



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. With an area of 11,780 square miles (30,510 square kilometers), Belgium is slightly larger than Maryland. It is generally flat, with increasingly hilly terrain near the southeast Ardennes forest. The highest elevation is only 2,275 feet (693 meters). Almost one-quarter of Belgium is suitable for agriculture. More than 20 percent is forested. Belgium's major rivers include the Schelde and the Meuse, both of which are navigable throughout most of the country. Belgium has a system of dikes and seawalls along the coast to prevent tidal flooding. Because of its heavy industry, the country faces problems with air and water pollution that are common in many industrialized nations.

The climate is damp and temperate. Summer temperatures range from 54 to 72°F (12–22°C); winter temperatures generally do not go below 32°F (0°C). Belgium's maritime climate is heavily influenced by the sea; fog and rain are common and there is little snow in winter. The most pleasant months are June through September.

History. Belgium has known heavy conflict as well as great achievement in art and commerce. Modern Belgians are descendants of a Celtic tribe whose courage was admired by Julius Caesar. In the fifth century, Germanic Franks took control and established the Merovingian Dynasty, later followed by Charlemagne's empire. Fragmentation after Charlemagne's death eventually split Belgium into four regions, which were ruled by dukes and counts. As the 15th century approached, the French dukes of Burgundy began to consolidate territory and eventually gained all of what is now Belgium, reigning over several decades of prosperity and progress.

From the 1600s to 1830, the Belgium area was a battleground for the Protestant-Catholic wars and for battles fought

by neighboring countries, including Napoleonic France (Waterloo is just south of Brussels). The territories of Belgium gained independence from the Netherlands in 1830 and united in a constitutional monarchy. However, divisions based on language continued: French speakers lived in the south while Dutch (Flemish) speakers settled in the north. The two groups developed separate cultural and linguistic traditions but remained linked politically.

Belgium became a battleground again in the 20th century. Despite its claims to neutrality during both world wars, Belgium was overrun by conquering German armies in 1914 and again in 1940. Some of World War I's fiercest battles were fought in Flanders (northern Belgium). In World War II, the famous Battle of the Bulge was fought in Bastogne and in central Belgium, where U.S. divisions held off massive assaults by German troops who were attempting to reach the Allied port at Antwerpen. This pivotal battle helped secure an Allied victory in the war.

Belgium remained a constitutional monarchy after World War II. From 1951 to 1993, King Baudouin I ruled as head of state. In 1960, Belgium granted independence to the Belgian Congo in Africa. Soon after, Rwanda and Burundi also gained independence from Belgium. Belgium's constitution was changed in 1993 to recognize the division of the country into three administrative regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. In that same year, King Baudouin I was succeeded by his brother, Albert II.

Because of its vulnerability and small size, Belgium has favored European cooperation and integration since the 1940s. It was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and serves as that alliance's headquarters.

Belgium

Brussels is home to the European Union (EU) headquarters and other European and international groups as well, making it an important city for business and diplomacy. Belgium has devoted attention to resolving internal cultural conflicts and has created a system to negotiate the needs of both major linguistic groups as well as various minorities.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The population of Belgium is about 10.36 million and is growing at 0.15 percent. More than 97 percent of the people live in cities or towns. Belgium's overall population density is one of the highest in Europe. The Walloons occupy the south (Wallonia) and comprise 31 percent of Belgium's population. The Flemish (58 percent) live in the northern half (Flanders). A German-speaking minority (1 percent) lives east of Wallonia.

Almost 10 percent of the country's population is non-Belgian. Many Italians, Spaniards, and North Africans (mainly Moroccans) work in Belgian industry. Brussels (with a population of about 1,000,000), Antwerpen (500,000) and Gent (250,000) are the largest cities. Because of Brussels's international importance, nearly one-fourth of the city's inhabitants are foreigners.

Language. French and Dutch (Flemish) are the primary official languages of Belgium. French dominates in southern areas and the capital, and Dutch is more prominent in the north. Dutch and Flemish have the same grammar and are written the same but pronounced differently. About one percent of Belgians speak German (also an official language). Many also speak English. Eleven percent of the population is officially bilingual. Although Brussels is in Flanders, 85 percent of its people speak French. Some towns in Wallonia have retained Latin dialects for festivals and folklore.

Because of the two distinct languages, French and Dutch names for the same city are often quite different. For example, the Wallonian city of *Mons* is referred to in Flanders as *Bergen* (both names mean "mountains"). Generally, road signs are not bilingual; they are written in the principal language of the region in which they stand.

Religion. Although Belgium is primarily a secular society, 75 percent of the population is considered to be Catholic. Protestants and other groups comprise the remaining 25 percent. While only a fraction of the population attends church regularly, religion still plays a role in people's personal lives, mostly in connection with such major events as births, marriages, and deaths. Many Belgians, even if not practicing Catholics, keep the tradition of choosing a godfather and godmother (*peter* and *meter* in Dutch, and *parrain* and *marraine* in French) for their newborns. Most cultural festivals have their origin in, or have been strongly influenced by, Catholicism. The Walloons have a history of being less devoted to the Catholic faith than the Flemish.

Most other major world religions can also be found in Belgium. All Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic clergy have official recognition from the government and receive their salaries from the state. Private religious schools are also subsidized by the government.

General Attitudes. Two separate countries seem to exist within Belgium due to major differences in language and culture. However, the Flemish and the Walloons have shown a remarkable ability to live together through open discussion and compromise. Conflicts tend to be political and economic; the groups are not antagonistic on an individual level.

A strong work ethic and an appreciation of culture are important to Belgians. The people tend to have tight regional and family ties, holding to the traditions of both. Nevertheless, Belgium's geographical position in Europe also makes the people cosmopolitan and open to interaction with those outside Belgium. Both the Walloons and the Flemish have a love for life and live it to the fullest, working and playing hard. A mixture of material wealth, good living, and family values is the lifestyle most Belgians hope for. Individuals generally like being regarded for their social achievements, having good housing, and enjoying pleasant living conditions.

Like those in other European countries, Belgians are struggling with their feelings toward immigrants. Most people accept them and would like to see their living conditions improved. Yet very little is done to integrate some immigrant groups into mainstream society. This tends to alienate immigrants, especially their children born in Belgium, so violence sometimes erupts in immigrant sections of large urban areas.

Personal Appearance. Belgians follow European fashions and dress well in public. Extremely casual attire is reserved for the privacy of the home. Men who wear hats remove them in buildings. Suits and dresses are standard in offices.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Belgians greet each other with a handshake, which is often quick and light, although people in some areas give firmer handshakes. The phrases used for greeting depend on the region. A typical greeting in Dutch is *Goeiedag* (Good day); the French equivalent is *Bonjour*. Informally, and if familiarity permits, one would say *Hallo* (Hello) in Dutch and *Salut* in French. English and German greetings would not be out of place in Brussels and some other cities. Men and women greet close friends who are female with three light kisses on the cheeks. (This gesture is actually more like "kissing the air" while touching cheeks.) Belgians use first names only with friends and relatives; otherwise, they address people by last name. However, in professional circles, there is a growing tendency to call each other by first name once a working relationship has been established. When leaving a group, Belgians usually shake hands with and bid farewell to each person in the group.

Gestures. Hand gestures are used infrequently during conversation. It is rude to talk with one's hands in one's pockets. Belgians do not talk with something (gum, a toothpick, or food) in their mouths. Good posture is important, and people do not put their feet on tables or chairs. They avoid pointing with the index finger. Handkerchiefs are used discreetly.

Visiting. Belgians enjoy inviting relatives and close friends to their homes, but other socializing is usually done in public places such as cafés, bistros, and restaurants. It is rare for Belgians to visit one another without prior arrangement or at least calling ahead. It is a sign of confidence and friendship for a Belgian to invite an outsider into the home. Once a visit has been arranged, punctuality is important; arriving more than 30 minutes late is considered rude. A Belgian host or hostess appreciates a small gift or some flowers from an invited guest. Chrysanthemums are not given in such situations since they are associated with funerals. Hosts, especially those who tend to invest in home beautification, welcome sincere compliments and interest in their home. In rural communities, it may be appropriate to remove one's shoes before entering the home. Guests are usually offered refreshments (or appetizers if invited for a meal).

Eating. Most Belgians eat three meals a day, with the main meal served around 6 or 7 p.m. The family usually gathers for this meal, which consists of a main dish and dessert. However, many adults and schoolchildren now have a hot meal at noon at their workplace or school and eat a lighter meal or snack in place of the traditional evening meal. Meals are a social and cultural event in Belgium, and they are not to be finished quickly. The continental style of eating, with the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left, is most common. A parent normally serves individual plates for each family member. Hosts also prepare individual plates for their guests. Belgians are thrifty and do not like waste; finishing one's food is expected. It is not impolite for guests to decline second helpings. In restaurants, one pays at the table, and the tip is included in the bill. Still, one may also leave extra change if desired.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Even though young people are becoming more independent, the family is still a strong and vital part of Belgian society. More than a third of Belgian households include children. Of this number, about a tenth are single-parent homes. The average family has one or two children. Although both parents often work outside the home, women are still responsible for most household duties and child care. Families often take excursions on holidays and Sundays. In Flanders, married couples seldom live with their parents, except in rural areas where families share farmland.

In the past, Wallonian extended families shared a large single house, but today they live separately. Still, they often remain in the same town or city as the rest of their family. In fact, throughout Belgium, mobility tends to be low, and people settle in or near the towns in which they were raised. Family and community roots are important to Belgians. The elderly are generally well respected, but it has become customary and socially acceptable for parents to spend their declining years in a home for the elderly, where they are visited by children and grandchildren.

"A Belgian is born with a brick in his stomach" is a popular saying that reflects the nearly universal desire among Belgians to build and own a brick home. Around 65 percent of the population owns a home. Nearly nine out of ten homes are single-family dwellings with an average of five rooms. About half of these are standalones in suburbs and rural areas, while the other half are row houses in cities or densely populated suburbs. Most rural homes have gardens. All houses have electricity and running water, and nearly all have central heating and at least one bathroom with a bathtub or shower.

Dating and Marriage. Group dating usually begins by age 16, but dating behavior may vary according to regional traditions. Younger teens use public transportation and bikes at first, but when they reach driving age (18), they prefer to use private cars for dating. Young people go to movies, dances, and cafés. Long engagements are common. Many Belgians live together before or instead of marrying. Only civil marriages are accepted by the government, but most couples also have a Catholic religious ceremony attended by relatives and friends. The civil ceremony must precede the religious one, and it is usually attended by only a few relatives. Belgian brides traditionally carry a special embroidered handkerchief on the wedding day. The memento is kept as a family heirloom.

Diet. Belgians eat a rich variety of foods, including pork, game birds, fish, sausages, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, breads, and

soups. Wine, beer, or mineral water is often served with meals. Belgium is famous for mussels, chocolates, beer (three hundred varieties), waffles, and french fries—which Belgians claim to have invented. French fries are served with mayonnaise rather than ketchup. Breakfast consists of a hot drink along with rolls or bread with jam or jelly. A snack at 4 p.m. is not unusual. Belgians take great pride in the quality of their food and the variety of their cuisine—from domestically developed dishes to those adapted from other cultures. Restaurants offer a wide variety of international cuisine.

Recreation. Participation in sporting activities is nearly universal; cycling and soccer are most prominent. Many Belgians like to play a game called *boules*, a form of lawn bowling. Beaches in the northwest and beautiful forests in the south are popular attractions. Hiking, hunting, fishing, and pigeon racing have large followings in some areas. In pigeon racing, male pigeons are released far away from the females, and owners bet on which will be the quickest to fly back to its mate. Families enjoy picnics, the theater, and movies. Local festivals, as well as national ones like *Carnaval*, are popular. Most families go on a one-month vacation each year; however, many are now taking shorter vacations during the year when their children are out of school. Most schoolchildren have a week off in November, two weeks at Christmas, one week in February, and two weeks at Easter.

The Arts. Belgians are intensely proud of their rich cultural heritage, especially in art and architecture. Both ancient and modern art are admired. Belgium is known for such art masters as Pieter and Jan Brueghel, Jan Van Eyck, and Peter Paul Rubens. Castle ruins and other historic buildings are seen as national treasures. The country's numerous theaters, festivals, and museums enjoy high patronage. Belgium sponsors national ballet, orchestral, and opera companies.

The country's writers have made significant contributions to literature in both French and Dutch. Mysteries are the most popular genre for Belgian plays and novels. Belgian cartoonists are among the most famous in the world. They have created such comic characters as Tintin and the Smurfs. Belgium is known internationally for its beautiful and delicate lace.

Holidays. Fairs, festivals, parades, and religious holidays are an integral part of the Belgian way of life. Official holidays include New Year's Day, Easter Monday, Labor Day (1 May), Ascension Day, Whitmonday (Pentecost), Independence Day (21 July), Assumption (15 Aug.), All Saints' Day (1 Nov.), Veterans' Day (11 Nov.), and Christmas. *Carnaval* is celebrated in February or March, depending on the city. This festival is characterized by parades, parties, and colorful costumes. Local spring and fall cultural and folklore festivals, such as the Holy Blood Procession in Brugge, take place throughout the country.

Commerce. Because it is still customary to shop daily for fresh food, many open-air markets do business in the larger cities. Butcher shops are plentiful and well maintained. Supermarkets are available, although Belgium still has many small specialty shops. Businesses are open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a one- or two-hour break for lunch. Once a week (usually Friday), they remain open until 9 p.m. The average workweek is about 36 hours.

SOCIETY

Government. Belgium is a constitutional monarchy under King Albert II, who holds executive power with the prime minister (currently Guy Verhofstadt). The prime minister and

Belgium

his cabinet handle day-to-day affairs. The prime minister is appointed by the monarch, with approval from Parliament. The cabinet, also appointed by the monarch, contains an equal number of French- and Flemish-speaking ministers. All governments have been coalitions, meaning no single political party has ever had a majority in Parliament.

Parliament has two chambers: a 71-seat Senate and the more powerful 150-seat Chamber of Representatives. Parliamentary elections are held at least every five years. Belgium's major political parties are split along linguistic lines. The voting age is 18. Belgium has an independent judiciary that is equal in power to the executive and legislative branches. The country is divided into 10 provinces, or *provincien*.

Constitutional reforms in 1981, 1988, and 1993 led to the organization of Belgium as a federal state. This move greatly reduced tensions related to linguistic divisions, as newly created government bodies have given greater decision-making authority to regions and communities (i.e., linguistic areas) in matters such as education, investment, welfare, and public works. The German-speaking minority is also protected.

Economy. Belgium's economy is diversified and highly industrialized; its labor force is highly skilled. Only a small part of the labor force is involved in agriculture, yet Belgium grows more than enough food to be self-sustaining. About three-quarters of the population is employed in service industries. Belgium is one of the world's major exporters of wool, beer, and meats, and is a key producer of automobiles for major foreign companies. Belgian steel, the principal export, is famous. However, because of steel- and textile-market fluctuations in the 1980s, that sector has declined and other industries—such as engineering, chemicals, food processing, and biotechnology—have grown. Exports now include items from each of these industries. Other well-established industries include diamonds, crystal, and glass. Belgium is strong in foreign trade, partly because Antwerpen is one of the world's largest seaports and because the country holds a central location among EU countries. Most Belgian trade is conducted with EU members, especially Germany, France, and the Netherlands.

Economic prosperity is available to most Belgians, and wealth is well distributed. Leaders are making rapid progress in reducing the country's debt ratio. The economy has experienced modest growth in recent years, and inflation has been kept under control. Belgium's currency, which was the *Belgian franc* until 2002, is now the euro.

Transportation and Communications. Belgium has a complete and varied transportation system, with a highly developed system of railways, waterways, and highways. Trains are the fastest and most practical form of public transportation between cities. Buses and streetcars are widely available, but most people also own cars. All freeways are lit at night. Bicycles are popular for personal transportation. The efficiency of Belgium's postal system is well known. There are both public and private television and radio stations. Cable television is available in all parts of the country and offers dozens of channels. An increasing number of people use the internet.

Education. Public education is free and compulsory between ages six and eighteen. Many Flemish families send their children to schools operated by the Catholic Church and subsidized by the state. A large portion of the federal budget is allotted to education, and 20 percent of the population is enrolled

POPULATION & AREA

| | |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Population | 10,364,388 (rank=77) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 11,780 (rank=136) |
| Area, sq. km. | 30,510 |

DEVELOPMENT DATA

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 9 of 177 countries |
| Adjusted for women | 9 of 140 countries |
| Real GDP per capita | \$28,335 |
| Adult literacy rate | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate | 4 per 1,000 births |
| Life expectancy | 76 (male); 82 (female) |

in school at any given time. All students learn at least two foreign languages. Beginning at age 14, students have opportunities to choose between different career and educational paths; comprehensive examinations determine one's entrance to higher education. Those who do not go on to a university receive training in their chosen careers at vocational and technical schools. Schools for the arts are also popular. Adult literacy is nearly universal.

Health. Socialized medicine provides for the health care of all citizens. Doctors and clinics are private but are paid out of public funds. The cost of Belgium's comprehensive welfare system has contributed significantly to the country's budget deficits. Health concerns are similar to those in the United States, as is the quality of care. Although the water is generally safe, Belgians drink bottled water rather than tap water.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In December 2005, the lower house of the Belgian parliament passed a measure to legalize adoption by gay couples. Assuming the upper house approves the proposal, as expected, Belgium will become the third EU country to legalize the practice. Gay marriage became legal in the country in 2003.
- November 2005 saw thirteen alleged terrorist supporters go on trial in Belgium. The men are accused of being members of the Moroccan Combatant Group (GICM), which has ties to the 2004 Madrid bombings and al-Qaeda.
- In October 2005, two 24-hour-long nationwide strikes broke out in response to the government's decision to raise the retirement age from 58 to 60. The first strike paralyzed the country, as transportation systems, factories, and Antwerp's port shut down. During the following strike, one of Brussels's airports closed and tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Brussels.
- The Belgian government was subjected to a vote of no confidence, which it survived, in May 2005. The vote was prompted by months of failed negotiations about electoral boundaries in Dutch-speaking Flemish suburbs, to which many French-speaking Wallons have recently moved.

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