

Frommer's Belgium, Holland & Luxembourg



Frommer's®

Belgium, Holland & Luxembourg

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by George McDonald



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George McDonald has lived and worked in both Amsterdam and Brussels, as deputy editor of the in-flight magazine for KLM and as editor-in-chief of the in-flight magazine for Sabena. Now a freelance journalist and travel writer, he has written extensively on both the Netherlands and Belgium for magazines and for travel books. In addition to *Frommer's Belgium, Holland & Luxembourg*, he is the author of *Frommer's Amsterdam* and a coauthor of *Frommer's Europe and Frommer's Europe by Rail*.

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HOW TO CONTACT US

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

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AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

FROMMER'S STAR RATINGS, ICONS & ABBREVIATIONS

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system**. In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **seven feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

-  **special finds**—those places only insiders know about
-  **fun facts**—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
-  **kids**—best bets for kids and advice for the whole family
-  **special moments**—those experiences that memories are made of
-  **overrated**—places or experiences not worth your time or money
-  **insider tips**—great ways to save time and money
-  **great values**—where to get the best deals

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE American Express **DISC** Discover **V** Visa
DC Diners Club **MC** MasterCard

TRAVEL RESOURCES AT FROMMERS.COM

Frommer's travel resources don't end with this guide. Frommer's website, **www.frommers.com**, has travel information on more than 4,000 destinations. We update features regularly, giving you access to the most current trip-planning information and the best airfare, lodging, and car-rental bargains. You can also listen to podcasts, connect with other Frommers.com members through our active-reader forums, share your travel photos, read blogs from guidebook editors and fellow travelers, and much more.

THE BEST OF BELGIUM, HOLLAND & LUXEMBOURG

1

Although they're small, each of these three countries contains a diversity of culture, language, and tradition that defies easy definition. Belgium is fractured along the age-old European divide between the Germanic north and the Latin south. This division is expressed in the constant regional bickering between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia that threatens to split the country entirely.

Holland (the Netherlands) has its great divide, too, along the "three great rivers"—the Maas, the Waal, and the Rhine. The northerners are strait-laced and Calvinist and (to hear the southerners say it) know what to do with a glass of beer only because they've been shown by the exuberant, Catholic southerners. Then there's the matter of nations within the nation. Friesland, Zeeland, and Limburg have their notions of separateness and their own languages to back them up.

As for Luxembourg, you'd think a country so small that—even on a big map—its name can't fit within its borders would be simpler. Not a bit. Luxembourgers are such a mixed bag they're still trying to sort out the mess left behind when the Germanic tribes overran the Roman Empire's Rhine defenses in A.D. 406.

Diversity is the greatest asset of the Benelux countries. The visitor from afar may be equally impressed by their shared characteristics, which include a determined grasp on the good life, as by the differences that separate them.

THE best TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Seeing the Grand-Place for the First Time** (Belgium): There's nothing quite like strolling onto the Grand-Place. You'll never forget your first look at this timelessly perfect cobbled square, surrounded by gabled guild houses and the Gothic tracery of the Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall) and Maison du Roi (King's House). See chapter 6.

- **Admiring Art Nouveau** (Belgium): Brussels considers itself the world capital of Art Nouveau, and local architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) was its foremost exponent. View the master’s colorful, sinuous style at his former home, now the Horta Museum, and in buildings around town. See chapter 6.
- **Time-Traveling in Bruges** (Belgium): Without a doubt, Bruges is one of Europe’s most handsome small cities. Its almost perfectly preserved center sometimes seems like a film set or museum, with buildings that run the gamut of architectural styles from medieval times to the 19th century. The picturesque canals are the icing on Bruges’s cake. See chapter 7.
- **Riding the Kusttram** (Coast Tram; Belgium): Onboard the Kusttram, the 2-hour ride along the Belgian coast, from De Panne on the French border to Knokke-Heist near the Dutch border, still seems like an old-fashioned adventure. Along the way, stop off at inviting resorts, beaches, horseback-riding trails—whatever takes your fancy. See chapter 9.
- **Touring the Ardennes** (Belgium and Luxembourg): The Ardennes, which covers the eastern third of Belgium, beyond the Meuse River and on into Luxembourg, is unlike any other Benelux landscape. Steep river valleys and thickly forested slopes set it apart. This region of castles, stone-built villages, and farms has resort towns like Spa and Bouillon; unequaled cuisine created from fresh produce and game; winter skiing; nature and fresh air in abundance; and towns like Bastogne and Ettelbruck that recall the sacrifice American soldiers made for victory in the Battle of the Bulge. See chapters 11 and 20.
- **Skating on the Canals** (Holland): When the thermometer drops low enough for long enough, the Dutch canals freeze over, creating picturesque highways of ice through the cities and countryside. At such times, the Dutch take to their skates. Joining them could be the highlight of your trip. See p. 317.
- **Relaxing in a Brown Cafe** (Holland): Spend a leisurely evening in a brown cafe, the traditional Amsterdam watering hole. These time-honored Dutch bars are unpretentious, unpolished institutions filled with camaraderie, like a British pub or an American neighborhood bar. See chapter 13.
- **Following the Tulip Trail** (Holland): The place to see the celebrated Dutch tulips in their full glory is Keukenhof Gardens at Lisse, where vast numbers of tulips and other flowers create dazzling patches of color in the spring. Combine your visit with a trip through the bulb fields between Leiden and Haarlem. See chapter 14.
- **Checking Out the Windmills at Zaanse Schans** (Holland): In flat Holland, wind is ever present, so it’s not surprising that the Dutch have used windmills to assist with their hard labor, from draining polders to sawing wood. At one time, the Zaan district, northwest of Amsterdam, had more than 1,000 windmills. Of the 13 that survive, five have been reconstructed at Zaanse Schans, together with other historical buildings reminiscent of the area’s past. See chapter 14.
- **Celebrating Carnival in Maastricht** (Holland): The country never seems so divided by the great rivers as it does during Carnival season. Southerners declare that their celebrations are superior, and if you ever run into a southern Carnival parade, you’ll have to admit they know how to party. In Maastricht the festivities are especially boisterous—people parade through the streets in an endless procession of outrageous outfits and boundless energy. See p. 258.
- **Driving the Wine Trail** (Luxembourg): Follow the Route du Vin along the banks of the Moselle River from Echternach to Mondorf-les-Bains. Here the low hills of

Luxembourg are covered with vineyards. Several wineries open their doors to visitors, offer guided tours, explain how their wine is produced, and treat you to a little of what they have stored in their barrels. See chapter 20.

1

THE BEST OF BELGIUM, HOLLAND & LUXEMBOURG

The Best Museums

THE best CASTLES & STATELY HOMES

- **Beersel** (near Brussels, Belgium): This 13th-century castle, 8km (5 miles) south of Brussels, is a castle just like Disney makes them, with turrets, towers, a drawbridge, a moat, and the spirits of all those who have, willingly or unwillingly, resided within its walls. It looks like the ideal place for pulling up the drawbridge and settling in for a siege—so long as the owners have the foresight to amply stock the rustic Auberge Kasteel Beersel restaurant inside. See p.131.
- **Gravensteen** (Ghent, Belgium): Even 900 years after it was constructed, the castle of the Counts of Flanders in Ghent can still summon up a feeling of dread as you peruse its gray stone walls. It's a grim reminder that castles were not all for chivalrous knights and beautiful princesses. This one was intended as much to subdue the independent-minded citizens of Ghent as to protect the city from foreign marauders. Inside are the tools of the autocrat's profession: torture instruments that show that what the Middle Ages lacked in humanity, they made up for in invention. See p. 162.
- **Bouillon** (near Dinant in the Ardennes, Belgium): This was the seat of the valiant but hardhanded Godfrey of Bouillon, who led the First Crusade in 1096. His castle still stands today, atop a steep bluff overlooking the town, the bridge over the Semois River, and the road to Paris. Tour its walls, chambers, and dungeons. See p. 238.
- **Menkemaborg** (Uithuizen, in Groningen province, Holland): A *borg* is the Groningen version of a stately home, developed from an earlier, defensive structure. Once home to Groningen landed gentry, Menkemaborg is a fine example of the style. Rebuilt in the 1700s, it was owned by the same family until the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays it's a museum, with period furnishings re-creating a vivid picture of the life and times of a wealthy provincial squire. See p. 417.
- **Rijksmuseum Paleis Het Loo** (near Apeldoorn, Holland): William III, who became king of England, had a royal hunting lodge built here in the forests surrounding Apeldoorn. Subsequent members of the House of Orange made alterations to the palace, especially during the 19th century. Restoration has revealed much of the original decoration, and what couldn't be saved has been redesigned according to the original plans. The gardens have been restored to their original 17th-century splendor. See p. 435.
- **Kasteel Ammersoyen** (near 's-Hertogenbosch, Holland): This magnificent example of a moated fortress, with sturdy towers at each corner, dates from the second half of the 13th century. Ammersoyen's history was turbulent—it burned down in 1590 and was left in ruins for half a century before being rebuilt. See p. 467.

THE best MUSEUMS

- **Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique** (Brussels, Belgium): Paintings by many of the finest Belgian artists are assembled in this museum's neoclassical Museum of Historical Art. An entire section is devoted to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and there are works by Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Hieronymus Bosch, and many others. Go underground to the Modern Art Museum for works by René Magritte, Paul

Delvaux, James Ensor, Félicien Rops, and Pierre Alechinsky, as well as the Musée Magritte, boasting more than 150 works by the surrealist artist Magritte. See p. 112.

- **Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen** (Royal Fine Arts Museum; Antwerp, Belgium): If you want to see the Flemish Masters in all their glory, head to Antwerp, where the Fine Arts Museum has the world's best collection of their works, including the largest group of Rubens masterpieces in existence. See p. 117.
- **Musée de la Vie Wallonne** (Museum of Walloon Life; Liège, Belgium): Set in a 17th-century convent, this museum rambles through the history and culture of Belgium's French-speaking region of Wallonia. The exhibits wander through the building that houses them, covering everything from popular arts and crafts to industry and agriculture. There's an interesting section on theater marionettes. See p. 212.
- **Rijksmuseum** (State Museum; Amsterdam, Holland): The Rijksmuseum houses some of the Netherlands's most important works of art: many paintings by Rembrandt, among them the world-famous *The Night Watch*, four of Jan Vermeer's miniatures, and numerous works by Frans Hals. All in all, this is one of the most impressive collections of Old Masters in the world. Unfortunately, until 2013 you'll be viewing a lot fewer than before, since most of the museum is closed for refurbishment. But in the sole wing that remains open, the museum has assembled The Masterpieces, highlights from its collection of 17th-century Dutch Golden Age collections. See p. 301.
- **Van Gogh Museum** (Amsterdam, Holland): An extensive collection of van Gogh's work is here: 200 paintings and 500 drawings, ranging from the famous *Sunflowers* to earless self-portraits. The permanent collection includes important works by van Gogh's 19th-century contemporaries, and frequent temporary or visiting exhibits concentrate on the same period. See p. 304.
- **Mauritshuis** (The Hague, Holland): An intimate museum set in the 17th-century palace of a Dutch count, it contains a small but impressive collection of Golden Age art treasures. See p. 360.
- **Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen** (Rotterdam, Holland): This eclectic museum features a range of art forms, from visual to applied arts, covering a period of over 7 centuries. Here you see paintings by the likes of Pieter Bruegel and Jan van Eyck, and surrealists like René Magritte and Salvador Dalí. See p. 375.
- **Musée National de l'Histoire Militaire** (National Museum of Military History; Diekirch, Luxembourg): There's something special about this tribute to the heroes of the Battle of the Bulge (1944–45), something gritty and immediate that sets it apart from other war museums. Its centerpiece is a series of dioramas that give you an eerie sense of being there in the battle, in the snow, with danger all around. See p. 506.

THE best CATHEDRALS & CHURCHES

- **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk** (Church of Our Lady; Bruges, Belgium): The spire of this church soars 122m (400 ft.) high and can be seen from a wide area around Bruges. The church holds a marble *Madonna and Child* by Michelangelo, a painting by Anthony van Dyck, and the 15th-century bronze tomb sculptures of Charles the Bold and Mary of Burgundy. See p. 150.
- **Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal** (Cathedral of Our Lady; Antwerp, Belgium): It's hard to miss this towering example of the Flemish Gothic style if you visit Antwerp or even

pass close to the city—its spire is 123m (404 ft.) high and dominates the area. This is the biggest church in the Benelux countries, with seven naves and 125 pillars. But oversized statistics are not Our Lady's only attraction—no fewer than four Rubens masterpieces are inside, along with paintings by other prominent artists. See p. 176.

- **Cathédrale Notre-Dame** (Cathedral of Our Lady; Tournai, Belgium): With a harmonious blending of the Romanesque and Gothic styles, this cathedral has five towers, magnificent stained-glass windows, and paintings by Peter Paul Rubens and Jacob Jordaens. Equally interesting are the opulent objects in the Treasury, especially a gold-and-silver reliquary, The Shrine of Our Lady, dating from 1205. See p. 232.
- **Westerkerk** (West Church; Amsterdam, Holland): The Westerkerk's tower, the Westertoren, is, at 85m (277 ft.) high, the tallest in Amsterdam, providing a spectacular view of the city. Anne Frank could hear every note of the carillon's dulcet tones while in hiding from the Nazis in her house nearby. See p. 310.
- **Sint-Bavokerk** (Church of St. Bavo; Haarlem, Holland): The moment you enter Haarlem's main square, this church is revealed in all its splendor. Completed after an unusually short construction period, it has a rare unity of structure and proportion. Regular concerts are given here on the famous organ built by Christian Müller in 1738. The young Mozart once played on this instrument. See p. 383.
- **Sint-Janskerk** (Church of St. John; Gouda, Holland): At 122m (400 ft.), this is the longest church in Holland, and it has magnificent stained-glass windows. See p. 390.
- **Domkerk** (Cathedral; Utrecht, Holland): This magnificent cathedral was begun in the 13th century. Its tower, which is 111m (365 ft.) high and dominates old Utrecht's skyline, affords great views of the city. See p. 428.
- **Sint-Servaasbasiliek** (Basilica of St. Servatius; Maastricht, Holland): One of Holland's oldest churches, this basilica was built over the grave of St. Servatius, the first bishop of Holland. Over the centuries, people have honored St. Servatius with gifts, and now the Treasury holds a collection of incredible richness and beauty. Most impressive are the reliquaries of St. Thomas and of St. Servatius, created by Maastricht master goldsmiths in the 12th century. See p. 474.
- **Cathédrale Notre-Dame** (Cathedral of Our Lady; Luxembourg City): The cathedral was built late for the Gothic style—in the early 17th century—but is nevertheless a great Gothic monument, albeit one clearly influenced by Renaissance ideals. The Octave of Our Lady of Luxembourg takes place here every year before the statue of the Virgin, which is said to have miraculous powers. See p. 496.

THE best OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- **Sand-Yachting at De Panne** (Belgium): Conditions on the beach at De Panne are ideal for this exciting, unusual sport. See p. 203.
- **Hiking Across the Hautes Fagnes** (Belgium): Wooden walkways stretch like the Yellow Brick Road across the high, bleak moorland plateau of Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve in eastern Belgium, between Eupen and Malmédy. On these walkways, you explore the remnants of an ancient morasslike landscape that has claimed lives in bad weather through the centuries and into recent times. It is a beautiful, wild place and satisfying to cross at any time of year. A fine summer's day may be best, but venturing onto the moor, adequately clothed, in the middle of a snowbound winter night also has its attractions. See p. 250.

- **Skiing the Ardennes** (Belgium and Luxembourg): Some years it snows and some years it doesn't. But when it does snow enough, the Ardennes is a very pleasant place to ski. You'll find a dozen or so downhill centers, but most skiing in the Ardennes is cross-country. A particularly good location is Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve between Eupen and Malmédy, but skiing is permitted only on the designated trails because this is a protected landscape. See chapters 11 and 20.
- **Biking in Holland:** To fully engage in the Dutch experience, you positively have to board a bicycle and head out into the wide green yonder. The tourism authorities have marked out many cycling tour routes and have published descriptive booklets and maps to go along with them, available from VVV tourist offices. Many rail stations around the country have bikes for rent. See p. 264.
- **Walking on the Wadden Sea** (Holland): At low tide, the Wadden Sea, between the northern coast and the Wadden Islands, virtually disappears, and if you're up for a walk in the mud, join a Wadden Walking (*Wadlopen*) trip and plow your way over land to one of the islands. If you're lucky, you might encounter seals gallivanting in pools left by the retreating tide or sunbathing on the flats. See p. 412.
- **Riding White Bikes in Hoge Veluwe National Park** (Holland): It was tried once in Amsterdam—providing free white bikes for everyone to use—but the bikes mysteriously disappeared and turned up in private hands with fresh coats of paint. The scheme has worked much better in this beautiful national park, which apparently doesn't shelter as many bike thieves. Just head to Hoge Veluwe's parking lot, pick up a bike, and explore the traffic-free scenery. See p. 436.
- **Canoeing in the Biesbosch** (Holland): This unique natural park of marshland, meadows, and willow woods was formed during the St. Elizabeth floods of 1421, when 16 villages were submerged and polderland became an inland sea. There are several possibilities for exploring the Biesbosch, including a tour boat, but paddling your own canoe is the best way to get close to nature. See p. 465.

THE best DELUXE HOTELS

- **Métropole** (Brussels, Belgium; ☎ 02/217-23-00): This century-old hotel in the heart of Brussels maintains the Belle Epoque splendor of its first days and combines it with modern furnishings and service. Its **L'Alban Chambon** restaurant is one of Brussels's best. See p. 89.
- **Hotel des Indes** (The Hague, Holland; ☎ 070/361-2345): Within this opulent hotel, simply lean over the balustrade on the first-floor landing to watch the cream of The Hague's society having tea in the lounge, and the lights of chandeliers reflecting in the polished marble pillars. The rooms are equally grand and comfortable. See p. 364.
- **Bilderberg Landgoed Lauswolt** (Beetsterzwaag, near Leeuwarden, Holland; ☎ 0512/381-245): This 19th-century country house has been converted into a luxury hotel equipped with the latest amenities and leisure facilities. Some 2,700 acres of forest and heather offer ample opportunity for walking or horseback riding. Play golf or tennis, or swim in the heated indoor pool. All this activity will surely stir your appetite—luckily, the cuisine in the restaurant **De Heeren van Harinxma** is of the same high standard as the other comforts in the hotel. See p. 400.
- **Romantik Hotel-Auberge de Campveerse Toren** (Veere, Holland; ☎ 0118/501-291): This ancient inn guards the harbor of Veere. With the Veerse Meer (Lake Veere) lapping at the walls below your room, you overlook the length of the lake to

the harbor where pleasure boats are moored. Little is as calming to the spirit as a walk through the old streets of Veere at dusk. Later, back in your room at the inn for the night, you'll be gently lulled to sleep by the murmuring lake waters. See p. 460.

- **Kasteel Wittem** (Wittem, Holland; ☎ 043/450-1208): This romantically idyllic 12th-century castle is also a hotel. It's the perfect place to stay after exploring the south of Holland's Limburg province. In the summer, dine or have breakfast on a magnificent terrace overlooking the garden and moat. See p. 478.
- **Grand Hotel Cravat** (Luxembourg City; ☎ 22-19-75): The Cravat has been a Luxembourg institution for a century. And for fine dining nearby, you won't need to look farther than its own **Le Normandy**. See p. 499.

THE best MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Welcome** (Brussels, Belgium; ☎ 02/219-95-46): This is the best little hotel in Brussels, a small place with a big welcome, and the standard of the rooms is high. Try to get proprietor Michel Smeesters to tell you about his hotel's history, preferably over a glass or two of Kwak beer—but be careful: It's a long story, and Kwak is strong beer. See p. 92.
- **Egmond** (Bruges, Belgium; ☎ 050/34-14-45): Think of the Egmond as your own country mansion, for not much more than a hundred bucks a room. There's just one problem with this image: The Egmond is not actually in the country. In compensation, it has its own grounds and gardens, and stands next to the Minnewater (Lover's Lake). See p. 137.
- **Firean** (Antwerp, Belgium; ☎ 03/237-02-60): Some hotels would be notable enough if they only shared the Firean's Art Deco style and Tiffany glass decor. So having an inventively fitted-out interior, a fine restaurant, and proprietors who care about service makes this one stand out from the crowd. See p. 180.
- **Seven Bridges** (Amsterdam, Holland; ☎ 020/623-1329): At some hotels, the owners aren't just running a business—they're doing what they love. The Seven Bridges is that kind of place. Pierre Keulers and Günter Glaner have found both their hobby and their profession in this fine hotel in Amsterdam. It's no exaggeration to say that all the furniture, fixtures, and fittings have been selected with loving care, and guests receive the same conscientious attention. See p. 281.
- **Amrâth Hotel DuCasque** (Maastricht, Holland; ☎ 043/321-4343): The Hotel DuCasque overlooks the Vrijthof, which basks in its reputation as the liveliest square in the liveliest city in the country. Despite its prestigious address, this hotel is about as moderately priced as you're likely to find in Maastricht. See p. 476.

THE best RESTAURANTS

- **Comme Chez Soi** (Brussels, Belgium; ☎ 02/512-29-21): An irony about this culinary holy of holies is its name: "Just Like Home." A hallowed silence descends on diners as they sample their first mouthful of French specialties with added Belgian zest. This being Belgium, the silence doesn't last long, but the taste and the memory linger. See p. 95.
- **In 't Spinnepopke** (Brussels, Belgium; ☎ 02/511-86-95): For a different kind of Brussels eating experience, try this down-home restaurant dating from 1762. Here

traditional Belgian dishes are given the care and attention expected of more refined—though not necessarily tastier—cuisine. See p. 102.

- **Le Sanglier des Ardennes** (Durbuy, Belgium; ☎ 086/21-32-62): This restaurant, in a hotel in one of the prettiest of Ardennes villages, has the rustic looks and ideal location to go along with its fine country food. Walking in the surrounding wooded hills is the perfect preparation for lunch or dinner here. See p. 244.
- **De Echoput** (Apeldoorn, Holland; ☎ 055/519-1248): Game features prominently on the menu at this restaurant, set amid the forests near Apeldoorn, on the edge of the Royal Wood. During the hunting season, try wild boar, venison, and any kind of fowl—always succulent and prepared with flair. In spring and summer, the menu's just as delectable, and in fair weather, dine on the terrace in the fresh forest air. See p. 436.
- **Château Neercanne** (Maastricht, Holland; ☎ 043/325-1359): "To live like a god in France" goes the proverb expressing the pinnacle of earthly pleasure. You might imagine yourself to be both a god and in France if you dine at this château, which was designed following French models. What's more, in true French culinary style, the food here is seductively elegant and the wine cellar is unique and impressive—the wines are kept under perfect conditions in the marlstone caves behind the château. See p. 478.
- **Le Bouquet Garni/Salon Saint-Michel** (Luxembourg City; ☎ 26-20-06-20): The Saint-Michel occupies a little side street in the Old Town, but it lights up the entire city with classic French cuisine that makes no concessions where quality is concerned. See p. 500.

THE best CAFES & BARS

- **Falstaff** (Brussels, Belgium; ☎ 02/511-87-89): Le Falstaff deserves the highest accolades for its eclectic, accomplished mix of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, and its extensive drink list. This is self-satisfied, bourgeois Brussels at its best. See p. 129.
- **'t Dreupelkot** (Ghent, Belgium; ☎ 09/224-21-20): Ghent has no shortage of fine cafes, and you can just about guarantee that any one you enter will provide pleasant memories. 't Dreupelkot adds a particularly warm glow of appreciation, but you should know that its stock in trade is *jenever*, one of the most potent alcoholic liquids known to humankind. Actually, some of 't Dreupelkot's 100 varieties are fairly mild, while others have been flavored with herbs and spices. The atmosphere in the cafe is great—it's filled with *jenever* buffs, not drunks. See p. 171.
- **Den Engel** (Antwerp, Belgium; ☎ 03/233-12-52): There are cafes in Antwerp with a lot more action, but for a genuine Antwerp bar, it's hard to beat this one. A location on a corner of the Grote Markt adds to the attraction. To experience Den Engel's crowning glory, order a glass of Antwerp's own, lovingly poured De Koninck beer—a golden-brown liquid in a glass called a *bolleke* (little ball) that glows like amber in sunlight streaming through Den Engel's windows. See p. 184.
- **Cafe 't Smalle** (Amsterdam, Holland; ☎ 020/623-9617): This cozy, crowded brown cafe on Amsterdam's Egelantiersgracht is usually thick with *jenever* vapor and lively conversation. Escape the crush on the splendid canal-side terrace, a perfect place to watch cyclists and cars rushing past while you rest your legs on the terrace railing. See p. 326.
- **In den Ouden Vogelstruys** (Maastricht, Holland; ☎ 043/321-4888): This friendly, popular Maastricht watering hole was already well-trodden territory when

it came under artillery fire in some war or another in 1653 and took a hit from a cannonball that remains lodged in one of its walls. The place attracts a broad—in some individual cases, very broad—cross section of Maastricht society. See p. 479.

THE best SHOPPING

- **Antiques** (Brussels, Belgium): You'll need luck to score a bargain at the weekend antiques market on place du Grand Sablon—the dealers are well aware of the precise worth of each item in their stock and are calmly determined to get it. But it's still fun to wander the market, browsing and haggling, and who knows? You just might stumble on that hard-to-find affordable treasure. See chapter 6.
- **Chocolates** (Belgium): The Swiss might want to argue the point, but the truth is that Belgian handmade chocolates, filled with various fresh-cream flavors, are the best in the universe. You won't go wrong if you buy chocolates made by Marcolini, Wittamer, Nihoul, Leonidas, and Neuhaus, available in specialist stores all over Belgium (and in Holland and Luxembourg, too). See chapter 6.
- **Lace** (Belgium): There are two kinds of Belgian lace: exquisitely handmade pieces, and machine-made stuff. Machine-made lace is not necessarily bad, but this is the form used to mass-produce pieces of indifferent quality to meet the demand for souvenirs. The highest-quality lace is handmade. Brussels, Bruges, and Ghent are the main, though not the only, points of sale. See chapters 6, 7, and 8.
- **Diamonds** (Antwerp, Belgium): One thing is for sure: You'll be spoiled for choice in Antwerp's Diamond Quarter. Much of the trade here is carried on by the city's Orthodox Jewish community, whose conservative ways and traditional black clothing make a striking contrast to the glitter of their stock in trade. See chapter 8.
- **Flower Bulbs** (Holland): It's difficult to choose from the incredible variety of bulb shapes and colors offered in Holland. Some bulbs flower early in January; others wait until the warmer months of May or June. Knowing this, choose bulbs with different flowering times, so you'll enjoy their blooming over a long period in spring. In Amsterdam buy them from the Floating Flower market on the Singel canal. See chapter 13.
- **Delftware** (Holland): Originally, the pottery made in the factories at Delft was white, imitating tin-glazed products from Italy and Spain. But during the 16th century, blue Chinese porcelain was imported to Holland, and this was soon recognized to be of superior quality. So the Delftware factories started using a white tin glaze to cover the red clay and decorating the pottery in blue. This Delft Blue became famous the world over, along with Makkumware, which is pottery produced in the Dutch town of Makkum. Delftware and Makkumware are for sale in specialized stores all over the country, but it's far more interesting to go to one of the workshops in the towns themselves and see how it's made. Little has changed over the centuries, and all the decorating is still done by hand. See chapters 15 and 16.
- **Wine** (Luxembourg): Holland's and Belgium's modest output notwithstanding, Luxembourg is the only major wine producer in the Benelux countries. The vintage in question is the highly regarded Moselle wine, perhaps not as well known outside the Grand Duchy and its immediate neighbors as German and French wines, but fine stock nonetheless. See chapter 20.

BELGIUM, HOLLAND & LUXEMBOURG IN DEPTH

Nobody who lives in one of these countries—with the exception of politicians and bureaucrats—speaks routinely of the “Benelux.” Whenever you read that word in this book, be advised that it’s merely a convenient shorthand that does away with the need to write “Belgium, the Netherlands (Holland), and Luxembourg.” No one from the Benelux—not even politicians and bureaucrats—thinks of themselves as a Beneluxian.

Despite being buffeted by the economic storms roiling the world at the time of writing, the three Benelux countries continue to enjoy an enviable standard of living, and a quality of life that makes good use of it. Their societies become more multicultural by the day, a development that’s seen most clearly in the region’s towns and cities—these lands are among the most urbanized on earth. For the most part, this has only added to their contemporary vibrancy, but the process has not been without stress. Even Amsterdam’s famed tolerance is showing signs of strain.

Belgium is a small country. Not so small that if you blink you’ll miss it, but small enough that a couple of hours of focused driving will get you from the capital, Brussels, to any corner of the realm. Yet the variety of culture, language, history, and cuisine crammed into this space would do credit to a land many times its size. Belgium’s diversity is a product of its location at the cultural crossroads of western Europe. The boundary between the Continent’s Germanic north and Latin south cuts clear across the country’s middle.

Like an Atlantis in reverse, Holland has emerged from the sea. Much of the country was once a pattern of islands, precariously separated from the North Sea by dunes. As the centuries rolled past, these islands were patiently stitched together by Dutch ingenuity and hard work. The outcome is a canvas-flat, green-and-silver Mondrian of a country, with nearly half its land and two-thirds of its 16 million inhabitants below sea level.

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is tiny. Its borders seem unlikely to enclose so many worthy travel delights. Yet within this country are the

remnants of a rich history and a landscape with scenery that varies from wild highlands to peaceful river valleys fringed by vineyards to plains dotted with picturesque villages and farmlands.

To make themselves even more livable than they already are, the big cities of Brussels, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Rotterdam, and The Hague have been building out their rapid-transit systems, redeveloping decayed or decaying inner-city and harbor zones, and expanding their cultural offerings. All the while, more ethnic eateries and shops are springing up. Other cities, such as Bruges, Ghent, Liège, Utrecht, Maastricht, and Luxembourg City (to name just a few!), are doing no less, and I recommend that you get out of the big cities and find out what's up in these other places during your visit to the Benelux.

BELGIUM TODAY

After a long history of occupation by foreign powers, Belgium has emerged as a site for European nations to come together. Brussels—which hosts the headquarters of both the European Union and NATO—is now home to the world's largest concentration of international diplomats.

Modern Belgium is a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch, King Albert II. The government exists in a more-or-less permanent state of crisis due to the cultural and linguistic divide. And that's when there even is a government with ambitious regional politicians, particularly in Flanders, often pushing the country to the brink of dissolution. In 2010 Flanders was once again threatening to break away and form its own government, in light of inconclusive election results and Wallonia's weaker economic status. Still, reports of Belgium's death have been published before and have always turned out to be greatly exaggerated, and it seems likely to be no different this time around.

For a graphic picture of Belgium's two ethnic regions, Dutch-speaking Vlaanderen (Flanders) and French-speaking Wallonie (Wallonia), draw an imaginary east-west line across the country just south of Brussels. North of the line is Flanders, where you find the medieval cities of Bruges, Ghent, and Antwerp, and Belgium's North Sea coastline. South of the line is Wallonia. Then there's Brussels, the capital, roughly in the geographic middle, and going off on a trajectory of its own as the "capital of Europe."

It has been said that Belgium suffers severely from linguistic indigestion. The inhabitants of Flanders speak *Nederlands* (Low Countries Speech), which is generally rendered in English as Dutch, although you may hear the language referred to as *Vlaams* (Flemish) in Flanders. The inhabitants of Wallonia speak French, and a minority still speak the old Walloon dialect. In Brussels the two languages mingle, but French has the upper hand. So strong is the feeling for each language in its own region that, along the line where they meet, it's not unusual for French to be the daily tongue on one side of a street and Flemish on the other. Throughout the country, road signs acknowledge both languages by giving multiple versions of the same place name—Brussel/Bruxelles or Brugge/Bruges, for example. There's even a small area in eastern Belgium where German is spoken. Belgium, then, has not one, but three, official languages: Dutch, French, and German.

In short, far from being a homogeneous, harmonious people with one strong national identity, Belgians take considerable pride in their individualistic attributes.

The vast majority of Belgians are Catholic, though there's more than a smattering of Protestants, a small Jewish community, and a rising proportion of immigrant Muslims and their locally born children. Down the centuries, Belgians—nobles and peasants alike—have proclaimed their Christian faith by way of impressive cathedrals, churches, paintings, and holy processions. The tradition continues today.

Folklore still plays a large part in Belgium's national daily life, with local myths giving rise to some of the country's most colorful pageants and festivals, such as Ypres's Festival of the Cats, Bruges's Pageant of the Golden Tree, and the stately Ommegang in Brussels. In Belgium's renowned puppet theaters, marionettes based on folkloric characters identify their native cities—Woltje (Little Walloon) belongs to Brussels, Schele to Antwerp, Pierke to Ghent, and Tchanchès to Liège.

Undoubtedly, Belgians have a finely tuned appreciation for the good things in life; when standards are met, watch Belgian eyes light up. Appreciation then moves very close to reverence, whether inspired by a great artistic masterpiece, or a homemade mayonnaise of just the right lightness, or one of Belgium's more than 450 native beers. If you have shared that experience with a Belgian companion, chances are you'll find your own sense of appreciation taking on a finer edge.

LOOKING BACK AT BELGIUM

Julius Caesar first marched his Roman legions against the ancient Belgae tribes in 58 B.C. For nearly 5 centuries thereafter, Belgium was shielded from the barbarians by the great Roman defense line on the Rhine.

From the beginning of the 5th century, Roman rule gave way to the Franks. In 800, their great king Charlemagne was named emperor of the West. He instituted an era of agricultural reform, setting up local rulers known as counts, who rose up to seize more power after Charlemagne's death. In 843, Charlemagne's grandsons signed the Treaty of Verdun, which split French-allied (but Dutch-speaking) Flanders in the north from the southern (French-speaking) Walloon provinces.

Then came Viking invaders. A Flemish defender known as Baldwin Iron-Arm became the first count of Flanders in 862; his house eventually ruled over a domain that included the Low Countries and lands as far south as the Scheldt (Escaut) in France. Meanwhile, powerful prince-bishops controlled most of Wallonia from their seat in Liège.

Flanders Rising

As Flanders grew larger and stronger, its cities thrived, and its citizens wrested more and more self-governing powers. Bruges emerged as a leading center of European trade; its monopoly on English cloth attracted bankers and financiers from Germany and Lombardy. Ghent and Ypres (Ieper) prospered in the wool trade. Powerful trade and manufacturing guilds emerged and erected splendid edifices as their headquarters.

As towns took on city-state status, the mighty count of Flanders, with close ties to France, grew less and less mighty; in 1297, France's Philip the Fair attempted to annex Flanders. However, he had not reckoned on the stubborn resistance of Flemish common folk. Led by Jan Breydel, a lowly weaver, and Pieter de Coninck, a butcher,

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