

# Happily ever Belgian

If you've ever wondered where Cinderella enjoyed her fairy-tale ending, look no further: Belgium has more castles per square mile than anywhere else in the world (an estimated 3,000 in total).

**Kimberley Lovato** seeks out the best

## Flower power

Originally constructed around 1110, **Château de Grand-Bigard** sits just 7km west of Belgium's busy capital, off the Ring at exit 11 or via the De Lijn Bus number 136 from Brussels South Station. Designed in Flemish and medieval Renaissance styles, with deep protective moats, the castle has seen some 40 different owners throughout its history, but it was in 1902 that Raymond Pelgrims de Bigard began restoring the site to its current state, spending 30 years making it one of the country's most prestigious châteaux.

While the building itself isn't open to the general public, the surrounding gardens draw nearly 50,000 visitors during four weeks each spring to tiptoe through more than one million bulbs, including 300 tulip types. This year, 1000m<sup>2</sup> of newly restored greenhouses will display flower design trends and arrangements, which will change each week.

**Open** 8 April – 6 May 2010. **Entry** adults €10, children €5.

The **Château Royal de Laeken** has been the main residence of the Belgian royal family since 1831, when King Leopold II ascended to the throne. Located a metro ride (Heysel stop) from the centre of Brussels in a 395-acre park, the château remains a private residence, but the splendid art nouveau greenhouses open their glass doors to the public each April for three weeks only, a tradition that's been carried out for over a century. Wandering the Royal Greenhouses is an exceptional opportunity to follow Belgium's royal lineage while admiring the awe-inspiring collection of flowers and rare plants, some belonging to Leopold II's original collection. The evening openings are particularly magical, when the glass orbs are aglow from the inside.

**Open** 16 April – 9 May 2010. **Entry** €2,50. [monarchie.be](http://monarchie.be) >>





## Et ils vécurent heureux... en Belgique

Si vous vous êtes jamais demandé où Cendrillon vécut durant toutes ces longues années de bonheur, ne cherchez pas plus loin. La Belgique possède plus de châteaux au kilomètre carré que n'importe quel autre coin de la planète (on les estime à 3 000 au total). **Kimberley Lovato** part à l'assaut de ces forteresses



MAIN IMAGE: ALAMY

### Le Flower power

Construit à l'origine aux alentours de 1110, le **Château de Grand-Bigard** se trouve à seulement 7 km à l'ouest de la trépidante capitale de la Belgique, en empruntant le Ring sortie 11 ou en prenant le bus numéro 136 de De Lijn au départ de la Gare de Bruxelles Midi. Bâti dans un style remarquable de la Renaissance flamande, entouré de vastes douves, le château a vu défiler 40 propriétaires différents au cours de son histoire, mais c'est à partir de 1902 que Raymond Pelgrims de Bigard s'est lancé dans une entreprise de 30 années de restauration du site tel qu'on le connaît aujourd'hui. Il en a fait un des joyaux du patrimoine belge. Alors que le bâtiment principal n'est pas ouvert au public, les jardins environnants attirent près de 50 000 visiteurs chaque printemps. Durant quatre semaines, les amateurs de fleurs peuvent déambuler à travers plus d'1 million de plantes à bulbes, dont 300 variétés de tulipes. Cette année, 1000 m<sup>2</sup> de serres nouvellement restaurées accueilleront une exposition d'arrangements floraux et de plantes décoratives, renouvelés chaque semaine. **Ouverture du 8 avril au 6 mai 2010. Entrée : adultes 10 €, enfants 5 €.**

Le **Château Royal de Laeken** est la résidence principale de la famille royale de Belgique depuis 1831, lors de l'accession au trône du roi Léopold I. Facilement accessible en métro du centre de Bruxelles (arrêt Heysel) le château, situé dans un parc de 160 ha, reste une résidence privée, mais les splendides Serres royales attenantes, de style Art Nouveau, >>

**Above:** The Château de Bouillon is one of the country's most ancient fortifications

**Left:** High flyers at Château d'Hassonville, now a luxurious hotel

**Opposite page:** The tulip-filled grounds of Château de Grand-Bigard are open to the public every spring



“Château d’Hassonville is a stunning stopover for refined epicureans”

### Eat, sleep and be merry

The gothic **Kasteel Ten Berghe** is located 3km from the picturesque town of Bruges (trains from Brussels take an hour) and only 14km from Belgium’s coast. It’s now a hotel, with rooms that have been modernised to a high standard. The castle is surrounded by lush parkland (bikes are available from the front desk) and the requisite moat, while the interior is chock-a-block with authentic furnishings, gargoyles and paintings of the aristocratic family that once lived here. Crown yourself king and reserve the turret room, or rent the entire castle for a meeting or special occasion.

**Open** Year-round. [kasteeltenberghe.be](http://kasteeltenberghe.be)

En route to Luxembourg, about one hour from Brussels on the E411 motorway, the **Château d’Hassonville** is a stunning stopover for refined epicureans. In the 17th century, King Louis XIV of France used the château and its surrounding 136 acres as a hunting lodge. Today, Christian Rodrigues and his wife Liliane Van Eyck (both from Antwerp) welcome visitors to their luxurious guest rooms and onsite spa, and at the gourmet restaurant run by chef Olivier Delaere (with Belgium’s best-known sommelier, Pierr Vicini). Chocaholics planning a stay at Hassonville over Easter can take part in an Easter egg hunt organised around the castle’s grounds on 4 April.

**Open** Year-round. [hassonville.be](http://hassonville.be) ■



IMAGE DANITA DELIMONT/ALAMY

**Above:** The dramatic Château d’Hassonville was once used as a hunting lodge by King Louis XIV

**Below right:** Located 70km from Brussels, Beloeil hosts an auspicious annual music event

### Patrimony pleasers

**Beloeil**, literally translated as ‘beautiful eye’, is one of the largest and most splendid of Belgium’s castles. Founded in the 13th century as a medieval fortress, it has slowly transformed into a residential palace reminiscent of a Loire Valley château. Since 1394, the domain has belonged to the Princes of Ligne, one of the country’s oldest noble families. A car is the best option for visiting Beloeil, located 70km from Brussels.

The castle is fully furnished, with a varied collection of art from the 15th to the 19th century, and a library with 20,000 books. Beloeil is also the venue for one of summer’s most notable events, The Boleil Night of Music, which this year will be held on 21 August and will feature 350 musicians playing homage to the music of kings amongst beautifully sculptured gardens.

**Open** Weekends starting 1 April, and every afternoon (13:00-18:00) from 15 May – 30 September 2010.

**Entry** €8. [chateaudebeloeil.com](http://chateaudebeloeil.com)

The **Château de Bouillon**, near the French border, has fortifications dating from the eighth century. It was the seat of the notorious Godfrey of Bouillon (his statue decorates the Place Royale in Brussels), who led the First Crusade in 1096. Partially in ruins, atop a bluff overlooking the town of Bouillon and the Semois River, the castle is a must for anyone interested in Belgium’s feudal past. Come 1 March, don’t miss the impressive falconry demonstration (a popular sport and status symbol among the nobles of medieval Europe), with an onsite falconer and birds of prey including owls, eagles, vultures and, of course, falcons.

**Show** Three times daily from 1 March – 11 November 2010.

**Entry** €5,90. [bouillon-initiative.be](http://bouillon-initiative.be)