



# Weekend Getaways

ExpatsatHome Essential Guide

## Weekend Getaways: Your Guide to Exploring Belgium & Beyond

Welcome to Belgium, a country perfectly positioned for exploration! When you first move here, it's easy to get caught up in the bubble of work, administration, and setting up your new life. But one of the greatest rewards of living in Belgium is its incredible accessibility—to its own historic cities, beautiful nature, and even neighboring countries.

This guide is designed to demystify travel in and from Belgium. We'll break down the planning process, reveal local secrets for saving money, and give you the confidence to turn those "I should go there someday" thoughts into unforgettable weekend adventures. It's time to explore your new home.

### Part 1: Understanding Your Getaway Options

Belgium might be small, but it packs a punch when it comes to travel diversity. Whether you have a single day or a full weekend, there's an adventure waiting just a short train ride away.

#### The Classic Belgian City Trip

The easiest and most rewarding way to start exploring is by visiting Belgium's other major cities. The train network is so efficient that you can wake up in Brussels and be sipping coffee by a canal in a medieval city in under an hour.

- **Ghent (Gent):** Often called the "hidden gem" of Flanders, Ghent offers the medieval charm and canals of Bruges but with a more vibrant, lived-in feel. It's a university city with a stunning historic center, a formidable castle (the Gravensteen), and a fantastic culinary scene. It's incredibly easy to reach from Brussels, making it a perfect first day trip.
- **Antwerp (Antwerpen):** Belgium's capital of cool, Antwerp is a bustling port city famous for fashion, art, and diamonds. Explore the magnificent Cathedral of Our Lady to see masterpieces by Rubens, wander through the trendy Zurenborg district with its stunning architecture, or shop 'til you drop on the Meir.
- **Leuven:** A lively university town just a 30-minute train ride from Brussels. Its heart is the Grote Markt (Grand Square), dominated by a spectacular Gothic town hall and Saint Peter's Church. It's home to the oldest Catholic university in the world and has a youthful, energetic atmosphere, especially known for its countless pubs.

 **Tip: Start Here!** If you're new to exploring Belgium, make Ghent your first day trip. It's less crowded than Bruges, easily walkable from the train station (or a short tram ride), and gives you a perfect taste of historic Flanders.

#### Escaping to Nature

When you need a break from the urban hustle, Belgium offers two distinct natural landscapes.

**The Belgian Coast (De Kust)** The entire 67-kilometer coastline is essentially one long, sandy beach dotted with unique towns. The best part? It's all connected by the **Kusttram** (Coastal Tram), the longest tram line in the world, allowing you to hop between seaside resorts with ease.

- **How to get there:** Take a direct train from Brussels to a major coastal city like **Oostende** (Ostend) or **Blankenberge**. From the station, you can walk to the beach or jump on the Kusttram to explore quieter towns like the elegant **De Haan** or the family-friendly **De Panne**.
- **What to do:** Walk along the promenade, build sandcastles, try fresh seafood, and rent a “cuis-tax” (a pedal car for the boardwalk). For a weekend stay, you'll find over 4,500 holiday homes and apartments available, many with direct sea views.

**The Ardennes** Located in the south of Wallonia, the Ardennes region is a world away from the flatlands of the north. Here you'll find rolling hills, dense forests, winding rivers, and charming villages. It's a paradise for hiking, kayaking, and outdoor pursuits.

- **How to get there:** While the Ardennes are best explored by car, you can still get a wonderful taste of the region without one. Take a train to a picturesque town like **Dinant**, famous for its citadel perched on a cliff above the Meuse river.
- **What to do:** Hike in the Nature Park of Furfooz, visit historic castles like Vêves or Walzin, or simply enjoy the stunning scenery.

### The Cross-Border Dash

One of the biggest perks of living in Brussels is its proximity to other countries. You can literally have lunch in another country and be back home for dinner.

- **Lille, France:** Just a 40-minute train ride away, Lille offers beautiful Flemish architecture, a charming old town (Vieux Lille), and fantastic French cuisine. It's a perfect, low-pressure way to practice your French.
- **Maastricht, Netherlands:** About an hour and a half by train, Maastricht is a historic Dutch city with a unique character, great shopping, and cozy riverside cafes.
- **Aachen, Germany:** In about an hour on a high-speed train, you can be in Aachen, the historic capital of Charlemagne's empire. Visit its stunning cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and enjoy a different culture and language.

## Part 2: The Expat's Toolkit for Travel

Now that you have some ideas, let's get into the practical tools that make planning easy and affordable.

Resource Focus: The `weekend_trip_planner`

Feeling overwhelmed? The key is to start small. Don't try to see everything in one day. The `weekend_trip_planner` is a simple framework to help you focus your ideas and create a manageable, enjoyable itinerary.

### How to Use the Trip Planner

The goal of the planner isn't to create a strict, minute-by-minute schedule. It's to give your trip a purpose and direction, so you don't waste time on the day wondering, “What should we do now?” Below is a breakdown of the sections and a filled-in example for a day trip to Ghent.

### Planner Breakdown:

- **Destination:** The city or region you're visiting.
- **Date & Duration:** When you're going and for how long (e.g., Day Trip, Weekend).
- **Travel Logistics:** How you'll get there. Note train times, ticket costs, and platform numbers.

- **Top 3 Priorities:** What are the three things you absolutely want to see or do? This is the core of your trip.
- **Food & Drink Mission:** Name one local specialty you want to try (e.g., Gentse Neuzen, Antwerp's Elixir d'Anvers).
- **Budget Estimate:** A rough calculation of costs (train, food, tickets) to avoid surprises.

### Example: Day Trip to Ghent

<b>Destination</b>	Ghent (Gent)
<b>Date &amp; Duration</b>	Saturday, Day Trip
<b>Travel Logistics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train from Bruxelles-Midi to Gent-Sint-Pieters.</li> <li>• Outbound: 09:04, Platform 12.</li> <li>• Return: 18:56, Platform 1.</li> <li>• Ticket: Weekend Ticket (or Train+ discount).</li> <li>• From station, take Tram 1 to the city center (Gravensteen stop).</li> </ul>
<b>Top 3 Priorities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Visit the Gravensteen (Castle of the Counts).</li> <li>2. Take a canal boat tour.</li> <li>3. Walk across St. Michael's Bridge for the famous "three towers" view.</li> </ol>
<b>Food &amp; Drink Mission</b>	Try a "Gentse Neus" (cuberdon) from a street cart and have a Waterzooi stew for lunch.
<b>Budget Estimate (per person)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train: €25</li> <li>• Tram: €3</li> <li>• Gravensteen Ticket: €12</li> <li>• Boat Tour: €10</li> <li>• Lunch &amp; Snacks: €30</li> <li>• <b>Total: €80</b></li> </ul>

### Resource Focus: train\_tips - Mastering the SNCB/NMBS

The Belgian National Railway Company (SNCB in French, NMBS in Dutch) is your key to unlocking the country. While buying a standard ticket can seem pricey, a little insider knowledge goes a long way.

**The Golden Ticket: The Train+ Card** This is the single best hack for frequent weekend travelers. As of early 2026, the Train+ card is a subscription that offers massive discounts.

#### 2026 Train+ Card Details

- **Benefit:** 40% discount on all train travel during off-peak hours (after 9 AM on weekdays) and **all day on weekends**.
- **Cost:** €6/month or €48/year for adults (26-64). Cheaper rates for youth and seniors.
- **Price Cap:** With the card, you are guaranteed to never pay more than **€14 for a single trip** in second class within Belgium. This makes traveling to farther destinations like the coast or the Ardennes incredibly affordable.
- **The Fine Print:** The 40% discount is applied to the Standard Fare. It can't be combined with other offers like the Weekend Ticket, but it's often the better deal.

### Other Key Savings & Ticket Types

- **Free for Kids:** Up to four children under 12 can travel with a paying adult for **free**. This is a huge saving for families.
- **Weekend Ticket:** If you don't have a Train+ card, the Weekend Ticket offers a 50% discount on a return journey between 7 PM Friday and Sunday evening.
- **Youth/Senior Ticket:** If you are under 26 or over 65, you can buy fixed-price tickets for single journeys, which are often the cheapest option available for your age group.

### How to Buy Your Tickets

1. **The SNCB App:** The easiest and most recommended method. You can buy tickets, check live train times, and see platform information. Your ticket is a QR code on your phone.
2. **The SNCB Website:** Similar to the app, good for planning on a computer. You can print your tickets or save them as PDFs.
3. **Station Kiosks:** Use the touch-screen machines at any station. They are multilingual and easy to navigate.
4. **Ticket Counter:** The most traditional way, but expect queues, especially at major stations.

**⚠ Important: Always Buy Before You Board!** Buying a ticket from the conductor on the train is possible but comes with a significant surcharge. It's much cheaper to buy your ticket a few minutes before departure on the app or at a kiosk.

## Part 3: Planning Your First Trip Step-by-Step

Let's put it all together. Here is a simple, repeatable process for planning any getaway.

### Step 1: Choose Your Destination & Vibe

- What are you in the mood for? A historic city, a walk on the beach, or a hike in the forest?
- How much time do you have? A day trip is perfect for nearby cities; the coast or Ardennes might be better with an overnight stay.
- Use the `weekend_trip_planner` to jot down your initial ideas.

### Step 2: Check the Logistics

- **Transport:** Use the SNCB app to check train times and prices. Decide which ticket type is best for you (Train+, Weekend Ticket, etc.).
- **Accommodation (if applicable):** For weekend trips, check platforms like Booking.com, Airbnb, or Holidu. For the coast, Holiday Suites is a popular local option with apartment-style rentals.
- **Opening Times:** Do a quick search for the opening hours of any museums or attractions you want to visit. Many museums in Belgium are closed on Mondays.

### Step 3: Pack Smart

Belgian weather is famously unpredictable. The key is layers!

- **Day Trip Essentials:** Good walking shoes, a reusable water bottle, a portable charger, and a light rain jacket or umbrella (even if the forecast is sunny!).
- **Weekend Bag:** Add a change of clothes, basic toiletries, and perhaps a book for the train ride.

### Step 4: On the Day of Travel

- Arrive at the train station 15-20 minutes before departure.
- Find your train on the large departure boards (they show the final destination, all the stops, the time, and the platform number).
- Hop on, find a seat in the correct class (1st or 2nd), and enjoy the ride!

## Part 4: Essential Resources

Keep this section handy for quick reference as you plan your travels.

### Your Weekend Getaway Checklist

Use this checklist to make sure you haven't forgotten anything.

- ☐ Decide on a destination and duration.
- ☐ Fill out the `weekend_trip_planner` with top priorities.
- ☐ Check train times and purchase tickets via the SNCB app.
- ☐ Book accommodation (if staying overnight).
- ☐ Check the weather forecast and pack accordingly.
- ☐ Charge phone and portable power bank.
- ☐ Download offline maps (Google Maps) for your destination.
- ☐ Have your digital train ticket ready for inspection.

### Key Vocabulary: Travel & Transport

English	French	Dutch
The train	Le train	De trein
The station	La gare	Het station
The platform / track	Le quai / la voie	Het perron / het spoor
A ticket	Un billet	Een ticket
One-way ticket	Un aller simple	Een enkele reis
Return ticket	Un aller-retour	Een heen-en-terug
The departure	Le départ	Het vertrek
The arrival	L'arrivée	De aankomst

### Insider Tips from a Local

#### Tip:

- **The Kusttram is an attraction in itself.** For a unique coastal experience, buy a day pass for the Coastal Tram and ride it from one end to the other (De Panne to Knokke-Heist). It takes over two hours and shows you the incredible diversity of the seaside towns.
- **Check for local events.** Before you go, do a quick search for "[City Name] events this weekend". You might stumble upon a local market, a festival, or a free concert that will make your trip even more memorable.
- **Don't ignore Wallonia.** While the Flemish cities are more famous, Wallonia has incredible charm. Beyond Dinant, consider visiting Namur for its stunning citadel or Tournai for its massive cathedral.
- **Book international trains in advance.** For trips to Paris, Amsterdam, or Cologne, prices on high-speed trains (Eurostar/Thalys) work like airline tickets—the earlier you book, the cheaper they are.

Taking that first step to explore is the hardest part. But once you take one trip, you'll realize how easy and rewarding it is. You'll feel more connected to your new country and be reminded of the incredible

adventure you're on. So pick a spot on the map, plan a small trip for this weekend, and go make some memories. Happy travels!

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