



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

Belgium

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Geography and Regions of Belgium
- **Chapter 2** Landscapes: The Coast, Plateau, and Ardennes
- **Chapter 3** Climate and Natural Environment
- **Chapter 4** Early History: From Prehistory to Roman Belgium
- **Chapter 5** The Middle Ages and the Rise of Cities
- **Chapter 6** Under Burgundy and Habsburg Rule
- **Chapter 7** Revolution and Independence (1830)
- **Chapter 8** Industrialization and Colonial Era
- **Chapter 9** Belgium in the World Wars
- **Chapter 10** Federalization: Language and Politics
- **Chapter 11** Belgian Monarchy and Political Structure
- **Chapter 12** Communities and Regions: Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels
- **Chapter 13** Economy: From Industry to Services
- **Chapter 14** International Role: EU, NATO, and Beyond
- **Chapter 15** Demographics and Languages
- **Chapter 16** Society and Daily Life
- **Chapter 17** Religion and Secularism
- **Chapter 18** Education in Belgium
- **Chapter 19** Culture: Art, Architecture, and Design
- **Chapter 20** The World of Belgian Comics
- **Chapter 21** Music, Dance, and Performing Arts
- **Chapter 22** Cuisine: Beer, Chocolate, and Culinary Traditions
- **Chapter 23** Festivals, Folklore, and Traditions
- **Chapter 24** Traveling in Belgium: Cities, Sights, and Itineraries
- **Chapter 25** Belgium Today: Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

Belgium, though modest in size, stands as one of Europe's most intriguing nations—a place where contrasting traditions, languages, and histories converge to create a unique cultural mosaic. Situated at the crossroads of Western Europe, Belgium has, for centuries, been a focal point of migration, commerce, and diplomacy, shaped as much by its strategic location as by the ambitions of external powers and the resilience of its people. The country's complex past, visible in the architecture of its medieval cities and the diversity of its regions, finds daily echo in both its political structure and the everyday lives of its citizens.

Known as the "Battlefield of Europe," Belgium has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the movement of armies, and the coming together of diverse populations. Its cities—Brussels, Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, and Liège—tell stories of bustling medieval trade, artistic revolutions, political realignments, and economic transformation. This legacy of layered histories is perhaps most palpable in the nation's federal landscape today, where three language communities and three distinct regions operate together in a delicate, and often fascinating, balance.

Despite being frequently defined by what divides it—language, religion, or region—Belgium possesses a surprising cohesiveness and charm, offering a wealth of riches that extend far beyond its well-known chocolates, beers, and waffles. The Belgian art world has given birth to masters of the Flemish Renaissance and pioneers of surrealism; its festive calendar is filled with centuries-old processions and carnivals recognized by UNESCO. At the same time, Belgium is a dynamic, forward-looking society, a vital hub of the European Union, and a center for international diplomacy whose influence belies its geographical size.

Modern Belgium blends tradition with innovation. Visitors discover a country that honors its past with world-class museums, UNESCO World Heritage sites, and lively folk traditions—yet also embraces contemporary arts, design, and progressive social policies. The Belgian way of life, shaped by a respect for privacy, a commitment to family, and a vibrant community spirit, reflects both the legacy of its past and the spirit of its present.

This book, *Belgium: Portrait of a Country*, seeks to uncover the layers that form the Belgian identity. From the formation of its landscapes and cities to its evolving political structures; from the threads of folklore weaving through everyday life to the challenges and achievements of the 21st century, each chapter offers insights into a nation that embodies much of Europe's complexity—while remaining unmistakably itself.

Whether you are fascinated by history, captivated by culture, planning a visit, or simply eager to understand what makes Belgium both so diverse and so uniquely cohesive, this portrait will guide you through its geography, people, stories, and spirit. Welcome to Belgium—a country whose contrasts make it, paradoxically, one of Europe’s most harmonious and compelling places.

SAMPLE COPY

CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Regions of Belgium

Belgium, often described as a low-lying country, gradually ascends from a vast coastal plain in the northwest, stretching from the North Sea and the Netherlands, to the more rugged and forested Ardennes hills in the southeast. This gradual incline means that while the country might not boast towering mountain ranges, its diverse topography offers a surprising range of landscapes within its relatively compact 30,689 square kilometers (about 11,849 square miles) of total surface area, including water.

The country's strategic position in Western Europe, bordering France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, with a coastline along the North Sea, has profoundly shaped its identity. This location has historically made it a crossroads for trade, culture, and, unfortunately, conflict. Within these borders, Belgium's geography can be broadly categorized into three main physical regions: the coastal plain, the central plateau, and the Ardennes uplands. Some sources also identify a small fourth area in Belgium's southernmost tip, Belgian Lorraine, which is an intrusion of the Paris Basin.

The Coastal Plain: Where Land Meets Sea

Imagine a narrow strip of land, approximately 65 kilometers (about 40 miles) long, characterized by wide sandy beaches and a narrow belt of dunes. This is Belgium's coastal plain, stretching along the North Sea. It's a dynamic area where land and sea constantly interact, shaped by the ebb and flow of tides and the prevailing winds. The dunes, though sometimes fragmented by development, serve as a natural barrier protecting the low-lying hinterland from the sea.

Further inland from the immediate coastline, you'll find the "polders." These are flat, fertile lands, often below sea level, that have been reclaimed from the sea over centuries and are meticulously protected by a network of dikes and sluices. This impressive feat of hydraulic engineering ensures that this valuable agricultural land remains dry and productive. The polders are a testament to human ingenuity and perseverance in shaping the landscape.

Within this coastal plain, particularly in the western part, is the plain of Flanders. This area includes Maritime Flanders, which extends inland for about 8 to 16 kilometers (5 to 10 miles) and is characterized by newly formed and reclaimed land with largely clay soils. Interior Flanders, covering most of the East and West Flanders provinces, features sand-silt or sandy soils. This region, with its flatlands and canals, connects to the lowlands of the Netherlands, showcasing a shared geographical heritage.

The coastal plain's low elevation, ranging from approximately 0.5 meters to 2 meters above sea level, highlights the importance of the protective measures in place. While the landscape here is largely flat, there are some minor undulations, such as the Kemmelberg and the Kluisberg in the Flemish lowlands, which offer a gentle contrast to the otherwise level terrain.

The Central Plateau: Belgium's Fertile Heart

Moving eastward and inland from the coastal plain, the landscape gradually rises into the central plateau. This region is characterized by a smooth, gently undulating terrain, punctuated by fertile valleys carved out by numerous rivers and waterways. It's a productive agricultural area, with rich clay soils that have supported farming communities for centuries. This is often considered the heartland of Belgium, both geographically and economically, with a diverse mix of urban and rural areas.

The central plateau covers northern Hainaut, Walloon Brabant, southern Flemish Brabant, and the Hesbaye plateau region of Liège. This area is dissected by rivers like the Dender, Senne, and Dijle, all of which eventually flow into the Scheldt River. The Scheldt, a major river in Belgium, along with its tributaries, forms a fan-like drainage basin that converges on Antwerp, a significant port city. The Meuse River is another principal waterway that traverses Belgium.

Brussels, the capital of Belgium and a major European hub, lies within this central plateau, giving it a somewhat central position within the country. This region showcases a transition in landscape, moving from the low, reclaimed lands of the coast to gently rising plateaus and fertile farmlands. It's a testament to Belgium's varied geology, with progressively younger rocks as you move north from the ancient Ardennes.

The central plateau also features some notable forested areas, such as the Sonian Forest in Brabant, a remnant of the ancient Forest of Cologne that once covered a large part of the country during Roman times. These patches of woodland add to the picturesque quality of the region, offering green spaces amidst agricultural fields and urban centers. The blend of cultivated land, gentle hills, and waterways makes the central plateau a diverse and visually appealing part of Belgium.

The Ardennes: Rugged Beauty and Ancient Forests

As you journey southeast, the landscape undergoes a dramatic transformation, giving way to the more rugged and thickly forested Ardennes uplands. This region is a stark contrast to the low-lying plains and gentle plateaus, characterized by rolling hills, deep river valleys, caves, and small gorges. The Ardennes is part of a larger geological formation, the Hercynian orogenic belt, which extends from western Ireland into Germany.

The hills in the Ardennes typically range from 350 to 400 meters (about 1,150 to 1,310 feet) in height, but they ascend to over 694 meters (2,277 feet) in the boggy moors of the High Fens region in southeastern Belgium. Here, you'll find Signal de Botrange, the highest point in both Wallonia and Belgium. It's a broad plateau, with a road crossing the summit, and even a café nearby. An interesting historical note: a six-meter-high "Baltia tower" was built on the summit in 1923, allowing visitors to reach an altitude of exactly 700 meters.

The Ardennes is a sparsely populated region, known for its extensive forests that cover approximately 23% of Belgium's total land area. The majority of these forests, about 79.8%, are located in the Walloon Region. These dense woodlands, often featuring a mix of natural beech forests and fir trees, are cut deeply by the Meuse River and its tributaries, such as the Semois. The region's challenging terrain and dense cover have historically made it a strategic location, famously serving as a battleground during both World Wars.

Beyond its historical significance, the Ardennes is a paradise for nature lovers, offering abundant opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking, mountain biking, and kayaking. The region's natural beauty changes with the seasons, from vibrant greens in summer to a blanket of snow in winter, making it suitable for cross-country skiing. The Ardennes is also known for its distinctive cuisine, including game, wild boar, and the world-renowned Ardennes smoked ham.

It's important to distinguish the Ardennes proper from the "Flemish Ardennes," an informal name given to a hilly region in the south of East Flanders province. While also characterized by rural, hilly landscapes and woodlands, the Flemish Ardennes is distinct and not adjacent to the larger Ardennes region in Wallonia, France, Germany, and Luxembourg. This smaller, yet charming, area is particularly popular for cycling, hosting parts of major bike races like the Tour of Flanders.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY