



Making Belgian Friends

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Making Belgian Friends: An Expat's Guide to Authentic Connections

Welcome to Belgium! You've navigated the administrative hurdles, found a place to live, and are starting to build your new life. But there's one challenge that often surprises expats: making local friends. It can feel like Belgians are reserved or that social circles are closed.

This guide is here to change that. We'll demystify Belgian social culture, give you a concrete strategy for meeting people, and provide the tools you need to turn acquaintances into genuine, lasting friendships. It takes patience, but the reward—a deep, authentic connection to your new home—is well worth the effort.

Understanding the Belgian Social Landscape

Why does it feel different? The key is to understand that Belgian social norms are likely different from what you're used to. What might seem like distance is often a form of respect.

The Pillars of Belgian Social Culture

- **Privacy is Paramount:** Belgians are raised with a strong sense of distinction between public and private life. Personal topics like salary, politics, family issues, or even weekend plans are often considered private and not discussed with new acquaintances. This isn't coldness; it's a sign of respecting boundaries.
- **Work is Work, Life is Life:** Unlike in some cultures where colleagues are your primary social circle, Belgians tend to keep their professional and personal lives separate. Don't be surprised if after-work drinks with colleagues are not a regular occurrence.
- **Friendships are Earned, Not Given:** Many Belgians have tight-knit groups of friends they've known since childhood or university. Their social calendars are often full. This doesn't mean they are closed off, but it does mean new friendships are built slowly and deliberately, based on trust and shared experiences over time.
- **Subtlety Over Confrontation:** Belgians generally prefer harmony and avoid direct confrontation. Disagreements are handled with logic and compromise rather than passionate debate, which can be seen as impolite.

Regional Differences Matter

Belgium is not a monolith. The social approach can vary significantly by region:


- **Flanders (Dutch-speaking):** Often perceived as more direct and pragmatic, influenced by Dutch culture, but still more reserved than their northern neighbors. Business structures tend to be flatter.
- **Wallonia (French-speaking):** Generally seen as more laid-back, expressive, and relationship-oriented, similar to French culture. Hierarchies can be more pronounced.
- **Brussels:** A multicultural melting pot. While the underlying culture is largely Wallonian (French-speaking), the massive international presence means social norms can be more fluid. However, to connect with true **Brusseleirs**, understanding the local Belgian mindset is crucial.

The Belgian Friendship Playbook: Your Strategy for Success

This is your core strategy. Making Belgian friends isn't about luck; it's about putting yourself in the right situations with the right mindset.

Phase 1: Find Your Entry Point



The single most effective way to meet Belgians is through a shared, structured activity. This bypasses the awkwardness of a cold approach at a bar and gives you an immediate, natural topic of conversation.

 **Tip: The Golden Rule:** Don't just go where expats go. To meet locals, you need to go where locals spend their free time. Think hobbies, not happy hours.


Activity Type	Why It Works & What to Look For
Sports Clubs	Sport is a national passion. It creates teamwork and regular interaction. Look for a local <i>club de sport</i> or <i>sportclub.n</i> - Cycling: Belgium's national sport. Find a <i>club de cyclisme</i> or <i>wielerclub.n</i> - Running: Join a <i>club de course à pied</i> or <i>loopclub.n</i> - Football: Find a local amateur team or supporter's club.
Creative & Hobby Classes	Learning a new skill together is a powerful bonding experience. It provides a low-pressure environment to chat before, during, and after class.n- Cooking: Look for <i>cours de cuisine</i> .n- Pottery/Art: Search for <i>atelier de poterie</i> or <i>cours de dessin</i> .n- Music: Join a local choir (<i>chorale / koor</i>) or find amateur musician groups.
Volunteering	Working towards a common goal is an incredible way to build deep connections. It shows you're invested in the local community.n- Look for an <i>ASBL</i> (non-profit) or <i>vrijwilligerswerk</i> in a field you care about, like Serve the City.
Language Exchange	These are specifically designed for locals and newcomers to meet. They are a perfect, low-stakes starting point.n- Search for <i>Table de Conversation</i> (FR) or <i>Conversatietafel</i> (NL) in your city. They are often held in casual cafés.

Phase 2: The First Interaction

You've joined a club. Now what? The approach is key. Focus on the shared context and keep it light.

Conversation DOs 	Conversation DON'Ts 
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"This is my first time here. Any tips on (the technique)?" (Asks for help, shows humility).	"So, what do you do for a living?" (Too direct, too personal for a first chat).
"You make that look so easy! How long have you been doing this?" (A genuine compliment).	"How much does a membership here cost?" (Avoids topics related to money).
"I'm still exploring the city. Do you know any good cafés around here?" (Opens the door for local recommendations).	"What did you think of the election results?" (Avoids potentially divisive topics like politics).
"I really enjoyed that class/game. The instructor/coach was great." (Positive and focused on the shared experience).	"Are you married? Do you have kids?" (Far too personal for an initial acquaintance).

 **Tip:** A little language goes a long way. Starting with a simple **"Bonjour/Goeiedag"** or **"Merci/Dank u"** before switching to English shows respect and effort. Locals know it's hard and will appreciate the gesture enormously.

Phase 3: Deepening the Connection

You've been chatting with the same person at your weekly activity for a few weeks. How do you move from a "club friend" to a "real friend"?


Be Specific with Invitations:

- **Don't say:** "We should get coffee sometime." This is often seen as a polite platitude with no real intention behind it.
- **Do say:** "I'm planning to try that new café we talked about next Saturday morning. Would you be free to join me?"

Understand the Planner Mentality: Belgians are planners. Their agendas can be booked weeks, or even months, in advance. Don't be discouraged if they aren't free.

- If they say, "I'm busy then, but how about the week after?" — **This is a great sign!**
- If they say, "Ah, I'm busy," with no counter-offer, they may not be interested. That's okay. Move on.

The Home Invitation:

 **Important:** An invitation to a Belgian's home is a **significant** step. It signals that you are moving from acquaintance to trusted friend. Always accept if you can, and always bring a small gift: a good bottle of wine, a nice dessert, flowers for the host, or a box of quality chocolates from a local chocolatier (not from the supermarket).

Greetings Evolve:

- **New acquaintances:** A firm, brief handshake.
- **Becoming friends:** This is where you'll encounter **la bise**. In Brussels and Wallonia, it's typically one or three kisses on the cheek (alternating). In Flanders, it's usually one. Let the Belgian initiate it the first time.

Step-by-Step: Your First Month's Action Plan

Feeling overwhelmed? Here is a concrete, week-by-week plan to get you started.

Week 1: Research & Reconnaissance

- Brainstorm 3-5 hobbies you genuinely enjoy (or want to try).

- Use the keywords from the “Playbook” table to search online for clubs or classes in your local area.
- Shortlist 2-3 promising options. Check their schedules, locations, and costs.

Week 2: Take the Plunge

- Sign up for at least one of your shortlisted activities.
- Attend your first session. Don’t put pressure on yourself to talk to everyone. Your only goal this week is to **show up** and get a feel for the environment. Smile and be observant.

Week 3: Initiate a Conversation

- Attend your activity again. Consistency is key.
- Identify one or two people who seem friendly.
- Use one of the “Conversation DOs” from the playbook to start a brief, low-pressure chat before, during, or after the activity. The goal is simply to break the ice.

Week 4: Follow Up & Be Consistent

- Go to your activity again. Make a point to say hello to the person you spoke with last week.
- Ask a follow-up question related to your last chat. (“Did you end up trying that hiking trail you mentioned?”).
- This week, your goal is to reinforce the connection and establish yourself as a friendly, regular presence.

Your Friendship-Building Checklist

Use this checklist to track your progress and stay motivated.

- ☐ I have identified at least three potential hobbies or clubs that genuinely interest me.
- ☐ I have researched where locals, not just expats, pursue these hobbies.
- ☐ I have signed up for and attended at least one club or class session.
- ☐ I have learned five basic greetings and phrases in French or Dutch.
- ☐ I have initiated a light conversation with someone using a context-based starter.
- ☐ I have attended the same activity more than once to build familiarity.
- ☐ I have proposed a specific invitation (e.g., “coffee next Tuesday at 10 am”) to an acquaintance.
- ☐ I have practiced patience and reminded myself that this is a marathon, not a sprint.

Essential Vocabulary for Socializing

Knowing a few key phrases can make a world of difference.

English	French / Dutch	Context & Use
Hello	Bonjour / Goeiedag	The standard formal/informal greeting.

How are you?	Comment ça va? / Hoe gaat het?	A good follow-up to hello with someone you've met before.
My name is...	Je m'appelle... / Ik heet...	Basic introduction.
Excuse me	Excusez-moi / Excuseer mij	Use to get someone's attention politely.
Cheers!	Santé! / Schol! (or Gezondheid!)	For when you finally get that drink together!
Would you like to get a drink?	On va prendre un verre? / Zullen we iets gaan drinken?	A casual invitation.
See you next week!	À la semaine prochaine! / Tot volgende week!	Perfect for leaving your weekly hobby club.

Insider Tips from a Local

- **Punctuality is a Sign of Respect:** Always be on time for meetings, classes, and especially for an invitation to someone's home. Being late is considered very rude.
- **Don't Mistake Questions for Nosiness:** While Belgians avoid asking personal questions, they are often curious about other cultures. If they ask about your home country, it's a great sign of genuine interest.
- **Embrace the "Apéro":** The pre-dinner drink, or **apéritif**, is a cherished social ritual. It's more than just a drink; it's a moment to unwind and connect before a meal.

- **The Expat Bubble is Comfortable but Limiting:** It's easy and tempting to only socialize with other expats. While these friendships are valuable, if you plan to stay long-term, make a conscious effort to break out and build local ties for a richer, more integrated experience.
- **Patience is Your Superpower:** We cannot say this enough. It might take six months of weekly interactions before a friendship blossoms. This is normal. The friendships you build this way are often incredibly loyal, deep, and lasting. Don't give up. You can do this.

ExpatsatHome.be | Your guide to feeling at home in Brussels