociable brasserie and an institution among Namur's late-night diners.

La Bonne Fourchette (☎ 08 123 15 36; Rue Notre Dame 112; mains €15-18, menu du chef €25; ☎ dinner daily, lunch Sat & Sun) Intimate Belgian/French restaurant, located near the casino, with plum décor and hovering angels.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Local and regional buses are operated by **TEC** (☎ 08 125 35 55; Pl de la Station; ☎ 7am-7pm). Regional buses leave from either the bus station near the C&A department store or from Pl de la Station. Details of bus services to regional destinations are given in the Getting There & Away section in each of the following towns.

TRAIN

Namur is a major rail hub in this part of Belgium and boasts a gleaming **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28). Regional connections include Brussels (€7.40, one hour), Dinant (€3.90, 30 minutes), Jemelle (€7.40, 40 minutes), Liège (€7.40, one hour) and Marloie (€6.70, 35 minutes).

DINANT

pop 12,700

Pressed between rock and river, Dinant is one of the Ardennes' tourist hot spots. About 28km south of Namur, its bulbous cathedral, **Église Notre Dame** (Pl Reine Astrid; admission free), competes for attention with the cliff-front **citadel** (☎ 08 222 36 70; www.citadellededinant.be; Le Prieuré 25; adult/child €6.50/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Sat-Thu Nov-Mar) and in summer the town almost chokes with tourists and traffic. Good for a pit stop but there are better places deeper in the Ardennes to kick back.

The **tourist office** (☎ 08 222 28 70; www.dinant-tourisme.be; Ave Cadoux 8; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-7pm Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) is on the opposite side of the river from the cathedral.

ROCHEFORT & HAN-SUR-LESSE

pop 15,600

As a base in this part of the Ardennes, Rochefort's hard to beat. Together with its neighbour Han-sur-Lesse, Rochefort is famed for the millennia-old underground limestone grottoes that attract families from all over

Belgium. The caves at Han are the more spectacular of the two, but Han itself is a tourist trap; stay in Rochefort and commute between the towns.

Rochefort is also well known for the Trappist beer of the same name that's brewed by local monks. There's no shortage of watering holes for sampling.

The **Rochefort tourist office** (☎ 08 434 51 72; www.valdelesse.be; Rue de Behogne 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun) is in the centre of town.

Sights & Activities

The impressive **Grottes de Han** (☎ 08 437 72 13; www.grotte-de-han.be; Rue Lamotte 2; adult/child €12/7; ☎ 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 11.30am-4pm Nov, Dec & Mar) is a series of caves dripping with stalactites and stalagmites a little way out of Han. Excursions here start with a toy-train ride, followed by a long walk through cold tunnels and finally a boat trip on an underground lake. Rochefort's cave, **Grotte de Lorette** (☎ 08 421 20 80; Drève de Lorette; adult/child €7.25/4.70; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Mar-Oct), is smaller but also worth seeing.

The area is a great base for **walking** and **cycling**. One trail for cyclists is **RAVEL**, an 18km stretch of disused train line linking Rochefort and the village of Houyet. Buy a map of the local trails from the tourist office and hire a bike from **Cycle Sport** (☎ 08 421 32 55; Rue de Behogne 59; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-noon Sun) for €10/15/20 per morning/afternoon/full day.

Sleeping & Eating

The following options are all in Rochefort.

Camping Communal (☎ 08 421 19 00; Rue du Hableau; adult €2, car & tent €3; ☎ Easter-Oct) Next to the Homme River, immediately below the main part of town, the facilities here are very basic, but it's well located and there's a large playground and pool nearby.

Le Vieux Moulin (☎ 08 421 46 04; www.giterochefort.be; Rue du Hableau 25; demi pension 25 yr & under/26 yr & over €18.50/21.25; ☎ year-round) Pleasant *gîte d'étape* (basic hostel-style accommodation) in the heart of town. The overnight price includes breakfast and one meal.

Hôtel La Malle Poste (☎ 08 421 09 86; www.malleposte.be; Rue de Behogne 46; s/d Maison du Cocher €60/85, Les Thermes from €75/100) The best address in town. Two beautifully restored buildings offer a variety of accommodation – opt for

a night in the quaint old stagecoach quarter, Maison du Cocher, or choose a more stylish room (complete with jacuzzi) in the new Les Thermes section.

La Bella Italia (☎ 08 422 15 20; Rue de Behogne 50; pizza €7.50-12) Enjoy excellent pizza at this busy Italian restaurant in the heart of town.

La Gourmandise (☎ 08 421 09 86; Rue de Behogne 24; mains €9-21) Stop in for a Rochefort beer or stay for dinner – excellent local cuisine, such as chicken in Trappist sauce, is served.

Getting There & Away

Rochefort is linked by bus to Han-sur-Lesse and the train stations of Jemelle and Houyet. To get here from Namur, take the train to Jemelle (€7.40, 40 minutes, hourly) and from there bus 29 to Rochefort (€1.20, seven minutes, hourly), which continues on to Han (€1.20, seven minutes).

LA ROCHE-EN-ARDENNE

pop 4250

La Roche is a vibrant little town hidden in a deep valley, crowned by a ruined castle and surrounded by verdant hills. One of the Ardennes' most popular summer resorts, it hums with Belgian holidaymakers buying up big on smoked hams and getting into outdoor pursuits. All in all, a great family destination.

The **tourist office** (☎ 08 436 77 36; www.la-roche-tourisme.com; Pl du Marché 15; ☎ 9am-5pm) is on the main street.

Sights & Activities

La Roche's picture-postcard medieval **castle** (adult/child €4/2; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Apr-Oct, 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), perched on a crag above town, is accessed from steps leading up from the main street.

Kayaking is big business here. The most popular excursion, a 25km paddle along the Ourthe River (€20, six hours), is organised by **Ardenne-Aventures** (☎ 08 441 19 00; www.ardenne-aventure.be; Rue du Hadja 1), next to the bridge at the northern end of town. It also hires out mountain bikes (half-/full day €17/22) for exploring the many marked hiking/biking trails that crisscross the surrounding hills.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Le Vieux Moulin (☎ 08 441 13 80; www.strument.com; Petite Strument 62; adult/child/campsite

€2.50/2.50/8; ☺ Easter-Oct) Draped for what seems an eternity along a stream next to the Hôtel Moulin de la Strument. Great site.

Domaine des Olivettes (☎ 08 441 16 52; www.lesolivettes.be; Chemin des Soeret 12; dm €12, s/d from €35/55) Hotel-cum-hostel-cum-equestrian centre, perched on a hill above town. The hotel rooms are pleasant, alternatively there's a separate *auberge* (hostel) with dormitory-style accommodation.

Hôtel Moulin de la Strument (☎ 08 441 15 07; www.strument.com; Petite Strument 62; s/d €65/75; ☺ Feb-Dec; P) La Roche's most agreeable hotel is part of an old mill and is nestled in a secluded wooded valley next to a babbling stream. There's a good restaurant on site.

Maison Bouillon & Fils (☎ 08 441 18 80; Pl du Marché 6; snacks €5-10) Where but the Belgian Ardennes would a butcher's shop boast its own café? Dine in with an *assiette ardennaise* (plate of mixed local charcuterie, €10) or takeaway from this must-see boucherie.

Le Clos René (☎ 08 441 26 17; Rue Châmont 30; snacks €6-10; ☺ 11am-11pm daily Jul & Aug, Fri-Wed Sep-Jun) Escape sausages and smoked hams in this tasteful crêperie. Kids welcome.

Getting There & Away

Buses are the only form of public transport to La Roche. If you're coming from either Namur or Luxembourg, the nearest rail junction is Marloie, from where bus 15 goes to La Roche (€3.50, 35 minutes, six per day). From Liège, take the Liège-Jemelle train to Melreux and then bus 13 to La Roche (€3.50, 30 minutes, seven a day).

BASTOGNE

pop 14,000

It was in Bastogne, close to the Luxembourg border, that thousands of soldiers and civilians died during WWII's Battle of the Bulge. Today this little town is full of wartime reminders.

The main square – a parking lot adorned with a tank – has been renamed Pl McAuliffe after the famous American general whose reply to the German call to surrender was 'Nuts!'. Here, too, you'll find the **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 06 121 27 11; www.paysdebastogne.be; Pl McAuliffe; ☺ 9am-6pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm mid-Sep–mid-Jun).

Most visitors head straight to the star-shaped **American Memorial** that stands on a hill just outside town. Next to the memorial

is the **Bastogne Historical Centre** (☎ 06 121 14 13; Colline du Mardasson; adult/child €8.50/6; ☺ 9.30am-6pm Jul-Aug, 9.30am-5pm May-Jun & Sep, 10am-4.30pm Mar-Apr & Oct-Dec), where war footage recounts the battle.

For overnighters, **Hôtel Caprice** (☎ 06 121 81 40; www.horest.be; Pl McAuliffe 25; s/d/tr €55/70/95; P) has saccharine-sweet pink rooms and **Restaurant Léo** (☎ 06 121 14 41; Rue du Vivier 4; mains €12-20; ☺ 11.30am-9.30pm Tue-Sun) does an excellent *assiette ardennaise* (11 types of charcuterie).

To get to Bastogne, the closest rail junction is Libramont, from where bus 163b (€3.50, 45 minutes) departs every two hours.

BELGIUM DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Prices listed in reviews are for rooms with attached bathroom unless otherwise specified.

Camping and caravanning facilities are plentiful and at their best in the Ardennes. Rates vary widely – expect to pay €10 to €20 for two adults, a tent and vehicle.

Belgium has many youth hostels (*jeugdherbergen* in Flemish, *auberges de jeunesse* in French) affiliated with Hostelling International (HI), as well as a small number of private hostels offering slightly cheaper accommodation. HI hostels charge €14.50 to €17.60 per night in a dorm, including breakfast and sheets, or €29/42 in a single/double room. Contact **Vlaamse Jeugdherberg-centrale** (☎ 03 232 72 18; www.jeugdherbergen.be; Van Stralenstraat 40, B-2060 Antwerp) for hostels in Flanders and **Les Auberges de Jeunesse** (☎ 02 219 56 76; www.laj.be; Rue de la Sablonnière 28, B-1000 Brussels) for Wallonia.

In Wallonia's rural areas you'll occasionally come across *gîtes d'étapes*, basic hostel-style places mostly set up for large groups, though individual travellers are welcome.

B&Bs (*gastenkamers/chambres d'hôtes*) usually represent excellent value. Spacious rooms, private bathrooms, breakfast feasts and vibrant hosts are the salient features. Prices start at €35/45 per single/double, rising to around €50/65 for midrange options and levelling out at €100 to €160 at the top end.

The cheapest hotels charge €35 to €45 for a single room and €50 to €60 for doubles. Expect shared bathroom facilities. Midrange hotel prices average €70 to €100 for singles

and €80 to €150 for doubles. Top-end establishments start at €150. Many hotels in Brussels offer weekend discounts – see p110 for details.

ACTIVITIES

Canoeing & Kayaking

The Ardennes is the place to ride rivers. Kayaks and canoes can be hired at La Roche-en-Ardenne (p137), but don't expect rapids of any magnitude.

Cycling

Belgians are passionate about cycling. There are two genres: in flat Flanders, bikes are a popular means of everyday travel and many roads have dedicated cycle lanes; in Wallonia, the hilly terrain is favoured by mountain-bike (VTT, or *vélo tout-terrain* in French) enthusiasts.

Bikes are not allowed on motorways but can be taken on trains (one way/return €5/8). Hire them from private operators or from most train stations for around €6.50/9.50 per half-/full day or €55 per week. You may be required to pay a deposit (€20) and/or show your passport or credit card. For more on cycling, see p142.

Walking

Walkers are spoilt for choice, with easy, flat terrain in Flanders or the more inspiring hills of the Ardennes in Wallonia. Local tourist offices have copious information about paths and they sell regional hiking maps.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks open from 9am to 3.30pm or as late as 5pm Monday to Friday. Tourist office hours vary – see the individual city and town sections throughout this chapter for more details.

Restaurants generally open from 11.30am until 2pm or 3pm and from 6.30pm to 11pm. Brasseries are open from 11am to 1am.

Pubs and cafés open from 10am or 11am to 1am or 2am (some stay open until dawn). Clubs open from 11pm to 6am Friday to Sunday.

Shops open from 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday; supermarkets stay open until 9pm. Shops in major cities also open from 10am to 4pm on Sunday. Shops in smaller towns close for lunch (noon to 2pm).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Belgian Embassies & Consulates

Australia (☎ 02-6273 2501; fax 6273 3392; 19 Arkana St, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-236 7267; fax 236 7882; Constitution Sq, Ste 820, 360 Albert St, Ottawa ON K1R 7X7)

France (☎ 01 44 09 39 39; fax 47 54 07 64; rue de Tilsitt 9, Paris F-75840 Cedex 17)

Germany (☎ 49-3020 6420; fax 3020 642 200; Jägerstrasse 52-53, Berlin D-10117)

Ireland (☎ 01-205 7100; fax 283 9403; 2 Shrewsbury Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

Luxembourg (☎ 25 43 251; fax 45 42 82; rue des Girondins 4, Luxembourg City L-1626)

Netherlands (☎ 070-312 34 56; fax 364 55 79; Alexanderveld 97, Den Haag NL-2585 DB)

New Zealand (☎ 09-575 6202; ismackenzie@xtra.co.nz; 15A Rarangi Rd, St Heliers, Auckland)

UK (☎ 020-7470 3700; fax 7470 3795; 103-105 Eaton Sq, SW1W 9AB)

USA (☎ 202-333 6900; fax 333 5457; 3330 Garfield St, NW, Washington, DC, 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Belgium

The following diplomatic missions are all embassies and all are located in or around Brussels:

Australia (☎ 02 286 05 00; fax 02 230 68 02; Rue Guimard 6, B-1040)

Canada (☎ 02 741 06 11; fax 02 741 06 43; Ave de Tervuren 2, B-1040)

France (☎ 02 548 87 11; fax 02 513 68 71; Rue Ducale 65, B-1000)

Germany (☎ 02 787 18 00; fax 02 787 28 00; Rue Jacques de Lalaing 8-14, B-1040)

Ireland (☎ 02 235 66 76; fax 02 235 66 71; Rue Wiertz 50, B-1050)

Luxembourg (☎ 02 735 57 00; fax 02 737 57 10; Ave de Cortenberg 75, B-1000)

Netherlands (☎ 02 679 17 11; fax 02 679 17 75; Ave Herrmann-Debroux 48, B-1160)

New Zealand (☎ 02 512 10 40; fax 02 513 48 56; 7th fl, Sq de Meeus 1, B-1100)

UK (☎ 02 287 62 11; fax 02 287 63 55; Rue d'Arlon 85, B-1040)

USA (☎ 02 508 21 11; fax 02 511 27 25; Blvd du Régent 27, B-1000)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Belgium buzzes with music, pageantry and parades.

Concours Musical International Reine Élisabeth de Belgique (Queen Elisabeth International Musical Competition; www.concours-reine-elisabeth.be) Held in May, this is Belgium's most prestigious classical-music event.

KunstenFESTIVALdesArts (www.kunstenfestivaldesarts.be) Held in Brussels over three weeks in May, big names in the worlds of music, dance, theatre and opera combine for an international festival to rival all others.

Brussels Jazz Marathon (www.brusselsjazzmarathon.be) The second-last weekend in May brings nonstop jazz to Brussels.

Rock Werchter (www.rockwerchter.be) Held in Leuven, near Brussels, for three days over the first weekend of July. Together with Glastonbury (England), this is one of Europe's biggest 'field' rock festivals.

De Gentse Feesten (www.gentsefeesten.be) An annual 10-day festival in mid-July that transforms the city into a party of music and theatre (see p126).

Pageant of the Golden Tree (www.comitevoornitiatief.be) Famous Bruges procession that retells the history of Flanders. Held every five years – check the website for dates.

HOLIDAYS

Following is a list of the public holidays observed in Belgium:

New Year's Day 1 January

Easter Monday March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Ascension Day Fortieth day after Easter

Whit Monday Seventh Monday after Easter

Festival of the Flemish Community 11 July (Flanders only)

National Day 21 July

Assumption 15 August

Walloon Community 27 September (Wallonia only)

All Saints' Day 1 November

Armistice Day 11 November

Christmas Day 25 December

MONEY

Banks are the best place to exchange money. Outside banking hours, exchange bureaux (*wisselkantoren* in Flemish, *bureaux d'échange* in French) operate at Brussels National Airport and at main train stations. ATMs are widespread.

Tipping is optional, as service and VAT is included in hotel and restaurant prices.

POST

Mail can be sent either *prior* (priority) or *nonprior* (nonpriority) but, given the delays experienced with priority mail, don't even consider sending things nonpriority. Letters under 50g to European countries cost €0.60 and to non-European countries €0.65.

Poste restante attracts a €0.40 fee and you may need to show your passport. Following are some useful addresses:

Poste Restante Hoofdpostkantoor, Groenplaats, B-2000 Antwerp

Poste Restante Hoofdpostkantoor, Markt 5, B-8000 Bruges

Poste Restante Bureau de Poste Central, Blvd Anspach 1, B-1000 Brussels

TELEPHONE

Belgium's international access code is 00. The country code is 32. Call 1234 for an international operator.

Local phone calls are metered and cost a minimum of €0.25. Telephone numbers prefixed with 0900 or 070 are pay-per-minute numbers (€0.17 to €0.45 per minute). Numbers prefixed with 0800 are toll-free calls. Those prefixed with 0472 to 0479, 0482 to 0489 and 0492 to 0499 are mobile numbers. Note also that a call to directory assistance (1405) costs €3.

TIME

Belgium runs on Central European Time (GMT/UTC plus one hour). During daylight-savings time Central European Time is GMT/UTC plus two hours.

VISAS

There are no entry requirements or restrictions on EU nationals visiting Belgium. Citizens of Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and the USA don't need visas to visit as tourists for up to three months. Except for people from a few other European countries (such as Switzerland), everyone else must have a visa issued by a Belgian embassy or consulate.

For up-to-date visa information, check **Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs Belgium** (www.diplomatie.be).

TRANSPORT IN BELGIUM

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

SN Brussels Airlines has flights from Brussels National Airport to European and African destinations. VLM Airlines flies from Brussels National and Antwerp airport to London.

Belgium's main international airports: **Antwerp** (ANR; ☎ 03 285 65 00; www.antwerpairport.be) **Brussels National Airport** (BRU; ☎ 09 007 00 00; www.brusselsairport.be)

Charleroi (RL; www.charleroi-airport.com)

Liège (LGG; ☎ 04 234 84 11; www.liegeairport.com)

Airlines flying to and from Belgium:

Aer Lingus (code EI; ☎ 02 548 98 48; www.airlingus.com)

Air France (code AF; ☎ 02 526 12 70; www.airfrance.com)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 02 717 32 17; www.britishairways.com)

KLM (code KL; ☎ 07 022 27 47; www.klm.be)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 07 035 30 30; www.lufthansa.be)

Ryanair (code FR; ☎ 09 028 80 07; www.ryanair.com)

SN Brussels Airlines (code SN; ☎ 07 035 11 11; www.flysn.com)

Virgin Express (code TV; ☎ 07 035 36 37; www.virgin-express.com)

VLM Airlines (code VG; ☎ 03 287 80 80; www.flyvlm.com)

Check the following for cheap airlines flying into Belgium: **Wizz Air** (www.wizzair.com), **Welcome Air** (www.welcomeair.com), **Sky Europe** (www.skyeurope.com), **Condor – Born to Fly** (www.condor.com) and **Aer Arann** (www.aerarann.com).

Land

BUS

Eurolines (☎ 02 274 13 50; www.eurolines.be) operates international bus services to and from Belgium.

Depending on the destination and the time of year, Eurolines buses stop in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Leuven and Liège. Tickets can be bought from its offices in these cities or from travel agencies – for details see the relevant city's Getting There & Away section.

Services from Brussels include Amsterdam (€18, 3¼ hours, six daily), Frankfurt (€34, 5¼ hours, one daily), London (€38, 8½ hours, six daily), Luxembourg City (€15, 3¼ hours, one or two daily) and Paris (€25, 3¼ hours, nine daily).

One Busabout service also passes through Belgium, stopping in Bruges as part of its Northern Loop. For details, see p1117.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The main motorways into Belgium are the E19 from the Netherlands, the E40 from Germany, E411 from Luxembourg, and the E17 and E19 from France. There are no controls at border crossings. From Luxembourg, fill up before you leave as petrol is more expensive in Belgium. For road rules, see p142.

TaxiStop (☎ 07 022 22 92; www.taxistop.be; Rue du Fossé aux Loups 28, Brussels) is a travel agency that matches long-distance travellers and drivers headed for the same destination for a reasonable fee.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 100
- Fire ☎ 100
- Police ☎ 101
- EU-wide emergency hotline ☎ 112
- Touring Secours breakdown service ☎ 07 034 47 77 (24-hour assistance)

TRAIN

Trains operated by **Eurostar** (☎ 02 528 28 28; www.eurostar.com) travel between Brussels' Gare du Midi station and London's Waterloo station (two hours 20 minutes, 10 trains Monday to Friday, seven Saturday and Sunday) through the Eurotunnel. Standard semi-flexible, 2nd-class fares start from €200 return, though cheaper fares are available (21-day advance fare €40). Fares include travel to any train station in Belgium (eg continue from Brussels' Gare du Midi to Bruges at no extra cost).

For details on **Eurotunnel** (☎ 07 022 32 10; www.eurotunnel.com) services between the UK and France, see p278 and p415.

Thalys (☎ 07 066 77 88; www.thalys.com) fast trains link various cities in Belgium with destinations in France, the Netherlands and Germany. In Brussels, Thalys trains depart from Gare du Midi. Flexible one-way fares, known as Librys tickets, include Brussels to Paris (€74.50, 1½ hours, hourly), Cologne (€40, 2¼ hours, six daily) and Amsterdam (€44, 2¼ hours, five daily). Cheaper non-flexible return fares (eg Paris/Cologne/Amsterdam €49/29/32), known as Smilys, are also available. Discounted adult fares are also offered on weekends and for trips booked well in advance. Travellers aged 12 to 26 get a 50% discount and seniors a 30% reduction.

Sea

Two overnight car-ferry services exist: **P&O** (☎ Belgium 02 710 64 44, UK 0870-520 2020; www.pferries.com) Sails overnight from Zeebrugge in Belgium to Hull in the UK (14 hours) and charges from €162/245 one way/return for two passengers, a car and cabin. **Superfast Ferries** (☎ Belgium 05 025 22 52, UK 0870-234 0870; www.superfast.com) Ultramodern ferry sails three times per week between Zeebrugge in Belgium and Rosyth in Scotland (18 hours). Fares start at €92/165 one way/return for a car. Adult passengers pay from €60 one way.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

Cycling is a great way to get around in Flanders. The countryside is riddled with cycling routes and if you hire a bike (or buy a second-hand), it's easy to cycle from destination to destination, or go from city to city by train, using the bike to explore once you're there.

Those serious about a cycling holiday should get the multilingual *Topogids Vlaanderen Fietsroute*. This book details the 800km Flanders Cycle Route, plus shorter circuits. It's available from the **Belgian Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 02 504 03 90; www.visitflanders.com, www.belgique-tourisme.net; Rue du Marché aux Herbes 63; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun, 9am-1pm Sun Jan-Feb; 📍 Gare Centrale).

For more on cycling, see p139.

Bus

Buses are a secondary means of getting around as the rail network is so widespread. The exception is the Ardennes region in Wallonia. Here train lines run to bigger settlements, but many smaller places are connected only by bus. Without a car, you'll find relatively short distances can involve long waits as bus routes are often sparsely serviced.

Following are the major bus companies:

De Lijn (☎ 01 631 37 11; www.delijn.be, in Flemish) Buses in Flanders.

Société des Transports Intercommunaux de Bruxelles (☎ 02 515 20 00; www.stib.irisnet.be, in French & Flemish) Buses in Brussels.

Transport en Commun (☎ 01 023 53 53; www.infotec.be, in French) Buses in Wallonia.

Car & Motorcycle

Foreign drivers don't need an international driving licence in Belgium; your driving licence from home will suffice. Road rules are easy to understand, although the peculiar give-way-to-the-right law takes getting used to. Standard international signs are used and motorways are toll-free. The speed limit is 50km/h in towns, 90km/h outside towns and 120km/h on motorways. The blood alcohol limit is 0.05%. Fuel prices per litre are around €1.40 for unleaded and €1.10 for diesel.

Major car-hire companies have offices in central Brussels, as well as offices at Brussels National Airport and Gare du Midi, the city's main train station. Hire cars from either the airport or Gare du Midi cost considerably more because of additional taxes.

Following are some recommended car-hire companies:

Avis (☎ 02 537 12 80; www.avis.be; Rue Américaine 145, Brussels)

Budget (☎ 02 646 51 30; www.budget.com; Ave Louise 327b, Brussels)

Hertz (☎ 02 513 28 86; www.hertz.be; Blvd Maurice Lemonnier 8, Brussels)

Hitching

It's illegal to hitch on Belgian motorways.

Train

Taking the train is the best way to get around. Belgium built Continental Europe's first train line (between Brussels and Mechelen) in the 1830s and has since developed an extremely dense network. Trains are run by the **Belgische Spoorwegen/Société National des Chemins de Fer Belges** (Belgian Railways; ☎ 02 528 28 28; www.b-rail.be). Major train stations have information offices, open until about 7pm (later in large cities).

There are four levels of service: InterCity (IC) trains (the fastest), InterRegional (IR), local (L) and peak-hour (P) commuter trains. Depending on the line, there will be an IC and IR train every half-hour or hour.

Trains have 1st- and 2nd-class compartments; both are completely nonsmoking.

COSTS

Second-class tickets are 50% cheaper than 1st-class tickets. On weekends return tickets to anywhere within Belgium are 50% cheaper than on weekdays. Children under 12 travel for free when accompanied by an adult, provided the journey starts after 9am. Seniors over 65 (including visitors) pay only €4 for a return 2nd-class trip anywhere in Belgium (not on weekends from mid-May to mid-September).

If you intend on doing day excursions, investigate discounted packages known as B-Excursions. They're always good value.

TRAIN PASSES

Benelux Tourrail Allows five days' travel in one month in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, and costs €160/120 in 1st/2nd class (under 26 years €90, 2nd class only). It can be purchased in Belgium or Luxembourg but not in the Netherlands (though it's valid for use there).

Go Pass Provides 10 one-way trips anywhere in Belgium for people under 26 (€45, 2nd class only).

Rail Pass Gives 10 one-way trips anywhere in Belgium. Valid for one year and costs €104/68 in 1st/2nd class.

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