Bel - Air

World Wide
Chauffeured Services

Sight seeing tour - Brussels (4 or 8 hours)

- Belgium, some figures
    - Country name - Belgium, België (Flemish), Belgique (French), Belgiën (German)
    - Geographical Area - 30,510 sq km
    - Population - 10,190,034 (July 2001 est.)
    - Capital City - Brussels
    - People - Flemish (of Teutonic origin), Walloons (French Latin), and others (foreigners)
    - Language - Flemish, French, German, others.
    - Religion - Roman Catholic, Protestant and or other minorities.
    - Government - Federal parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch.
    - Head of Gov. - Guy Verhofstadt.
    - Visas - EU citizens can enter on an official identity card. Travellers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, the USA and many other countries just need a valid passport.
    - Health Risks - None.
    - Time Zone - GMT/UTC plus one hour.
    - Currency - The Euro (€).
    - Weights & measures - Metric.
    - Belgian Airports - National (BRU), Brussels, Deurne (ANR), Antwerp, Liége, Charleroi (Brussels South airport), Oostende.

- The map of Belgium.

- The Belgian flag

Origin of the colors

The colours were taken from the flag of Brabant, a province in the Low Countries (the Netherlands + Belgium), which extended from Walloon province Walloon Brabant, over Flemish Brabant (and Brussels) and Antwerpen in Flanders, and in the Netherlands the province of North-Brabant. The flag of Brabant was a golden (yellow) lion climbing the hoist, on a black surface, and its tongue and nails were red. Its heraldic description is:
Sable, a Lion Rampant Or, Nails and Tongue Gules.
This lion features on the arms of the Belgian kingdom, and several arms of the provinces, like Walloon Brabant (Brabant wallon), Flemish Brabant (Vlaams-Brabant), and the Dutch province North-Brabant (Noord-Brabant).

Probably, the vertical ordering of the colours in vertical bands was based on the French flag, since the colours of the Dutch flags were ordered in horizontal bands, and the founding of Belgium was actually a separation from the Netherlands. (Filip Van Laenen)

Horizontal vs. vertical bands

The Belgian colours are nowadays in vertical bands, but a few months ago I saw some drawings about the Belgian revolution of 1830 (separation from the Dutch kingdom which has its colours in horizontal bands), and some flags waved on the drawings had the colours in horizontal bands, others in vertical bands. It seems that in the early days of that revolution, it didn't matter whether the colours were ordered vertically or horizontally, as long as they were black-yellow-red. But perhaps later on the vertical bands were favoured because the French flag has its colours in vertical bands too, and the young Belgian nation was very French-minded. (Filip Van Laenen, 20 October 1995)

These horizontal tribands were already used in an earlier revolution, in December 1789 when the Belgians raised (not succesfully) against the Habsburgers (Austrians). I've got a drawing of it, the colours arranged red/black/yellow. On 25 August 1830 (after the performance of Auber's freedom opera La Muette de Portici) began the revolt against the Dutch king William I. The next day a French (!) flag was hoisted on the city hall of Brussels. Two men (Lucien Jottrand and Edouard Ducpètiaux) remembered the colours used in 1789 and made two flags horizontal red/yellow/black; one to replace the French flag, and with one they marched through the streets. On 23 January 1831 the Provisional Gouvernment decreed:

"The flag of Belgium is red, yellow and black. These colours are arranged vertical".

But in article 124 of the Belgian constitution of 4 February 1831 no order of colours was given. On 13 September 1831 the minister of the Navy decreed:

"Black must be placed on the hoist, yellow in the middle and red on the fly".

This flag was last confirmed on 28 January 1936. (Mark Sensen, 20 October 1995)

- Capital city of Brussels.
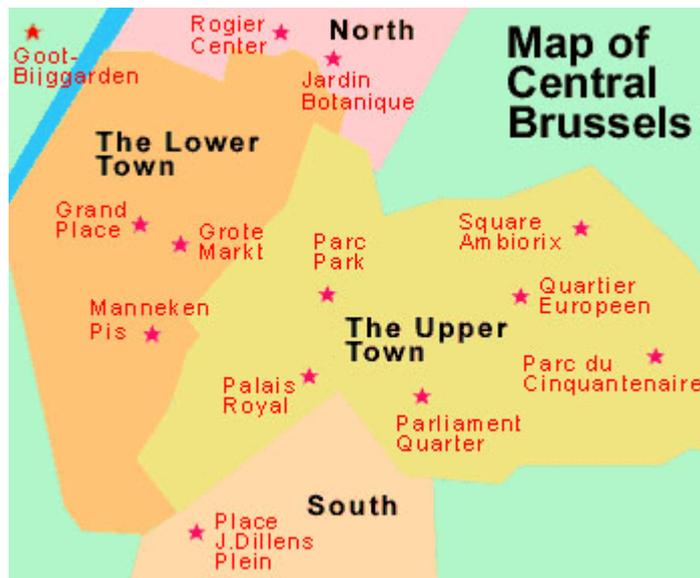
- The Grand-Place and the Guild Houses.

Belgium is famous for it's chocolate, lace and beer and there are many opportunities to sample both in the many shopping arcades and cafés around the magnificent Grand-Place. English is widely spoken.

The fame and beauty of the Market Place does not lie only in the Town Hall and the King's House, but perhaps first of all in the presence of a remarkably beautiful set of elaborately decorated guild houses. The name "guild houses" is most commonly used for the entire set of

houses, although in reality they did not all belong to the medieval guilds. Some of the houses were always privately owned.

During the Middle Ages, and later, every city in the Low Countries had guilds or corporations which always had a stake in the city administration. Because they were very wealthy and politically powerful , their importance had to show in their houses in which they regularly met to discuss new rules or regulations within their specific trade or commerce.

In Brussels the guilds built their houses, of course, around the main town square. After the French bombardment of August 1695, the city ordered the guilds to submit the restoration plans of the houses before a final approval could be given for the reconstruction. Because of this wise decision the unity of style could be preserved and former irregularities could be done away with.

In the Middle Ages no house numbers were given , but names. There were so few stone houses that most people could locate a house just by its name. On the Grand-Place the names of the houses are often indicated by a little statue or some part of the decoration.

 On the Grand Place you'll find the Brewery Museum, which allows you to discover the secret of what makes the Belgian beer so special. With over 400 beers native to Belgium you can tell Belgians take it seriously and it's best to be pre-armed with the theory before you rush into the practical task of selecting a beer from the extensive "beer menus" that many cafés and bars offer. If it all gets too much there are several Irish bars to restore more familiar surroundings and tipples.

As well as the beer, Brussels is proud of its food, and now boasts more Michelin starred restaurants than Paris. The "Marché aux Poissons" in old Brussels has plenty of choice for restaurants and shops, with an unsurprising speciality of seafood and fish.

One other place worth a visit is the Belgian Comic Strip centre – home of Tintin, Snowy and the Smurfs. Our love for comic strip characters can be seen in the outstanding city walls – some of which are decorated with popular Belgian comic strip heroes.

Down one of the side streets leading out from the Grand' Place, you can plop down at an outside table of a coffee shop for a little cappuccino pick-me-up.

Your driver-guide will show and tell you that the Galerie de la Reine, was in fact the world's oldest covered shopping mall. Dating 1847.

Then you can check out the cathedrals of St. Nicholas and St. Michael before getting somewhat lost in the new, or 'upper' town.

The Manneken-Pis, situated in Rue de l'Etuve, is well known. Crowds of tourists patrol the meandering cobbled streets near Brussels' Grand' Place hoping to find this small statuette of a little boy in the midst of a never-ending pee. Since its creation by J Duquesnoy in the 17th century, the Manneken-Pis has attracted a great deal of attention, having been stolen (by the English in 1745 and the French in 1747), vandalised and dressed in over 600 costumes, which are on display at the City of Brussels Museum.

- The Royal palace in Brussels

During the Austrian rule in the 18th century, empress Maria-Theresia preferred not to have the old palace rebuilt because she didn't want the Austrian governor in Brussels to feel himself like a king. Only four houses where built on the site where the palace now stands.

It was William I, king of the reunited Netherlands, who decided in 1815 to rebuild these houses to turn them into a royal palace. This was finished in 1829. One year later Belgium became independent and the new king of Belgium, Leopold I, decided to use the new palace as his residence. It was king Leopold II, who had the original building turned into the palace like we now know it. This transformation ended in 1903.

The palace was used as the residence of the Belgian King until after the death of Queen Astrid in 1935, when her husband Leopold III, decided to move his residence to the castle of Laken. His successors also resided in Laken.

The royal palace in the centre is now used as the office of the king and as the residence of the crown prince.

The royal palace harbours a museum called Belle-vue with a collection about the Belgian royal dynasty.

- From ancient to modern

Just round the Place Royale/Koningsplein, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium inspire contemplation. At a few metres distance from each other, linked by a single corridor, ancient and modern art provide a most pleasant walk. You can enjoy wandering here to admire the masterpieces of Rubens, Breughel or Bosch.

- The royal square and the art museums

The royal square lies at the Koudenberg/Coudenberg, a natural hill at the edge of the medieval city center. Here, the duke of Brabant had a castle built in the 11th century. His successors left the city of Leuven, which had been the old capital of the dukedom and chose the castle in Brussels as their permanent residence.

In the course of the following centuries, the dukes of Burgundy and, later, the Habsburg kings and emperors all adapted the castle to their needs and wishes. Between 1452 and 1459 Philip

the Good of Burgundy had the Magna Aula constructed. This hall was meant for the many meetings of the Council of Brabant and other festivities. By the 16th century, the palace had become one of the most impressive and picturesque royal residences in Europe. It also had a magnificent garden, which is now the royal park.

- Museum of modern art

In 1984 a new museum complex was opened near the Royal Square. In this complex, the collection of modern masters is now housed. The entrance, situated in a neo-classical building at the Place Royal, leads to the underground museum, built around a central light well, where the displays are arranged in chronological order, from level -4 to level -8.

- The Sablon Square

The Sablon is one of the most prestigious and attractive areas in Brussels. In recent years it has become the center of the antiques shops and art galleries.

The name of this area refers to the time when it was still situated outside of the city walls of the 12th century. It was originally a sandy road, along which people had access to the city gates. Because of frequent use this road had become hollow and on both sides a yellowish earth layer could be seen. This type of sandy clay was called "zavel" in Dutch and "sablon" in French.

In the 14th century a small chapel in the sablon area was transformed into an important pilgrimage site where a miraculous statue of Our Lady was venerated. Very soon the area became more populated and was enclosed within the 14th century city walls. Around 1450 the little chapel had been transformed into a beautiful gothic church, the Sablon church or church of Our Lady of the Victories. In the following centuries more and more noble men settled in the area because it was close to the duke's palace.

- The Sablon church

The Our-Lady-of-the-Sablon church, or shorter Sablon Church, dominates the Sablon Square in the center of Brussels. The Sablon area is nowadays the exclusive antiques shop area of Brussels with its many shops, art galleries, busy cafés and restaurants.

Until the end of the 13th century the Sablon was a scarcely populated area just outside the 12th century city walls. In 1304, however, the Brussels guild of Archers, had a little chapel built here in honor of the Holy Virgin.

The little chapel very soon turned into a major pilgrimage site. In 1348 a pious woman called Beatrijs Soetkins received a vision from the Holy Mother. She asked Beatrijs to steal a statue of the Madonna from a church in Antwerp and to bring it over to the Sablon chapel in

Brussels. It was soon believed that the statue was miraculous, which, of course, started to attract flocks of pilgrims to the Sablon.

- St. Michael and St. Gudula Cathedral

This church is to be found at the Treurenberg hill on the edge between lower and upper town. Already at the beginning of the 11th century a church was situated here. In 1047 the Duke of Brabant, Lambert II, had the relics of Saint Gudula transferred from the Saint Gorik church in downtown Brussels to the new church at the Treurenberg hill. From that moment on the Saint Gudula and Saint Michael church took the lead over all the other churches in Brussels. Lambert II also gave the church a chapter of 12 canons.

Because of its growing importance, the first St. Gudula church originally built in romanesque style was transformed in gothic style as from the 13th century. Today, the foundations of the first church can still be seen under the crypt of the gothic cathedral.

The gothic choir was constructed between 1226 and 1276, nave and transept in the middle of the 15th century. The western facade, completed between 1450 and 1490, follows the example of the French gothic facades.

- The Royal Park

The entire area of the royal park and the royal square is situated on the site where the medieval court of Brabant used to stand. This enormous palace dated from the 11th century when the duke of Brabant left his 'castrum' in the center of the city.

A new castle was built on the so-called 'Koudenberg' at the edge where the higher part of Brussels stops and the lower part begins. The successors of the dukes (e.g. Filip the Good and Charles V) kept enlarging the palace which turned into one of the most beautiful and picturesque royal residences in medieval Europe.

The entire complex, however, burnt down in 1731 during the Austrian rule of the Southern Netherlands. The palace, which lay in ruins, was never to be reconstructed.

A part of this royal residence was the 'warande', or the forest and the park of the palace. In 1775 the Austrian governor decided, together with the City of Brussels, to construct an new prestigious and modern residential area. The former park was almost like a forest in the city, with hills and little valleys where game and other animals lived.

The Austrian empress Maria-Theresia agreed to turn the forest into a new park in classical style for the rich citizens of Brussels to spend their free time in. The park was leveled, new trees were planted and the roads where traced according to geometrical plans. The architects were Guimard and the Austrian Joachim Zinner.

Classical statues were placed in the park, some of which had come from the burned residence. In 1780 a Waux-Hall was built, where music was to be played and where people could sit down and relax while having a drink or something to eat. In 1803 a dinner for 1800 people was organized there in honour of Napoleon and his wife Josephine.

- Natural Science Museum

Located at Waversesteenweg the Museum of the Royal Institute for Natural sciences of Belgium gives a fascinating overview of natural life in Belgium and elsewhere, now and during the course of time. Some of the major rooms have been reconstructed to embellish and improve the presentation of the collection.

The major attraction of the museum is its splendid collection of the so-called "Iguanadons of Bernissart". Skeletons of these dinosaurs were found in the late 19th century in the small village of Bernissart in the south of Belgium. The beautifully reconstructed skeletons attract lots of people every year. This is an ideal museum to visit with children.

- The European Parliament.

Visits last approximately between one to three hours and include a general introduction, given by a European Parliament official, to what the EP is and how it works, possibly followed by a discussion with one or more MEPs, insofar as parliamentary business so allows. When the European Parliament is in session, visitors will be able to observe MEPs' debates 'live'.

During part-sessions, the maximum number of visitors in a group is 40, and participants must be at least 14 years old. Auto-guided visits for a maximum of 40 visitors per slot can be arranged on workdays, even when Parliament is meeting in plenary in Strasbourg, from Mondays to Thursdays at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. and on Fridays at 10 a.m.

Visits on Saturdays are possible only at certain times of the year, at 10 a.m, 11.30 a.m. and 2.30 p.m. These visits are intended for individuals and small groups: reservation is not required.

Visit also: http://europa.eu/.

- NATO

  The fundamental role of NATO is to safeguard the freedom and security of its member countries. It is one of the foundations on which the stability and security of the Euro-Atlantic area depends and it serves as an essential forum for transatlantic consultations on matters affecting the vital security interests of all its members. Its first task is to deter and defend against any threat of aggression against any of them.

  In order to improve security and stability in the area, the North Atlantic Alliance also plays a key role in the field of crisis management, by contributing to effective conflict prevention and, in the event of a crisis, by taking appropriate action to resolve the crisis when there is consensus among the member countries to do so. In addition, the Alliance promotes partnership and cooperation with other countries in the Euro-Atlantic area, aimed at increasing openness, mutual confidence and the capacity for joint action.

- The North Atlantic Treaty

  The North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington on 4 April 1949, creating an alliance of 12 independent nations committed to each other's defence. Four more European nations later acceded to the Treaty between 1952 and 1982. On 12 March 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were welcomed into the Alliance, which now numbers 19 members.

  The North Atlantic Treaty has continued to guarantee the security of its member countries. Today, following the end of the Cold War and of the division of Europe, the Alliance has been restructured to enable it to contribute more effectively to the development of cooperative security structures for the whole of Europe. It has also transformed its political and military structures in order to adapt them to peacekeeping and crisis management tasks undertaken in cooperation with countries, which are not members of the Alliance, and with other international organisations.

  The 19 member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance: Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

- The Cinquantenaire
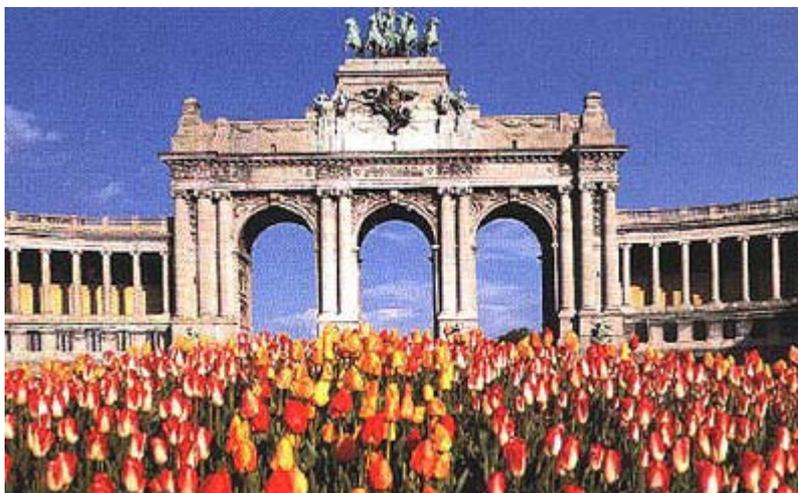
  - The park

In 1880 Belgium celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence. Therefore, king Leopold II wanted to have a world exhibition organized in Brussels. For its location a former military exercising ground outside of the center of the city was chosen, the so-called "Linthout" plains. In this exhibition the world would be able to see that the new state of Belgium was prospering and able to take its place between the important nations of Europe. In the second half of the 19th century Leopold II had acquired the Congolese colony in Africa which supplied him with considerable financial possibilities. He decided to use a part of his new fortune to give Brussels the outlook of an important European city. One of his realizations was this Cinquantenaire park with its imposing monuments.

o   The triumphal arch (Arc de triomphe)

The most eye-catching monument is, of course, the triumphal arch. This arch was built to serve as a monument to illustrate the glorious past of Brussels. It also was to serve as a new entrance gate to the center for people entering from the eastern side of Brussels, via the newly constructed Tervurenlaan/Avenue de Tervueren.

The arch was planned for the world exhibition of 1880, but would take a long time to be finished. In 1880 only the basis of the colons had been constructed. During the exhibition the rest of the arch was completed with wooden panels. In the following years the construction and completion of the monument was the topic of a continuous battle between the king and the government. The Belgian government actually did not want to spend so much money on an (in their eyes) unnecessary monument. Via private funding (for which the king had provided the money) the arch was finally completed by 1905, just in time for the 75th anniversary of the Belgian independence.
The monument was then also crowned with a quadriga, representing the province of Brabant. The other 8 provinces were symbolized by allegoric statues at the foot of the columns.

On both sides of the arch are 'galleries of the columns' with mosaics representing and glorifying the 'peace-loving nation of Belgium'. These mosaics were made between 1920 and 1932.

o   The exposition halls

The large halls on both sides of the arch were built as a replacement for the original pavilions and halls of the 1880 exposition. They now house museums, but the constructions themselves are worth a visit. The design is a real glorification of the industrial accomplishments. Iron and glass are the main materials that were used here. The southern hall now houses the beautiful Autoworld museum, with its splendid collection of old-timer cars. In the northern hall airplanes can be seen which belong to the collection of the space and aviation department of the army museum.

o   The Bordiau halls

The beautiful Bordiau halls (named after the architect Jules BORDIAU) were the only buildings that were ready for the 1880 exposition. They are very typical for the glass and iron constructions build in late 19th century Europe as influenced by the Crystal Palace in London. After the exposition, the government decided to use these halls for the museums of Brussels.

The northern Hall now houses the royal Army museum. Unfortunately, the southern hall was destroyed by a fire in 1946. It was rebuilt in the 1950's but not in the original style. This is now the seat of the prestigious Museum of art and history of Brussels.

o   The museum of art and history

This museum has an important collection of art objects from different civilizations from all over the world. It offers an overview of the history of mankind in the five continents (with the exclusion of Black Africa) from prehistoric times until today. The museum was founded in 1835 and was located in the Hallepoort/Porte de Hal, one of the last remaining medieval city gates of Brussels. In 1889 it was transferred to the newly built pavilions in the Cinquantenaire Park. The Art and History Museum as remained at this site, albeit in different pavilions and exposition halls that were renovated or constructed after 1889. The museum is part of the Royal Museums of Art and History, to which also belong The Hallepoortmuseum, The Japanese Tower and the Chinese Pavilion.

▪ The Atomium

The only major monument of the 1958's World Exibit that has remained at the Heysel is also the most spectacular: the Atomium. The 1958 world exhibition was the first to take place after World War II. The entire economic outlook was much better than in the 1930's (the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957) and the world was vibrating with enthusiasm for the new technologies (nuclear power, the first satellite launch by the soviets, etc.). Over 35 million people visited the Expo 58 and 46 countries from six continents were represented. Most pavilions were built in a very modern futuristic architectural style which became the symbol of that era. This monument from 1958 has become the Eiffel Tower of Brussels. The Atomium is the visual representation of the concept of an "atom". It symbolizes an elementary iron crystal with its 9 atoms and magnified 150 billion times. It honored the metal and iron industry and the belief in the atomic power.

In the neighbourhood you have the largest Belgian sports stadium, where athletics and soccer takes place. It is named after our former King: Boudewijn. Then we can see the Palace of Laken where our former Queen Fabiola still lives.

This monument was inaugurated in the 1958 International Exhibition, there is an exhibition: "The Atomium in Comic Strips". From the top you have a spectacular view of Brussels.

▪ The Japanese Tower and the Chinese Pavilion.

The Japanese Tower (80 meters high), and the Chinese Pavillion are real oriental jewels.

They are originating from the international exhibition in Paris in 1900, and were rebuilt under rule of King Leopold II.

- The Royale Palace of Laken.