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Cities of Belgium

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Introduction

Belgium, though modest in size, is a country of astonishing historical depth and cultural diversity, revealed most clearly through its remarkable cities. Scattered across the Flemish plains and the wooded hills of Wallonia, Belgium's urban centers each tell a compelling story—a tapestry woven from threads of medieval grandeur, architectural ingenuity, vibrant local traditions, and ongoing transformation. This book, "Cities of Belgium," serves as both a historical exploration and a practical guide for visitors wishing to experience the best of Belgian urban life.

Belgium's cities are much more than administrative or economic hubs; they are living chronicles of the nation's past and present. From the bustling cosmopolitan avenues of Brussels—capital not only of Belgium but of the European Union—to the cobbled medieval streets of Ghent and Bruges, each city offers a unique perspective on how commerce, culture, and conquest have shaped the Belgian identity across centuries. These cities preserve witness to trading empires, artistic revolutions, and waves of migration, each leaving their imprint on the urban fabric.

In the pages that follow, readers will discover historical backgrounds, architectural highlights, and the distinctive personalities that define each major city. Attention is given not only to internationally renowned destinations like Antwerp and Bruges, but also to lesser-known gems such as Tournai, Hasselt, and Genk. Throughout, visitors are introduced to the layers of language, tradition, and innovation that make Belgian cities endlessly fascinating, from stately Gothic cathedrals and quiet Art Nouveau neighbourhoods to the thriving multicultural quarters transforming cities like Antwerp and Liège.

This book is designed both as an armchair journey and as a practical handbook for travelers. Whether you are drawn to the artistry of ancient guildhalls, the romance of canal-side strolls, the creative pulse of student cities, or the unmistakable taste of Belgian gastronomy, you will find guidance, historical context, and insider tips for exploring each location. The focus extends beyond monuments and museums to include everyday life: bustling markets, green parks, public events, local customs, and the evolving demography that makes Belgium's cities some of the most cosmopolitan in Europe.

Moreover, "Cities of Belgium" places urban evolution within the broader context of Belgian society—its linguistic borders, economic transformations, and commitment to cultural preservation amid modern challenges. Each city is presented not as a museum piece, but as a dynamic, living organism, continually adapting to global currents and local aspirations.

Belgium's cities offer an open invitation to visitors: to wander, to discover, and to be surprised by their constant dialogue between past and future. This book aims to illuminate those journeys, encouraging readers to look with fresh eyes at both renowned and hidden corners of the country. Whether planning a visit or seeking to understand the soul of Belgium from afar, you are warmly invited to embark on this urban exploration.

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CHAPTER ONE: Brussels: The Heart of Europe

Brussels, a city that gracefully juggles its roles as the capital of Belgium and the de facto capital of the European Union, is a vibrant tapestry of history, culture, and international diplomacy. It's a place where medieval guildhalls stand proudly alongside sleek modern architecture, and where over a hundred museums offer a dense concentration of cultural experiences. This metropolitan area, the most populous in Belgium with approximately 1,789,447 residents, hums with a cosmopolitan energy that is both distinctly Belgian and uniquely European.

The city's origins trace back to 979 AD, when Charles, Duke of Lower Lorraine, transferred the relics of Saint Gudula to a chapel on an island in the Senne River. This strategic location on the river quickly propelled Brussels into prominence as an important trade center, connecting Flemish cities like Bruges and Ghent with Cologne in Germany. Over the centuries, Brussels flourished, expanding from its humble beginnings to become a significant urban hub. The Senne River, while crucial to the city's early development, eventually became a source of health concerns due to pollution and flooding, leading to its covering in the late 19th century, a monumental urban planning project that reshaped the city center and paved the way for grand boulevards.

At the very heart of Brussels lies the Grand Place, a UNESCO World Heritage site that is nothing short of breathtaking. Surrounded by opulent guildhalls with their gleaming golden accents and the impressive Gothic Town Hall, this central square is a testament to the city's historical wealth and architectural prowess. Visitors often find themselves gazing upward, captivated by the intricate details and sheer grandeur of the buildings. The Grand Place continues to be a focal point for events and gatherings, from flower markets to festive Christmas celebrations.

Just a short stroll from the Grand Place, one can find the quirky yet iconic Manneken Pis, a small bronze statue of a urinating boy that has become a beloved symbol of Brussels. Despite its diminutive size, it draws crowds of tourists eager for a photo opportunity. The Atomium, a striking 100-meter-tall model of an iron atom built for the 1958 World's Fair, offers a contrasting vision of modernity. You can even climb inside for panoramic views of the city.

Brussels is also a city that embraces the elegant curves and organic forms of Art Nouveau architecture. Renowned Belgian architect Victor Horta left an indelible mark on the city, with several of his townhouses—Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde, and the Maison & Atelier Horta—recognized as UNESCO World Heritage sites. These buildings are exquisite examples of the style, characterized by their

innovative use of iron, glass, and flowing decorative motifs.

Beyond its architectural marvels, Brussels thrives as a significant economic hub, boasting the highest GDP per capita in Belgium. The city's labor force is substantial, with professional and business services making up the largest employment sector, accounting for nearly a third of all employees. This strong economic foundation, coupled with its role as a European capital, contributes to a lively job market and a diverse culinary scene that caters to a global palate.

However, life in this bustling metropolis isn't without its challenges. Traffic congestion is a significant drawback, impacting the quality of life for residents and expats alike, despite the high standards of medical services and consumer goods available. While the inner city areas can be prone to traffic and pollution, tranquil green spaces offer a welcome respite. Neighborhoods such as Ixelles and Uccle are known for their beautiful parks and provide a calmer atmosphere.

The demographics of Brussels reflect its international character. The city's population has been steadily growing due to immigration, with a significant proportion of residents being non-Belgian nationals. As of 2023, nearly 40% of the Brussels-Capital Region's population was non-Belgian, with French, Romanians, Italians, and Moroccans being among the largest foreign communities. This rich blend of nationalities contributes to Brussels' vibrant multicultural fabric, making it a truly global city.

The public transportation system in Brussels is extensive and efficient, a crucial asset for navigating the city's often-congested streets. It boasts the only rapid transit metro system in Belgium, complemented by an extensive tram and bus network. Operated by STIB/MIVB, these services make getting around the city and its surrounding municipalities relatively straightforward, connecting residents and visitors to all corners of the capital.

Culturally, Brussels is a treasure trove. With over 100 museums, there is an incredible density of cultural experiences to be had. These institutions cover a vast range of interests, from fine arts at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium to more specialized collections. The city also has a long tradition of Belgian comics, earning it the moniker "capital of the comic strip," with murals and museums dedicated to this art form.

While its international institutions often take center stage, Brussels also offers a vibrant social life. The city is renowned for its cuisine, particularly its local waffles, exquisite chocolates, and famous French fries. Its numerous types of beers are a source of national pride, and the café culture provides ample opportunities for socializing and people-watching. Whether exploring historic landmarks or enjoying contemporary urban life, Brussels offers a captivating blend of experiences at the very heart of Europe.

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