



Belgian Culture Deep Dive

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

Belgian Culture: A Deep Dive for Expats

Introduction: Beyond Waffles, Chocolate, and Beer

Welcome to Belgium! When you first arrive, it can feel like a country of charming contradictions. You see grand, historic buildings standing next to walls covered in vibrant comic book art. You hear conversations that switch seamlessly from French to Dutch and back again. You might find yourself asking: What is the “real” Belgium?

This guide is designed to answer that question. We’ll move beyond the stereotypes to explore the heart of Belgian culture: its history, its people, its humour, and its traditions. Our goal is to give you the context behind what you see and hear every day, helping you navigate your new life with confidence and avoid those common cultural slip-ups.

The Foundation: A Nation at the Crossroads

To understand Belgium today, you must first understand its past. For centuries, before its independence in 1830, the land that is now Belgium was a battleground and a prize, ruled by the Romans, Spanish, Austrians, French, and Dutch.

This long history of being a “crossroads of Europe” has forged a unique national character. Belgians are often pragmatic, adaptable, and perhaps a bit skeptical of grand, overarching ideologies. There’s a deep-seated modesty and a preference for the tangible and the local over the abstract and the national. This history is the key to understanding everything from the complex political system to the famously self-deprecating humour.

The Great Divide: Understanding Belgium’s Communities

The most defining feature of modern Belgium is its division into regions and language communities. This is not just about language; it’s about distinct cultural identities, political structures, and media landscapes.

Belgium's Three Regions & Languages

- **Flanders (Vlaanderen):** The northern, Dutch-speaking region. Known for its historic art cities like Bruges and Ghent, and as an economic powerhouse.
- **Wallonia (Wallonie):** The southern, French-speaking region. Known for the rolling hills of the Ardennes, historic castles, and its industrial heritage.
- **Brussels-Capital Region (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale):** Geographically located within Flanders, Brussels is officially bilingual (French and Dutch), although French is more widely spoken. It’s the capital of Belgium and the de facto capital of the European Union.
- A small **German-speaking community** also exists in the east of Wallonia.

For an expat, this reality has practical daily consequences. In Brussels, shop signs, public transport announcements, and official documents are in both French and Dutch. Making an effort to acknowledge this duality is deeply appreciated.

 **Tip:** A simple greeting like “**Bonjour / Goeiedag**” shows that you recognize and respect Brussels’ bilingual status. You don’t need to be fluent in both, but the gesture goes a long way.


Decoding Belgian Humour: It’s Not a Joke (Or Is It?)

Belgian humour can be an acquired taste. It is often dry, ironic, deeply surreal, and relies heavily on self-deprecation. Belgians generally do not take themselves too seriously—a trait essential for a country with such a complex identity.

The ultimate symbol of this mindset is the work of surrealist painter René Magritte. His famous painting of a pipe with the caption “**Ceci n’est pas une pipe**” (This is not a pipe) perfectly captures the Belgian tendency to look at the world from a slightly skewed, questioning perspective.

Humour also differs by region, reflecting the broader cultural divide.

Region	Style	Characteristics
Flemish Humour	Direct & Combative	Often more crude and satirical. It enjoys challenging authority, religion, and the monarchy with a playful but sharp edge.
Walloon Humour	Subtle & Indirect	Relies more on clever wordplay, gentle mockery, and circumvolution (talking around a subject). It shares more characteristics with French humour, but with a strong dose of self-deprecation.

 **Important:** While Belgians often joke about themselves and their country, certain topics are best avoided in casual conversation, especially for newcomers. Steer clear of making strong jokes about domestic politics, the monarchy, religion, or personal wealth. The humour is about finding absurdity in life, not offending others.

The Belgian Pantheon: Famous Faces You Should Know

Knowing a few key cultural figures can help you connect the dots in conversations and understand national points of pride.

- **The Arts & Design**
 - **Hergé (Georges Remi):** The globally renowned creator of **The Adventures of Tintin**. He is a national hero and a pioneer of the European comic strip.
 - **René Magritte:** The master of surrealist painting, whose work challenges perception and reality.
 - **Peter Paul Rubens:** A dominant figure of the Baroque period, his dramatic and vibrant paintings are celebrated worldwide.

- ▶ **Peyo (Pierre Culliford):** The creator of the beloved blue characters, **The Smurfs (Les Schtroumpfs)**.
- ▶ **Victor Horta:** A founding father of the Art Nouveau architectural style, his elegant buildings define many of Brussels' most beautiful streets.
- **Music & Performance**
 - ▶ **Jacques Brel:** An iconic and passionate singer-songwriter whose songs are legendary in the French-speaking world and beyond.
 - ▶ **Toots Thielemans:** A jazz legend, widely considered the greatest harmonica player of the 20th century.
 - ▶ **Adolphe Sax:** The inventor of the saxophone, born in Dinant in 1814.
- **Sports**
 - ▶ **Eddy Merckx:** Nicknamed "The Cannibal," he is widely considered the greatest professional cyclist of all time. His legacy fuels Belgium's obsession with the sport.
 - ▶ **Justine Henin & Kim Clijsters:** Two tennis superstars who dominated the women's game in the early 2000s, bringing multiple Grand Slam titles back to Belgium.

The Holy Trinity: Comics, Chocolate, and Beer

These three are not just stereotypes; they are pillars of Belgian culture and craftsmanship, taken very seriously.

Comics: The Ninth Art

In Belgium, comics—**bande dessinée** or **stripverhaal**—are considered a legitimate art form, often called the "Ninth Art." It's a medium for all ages, telling stories from adventure and comedy to history and social commentary.

- **What to know:** Belgium has more comic strip artists per square kilometre than any other country.
- **How to experience it:** Walk the **Comic Strip Route** in Brussels to see giant murals of famous characters, or visit the Belgian Comic Strip Center to dive into the history of the art form.

Chocolate: The Praline's Birthplace

Belgian chocolate is world-famous for its high quality, high cocoa content, and fine texture.

- **What to know:** The **praline**—a hard chocolate shell with a soft, creamy filling—was invented in Brussels in 1912 by Jean Neuhaus Jr.
- **How to experience it:** Skip the supermarket brands for special occasions. Visit a local, independent **chocolatier** to buy freshly made pralines. They are sold by weight and are a perfect gift when visiting someone's home.

Beer: A UNESCO Treasure

Belgian beer culture was officially recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The focus is on variety, flavour, and tradition, not quantity.

- **What to know:** There are over 1,500 different Belgian beers, from world-famous Trappist ales brewed in monasteries to sour Lambics unique to the Brussels region. In 2026, Belgium celebrates the 10-year anniversary of this UNESCO recognition.
- **How to experience it:** Visit a traditional beer café and notice how each beer is served in its own unique, specially shaped glass, designed to enhance its specific aroma and flavour. Don't be afraid to ask the bartender for a recommendation based on your tastes.

Culture in Action: Festivals & Events in 2026

To truly experience the culture, join in the celebrations. 2026 is a fantastic year for it.

- **Carnaval de Binche (Feb-Mar):** A UNESCO-recognized event in Wallonia featuring the masked “Gilles” who parade through the town throwing oranges for good luck.
- **Ommegang Festival (July, Brussels):** A spectacular historical pageant with over 1,400 participants in 16th-century costume, re-enacting the celebration for Emperor Charles V.
- **Belgian National Holiday (July 21st):** A day of parades, parties, and fireworks, especially vibrant in Brussels.
- **KANAL–Centre Pompidou (Opening 2026):** Brussels will welcome a massive new cultural hub for modern and contemporary art, a major addition to the city’s art scene.

Resource: Your Belgian Culture Cheat Sheet

A quick reference guide for your first few months.

DOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be punctual for appointments and invitations. • Greet shopkeepers with a simple “Bonjour/Goeiedag” when entering and “Merci/Dank u” when leaving. • Bring a small gift (chocolates, flowers, wine) when invited to someone’s home. • Try to learn a few basic phrases in both French and Dutch. • Patiently wait your turn in line; queuing is the norm.
DON'Ts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate conversations about politics or the language divide. • Brag about your salary or personal wealth; modesty is a virtue. • Assume everyone speaks English (though many do, especially in cities and Flanders). • Be overly loud or expressive in public spaces. Belgians are generally more reserved. • Confuse Belgium with its neighbours, France and the Netherlands. It has its own distinct identity.

Go-To Conversation Starters: The weather (a national obsession), travel plans, food and drink, cycling, or asking for recommendations for local sights.

Checklist for Cultural Integration

- ☐ Visit a local weekend market and buy regional produce.
- ☐ Order a Trappist beer and drink it from its correct, designated glass.
- ☐ Buy a box of pralines from an artisanal **chocolatier**.
- ☐ Read one volume of a classic Belgian comic like Tintin, The Smurfs, or Blake and Mortimer.
- ☐ Try **frites** (fries) from a proper street-side stand (**fritkot** or **frietkot**) with mayonnaise.
- ☐ Attend a local festival, whether it’s a neighbourhood street party or a grand national event.
- ☐ Take a day trip to a city in the “other” linguistic region (e.g., from Brussels to Ghent or Namur).

Key Vocabulary: Sounding Like a Local

English	French (Wallonia/Brussels)	Dutch (Flanders/Brussels)
Hello	Bonjour	Goeiedag / Hallo
Goodbye	Au revoir	Tot ziens

Thank you	Merci	Dank u / Dank je wel
Please	S'il vous plaît	Alstublieft
Cheers!	Santé!	Gezondheid! / Proost!
Enjoy your meal	Bon appétit	Smakelijk
Comic strip	Bande dessinée	Stripverhaal
Fry stand	Friterie / Fritkot	Frietkot

Insider Tips from a Local

💡 **Tip: Friendships Take Time:** Belgians can seem reserved at first. Don't mistake this for unfriendliness. It often takes more time to move from acquaintance to friend, but once you do, the friendships are typically deep and loyal.

💡 **Tip: Embrace “La Belgique des Pigeons”:** This phrase refers to the Belgian love of simple, everyday pleasures. A good beer with a friend, a walk in the park, a delicious meal. The culture values comfort, quality, and cosiness over flashiness.

💡 **Tip: Explore Beyond the Capitals:** Brussels, Bruges, and Ghent are beautiful, but the real Belgium is also in the small towns. Explore the rolling hills of the Ardennes, the coastline, or the quiet villages of Flanders to get a fuller picture of the country.

💡 **Tip: Master the Art of the Apéro:** The “apéro” (aperitif) is a cherished tradition. It's a pre-dinner drink with friends, often accompanied by small snacks like cheese, olives, or crisps. It's a relaxed and essential part of social life.