

This page: the lobby of Hotel Bloom. Opposite page: the Atomium monument built for the 1958 World's Fair (top); Serres Royale de Lacken (middle); Rue de Bouchers (bottom).



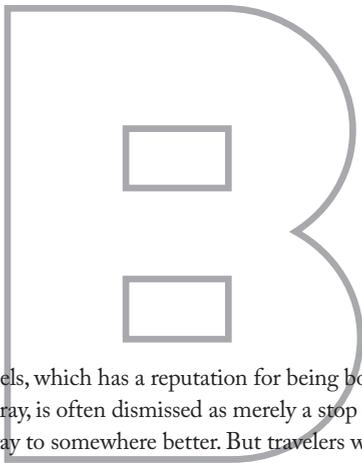
BRUSSELS

The diplomatic center of Europe is shaking off its musty image.
by Kimberley Lovato



**This page: Palais Royal (above);
dining on the Grand-Place (right).
Opposite page: Galerie de la Reine.**





Brussels, which has a reputation for being boring and gray, is often dismissed as merely a stop along the way to somewhere better. But travelers who have spent time in Brussels—and those who live and work here—know better. The thousand-year-old capital of Belgium is no longer Europe’s wallflower: It has blossomed into an international city that seamlessly blends business, politics and culture.

Home of the European Commission (executive branch of the EU), NATO, a multilingual population consisting of 50 percent foreigners, and more than 2,000 international agencies and firms, Brussels is known as the crossroads of Europe for a reason. Even *Forbes* magazine’s 2009 list of “Best Countries for Business” ranked Belgium 12th out of 127 countries—further proof that Brussels is no longer just a pit stop for travelers.

“Brussels is an ideal place for business,” says Kim Staveloz, head of the Brussels Enterprise Agency (bea.irisnet.be), which is charged with welcoming foreign investors and business into the region. “It’s a city of highly educated and multilingual leaders who are open to new cultures and willing to make contact.”

Communication tips

Whether you’re stopping by for a week or establishing a permanent presence in Europe, Staveloz suggests a base in Brussels—and American companies are heeding the call. According to the agency, American businesses are Belgium’s largest foreign investor with business services, pharmaceutical, chemical, and software sectors representing the largest concentration of U.S. companies.

Brussels is officially bilingual in French and Flemish, but English is widely spoken. Even so, it’s never a bad idea to learn a few basic words (*please, thank you*) in any local language, says American-born Anne Randerson, the founder and managing director of Cross Cultural Horizons (crossculturalhorizons.com), a cultural integration consulting firm headquartered in Brussels. She also advises a slice of humble pie.

“Many of us [Americans] were raised with an entrepreneurial spirit and resoluteness to achieve our goals,” explains Randerson. “What we perceive as confidence, which is positive, can come



“AMERICANS ARE USED TO INSTANT RESULTS, INCLUDING DECISIONS. BUT A LONG-TERM APPROACH IS NECESSARY HERE.”

across as arrogance and impatience to Europeans, which is generally negative. It’s important to recognize these kinds of cultural differences.”

Cultural quirks

Randerson has lived all over the world and has made a career of integrating American businesspeople into their foreign surroundings, most notably in Japan and Belgium. She says the direct American style of doing business varies from the more passive style found in Brussels, and this can present a challenge. “Things take a little longer here. It is a relationship-driven culture, rather than an individualist mentality,” she explains. “[Americans] are used to instant results, including decisions, but a long-term rather than short-term approach is necessary here.”

Eric Werbrouck, the area manager for Berlitz Schools of Language and Cross Cultural Training in Brussels, agrees that relationship-building is important, but he cautions that the word *relationship* does not mean getting truly personal. Unlike in the States, where going to a holiday party at the boss’s home



Radisson Blu Hotel

Where to sleep

The Conrad Hotel

Luxury hotel on fashionable Avenue Louise, with sophisticated surroundings.
Avenue Louise 71
 +32 (02) 542 42 42

Radisson Blu Hotel

Walking distance to all European institutions, with fitness center and free Wi-Fi.
Rue d'Idalie 35
 +32 (02) 626 81 11

Hotel Bloom

Contemporary boutique hotel located near the Metro, with extensive business facilities.
Rue Royale 250
 +32 (02) 220 66 11



Belga Queen

is common, personal relationships with colleagues take longer to nurture in Brussels.

“People do not go to each other’s houses,” he says. “Personal life and work life are kept separate. But once a relationship is established, say over a period of years, one might then be invited.”

Entertaining clients at lunch or dinner is not unusual, however, and conversation is not limited to business matters. Art, literature, politics and sports also have their place at the table, as does a glass of wine or beer at lunch. “This would not be the case with American companies,” stresses Randerson.

Belgian law grants a minimum of 20 vacation days per year—unheard of for Americans, who find the coveted work/life balance more difficult to manage. But when they are at work, Belgians take things seriously: The idea of Casual Friday would be downright laughable in Brussels. “Unless you know for certain that an environment is casual,” says Werbrouck, “you will never make a mistake by wearing business attire.”

While Belgians do take time to get to know you, they don’t take time as seriously as Americans. “Fifteen minutes late for a meeting is acceptable,” says Werbrouck. “It’s called the academic quarter [hour] and comes from our university days, when professors would leave the door

open for 15 minutes after class started before locking students out. I guess this transferred over to offices, too.”

But overall, Americans and Belgians are more alike than not, says Randerson, and Brussels is an easy place to navigate and integrate. “Brussels is more multi-lingual and multicultural than any other city I’ve lived and done business in,” he enthuses. “There’s no place like it.”

“Brussels is unique,” agrees Werbrouck. “Because of our multi-cultural environment, we are extremely flexible.” Just pack a little patience (and a well-pressed suit), and you’ll be fine.

Taking time off

It takes a little digging, but once you get below the gritty surface, Brussels’ personality shines through. The Grand-Place is a must-see, with its golden guild houses and impressive town hall, but the surrounding tourist shops do not reflect real life in the capital.

Brussels is a city of neighborhoods, and exploring the daily open-air markets is a fun way to discover this

mosaic. Stockel on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays is great for fresh produce, delicious waffles and a familial neighborhood with scores of restaurants and shops. Gare du Midi, on Sundays, is the site of one of the biggest open-air markets in Europe (more than 400 stands), and offers a colorful array of goods and people-watching. Place du Chatelaine, on Wednesday afternoons, is a gourmet's favorite in a trendy neighborhood, offering everything from saffron to wine. The weekend antiques market in the Grand Sablon is worth the visit—it's held in one of the most beautiful squares in Brussels. You'll also find chocolate shops and Belgian specialty boutiques there, including Biscuiterie Dandoy, which is famous for *speculoos* (Belgian spice cookies). Don't miss the daily flea market at Place du Jeu de Balle in the Marolles, the city's old working-class quarter and one of the only neighborhoods where shops are open on Sunday.

The compact city center is ideal for walking, and the tourist office (*brusselsinternational.be*) gives guided tours with a variety of themes that take you around lively downtown neighborhoods. For a true Belgian experience, take the comic-strip trail tour. Thirty walls in Brussels are covered with larger-than-life characters, displaying this typically Belgian art form in grand style.

There are more than 2,000 restaurants in Brussels, where eating and drinking are favorite pastimes. From the famous *friteries* (french-fry stands) and beer bars that dot the cityscape to the Michelin-starred establishments, there is something for every taste. *Sensum.be* sorts notable restaurants by neighborhood and type of cuisine, making it easy to understand why Brussels is a foodie favorite. **ET**

KIMBERLEY LOVATO, a food and travel writer, has lived in Brussels for five years.

Where to eat

Belga Queen

This beauty, housed in an old bank building, serves modern Belgian cuisine and has a downstairs club. *Rue Fossé aux Loups 32*
+32 (02) 217 21 87

L'Ecailler du Palais Royal

A Michelin-starred fish restaurant in one of the most beautiful areas in the city. *Rue Bodenbroeck 18*
+32 (02) 512 87 51

Au Vieux Saint Martin

This consistently popular bustling brasserie serves up typical Belgian fare. *Grand Sablon 38*
+32 (02) 512 64 76



MORE TO DISCOVER IN BRUSSELS

Cantillon Brewery & Geuze Museum

Discover the production of traditional Geuze, a distinctive Belgian beer brewed only in Brussels. *Rue Gheude 56, +32 (02) 521 49 28*

Duval Chocolate Factory

Take a factory tour and watch a demonstration of the manual production of chocolate, with tastings. *Rue des Chardons 19, +32 (02) 242 94 66*

The Horta Museum

Victor Horta's house is an example of the art nouveau style that made him Belgium's most renowned architect. *Américaine 25, +32 (02) 543 04 90*

