

COUNTRY PROFILE

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BELGIUM: THE LAND OF SOCIAL TOURISM YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

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Belgium is a complex and varied country, both on administrative and geological level. For a few years, tourism has been a sector depending on our three regions, Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. These three regions also cover many different tourist areas.

Brussels, the capital of the country and a European and cosmopolitan city, recovers from the years where it was put in the hands of demolishers and speculators. Today Brussels is a city which is going to regain its previous image: a beautiful European city keeping a human dimension despite its relatively modest size.

Flanders can be proud to have the most beautiful cities of the country, such as Bruges and Ghent among others. But the area is not limited to that. Flanders also offers the coast and beaches of the North Sea and natural reserves of seashore, not forgetting the ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge.

Wallonia boasts its Ardennes and High-Fagnes, privileged sites of nature rich in wild rivers and unforgettable cities of art such as Liege, Tournai or Mons. Wallonia is also a historical land with well known sites in the entire world like Bouillon, Bastogne or Waterloo.

Land of tourism, Belgium, is also a land of social tourism. Since the end of the Second World War, the country is proud of its legislation which has systematically encouraged the creation of infrastructures of tourism and leisure in support of families or young people. It is also important to remind the great contribution of Arthur Haulot, the former General Commissioner.

Even if the administrative regionalisation of tourism allows today separate and diverging policies depending on the area, those remain generally attached to social tourism and that of young people in particular. And there is a permanent dialogue between the authorities in charge of tourism and associations.

On the side of the French-speaking community, the tradition of support comes from the very beginning, and is called very simply "support to building". That means that the authorities will grant essential aids for the building, renovation and equipment of infrastructures of recognized associations. On the side of Flemish Ministry, the current aid is more targeted at helping persons, primarily persons with disabilities and those with low income.

You can also find a lot of Youth Hostels in Brussels ready to accommodate young people visiting the capital, individually or in school groups.

Flanders concentrated these social tourist centres along the coast, but not only. The historical cities such as, Ghent or Leuven, have many excellent Youth Hostels.

As for Wallonia, the most important centres are situated in the heart of Ardennes, both intended for a young public and families. The youth benefit from ideally located Gites d'Etapes, and families, from modern centres managed by trade-unions. But the cities of art are also well equipped. It is enough to list Liege, Mons or Tournai.

Finally all centres, over the whole country accommodate many associations whose members, young people and less young people, practice sports like hiking, the mountain-bike and other. These activities have been largely developed over the last twenty years, benefiting from wide variety of natural landscapes and reliefs.

The stakes of social tourism for the future are simple in their principles: it is necessary to adapt infrastructures to the users' new patterns. If the traditional destinations are always the same, the social practices and the requirements for leisure and holidays are changing. The hundreds of thousands of nights, Belgian and foreign, recorded each year confirm the interest of the public in social tourism. It is the responsibility of the leaders of associations never to disappoint them.

Indicators of Tourism in Belgium

Number of Arrivals and Overnight Stays from International Tourists – 2002		
	Arrivals	Overnight Stays
Flanders	3, 420, 020	8, 717, 946
Brussels	2, 226, 698	4, 256, 398
Wallonia	1, 072, 935	2, 921, 073
Total Belgium	6, 719, 653	15, 895,417

Number of Overnight Stays in General and in the Social Tourism Sector from International and National Tourists - 2002		
	Tourism in General	Social Tourism
Flanders	17, 566, 192	1,126, 276
Brussels	4, 686, 350	249, 311

Wallonia	6, 819, 401	600,882
Total Belgium	29, 071, 943	2,046, 469

Sources: Toerisme in Cijfers 2002, Toerisme Vlaanderen ; Le tourisme en Région wallonne – Les chiffres 2002, Observatoire du tourisme wallon ; Observatoire du tourisme à Bruxelles – Rapport Annuel 2002.