

Creating Your Routine

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Creating Your Routine: A Guide to Finding Stability in Belgium

Welcome to your guide on building a routine that supports your new life in Belgium. When you first move, it's easy to feel like you're constantly reacting to new challenges rather than being in control of your day. Your old rhythms might not fit with new transport schedules, shop opening hours, or cultural norms. It can be exhausting.

This guide is designed to help you build a simple, flexible foundation for your days and weeks. The goal isn't a rigid, minute-by-minute schedule, but a structure that provides stability, reduces decision fatigue, and helps you feel more grounded and at home here. We'll explore how to create personal rituals, integrate local Belgian habits, and structure your week in a way that truly serves you.

Why a Routine is Your Expat Superpower

Living abroad is an adventure, but it also comes with a significant mental load. You're navigating a new language, new social rules, and new systems for everything from groceries to healthcare. A routine isn't about adding another stressful task to your list; it's about creating a framework that frees up mental energy for the things that matter.

- **Reduces Decision Fatigue:** By automating common decisions (what to eat for breakfast, when to do laundry), you save your brainpower for more important challenges.
- **Provides Stability:** In a sea of change, a predictable daily structure can be a comforting anchor. It creates a sense of normalcy and control.
- **Fosters Wellbeing:** A good routine carves out intentional time for rest, connection, and self-care—things that can easily get lost in the chaos of setting up a new life.
- **Connects You to Your New Home:** By consciously integrating local habits, your routine becomes a bridge to understanding and participating in Belgian culture.

The Building Blocks of Your Belgian Routine

Let's break down the key components of a balanced routine. Think of these as modules you can customize to fit your life.

The Morning Kickstart: Setting the Tone

A morning routine is less about hyper-productivity and more about starting your day with a sense of calm and intention. It's about having the first part of your day belong to **you**, before the demands of work, bureaucracy, and daily life take over.

An Expat's Experience

As our instructor shared, "For me, as an expat in Austria, this was key. I made a rule to not look at work emails for the first 30 minutes of my day. This small change helped reduce that feeling of being overwhelmed." Your routine should serve you, not add more stress.

What it could look like:

- Making your coffee or tea and sitting by a window for five minutes—no phone.

- A short 10-minute stretching session or a walk around the block.
- Journaling three things you're grateful for.
- Listening to a podcast or music while you get ready.

The key is that it's an activity **for you**, not for your job or your to-do list.

Integrating Local Rhythms: Feeling at Home

One of the most rewarding parts of building a new routine is weaving in local habits. This helps you connect with the culture and rhythm of life in Belgium.

1. The Boulangerie Run: In many Belgian towns, a morning trip to the *boulangerie* (bakery) for fresh bread is a cherished ritual. You don't have to do it daily, but making it a weekly habit—perhaps on a Saturday morning—is a wonderful way to participate in local life. Try asking for *pistolets* (crusty rolls) or a *pain gris* (whole wheat bread).

2. The Proper Lunch Break: Unlike in some cultures where eating at your desk is the norm, taking a real lunch break is common in Belgium. Many workplaces encourage stepping away to eat with colleagues. In city centres, you'll see people grabbing a *sandwich garni* (a filled baguette), a *dagsoep* (soup of the day), or a fresh salad and taking a genuine break. This simple habit can break up your day, improve focus, and help you build connections.

3. The Weekly Market Visit: Most municipalities and neighbourhoods have a weekly outdoor market (*marché* or *markt*). This is where locals buy fresh produce, cheese, meats, and flowers. Finding your local market and making it a weekly anchor point is a fantastic way to shop fresh and feel part of the community.

Tip: Look up your local commune's website (e.g., "marché Forest" or "markt Etterbeek") to find the day and time for your neighbourhood market. They are a feast for the senses and a core part of Belgian life.

The Evening Wind-Down: Decompressing and Switching Off

Being an expat is mentally taxing. Your brain is constantly working, translating, and learning. An evening routine is crucial for signalling that the "work" is done and it's time to rest and recharge.

Ideas for your wind-down:

- **Prepare for tomorrow:** Laying out your clothes or packing your lunch can create a sense of calm and make the next morning smoother.
- **Language Practice as Relaxation:** Instead of a high-pressure lesson, try watching a Belgian TV show for 15-20 minutes. It's a low-stakes way to hear the language spoken naturally. Shows like "De Dag" (Flemish) or "La Trêve" (French) are popular choices.
- **Digital Detox:** Put your phone away for the last hour before bed. Read a book, listen to music, or chat with your family. This helps improve sleep quality.

The Belgian Weekly Rhythm

The week in Belgium has a distinct flow that's important to understand for planning.

- **Wednesdays:** Be aware that schools often finish early on Wednesday afternoons.
- **Saturdays:** This is the main day for errands, grocery shopping, and visiting busy city centres.
- **Sundays:** This is a designated rest day. Most supermarkets, retail stores, and many other businesses are **closed**. Planning your big grocery shop for a Sunday will lead to disappointment. Instead, Sundays are for family, visiting parks, long leisurely lunches, or exploring a museum.

Warning: Don't get caught out! Supermarket chains like Delhaize and Carrefour often have smaller “Proxy,” “Shop’n’Go,” or “Express” stores that **are** open on Sundays, but with limited selection and higher prices. Plan your main weekly shop for another day.

Your Expat Routine Toolkit: The `routine_template`

To help you put all this into practice, we've created a simple `routine_template`. This isn't about micromanaging your life; it's a tool for visualising your week, identifying your priorities, and ensuring you're making time for what matters.

Why Use the Template?

The template provides a high-level overview of your week. It helps you:

- **Set anchor points:** Place your non-negotiable commitments first.
- **Block out time:** Intentionally schedule time for personal care, socialising, and rest.
- **See the balance:** Quickly assess if your week is too packed or if you've forgotten to plan for essentials like groceries or downtime.
- **Be flexible:** It's a guide, not a rulebook. You can and should adapt it weekly.

How to Use the `routine_template`

Here is a step-by-step guide to filling out your template for the first time.

Step 1: The “Big Rocks” First Before anything else, block out the non-negotiables. These are the things that are fixed in your schedule.

Work or study hours

Fixed appointments (doctor, administrative meetings)

Children's school hours and activities (remember the Wednesday early finish!)

Step 2: Anchor Your Week with Belgian Rhythms Now, add the key weekly tasks that are influenced by the local culture.

Pencil in your weekly market day (e.g., Wednesday afternoon at Place du Châtelain).

Block out your main grocery shopping time (e.g., Saturday morning).

Mark Sunday as “Rest / Family / Park Day” to remind yourself to take it slow.

Step 3: Define Your Morning and Evening “Bookends” You don't need to write down every detail, just the intention.

In the “Morning” row, write a simple goal like “Coffee, no phone” or “15 min walk”.

In the “Evening” row, note your wind-down plan, such as “Read book” or “Watch Belgian series”.

Step 4: Schedule Self-Care and Social Time This is the most important step. Look at the empty spaces and be intentional about filling some of them with activities that recharge you.

Schedule your language class or a study session.

Plan a coffee date with a new friend.

Crucially, schedule an evening to do nothing. Write “Homebody Night” or “Relax” in a slot. It's an appointment with yourself.

An Example Snippet:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
Morning	Work (9:00-17:30)	Work (9:00-17:30)	Work (9:00-12:30)

Afternoon	Grocery Shop	Language Class	Local Market (Châtelain) / Kids finish school early
Evening	Cook & Relax	Meet friend for apéro	Family Dinner

Your Routine Creation Checklist

Use this checklist to guide you as you build and refine your routine.

Identify a simple, calming morning ritual that is just for you.

Identify a simple evening wind-down activity to help you switch off.

Find the day and time of your local Belgian market.

Acknowledge the quietness of Sundays and plan your errands accordingly.

Use the `routine_template` to block out your “big rocks” (work, appointments).

Intentionally schedule time for social connection.

Intentionally schedule time for rest and doing nothing.

Review your routine at the end of the week. What worked? What didn't? Adjust for next week.

Vocabulary Corner: Routine & Rhythms

Here are some key terms that will help you navigate daily life and routines in Belgium.

English	French	Dutch
The routine	La routine	De routine
The bakery	La boulangerie	De bakkerij
The market	Le marché	De markt
Crusty bread roll	Un pistolet	Een pistolet
Soup of the day	La soupe du jour	De dagsoep
To do errands/shopping	Faire les courses	Boodschappen doen
An appointment	Un rendez-vous	Een afspraak
To relax / rest	Se détendre / se reposer	Zich ontspannen / rusten

Insider Tips for Success

Tip: Start Small. Don't try to change everything at once. Introduce one new habit at a time. Maybe this week, you just focus on a 5-minute morning routine. Next week, you can add a trip to the market.

Tip: Be Patient With Yourself. Building a routine in a new country takes time. Some weeks will feel chaotic, and that's perfectly okay. The goal is progress, not perfection. You are adapting to immense change, and you're doing a great job.

Warning: Avoid Overscheduling. The purpose of the template is to create balance, not to fill every single second of your day. White space is essential. An evening with no plans is a success, not a failure.

Thank you for taking the time to invest in your wellbeing. A thoughtful routine is one of the best gifts you can give yourself during your expat journey. You've got this!

[ExpatsatHome.be](https://expatsathome.be) | Your guide to feeling at home in Brussels