

Belgium | Country Report

21 Dec 2011

Travel security guide

Standing travel advice

STANDING TRAVEL ADVICE

- Normal travel can continue.
- Take basic security precautions against petty and street crime.

Travel security

CRIME

Crime levels are lower than in cities in other parts of Europe and in the US. However, petty street crime is on the increase in Belgium's two largest cities, Brussels and Antwerp. Petty crime and snatch-and-run theft are most commonly reported at public transport hubs or in crowded public transport, notably the metro. Thieves often operate near an escalator, elevator, or where there is a throttle point in the pedestrian traffic, obstructing free movement while an accomplice commits the crime. Laptop computers are usually stolen when the passenger puts the shoulder bag on the ground while ordering food, at ticket counter or when waiting for a taxi. Personnel should exercise situational awareness of their immediate surroundings, maintain control of their belongings, and avoid displaying valuable items.

Rates of violent crime are low, though muggings can turn violent. Thefts from cars, even those waiting at traffic lights, are common, but basic precautions including keeping windows closed, doors locked and concealing expensive items can mitigate this risk. The theft of expensive makes and models of cars also remains a risk.

Burglars often target empty residences particularly during the holiday periods in August, around Christmas, and the ski period in February. Thieves usually do reconnaissance by posing as utility employees or charity workers to gain access to the residence. Expatriates should not allow entry to unknown individuals and should ask for identification; effective security mechanisms can also mitigate risks.

Hate crime is not prevalent; however, acts of vandalism, including arson attacks by disgruntled Muslim youths on synagogues and Jewish cultural centres have previously taken place. A wave of attacks took place between December 2008 and January 2009, coinciding with Israel's operation 'Cast Lead' in the Gaza strip. Similar incidents remain possible depending on developments in the Middle East, though they pose only low incidental risks to bystanders.

TERRORISM

Terrorism poses a low risk and no terrorist incident has taken place in the country's recent history. However, Belgium hosts a number of international organisations and interests, including the NATO headquarters in the capital Brussels, NATO's military command SHAPE in Casteau (Hainaut province) and the European Parliament at the Espace Leopold complex in Brussels, which may be considered potential targets for Islamist extremists.

Evidence emerged after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US of the presence of Islamist extremist cells in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp (Antwerp province), though their activities seemed mostly limited to fundraising and logistics. A majority of Belgium's estimated 400,000 Muslims are of Moroccan ancestry and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) – a Salafist organisation which was linked to the March 2004 commuter-train bombings in Madrid (Spain) – used to have a presence in the country. One of the group's leaders at the time of the Madrid attacks resided in Brussels and many of those involved visited Belgium shortly before the bombings. In 2007, three GICM members were sentenced to prison terms of up to seven years.

A crackdown on Islamist extremists was launched following the September 2001 attacks; Nizar Trabelsi, a Tunisian national, was convicted in 2004 of planning to conduct an attack against a NATO base in Belgium and sentenced to ten years in prison; the US has demanded that he be extradited to face allegations of involvement in plots against US military interests.

In May 2010, a leader of the Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) warned that it would consider Belgium as a legitimate target after the country's parliament adopted a law prohibiting women from wearing burqas in public. In addition, there have been cases of Belgian nationals involved in international terrorism. Muriel Degauque, a Belgian national and Muslim convert, was the first reported female suicide bomber in Iraq. Two Belgian nationals were responsible for the assassination on 9 September 2001 of Gen Ahmed Shah Masood, the leader of the Northern Alliance which resisted Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

SOCIAL UNREST

Public sector workers have been known to stage protests over job cuts, pension reductions and the withdrawal of welfare benefits. Farmers, truck drivers, rail workers and taxi drivers have on occasion blocked border crossings and major road routes in and around Brussels in protest at government policies. Protests of this kind cause major travel disruption but generally remain peaceful.

Racial tensions occasionally flare in Belgium, though attacks usually target immigrants and institutions like the Flemish (Dutch speakers)- and French-speaking Free Universities (Wallons). Individual immigrants have been attacked by youth gangs, especially in urban centres. Brussels hosts around 300,000 immigrants from North Africa, while a smaller number live in Antwerp. There is a feeling of being neglected among this community because of the higher-than-average unemployment rates it experiences and the fact that its members are not granted voting rights.

Environmentalists, anti-capitalists and other activists from Belgium and the rest of Europe stage occasional protests against EU policies outside EU institutions in central Brussels, particularly during EU summits. Protests of this kind occasionally lead to clashes between activists and riot police.

CONFLICT

Belgium is not engaged in any foreign conflicts and does not suffer from internal unrest.

POLITICAL SITUATION

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy and practises parliamentary democracy. Since 1993 it has been a federal state, comprising three linguistic communities (Flemish, French and German) and three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels). The federal government transferred additional powers to the regional governments in 2001. The regional governments are granted responsibility for housing, educational and environmental policy, while the federal government controls foreign, defence, justice and fiscal policy.

Parliament is bicameral, with a Chamber of Representatives (lower house) and a Senate (upper house). The main political parties include: the Christian Democratic and Flemish Party (CD&V); the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH); the francophone Socialist Party (PS); the Flemish Liberal and Democratic Party (Open VLD); the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA); and the Flemish Interest (VB).

Regional and linguistic disputes tend to challenge the country's political institutions. The country has a complex federal structure: Flanders (Dutch-speaking community) in the north and west; Wallonia (French-speaking); and the third region of Brussels (francophone majority). Flanders has prospered, while Wallonia has witnessed a decline in key sectors of the economy. Accordingly, a key issue is the level of autonomy afforded to regional governments; persistent disagreements over this led to the resignation in April 2010 of Prime Minister Yves Leterme. The legislative elections that took place in June of that year were followed by a political stalemate and Belgium experienced 540 days without a formal government. Eventually, after protracted negotiations, Elio Di Rupo of the PS became the new prime minister and formed a cabinet in which six parties are represented.

RULE OF LAW

Like all EU member states, Belgium has adopted EU legislation and its own legal system operates within this framework. The regulatory environment in Belgium is satisfactory. EU institutions may be approached if the country's legal system fails to uphold any regulations properly.

The Belgian judiciary is independent. It has undergone wide-ranging reforms since 1998, after a major paedophilia scandal exposed failings.

The police are well-trained, reliable and can be approached with confidence.

CORRUPTION

Corruption is not a significant problem in Belgium. Travellers are unlikely to be affected directly.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Floods are the most common natural hazard in the country. Flood precautions and warning systems are well practised.

BUSINESSWOMEN

Female business travellers face no particular security concerns. Unwanted physical attention and verbal harassment are rare, though lone women should observe standard security precautions, particularly at night.

Belgian society is egalitarian and visiting female personnel are unlikely to face any kind of discrimination in business and political circles on account of their gender.

Country travel guide

Arrival

METHOD OF ARRIVAL

By air

The main airport used for international flights is the capital's Brussels Zaventem International Airport (**BRU**). Short-haul services also operate from other major European cities to airports in Antwerp (**ANR**), Charleroi (**CRL**, also known as Brussels South), Liège (**LGG**) and Ostend (**OST**). Airport security is generally good.

Airlines have variable security standards. You may wish to consult the European Commission's [website](#) for a list of airlines banned within the EU and the US Federal Aviation Administration's [website](#) for a database of aviation accidents and statistics.

By land

Belgium has borders with France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Efficient railway services operate between Brussels and major cities in all these countries. These include the high-speed Thalys service to Paris (France), Cologne (Germany), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), and the Eurostar service to London (UK) via the Channel Tunnel.

By sea

Regular ferries operated by [Transeuropa Ferries](#) are available from Ramsgate port (Kent county, UK) to Ostend (Flanders region).

IMMIGRATION REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES

	Passport Required?	Visa Required?	Return Ticket Required?
British	Yes	No	No
Australian	Yes	No	Yes
Canadian	Yes	No	Yes
USA	Yes	No	Yes

Other EU 1 No No

Passports

Passport valid for at least three months beyond length of stay required by all nationals except:

1. EU nationals (except those of Denmark, Sweden and the UK) holding a valid national ID card.

Visas

Not required by all nationals referred to in the chart above for stays of up to three months within a six-month period. Nationals not referred to in the chart above are advised to contact the embassy to check visa requirements. Personnel should ensure that their passport has at least one blank page while applying for tourist visa and a letter of invitation stating the purpose of visit while seeking a business visa. Nationals staying for longer than three months may require a long-stay visa. Short-stay visas are valid for stays not exceeding 90 days and cost 60 euros. Long-stay visas are applicable for visits exceeding this period and cost 180 euros.

Entry/Exit requirements

Belgium is a signatory to the Schengen Agreement, which allows visitors to travel within the territory of member countries without any entry/exit formalities on a Schengen visa for stays up to 90 days within a six-month period. Visitors must also possess a return/onward ticket, proof of sufficient funds and address of local residence. Travellers entering or leaving the EU with 10,000 euros or more or the equivalent in another currency are required to make a declaration on arrival or departure. This declaration is neither applied to passengers who are in transit via the EU to a non-EU country, provided the journey started from a non-EU country, nor to those travelling within the EU.

Procedures

Airport procedures are generally straightforward. Business travellers should not encounter major delays, particularly when arriving from other EU member states.

DEPARTURE TAX

- It is included in the air fare.

Internal travel

BY AIR

The small size of the country means that travellers will probably find it more convenient to travel by train or car than by air. Brussels Airlines is the national carrier.

BY ROAD

The road system is excellent. Traffic drives on the right. Foreign travellers can drive provided they have a valid national driver's licence. There should be no problem hiring a car and most cities provide car parks and street parking-meters. Hotels and limousine companies can arrange the hire of cars with drivers on a daily basis. Highways are large and well maintained; however, secondary and rural roads are narrow and poorly lit. The maximum speed limit on highways is 72 miles per hour (120kph); in urban areas it is 30 mph (50kph), while in Brussels the limit is 18 mph (30kph). Although these restrictions are strictly imposed by the authorities, motorists frequently exceed the limits and often drive aggressively. Road signage is adequate. Vehicles joining from the right are given priority, as are trams and buses over other traffic. Travellers are advised to carry a blank copy of the accident reporting form (CONSTAT) in case they become involved in an accident. The police must be informed of accidents and drivers should remain at the site until the police write their report. Vehicle-related crime such as carjacking has been a serious problem in recent years in and around Brussels and in Charleroi (Hainaut province).

BY TAXI

Taxis are a safe way of travelling around. They are available at taxi stands in most towns and cities or can be booked by telephone. Tips are normally included in the fare.

BY TRAIN

The National Railway Company of Belgium (French: [SNCB](#), Dutch: NMBS) operates services throughout the country. Suburban commuter and intercity services are generally reliable, though railway workers stage occasional strikes during disputes with the management over pay and conditions. Stations have car parks.

BY OTHER MEANS

Domestic bus services are operated by Société des Transports Intercommunaux de Bruxelles ([STIB](#), Brussels metropolitan area), Transport En Commun ([TEC](#), Wallonia region) and [De Lijn](#) (Flanders region). However, trains are usually a quicker and more efficient way of travelling around the country.

Practicalities

LANGUAGE

French and Dutch (known in Flanders as Flemish) are the national languages. However, few people in Flanders speak good French, even fewer Walloons speak Dutch, and using the other community's language is rarely fruitful. Many businesspeople and most government officials are also likely to speak English, particularly in Brussels and the larger towns of Flanders.

MONEY

Belgium is a member of the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and its currency is the euro. Euro-denominated credit cards (Visa and MasterCard) are widely accepted in main hotels, shops and restaurants; traveller's cheques are also often accepted. Smaller establishments may accept cash only. ATMs accept cards linked to Cirrus and Plus networks, and are widely available in major cities.

CULTURAL ISSUES AND ETIQUETTE

General cultural tips

- Acquaintances shake hands to greet each other and when parting ways. Friends may touch cheeks and kiss the air. This is customary for both women and men. Visitors should shake hands as a greeting unless invited to do otherwise.
- When invited to someone's home, bringing flowers or chocolates is a welcome gesture. Do not bring chrysanthemums, which are reserved for funerals, or red roses. Send a thank you note.
- Use a low, moderate voice and avoid excessive gesturing.
- Language can be a sensitive issue because the country is divided between French-speakers in the southern region of Wallonia and Dutch-speakers in the northern region of Flanders. Relatively few people in either region speak the other region's language, particularly in Wallonia. Visitors should be aware that in Flanders, some people remain reluctant to speak French even though they are able to do so, and prefer to speak to foreigners in English rather than French.
- Brussels is officially bilingual and many residents speak both languages. English is also widely understood within the Wallonian business community.
- French and Dutch names for certain cities and towns can be confusingly different, for example Anvers/Antwerp and Malines/Mechelen.

Business cultural tips

- Business etiquette is becoming more informal, but Belgians continue to use formal titles and surnames when addressing business associates until it has been mutually agreed to use first names.
- Belgians shake hands with all in the room upon meeting and leaving business gatherings.
- Appointments should be made at least one week in advance. Being punctual to business appointments is important.
- Exchanging business cards is common.
- Wait for your Belgian colleagues to bring up business during meals. The first business appointment is most often social.
- Business dress is conservative.

TIPPING

Business personnel should tip taxi drivers and hotel staff. Tipping in restaurants and cafes is becoming less common because bills invariably include a service charge.

COMMUNICATIONS

The telephone system and postal service are efficient. Local pay telephones take coins and phonecards, which can be purchased at any post office. Mobile coverage is generally good. Short-term mobile telephone rental is widely available for visiting personnel but is generally significantly more expensive than using roaming services. Major mobile network providers include Mobistar, Proximus and BASE. All major hotels have internet access and fax facilities.

DIALLING CODES

DIALLING CODES	
Country Code	32
IDD Prefix (International Direct Dialling)	00
NDD Prefix (National Direct Dialling)	0

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Emergency Numbers	
Ambulance	100/ 112
Fire	100/ 112
Police	101/ 112

WORKING WEEK

- Working week: Monday to Friday
- Working hours: 08.30-17.30
- Banking hours: 09.00-16.00

CLIMATE

The climate is temperate, with frequent rain. Daytime temperatures average 23°C (73°F) in summer (July-August) and 6°C (43°F) in winter (January-February).

ELECTRICITY

Voltage: 230 volts
Frequency: 50 Hz

These are the most common plug types used:



Background brief

GEOGRAPHY

The Kingdom of Belgium is a European country bordered by France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The landscape is varied, the rivers and gorges of the Ardennes contrasting sharply with the rolling plains that make up much of the countryside. The major North Sea port of Antwerp lies on Belgium's coast, and gives the country strategic importance to continental Europe. The low-lying areas on the Schelde estuary are prone to flooding. The country is divided into three regions - the Dutch-speaking Flemish Region (Flanders); the French-dominated Walloon Region (Wallonia); and the bilingual Brussels Capital Region.

RECENT HISTORY

By the end of the 20th century, Belgium had established a stable constitutional settlement, though there have been persistent disputes between the Flemish- and French-speaking communities. A 'rainbow coalition' government, including the Green Party, was formed in 1999 following a serious food crisis, though it was defeated in 2003. The subsequent centre-right government delivered many important reforms until it too was defeated in 2007. In March 2008, Yves Leterme of the Christian Democratic and Flemish Party was sworn in as the country's new prime minister by King Albert II, apparently ending months of political instability after the national elections of June 2007. However, following the failure of the coalition government to make any progress on the issue of constitutional reform, the cabinet resigned in July 2008. Another major political crisis was sparked off by the June 2010 election that followed Leterme's resignation. The parties that emerged as victors – notably the New Flemish Alliance – differed over key institutional reforms, notably levels of regional autonomy, and failed to agree on a common agenda for forming a coalition. Leterme stayed on as caretaker prime minister and the country experienced 540 days without a formal government. Eventually, in December 2011, an agreement was reached whereby Elio di Rupo of the Socialist Party became prime minister and formed a government comprising of six parties.

Diplomatic representation

Embassy of Australia

Guimard Centre, Rue Guimard 6-8
Brussels 1040
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 2860500
Fax: +32 2 2306802
Email: austemb.brussels@dfat.gov.au
Website: www.austemb.be

Embassy of Canada

Avenue de Tervuren 2
Brussels 1040
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 7410611
Fax: +32 2 7410643
Email: bru@international.gc.ca
Website: www.belgium.gc.ca

Embassy of China

443-445 Avenue de Tervuren, 1150 Woluwe Saint-Pierre
Brussels 1150
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 6633001/04
Email: chinaemb_be@mfa.gov.cn
Website: <http://www.chinaembassy-org.be>

Embassy of Finland

Avenue des Arts 58
Brussels B-1000
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 2871212
Fax: +32 2 2871200
Email: sanomat.bry@formin.fi
Website: www.finlande.be/fi/

Embassy of France

65 Rue Ducale
Brussels 1000
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 5488711
Fax: +32 2 5488732
Email: ambafr@ambafrance-be.org
Website: www.ambafrance-be.org

Embassy of Germany

8-14 Rue Jacques de Lalaingstraat
Brussels 1040

Belgium

Phone: +32 2 7871800
Fax: +32 2 7872800
Email: info@bruessel.diplo.de
Website: www.bruessel.diplo.de

Embassy of Italy

28, Rue Emile Claus
Brussels 1050
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 6433850
Fax: +32 2 6485485
Email: ambbruxelles@esteri.it
Website: www.ambbruxelles.esteri.it

Embassy of Japan

Avenue des Arts 58, 6th Floor
Brussels 1000
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 5132340
Fax: +32 2 5131556
Website: www.be.emb-japan.go.jp

Consulate of Netherlands

Hoek Kimmelbergstraat (nr 78), Antwerp – Berchem
Antwerp 2600
Belgium

Phone: +32 3 2870830
Fax: +32 3 2814331
Email: ant@minbuza.nl
Website: <http://www.nederlandsconsulaat.be/>

Embassy of Netherlands

Kortenberglaan 4-10
Brussels 1040
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 6791711
Fax: +32 2 6791775
Email: bru@minbuza.nl
Website: www.nederlandseambassade.be

Embassy of South Africa

17-19 Rue Montoyer
Brussels 1000
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 2854400
Fax: +32 2 2854402
Email: embassy@southafrica.be
Website: <http://www.southafrica.be>

Embassy of Spain

19, Rue de la Science
Brussels 1040
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Phone: +32 2 2300340
Fax: +32 2 2309380
Email: ambespbe@mail.mae.es

Embassy of Switzerland

26 Rue de la Loi/ Wetstraat, box 9
Brussels B-1040
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Phone: +32 2 2854350
Fax: +32 2 230 3781
Email: bru.vertretung@eda.admin.ch
Website: <http://www.eda.admin.ch/bruxelles>

Embassy of United Kingdom

Avenue d'Auderghem 10 Oudergelaam
Brussels 1040
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 2876211
Fax: +32 2 2876355
Email: info@britain.be
Website: <http://ukinbelgium.fco.gov.uk/en/>

Embassy of United States

Regentlaan, Boulevard du Regent 27
Brussels 1000
Belgium

Phone: +32 2 8114000
Fax: +32 2 8114500
Website: <http://brussels.usembassy.gov>

Calendar

Holidays & Security Dates

Holidays & Security Dates

Category Key: **H**oliday | **S**ecurity date | **E**lection | **T**ravel disruption

21 Dec 2011 - 22 Dec 2011 Nationwide strikes over pension reform ()

Various categories of workers plan to observe a strike nationwide on 21-22 December over a proposed reform of pensions. The work stoppages are expected to significantly affect urban public transport, train services and possibly also flights. Protests are also likely to generate traffic congestion. Personnel should anticipate travel delays and be flexible in their itineraries.

25 Dec 2011 Christmas Day (H)

In some countries, if this holiday falls on a Saturday or Sunday, a public holiday is declared for the following Monday.

1 Jan 2012 New Year's Day (H)

In many countries, if this holiday falls on a Saturday or Sunday, a public holiday is declared for the following Monday.

9 Apr 2012 Easter Monday (H)

1 May 2012 Workers' Day/Labour Day/May Day/Spring Day (H)

Student/labour demonstrations. If the holiday falls on a rest day, it may be observed on the next working day.

17 May 2012 - 17 Jun 2012 Ascension (H)

28 May 2012 Whit Monday (H)

11 Jul 2012 Local holiday - North (H)

21 Jul 2012 National Day (H)

15 Aug 2012 Assumption Day (H)

27 Aug 2012 Yser pilgrimage (S)

The commemoration of Flemish soldiers who died in the First World War sometimes attracts right-wing extremists from across Europe, prompting riots and clashes with the police.

27 Sep 2012 French Community Day (H)

French-speaking community only.

1 Nov 2012 All Saints' Day (H)

11 Nov 2012 Veterans' Day (H)

Maps

Maps

Medical

Medical Care

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