

# Brussels – Not What You Expected, But More...

Brussels is a city that divides opinions. One can easily spend a day in the beautiful downtown and be either content surrounded by luxurious chocolate stores and bars offering hundreds of different types of Belgian beers, or disappointed by the small, crowded and touristy settings. The true Brussels is however much more and the city layout reveals areas which almost appear as individual towns. Host to the European Union institutions, Brussels is considered the capital of Europe. It therefore inhabits a large international population, yet it has well managed to keep its local vibe and a small city atmosphere.

After having a little tour in the Medieval downtown, obviously one cannot miss the gorgeous *Grand Place* full of tourists with selfie sticks, the small peeing statue *Manneken Pis*, the *Cathedral* famous for royal weddings and of course the *Royal Palace* itself. However, after this little walking tour it is time to discover the true Brussels in depth. A good starting point is *Boulevard Anspach* by a popular meeting point at *La Bourse*. This road dividing the touristy and local parts of the centre was recently declared car-free and provides now a relaxed atmosphere with ping pong tables and picnic areas. A 200 meter walk leads you to *Sainte-Catherine's church* and the two squares on both sides of the church offer a great variety of local restaurants and bars.

First, let's talk FOOD! Belgium might be small, but it's known for a variety of international goods. Chocolate, fries, beer, waffles and even mussels are on the list to try while checking out the other attractions in Brussels. The most common chocolate shops for pralines include Wittamer, Marcolini, Neuhaus, Godiva and Leonidas, but a special recommendation goes to *Frederic Blondeel Chocolatier* at *Sainte-Catherine*. Here you get a glimpse of an actual chocolate factory and won't be pushed over by other drooling tourists. Don't forget to try the hot chocolates with Madagascar chocolate, lemon grass, chili pepper, and other flavours starting from €2.50 (\$2.73). See: <http://www.frederic-blondeel.be>.

Time for lunch? When ordering fries it is advisable not to mention the French as these yellow sliced potatoes were in fact invented by Belgians. The authentic fries are also baked twice in different temperatures and served as a full meal. *Maison Antoine*, at *Place Jourdan*, has been feeding the citizens since 1948 for €2.60 (\$2.84) per cone. Before asking for ketchup, have a look at the long list of other excellent options for sauce (e.g. andalouse, tartar, curry ketchup, pili pili...). With a full stomach, you can now head towards the close by EU Commissions Headquarters and have a look at the busy workers in black suits at *Schuman*. Don't let the fancy crowd fool you; as a tourist you don't need to go out to enjoy all the local specialities. Even several of the Trappist beers (Chimay, Orval, Rochefort, Westmalle, Westvleteren, Achel), famously made by monks, can be found at supermarkets.

It may be hard to compete with food, but are you ready to hear of the true specialty in Brussels? Belgium is the heart of COMIC BOOKS, and don't mistake to consider yourself too old, many of the stories are not even suitable for children. When walking around the city, notice the numerous paintings on the walls, often ironic and well suited for the environment. Forget the art museums, this *Comics Museum* you will not find anywhere else (note that most museums, including Comics Museum, are closed on Mondays). The tickets are sold for €8 (\$8.73) and the museum is located in a beautiful Art Nouveau building designed by Victor Horta. The museum's reading room entertains visitors in more than 20 different languages, so have a pick! See: <http://www.comicscenter.net/en/home>.

If the fries left you hungry, you may continue your comic book discoveries at a *Cook & Book restaurant* located in *Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe* neighbourhood. This unique bookstore is divided into different sections each combined with a small restaurant of an altered theme. You would never have seen anything like this! There are even books hanging from the ceiling. Located a decent metro ride away from the city centre,

this place is one of the true hidden gems in Brussels. See: <http://www.cookandbook.be>.

You have already seen (and tasted) many specialties in Brussels, but what about the VIEWPOINTS? A big part of a city tour is finding a panoramic spot for photos, but instead of spending €12 (\$13.10) at the distant *Atomium*, one of the touristy monuments, the locals have discovered an excellent free view point at *Parking 58* (Rue de l'Évêque). Just take the elevator to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor and enjoy! Alternate viewpoint is located by the *Palace of Justice*, another architectural amazement built in 1883, the largest building in Europe at the time. Its enormous halls and ghostly atmosphere are worth visiting free of charge. At *Poelaert Square*, you may also take a glass elevator down and get lost in the small adorable streets with more bars, restaurants and little boutiques.

Surely you don't want to miss the big SHOPPING. Instead of mingling at the crowded *Rue Neuve* in the centre, the area of *Louise* offers nice boutiques and shops in a more relaxed and beautiful setting. *Avenue Louise* is one of Brussels longest streets, known for international fashion, and it can be easily reached by public transport. If you are looking for a more extreme shopping experience, it is worth spending a morning or an early afternoon at the local markets offering different food items or almost anything you might need for a cheap price. *Marché du Midi*, by the South Station, is open on Sundays and on Thursdays you can find a calmer market at *Comte de Flandre* in *Molenbeek*. These areas are known for their immigrant population and you can easily find nice Moroccan and Turkish bakeries selling delights you have never tasted before. You may even feel like you are visiting another country.

After your tiring shopping tour, it is a perfect time to relax in a park and enjoy the peace of NATURE. Some of the most disregarded attractions in Brussels are its numerous unique parks. If you are visiting in the spring, don't miss the opportunity to see *the Roayl Gardens of Laeken* north of Brussels. The gorgeous greenhouses are open for public only for three weeks around April and May. The price is only €2.50 (\$2.73) per person. Did I mention there is also a castle? See:

<http://www.monarchie.be/palace-and-heritage/greenhouses-laeken>.

The most visited parks in Brussels are geometrically shaped *Jardin du Mont des Arts*, *Parc de Bruxelles* and *Parc du Cinquantenaire*. They are definitely worth a glance, but since you are finishing your shopping at *Louise*, simply continue your walk to the end of *Avenue Louise* and discover the wonderful *Bois de la Cambre* with more laidback atmosphere. Join the picnic groups and happy families playing in the park, or take a little ferry to reach *Chalet Robinson* for a drink or full meal on an island in the middle of a lake. If you are lucky, you can spot a waffle car at the park while lying on the grass. Just forget the touristy toppings and ask for a plain one for €2 (\$2.18), those are simply the best!

Last but not least, notice the numerous jewels of ARCHITECTURE during your exploration. Brussels is like a messy puzzle with the most amazing pieces. It is hard to ignore the medieval downtown, but often unnoticed are the spectacular Art Nouveau buildings interspersed around the wider Brussels. Worth a photograph are, for instance, *the Museum of Musical Instruments*, *Avenue Palmerston* and *Ambiorix Square*. On the other hand, the area of *the European Parliament* by the popular expats' party spot, *the Luxembourg Square*, has brought a modern flavour to the ancient city.

**TIP 1!** Invest either in a day pass for €7.50 (\$8.18), two-day pass for €14 (\$15.28) or a three-day pass for €18 (\$19.64) to discover the truly exciting spots in Brussels (these tickets also include the airport transport which otherwise costs €4.50 (\$4.91) per ride). Single tickets are €2.10 (\$2.29) or €2.50 (\$2.73) if bought from the driver. One ticket is valid for an hour for all busses, trams and metros.

**TIP 2!** Make sure to get a USE-IT map from *Galerie Ravenstain 25* offering more local tips and greatly diverse walking routes around multicultural Brussels.



*Belgian chocolates are world famous, and Brussels is therefore packed with chocolate shops. To visit a real chocolate factory, drop by Frederic Blondeel's Chocolatier at Sainte-Catherine.*



*Brussels is probably the only city in the world known for comic books. You can spot these amazing comic designs all around the capital!*



*Jardin du Mont des Arts, located in downtown, is one of the most popular photography spots in Brussels, but don't take this for the nicest park in Brussels!*