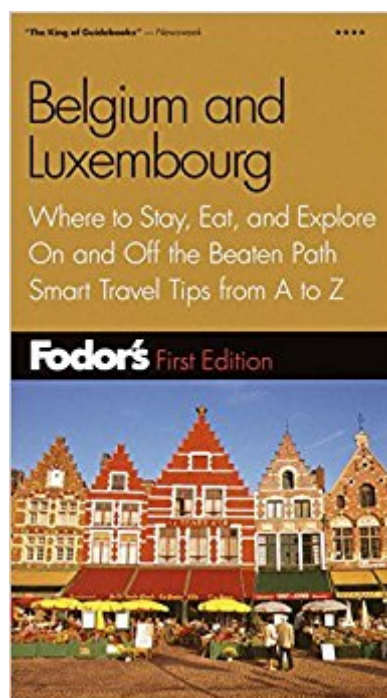




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Fodor's Belgium And Luxembourg, 1st Edition: Where To Stay, Eat, And Explore On And Off The Beaten Path, Smart Travel Tips Fr Om A To Z (Travel Guide)



Synopsis

"Fodor's guides cover culture authoritatively and rarely miss a sight or museum." - National Geographic Traveler
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No matter what your budget or whether it's your first trip or fifteenth, Fodor's Gold Guides get you where you want to go. Insider info that's totally up to date. Every year our local experts give you the inside track, showing you all the things to see and do -- from must-see sights to off-the-beaten-path adventures, from shopping to outdoor fun. Hundreds of hotel and restaurant choices in all price ranges -- from budget-friendly B&Bs to luxury hotels, from casual eateries to the hottest new restaurants, complete with thorough reviews showing what makes each place special. Smart Travel Tips A to Z section helps you take care of the nitty gritty with essential local contacts and great advice -- from how to take your mountain bike with you to what to do in an emergency. Full-size, foldout map keeps you on course.

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Destination: Belgium and Luxembourg Slate-color skies curve like a pewter bowl over an undulating landscape, the long, low horizon punctuated by blunt steeples and a scattering of deep-roofed farmhouses that seem to enfold the land like a mother goose spreading wings over her brood. Inky crows wheel over spindle-fingered pollards; jackdaws pepper the ocher grainfields; and a magpie, flashing black and white, drags a long, iridescent tail through the damp air. These are the 16th-century landscapes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder -- stained-glass planes in sepia tones, leaded by black branches, crooked spires, dark-frozen streams. And these, too, are the 20th-century landscapes of Belgium and Luxembourg -- a wedge of northern Europe squeezed between the massive and ancient kingdoms of France and Germany, bounded by the harsh North Sea to the northwest, defined by the rough, high forests of the Ardennes to the southeast. No wonder so much of their appeal, past and present, is interior -- their weather-beaten cultures have turned inward over the centuries, toward the hearth. Indoors, Bruegel's otherwise sepia scenes warm subtly with color -- earthy browns, berry reds, loden greens, muted indigos, coral cheeks. So it is today: the Flemish nurse goblets of mahogany beer by candlelight in dark-beamed halls, a scarlet splash of paisley runner thrown over the pine tabletop; red-vested Walloons -- French-speaking Belgians -- read the newspaper in high-back oak banquettes polished blue-black by generations of rough tweed. In Luxembourg, the glass of light beer and of eau-de-vie go down behind the candy-color leaded glass of spare, brightly lit or pubs, where village life finds its social focus, day in, day out. In these small northern lands, so often lashed by winter rain, soaked by drizzle, wrapped in fog, the people live out the rich-hued interior scenes of the Old Masters. Yet the skies do clear, come spring. Then the real pleasure begins -- an intense appreciation that residents of more moderate climates would be hard-put to understand. As if the people's gratitude took physical form, it manifests itself in flowers, a frenzy of color spilling from every windowsill, over rose trellises, through wisteria-woven archways. Fruit trees explode like fireworks, and whole orchards shimmer pink. Chestnut branches sag under the weight of their leaves and the heavy, grapelike clusters of blossom that thrust upward, defying gravity. In the midst of this orgy of scent and color, Flemish farmers in blue overalls open their half-doors and bask, and the international bankers of Luxembourg swing their Versace suit coats over their shoulders and head for the benches in the green PÃ©trusse Valley. Then cafÃ© society, and home life with it, moves outdoors to bask in the warmth. Terrace cafÃ©s on the Grote

Markts and Grand'Places rival any piazza in Italy. And when there's no café around, the family simply sets out a cluster of folding chairs, perhaps a checkered-cloth-covered card table, whether smack on the sidewalk or behind the barn door, to make the most of fine weather. A suntan remains (as it does in sun-starved North Germany) the most sought-after of status symbols — doubly prestigious if flaunted in midwinter, as northerners, once pale and prune-skinned, return from the ski slopes of the Alps or the beaches of the Canary Islands. The shared climate, from inexorable gray to luxurious sun, may form a common bond, but Belgium and Luxembourg sustain distinct identities. Belgium is a country torn in half, split by two tongues and two cultures. The division between Wallonia and Flanders traces back to Merovingian times, and the Walloon patois and Belgian French represent the last northward wave of the Roman Empire and its lingual residue. Twice in this century Flemish citizens (and possibly a king) were known to collaborate with German invaders, allying themselves against what they saw as French-speaking domination. In turn, francophone Belgians, made powerful by their region's blossoming heavy industry, looked down upon their Flemish countrymen: the country's constitution was not translated into Dutch until 1961. Today the bickering over bilingual rights — which leaves Brussels a no-man's-land, with extra-wide enamel signs naming every street and alley in two tongues — is especially acute. Many intellectuals believe politicians on both sides are whipping up national sentiment, when they should be looking at urgent matters like reform of the police and justice system. The cultures are as different as their languages: the Flemish are proud and tidy, their homes filled with the exterior light that pours in through tall, multipaned windows; a spare, avant-garde current in fashion, film, and literature shows their Dutch leanings. The Walloons, on the other hand, remain more laissez-faire, their homes often dark, cozy, and cluttered with knickknacks and lace. A women's clothing shop in Gent is likely to include progressive, trendy, severe clothing, while the equivalent in Liège will show cardigans, A-line skirts, and fussy floral prints. These two separate worlds share a Catholic culture that, beyond the spiritual realm, finds expression in a shared appreciation of the good things in life, such as the pleasures of the table. While Belgium is a picture of inner conflict, the natives of little Luxembourg present a solid front to the outside, interacting in French, German, or English, but maintaining their private world in their own native (Luxembourgish). Thus, having survived centuries of conquest and occupation, they can open their country to European Union "Eurocrats" and more than a hundred international banks, and still keep to themselves. Luxembourg sustains two parallel cultures, with some cafés catering to trendy, international, or tourist crowds and others reserved for the loden-coated locals, who may greet an aberrant visitor with stunned silence as thick as the cigarette smoke that fills the air. Belgium and Luxembourg, having been conquered and economically dwarfed

for generations by their larger neighbors, felt compelled in 1958 to join with the Netherlands in an economic alliance that served as a foundation for the European Union. Since then, "Benelux" has become a convenient abbreviation for a small, independent wedge of northern Europe where even fruit juice is labeled in French and in Dutch.

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