

Destination Brussels

A melting pot of cultures and gastronomic delights at the heart of the European Union, Brussels offers winter visitors some wonderful experiences

Words by Nick Ryan



It is the crossroads where two great nations meet, the Dutch-speaking Flemish and French-speaking Walloons. But, more than that, Brussels is the heart of the European Union: home to many of its institutions, to NATO and a plethora of peoples and languages, making it one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the planet.

Also known as the 'capital of comic strips', with iconic murals displayed on many of the city's walls, it is known for its mix of modern buildings and Art Nouveau-style homes. Brussels is an animated and festive city, and it is not rare to see a fanfare or a parade in the **Grand Place**, nor is it uncommon to see the famous **Manneken Pis** statue being cheekily adorned in a new costume.

Spread out over 19 districts, Brussels is a city made for walking. **Ixelles** is famous for its nightlife, while **Saint-Gilles**, particularly the **Maison Horta**, is popular with those who are interested in Art Nouveau. **Marolles**, with its famous flea market, is one of the few

neighbourhoods where the increasingly-rare Brussels dialect can still be heard. For those that don't have a lot of time, the best area to visit is the old city centre, featuring the Grand Place, in all of its traditional Flemish glory, and the City Hall. Next up are the **Saint-Hubert galleries** and elegant shopping centre covered by a beautiful stained glass ceiling. For art lovers, the **Royal Museums** of ancient and modern art are filled with the work of Belgian and foreign artists.

Winter is definitely the best time to visit, as Brussels is full of beautiful and cosy places to eat and drink. Take the time to ramble throughout the **Bourse** area, the **Marché aux Poissons** (fish market) and **place Sainte-Catherine**, where everyone keeps warm with mulled wine and 'croustillons' (deep-fried dough balls dusted in icing sugar). Sample Trappist beers, sugar-coated waffles, moules et frites (mussels and chips), or the Italian and French dishes also popular among the locals.

In 2009 the national, regional and city authorities have decided to focus their tourism efforts on 'comic strips'. It's not as odd as it might seem, considering so many famous comic artists and writers herald from the city, such as Tintin creator, Hergé. There are dozens of public events and exhibitions planned, including the **Balloon Parade** to launch proceedings (at the end of February). The 'comic tour', which has been around since 1993, takes in 31 famous mural-covered walls in the central Pentagon area and four walls in Laeken, and is a great way to see a different side to the old metropolis.

If you still have energy left after all that, head to **Sablon** for some antiques and secondhand bargains. Finally, what trip would be complete without trying some famous Belgian chocolate? ●



Top: The Grand Place
Left: Manneken Pis statue
Above: The quintessential cuisine, moules et frites