



Explore The Magic Of Belgium In Just Three Days

by Kristin Harmel

Just a block from the exquisitely beautiful Grand-Place, which Victor Hugo hailed as "the most beautiful square in the world," Belgium's most famous citizen goes about his business on a city corner, as he has every day since 1619. Known far and wide, Mannekin-Pis, a statue of a naked little boy, has been constantly urinating irreverently into a Brussels fountain for the past 400 years.

And it is here that the contrasts and unexpected surprises that make Belgium what it is begin.

I expected a country full of history, bustling with commerce, when we arrived in Brussels, the capital of the European Union, which is widely regarded as the capital of Europe itself. Instead, in the heart of Belgium lies a magical juxtaposition of old and new, the Gothic and the Modern, of kingdoms and of commerce. Instead of being impressed by its array of monuments, I was instead touched and inspired by its twisting streets where the 21st century and the 16th century coabide and by the friendliness of this worldly country's people.

In Antwerp and Bruges, two other famous corners of the Belgian world, it is more of the same. In Bruges, horse drawn carriages compete for space on the narrow cobbled streets with taxi minivans, and in Antwerp, you can buy hot dogs and browse through pop rock CDs as you exit the church where Rubens' "Descent from the Cross," one of the world's most famous paintings, hangs.

Often overlooked by tourists in favor of its larger neighbors such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, Belgium is a corner of the globe that anyone with an appreciation of history should explore. Using central Brussels as your home base -- an easy navigable one -- you can visit the rest of the diverse and picturesque nation. The bustling port city of Antwerp, one of the world's diamond capitals, is just a 45-minute train ride away, and gothic Bruges, a trapped-in-time throwback to the middle ages, is just a 51-minute trip by train. Waterloo, where Napoleon had his famous last stand, is just 30 minutes south of Brussels by train or bus and the windmill-dotted countryside spreads everywhere else the eye can see.

Adding to Belgium's appeal is the fact that each of its major cities are small enough to

easily navigate, and the widespread use of English as a second language makes it easy to communicate and understand the culture, the history and the lay of the land.

To see Belgium in three days is to experience a sampling of one of the most welcoming nations in the world in less time than it takes to enjoy a holiday weekend from work. Book a

nice first sight for your Belgian vacation. Built between 1871 and 1873, it is now the central meeting place of the Belgian financial world. No need to venture inside; the neoclassical building's exterior is a sight in itself. Six columns line the front of the building, which is flanked by stone lions. The roof is lined with cherubs.

Because you can't come to Belgium and not have one of the delicious Belgian brews, your next stop should be O'Reilly's Pub, an Irish bar right across the street from the Bourse. Grab a street-side table with a view of the famous building and order up a cold beer from the extensive menu. The waiters and bartenders all speak English, so you should have no problem asking questions about the unfamiliar beers native to Belgium. Try a Mort Subite in raspberry or cherry, or a light, crisp Stella Artois to quench your thirst. Now that you're in the city, this is the perfect time to look at your map to get oriented -- and you can always ask your waiter if you have any questions about seeing the city.

From O'Reilly's, it's just a two-block walk to the impressive Grand-Place, large and looming by day, glittering and gorgeous by night. In the center of Brussels' Old Town, it is a large rectangular square flanked by the elegant Town Hall, the House of the King and an array of 17th century guildhouses.

The gothic Town Hall, whose 90-meter belfry is a familiar and inspiring symbol of Belgium itself, was built in the 15th century and features an array of detailed figures that sit high above its 17 first-floor arches. Look closely and you'll see that the weathervane atop the famed belfry is a golden statue of Saint Michael slaying a dragon. The buildings' abutments

represent justice, prudence, peace, law, moderation and strength. The town hall is still the seat of the mayor of Brussels, although official city business is conducted elsewhere.

Opposite the Town Hall lies the equally ornate House of the King, an early 16th century neo-Gothic building which now houses the historical City Museum, worth a quick trip if you're interested in the history of Brussels.

The rest of the Grand-Place is lined with old guildhouses, which were built to compete with each other in the 17th century. The result is that each is more heavily detailed than the next. You could wander for hours around the Grand-Place, exploring the various scenes depicted on the buildings.

Three blocks away, you'll find the oddly out-

The Hotel de Ville in Brussels' Grand-Place is the centerpiece of what Victor Hugo once described as "The most beautiful square in the world."



Thursday night flight from the United States, and you'll arrive in Belgium mid-morning on Friday, just in time to start a day of exploring. A flight out on Sunday afternoon will get you home in time to catch a full night's sleep before returning to work on Monday.

Day One - Brussels:

Take a taxi from the train station to your hotel to check into your room and freshen up after your flight. My favorite is the friendly 88-room Atlas Hotel, just around the corner from the Bourse (the Belgian stock exchange) and very close to the famous Grand-Place.

From there, head out on foot toward the Bourse, whose ornate edifice will provide a

of-place Mannekin-Pis, who is often dressed in costumes that range from a British TK to Elvis. In fact, he has 600 changes of clothes, many of which have been gifts from foreign dignitaries. You'll wonder why the tiny statue is so famous; he's less than four feet tall and is built into the side of a building. Sculpted in 1619, he's based on a legend that no-one quite knows. Some say the statue is to commemorate the finding of the mayor's lost son, who was discovered in the same position as the statue. Another story tells of a little boy who saved the city by extinguishing a match that enemies intended to use to set Brussels on fire. In any case, the famous statue is worth a look.

After seeing Mannekin-Pis, have a quick lunch at one of dozens of French fry stands that line the streets of the city; the crispy potatoes originated in Belgium, not in France, as many people believe. The fries in Belgium are some of the best in the world; double-fried, they're extra crispy and served with delicious Belgian mayonnaise.

One of the major sites on your itinerary should be the Musee Royaux des Beaux Arts, which includes the adjoining museums of ancient and modern art, just a short walk from the Mannekin-Pis. Not to be missed are: "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus", the Rubens collection, David's "Death of Murrat" and work by artists as diverse as Picasso, Warhol and Gauguin. While the museum doesn't rival its larger neighbors, such as Paris's Louvre, it is worth a look.

After seeing the museum, you can check out the Belgian Comic Strip Center, which features the famed Belgian comic creation Tintin, or the Atomium, a representation of an iron crystal structure, built for the 1958 World's Fair. Mini-Europe, a collection of miniature European monuments, is also of interest.

After a day of sightseeing, head back to your hotel to freshen up, then set out again for the Grand-Place, where you can choose from an array of restaurants that flank it and its side streets. For a truly memorable meal, sit outside at any of the establishments around the plaza and order a Belgian specialty such as mussels or rooster. Then sit back and savor your meal as the day darkens and the lights of the Grand-Place turn on -- a truly breathtaking sight. Try another beer or two with dinner, then wander around the area of the Grand-Place. Finally, grab a waffle from a vendor near the Grand-Place, then find a seat on the steps of the House of the King before 10:30 so that you can watch the nightly light-show, in which the Grand-Place comes alive with hundreds of bright lights that dance across the square.

Day Two - Bruges

Sleep in and enjoy breakfast at your hotel, then catch a morning train to Bruges and prepare to step back in time to the Middle Ages to one of Europe's most beautiful cities. Known as the "Sleeping City," Bruges was once a bustling capital of Europe, but when its port dried up, it fell into disuse and remained amazingly preserved, a monument to its Gothic heyday. Today, as you stroll through the town,

you will feel as if you are strolling through a bustling village of the 16th century, which was Bruges' golden age.

The Venice of the North, this Gothic town is laced with tiny bridges and canals that are traversed by quiet boats. There aren't as many sights to see here, but strolling through the winding cobbled streets, across bridges and through neighborhoods that haven't changed in centuries is an experience in itself.

Take a taxi from the train station to the Markt Square, which sits in the shadow of the 88-meter Belfort, the famous symbol of the city. Climb 366 winding steps to the top of the tower, where you'll have a spectacular view of Belgium's Flanders region. The tower also houses a series of carillon bells; if you're there on the hour, you can hear their sweet music from just feet away.

Have a light lunch at one of the many Flemish restaurants that line the square, or try a Belfort-shaped waffle smothered in whipped cream and strawberries. Then head over to the Basilica of the Holy Blood, the home of a relic thought to contain Christ's blood, obtained during the Crusades and brought to Bruges in 1150.

On the other end of the small town, at the Church of Our Lady, you can find Michaelangelo's marble masterpiece Madonna and Child, one of the few works by the artist located outside of Italy.

Near the church is the Groeninge Museum, closed for repairs until the end of the year but worth a look if you're there while it's open. The museum hosts scores of works by Jan Van Eyck and Hieronymus Bosch.

Take a canal cruise through town to see the gorgeous Northern Renaissance architecture that is the city's signature, then stroll down to the Minnewater (also known as the Lake of Love) on the southern end of the city, where snow-white swans glide blissfully through a still pool of water while Belgians stroll quietly through a well-manicured park. If you want to see the city in yet another way, climb into a horse drawn carriage at the Lake of Love and take it back to the Markt Square.

Stroll through the city streets around the Markt, and pick out some chocolate from any of the chocolatiers surrounding it. Most of them make the chocolates right in the store and offer dozens of filled candies that are certain to be the best you've ever had. My favorite is Dumon on Walstraat, which serves up absolutely delectable melt-in-your-mouth delights at rock-bottom prices. These chocolate shops are also a perfect source of souvenirs to send to friends back home.

Finish off your day in Bruges with another meal in the Markt. Start with a big cast-iron pot of mussels, the city's specialty dish, and make sure to try one of Bruges' town brews such as Blanche de Bruges. Finish off with a waffle, then head back to the train station for the hour-long ride back to Brussels. Or, you could choose instead to stay in Bruges for the night. The Hotel Montanus, which features a sprawling English garden, is my favorite. It's located near the Groeninge Museum, within easy walking distance of everything.

Day Three - Antwerp

For your final day in Belgium, journey 45 minutes to Antwerp, the world's diamond center, for a more laid-back day. You'll step out of the station directly on to the city's main drag, which leads in several blocks into the Meir, a broad, trendy shopping street featuring stores selling everything from clothing to diamonds to famous Belgian chocolate.

Browse for awhile along the street, and step into a streetside sandwich shop to get an amazing crusty sub like nothing you've ever tasted at home. Go heavy on the mayonnaise -- a Belgian specialty -- and choose your favorite meats and veggies. Sub sandwiches in the U.S. will never satisfy you again!

There are three must-sees in Antwerp. The first is the Diamond Museum, which features an inside look into diamond-cutting and the diamond trade. Antwerp has been a major player in the diamond market since the 16th century, and this is one of the best places in the world to learn about diamonds.

As you leave the Diamond Center, continue west along the Meir toward the harbor. Branch off to the right as the Meir ends, and you'll find the Church of Our Lady, which houses Rubens' famous and moving "Descent from the Cross." Take a few minutes to gaze at the masterpiece, which is housed in Belgium's largest Gothic church. Rubens' "Raising of the Cross" is also housed in the church.

From the church, continue west until you reach the Schelde River, which has fed the town's existence for centuries. It is still one of the most bustling ports of Europe. Take a little while to explore the riverfront 13th-century Steen castle, which now houses the National Maritime Museum. According to legend, the terrible giant Druoon Antigoon lived in the castle's towers. When sailors refused to pay a toll, he would cut off their hands. On this site, Vikings razed an old fortress in 830. Linger by the water for a few minutes to soak in the mystery and lore of the castle, which was used as a prison in the 18th century, before you return to the train station to catch an afternoon train back to Brussels.

Grab your bags from the hotel, take a taxi to the airport and head back to the States. You'll hardly miss a beat at work, but the magic of Belgium will stay with you forever.

If You Go:

Atlas Hotel: Rue du Vieux Marché aux Grains, 30 Brussels 1000 - Belgium, www.atlas.be, info@atlas.be
Musees Royaux des Beaux Arts: 3 rue de la Regence, Phone: 322-508-33-33
Belgian Comic Strip Center: 20 rue des Sables, Phone: 322-219-19-80
The Atomium/Mini-Europe: Boulevard du Centenaire, Phone: 322-478-89-77
Hotel Montanus, Bruges: 7-8 Nieuwe Gentweg, Phone: 325-033-11-76
Dumon Chocolatier: chocolatierdumon@hotmail.com
Diamond Museum, Antwerp: <http://www.diamantmuseum.be>