

Did You Know ...?

- French Fries originated in Belgium and are served with a delicious yellow mayonnaise.
- Chocolate is produced at the rate of 172,000 tons per year and 2,130 chocolate shops are in existence.
- There are more than 500 different local beers from which to choose from...in every color of gold to red to brown!
- Mussels are abundant and always good, yet best during months ending in the letter "R".
- Street cleaners will put on a show and dance production if they catch someone letting their pet take care of business on a street or walk.
- Comics Tintin, Lucky Luke, Gaston, and Marsupilami were created here.
- Belgium is the lace-making capital of the world. The cities of Mons and Binche have lacing schools.
- There are over 2,000 diamond companies in Antwerp alone.
- Cinema directors use the dunes of La Panne on the Belgian Coast as a location for desert scenes.

The Past Lives on in Belgium

Belgium...this small country offers an abundance of delights for any visitor through its culture, food, architecture, languages, and history. Arriving in Brussels on my annual trip home, I am immediately taken back to fond memories of my youth. I am humbled to think that as a child I ran through the cobblestone streets of what is now the capital of NATO. Modernism abounds due to its international significance. While this is exciting, Brussels' geographical location has always offered me easy access to the Belgian Coast where nostalgia lives on.

The growing fishing industry and the prosperity of the country, after Belgium became an independent state in 1830, led to the many family resorts along the forty-mile coast. Shortly thereafter, important traditions began and continue to be passed on from generation to generation. One that fascinates me in particular is the "naming of the beaches". This takes place

in each of the 15 towns along the coast. Along the boardwalk (la digue) are the original wooden stairs with their wooden signs. Authentic wooden cabins, chairs, and umbrellas line the beaches in perfect succession. These wooden signs have been painted with the names of actual



people who have bought the option to rent chairs and umbrellas on the beachfront. This is big business and the only way a new "owner" can take over is if someone retires or dies. Certain beach names have been there since my mother was a child – "Nathalie", "Jean-Paul", "Pascale".

As a child, I saw men in the water on horseback fishing for crabs. Despite technology, they continue with their tradition.

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The Past ... *(Continued from page 1)*

Watching a group of elderly men playing the game of “boules” (pétanque) makes you wonder if you have taken a step back into 1910. Vendors walk the beach day in and day out selling ice cream and “boules de berlin” from wooden carts originating from the early 1900s. An electrical version of these old carts has yet to make an appearance. Activities such as soccer, cycling, games, and festivals are timeless, yet the ambiance along the coast creates an air of nostalgia.

People of all ages come to these seaside towns. Many stroll to study all facets of architecture. The art nouveau railway station in De Haan and Bredene’s “belle époque” houses renovated into hotels are a treat for aficionados of architecture. Knokke, one of the largest golf courses in Europe, is located here and still relays an atmosphere from the past. Cathedrals are scattered throughout the towns along the coast, some with her doors facing right out to sea.

The sea color may not be that of the Caribbean; however, its health benefits date back to the turn of the last century. The elderly come to the coast just to breath the therapeutic air. The perfect combination of air, sand, water, minerals, and temperature attracts generations of families to visit year after year. Most important; however, is the feeling they get from recapturing the past. This is not a superficial nostalgia created as re-enactments such as those seen in festivals or events in other places. Despite modernization and technology looming in the outfield, this is the priceless feeling one gets just by being and breathing at Belgium’s North Sea Coast. The more Belgium modernizes, the more its vast and humbling past comes forward. These wonders, undimmed by time, await your discovery.

- Ruth D. Wharton

Bruges...Worth the Side Trip



Hop off the train just 15 minutes before reaching the coast and you will be in Bruges. It’s no wonder “Good Morning America” took an entire week to explore this terrific city, where every view is picturesque. Start with a walk down the stairs to the omnipresent Reie, which flows around the old city. Then, its up the stairs to the Bell Tower, a 300-foot landmark, located next to the Church of Our Saviour and the Church of Our Lady. From these towers, your views will be breathtaking. Now that you’ve worked up an appetite, come down to the Grote Markt (Bruges’ Grand Place) and stop for a “sachet de frites” or for chocolate in any shape or size!

Suggested Reading:

- Insight Guide Belgium
by Michael Ellis
- Culture Shock!: Belgium
by Mark Elliot



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