

Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Brussels** Be seduced by surrealist art, Art Nouveau architecture, café culture, and galleries and restaurants galore (p119)
- **Bruges** Cycle this quaint medieval city's beautiful bridges and cobblestone streets (p128)
- **Chocolates** Pick and choose pralines at Pierre Marcolini (p123), Belgium's most expensive chocolate shop
- **Best journey** Prime yourself with Belgium's big three – Brussels (p119), Bruges (p128) and Antwerp (p124)
- **Off-the-beaten track** Explore the Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve, Belgium at its most wild and secluded (p132)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 30,000 sq km (about one third of Portugal)
- **ATMs** Widespread in the main cities, limited elsewhere
- **Budget** €45-50 per day
- **Capital** Brussels
- **Country codes** 📠 32, international access code 📠 00
- **Famous for** chocolate, beer, Bruges and tennis stars Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne
- **Head of State** King Albert II
- **Languages** Flemish, French, German
- **Money** euro (€); A\$1 = €0.59, CA\$1 = €0.70, ¥100 = €0.69, NZ\$1 = €0.50, UK£1 = €1.48, US\$1 = €0.78
- **Phrases** *Dag/bonjour* (hello in Flemish/French), *dag/au revoir* (goodbye), *dank*



U/merci (thanks), *hoe veel kost het?/c'est combien?* (how much is it?)

- **Population** 10.2 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1
- **Visas** The citizens of many countries do not need visas for stays up to three months

TRAVEL HINTS

The 'dish of the day' (*dagschotel* in Flemish, *plat du jour* in French) is good value. Train fares cost 50% less on weekends. If the budget's tight, buy pralines from supermarkets rather than *chocolateries*.

ROAMING BELGIUM

Belgium's big three – Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp – are essential stops. Day trip it to Ypres and Ghent, then burrow down in the Ardennes.

Belgium's a bizarre little place. Called 'Europe's most eccentric country' in one breath and 'boring' in the next, if you want something offbeat, this is it.

Ruled for centuries by ever-changing European powers, België to the Flemish and La Belgique to the nation's French speakers only came into being in 1830. These days it's a bit like a teenager –



world-weary, unruly and avant-garde all rolled into one. Don't make the mistake of judging it on day one or, worse still, in the first hour. It's the sort of place that takes time to know.

Belgium boasts one of Europe's richest art histories. From the passions of the Flemish Primitives to Gothic masterpieces, Art Nouveau jewels and strokes of surrealism, all are displayed.

To top it off, Belgians have a keen sense of the good things in life; they know how to eat well, they make some of the world's best beers and there's no need to introduce their chocolates.

HISTORY

Bruges, Ghent and Ypres were the first major cities in Belgium, with their economies booming in the 13th and 14th centuries on the manufacturing and trading of cloth. Their craftspeople established several powerful guilds (organisations to stringently control arts and crafts), whose elaborate guildhalls you'll see in many cities – the most famous are those on Brussels' Grand Place (see p121).

Sandwiched between the major European powers, Belgian history from 15th to 19th centuries is a battle tale. The subsequent years saw the start of Flemish nationalism, creating tension between Flemish and French speakers that has continued to this day (see opposite).

For details on King Léopold II's shocking rule of the Congo, see opposite.

The Germans invaded in WWI and the town of Ypres was wiped off the map – tours

KING LÉOPOLD II & THE CONGO

In 1885 Belgium's King Léopold II personally acquired the Congo in Africa, an area almost 100 times the size of his homeland. Between then and 1908, when the Belgian state stripped the king of his possession, it is estimated up to 10 million Africans died from starvation or overwork, or were murdered, in Léopold's quest for rubber.

We'll never know for sure the number of people who died. On Léopold's orders, the Congo archives were destroyed. But what is certain is that the booty from this barbarity was enormous. Brussels' landmarks – such as the Arcade du Cinquantenaire – were built on these proceeds. So, too, was the **Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika** (Royal Museum for Central Africa; ☎ 02 769 52 30; www.africamuseum.be; Leuvensesteenweg 13, Tervuren; adult/concession €4/1.50; 🕒 10am–5pm Tue–Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun). This monumental museum, located 14km east of the capital, makes for a half-day excursion (take the metro to Montgomerý then tram 44; 20 minutes) that won't be readily forgotten.

of the Ypres Salient (p131) offer poignant reminders.

Following WWII, Belgium underwent an economic boom, later accentuated by Brussels' appointment as the headquarters of the EU and NATO.

In 1999, sick of mismanagement and political scandals, Belgians booted out the Christian Democrat party after 40 years in power. In came current Liberal prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt, who leads a coalition government noted for robust foreign policies and new moral freedoms: Belgium is the second country in the world (after the Netherlands) to legalise gay marriage and euthanasia.

In recent times, things have quietened on the home front. Belgians, it seems, have gone back to sipping a beer while watching their girls rule the courts.

THE CULTURE

'National' character is elusive – many Belgians think of themselves first as Flemish or Walloon, and then as Belgian. This state of affairs was made official in 1962 when the government drew an invisible line – known as the linguistic divide – across the country, cutting it almost equally in half in a bid to ease tension between the Flemish and Walloon communities. To the north of the divide lies Flanders (Vlaanderen), whose Flemish speakers make up 60% of the population. South of the divide is Wallonia (La Wallonie), where French-speaking Walloons make up most – but not all – of the remainder: there's also a German-speaking enclave in the Eastern Cantons.

On top of all this there's Brussels. The only area in Belgium to be officially bilingual, the capital is predominantly French-speaking and

lies within Flanders, but is governed separately. Brussels' population includes more than 100 nationalities, from Europeans through to Moroccans, Turks and Africans, the latter largely from the former Belgian colony of Congo.

SPORT

If it wasn't for Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne, there'd be almost nothing to say here. But in 2003, Belgium's tennis ace became the world's top two women tennis players – a feat that no other country except the USA has managed. Since then, the pair has continued to be highly competitive, despite a series of injuries to Clijsters and the rise of a host of Russian players. Cycling has also produced an international hero Eddy Merckx.

ARTS

Belgium's rich art heritage began in Bruges in the late Middle Ages with the painters known as the Flemish Primitives. Their works greatly influenced the course of European art and, centuries later, they still astonish viewers. Key players included Jan

READING UP

King Léopold's Ghost by Adam Hochschild investigates the atrocities committed in the Congo during Léopold II's reign and chronicles the small band of activists who fought his rule. *A Tall Man in a Low Land* is Harry Pearson's tale of family travel in Belgium, spotlighting the country's many idiosyncrasies. Belgium warrants two chapters in Bill Bryson's European sojourn, *Neither Here nor There*.

van Eyck and Hans Memling; their paintings are best viewed at Bruges' Groeningemuseum (p128) and Hospitaal museum St Janshospitaal (p128), and also at Ghent's St Baafskathedraal (p127).

Antwerp held the cultural high ground during the 17th century, mainly due to Flemish baroque painter Pieter Paul Rubens. His famous altarpieces can be seen in the city's Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal (see p124 for details).

Surrealism, a movement that developed in Paris in the 1920s, found fertile ground here. Works by René Magritte and Paul Delvaux are displayed at Brussels' Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (p121).

Also not to be missed is Brussels' Art Nouveau architecture. Check out the Musée Horta (p121) and the Old England building (p121).

Inspector Maigret fans would know that Belgium celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of novelist Georges Simenon in 2003. The following year was the 75th anniversary of the birth of cartoon character Tintin by Georges Remi, aka Hergé.

ENVIRONMENT

Belgium's northern half is flat ol' Flanders. Here only church steeples break the monotonous topography. Sitting in stark contrast is the Ardennes in the southeast, a region of high plateaus and deep wooded valleys.

Belgium's environmental picture is ugly and the scene is not getting rosier – in the last national elections (2003), the country's two green parties were catapulted out of government. The only nationally protected reserves are the Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve (see p132) in Wallonia and the Hoge Kempen in Limburg province. Water and noise pollution, urbanisation and waste management are the most pressing environmental issues.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Belgium's main international airports:

Antwerp (ANR; ☎ 03 285 65 00; www.antwerpairport.be)

Brussels National Airport (BRU; ☎ 0900 70 000; www.brusselsairport.be)

Charleroi (CRL; www.charleroi-airport.com)

Liège (LGG; ☎ 04 234 84 11; www.liegeairport.com)

Airlines flying to and from Belgium:

Aer Lingus (EI; ☎ 02 548 98 48; www.airlingus.com)

Air France (AF; ☎ 02 526 12 70; www.airfrance.com)

British Airways (BA; ☎ 02 717 32 17; www.britishairways.com)

KLM (KL; ☎ 070 22 27 47; www.klm.be)

Lufthansa (LH; ☎ 070 35 30 30; www.lufthansa.be)

Ryanair (FR; ☎ 0902 88 007; www.ryanair.com)

SN Brussels Airlines (SN; ☎ 070 35 11 11; www.flysn.com)

Virgin Express (TV; ☎ 070 35 36 37; www.virgin-express.com)

VLM Airlines (VG; ☎ 03 287 80 80; www.flyvlm.com)

Check the following websites for cheap airlines flying into Belgium: www.wizzair.com, www.welcomeair.com, www.skyeurope.com, www.condor.com and www.aerarrann.com.

Boat

Two overnight car ferry services exist:

P&O (☎ in Belgium 02 710 64 44, in UK 0870-520 2020; www.poferry.com) Sails overnight from Zeebrugge in Belgium to Hull in the UK (14 hours).

Superfast Ferries (☎ in Belgium 050 25 22 52, in UK 0870-234 08 70; www.superfast.com) Sails three times per week between Zeebrugge in Belgium and Rosyth in Scotland (17½ hours).

Bus

Eurolines (www.eurolines.com; Brussels ☎ 02 274 13 50; Rue du Progrès 80; Antwerp ☎ 03 233 86 62; Van Straelenstraat 8; Ghent ☎ 09 220 90 24; Koningin Elisabethlaan 73; Liège ☎ 04 222 36 18; Rue des Guillemins 94) operates several international bus services to and from Belgium. Services from Brussels (with one-way prices listed) include Amsterdam (€18, 3¼ hours, six daily), Frankfurt (€34, 5¼ hours, one daily), London (€38, 8½ hours, six daily) and Paris (€25, 3¼ hours, nine daily).

Car & Motorcycle

The main motorways into Belgium are the E19 from the Netherlands, the E40 from Germany, the E411 from Luxembourg, and the E17 and E19 from France. There are no controls at border crossings on any of these motorways.

Hitching

TaxiStop (☎ 070 222 292; www.taxistop.be; Rue du Fossé aux Loups 28, Brussels) is an agency that matches long-distance travellers with drivers who are headed for the same destination for a reasonable fee.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance/Fire brigade ☎ 100
- EU-wide emergency hotline ☎ 112
- Police ☎ 101
- Roadside assistance ☎ 070 34 47 77 (Touring Secours 24-hour assistance)

Train

Eurostar (☎ 02 528 28 28; www.eurostar.com) operates trains between Brussels' Gare du Midi station and London's Waterloo station (two hours and 20 minutes, 10 trains Monday to Friday, seven Saturday and Sunday) through the Eurotunnel.

Thalys (☎ 070 66 77 88; www.thalys.com) fast trains link various Belgian cities with destinations in France, the Netherlands and Germany. In Brussels, Thalys trains depart only from Gare du Midi. Thalys fares are cheaper on weekends and for trips booked well in advance. People aged 12 to 26 get a 50% discount.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

For details on cycling, see p135.

Car & Motorcycle

Foreign drivers do not need an international licence to drive in Belgium: your licence from home will suffice. Road rules are easy to understand, though the peculiar 'give way to the right' law takes getting used to. Motorways are toll-free. The speed limit is 50km/h in towns, 90km/h outside towns and 120km/h on motorways. The blood alcohol limit is 0.05%.

Train

Train is the best way to get around. Belgium built Continental Europe's first railway line in the 1830s and has since developed an extremely dense network. Trains are run by the **Belgische Spoorwegen/Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Belges** (Belgian Railways; ☎ 02 528 28 28; www.b-rail.be).

At weekends, return tickets to anywhere within Belgium are 50% cheaper than on weekdays. For day excursions, find discounted packages called B-Excursions. A rail pass to consider is Go Pass (€45), which gives 10 one-way trips anywhere in Belgium for those under 26.

BRUSSELS (BRUSSEL, BRUXELLES)

pop 1 million

Quirky, secretive, surreal – Brussels, like the country it represents, pulls multiple identities into one enigmatic core. Home to superb Art Nouveau architecture, the EU headquarters, shabby suburbs, and more restaurants, pubs and chocolate shops than you'll ever manage, Brussels subtly slides under your skin.

ORIENTATION

The Grand Place, the imposing 15th-century market square, sits in the centre of Petit Ring, a pentagon of boulevards enclosing central Brussels. The centre is divided into the Lower Town, with its medieval core and atmospheric quarters such as Ste Catherine, St Géry and the Marolles; and the Upper Town, home to museums and chic shopping areas based around the Sablon and Ave Louise. East of the Petit Ring is the EU's real-life Gotham City.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

BXL (Place de la Vieille Halle aux Blés 46; per hr €2; ☎ noon-midnight; ☎ Gare Centrale) Groovy café/bar with terminals.

Medical Services

Helpline (☎ 02 648 40 14) A 24-hour assistance line run by Community Help Service.

Hôpital St Pierre (☎ 02 535 31 11, emergency 02 535 40 51; cnr Rue Haute & Rue de l'Abricotier; ☎ Porte de Hal) Central hospital offering 24-hour emergency assistance.

Money

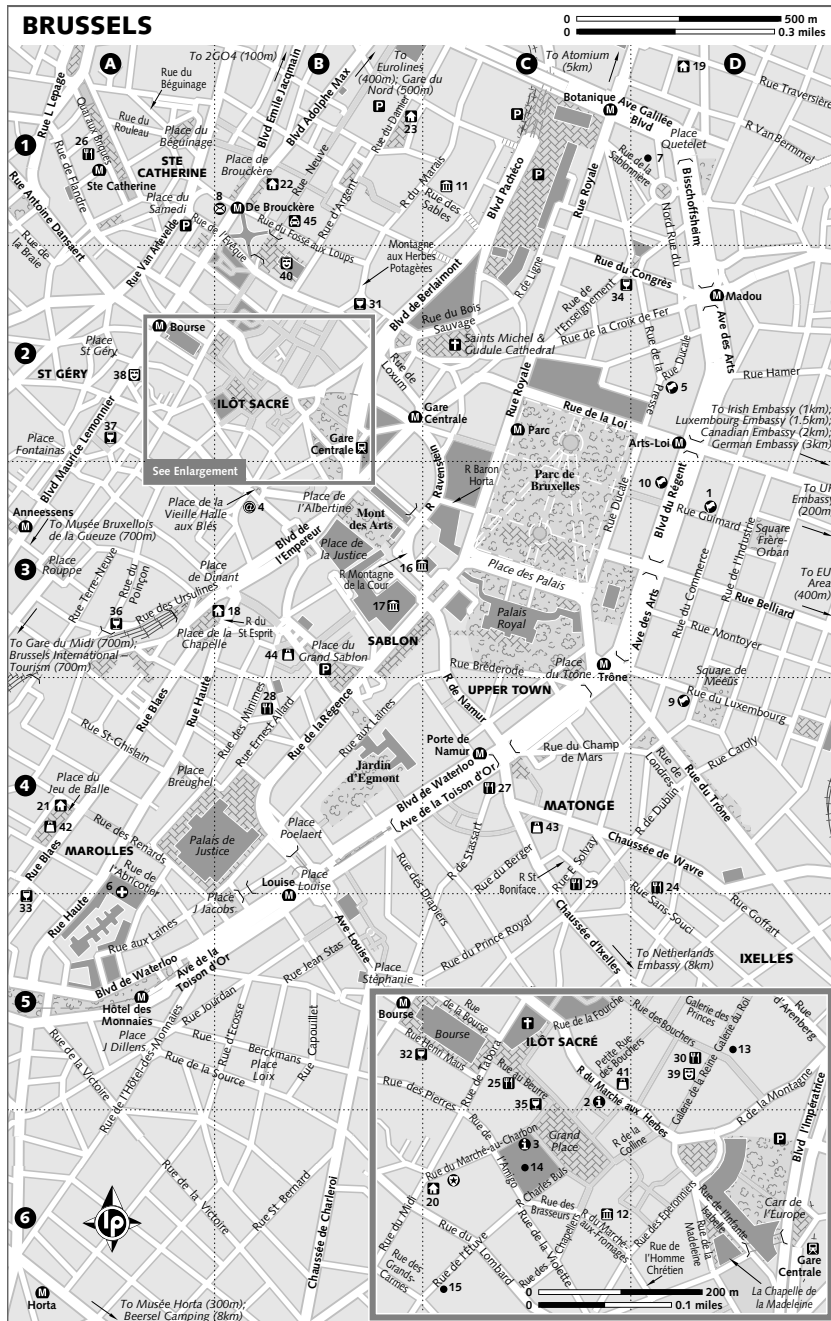
ATMs and exchange facilities are found on and around the Grand Place, at Gare du Midi and Brussels National airport.

Post

Main post office (☎ 02 226 97 00; Blvd Anspach 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-4.30pm Sat; ☎ De Brouckère)

Tourist Offices

Belgian Tourist Information Centre (☎ 02 504 03 90; www.visitflanders.com, www.belgique-tourisme.net; Rue du Marché aux Herbes 63; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun; to 1pm Sun Jan-Feb) Supplies national tourist information.



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Brussels International (☎ 02 513 89 40; www.brusselsinternational.be; Grand Place; ☎ 9am-6pm Easter-Oct, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Nov-Dec; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Jan-Easter) The City of Brussels' tiny tourist office is located inside the town hall and is usually crammed.

Brussels International - Tourism (Gare du Midi; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 9pm Fri May-Sep, 8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8am-8pm Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 9am-2pm Sun Oct-Apr) For Eurostar or Thalys arrivals.

SIGHTS

Brussels' magnificent central square, **Grand Place**, tops the itinerary. Here the splendid Gothic-style **Hôtel de Ville** was the only building to escape bombardment by the French in 1695 – ironic considering it was the target. The square's splendour is due largely to its antique frame of **guildhalls**.

Galleries St Hubert (Rue du Marché aux Herbes; ☎ Gare Centrale), one block northeast of the Grand Place, is a European first and a must visit. Opened in 1847, this *grande dame* of Brussels' shopping arcades contains an eclectic mix of cafés and traders, including **Neuhaus** (☎ 02 512 63 59; Galerie de la Reine 25; ☎ Gare Centrale), a gorgeous chocolate shop established in 1857 (it was thanks to Neuhaus' grandson that pralines were invented). Off one of the arcades is **Rue des Bouchers**, the capital's famous dining street – worth a wander for its barking hawkers and dancing lobsters (but dine elsewhere).

The **Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 02 508 32 11; www.fine-arts-museum.be; Rue de la Régence 3; adult/concession €5/3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun; ☎ Gare Centrale) has Belgium's premier collection of ancient and modern art; walk from the Lower Town.

The nearby **Musée des Instruments de Musique** (☎ 02 545 01 30; www.mim.fgov.be; Montagne de la Cour 2; adult/concession €5/3.50; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun; ☎ Gare Centrale) boasts one of the world's biggest collections of musical instruments. It's housed in the **Old England building**, an Art Nouveau showpiece and worth a look in itself.

A superb introduction to Art Nouveau is the **Musée Horta** (☎ 02 543 04 90; www.hortamuseum.be; Rue Américaine 25; adult/concession €5/3.50; ☎ 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun; ☎ Horta). It occupies two adjoining houses in St Gilles that Horta designed in 1898. It's 2.5km south of the Grand Place. To get there take tram 91 or 92 from Place Louise in the Upper Town.

If you're into national symbols, consider visiting the **Manneken Pis fountain** (nr Rue de l'Étève & Rue du Chêne; ☎ Gare Centrale), a little boy cheerfully taking a leak into a pool near the Grand Place, and the **Atomium** (☎ 02 475 47 77; www.atomium.be; Square Atomium; adult/concession €9/6; ☎ 10am-5.30pm; ☎ Heysel), a space-age leftover from the 1958 World Fair, 5km north of the city centre.

Dedicated beer buffs must not miss the excellent **Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze** (☎ 02 521 49 28; www.cantillon.be; Rue Gheude 56; adult/concession €4/3; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat; ☎ Gare du Midi). This working brewery is 800m from Gare du Midi – head to Place Bara, take Rue Limnander, and then cross into Rue Gheude.

The **Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée** (☎ 02 219 19 80; www.cbdb.be, in Flemish & French; Rue des Sables 20; admission €7; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun; ☎ Gare Centrale) tours the country's vibrant comic-strip culture. It's 10 minutes from the Grand Place.

SLEEPING

Brussels has all bases covered where sleeping is concerned.

Beersel Camping (☎ 02 331 05 61; campingbeersel@pandora.be; Steenweg op Ukkel 75; adult/tent/car €3/2/1.50; ☹ year-round) A small ground in Beersel, south of Brussels. Tram 55 (direction Uccle) stops 3km away, from where you take bus UB (direction Halle).

Centre Vincent Van Gogh (☎ 02 217 01 58; www.chab.be; Rue Traversière 8; dm/s/d/q €13.50/28/42/66, linen €4; ☒ ☑; M Botanique) Brussels' cheapest and grooviest hostel has clean, basic rooms and a laid-back vibe. It's strictly 17 to 35ers only and is located 1.2km uphill from Gare Centrale.

Sleep Well (☎ 02 218 50 50; www.sleepwell.be; Rue du Damier 23; dm/s/d/tr with shared bathroom €17/28/50/67; ☒ ☑; M Rogier) This is a bright, modern hostel-cum-hotel close to brash Rue Neuve, Brussels' main shopping thoroughfare.

our pick **2G04 Quality Hostel** (☎ 02 219 30 19; www.2G04.be; Blvd Emile Jacqmain 99; dm/s/d/t/q from €21/39/59/84/99; ☒ ☑ ☑; M Rogier/De Brouckère) Brussels' newest and trendiest hostel, with hip public rooms, buzzing atmosphere, and free Internet and wi-fi facilities. The central location also makes it an excellent base for those wanting to pub crawl the night away. Breakfast is not included.

Bruegel (☎ 02 511 04 36; www.jeuqgtherbergen.be; Rue du St Esprit 2; dm/s/d €19/33/62; ☒ ☑; M Gare Centrale) The most central of Brussels' three Hostelling International (HI) hostels.

Hôtel Galia (☎ 02 502 42 43; www.hotelgalia.com; Pl du Jeu de Balle 15; s/d/tr €60/65/70; ☒; M Porte de Hal/Lemonnier) Overlooking Brussels' famous bric-a-brac market square, this hotel has well-sized clean rooms (with tiny bathrooms) and is located near some of Brussels' best nightclub.

SPLURGE

For a weekend in luxury, book into the *grande dame* of Brussels' accommodation scene, the **Hôtel Métropole** (☎ 02 217 23 00, reservations 02 214 24 24; www.metropolehotel.com; Place de Brouckère 31; s/d/ste from €330/360/500, weekend from €120; ☒ ☑; M De Brouckère). The soberly furnished rooms contrast sharply with the lavish French Renaissance-style foyer, but the buffet breakfast is regal enough for all tastes.

EATING

As the capital of a nation of foodies, Brussels is over-endowed with quality eateries. Fill up fast on cheap pasta at tiny eateries on Rue de Stassart. **La Canardière** (☎ 02 512 26 20; Rue de Stassart 17; mains €7-8; ☹ noon-2pm & 6pm-1am Mon-Fri, 6pm-1am Sat & Sun; M Porte de Namur) is arguably the best.

Le Perroquet (☎ 02 512 99 22; Rue Watteuu 31; light meals €8-10; ☹ noon-1am; M Gare Centrale/Porte de Namur) Art Nouveau café in the affluent Sablon. Salads and stuffed pitas, including vegetarian options, are the mainstay.

L'Ultime Atome (☎ 02 513 13 67; Rue St Boniface 14; mains €11-20; ☹ 11am-midnight; M Porte de Namur) Buzzing brasserie that's just one of many great eateries in this Ixelles backstreet. There's a wide range on offer, including vegetarian fare.

Taverne du Passage (☎ 02 512 37 31; www.tavernedupassage.com; Galerie de la Reine 30; mains €15-20; ☹ noon-midnight, closed Wed & Thu Jun-Jul; M Gare Centrale) Consistently keen service, faithful Belgian meals and a fabulous location inside Galeries St Hubert are the pivotal points of this Brussels institution. Be daring and try *filet américain*.

Jacques (☎ 02 513 27 62; Quai aux Briques 44; mains €15-25, mussels €22; ☹ lunch & dinner, Mon-Sat; M Ste Catherine) One of many seafood restaurants in Ste Catherine. This one's down to earth and has been around for more than 60 years.

Also recommended:

African eateries (Rue Longue Vie; M Porte de Namur) Casual Congolese cafés line up on this pedestrianised street in the Matongé quarter. Best at night and definitely off-the-beaten track.

Frites/Pita (M Gare Centrale) For pita or *frites* (chips or fries), pick from the swarm of places along Rue du Marché aux Fromages, just south of Grand Palace.

GB Express (Rue au Beurre 25; ☹ 8am-10pm; M Bourse) Essentials sold at this little supermarket near the Grand Place.

DRINKING & CLUBBING

Pub and café culture is ingrained in Brussels. Most streets in the city centre have at least one pub – Place St Géry is particularly well endowed.

Le Roy d'Espagne (☎ 02 513 08 07; Grand Place 1; M Gare Centrale) Sit and sip pricey beers in the splendour of the Grand Place in this former pigghouse. And, yes, those are inflated dried pigs' bladders above your head.

À la Mort Subite (☎ 02 513 13 18; Rue Montagne aux Herbes Potagères 7; ☹ 10.30am-midnight; ☒; M Gare

Centrale) Long café with wood panelling, mirrored walls and brusque service. A must.

Falstaff (☎ 02 511 87 89; Rue Henri Maus 17; ☹ 10am-2am; M Bourse) Art Nouveau *grand café*, designed by Horta disciple, Houbion. Exotic world of mirrors, glass and fluidity.

Le Bier Circus (☎ 02 218 00 34; Rue de l'Enseignement 89; ☹ noon-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 6pm-midnight daily; M Mado) This place is for serious beer buffs.

Tels Quels (☎ 02 512 32 34; www.telsquels.be, in French; Rue du Marché au Charbon 81; M Anneessens; ☹ from 5pm daily, from 2pm Wed & Sat) Café-cum-info centre for Brussels' gay and lesbian community. Located on one of the city's prime nightlife streets.

Fuse (☎ 02 511 97 89; www.fuse.be; Rue Blaes 208; admission €3-12 depending on DJs; ☹ 11pm-7am Sat; M Porte de Hal) The Marolles house club that put Brussels on the international circuit.

Recyclart (☎ 02 502 57 34; www.recyclart.be; Rue des Ursulines 25; M Anneessens) An occasional club for those in the know, located in a disused train station in the Marolles. Dance nights listed online.

Culture Museum (☎ 0477 590 492; www.culture-museum.tv; Rue du Marché aux Fromages 10; ☹ 8pm-early Fri-Sun; M Gare Centrale) Retro disco that's a firm tourist favourite.

ENTERTAINMENT

The English-language magazine *Bulletin* has a 'What's On' guide with excellent entertainment coverage.

Arenberg Galeries (☎ 02 512 80 63 from 2pm; www.arenberg.be; Galerie de la Reine 26; M Gare Centrale) Remodelled Art Deco cinema located inside Galeries St Hubert. Foreign and art-house films are the staples.

AB (☎ 02 548 24 00; www.abconcerts.be; Blvd Anspach 110; M Bourse) AB, or Ancienne Belgique, is a great venue smack in the heart of town. The two auditoria accommodate international and home-grown bands.

La Monnaie/De Munt (☎ 70 23 39 39; www.demunt.be; Pl de la Monnaie; M De Brouckère) Brussels' premier venue for opera, theatre and contemporary dance.

SHOPPING

Browse **Place du Jeu-de-Balle fleamarket** (Pl du Jeu-de-Balle; ☹ 7am-2pm; M Porte de Hal), the Marolles' famous *brocante* (second-hand) market; a stately *galérie* such as **Galeries St Hubert** (p121); or **Galerie d'Ixelles** (off Chaussée de Wavre; M Porte de Namur), the pulse of Brussels' African community.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From Brussels National airport, take the Airport City Express train to Gare Centrale (€2.80, 20 minutes), Brussels' most central train station, from where it's five minutes by hoof to the Grand Place.

Travellers on Eurostar and Thalys trains arrive at Gare du Midi, 2.5km southwest of the Grand Place. You do not need to buy another train ticket to journey onto Gare Centrale – simply hop on a local train.

Eurolines buses deposit travellers at Gare du Nord, 1.5km north of the Grand Place; walk into town via Rue Neuve, or jump on a train to Gare Centrale.

De Biertempel (☎ 02 502 19 06; Rue du Marché aux Herbes 56; M Bourse) stocks 550 Belgian brews plus matching glasses.

For Belgium's most expensive pralines (€58 per kg) there's **Pierre Marcolini** (☎ 02 514 12 06; Pl du Grand Sablon 39; M Porte de Namur).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Brussels is Belgium's international transport hub. For information on air services to Brussels, see p118. Details on rail services, including Eurostar and Thalys, are on p119. For information on Eurolines buses, see p118.

GETTING AROUND

Brussels' efficient public transport system is operated by **Société des Transports Intercommunaux de Bruxelles** (☎ 02 515 20 00); buses, trams, the metro and prémetro (trams that dive underground) run from about 6am to midnight. Single tickets/day cards cost €1.50/€4.

AROUND BRUSSELS

For details on the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika (Royal Museum for Central Africa), see the boxed text on p117.

WATERLOO

pop 28,900

Waterloo's enough to defeat anyone. The battleground where Napoleon fell and European history changed course in 1815 is staid in essence and tedious to get around on public transport. You've got to be a war or history buff to make the pilgrimage 18km

south of Brussels. Catch TEC bus W from Ave Fosny at Brussels' Gare du Midi train station (buy a €6 day card) and start at the **Office du Tourisme Office du Tourisme** (☎ 02 352 09 10; www.waterloo-tourisme.be; Chaussée de Bruxelles 218, Waterloo; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10.30am-5pm Oct-Mar) in the village of Waterloo; bus W stops out the front.

FLANDERS

The only thing flat about Flanders is topography. Belgium's Flemish-speaking northern region is the country's powerhouse.

ANTWERP (ANTWERPEN, ANVERS)

pop 446,500

Attitude with a capital A – that's Antwerp. As an avant-garde fashion capital snapping at the heels of Milan and New York and the top spot on the clubbing circuit between Amsterdam and Paris, Belgium's second-biggest city's a magnet for fashionistas, foodies and party queens alike. And that's without even mentioning history, architecture and café culture.

Orientation & Information

Antwerp's impressive train station, Centraal Station, is 1km east of the historic centre, which is based around the Grote Markt and Groenplaats. To get to the centre walk along the Meir or take tram 2 or 15 from premetro station Diamant below Centraal Station.

2Zones (Wolstraat 15; per hr €4.50; ☎ 11am-midnight) Cool Internet bar.

ATMs KBC Bank (Eiermarkt); Fortis Bank (Wapper) Also at the post offices.

Main post office (Groenplaats 43); branch (Pelikaanstraat)

Main tourist office (☎ 03 232 01 03; www.visitantwerpen.be; Grote Markt 13; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun); branch (Centraal Station; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

Sights

Antwerp's epicentre is the **Grote Markt**, a pedestrianised market square presided over by the impressive Renaissance-style **Stadhuis** and lined by **guildhalls**, most of which were reconstructed in the 19th century.

The splendid **Onze Lieve Vrouwkathedraal** (☎ 03 213 99 51; Handschoenmarkt; adult/concession €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) is Belgium's largest and finest Gothic

cathedral (built 1352–1521). Its light interior houses four canvasses by Rubens.

Antwerp's prestigious **Rubenshuis** (☎ 03 201 15 55; Wapper 9-11; adult/concession €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) was the home and studio of Pieter Paul Rubens, northern Europe's greatest baroque artist.

The **Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten** (☎ 03 238 78 09; www.antwerpen.be/cultuur/kmska; Leopold De Waelplaats, 't Zuid; adult/concession/under 18 yr €6/4/free, last Wed of the month free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, to 6pm Sun) houses paintings dating from the Flemish Primitives to contemporary times. Take tram 8 from Groenplaats or bus 23 (direction Zuid) from Franklin Rooseveltplaats. The museum is 1.25km south of the Grote Markt.

Fashion followers must start with Antwerp's mode museum, **MoMu** (☎ 03 470 27 70; www.momu.be; Nationalestraat 28; adult/concession €7/5; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). To see what local designers are up to, visit **Walter** (☎ 03 213 26 44; St Antoniusstraat 12; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), the shop of fashion guru Walter Van Beirendonck.

The raised riverside promenade known as **Zuiderterras** offers a great skyline view plus an essential pit stop (see Drinking, p126).

Sleeping

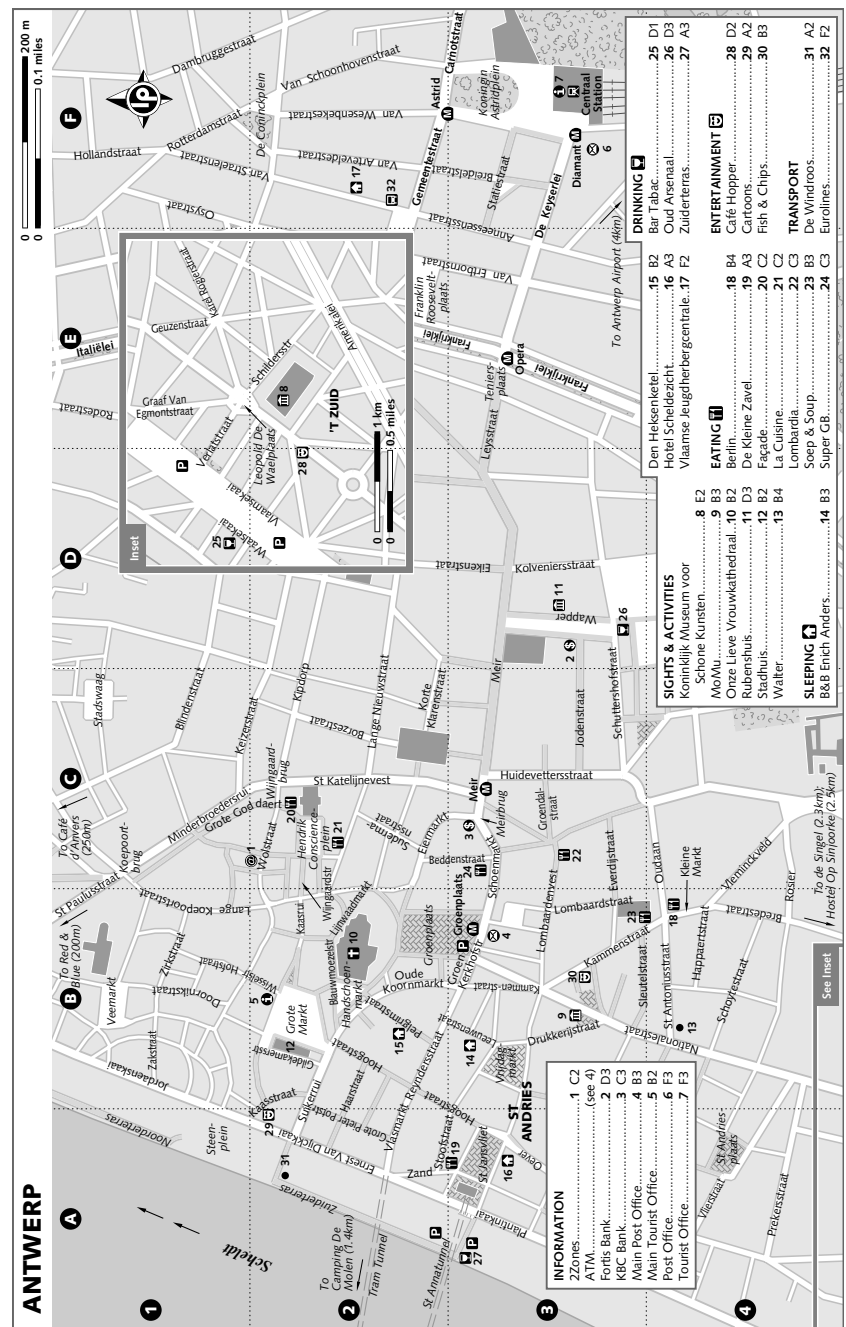
Camping De Molen (☎ 03 219 81 79; Thonetlaan; per adult/car/ten €1.80/1/2.50; ☎ Apr-Sep) This is the pick of Antwerp's two camping grounds. It's located on the Linkeroever; take bus 81 or 82 (direction Linkeroever).

Den Heksenketel (☎ 03 226 71 64; www.heksenketel.org; Pelgrimstraat 22; dm €19) The only cheap accommodation in the heart of town and fabulously located – note the cathedral view. Three simple but fresh dorms are situated above a small folk-music club (concerts Monday; jam sessions Thursday). Take premetro tram 2 or 15 to Groenplaats.

Hostel Op Sinjoorke (☎ 03 238 02 73; www.jeugdhergergen.be; Eric Sasselaaan 2; dm/s/d €14.50/29/42; ☎ closed Dec; ☎) Run-of-the-mill HI-affiliated hostel nearly 3km south of the centre. To get there, take tram 2 (direction Hoboken).

B&B Enich Anders (☎ 03 231 37 92; enich.anders@antwerpen.be; Leuwenstraat 12; s/d/trif €50/56/72/88; ☎) A stone-sculptor's home that's rough around the edges but nonetheless superbly located and popular with independent types. The rooms have small refrigerators and kitchenettes.

Hotel Scheldezicht (☎ 03 231 66 02; www.hotel-scheldezicht.be; St Jansvliet 2; s/d/tr from €45/65/85; ☎)



Quaint old-style hotel, well sited on a tree-lined square in the historic centre. The spacious rooms have private shower cubicles but share toilets. Take premetro tram 2 or 15 to Groenplaats.

Eating

Lombardia (☎ 03 233 68 19; Lombaardenvest 78; light meals €4-8; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Legendary health-food-shop-cum-café that has been around for three decades. The food's all *bio* (organic) and the décor's bizarre.

Soep & Soup (☎ 03 707 28 05; Kammenstraat 89; small/large bowl €4.25/5.50; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) Buzzy soup bar in trendy St Andries. Five pots of soup, with fresh ingredients, simmer away. Vegetarians can ask to hold the meatballs.

Façade (☎ 03 233 59 31; Hendrik Conscienceplein 18; mains €9-18; ☎ 11am-10.30pm) Unpretentious restaurant on one of the city's most delightful public squares. The French/Belgian cuisine is beautifully presented and prices are a snap.

De Kleine Zavel (☎ 03 231 96 91; Stooftstraat 2; mains €20-27; ☎ lunch Sun-Fri, dinner daily) One of the most sought-after and reliable eateries in Antwerp, with inventive fusion cooking accenting Mediterranean flavours.

Also recommended:

La Cuisine (☎ 03 226 42 71; St Pieter & Paulusstraat 7; mains €6-7.50, menu of the day €7.50; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat; ☎) The cheapest restaurant in town, run by youth learning the trade.

Berlin (☎ 03 227 11 01; Kleine Markt 1-3; dagschotel €9, mains €12-17; ☎ 7.30am-1am Mon-Wed, 10am-3am Fri-Sun) Spacious brasserie in St Andries.

Super GB (Groenplaats; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Supermarket in the Grand Bazar shopping centre.

Drinking & Clubbing

The only thing better in Antwerp than eating is drinking. Het Zuid (The South), commonly abbreviated as 't Zuid, is a popular nightlife quarter. Pick up dance party fliers at streetwear shop, **Fish & Chips** (☎ 03 227 08 24; 36-38 Kammenstraat).

Oud Arsenaal (☎ 03 232 97 54; Pijpelincxstraat 4; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Wed-Mon) Catch the city's most congenial brown café while it lasts. Beers are cheap and it's one of the few everyday pubs in Belgium to stock Westvleteren Trappist brews.

Zuiderterras (☎ 03 234 12 75; Ernest van Dijkstraal 37; ☎ 9am-midnight) Modern landmark café-restaurant at the southern end of the riverside

promenade and designed by the city's eminent contemporary architect, bOb Van Reeth.

Bar Tabac (www.bartabac.be; Waalsekaai 43; ☎ 8pm-7am Wed-Sun) Tiny corner bar that looks like it was plucked from obscurity in rural France and plunked in 't Zuid. The odd thing is, it's always packed (especially after midnight).

Café d'Anvers (☎ 03 226 38 70; www.café-d-anvers.com; Verversrui 15; ☎ 11pm-7.30am Fri & Sat) This legendary club does funk and house, disco and soul in a refurbished church in the city's red-light district. Many of Belgium's top DJs started here.

Red & Blue (☎ 03 213 05 55; www.redandblue.be; Lange Schipperskapelstraat 11; ☎ 11pm-7am Fri, men-only Sat) The biggest (and awarded best) nightclub in this corner of Europe, drawing party queens from outside Belgium's borders to house, techno, rap and soul.

Two annual festivals are also worth a look: **Antwerp is Burning** (www.antwerpisburning.be), a one-night, once-a-year affair in early September combining seven clubs; and **Clubland**, an extravaganza that takes over open fields on the Linkeroever (Left Bank) for a night in July or August.

Entertainment

Cinema buffs should head to **Cartoons** (☎ 03 232 96 32; Kaasstraat 4-6), where art-house movies and quality foreign films screen in three auditoriums.

For modern dance and theatre, there's **de-Singel** (☎ 03 248 28 28; www.desingel.be; Desguinlei 25).

Café Hopper (☎ 03 248 49 33; Leopold De Waelstraat 2) in 't Zuid is the city's best jazz venue.

Getting There & Around

From **Centraal Station** (☎ 02 528 28 28), train connections include Brussels (€6, 35 minutes), Ghent (€7.80, 45 minutes) and Bruges (€12.40, 70 minutes).

For details on Eurolines buses, see p118.

De Lijn Antwerpen (☎ 070 22 02 00; Centraal Station; ☎ info kiosk 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) runs a good network of buses, trams and a premetro (trams that run underground).

In summer, bikes can be hired from **De Windroos** (☎ 03 480 93 88; Steenplein 1a; per hr/day €2.50/12.50).

GHENT (GENT, GAND)

pop 229,000

Ghent is Flanders' unsung city. Smack in the middle of Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp, it's often overlooked on the hop between Bel-

gium's big three. With historic architecture, fab restaurants and sublime chocolate shops, it's a great place to give crowds the flick (but don't expect to have it all to yourself during De Gentse Feesten; see p135).

Orientation & Information

Ghent's main train station, St Pietersstation, is 2km south of the city centre based around the Korenmarkt – take tram 1, 10, 11, 12 or 13 from the tunnel to the right as you exit the train station.

ATM (Maria Hendrikaplein) At the post office, opposite the train station.

Tourist office (☎ 09 266 52 32; www.visitgent.be; Botermarkt 17; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar)

Sights

Join the queues at **St Baafskathedraal** (☎ 09 269 20 45; St Baafsplein; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 5pm Nov-Mar) to see the **Adoration of the Mystic Lamb** (admission €3; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat; 1-4.30pm Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-3.30pm Mon-Sat; 1-3.30pm Sun Nov-Mar). This lavish representation of medieval religious thinking is one of the earliest-known oil paintings,

executed in 1432 by Flemish Primitive artist Jan van Eyck and not to be missed.

The 14th-century **Belfort** (☎ 09 233 39 54; Botermarkt; admission €3; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Easter-mid-Nov) affords spectacular views of the city; there's a lift or stairs.

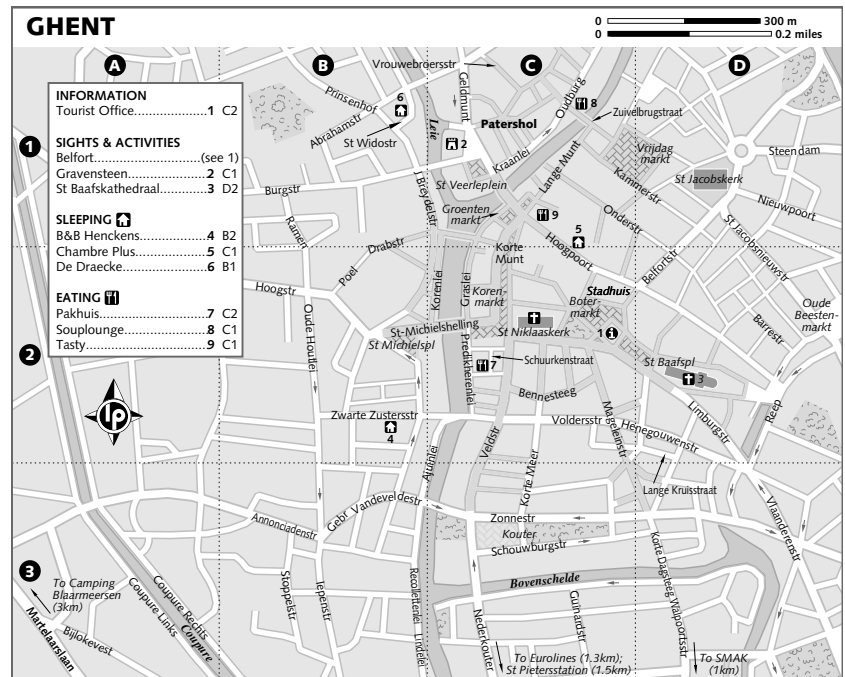
The **Gravensteen** (☎ 09 225 93 06; St Veerleplein; admission €5; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar), smack in the heart of the city, belonged to the 12th-century counts of Flanders and is the quintessential castle.

Ghent's highly regarded **SMAK** (☎ 09 221 17 03; www.smak.be; Citadelpark; admission €5, 10am-1pm Sun free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), or Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, contains works by Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky and Panamarenko – three of Belgium's best-known modern artists.

Sleeping & Eating

The old Patershol quarter is a wash with ambient restaurants and pubs. The Vrijdagmarkt is another good nightlife spot.

Camping Blaarmeersen (☎ 09 266 81 60; camping .blaarmeersen@gent.be; Zuiderlaan 12; adult/tent/car €4.50/4.50/2.50) A long way west of the city. Take bus 9 (direction Mariakerke) from St



Pietersstation to the Europabrug stop, then bus 38 or 39, which stops out the front.

our pick **Chambre Plus** (☎ 09 225 37 75; www.chambreplus.be; Hoogpoort 31; s/d/ste €65/80/140; ☒) Gorgeous B&B with a fab location on a pedestrianised street in the heart of town. The exotic rooms are complemented by convivial hosts and a truly gastronomic breakfast.

De Draecke (☎ 09 233 70 50; www.vjh.be; St Widostraat 11; dm/tw €16.60/42; ☒) One of Belgium's best HI-affiliated hostels occupies a renovated warehouse in the heart of town. From the train station, take tram 1, 10 or 11 to St Veerleplein.

B&B Henckens (☎ 09 224 34 05; www.bedandbreakfast-gent.be; Zwarte Zusterstraat 3; s/d/tr with shared bathroom from €35/50/65; ☒) Homy B&B that was once part of an old cloister. The three guestrooms are done in rich colours.

Souplounge (☎ 09 223 62 03; Zuivelbrugstraat 6; small/large soup €3/4.50; ☒ 10am-7pm) Modern soup kitchen and great for a light meal.

Tasty (☎ 09 225 74 07; Hoogpoort 1; light meals €5.50-7; ☒ 9.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) Casual eatery pumping out loud music and big boxes of noodles, sushi or pasta. Good veggie burgers and fresh juices, too.

Pakhuis (☎ 09 223 55 55; Schuurkenstraat 4; mains €14-25; ☒ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) Huge brasserie-cum-restaurant occupying a restored textile warehouse on a dog-eared backstreet; draws young and old alike.

Getting There & Around

From **St Pietersstation** (☎ 02 528 28 28) trains run half-hourly to Antwerp (€7.80, 45 minutes), Bruges (€5.40, 20 minutes) and Brussels (€7.40, 45 minutes), and hourly to Ypres (€9.50, one hour).

For details about Eurolines buses, see p118.

Public transport is operated by **De Lijn** (☎ 09 210 93 11), which has an info kiosk outside the train station. Single/day ticket prices are €1/3. Bikes can be hired from the St Pietersstation (rental per day €9.50 plus €12.50 deposit).

BRUGES (BRUGGE)

pop 117,000

Touristy, overcrowded and a tad fake: preface any other city like this and it would be left for dead. Not Bruges. This medieval town is Belgium's most popular destination and, despite the crowds, it's not to be missed.

By the 14th century, Bruges was one of Europe's leading trade centres. But during

the following century, the waterway linking the city to the sea silted up. Despite attempts to build a new canal, Bruges' economic lifeline was gone. Traders and townsfolk abandoned the city, leaving it suspended in time.

These days Bruges dreamily evokes a world long since gone. But its reputation as a perfectly preserved city is partly fabrication – much of the town was rebuilt in the 19th and 20th centuries to reflect medieval times.

Orientation & Information

Bruges' main square, the Markt, is about 1.5km north of the train station; to get there jump on any bus marked 'Centrum'.

ATM (Markt 5) Attached to the main post office.

In&Uit Brugge (☎ 050 44 46 46; www.brugge.be; 't Zand; ☒ 10am-6pm, until 8pm Thu) Tourist office located inside the Concertgebouw.

Main post office (☎ 050 33 14 11; Markt 5)

Tourist office (☒ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-5pm Tue-Sat) At the train station.

Sights

Bruges' nerve centre is the historic **Markt**, a large open square from which rises Belgium's most famous **Belfort** (Belfry; Markt; adult/concession €5/3; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun, last tickets sold 4.15pm). Squeeze up the 366 steps.

The nearby Burg features Belgium's oldest **stadhuis** (City Hall; Burg; admission €2.50; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun), along with the **Heilig-Bloedbasiliek** (Basilica of the Holy Blood; Burg; ☒ 9.30-11.50am & 2-5.50pm Apr-Sep, 10-11.50am & 2-3.50pm Oct-Mar), where a few coagulated drops of Christ's blood are kept and cherished.

Bruges' prized collection of art dating from the 14th to 20th centuries is housed in the small **Groeningemuseum** (Dijver 12; adult/concession €8/5; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun). Most notable is the section of Flemish Primitives.

The **Hospitaalmuseum St Janshospitaal** (Mariasstraat 38; adult/concession €8/5; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is home to a handful of masterpieces by Hans Memling, one of the early Flemish Primitives. Don't miss Memling's reliquary of St Ursula – the attention to detail is stunning.

The **Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk** (Church of Our Lady; Mariasstraat; adult/concession €2.50/1.50; ☒ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1.30-5pm Sun) has one remarkable art treasure: Michelangelo's *Madonna and Child*. This small marble statue (1504) was the only work of art by Michelangelo to leave Italy during his lifetime.

BRUGES

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

SLEEPING

- B&B Setola.....14 C3
- Snuffel Sleep In.....15 A1

EATING

- Christophe.....16 D5
- Het Dagelijks Brood.....17 C3
- Lokkedize.....18 A5
- Lotus.....19 C3
- Passion for Food.....20 C3
- Proxy/Delhaize.....21 A3
- Tom's Diner.....22 C1

DRINKING

- Bolero.....23 D5
- 't Brugs Beertje.....24 B4

TRANSPORT

- Fietsen Popelier.....25 B5

INFORMATION

- ATM.....(see 2)
- In&Uit Brugge.....1 A5
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Beginhof.....3 B6
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- Canal Tours.....5 C4
- Canal Tours.....6 C4
- Canal Tours.....7 C4
- Choco-Story.....8 C2
- Groeningemuseum.....9 C5
- Heilig-Bloedbasiliek.....10 C3
- Hospitaalmuseum St Janshospitaal.....11 B5
- Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk.....12 B5
- Stadhuis (Town Hall).....13 C3

TO TRAIN STATION (400m):
TOURIST OFFICE (400m)

The **Begijnhof** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6.30pm) was home to a 13th-century religious community of unmarried or widowed women, known as Begijnen. A 10-minute walk south of the Markt, it's a must.

Choco-Story (☎ 050 61 22 37; www.choco-story.be; Wijnzakstraat 2; admission €6; ☎ 10am-5pm) devotes itself to all things rich, dark and yummy. It's well done.

Tours

Canal tours (Steenhouwersdijk & Dijver; €5.20; ☎ 10am-6pm Mar-mid-Nov) Touristy but essential. Boats depart from jetties south of the Burg, and tours last 30 minutes.

Horse-drawn carriages (Markt; 5 passengers €30)

Thirty-five minute trips departing from the Markt.

Quasimodo (☎ 050 37 04 70; www.quasimodo.be; over/under 26 yrs €50/40 incl lunch) Bus day trips taking in either Bruges or Ypres.

Quasimundo (☎ 050 33 07 75; www.quasimundo.com; over/under 26 yrs €18/16; ☎ mid-Mar-mid-Oct) Excellent half-day bike tours; bookings necessary.

Sleeping

Camping Memling (☎ 050 35 72 50; www.camping-memling.be; Veltemweg 109, St Kruis; per tent/car €12/5; ☎ year-round) The quietest local camping ground, 2.5km east of town in St Kruis. Take bus 11 from the train station.

Snuffel Sleep In (☎ 050 33 31 33; www.snuffel.be; Ezelstraat 47-49; dm/d €15/36; ☎) Funky place that's been around for years. It has basic but original rooms, friendly staff, a kitchen and a bar. From the train station take bus 3 or 13.

Bauhaus (☎ 050 34 10 93; www.bauhaus.be; Langestraat 135; hostel section dm/d/tr per person €15/18/17, hotel section s/d/tr €26/40/57) This is a big and bustling hostel with separate budget hotel section next door. A popular hang-out for young travellers, though the blue rooms hardly fuel the imagination. Take bus 6 or 16 from the train station.

B&B Degraeve (☎ 050 34 57 11; www.stardekk.com/bedbreakfast; Kazernevest 32; s/d/tr €33/45/58) Located in a quiet, untouristed part of town and run by a zany woman who has filled the two spacious rooms with bizarre décor.

B&B Setola (☎ 050 33 49 77; www.bedandbreakfast-bruges.com; St Walburgastraat 12; s/d/tr €50/60/80, €10 extra for one-night stay; ☎) Modern style comes to Bruges in this mansion dating from 1740. While the façade is historic, the three 2nd-floor guestrooms have crisp colours and cool vibes, and you'll be hard-pressed to get a better location or breakfast.

Eating & Drinking

From cosy *estaminets* (taverns) to first-class restaurants, Bruges has all bases covered.

Het Dagelijks Brood (☎ 050 33 60 50; Philipstockstraat 21; snacks €5-11; ☎ 7am-6pm Wed-Mon; ☎) Smoke-free tearoom offering pies and *boterhammen* (sandwiches), plus the essential big table. A Belgian success story with branches worldwide.

Passion for Food (☎ 0477 40 17 14; Philipstockstraat 39; soup €4-6, salad €6-13; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Great Mediterranean flavours at this laid-back eatery. Sip a fresh juice on the terrace out the back.

Lokkedize (☎ 050 33 44 50; Korte Vuldersstraat 33; dishes €8-10; ☎) from 7pm Wed & Thu, from 6pm Fri-Sun) One of the city's most convivial *etcafé's* and a great spot for a late-night bite (kitchen open till midnight).

Tom's Diner (☎ 050 33 33 82; West Gistelhof 23; mains €10-15; ☎ 6.30pm-1am Wed-Mon) To the north of town, a little way out of the tourist centre and all the better for it. Stylish food at very affordable prices. Locals love it.

't Brugs Beertje (☎ 050 33 96 16; Kemelstraat 5; ☎ 4pm-1am Thu-Tue) Belgium's most famous beer pub is a tiny place situated on a poky backstreet. About 250 national brews are on offer, listed by brewery.

Also recommended:

Lotus (☎ 050 33 10 78; Wapenmakerstraat 5; meals €10; ☎ 11.45am-2pm Mon-Sat) Excellent lunch-time vegetarian restaurant.

Christophe (☎ 050 34 48 92; Garenmarkt 34; mains €14-23; ☎ 7pm-1am Thu-Mon) Cool late-night bistro.

Bolero (☎ 050 33 81 11; Garenmarkt 32; ☎ 9pm-4am Wed-Mon) The main gay and lesbian bar in town.

Proxy/Delhaize (Geldmuntstraat) Supermarket.

Getting There & Around

From Bruges' **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28), trains run half-hourly to Brussels (€11.80, 60 minutes) and Ghent (€5.40, 20 minutes), and hourly to Antwerp (€12.40, 70 minutes). For Ypres (known as Ieper in Flemish; €10.10, two hours), you'll need to change trains in Kortrijk.

A small network of buses operated by **De Lijn** (☎ 059 56 53 53) covers destinations in and around Bruges. Single/day ticket prices are €1.20/5.

Bruges is ideal for cyclists. Rent a bike from **Fietsen Popelier** (☎ 050 34 32 62; Mariastraat 26; per hr/half-day/day €3.50/7/10; ☎) 10am-6pm, until 8pm Jul & Aug).

YPRES (IEPER)

pop 35,200

Ypres was the last bastion of Belgian territory unoccupied by the Germans in WWI. As a result, this southwest corner of the country was a barrier to a German advance towards the French coastal ports around Calais. More than 300,000 Allied soldiers were killed here during the four years of fighting that left the medieval town flattened. Convincingly reconstructed, the town and its surrounds – the Ypres Salient – are now dotted with war cemeteries and memorials. Unless you have a car, the best way to visit the area is by guided tour (see below for more information). For more information there's the **Ypres Visitors Centre** (☎ 057 23 92 20; www.ieper.be; Grote Markt 34; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, until 5pm Oct-Mar).

Sights

Ypres' hub, the **Grote Markt**, is dominated by the enormous **Lakenhalle** (Cloth Hall) with its 70m-high belfry.

On the 1st floor of the Lakenhalle is **In Flanders Fields Museum** (☎ 057 23 92 20; www.inflandersfields.be; Grote Markt 34; admission €7.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), a moving testament to the wartime horrors experienced by ordinary people.

The **Menin Gate** (Meensestraat) is perhaps the saddest reminder of the town's tragic past. The huge white gate is inscribed with the names of 54,896 British and Commonwealth troops whose lives were lost in the quagmire of the trenches and who have no graves. Every evening at 8pm, traffic is halted while buglers sound the Last Post.

Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest British Commonwealth war cemetery in the world, sits on a plateau about 8km northeast of Ypres. As cemeteries go, this one is hugely moving; in all, a total of 11,956 soldiers are buried here.

Tours

Two companies offer good bus tours of the Ypres Salient. Book at least a day or two in advance:

Quasimodo (☎ 050 37 04 70; www.quasimodo.be; over/under 26 yrs €50/40 incl lunch) Departs from Bruges.

Salient Tours (☎ 057 21 46 57; www.salienttours.com; 2½/4hr tour €20/25; ☎) Thu-Tue Mar-Nov) Run by an Englishman based in Ypres.

Sleeping & Eating

Jeugdstadion (☎ 057 21 72 82; info@jeugdstadion.be; Bolwerkstraat 1; per adult/car €4.50/4.50; ☎ mid-Mar-Oct) Basic camping ground attached to a youth centre, 900m southeast of Grote Markt.

B&B Hortensia (☎ 057 21 24 06; info@guesthouse-ieper.be; Rijselsestraat 196; s/d €51/61) In the heart of town with modern, sober rooms. No fuss or bother.

Hotel Regina (☎ 057 21 88 88; www.hotelregina.be; Grote Markt 45; s/d €75/100) Smack on the Markt, this is Ypres' most atmospheric hotel. The cheaper rooms are old and ordinary; the most expensive ones are large and rustic.

In het Klein Stadhuis (☎ 057 21 55 42; Grote Markt 32; mains €10-15; ☎ closed Sun Oct-May) Smooth, split-level café tucked away in a quaint guildhall next to the Stadhuis. Offers good-value meals day and night.

Getting There & Around

From Ypres **train station** (☎ 02 528 28 28) hourly trains go direct to Kortrijk (€4.30, 30 minutes) and Ghent (€9.50, one hour). For Brussels (€14.60, 1½ hours), Bruges (€10.10, two hours) and Antwerp (€16.30, two hours), change in Kortrijk.

WALLONIA

Parlez-vous français? You'll need to in Wallonia, Belgium's French-speaking southern half. Step across the linguistic divide to seemingly enter a different country. Gone are the flat fields and affluence of the north – here it's forested hillsides, intimate villages and industrial decay. Then burrow down in the Ardennes, Wallonia's southeastern corner, where ancient castles loom over tranquil hamlets.

LIÈGE (LUIK)

pop 185,500

Love or loathe it, Liège always leaves an impression. This gritty city, sprawled along the Meuse River about 90km east of Brussels, takes time to know. Stay a while and explore its excellent museums devoted to Walloon life, and it may win you over. For Simonon fans, this is Georges' birthplace and his primary place of homage (though there's little to see).

The main tourist office is **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 04 237 92 92; www.liege.be; Pl St Lambert 35; ☎) 9am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Oct-May).

Sights

For a city panorama, start with **Montagne de Buuren** (Hors Château), a flight of 373 stairs leading up to a former citadel.

The excellent **Musée d'Art Religieux et d'Art Mosan** (Museum of Religious Art & Art from the Meuse Valley; ☎ 04 221 42 25; Rue Mère Dieu; adult/child €3.80/2; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) is chock-full of well-preserved regional religious relics.

The **Musée de l'Art Wallon** (☎ 04 221 92 31; Féronstrée 86; adult/child €3.80/2; ☎ 1-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4.30pm Sun) accommodates art by French-speaking Belgians, including surrealists René Magritte and Paul Delvaux.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 344 56 89; www.laj.be; Rue Georges Simenon 2; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42; ☎ ☑) Modern HI-affiliated hostel on Outremeuse; take bus 4 from Gare Guillemins to Pl St Lambert and change to bus 18.

Hôtel Les Acteurs (☎ 04 223 00 80; www.lesacteurs.be; in French; Rue des Urbanistes 10; s/d €50/65, breakfast €6) Comfy modern hotel that tries hard to be artistic. It's well located and buses 1 and 4 stop about 200m away.

As Ouhès (☎ 04 223 32 25; Pl du Marché 21; mains €12-20, menu €25) Liège institution that specialises in rich Walloon cuisine. Note the apt logo – a gluttonous man sitting on a mound of hams, sausages and waffles.

Maharaja Palace (☎ 04 223 23 94; Rue St-Jean-en-Isle 5; mains from €13.50; ☎ closed Mon & lunch Tue) Indian restaurant doing well-priced meals smack in the city's nightlife hub.

Getting There & Away

Liège's main train station, **Gare Guillemins** (☎ 02 528 28 28), is 2km south of Place St Lambert, the city's heart and main bus hub – to get there simply catch another train to the city's most central station, Gare du Palais.

From Gare Guillemins, trains connect with Brussels (€12.40, one hour), Namur (€7.40, one hour), Spa (€4.30, 50 minutes), Tongeren (€3.80, 30 minutes) and Luxembourg City (€32.20, 2½ hours, every two hours).

For info on Eurolines buses, see p118.

AROUND LIÈGE

Spa

pop 10,500

There's no bursting its bubble. Spa, Europe's oldest health resort, has for centuries embraced royalty and the wealthy who came

to drink, bathe and cure themselves in the mineral-rich waters that bubble forth here. These days a new generation interested in health and wellbeing is taking to the town's palatial hilltop complex, the **Thermes de Spa** (☎ 087 77 25 60; www.thermesdespa.com; ☎ 10am-9pm). Go for a couple of hours in one of the hydrotherapy pools (€17), or submerge yourself for days.

Spa is 40km southeast of Liège and connected by regular trains (€4.30, 50 minutes). The **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 087 79 53 53; www.spa-info.be; in French & Flemish; Pl Royale 41; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) can help with inquiries.

Hautes Fagnes Nature Reserve

The Hautes Fagnes, or High Fens, is a plateau of swampy heath, woods and windy moors that sweeps over to Germany's Eifel hills. The area is popular with walkers and cyclists. Start a visit at the **Botrange Nature Centre** (☎ 080 44 03 00; www.centrenaturebotrange.be; in French & Flemish; Route de Botrange 131; ☎ 10am-6pm).

It takes at least 1¼ hours to arrive here on public transport from Liège – take the train to Verviers (€3.40, 20 minutes, hourly) and then bus 390 (€3.60, 30 minutes, five daily) to Rocherath.

NAMUR (NAMEN)

pop 106,200

Namur is a great jumping-off point for exploring Wallonia's forested Ardennes. Some 60km southeast of Brussels, it's a picturesque town built at the confluence of the Meuse and Sambre Rivers and presided over by a citadel that, in times gone by, ranked as one of Europe's mightiest.

The **Office du Tourisme** (☎ 081 24 64 49; www.pays-de-namur.be; Sq Léopold; ☎ 9.30am-6pm) is near the train station.

Sights

Don't miss the **Trésor du Prieuré d'Oignies** (☎ 081 25 43 00; Rue Julie Billiart 17; adult/child €2/1; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun & Mon), a one-room hoard of exquisite Gothic treasures housed in a modern convent. Ring the bell to be taken on a guided tour by one of the nuns.

What remains of Namur's once-mighty **citadel** (Route Merveilleuse) is slung high above the town on a rocky outcrop. It's easily accessed by a **tourist train** (☎ 081 24 64 49; €1; ☎ 10am-5pm daily Jun-mid-Sep, Sat & Sun Apr & May & mid-Sep-Oct), which departs hourly from the tourist office.

Alternatively, walk up (trail distances vary; the shortest walk is 1km).

The **Musée Félicien Rops** (☎ 081 22 01 10; www.ciger.be/rops; Rue Fumal 12; admission €3; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, daily Jul & Aug) devotes itself to Namur-born artist Félicien Rops (1833-98) who fondly illustrated the erotic and macabre.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Les 4 Fils Aymon (☎ 081 58 02 94; Chaussée de Liège; tent, car & 2 persons €6.20; ☎ Apr-Sep) Pleasant ground located about 8km east of Namur; take bus 12 (hourly) from the bus station.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 081 22 36 88; www.laj.be; Ave F Rops 8; dm/s/d €16.60/29/42; ☎ ☑) Attractive riverfront hostel, about 3km southwest of the train station. Buses 3 and 4, which both depart hourly from Pl de la Station, stop nearby.

Hôtel Les Tanneurs (☎ 081 24 00 24; www.tanneurs.com; Rue des Tanneries 13; s €45-200, d €60-215, breakfast €10; ☎ ☑) This unique hotel, situated on a shabby street in the heart of town, unites modern comfort with 17th-century charm. Book well ahead.

Brasserie Henry (☎ 081 22 02 04; Pl St Aubain 3; mains €10-27; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Thu, until 1am Fri & Sat) A sociable brasserie and an institution among Namur's late-night diners.

Getting There & Away

Namur **train station** (☎ 025 28 28 28) is a major rail hub. Regional connections include Brussels (€7.40, one hour, every 30 minutes), Jemelle (€7.40, 40 minutes, hourly), Liège (€7.40, one hour, every 30 minutes) and Marloie (€6.70, 35 minutes, hourly).

Regional and local buses are operated by **TEC** (☎ 081 25 35 55; Place de la Station; ☎ 7am-7pm).

ROCHEFORT & HAN-SUR-LESSE

pop 15,600

As a base in the Ardennes, Rochefort is hard to beat. Together with its neighbour Han-sur-Lesse, 6km away, Rochefort is famed for the millennia-old underground limestone grottoes that attract visitors from all over Belgium. The caves at Han are the more spectacular of the two, but Han itself is a tourist trap; stay in Rochefort and commute between the towns.

Rochefort's **tourist office** (☎ 084 34 51 72; www.valdelesse.be; Rue de Behogne 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun) is in the centre of town.

Sights & Activities

The impressive **Grottes de Han** (☎ 084 37 72 13; www.grotte-de-han.be; Rue Lamotte 2; adult/child €12/7; ☎ 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 11.30am-4pm Nov, Dec & Mar) is a series of caves dripping with stalactites and stalagmites. An excursion here includes a toy-train ride, a long walk through cold tunnels and an underground boat trip. Rochefort's cave, **Grotte de Lorette** (☎ 084 21 20 80; Drève de Lorette; adult/child €7.25/4.70; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Mar-Oct), is smaller but also worth seeing.

The area is a great base for walking and cycling. One trail for cyclists is **RAVeL**, an 18km stretch of disused railway line linking Rochefort and the village of Houyet. Rent a bike from **Cycle Sport** (☎ 084 21 32 55; Rue de Behogne 59; morning/afternoon/day €10/15/20; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-noon Sun).

Sleeping & Eating

The following options are all in Rochefort.

Camping Communal (☎ 084 21 19 00; Rue du Hableau; adult €2, car & tent €3; ☎ Easter-Oct) Next to the Lomme River, immediately below the main part of town.

Le Vieux Moulin (☎ 084 21 46 04; www.gitero.chefort.be; Rue du Hableau 25; demi pension junior/senior €18.50/21.25; ☎ year-round) Pleasant *gîte d'étape* hostel in the heart of town. The price includes breakfast and one meal.

Hôtel La Fayette (☎ 084 21 42 73; www.hotellafayette.be; in French; Rue Jacques 87; s/d/tr €45/50/65, with shared bathroom €40/45/60, breakfast €5, mains €12-25) White-washed hotel/restaurant that's yet to emerge from the '70s.

La Gourmandise (☎ 084 21 09 86; Rue de Behogne 24; mains €9-21) Stop in for a Rochefort beer or stay for dinner: excellent local cuisine, such as chicken in Trappist sauce, is served.

Getting There & Away

To get to Rochefort from Namur, take the train to Jemelle (40 minutes, hourly) then bus 29 to Rochefort (€1.20, seven minutes, hourly), which continues on to Han (€1.20, seven minutes).

LA ROCHE-EN-ARDENNE

pop 4250

La Roche is a vibrant little town, hidden in a deep valley, crowned by a ruined castle and surrounded by verdant hills. One of the Ardennes' most popular summer resorts, it hums with Belgian holiday-makers buying

up big on smoked hams and getting into outdoor pursuits.

The **tourist office** (☎ 084 36 77 36; www.la-roche-tourisme.com; Pl du Marché 15; ☹ 9am-5pm) is on the main street. Travellers arriving by bus will be dropped at Place du Bronze, the heart of town.

Sights & Activities

La Roche's picture-postcard medieval **castle** (adult/child €4/2; ☹ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Apr-Oct, 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), perched on a crag above town, is accessed from steps leading up from the main street.

Kayaking is big business here. The most popular excursion, a 25km paddle along the Ourthe River (€20, six hours), is organised by **Ardenne-Aventures** (☎ 084 41 19 00; www.ardenne-aventure.be; Rue du Hadja 1), next to the bridge at the northern end of town. It also rents out mountain bikes (half/full day €17/22) for exploring the many marked hiking/biking trails that crisscross the surrounding hills.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Le Vieux Moulin (☎ 084 41 13 80; www.strument.com; Petite Strument 62; per person/site €2.50/8; ☹ Easter-Oct) A great place draped for what seems an eternity along a stream next to the Hôtel Moulin de la Strument.

Domaine des Olivettes (☎ 084 41 16 52; www.lesolivettes.be; Chemin des Soeret 12; dm €12, s/d from €35/55) A hotel-cum-hostel-cum-equestrian centre, perched on a hill above town. The hotel rooms are pleasant and there's a separate *auberge* with dormitory-style accommodation.

Hôtel Moulin de la Strument (☎ 084 41 15 07; www.strument.com; Petite Strument 62; s/d €65/75; ☹ closed Jan) La Roche's most agreeable hotel is nestled in a secluded wooded valley next to a babbling stream and is part of an old mill.

Maison Bouillon & Fils (☎ 084 41 18 80; Pl du Marché 6) Where but the Belgian Ardennes would a butcher's shop boast its own café? Dine in with an *assiette ardennaise* (plate of mixed local charcuterie, €10) or takeaway from this must-see *boucherie*.

Getting There & Away

Buses are the only form of public transport reaching La Roche. Coming from Namur, the nearest rail junction is Marloie, from where bus 15 goes to La Roche (€2.50, 35 minutes,

six daily). From Liège, get a train to Melreux and then the La Roche bus (€2.10, 30 minutes, seven daily).

BASTOGNE

pop 14,000

It was in Bastogne, close to the Luxembourg border, that thousands of soldiers and civilians died during WWII's Battle of the Bulge. Testament to these events is a huge, star-shaped **American memorial** on a hill 2km from Bastogne. The neighbouring **Bastogne Historical Centre** (☎ 061 21 14 13; Colline du Mardasson; adult/child €8.50/6; ☹ 10am-4.30pm Mar-Apr & Oct-Dec, 9.30am-5pm May-Jun & Sep, 9.30am-6pm Jul-Aug) recounts the battle.

The **Maison du Tourisme** (☎ 061 21 27 11; www.paysdebastogne.be; Pl McAuliffe; ☹ 9am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm mid-Sep-mid-Jun) is in a conspicuous building in the heart of town.

Hôtel du Sud (☎ 061 21 11 14; www.hotel-du-sud.be; Rue du Marché 39; s/d €47/59), a block from Place McAuliffe, passes muster with clean if unexceptional rooms.

To get to Bastogne, the closest rail junction is Libramont, from where bus 163B departs every two hours (€2.50, 45 minutes).

BELGIUM DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Camping grounds are plentiful throughout the country and at their best in Wallonia's Ardennes region. Check www.campingbelgique.be for listings.

Hostels (*jeugdherberg* in Flemish, *auberge de jeunesse* in French) affiliated with Hostelling International (HI) are easily found. Contact **Vlaamse Jeugdherbergcentrale** (☎ 03 232 72 18; www.jeugdherbergen.be; Van Stralenstraat 40, B-2060 Antwerp) for hostels in Flanders and **Les Auberges de Jeunesse** (☎ 02 219 56 76; www.laj.be; Rue de la Sablonnière 28, B-1000 Brussels) for hostels in Wallonia. There are also a few private hostels.

In rural areas, you'll occasionally come across *gîtes d'étapes*, basic hostel-style dwellings that welcome individual travellers.

B&Bs (*gastenkamers/chambres d'hôtes*) normally represent excellent value, with prices starting at €35/45 a single/double. Hotels start at similar rates, but at this price you'll get communal bathroom facilities.

ACTIVITIES Cycling

Cycling is one of Belgium's national passions. In flat Flanders, many roads have dedicated cycle lanes. In Wallonia, the hilly terrain is favoured by mountain bike (VTT, or *vélo tout-terrain* in French; *terreinfiets* in Flemish) enthusiasts.

Bikes can be hired from private operators or from about 20 train stations for around €6.50/9.50 per half/full day. You may have to pay a deposit (€12 to €20) and show your passport. Bikes can also be taken on trains (one way/return €5/8 to anywhere in Belgium).

Hiking

Hiking ranges from the easy terrain in Flanders to the more inspiring hills of the Ardennes. Local tourist offices have copious information about hiking paths and they sell regional hiking maps.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks ☹ 9am-3.30pm or 5pm Mon-Fri

Clubs ☹ 11pm-6am Fri-Sun

Pubs & Cafés ☹ 10am or 11am-1am or 2am (some stay open till dawn)

Restaurants ☹ 11.30am-2pm or 3pm & 6.30-11pm, brasseries 11am to 1am

Shops ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun in major cities; most supermarkets stay open until 9pm. Shops in tourist towns often close for lunch (noon to 2pm).

Tourist information offices Hours vary – see the individual city/town sections

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Embassies & Consulates in Belgium

The following diplomatic missions are located in Brussels.

Australia (☎ 02 286 05 00; fax 02 230 68 02; Rue Guimard 6, B-1040)

Canada (☎ 02 741 06 11; fax 02 741 06 43; Ave de Tervuren 2, B-1040)

France (☎ 02 548 87 11; fax 02 513 68 71; Rue Ducale 65, B-1000)

Germany (☎ 02 787 18 00; fax 02 787 28 00; Rue Jacques de Lalaing 8-14, B-1040)

Ireland (☎ 02 235 66 76; fax 02 235 66 71; Rue Wiertz 50, B-1050)

Luxembourg (☎ 02 735 57 00; fax 02 737 57 10; Ave de Cortenberg 75, B-1000)

Netherlands (☎ 02 679 17 11; fax 02 679 17 75; Ave Herrmann-Debroux 48, B-1160)

New Zealand (☎ 02 512 10 40; fax 02 513 48 56; 7th fl, Sq de Meeus 1, B-1100)

UK (☎ 02 287 62 11; fax 02 287 63 55; Rue d'Arlon 85, B-1040)

USA (☎ 02 508 21 11; fax 02 511 27 25; Blvd du Régent 27, B-1000)

Belgian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-6273 2501; fax 6273 3392; 19 Arkana St, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-236 7267; fax 236 7882; Constitution Sq, 360 Albert St, Ste 820, Ottawa ON K1R 7X7)

France (☎ 01 44 09 39 39; fax 47 54 07 64; rue de Tilsitt 9, Paris F-75840, Cedex 17)

Germany (☎ 49-3020 6420; fax 3020 642 200; Jägerstrasse 52-53, Berlin D-10117)

Ireland (☎ 01-205 7100; fax 283 9403; 2 Shrewsbury Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

Luxembourg (☎ 25 43 251; fax 45 42 82; rue des Girondins 4, Luxembourg City L-1626)

Netherlands (☎ 070-312 34 56; fax 364 55 79; Alexanderderveld 97, The Hague NL-2585 DB)

New Zealand (☎ 09-575 6202; ismackenzie@xtra.co.nz; 15A Rarangi Rd, St Heliers, Auckland)

UK (☎ 020-7470 3700; fax 7470 3795; 103-105 Eaton Sq SW1W 9AB)

USA (☎ 202-333 6900; fax 333 5457; 3330 Garfield St, NW, Washington DC, 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The country buzzes with festivals. Following are a few of the highlights:

Brussels Jazz Marathon (www.brusselsjazzmarathon.be) The second-last weekend in May brings nonstop jazz to Brussels.

De Gentse Feesten (www.gentsefeesten.be) Ghent's annual 10-day festival shindig in mid-July transforms the city into a party of music and theatre. It includes 10 Days Off... (www.10daysoff.be), one of Europe's main techno parties.

Pageant of the Golden Tree (www.comitevoorinitiatief.be) Famous Bruges procession that retells the history of Flanders. Held every five years – the next is 25 to 26 August 2007.

FOOD & DRINK

Belgians love food. They are reputed to dine out, on average, more than any other people in the world.

The national dish is *mosselen/moules*, mussels cooked in white wine and served in steaming cauldrons with a mountain of *frietten/frites* (fries). Meat and seafood are abundantly consumed, as are offal and *filet américain*. Don't be deceived, it's not a succulent American steak but a blob of minced beef served raw.

Brussels' dining scene is eminently international, reflecting its status as the EU capital, but around the countryside things are less diverse. Many cafés and brasseries these days cater to vegetarian tastes (but not to vegans).

On the drinking scene, beer rules. No country in the world boasts a brewing tradition as rich and diverse as Belgium. And nowhere will you find the quantity of quality beers – somewhere between 400 and 800 beers exist. Try a dark Trappist beer made by monks, golden nectars like Duvel (named after the devil himself) or the acquired taste of tangy, fruity *lambics* (beer unique to the Brussels region). For the latter, don't miss Brussels' Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze (see p121 for more information).

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1 January

Easter Monday March/April

Labour Day 1 May

Ascension Day 40th day after Easter

Whit Monday 7th Monday after Easter

Festival of the Flemish Community 11 July
(Flanders only)

National Day 21 July

Assumption 15 August

Walloon Community 27 September (Wallonia only)

All Saints' Day 1 November

Armistice Day 11 November

Christmas Day 25 December

School Holidays July & August; one week in November; two weeks at Christmas; one week around Carnival; two weeks at Easter; one week in May

LANGUAGE

For details on the country's linguistic makeup, see The Culture, p117.

MONEY

Banks are the best place to exchange money. Outside banking hours, exchange bureaux (*wisselkantoren* in Flemish; *bureaux d'échange* in French) operate at Brussels National airport and at main train stations. ATMs are widespread. Tipping is not obligatory as service and VAT (value-added tax) are included in prices.

POST

Letters under 50g cost €0.60 within the EU, or €0.65 anywhere else.

TELEPHONE

To call abroad, the international access code is ☎ 00. Belgium's country code is ☎ 32. Mobile codes are 0472 to 0479, 0482 to 0489 and 0492 to 0499. Numbers prefixed with 0900 or 070 are expensive pay-per-minute numbers. Numbers prefixed with 0800 are free calls. For an international operator, call ☎ 1324.

VISAS

There are no entry requirements or restrictions on EU nationals visiting Belgium. The citizens of Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and the USA do not need visas to visit the country as tourists for up to three months. Except for people from a few other European countries (such as Switzerland and Norway), everyone else must have a visa issued by a Belgian embassy or consulate.

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