



Belgium: 10 reasons to go to Brussels now

Story and photos by

Special Contributor

Published: 21 December 2012 05:33 PM

BRUSSELS — Brussels may be the capital of the European Union and of all things business on this side of the world, but the city is anything but stuffy. On the contrary, there's a vibe that's just a little off-center. From its avant-garde fashion boutiques to the surrealist art by native son René Magritte, Brussels definitely sprouts a style of its own.

Easy to navigate — finding your way around is simple, and nothing's too far from anything else — Brussels has an openness that many European cities don't. Plus, most Bruxellois speak English, in addition to Flemish and French. What to do? Here are my top 10.

Ellise Pierce is a Paris-based freelance writer.

Shop local

What was once a 19th-century market for grain, cattle and fish — the Antoine Dansaert-St. Catherine quartier — is now a chic Belgian-centric shopping district. Top shops include: the flagship N.D.C. Made by Hand store, stocked with trend-proof handmade boots for men and women; Sonja Noel's cutting-edge boutique Stijl, which carries Belgian designers Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten and Raf Simons, along with the new guard, too (Cathy Pill, Haider Ackermann, Tim Van Steenberghe); Noel's newest shop, Haleluja, stocked only with organic and sustainable fashions; Martin Margiela, for all things asymmetrical; and Olivier Strelli, for men's and women's work-wearable separates and layers, from lambskin vests to classic trench coats.

Details:

N.D.C. Made by Hand, 36 Léon Lepage, 32-1/02-808-36-31.

Stijl, 74 Rue A. Dansaert, 32-1/2512-0313.

Haleluja, 6 Place du Nouveau Marché aux Grains, 32-1/2513-4250.

Martin Margiela, 144 Rue de Flandre, 32-1/2223-7520.

Olivier Strelli, 44 Rue A. Dansaert, 32-1/2512-0942.

Find hidden treasures

Every morning, old sheets and blankets are unfurled onto the cobblestones in the Place du Jeu de Balle in the Quartier Marolles, where stacks of vintage plates, silverware with wooden handles and plenty of beer steins are laid out for the daily flea market that takes place, rain or shine, as it has since it began in 1640. The vibe is more grandmother's attic than shabby chic, which makes the digging that much more fun. For serious junkers, this is a must-do, and the later you go — around noon, an hour before the market closes — the lower the prices.

Details: Place du Jeu de Balle Flea Market, at the corner of Rue Blaes and Place du Jeu de Balle.

Go to the coolest kitchen store ever

The idea behind Dille & Kamille, a small Dutch chain of kitchen and housewares boutiques, is simple: Good design shouldn't cost a fortune, and it doesn't have to be made cheaply, either. Case in point, Dille & Kamille's fabulously sturdy wooden spoons, in every size and handle length imaginable, for less than 2 euros apiece. Cotton napkins and matching tablecloths, in easy, changeable-with-the-seasons (or your mood) colors. Café au lait bowls in a basic creamy white. Plus hundreds of kitchen gadgets, from the tiniest cheese grater in the world to forks made specifically for plucking the meat out of shellfish. There are also plenty of wicker baskets to hold everything in — you may need two.

Details: Dille & Kamille, 16 Rue Jean Stas, 32-1/2538-8125.

Stand in line for frites

Not eating frites while in Belgium would be like passing up a Fletcher's corny dog at the Texas State Fair. So go ahead and order your comet of thick-as-your-finger frites at the family-owned Fritland, which has been serving up heaps of fries since 1978, along with 10 different sauces (i.e., mayonnaises), from the mildly spicy Andaluz to curry ketchup, which is a bit like barbecue sauce. Know that sauces are not included and will set you back an additional 80 centimes over the 3-euro-per-cone price. Grab a Barbie-size plastic fork and dig in.

Details: Fritland, 49 Rue Henri Maus, 32-1/2514-0627.

See flying sea turtles, pipes and apples

René Magritte fans will love Brussels' newest museum, dedicated to its most famous painter, in the restored neoclassical Altenloh hotel in the Place Royale. At the Magritte Museum, in three compact floors, visitors can follow Magritte's life chronologically, through bits and pieces that you won't find elsewhere — sketches and drawings on scraps of paper, letters and personal photographs and films he made himself. Go early in the day to avoid the crowds; there are plenty of benches to sit on and reflect. A pipe is not a pipe? Discuss among yourselves.

Details: Magritte Museum, 1 Place Royale, 32-1/2508-3211.

Drink lambic, bacteria-borne brew

With more than 800 varieties of beer in Belgium, it's no wonder that some of the bars in Brussels don't post a closing time. (What? Midnight? I'm only on number 13!) The most famous of Belgian brews — and the one to try while you're here — is lambic, that is, beer that's made when airborne bacteria mix with wheat and barley, aged in barrels, then in bottles, for up to five years. Best place to try one is the circa 1928 cafe and bar, À La Mort Subite, which literally means "in the

manner of a sudden death.” Don’t let that scare you. There are no vampires here.

Details: À La Mort Subite, Rue Montagne-aux-Herbes Potagères 7, 32-1/2513-1318.

Buy chocolate

All it takes is one bite into a dark chocolate-covered fig. Or apricot. Laurent Gerbaud, who’s been making chocolates in Brussels now for 12 years, began playing around by dipping kumquats in dark chocolate when he was living in China. When he moved back to his native Brussels, he continued to mix Asian flavors with chocolate, which is why his permanent collection includes confit of ginger, orange or grapefruit enrobed in chocolate that’s a mix of cacao beans from Madagascar, Peru and Ecuador. Undecided? No worries. Here, you can try before you buy.

Details: Laurent Gerbaud Chocolatier, 2 D Rue Ravenstein, 32-1/2511-1602.

Listen to jazz

Walk through the heavy wrought-iron door and step back into the 1930s at L’Archiduc, the art deco built-in-the-round jazz club where Miles Davis and Charlie Parker played, and live jazz is still presented every week. With a grand piano in the center of the multilevel space, you can take your seat, order a Manhattan and just sit back and enjoy.

Details: L’Archiduc, 6 Rue A. Dansaert, 32-1/2512-0652.

Beer-centric cuisine

Just off of Place St. Catherine, La Villette’s Belgian cuisine shows you that beer is more than just for drinking. Here, the country’s famous brew is whisked into sauces with steaks and added to Carbonnades Flamandes, traditional Flemish beef stew. It’s all served up in a homey tavern with red-and-white checked tablecloths, and creaky wooden chairs that have probably been around for a century.

Details: La Villette, 3 Rue du Vieux Marché aux Grains, 32-1/2512-7550

Sleep in style

Modernists will love the sharp lines and simple, cool aesthetic of the Dominican, tucked behind the theater La Monnaie and within walking distance to the Grand Place. Each room has a slightly different design, but the aim is serenity, to provide a place of calm from the hustle below. With downy pillows and a cool gray granite walk-in shower, you may feel so at home, you won’t want to leave.

Details: The Dominican, 9 Rue Léopold, 32-1/22-5-0808

Insider’s tip

Buy a Brussels card before you go — available in 24-, 48- or 72-hour segments — for admission to museums and unlimited rides on the city’s subway system and trams.

visitbrussels.be

visitflanders.us

Ride the rails

For a quick trip out of town (Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent are all great day trips), contact Rail Europe before you go for easy, ticketless travel. For more information or to book, visit raileurope.com. Trips can also be reserved by consulting with a travel agent or calling 1-800-848-7245.



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