
The Kingdom of Belgium, located between France, Luxembourg, Germany and the Netherlands, covers a surface of 18,600 square miles and has a population of 10 million people. Its capital, Brussels, is also considered the capital city of Europe, as it hosts numerous institutions of the European Union. Belgium is a complex Federal State gathering, for economic matters, three regions (the Walloon Region, the Brussels Region, the Flemish Region), and, for cultural matters, such as education, three Communities (the French Community, the Flemish Community, the German Community).

PASSPORT

A valid passport is needed to enter Europe, and it should be valid 6 months beyond your intended departure date, meaning the end of your visit. We suggest you take a photo of your passport and email it to yourself in case it is ever lost or stolen. If it is lost or stolen, try to find the nearest embassy to get a temporary passport before you head to the airport.

CURRENCY

- **The Euro is the currency**
- **Use credit and debit cards during your trip** – many places accept foreign credit and debit cards. Notify the card companies that you will be using your card in Europe.
- **Have euros in your pocket** – Make sure to get at least a little cash out, and carry some with you. Many small restaurants and some grocery stores don't take credit cards, especially for small purchases. Many places do not take American Express.
- **Don't exchange money, get cash from an ATM** - the exchange rate comes directly from the bank. Check with your bank about the international foreign ATM fee before leaving. A \$4-10 fee won't matter if you get 200-400 euros out at one time. You might only have access to your checking account, not savings account.
- **Find a bank's ATM** - "Independent" ATMs charge outrageous fees.

VOLTAGE

- **The electrical current in Europe is 220 volts** - this is twice as strong as US and Canada.
- **Outlets take the "europlug"** - two round prongs. Bring an **europlug adapter** with you. These are easy to find online or at a travel store.
- **Do NOT bring a US or Canadian hairdryer** - These require a voltage converter. The 220 volts of European outlets will short-circuit your blow dryer. Cell phone, iPad, and laptop chargers all have a little box with the plug that automatically converts the voltage, so for most electronics a voltage converter isn't necessary, only an adapter.

CELL PHONES

- **Get an international plan** – This is the simplest option. Call your phone provider before leaving to inquire about a temporary international plan.
- **Buy a SIM card upon arrival** – For you tech-savvy folks with an unlocked phone, this is usually the most economical option. You can buy a SIM card with a data plan (to use internet) at the airport or convenience stores.
- **Just use the WIFI** - If you don't feel you will need phone coverage all the time, and you have a smart phone, then you could simply use the WIFI at hotels, cafes, and restaurants. Use a program like "Skype" to make cheap calls to your loved ones.
- Check out Rick Steve's page for more advice: <https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/phones-tech>

MAKING PHONE CALLS WITHIN EUROPE

Using your cell phone in Europe: If someone is trying to reach you from the US or Canada, as long as you have cell service, you can be reached at your usual phone number. (Call your provider before leaving home to ask about international plans.)

To Call a European number: (*sample phone number +33 (0) 2222 4444*)

1. Dial 00 or enter + from any mobile phone
2. Dial the country code 33
3. Dial the phone number, excluding the zero

Example: 003322224444 or +3322224444

To Call the US or Canada:

- Dial the phone number as usual, just don't forget the 1 before the area code

If you use a local European phone:

- Dial the zero then dial all the numbers after the zero

Example: 022224444

TRANSPORTATION AROUND EUROPE

- **Train travel** – this is the most convenient and speedy way of travel in Europe. High-speed trains generally require reservations but local trains do not and tickets can be purchased at the train station upon arrival. Generally tickets cannot be purchased more than two months in advance.
- **Busses** – a cheaper alternative to trains, especially for travel between two countries.
- **Car Rental** – this can be a great way to see the countryside, especially when you would like to visit smaller villages and towns where train connections are limited. Usually one-way car rental within the same country charges no extra fee, but if you want to pick up the car in one country and drop it off in another, there is a hefty fee.
- **Logistical Wizard** - A *fantastic* resource for travel logistics is www.rome2rio.com. Plug in your departure and arrival information and they will tell you which planes trains busses or ferries you could take to get from one place to another, even with small towns!

TIPPING AT RESTAURANTS

Tip in cash and hand it to the waiter, don't leave it on the table.

- **Italy & Austria** – Check the bill to see if service is included. If not, leave a tip of 10-15%.
- **France & Belgium** – Service is included. If it was superb, feel free to leave a few euros.
- **Netherlands & Germany** – Tip 5-10%, or rounding up is common, for example €37 to €40.

GRATUITY FOR THE GUIDE

Tipping is not expected, but is always appreciated. The average gratuity for one couple is 50 euros for a one-week tour, given to the guide. There is a general range of 40-100 euros. If you also wish to tip the crew, you should do this separately, giving it to one member of the crew who will share it among the others.

OPENING HOURS - SHOPS

Generally shops operate from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and are closed on Sunday. Most towns and villages also have an open-air market day once per week.

BRUSSELS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

The airport is located 8 miles northeast of the city center. The train station is located on the lower level of Brussels International Airport (1st floor). There is a train shuttle service from the airport to the North, South and Central stations of Brussels. Taxi service from the airport to the city center is approximately 35 Euro. Taxis are available 24 hours.

LANGUAGES

There are three officially recognized languages: French and Dutch are the main languages; German is spoken by a small segment of the population and **English is widely spoken.**

TRAIN TRAVEL IN BELGIUM

To get around Belgium, take the train. You do not need to reserve ahead of time unless you are traveling to another country. You can check the train schedule in Belgium at www.raileurope.com or www.b-rail.be.

TRAIN TRAVEL BETWEEN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

You cannot purchase tickets more than four months in advance, but the earlier you reserve, the cheaper the ticket is. You can find information about the trains at nshispeed.nl or www.b-rail.be.

- **Bruges and Amsterdam** - there are trains that run with one change in Brussels or Antwerp. The trip takes 3-4 hours, depending on the speed of train you choose. Tickets should be purchased ahead of time.
- **Amsterdam and Brussels** - the trip takes 2-3 hours and should be reserved ahead of time.

Hotels in Bruges

If you wish to spend time in Bruges before or after your trip, then we recommend the following hotels.

Romantik Pandhotel ****

An intimate 18th century mansion hidden on a quiet street minutes from the Market Square.
www.pandhotel.com

Tel: +32 (0) 50 34 06 66, E-mail: info@pandhotel.com

Die Swaene ****

"The Swan" is a lovely hostelry located on a peaceful canal. www.dieswaene-hotel.com

Tel: +32 (0) 50 34 27 98, E-mail: info@dieswaene.com

Hotel Academie ****

The modern hotel Academie is situated in the famous "golden triangle" of Bruges, less than 50 meters from such well-known tourist landmarks as the Lake of Love and the Convent. All the other sites of interest are within easy walking distance. Small inner courtyard; reasonably priced. www.hotelacademie.be

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 33 22 66, E-mail: inge@hotelacademie.be

Hotel Oud Huis de Peellaert ****

"This elegant hotel is in the very heart of the historical center, 150 meters from the "Grote markt". Beautifully restored 19th century mansions; nice inner courtyard"

www.depeellaert.be

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 33 78 89, E-mail: info@depeellaert.be

Hotel Biskajer ****

A small hotel on a quiet small square in the center of town near the canal "Spiegelrei."

www.hotelbiskajer.com

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 34 15 06, E-mail: info@hotelbiskajer.com

Hotel Marabou ***

A charming hotel located on the edge of the city center. <http://www.hotel-maraboe.com>

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 33 81 55, E-mail: hotel@maraboe.be

Hotel Botaniek ***

An 18th century mansion elegantly renovated and right in the historic center of Bruges.

www.botaniek.be

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 34 14 24, E-mail: info@botaniek.be

Hotel Ter Reien ***

Situated along one of the most beautiful canals of Bruges, the Sint-Annarei, the hotel offers unique views and an ideal location for exploring the historic city of Bruges.

www.hotelterreien.be

Tel.: +32 (0) 50 34 91 00, E-mail: info@hotelterreien.be

Packing Tips

- **Pack lightly!** – you will thank yourself as you lug your suitcase around the airport, on trains, busses, up staircases when your European hotel has no elevator.
- **Use ziploc bags or packing cubes** - These make it easy to stay organized.
- **Wash clothes in the bathroom sink** – While in most towns you can find a Laundromat, it is also convenient to wash out t-shirts or bike pants in your hotel or barge bathroom. Ring them out, the roll them in a dry towel and press the water out of them. Hang to dry! Washing a few items during your trip will help keep your luggage light.
- **Spring cycling** – this can be unpredictable. It is not a bad idea bring warm gloves, hat/helmet liner, and socks. Check the weather forecast.
- **Layer!** - Even during the summer months or in a warm climate you may have some cool or wet days. Bring a lightweight base layer that will wick away moisture. Next wear a layer of insulation for cool weather conditions. Finally you need a windproof and waterproof shell to protect you from the elements.
- **Bring accessories you love** – have a gel cover that you love to use? Like to have a clip-on rearview mirror? Bring them. If you are accustomed to riding with certain items, you will feel more confident and comfortable riding in a foreign place if you have them with you. Ask us before bringing pedals or bike seat.
- **Wear padded bike shorts** – This helps tremendously to keep your sit bones happy.
- **Take a photo of your passport** – email it to yourself. If lost, you'll save time replacing it.

Suggested Packing List

One-week cycling tours

BIKING GEAR

- 1-3 pairs of biking shorts
- 4-5 t-shirts or biking jerseys
- 1 pair of long comfortable pants
- 1-2 long-sleeved shirts or jerseys
- Sweatshirt or fleece pullover
- Waterproof jacket (a must!)
- Shoes to cycle in (sneakers are fine)
- Sunglasses (a must!)
- Water bottle (at times provided)
- Rain legs (optional)
- Helmet (**many times provided!**)
- Cycling gloves (optional)

CLOTHES

- Regular shoes or sandals
- Socks
- Underwear
- Casual outfits for the evening
- Bathing suit (*optional*)

TOILETRY KIT

- Deodorant
- Toothpaste, toothbrush
- Comb, brush, shaver or razor
- Shampoo/conditioner

FIRST-AID KIT

- Sunscreen
- Band-Aids
- Aspirin or Ibuprofen
- Digestive aid
- Lip balm with sunscreen
- Butt butter (optional)*

MISCELLANEOUS

- Passport (and copy)
- Earplugs
- Reading glasses & reading material
- Headphones
- Europlug adapter
- Printed final documents**
(Emailed ~40 days before departure)

Tips on Getting in Shape

You'll enjoy your cycling vacation a whole lot more if you take the time to get reasonably fit. You will also decrease the possibility of an injury while on tour. Please consult your physician if you have any health concerns that might make strenuous exercise a risk.

- **Gradual training** - strengthen your body incrementally so you won't become injured from the stress of cycling.
 - Take some fun rides two months prior to the tour.
 - Build your distance gradually.
 - Stretch and loosen up your muscles before and after each ride.
- **Get your sit bones in shape!** – Even if you are good physical shape, your sit bones won't be. If you put in consistent time on the bike (2-5 times a week!) your caboose will thank you later.
- **Go at an easy pace** - 9-12 miles per hour is an excellent sightseeing speed. Stop at 1-hour intervals and take a water break. You'll be stopping at least that often to photograph a windmill, visit a castle or simply behold a beautiful field of sunflowers. You'll also be stopping for lunch, snacks or a museum break!
- **Don't over train** - take rest days to allow yourself to recover. Your body is damaged by exercise and it's during the rest that follows the exercise that you get stronger.
- **Ride someplace fun** - Structure your bicycling workouts so they're enjoyable. Ride to a destination with friends if that is motivating.

PAYMENTS

Full payment by credit card is due 70 days before trip departure. An invoice will be sent about 90 days before departure date. VGT will regard reservations canceled when payment of the balance is not received when due.

CANCELLATION POLICY

For TULIP TOURS:

After reservation and up to 90 days prior to departure: 20% of total tour cost

From 89 to 60 days prior to departure: 35% of total tour cost

From 59 to 30 days prior departure: 60% of total tour cost

From 29 days prior to departure date to arrival day: 100% of total tour cost

For All Other Tours:

After reservation and up to 90 days prior to departure: 10% of total tour cost

From 89 to 60 days prior to departure: 35% of total tour cost

From 59 to 30 days prior departure: 60% of total tour cost

From 29 days prior to departure date to arrival day: 100% of total tour cost

CHANGES TO THE ITINERARY

Due to unforeseen circumstances VGT on rare occasions must alter accommodations or routes from those mentioned in the itinerary. All efforts are made to select a hotel of the same high quality and keep route changes to a minimum.

VGT CANCELLATION OF TOURS

VGT reserves the right to cancel a tour for any reason. In the unlikely event that this happens a refund of all money received will be made.