Belgium

Location

Belgium is situated in Western Europe. The Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Germany, and the North Sea surround it. Its latitude is 50°50’ N and its longitude is 4°0’ E. The total area is 11780 square miles. Belgium is split into three regions – the northern region of Flanders, the southern region of Wallonia, and the central region of Brussels.

Geography

The Meuse-Sambre Valley divides Belgium into two regions. The northwestern region has flat coastal plains. The shore along the North Sea has low sand dunes. Between the North Sea and the border of the Netherlands, the land is sandy. The southwestern region has rolling hills, which eventually becomes low, rugged mountains in Ardennes.

History

Julius Caesar and his Roman army conquered Belgium in 52 BC. After the demise of the Roman Empire, the Germanic Franks from the east began to move into Belgium and settled in the northern and western regions. The Franks adopted Christianity. Eventually, Charlemagne ruled the Franks. Charlemagne’s greatest feat was uniting all of Western Europe during his reign from 768 – 814. In 843, the duchy of Lorraine, whose kingdom included Germany, conquered Belgium. During this reign, the region of Flanders was established. Flanders united with Burgundy, who ruled most of Belgium and the Netherlands in 1384. The nation of Burgundy ruled Belgium until 1477, when Charles the Bold died. Afterwards, France became the ruler of Belgium.

Under the French regime, Belgium prospered economically. The French utilized the Schelde River, which benefited the city of Antwerp with regards to trade. In 1814, the armies of
the nations who were against Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Belgium. In 1815, the Battle of Waterloo was fought in Belgium.

After the Battle of Waterloo, the Belgians established a constitution where a king would rule, but whose acts must be approved by a minister. The first monarch was Leopold I of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. He became influential towards the other monarchs of his time due to his political know-how. In 1839, the Netherlands and Belgium signed a peace treaty. The treaty stated that Belgium was an independent entity and that part of Luxembourg became a province of Belgium, while the Dutch gained control of the Grand Duchy as well as the land east of the Meuse River. This marked the beginning of Belgium’s role as a neutral and autonomous state.

Climate

The climate in Belgium is humid and mild along the coastal region. Inland, an increase in temperature occurs. In the central region of Brussels, the average temperature in January is between 30ºF - 40ºF. In July, the average temperature is between 54ºF – 73ºF. Along the coast, the average temperature in January is between 38ºF - 41ºF and in July, the temperature is between 56ºF and 73ºF. The average rainfall per year throughout Belgium is between 28 – 48 inches.

Important Dates


Population

The current Belgian population as of July 2002 is 10.2 million inhabitants. Fifty-eight percent of the population are Fleming, 31% are Walloon, and 11% are of other ethnicities. The
population density is 335.5 people per square kilometer. This is the second highest population density in Europe, with the Netherlands being the highest. The population growth rate is 0.15%. The average life expectancy is 78 years.

**Currency**

The official currency of Belgium is the Euro (EUR). The Euro banknotes comes in denominations of €5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500. The Euro coins comes in denominations of €0.01, 0.02, 0.05, 0.10, 0.20, 0.50, 1, 2. The current exchange rate of the Euro as of March 2003 is $1.00 = €0.92.

**Education**

Education in Belgium is required and free from the ages of 6 to 18. Primary schooling lasts for six years. Secondary education consists of three grade levels, with each level lasting two years, starting at the age of 12 years old. Higher education is separated into two cycles. Each cycle lasts two to three years. A university degree is usually awarded after four or five years of study. The largest university in Belgium is the Katholieke Universiteit in Lueven. The student population is approximately 27,000. The Belgian literacy rate is 98%.

**Language**

Belgium has two official languages – Dutch and French. In the Flanders region, Dutch is the official language. In Wallonia, French is the official language. In the capital city of Brussels, both French and Dutch are the official languages, but French is predominately spoken there.

**Religion**

Seventy-five percent of Belgians are Roman Catholic. The other twenty-five percent of the population is Protestant or another religion. There are a few Protestants who live in Hainaut and Brabant. In Brussels and Antwerp, there is a Jewish population present there.
Agriculture

Agriculture employs approximately three percent of the total population. Twenty-five percent of Belgium’s land is agricultural and about one-fifth of the land consists of meadows and pastures. Sugar beets, fruits, vegetables, grain, and tobacco are just a few of Belgium’s agricultural products. In the Flanders region, the cultivation of flowers, fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants are significant. Primarily, Belgium’s agricultural sector relies heavily on dairy and meat products, particularly beef, veal, and pork, which total about two-third of the total farm value.

Trade

Belgium’s main trading partners are the member countries of the European Union, particularly France, Germany, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and also the United States. Belgium primarily imports raw materials, motor vehicles, chemicals, food products, and textiles. Its main exports are chemicals and pharmaceutical products, machinery, plastics, diamonds, motor vehicles, food and livestock, iron and steel, and textiles.

Food

There are a few dishes that are native to Belgium. Frites, otherwise known as French fries, is considered to be the national dish. Frites are eaten with mayonnaise. Waterzooi is a hearty stew that consists of either fish or chicken with vegetables and herbs, and is mixed with butter, cream, and egg yolks. Carbonnades is a dish made of meat that is cooked with brown beer. Belgium is famous for its endive, chocolate, and beer, which come in a variety of flavors.

Landmarks

Belgium is a country rich with history and full of landmarks. Manneken-Pis, which is located in Brussels, is a famous statue of a little boy who is happily relieving himself. The Hôtel de Ville, located in Brussels, is a Gothic hall where the aldermen of Brussels meet. Outside of
the building are a group of statues. These statues depict a group of monks drinking, a medieval
torture device, a sleeping Moor, and St. Michael killing a female devil. The Diamond Quarter,
located in Antwerp, is a district where much of the world’s diamonds, more than $23 billion
dollars worth, are traded annually. In Bruges, the Church of Our Lady is located. This is a
church with a 396 feet spire that can be seen from around the city. Michelangelo’s Madonna
and Child sculpture can be viewed here and this is the only statue of Michelangelo that can be
seen outside of Italy.

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