

Belgium

SHADES OF BAHRAIN WITH WARM, FRIENDLY PEOPLE AND A CITY LACED WITH INTERNATIONAL FLAVOUR

About Belgium

Belgium, a country of some 10 million people, has France, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg as its neighbours. Perhaps unsurprisingly, French, German, Dutch and Luxembourgish are all widely spoken here.



When To Visit

Temperatures do not fluctuate wildly, though April to September is warmest. Expect grey skies a lot of the time.

Visa Requirements

No entry restrictions on EU nationals visiting Belgium. Citizens of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the US and a few other (mainly European) countries do not need visas to visit as tourists for up to three months.

Getting There

The main airport is Zaventem, near Brussels. If you're in Europe already, a bus or train is the best option, or take a ferry from Britain.



Bahrain Connection

Both Bahrain and Belgium are small countries in their respective regions, both maintain relatively low international profiles, and both enjoy membership of a very exclusive club – that of Formula-1 hosts!



IN MANY WAYS, BELGIUM IS A PERFECT INTRODUCTION to Europe. It's especially good for first-timers who might be overwhelmed by all there is to see in larger European countries. While there are plenty of attractions to keep visitors happily occupied for

a couple of weeks, its size is quite manageable and getting around is easy.

Much like with Bahrain (though on a slightly larger scale), you could set up base in the capital, Brussels, and explore the entire country from here. However that would mean some local flavour would be missed.

Guidebooks will tell you Belgium is torn into half by the Great Linguistic Divide. The northern part of Belgium, known as Flanders, is flat and predominantly agricultural. The people there tend to speak Flemish, a Dutch dialect. To the south is Wallonia, noted for its hills and woods – particularly in the Ardennes region in the country's southeast corner. The common language in Wallonia is French. Brussels sits just slightly north of centre.

However if Belgians are indeed divided by language, it is very hard for a visitor to tell. The people here



A vintage car parked on a street in Brussels.

PAGE OPPOSITE:

There is a sense of history in Brussels that is reflected in its stately architecture.



Belgians mix with tourists in a city square in Brussels.



are all very friendly and helpful – even to visitors who speak only English.

It's very hard not to like Belgians; they have much to be proud – a rich history, world class museums, tennis champions like Justine Henin-Hardenne and Kim Clijsters, and waffles and chocolate arguably unmatched even by the Swiss and French – yet the people are rarely boastful about themselves and are willing, enthusiastic listeners to visitors like us.

We got an opportunity to spread the word about the Friendship Tour and its mission through a press con-

ference, organised for us by the Gulf Co-operation Council's Ambassador to Belgium Hamad Ahmed Al-Amer, who himself is a Bahraini.

We also met writer Dennis O'Dwyer who is publishing a book on Bahraini artist Abbas Al Mosawi, and visited the Gulf Air office where we met the manager Nabih J Alouf.

All around, there was genuine interest and wonderment at our long journey from Bahrain, and many words of support and encouragement.



Belgium being a small country, we were able to do quite a bit of touring in the little time we were there.

We enjoyed going to the museums – the country’s collections are first rate – but here’s a bit of advice to anyone travelling to Belgium: don’t spend too much time indoors admiring the work of Flemish masters when you could be experiencing Belgian life in other ways – especially partaking of what must be some of the best food and drink on the continent.



Bruges is often called ‘Venice of the North’, and it’s easy to see why.



Ali, left, Christine and Martin, far right, with GCC ambassador to Belgium Hamad Ahmed Al Amer, second from left, and Dennis O’Dwyer, centre, who is publishing a book on Bahraini artist Abbas Al Mosawi.



The Friendship Tour team with Nabih J. Alouf, centre, manager of the Gulf Air office in Brussels.

Don’t hesitate to sample the chocolate in its various forms: sipping the oh-so-rich hot chocolate while people-watching at sidewalk cafes; strolling down cobbled streets to window-shop with a chocolate ice-cream cone in hand (the ice cream contains wonderfully thick chocolate shavings); or buying a gaufre (waffle) slathered with melted chocolate sauce from a street vendor for an afternoon snack. And that’s besides the eye-pleasing fare that awaits in your favorite chocolaterie.

