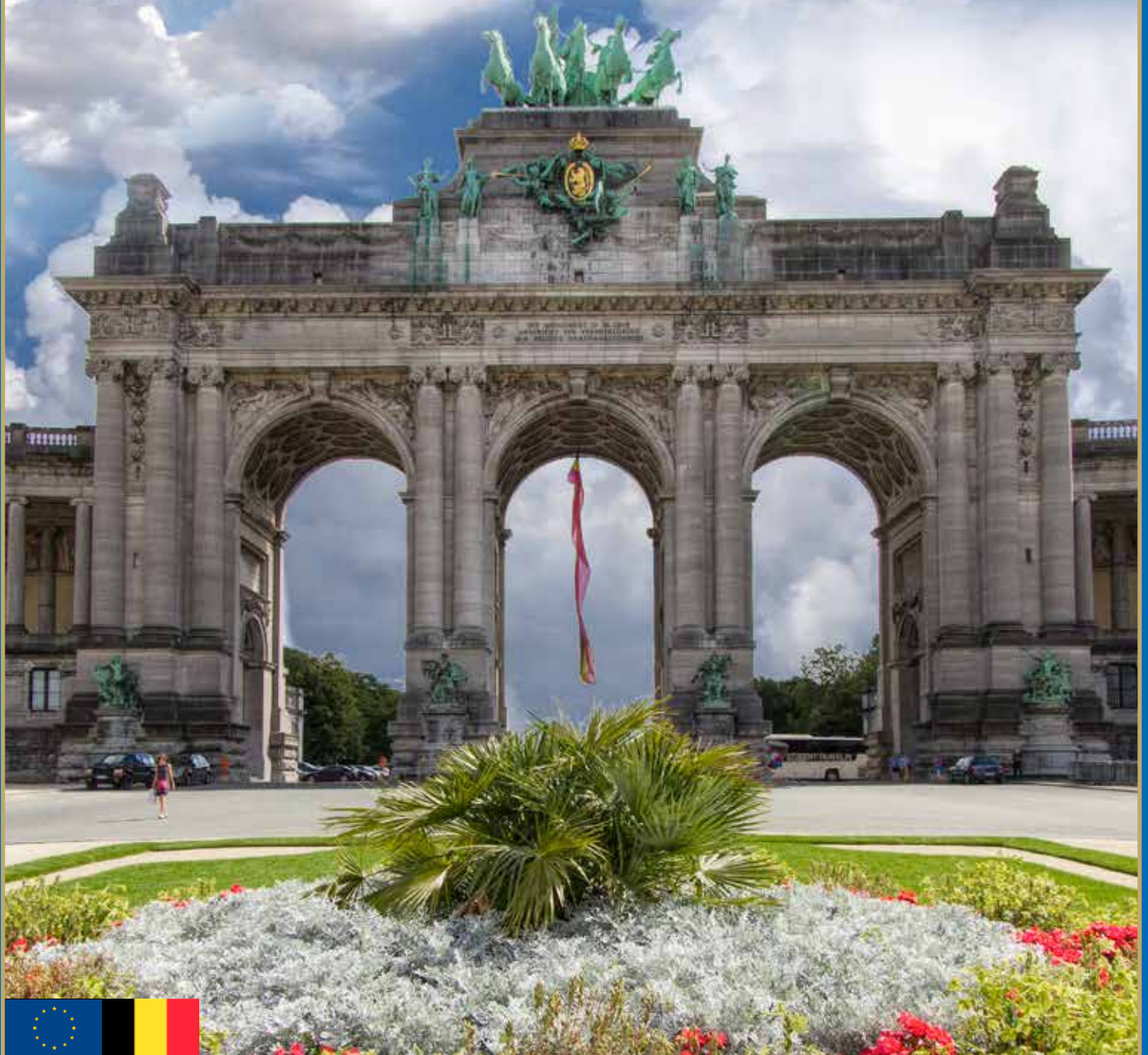


# THE EUROPEAN TIMES

## BELGIUM





# BELGIUM

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# Belgium: A Gateway to Europe

Belgium is strategically located in the heart of Europe. Nestled between Germany, the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg, and in close proximity to the UK, it lies at the centre of the richest and most densely populated area in Europe. Thanks to its position, Belgium enjoys excellent access to Europe's key markets and suppliers.

Belgium's geographical location, multicultural population and history have shaped the country into a truly international society. Located at the crossroads of western Europe, this modern country with a highly developed infrastructure and an excellent standard of living has been drawing investors, travellers and expats for many years and it is no wonder that Belgium is regarded as one of the best countries in the world when it comes to doing business.

## Strategic location

Owing to its strategic position halfway between the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, Belgium has become a magnet and a melting pot of cultures and a busy meeting place for artistic, cultural, economic, scientific, political and technological activity. Within 300 kilometres are cities like London, Paris, Amsterdam or Frankfurt, and cities such

as Lisbon, Madrid, Stockholm, Rome, Athens, Warsaw, Berlin, Dublin and other European business centres are only a few hours flight away.

## Multilingual and multicultural centre with superb workforce

Belgium is home to two main linguistic groups: the Dutch-speaking Flemish community and the French-speaking Walloon community, with a small majority of German speakers who live in eastern Wallonia. Furthermore, Belgium is divided into three regions: the Flemish Region, subdivided into five provinces; the Walloon Region, subdivided into five provinces; and the Brussels-Capital Region. In addition to the trilingual nature of the country, the Belgian population is known for their language skills and English is spoken by the majority of the population. Belgium has an efficient educational system, delivering high-quality training that meets the needs of the international marketplace and that is a breeding ground for innovation. The companies that choose to invest in Belgium stand to benefit from these recognised skills and from a highly professional workforce whose productivity is 20% higher than the European average. Furthermore, Belgians are renowned for their loyalty and openness.





## Vital trade hub

Belgium has been regarded as one of the vital global trade hub for centuries, thanks to its location and many major ports. Even though it is a small country, Belgium has developed significant international trade and has made the most of its central location by investing in cutting-edge transport infrastructure. In 2016, Belgium was ranked among the first 20 countries in the world in terms of trade, and nearly three-quarters of Belgium's trade is with other EU countries.

## Tax reform measures for enhancing growth potential

Aiming to enhance its growth potential, Belgium recently introduced tax reform measures. The corporate tax, currently at 33.99% including the solidarity contribution, will be lowered to 29% in 2018, and to 25% in 2020. In addition, the solidarity contribution will be phased out. The levy will be reduced from 3% to 2% next year, and to 0% in 2020. The agreement also includes cuts to corporate tax for small businesses, which will pay 20% income tax on the first €100.000 of income from 2018, instead of 25% tax under current rules. Small companies would have to pay one director remuneration of at least €45.000 per year to qualify for the reduced income tax.

## New company code to bring changes to the corporate landscape

The Belgian government has prepared a new Company Code, which will introduce major changes to the existing corporate landscape. The aim of these reforms is to align the Code with the needs of a fast-paced, ever-changing, digitalized society, effectively making Belgian corporate law and Belgian companies more attractive to both domestic

and foreign investors. The proposed reforms have been greeted with optimism, as they increase the flexibility of Belgian corporate law, although the envisaged increased attractiveness of Belgian companies for investors requires significant amendments to accounting and tax law provisions as well. In addition to companies, the new code will also apply to non-profit organisations and foundations, this eliminating the need for the current Act on Associations & Foundations.

## World renown hospitality

Although Belgium is a relatively small country with 11.5 million inhabitants, it is a country renowned for its hospitality, warmth and welcoming spirit. The corporate tax, currently at 33.99% friendliness, paired with the exquisite cuisine and the best chocolate and beer in the world, put Belgium on top of the list of best travel destinations.

## Brussels – the capital of Belgium and the capital of Europe

Home to the headquarters of the European Union and NATO, Brussels is an international financial centre that hosts the headquarters of over 2.000 multinationals. Brussels offers high-calibre scientific resources and has flexible economic infrastructures that have enabled it to keep pace with the great technological changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a travel destination, Brussels is easy to reach and reasonably priced. It is a city touched by the spirit of times, a capital that's relaxed and comfortable, as much in its history as in its present-day reality. In addition to the rich cultural life, Brussel offers lush green parks and woods, which account for 11.4% of the region's territory. Its utterly multicultural essence captures the hearts of visitors – nearly 30% of Brussels' 1.1 million inhabitants are foreigners.



# Federal Parliamentary Democracy with a Three-Tier Government

Established as a federal parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarchy, Belgium has three levels of government: federal, regional and provincial. The King of the Belgians is the Head of State and the Prime Minister of Belgium is the Head of Government in a multi-party system. Federal legislative power is vested in both the Government and the two chambers of Parliament, the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives.

The federal executive power is held by the Prime Minister and the ministers, who together form the Council of Ministers. Furthermore, since the federation is made up of language-based communities and regions, there are regional and community governments, which have jurisdiction over transportation, public works, water policy, cultural matters, education, public health, environment, housing, zoning, and economic and industrial policy, and provincial and local governments under an exclusive competency of the regions. The two biggest regions, Flanders and Wallonia, are subdivided into five provinces each, and the Brussels-Capital Region is directly divided into 19 municipalities. In total, Belgium counts 589 municipalities.

## Constitution

The Constitution of Belgium was established on 7 February 1831, and its most relevant reforms were performed in 1970 and in 1993. With the reforms of 1970, the constitution recognised the existence of strong communitarian and regional differences within Belgium, but sought to reconcile these differences through a diffusion of power to the communities and the regions. In 1993, the parliament approved a constitutional package transforming Belgium into a full-fledged federal state.

## Head of State

Belgium's Head of State is a hereditary monarch. The current King Philippe succeeded on the throne in August 2013, upon his father King Albert II's abdication. As the moderator of the political life, the King has a symbolic unifying role, representing a common national Belgian identity. The heir apparent to King Philippe is his daughter Princess Elisabeth.

## Federal Government

The Federal Government exercises the federal executive power. The Head of Government is the Prime Minister, who is appointed by the monarch and approved by Parliament. The Prime Minister is traditionally the leader of the majority party or the majority coalition following legislative elections, which are held every four years. The Prime Minister leads and coordinates the work of the Federal Government and heads the Council of Ministers. The current Government has 15 ministers which, with the possible exception of the Prime Minister, consists of the same number of Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. Furthermore, there are secretaries of state, each of whom is deputy to a minister and is part of the Federal Government, but does not sit in the Council of Ministers. Belgium's current Prime Minister is Charles Michel.



Charles Michel, Prime Minister





The Belgian Federal Parliament sits in the Palace of the Nation in Brussels  
© Kartouchken Dreamstime

## Ministers

Deputy Prime Minister and  
Minister of Employment, Economy  
and Consumer Affairs, in charge of Foreign Trade  
*Kris Peeters*

Deputy Prime Minister and  
Minister of Security and the Interior,  
in charge of the Buildings Agency  
*Jan Jambon*

Deputy Prime Minister and  
Minister of Development Cooperation,  
Digital Agenda, Telecom and Postal Services  
*Alexander De Croo*

Deputy Prime Minister and  
Minister of Foreign and European Affairs,  
in charge of Beliris and Federal Cultural Institutions  
*Didier Reynders*

Minister of Justice  
*Koen Geens*

Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health  
*Maggie De Block*

Minister of Pensions  
*Daniel Bacquelaîne*

Minister of Finance,  
in charge of Fight against Tax Fraud  
*Johan Van Overtveldt*

Minister of Energy, Environment  
and Sustainable Development  
*Marie Christine Marghem*

Minister of Defense, in charge of the Civil Service  
*Steven Vandeput*

Minister of the Budget,  
in charge of the National Lottery  
*Sophie Wilmes*

Minister of Mobility,  
in charge of Belgocontrol and  
the National Railway Company of Belgium  
*Francois Bellot*

Minister of Small Businesses,  
Self-employment, Small and  
Medium-sized Enterprises,  
Agriculture and Social Integration  
*Denis Ducarme*

## Secretaries of State

State Secretary for Foreign Trade, attached to the Minister  
in charge of Foreign Trade  
*Pieter De Crem*

State Secretary for Asylum Policy and Migration, in charge  
of Administrative Simplification, attached to the Minister  
of Security and the Interior  
*Theo Francken*

State Secretary for the Fight against Social Fraud, Privacy  
and North Sea, attached to the Minister of Social Affairs  
and Public Health  
*Philippe De Backer*

State Secretary for Combating Poverty, for Equal Opportu-  
nities, for Disabled People and for Science Policy, in charge  
of Larger Towns, attached to the Minister of Security and  
Home Affairs  
*Zuhal Demir*



# Open, Diversified and Well-balanced Economy Fosters Entrepreneur-friendly Environment

Belgium is an open, diversified and well-balanced economy with an entrepreneur-friendly environment and quick procedures for setting up a new business. Being among the world's top exporters, the country offers no trade restrictions and can serve as an ideal base for reaching out to the European consumer market.

Belgium has a stable economy with a highly developed road network and diversified industrial and commercial sectors. Belgium is known for its high-tech sectors and it is known as R&D home for life sciences. The considerable strengths of economy lie in the textile, heavy engineering sectors, steel and coal. Foreign investors have attractive opportunities for investment in different industries and sectors, such as chemical industries, the automotive industry, greenfield investment projects, the agro-food sector, the pharmaceuticals industry, R&D, industrial metal, etc.

## Key advantages

Due to its central location, investors in Belgium can reach more than 500 million consumers within a radius of 800 kilometres. It is in close proximity to major production centres and sales markets, and it is easy to reach from

Europe and the rest of the world thanks to the excellent infrastructure and connections. Furthermore, Belgium is a culturally diverse society, which makes it an ideal market for testing new products.

## International decision-making centre

Brussels is not only the capital of Belgium, it is also the capital of the European Union. In Belgium, there are countless of European and international institutions, more than 2.000 multinationals, and a strong presence of lobby groups, diplomats and press.

## Highly qualified workforce

Belgium's workforce is highly skilled, educated, and productive. Belgian workers are the most productive in the EU, and are also ranked among the world's most entrepreneurial employees. Key factors contributing to this are the quality of the education system and the ability to speak multiple languages. Other attractive assets are the workforce's flexibility, versatility and eagerness to learn in changing working environment. Belgium's superb universities, outstanding research and development centres, and other institutions focused on innovation make the country a true knowledge centre.





## Investor-friendly environment

Foreign Direct Investment has always played a systematic and pivotal role in Belgium's economy. Belgium has always encouraged international trade and foreign investment. Promoting investor friendly climate, Belgium practices global equity which means Belgium's trade and incentives policies does not discriminate between domestic and foreign companies. Belgium follows openness in foreign trade and investment which means foreign investors does not need prior authorization of payments and investors can also use other currencies for transactions. There are no debt-to-equity requirements and there is free flow of financial investments including investments and credits. Belgium has strong anti-bribery laws, freeports, foreign trade zones and investors can gain from investment subsidies and incentives. Furthermore, special tax inducements and incentives are offered to foreign companies to setup and establish enterprises in different sectors. Additional competitive advantages include the intelligent, competitive, and business-friendly tax system which offers significant tax benefits, as well as the competitive property prices, which are lower compared to the neighbouring countries.

## Incentives aimed at promoting investment

In Belgium, regional authorities provide incentives to investors for setting up an enterprise in their area. For example, Flanders regional authority gives special grants for ecological investments, applicable to companies of any size regardless of location. Incentives are also provided for energy saving investments, investments focusing on renewable energy, etc. Belgium government also provides direct aid, labour and training incentives, R&D and inter-

national trade opportunities. There are subsidies to enterprises that create jobs, reduced security payment to employers and special tax regime for individuals that include foreign executives, researchers and specialists.

## Excellent international rankings

In global comparisons, Belgium performs exceptionally well in terms of productivity and the openness of its economy. Belgium is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the World Talent Ranking (2017) by the International Institute for Management Development; 4<sup>th</sup> most productive country in the world by the Conference Board (2012) and 4<sup>th</sup> in EY's Globalization Index (2014); 6<sup>th</sup> on DHL's Global Connectedness Index (2016) and World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (2016); 10<sup>th</sup> in the Enabling Trade Index (2016) of the World Economic Forum and the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation; 13<sup>th</sup> on the Global Connectivity Index (2015) of Huawei; 15<sup>th</sup> in Attractive for Venture Capital (2014) of IESE Business School; 17<sup>th</sup> on the Global Entrepreneurship Index (2018) of the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute and on the Business Environment scale (2014) of the Economist Intelligence Unit; 18<sup>th</sup> on the Global Talent Competitiveness Index (2015-16) of INSEAD, Adecco Group, Human Capital Leadership Institute; 19<sup>th</sup> on the Foreign Direct Investment Confidence Index (2015) of A.T. Kearney; 20<sup>th</sup> most competitive economy (2017-18) by the World Economic Forum; 23<sup>rd</sup> in the World Competitiveness Yearbook (2017) of the International Institute for Management Development; 27<sup>th</sup> on the Global Innovation Index (2017) of Cornell University, INSEAD and the World Intellectual Property Organization; 40<sup>th</sup> on the Index of Economic Freedom (2015) by the Heritage Foundation; and 52<sup>nd</sup> on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business 2018 report. In the latter, Belgium ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the Trading Across Borders section.



# Essential Support in the Development of Sustainable International Businesses

THE EUROPEAN TIMES

Government agency Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT) has been created to promote sustainable international businesses, both by attracting foreign investors and supporting the development of Flemish companies abroad. Dispersed over more than 100 offices across the main economic centres in the world, FIT plays a key role in the social and economic development of Flanders. Claire Tillekaerts, CEO, discusses the role of the agency in the Flemish economy, highlighting the investment opportunities that the region offers.



Claire Tillekaerts, CEO of Flanders Investment & Trade

## European Times: What are the main characteristics of the Flanders Region?

**Claire Tillekaerts:** Flanders is one of the three independently-governed regions, stated in the North of Belgium. As capital of this region, Brussels incorporates the most important international institutions including NATO, the EU Parliament and many other major public and private international institutions, making Flanders the gateway to Europe.

Flanders represents a home to a wide range of creative and innovative companies, due to the openness of the Flemish people to new ideas and influences, creating thriving communities. Considering the location of the region, the strongly developed infrastructure, the high purchasing power and the numerous innovative clusters, Flanders is the ideal test market for innovations and new products for local and foreign companies.

## European Times: What is the main role of FIT?

**Claire Tillekaerts:** FIT facilitates the investment projects in Flanders and assists, supports and stimulates the Flemish companies to expand internationally. The agency ensures a tailor-made approach for potential foreign investors, focusing on the business opportunities that the region offers. FIT also provides free advice, guidance and business expertise, access to the global network of companies, stimulation of partnerships between the domestic and international companies, and provision of financial support for the Flemish exporters.





*“Belgium ranks in the top 15 exporting countries in the world and Flanders provides 83% of the overall Belgium exports and imports. Flanders ranks among the world’s elite when it comes to R&D, supporting and promoting the innovative clusters into leading positions in the world.”*

**European Times: What are some of the activities that FIT undertakes to attract foreign investments?**

**Claire Tillekaerts:** We organize more than 120 activities that refer to this pillar, mainly focused on the promotion of the Flemish investment opportunities, logistic assets, innovation and the quality of life. We organize road shows in different regions and sectors in the world, as well as seminars and high-level events.

The agency provides free expert support and introduction to the local companies, banks and regulators, organizes site visits to the real estate locations and assists with the legal aspects of setting up a business.

**European Times: What are some of the activities to support the development of the Flanders’ exports sector?**

**Claire Tillekaerts:** Belgium ranks in the top 15 exporting countries in the world and Flanders provides 83% of the overall Belgium exports and imports. In order to reach the region’s trade goals, FIT performs more than 150 activities annually including participation on exhibitions in different parts of the world and organization of economic missions and seminars.

In order to reward the most successful export companies, FIT gives an award “The Lion of the Export” to two companies on annual basis. The agency supports the development of the Flemish export companies with tailor made programs, including preparation of export plan, mini audits and allocation of funds to finance the expansion of the company. We also guide the companies by providing market intelligence, like infrastructure opportunities in the world or trade proposals and tenders worldwide.

**European Times: Which are the most prominent clusters of the Region?**

**Claire Tillekaerts:** In terms of internationalization our strategy is to reach the top five rankings by 2020, by

attracting foreign investors capable to strengthen and develop the clusters into major international players.

Flanders ranks among the world’s elite when it comes to R&D, supporting and promoting the innovative clusters into leading positions in the world. This is supported by the highly developed strategic research centres including imec, VIB, Flanders Make and VITO, working in close partnerships with the internationally renowned universities, such as ULeuven, UGent, UAntwerpen, VUB and UHasselt. Belgium (Flanders) is second in Europe when it comes to clinical trials per capita, and boasts one of the world’s fastest approval time for clinical trials.

Easily accessible and centrally located, the Port of Antwerp is the second largest petro-chemical cluster in the world. The port includes five oil refineries, four steam crackers and 500 chemical companies, providing a diversified portfolio of more than 300 different chemicals. The Port of Antwerp also provides a state-of-the-art pipeline network that facilitates product interchange.

**European Times: Why should foreign investors choose Flanders?**

**Claire Tillekaerts:** Flanders is the first and best choice when it comes to business environment considering that we are close to the Europe’s institutions and the purchasing power. We are the fourth most productive workforce in the world with cutting-edge infrastructure where a business can be set up in only four days. We have an outstanding living environment, affordable housing and warehousing opportunities, well established education and healthcare system.

In this context, FIT provides tailored approach and assistance in every step of the process of developing international businesses. If you consider the business climate, the service and the quality of life, Flanders is an excellent choice for every investor!



# University City with a Distinct International Character

Leuven is the capital of the province of Flemish Brabant in Belgium and represents a city with a distinctly international character. The city is an agglomeration of five communities: Leuven, Heverlee, Kessel-Lo, Wilsele and Wijgmaal. Leuven has a population of over 100.000 inhabitants, not counting the foreign student population which exceeds 57.000. There are 157 nationalities working, studying and living in Leuven, which gives the city an unmistakably international flavour. Mayor Louis Tobback discusses Leuven's main advantages and challenges.



Louis Tobback, Mayor of Leuven

## European Times: As a university city, what are Leuven's main advantages?

**Louis Tobback:** Situated in Belgium, in the heart of Western Europe, the University of Leuven has been a centre of learning for nearly six centuries. Founded in 1425, the University of Leuven is the largest university in the country and one of the oldest and most renowned universities in Europe. With the number of students constantly increasing, the university offers a wide variety of international

master's programmes, all supported by high-quality, innovative, interdisciplinary research.

Furthermore, the world-famous beer brand Stella Artois has its original brewery in Leuven, which is still one of the largest breweries in the world and one of the city's main attractions.

Leuven is a city and a university! Its streets are full of life and the city hosts a great number of cultural events.

## European Times: What is the role of Leuven MindGate?

**Louis Tobback:** Leuven MindGate has recently been established to promote the city as a premier region for Health, High-Tech and Creativity. Leuven MindGate has a unique ecosystem of companies cooperating with knowledge institutions and the government in order to foster innovation and growth.

## European Times: With a large population living on a small territory, how is Leuven handling the issue of transportation?

**Louis Tobback:** Our major challenge is the fact that a significant number of inhabitants, as well as foreign students, live on a small territory. Most people use public transportation, since some streets are off-limits to vehicle traffic and there are strict maximum speed regulations of 30 km/h within the city centre. We also have the ambition to become the number one bicycle city of Belgium and, in order to lead by example, the city council and the University of Leuven have already purchased bicycles and e-bikes which can be used by their personnel.

## European Times: What is your personal message?

**Louis Tobback:** As Leuven is probably the most densely inhabited area in Flanders per square meter, my personal message is that we have to learn to share the space and to live close to each other.





# A Premier Region for Health, High-Tech and Creativity

Leuven MindGate is one of the world's prime regions for health, high-tech and creativity; it is a region with a unique ecosystem, where companies, knowledge institutions and the government collaborate closely to create tomorrow's innovative successes. Johan Merlevede, Managing Director, discusses Leuven MindGate's objectives and activities.



Johan Merlevede, Managing Director of Leuven MindGate

## European Times: What are Leuven MindGate major advantages?

**Johan Merlevede:** Leuven MindGate is a region with a unique ecosystem of companies which cooperate with knowledge institutions and the government, thus creating a perfect breeding ground for companies, entrepreneurs, investors and talent. It was founded in 2016 when 29 leading knowledge institutions, companies and the City of Leuven joined forces. These three parties represent the Leuven ecosystem in a so-called Triple Helix model.

## European Times: Please elaborate on the Triple Helix model.

**Johan Merlevede:** It is a unique model where companies cooperate with the government and knowledge institutions and create economic development, growth and jobs. Furthermore, the government invests in education in order to create a knowledgeable workforce and in infrastructure in order to create an ideal entrepreneurial climate, and simplifies the laws so local business can grow. The knowledge institutions develop talent and knowledge for the future and encourage innovation through cooperation and the creation of spin-off companies.

## European Times: What are Leuven MindGate's goals and objectives?

**Johan Merlevede:** Aiming to be the driver of the economic and societal development, we have set two primary objectives. Our first primary objective is to position the Leuven region internationally as a top destination in order to attract talent, investors and companies etc. The second objective is to further strengthen the unique ecosystem. We are firm believers in the crossover between creativity, high-tech and health, so we aim to stimulate cooperation among these fields by bringing together people from these industries. In the past year, we have made significant progress in establishing Leuven MindGate's brand, and we aim to become one of the top five high-tech regions in the world.

## European Times: What are some of your main activities and achievements?

**Johan Merlevede:** We are currently working on the improvement of the administrative process and the integration of international knowledge workers. This will further strengthen the attractiveness of the region for international talent. We will organise activities in the International House Leuven, a building which, later on, will also be the home of the Leuven MindGate Headquarters and of the International School of Leuven etc. Furthermore, we have Vaartopia, which used to be an abandoned, run-down part of Leuven, but now is a hip area booming with creative and artistic activities. Vaartopia is our response to the need for creating a hub with affordable space for the creative sector. Additionally, we and our members are important partners of the Smart City project, which aims to use technology to improve the life of the inhabitants and visitors concerning parking, air quality, shopping. It's also a crucial step in Leuven's goal to become climate neutral by 2030.

## European Times: What is your personal message?

**Johan Merlevede:** The Leuven region is very rich in potential; it is an excellent region to work, live, invest and study in and I invite all to put Leuven on their map.

# Uniting Entrepreneurs and Giving Them a Voice

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Voka – Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the province of Flemish Brabant, originated from a merger between Voka Leuven and Voka Halle-Vilvoorde, two communities with different DNA, separated by the ring of Brussels. The landscape around Leuven has many family-driven companies with a traditional of value driven production, and the members of Voka Leuven were traditionally family owned enterprises. The Chamber of Commerce of Vilvoorde serviced members from the area, with its proximity to Zaventem airport and Brussels, the capital of Belgium and Europe. The merger brought many advantages, such as needing only one head of services to serve two districts. Representing more than 2.500 companies in Flemish Brabant, Voka Flemish Brabant is the province's largest entrepreneurial network. Managing Director Peter Van Biesbroeck, who used to work at the leading corporation in Leuven AB-Inbev, discusses Voka Flemish Brabant's goals as well as the regional advantages and challenges.



Peter Van Biesbroeck, Managing Director of VOKA Vlaams Brabant

**European Times: As the largest Chamber of Commerce in the province, what are Voka Flemish Brabant's main priorities and services?**

**Peter Van Biesbroeck:** Voka Flemish Brabant is the most influential professional employers' organization in the region of East-Brabant. We strive to provide a platform where all the social-economic partners can meet and communicate about relevant themes. We are part of the Voka alliance, which has more than 18.000 members and a mission to create the optimal framework for successful entrepreneurship. Voka is the most influential professional network of entrepreneurs and the representative organization of companies in Flanders, thereby contributing fundamentally to the prosperity and well-being of the region.

Above all, Voka is a network organization which connects members; our aim is to unite entrepreneurs and give them a voice. Through the numerous activities on our agenda, including seminars and workshops, members get the opportunity to connect with other entrepreneurs and managers. Many of these activities are offered free





*“The simplest solution is to promote transportation via the water ways and to motivate transportation companies to make full use of the water ways. With roads that are becoming increasingly more congested and canals with a lot of free capacity, this is the simplest way to get containers off the road and onto the water.”*

of charge or at a reduced price for members. Our events, services and projects aim to strengthen the quality, added value and viability of business through three main pillars: lobbying, networking and service. Furthermore, through our monthly magazine *Entrepreneurs*, our newsletters, website, social media channels and the Voka app, we seek to keep members informed and provide reliable information on economic news, companies, inspirational role models and Voka's operations and activities.

Voka is not to be confused with a compulsory Chamber of Commerce where it is mandatory for companies to register, such as in the Netherlands. Our Chamber services companies that are voluntary members and believe in the added value and various services that we provide, including legal counselling and advice on accounting or tax issues, as well as support for HR and export related issues and documents, legal and financial issues.

**European Times: Traffic congestion is one of the main challenges in the region. What are your plans for resolving this issue?**

**Peter Van Biesbroeck:** The biggest challenge is to improve distribution and transportation through the region. The traffic in and around Brussels is very congested and the region needs solutions to improve the flow of traffic. Nearly 19 of the 26 bottlenecks of this country are in our region; it is a tremendous responsibility and we must put all our forces together to resolve this issue.

The simplest solution is to promote transportation via the water ways and to motivate transportation companies

to make full use of the water ways. With roads that are becoming increasingly more congested and canals with a lot of free capacity, this is the simplest way to get containers off the road and onto the water. With some adjustments in the height of the bridges and the quays, a lot of traffic can be diverted to the water ways, which can connect Belgium with its neighbours and the most important rivers in Europe.

**European Times: What are Leuven's major advantages?**

**Peter Van Biesbroeck:** Leuven is a great place for doing business, with excellent dynamics between the local government, the university and the business community. Thanks to the university, Leuven has traditionally been a place where the best brains of the country come together. The university, the political leaders and the business community have remarkable cooperation, which is why Leuven has above average performance.

Today we market Leuven as the MindGate of Belgium, and the city has become a leader in innovation and technology, especially in the field of health and bio technology. The university hospital UZ Leuven plays a crucial role in the development of the health sector technology. Labelled as a 'city within a city', the hospital employs 7.000 people in 19 different hospital departments. It's a great endorser for spin off and helps Leuven to develop a real health hub, fortifying the city as one of the main health tourism centres in Belgium.

I would like to invite more foreign investors to come to Leuven and utilize the synergy of our business community.



# Outstanding Potential in the Heart of Europe

Voka – Chamber of Commerce and Industry Limburg’s mission is to create the optimal framework for successful entrepreneurship as the closest, most influential and professional network of entrepreneurs and the representative organisation of companies in Limburg, thereby contributing fundamentally to the prosperity and well-being of its region. CEO Johann J.L. Leten discusses the Chamber’s goals and activities, as well as the region’s potential.



Johann J.L. Leten, CEO of Voka - Chamber of Commerce and Industry Limburg

## European Times: Could you please elaborate on the Chamber’s goals, structure and activities?

**Johann J.L. Leten:** Voka Limburg, which was established in 1860, has over 3.000 members, amounting to 75% of the private sector and the added value in our province. With a mission to serve both as the optimal framework for successful entrepreneurship and the most influential and professional network of entrepreneurs, we are firmly dedicated to offering a wide range of support and encouragement on various levels.

Furthermore, the Chamber strives for the widest possible balance between large, medium and small businesses, which is why we have a well-balanced management system – a Board of Directors composed of 47 member companies, an Executive Committee appointed by the Board of Directors and composed of 15 member companies, and a General Assembly composed of all member companies. Attention is also paid to fostering proper representation of the various subregions and the different economic sectors.

## European Times: What are Limburg’s main advantages?

**Johann J.L. Leten:** Limburg is the true heart of Europe; a region with 85 million inhabitants and the centre of Europe in terms of economy, innovation and decision power. More than 60% of the European buying power lies in within 500 kilometres of Limburg, including major metropolises such as Brussels, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, London and Paris.

Limburg’s excellent geopolitical position, paired with its outstanding growth potential, continue to attract foreign investors, including global titans such as Nike, Ikea, Hyundai and many others. Over 300 foreign companies are already well-established in Limburg, amounting to 50% of the private sector. Its potential is growing even further with the development of eight million sq meters of space which will be available to interested investors.

Limburg recorded a strong growth in exports over the period of 2010-2016 and industry remains the biggest export sector. Furthermore, Limburg is in the centre of the knowledge triangle ELAt (Eindhoven, Leuven, Aachen), and has three high schools and the University UHasselt, which is ranked 15<sup>th</sup> on the list of Best Small Universities.

## European Times: What is your personal message?

**Johann J.L. Leten:** Limburg has proved its potential for overcoming challenges by reinventing its economy after experiencing some shock waves with the closing of the mines and the Ford factory in Genk. The people demonstrated flexibility and interested was shifted towards the development of SMEs, achieving a record number of start-ups in the past several years.

I invite all interested investors to explore Limburg’s potential and become one of the numerous successful business stories in the region. Limburg is your gateway to a successful market approach in the European economy.



# Driving Belgian Communities Forward for 125 Years



Franky Depickere, Chief Executive Officer of Cera

Founded in 1892 as a cooperative inspired by the German mayor and philanthropist Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, Cera is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

“Co-operatives are in other words businesses in which the fulfilment of common goals is essential”, Franky Depickere, Chief Executive Officer of Cera, explains.

Starting in 1892 as a small savings bank, a century later, Cera became a full-blown bank, merging in the KBC group in 1998 and since then continuing its way as a cooperative financial holding company. Inspired by the values of Raiffeisen, Cera together with its 400.000 members now works to guarantee the financial sustainability and long-term development of KBC Group. They are also united behind important social goals, investing into valuable community projects at a regional, national and international level.

“We are celebrating our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and one of our core issues is the promotion of the cooperative enterprise. We are convinced that the cooperative model is the key to the development of the economy” Franky Depickere points out.

The local economies in Brussels (KBC Brussels) and Wallonia (CBC Banque soon headquartered in Namur) have benefited from the fact that the decision centres for the KBC group, in which Cera is the largest stakeholder, are located in Belgium. “We take pride in the fact that we are creating job opportunities for young people and the local economies and we are present in all parts of Belgium: in Brussels, Walloon, Flanders and the German part”, Franky Depickere says.

The ‘Belgium Raiffeisen Foundation’ (BRS) was established in 1992, with the aim to support micro finance and micro insurance projects which help improve the quality of life of marginalised groups in a sustainable way.

After the world economic and financial crisis, Cera’s targets are focused on empowering young people, to which they have devoted their Next Generation project. “In the past three years, we have enlarged and strengthened, we have a strong capital base and membership, and our main aim now is to attract and keep young people on board, thinking for the next generations”, Franky Depickere highlights.

Cera is renowned for its encouragement of the cooperative model and spirit, guiding 40-50 organisations per year and supporting the creation of new ones.

The consortium has managed to overcome a number of crises in its long history, demonstrating the strength and endurance of cooperative entrepreneurs. “We are a strong financial holding, which takes its social responsibilities seriously. My message is that we have proved that locally anchored organisations are crucial for the local economy. We will continue to demonstrate that the cooperative model is working and we have our goals set for the long term”, Franky Depickere concludes.

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# Experience You Can Trust



Johan Durnez, Partner at the Law firm Durnez

Acting for a diverse range of international and local companies, corporate work is the cornerstone of the legal services offered by the Belgian law firm Durnez (Advocat-enassociatie Durnez). “Our lawyers are skilled at creating new structures for commercial growth, advising on public and private mergers and acquisitions, as well as advising boards and shareholders”, Johan Durnez, Partner, emphasizes.

The scale of their corporate practice enables the firm to structure its team according to their role, whether they are providing focused advice directly to their clients or acting in partnership with advisers on complex international transactions. “We match the level of resource to your requirements, expectations and deadlines, giving you the commercial agility to achieve your objectives. We give you also a more general approach and, alongside our

corporate specialisms, we provide regulatory, employment, pensions, litigation, property and commercial advice”, Johan Durnez explains. This integrated expertise enables them to form a broader team across legal disciplines and jurisdictions when necessary.

“Our restructuring and insolvency lawyers apply their knowledge of insolvency, corporate and banking law, regulatory guidance and litigation to the full spectrum of restructuring, recovery and insolvency matters”, Johan Durnez says. The firm is frequently instructed on the planning and implementation of, or response to, formal insolvency proceedings commenced in or involving our European jurisdictions. “Our lawyers have been involved in a very significant number of the major formal insolvency proceedings in recent years in the jurisdictions in which we practice, and have played a key role in the development of the law in many key areas”, he adds.

Emphasizing that the firm has the scale and experience to resource the most demanding and complex cases as well as the day-to-day instructions, Johan Durnez highlights that their work includes acquisitions and disposals, landlord and tenant agreements, financing and secured transactions, joint venture agreements, as well as development and infrastructure projects. “We are also instructed on a range of contentious and non-contentious matters, including planning appeals, and other disputes. Additional key areas of work include advising on share purchase agreements, large scale retail and commercial leases for retailers and corporates, competition law, criminal defence, and tax matters”, he says.

Whether the tax issues are focused on a single European country or cross-border, involve planning for tax efficiency or require resolution of a civil or criminal tax controversy or investigation, the law firm Durnez is able to provide appropriate advice and solutions. “We provide a wide range of service options at all levels of court, but the best way to find out if we are right for your case is to contact us as soon as possible for an open and honest one-on-one consultation”, Johan Durnez concludes.

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## Among Europe's Most Important Transportation Hubs

Belgium is acknowledged as the administrative heart of Europe, but the country is also one of the most important transportation hubs. Transport in Belgium is facilitated with well-developed road, air, rail and water networks. With highly developed transport infrastructure and an integrated public transport system, getting around Belgium is easy and cost-effective. Furthermore, due to its strategic location, Belgium has excellent international transport links.

### Road

Belgium has the second highest density highway network in Europe after the Netherlands, at 54.7 kilometres per 1.000 sq kilometres. Belgium features an extensive system of main roads, and since it is situated at a crossroads of several different countries, its highways are used by people of many nationalities. Modern motorways connect

Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, Ostend, Hasselt, Liege and Antwerp, and provide convenient access to Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany and France. There are a total of 154.012 kilometres of road, out of which 120.514 kilometres are paved road, including 1.756 kilometres of expressways. All roads and expressways are free to drive on, since there are no toll roads in Belgium.

Most Belgian highways have three lanes with a few exceptions like the ring roads around Brussels and Antwerp which have five or six lanes in some stretches. Belgian highways are indicated by the letter "A" and a European number, with E numbers being used most often. Roads that area ring road around a city or a town are usually indicated by an R number.

The road network in Belgium is managed by regional authorities, meaning that a road section in Flanders is





managed by the Flemish government, a road section in Brussels by the Brussels government and a road section in Wallonia by the Walloon government. The country's dense road network enjoys near-total streetlight coverage, with lights kept on throughout the night, using about 2.2 million bulbs.

## Public transport

Public transportation systems in Belgium are of the highest quality, offering best adapted transport solution with a competitive travel time at affordable prices. Being accessible and efficient, one of its key advantages is an integrated train, tram, metro and bus system, which makes connections easier between different transport types. Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp feature metro networks, while the other cities use mainly buses and trams.

## Rail

Belgium has an impressive, modern railway network. There are a total of 3.592 kilometres of rail, out of which 2.960 kilometres are electrified. The network currently includes four high speed lines: from just south of Brussels to the French border, where it continues to Lille, Paris or London; from Leuven to Liege; from Liege to the German border near Aachen; and from Antwerp to Rotterdam by meeting HSL-Zuid at the border with Netherlands. Due to the high population density, the train tickets are not expensive and the frequency of services is high. The rail transport in Belgium is managed by Infrabel, which manages the rail network and SNCB/NMBS, which manages the freight and passenger services.

The capital is the heart of the system, the hub of many lines radiating outward and providing access to all of the country's major destinations. The busiest route is that between Brussels and Antwerp. Also, when it comes to international travel, Belgium is truly the railway crossroads of Europe, with trains entering Brussels from all over the continent. High-speed trains connect the Belgian capital

with other important Western European capitals: the Thalys trains run between Brussels, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hague and Paris; the Eurostar service runs to Lille in France and, through the Eurotunnel, to London. Additionally, an InterCity connection with Amsterdam is available every hour. Alternatively, travellers can take the conventional EuroCity trains to most European cities.

Furthermore, an urban commuter rail network, Brussels Regional Express Network, is currently being set up the capital, and it is expected to be ready by 2019. This extra capacity will enable faster and more frequent rail links to and from Brussels, thereby providing a wider range of public transport services. The Regional Express Network aims to improve public transport within a 30-kilometre radius of the capital.

## Buses and trams

Regional transport in Belgium is operated by regional companies: De Lijn in Flanders operates the Kusttram and the Antwerp pre-metro and tram, and the tram in Gent, as well as a bus network both urban and interurban, TEC in Wallonia operates the Charleroi pre-metro as well as a bus network and MIVB/STIB in the Brussels Capital-Region operates the Brussels metro as well as the Brussels tram and bus network. The bus routes are also handled by these three companies: De Lijn is responsible for the Flanders network, TEC handles bus travel in Wallonia, and STIB buses cover the Brussels metropolitan area.

The bus network constitutes a supplement to the railway network, running to the towns without a train station. Bus service is generally local, although a number of long-distance connections also operate. International service is provided by Eurolines.

Urban tram networks exist in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels and are gradually being extended. The only rapid transit system in Belgium is the Brussels Metro. An interesting means of city and suburban transportation is the





Kusttram, a tram running along the Belgian coast between the French and the Dutch border. As the longest tram line in the world, the Kusttram is a popular attraction in itself, especially during the summer.

## Airports

Belgium is regarded as the first stop in Europe due to its central location, offering direct flights to many destinations both in Europe and overseas via its airports. There are a total of 41 airports, 26 of which have paved runways. Belgium has five airports offering passenger services: Zaventem and Charleroi in Brussels, Ostend-Bruges International Airport in Ostend, Liege Airport, and Deune Airport in Antwerp. Other airports are military airports or small civil airports with no scheduled flights. Well-known military airports include the Melsbroek Air Base and the Beauvechain Air Base. Belgium has also one heliport.

Belgium's major international gateway is Zaventem Airport in Brussels, located 12 kilometres northeast of the capital. It is the largest of the five commercial airports and receives flights operated by most major airlines from all over the world. Brussels Airport is well connected with six trains an hour to Brussels centre, plus direct train links to main Belgian cities and the Netherlands. An airport express line runs every 30 minutes between the airport and Brussels' European Quarter. In 2017, Brussels Airlines, Brussels Airport, SNCB and various tourist offices introduced the Hi Belgium Pass, which combines a return flight, unlimited public train transport and two tourist activities for €149. The airport is expected to have 24.5 million passengers this year, three million passengers more than last year, and it will beat its 2015 record of 23.5 million passengers. In terms of cargo, the airport will have handled more than 500.000 tonnes of goods.

Charleroi, also known as Brussels South, is used mainly by low budget airlines, such as Ryanair. The airport is situated 50 kilometres from Brussels. From Charleroi, there is the Brussels city shuttle that takes around an hour to the capital.

Antwerp airport is just two kilometres away from the city centre and close to the Antwerp Berchem rail station.

There are daily flights to London, and some regular flights to destinations in Germany, Spain and Switzerland. The low-cost Belgian air carrier, Jetairfly, offers holiday destinations flights such as to Split, Rome, Berlin and Morocco and Spain.

Liege airport mainly offers holiday destination flights. The airport can be reached by train and taxi, or by TEC buses.

## Waterways and ports

The Belgian waterway network has 2.043 kilometres, out of which 1.532 kilometres are in regular commercial use. The main waterways are the Albert Canal connecting Antwerp to Liege, the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal through the port of Ghent connecting Ghent with the Westerschelde, the Boudewijn Canal through the port of Bruges-Zeebrugge connecting Bruges with the North Sea, the Brussels-Charleroi Canal, Brussels-Scheldt Maritime Canal and Scheldt connecting Charleroi to Antwerp, the Nimy-Blaton-Peronnes Canal and Scheldt connecting the Borinage to Antwerp, the connection between the North Sea and Antwerp and the connection between Dunkerque and Liege via the Nimy-Blaton-Peronnes Canal, the Canal du Centre, the lower Sambre and the Meuse. Waterways are managed on a regional level.

Major seaports in Belgium are Ostend and Zeebrugge. Main river ports are the Port of Antwerp and the Port of Ghent on the river Scheldt; the port of Brussels on the river Seine, the Port of Liege on the river Meuse.

## Port of Antwerp

Being one of the largest ports in the world, the Port of Antwerp continues to be an indispensable link in the world trade. Covering an area of 12.068 hectares, Antwerp is the biggest port area in the world. Its main competitive advantages are its central location, many links, modern infrastructure, sufficient capacity, high productivity, a lasting potential. More than 150.000 people are engaged in its operation in various ways, and there is a close co-operation between private enterprises, the authorities and the Port Authority. The river Scheldt has truly made Antwerp an international metropolis with an international seaport.



# Developing Flemish Waterways as an Important Alternative to Solve the Traffic Congestion

Ben Weyts, the Flemish Minister for Mobility, Public Works, the Flemish Periphery of Brussels, Tourism and Animal Welfare, discusses the region's challenges in the mobility sector, highlighting the opportunities of the alternative transportation development.



Ben Weyts,  
Flemish Minister for Mobility, Public Works, the Flemish Periphery of  
Brussels, Tourism and Animal Welfare

## European Times: Which are some of the Ministry's major achievements?

**Ben Weyts:** The Ministry undertakes important measures in order to improve and develop each sector it represents and governs. Regarding the mobility and the public works, the Ministry adopted an ambitious plan, ensuring funding of approximately €5.8 billion, projected for use until 2019. This budget covers investments in roads, railways, bridges, ports, waterways and bicycle paths, putting priority on the road safety and job accessibility.

Being the first Flemish Ministry responsible for the Animal Welfare, we play an important role in the protection of farm, exotic and laboratory animals, developing policy and detailed inspection against animal abuse.

Considering tourism as one of the most important sectors of the economy, our endeavours are focused on the development of Flanders as attractive tourist destination, including the promotion of the Flemish Masters and the Flemish cuisine, the cycling past and present, the festivals, the heritage and the Flemish coast.

## European Times: What are some of the main challenges in the Flemish mobility sector?

**Ben Weyts:** Mobility Problems stifle Flanders and the Flemish. The increased use of cars causes traffic congestion and side effects on the citizens, the environment and the economy.

I strongly believe that the solution for the traffic congestion can be found in the development of alternative transport such as the waterways. In this context, 80% of all companies in Flanders are less than ten kilometres from a navigable waterway, and if only a part of them uses the waterways, it will result with less traffic on the highways. An advanced solution for the congestion is the Combi Mobility, where passengers easily switch between different modes of transport.

## European Times: What are the Ministry's future objectives and goals?

**Ben Weyts:** The main strategy of the Flemish Government is to invest in the development. The Government reorganizes its operations, allocating the savings into ambitious investments that offer new hope and perspectives for Flanders. In this context, the Ministry will undertake a few important infrastructure projects, such as The Oosterweel Link, an infrastructure plan that will improve the access to the city and the port of Antwerp, relieving the traffic congestion on the Antwerp Ring Road. The Government is also investing in the redevelopment of the Brussels Ring, a project with an estimated value of €2 billion, which includes the redesign of 20 kilometres motorway Ring, 40 kilometres cycling roads and 60 kilometres of tram lines, in order to provide larger accessibility to Brussels through alternative roads.

## European Times: What is your personal message?

**Ben Weyts:** The Flemish Government is a government that is investing. Many people talk about savings, but our government has saved in order to invest. We have put the accounts in order, we have saved a lot in our own operations so we could make room for ambitious investments that offer new hope and new perspectives for Flanders. That story is not being told often, but it is a reality.





## Providing High-quality Transport Services in the Flanders Region



Roger Kesteloot, Director General of De Lijn

Established in 1990, following the merging process of the public transport companies from Antwerp (MIVA) and Ghent (MIVG), as well as the Flemish part of the old Interurban Railway (NMVB), De Lijn (The Line) is a leading company which provides local and urban transport services in the Flanders Region. Headquartered in Mechelen, De Lijn offers extensive range of sustainable and high-quality transport solutions, putting safety, reliability and efficiency on the pedestal of its performance. Roger Kesteloot, Director General, explains, "The Flemish Regional Government holds 80% of the shares, complemented with the municipalities and the provinces of the region, as minority shareholders. De Lijn operates with on ground and underground tramways, and offers regular and on demand bus and tramway services".

Guided by its mission to make the Flanders region easily accessible and a pleasant place for living, De Lijn, is an important interlocutor for the Flemish authorities and aims to develop the mobility policy and to support the economic, ecological and social progress of this region. He emphasizes, "We have approximately 530 million passengers a year. A third of them use public transport to go



shopping in the urban areas, and the main advantage is that they do not have to find and pay for parking. The public transport is an excellent choice for large events such as concerts and sports games. It is not only for functional, but also for recreational and cultural use”.

## Fighting Flanders' urban congestion

De Lijn takes an active role in facing the huge mobility problems in the Flanders region, related to the congestion, traffic safety and accessibility. In this context, the company works on defining a public transport strategy that will provide improvements in the quality of life and reduce the air and noise pollution. Roger Kesteloot says, “Our main focus is on making urban areas more liveable. Congestion is a major problem in Belgium. We concentrate on increasing our offer where the demand is. Even though the government did some cuts in budget, our plan for investments remains the same”.

The company is working towards directing its investments in areas that will provide more efficient work, increase the number of new passengers and strengthen the market share. Roger Kesteloot, adds, “We made diversion in our policy, from establishing minimum transport service spread out over the Flemish region, to a more concentrated offer in urban areas such as Antwerp and Gent, with significant investments in extra capacities during peak hours. De Lijn also directs its investments towards the so-called Centre Towns, which have from 60.000 to 100.000 residents. We are aiming for speed and good reliability. The efficiency ratio is important for us”.

De Lijn has developed a Mobility vision 2020 for the public transport in Flanders, at interregional, regional and urban level. This vision requires significant investments which will enable time saving in traffic jam sensitive regions such as Flanders and Brussels. The Mobility vision 2020 is supported by the provincial governors, the mobility delegates and the interest groups such as TreinTramBus and Bond Beter Leefmilieu. Roger Kesteloot says, “Mobility Vision 2020 clearly expresses our ambition to be a forerunner in the transition to sustainable mobility. Mayor benefit

of taking public transportation is that the congestion will decrease and the air quality will increase. Since the Belgians are so much car-oriented, we are happy to work towards giving back their space and air quality”.

## Ensuring safe transportation services

Roger Kesteloot points out, “De Lijn is a client-oriented company where the customer comes first. One of our core values is passion for customers and that is our guiding principle”. De Lijn strives to provide high-quality service, putting the travellers and their expectations as first priority. The company provides continuous and structural attention to customer's satisfaction, verified by the ISO 9001 Certificate and the developed quality monitoring.

Traffic safety is one of the basic pillars in De Lijn's operations. The Director General adds, “Public transportation is the safest transport and we understand that safety measurements need to be introduced, such as the CCTV cameras”. In this context, the company developed the “Safe on the Road” plan, built around four major pillars – organizational measures, (techno) preventive measures, training and cooperation with other parties.

Discussing future strategies, Roger Kesteloot says, “We are early accommodating when it comes to new technologies, such as new apps. Mobility will become more competitive due to new players and technologies, and we are already trying to create strong position for ourselves. We have a lot of data, which we can use to be more competitive”. The role of the company's mobility will be shifted towards service. He concludes, “Building strategic partnerships will be very important in the next few years. De Lijn is open for cooperation in terms of service, technology, digitalization and we are ready to become a strategic partner”.

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# Belgian Rail Network as a Model for European Rail Safety



LucALLEmand, CEO of Infrabel

Infrabel coordinates the rail traffic on the whole Belgian network, allocates train paths to all rail operators, and also maintains, modernizes and develops the Belgian rail infrastructure.

Due to its central location in Europe, Belgium fulfils a strategic role for passengers and freight transport. Every day, approximately 4.000 trains run on the Belgian network, among them 130 international passengers' trains passing through Brussels towards London, Paris, Amsterdam, Frankfurt and other European cities. The Belgian railway network consists of 6.500 kilometres of

main lines and is one of the busiest European networks. "A well-maintained rail network is the foundation of a safe, high-quality and reliable service for all our customers", CEO LucALLEmand points out. Moreover, Belgium was the first country in Europe to have a complete high-speed network from border to border. Belgium is also involved in several international freight corridors and its ports serve as logistic access portals.

*"A well-maintained rail network is  
the foundation of a safe,  
high-quality and reliable service for  
all our customers"*

Considering the difficult economic circumstances which are putting pressure on public finances and therefore on the railway sector, Infrabel is constantly seeking ways to improve its asset management. Rationalization and a digital transformation of the rail infrastructure and the traffic management systems are playing an important role in securing the future of the rail, but safety remains the number one priority. "Infrabel is progressively implementing the European Train Control System (ETCS), and the Belgian rail network will be a model for European rail safety", LucALLEmand explains. The second priority and biggest challenge is the further improvement of punctuality, which is the key when it comes to customers' satisfaction. Other priorities are providing the required capacity, a financially healthy company as a basis for good operational management, and corporate social responsibility. "As a state-owned company, we serve the society completely", LucALLEmand emphasizes.

"The strengths of our country include a high quality of life, a rich historical heritage and culture, well-developed logistics networks and superb services", LucALLEmand concludes and invites all to come to Belgium.

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# Hertz

## Providing the Most Optimal Feeling of Mobility

Providing the most optimal feeling of mobility in Belgium for 45 years, Hertz Belgium is part of Hertz worldwide, which will be celebrating its centenary next year. As the third player on the Belgian market, Hertz Belgium aims to obtain the largest market share around the Brussels airport and therefore concentrates also on inbound business from other countries. "In Belgium there are many expats working for the EU or NATO and these foreigners know Hertz", Henk van den Helder, General Manager Hertz Rent A car Benelux, explains.

Differentiating themselves from their competition, Hertz Belgium is the only car rental company which offers premium brands and dream cars such as Maserati or Jaguar F-Type. "Our desire is to be the best, not the biggest", Henk van den Helder points out. The company also focuses on the 'off airport market' and the car replacement business. "We are a supplier for lease companies, so we provide temporarily cars whenever necessary", he adds.

With the objective to grow in the expat market, especially when it comes to expats living in Belgium for a shorter period, Hertz developed their 'MINI lease' offer, which is affordable and extremely flexible. The 'MINI lease' is pro rata, so the contract can be terminated at any time after the minimum lease of 30 days, and customers can even change the colour or size of the car without penalty. Their second brand called Thrifty car rental is an economic car rental and works with brokers, so the company can serve every customer.

Hertz is very flexible, which is why one third of their customers are on 30 days+ rental. The company is dedicated to providing the best experience, highest quality and the smoothest process for their clients. "Hertz is saying YES! We don't say no. For long-term customers, we can even buy the specific car they want", Henk van den Helder emphasizes. "With us it will never HERTZ!", Henk van den Helder promises.



# Construction Sector Focused on Energy Efficiency

The construction market is one of Belgium's largest industry sectors, employing nearly 250.000 workers in about 80.000 companies, generating an average annual turnover of over US\$40 billion. The construction industry in Belgium grew by 3.5% in 2016, which was preceded by an annual growth of 1.5% in 2014 and 3.2% in 2015, driven by government investments in transport, residential and renewable energy infrastructure, as well as the investments in nuclear power plants and high-speed internet infrastructure. Further growth in the following years is expected to be supported by improvements in business confidence, which will drive investment in infrastructure, commercial, residential projects and energy infrastructure. The focus on the development of renewable energy infrastructure is also expected to drive industry growth. The government aims to generate 13% of the country's total electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020, compared to 7.9% in 2015.

During the first eight months of 2017, the average construction production index rose by 1% compared with the same period in 2016. According to the National Bank of Belgium, the country's average construction production

index increased by 0.7% in 2016. The industry's output value in real terms recorded a compound annual growth rate is expected to be 2.3% in the following years.

## Strong residential construction market

The residential market continues to be strong and is expected to retain its leading position over the following period, with a share of 47.8% of the industry's total value. The market is expected to record a compound annual growth rate of 4.05% in nominal terms, driven by low housing interest rates and increases in residential buildings permits, coupled with rising population and urbanization.

## Diverse and increasingly regionalized real estate

The key competitive advantages of the Belgian real estate market are its stability and diversity. Many investors diversify their real estate portfolios to include not only office space, but also other types of real estate, such as nursing and care homes and service flats, since the





demand for these types of facilities has increased exponentially in recent years due to increased demand for senior housing. Investments in student housing have also increased considerably.

Traditionally, investments in office space are still predominant in the Belgian real estate market, but recent years have witnessed increased investments in retail, which is due to certain large investments in major shopping centres, such as the Wijnegem Shopping Centre and Waasland Shopping Centre.

Furthermore, the Belgian real estate market is becoming increasingly regionalized, with investors focusing less on Brussels and more on other regions and a growing population with preference for living outside of the capital.

### Focusing on sustainable development

Promoting sustainable development is central to the federal state's and the three regions' policies. They all have comprehensive sustainable development programmes. Additionally, they advocate for sustainable public tendering, which means that sustainable development must be considered when conducting a public tender. Several subsidies and tax cuts are in place to promote sustainable development and construction, which include the promotion of photovoltaic solar panels through subsidies, the promotion of isolation of older buildings through subsidies, and the promotion of renovation of older building through VAT cuts (6% instead of 21%). Furthermore, the three Belgian regions have adopted a

regional climate plan and implemented Directive 2010/31/EU on the energy performance of buildings. In general, the energy performance requirements of the construction projects in Belgium depend on the nature of the construction works and type of construction.

### High demand for renovation, energy efficiency and green construction

The expansion of the renovation sector has been the most important trend in residential construction in recent years, recording double digit increase for the past eight years. Residential renovation projects increase the demand for energy efficient products and construction materials. Several new EU Directives, aimed to reduce energy consumption and pollution, have resulted in a strong demand for economic water systems, double glazing, and an increased interest in solar panels, heating systems, and green roofs/rainwater usage. For example, the EU Directive on the Energy Performance of Buildings, adopted a decade ago, aims to promote improved energy performance of buildings within the EU through cost-effective measures and the convergence of building energy standards. Furthermore, energy-efficient construction materials are also tax deductible—a feature which creates further incentives for green construction.

Rising prices in renovation and new building construction reveal a Belgian preference for high quality and luxury products as well as innovative green building materials. With increasing real estate investment, there is even greater demand for superior quality building and renova-



Construction of the new Europa building  
© Bombaert Dreamstime





tion. There is also a growing interest in smaller pieces of property, such as duplexes. Duplex housing construction tends to apply more sustainable and durable building materials and utilizes exterior spaces very well (small gardens, courtyards, terraces, bike shelters, parking spots). Townhouses, like duplexes, are also becoming quite popular in Belgium. These houses, often divided into two or more separate housing units, can be extremely cost-efficient for group housing residents.

Increasing energy prices are encouraging many Belgians to install more efficient HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) and water heating systems. Much of the shift is from electric water heating to solar and high-efficiency gas and oil heaters. High labour costs in Belgium also indicate a strong demand for cost-efficient materials that are easy to install—such as pre-fabricated walls. For the past few years, there has been a growing interest in wood construction. Several Belgian companies specialize in the wood construction sector in Wallonia.

### **Representing and protecting construction companies**

The Belgian Construction Confederation is the employers' organisation for the construction sector and represents more than 15.000 Belgian construction companies active in construction, energy and the environment. Via

its three regional confederations (Vlaamse Confederatie Bouw (Flanders Construction Confederation), Confederatie Bouw Brussel-Hoofdstad (Brussels City Construction Confederation), Confederation Construction Wallonne (Wallonia Construction Confederation)), 19 local confederations and 17 professional associations, it provides information, advice, promotion, training and tailor-made support for all building suppliers.

The mission of the Confederation is to represent, protect and advise all the companies active in the construction, energy and environmental sectors at a local, regional, federal and international level. Founded in 1946 as the umbrella organization for the whole of Belgium, it brings together independents, SMEs and large companies, active in all areas of construction. Serving as the voice of its members, the confederation represents the sector in front of numerous organizations and bodies such as FEB, sectoral joint committees, non-governmental and para-professional organizations, and other federations linked to the sector. It is also their representative in many consultative and advisory bodies that directly or indirectly influence the interests of entrepreneurs. The Confederation offers its members a wide range of services: personalized advice, assistance with formalities, relevant information, training tailored to construction companies, promotion, etc.





# In Advance: A Construction Company You Can Trust

Steadily increasing its visibility in the Belgian construction sector through diligence, high-quality standards and flexibility, In Advance has built a superb reputation as a general construction company. In Advance was founded in 1993 with headquarters located in Haren, a town in the city of Brussels, and the company focusing mainly on the Brussels region, with around 80% of projects executed in this area.

In Advance was promoted to build Class 8 buildings in 2009, and since then it has been active both in the public as well as the private sector. “We started working primarily with the public sector, but currently around 25% of our projects are in the private sector, and this percent will increase in the future”, CEO Ir. Philippe De Blauwe explains.

The company’s vigorously expanding portfolio in the public sector construction includes schools, hospitals, social infrastructure objects, housing... The company participated in the construction of the Audience K of the University of Brussels, the Horta School of Architecture, as well as several cultural centres, sports halls, football stadiums, housing buildings, apartment buildings, offices, subway stations throughout the Brussels network, and RTBF infrastructures.

One of the company’s main advantages is its simple organizational structure, which allows them to act quickly and be very flexible. “I have an open door policy and I communicate directly with our clients and our employees. For me, it is very important that every problem is addressed swiftly. I want In advance be known as a company that nurtures personal contacts with the clients. When problems arise, we will always sit down with the clients to seek the best solution”, says the CEO.

As a “smaller” organization within the sector, In Advance is constantly looking for reliable partners. “Clients and partners are always happy to work with us because In Advance has proven itself as a company of trust. Earning and maintaining the trust of our clients and our partners is our top priority”, Philippe De Blauwe concludes.

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TRANSPORT, CONSTRUCTION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENGINEERING



# CIT Blaton: The Art of Building

THE EUROPEAN TIMES



With more than 150 years of experience, CIT Blaton remains faithful to the entrepreneurial spirit of its founders, proving that a family company with independent ownership can be among the leaders in the demanding construction sector. Under the board including members of the family's fifth generation and external experts, this general contractor is present in all sectors of construction and aims to create added value for their clients, to build on achievements that contribute to the well-being of all, and to turn each project into a success that reinforces their reputation. "Exceptional results can be achieved only with the will to surpass ourselves and project ourselves in the future", Ir. Frédéric Loriaux, Administrative Director of CIT Blaton, emphasizes.

Combining traditional techniques and advanced technologies, CIT Blaton's mission is simple: to build facilities

that last! Constantly adapting their methods and techniques to the evolving requirements of clients and end users, the company is working on all types of projects: civil engineering, public and private buildings, residential building, offices etc. "The market is very competitive and the gap on price is small. Our competitive advantage is that we guarantee quality, stability and sustainability, and we are flexible geographically, so we are able to deliver various kinds of projects", Ir. Frédéric Loriaux says.

The remarkable portfolio of CIT Blaton includes projects such as construction of the Montlégia Clinique in Liege, several tower buildings in Brussels, the GSK headquarters in Wavre, the new building for the high school Galilee in Brussels etc., as well as the Ghent-Saint-Peter's railways station and other. In 2015, CIT Blaton received the Innovation Award from the Belgian Construction Confederation for the construction of the Conference Centre in Mons.

## Expertise at the service of creation

Based in Brussels and with an office in Gent and a daughter company in Luxembourg, CIT Blaton earns the trust of its clients with their dedication to innovation, their commitment, their stability and their highly-qualified team.

Pointing out that the company always selects the best partners in order to deliver the best quality, Ir. Frédéric Loriaux emphasises that their priority is bringing added value to a project. "We never build the same building twice and each project involves different people. The quality of the collaboration between the people is what makes a project successful", he adds.

Standing by his motto "Try it", Ir. Frédéric Loriaux is proud of every project delivered. "From complex big projects to small projects like a private houses, all people involved should feel proud as they have invested their time, expertise and creativity into their realization", he concludes.

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# International Partner Provides Support to Innovative Solutions in the Construction Industry



Bernard De Bruyckere, Sales Director of SECO Group for Belgium

Through more than eight decades of dedication to supporting innovative solutions, SECO Group build a superb reputation as an international independent third party and inspection and control body for civil works, buildings and environmental works. Initially established in the Benelux region, SECO Group has grown into a company that offers customer support worldwide. In addition to being the market leader in Belgium, the company is active in more than 20 countries and has supervised over 30.000 public and private projects so far, adding around 1.000 new projects to their portfolio on annual level.

Growing steadily since 1934, SECO Group has proven to be a reliable partner for numerous owners, investors, contractors, architects, engineers, designers, lawyers, developers and property managers, who are more than satisfied with the group's technical expert services when acquiring, developing, building, maintaining and managing their infrastructure and real estate properties.

The company's main services include: certification and inspection of products, persons and processes; providing third party opinion on construction, concept, design and execution for buildings and civil works; technical support to building management, transactions (technical due diligence) and maintenance operations of buildings, which has been introduced four years ago.

Adhering to their mission of providing confidence and certainty, SECO Group's advantages are their dedication to quality, their highly skilled engineers (structural engineering, fire safety, steel, façades and technical installations MEP) and their knowledge regarding standards and regulations. Furthermore, the company adapts quickly to changes, including concerns about maintenance, comfort and sustainability, such as the digitalization of construction processes, which has an increasing impact on the overall sector.

With offices in Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Vietnam and France, as well as assignments on projects worldwide, SECO Group is currently looking to expand and welcomes new potential partners.

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# World-Class Infrastructure in the Heart of Europe

Strategically located in the heart of Europe, Belgium's multimodal transport is one of the most modern and efficient in the world. Many of the main European traffic arteries crisscross the country, making it an ideal hub for transport throughout all of Europe.

Motorways are less congested in Brussels compared to other major European cities, and its close proximity to the Eurotunnel provides important links to the UK, making Brussels and Belgium in general an attractive location. Furthermore, Belgium's railway network is one of the fastest and most extensive of any on the continent. High-speed trains (Eurostar-Thalys) link Brussels to London, Amsterdam, Paris, Frankfurt and many other major European cities. Additionally, Belgium has five international airports that handle cargo and passenger traffic, offering direct flights to virtually all major international destinations. It is the fifth biggest cargo hub in Europe. Brussels National Airport is the fifth biggest cargo hub in Europe. When it comes to shipping, Belgium has leveraged its location in the heart of Europe to become a major

shipper, with well-equipped ports located in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Ostend, Liege and Zeebrugge.

Aiming to improve regional connectivity, Belgium's government continues to invest in the development of rail, road and other transport infrastructure.

## Second best port infrastructure in the EU

The quality of Belgium's port infrastructure is rated second best in the EU. The infrastructure for the other modes of transport is also rated highly. In addition, Belgium is among the EU top performers in terms of the timeliness of shipments. The completion of the TEN-T Core Network is advanced for all modes of transport. Belgium's high-speed rail network is 100% completed.

## Adequate infrastructure for electric cars

Belgium is investing heavily in an adequate infrastructure for electric cars. With more than 20 charging stations





per 1.000 kilometres, Belgium ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in Europe. Furthermore, Belgium is EU's leader when it comes to the sales of electric cars, which have increased by 147% in 2016 compared to the previous year, which translates to approximately 10.000 new electric cars.

### PPPs used for a wide range of projects

Public private partnerships (PPPs) are very often used in Belgium for both local and regional construction projects in a wide range of sectors and projects, including schools, waste water facilities, rail roads, tunnels, roads, social housing, sports facilities, etc. The most commonly used form of PPP is the Design Build Finance Maintain model, or one of its variants. In Belgium, the procurement process depends on the nature of the PPP agreement, and the contracting authority/parties are free to decide on the contractual framework, which means PPPs can take the form of either a public contract or a civil contract.

### Investing in educational infrastructure

The government's efforts to provide quality education to all sections of the population will support investments in the educational buildings in the following period. In October 2017, Belgium's Ministry of Education announced plans to increase spending on primary education by 30% in 2018. Through this, the government aims to develop primary educational infrastructure in rural areas.

### High speed broadband network

To support economic development and growth, the government is introducing high speed broadband network across the country. Belgium's broadband strategy is incorporated into the broader policy strategy "Digital Belgium – Plan for Ultrafast Internet in Belgium 2015-2020", which aims at creating a favourable national context to reach and overpass the objectives of the Digital Agenda on a long-term basis. This plan aims to provide an internet connection speed of up to 1.0Gbps to half of all citizens by 2020.

### Significant investment in renewable energy infrastructure

Belgium is among the world leaders when it comes to renewable energies. The government aims to generate 13% of the country's total electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020, compared to 7.9% in 2015. Significant investment in renewable energy infrastructure have been recorded in previous years, and this trend is expected to continue to increase in the following period. With a forecasted compound annual growth rate of 4.62% in nominal terms of the country's energy and utility market, the sector is set to experience significant growth. Furthermore, in July 2017, the European Investment Bank provided a loan of €100 million to Elia, the main transmission system operator, for the expansion of the electricity network across the country in the following seven years.



## METAL SEALS FOR EXTREME APPLICATIONS

Production and development of metal seals according to catalogue or customer specifications:

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- UKAEA
- Ion Beam Applications (IBA)
- ITER
- Siemens
- Areva
- Cern
- ...

Made in  
Belgium



# Leading Company in Waste Management Guarantees Quality and Speed

THE EUROPEAN TIMES

Established in 1996, Eurowaste NV is a recognized collector of chemical and industrial waste and counts among the market leaders in Europe. In addition to the processing and transport of chemical waste, this Belgian company also deals with the administrative aspects of these activities. Director Wilfried Verhaegen, who is a “dinosaur” when it comes to special waste and has been working in this sector since 1982, emphasises Eurowaste’s extensive network among waste processing centres and laboratories, and its good relations with various authorities. “We are constantly building our network, as it is important to have a good presence. The chemical industry is moving all over the world”, he points out.

Providing superb service is key for Eurowaste’s success. “We are dedicated to maintaining good relations not just with our customers, but also with treatment centres and authorities, by being transparent and by respecting all legal requirements”, Wilfried Verhaegen says. As a niche player in the waste management sector, the company’s main advantage is their speed. “We can quickly respond to any problem, which is why clients have confidence in us”, he adds.

By evaluating client’s specific waste issues, Eurowaste looks for suitable and useful application for the waste, while adhering to the wishes of their customers. Furthermore, the company also takes on responsibility for all logistics procedures regarding waste transport from client’s facilities to treatment centres. For transboundary waste transport, Eurowaste carries out all necessary procedures with all involved authorities, and every transport is in accordance with the European Waste Shipment Regulations.

With 50% of their operation conducted abroad, Eurowaste is present in Ireland, England, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Central and Eastern Europe, France etc. Focusing on having good relations with every country in Europe, the



Wilfried Verhaegen, Director of Eurowaste NV

company’s plan is to expand geographically to 50% of the countries in Western and Central Europe within the next five years.

“As a service company, we guarantee good quality in everything we do, from searching for good alternatives, evaluation of the analyses, sampling of the waste, being aware of all technologies etc.”, Wilfried Verhaegen concludes.

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TRANSPORT, CONSTRUCTION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENGINEERING

# Creating Land for the Future

With more than 140 years of tradition and experience, DEME Group is a world leader in the highly specialised fields of dredging, marine engineering and environmental remediation. “While the company’s roots are in Belgium, DEME has built a strong presence in all seas and continents, operating in more than 90 countries worldwide”, says Alain Bernard, who has been with the company for 37 years and its CEO for 11 years.

Firmly dedicated to “creating land for the future”, DEME fosters a pioneering approach, being a frontrunner in innovation and new technologies. “With a strong entrepreneurial spirit, DEME has worked even during wars and revolutions and is constantly trying to conquer the world”, Alain Bernard points out.

While dredging is still DEME’s core business, the company has substantially diversified its portfolio over the decades, and today’s activities include land reclamation, hydraulic engineering, services for the offshore oil & gas and renewable energy industries, and environmental works. “We refer to our work as dredging+ activities, since those activities support our core business”, the CEO explains.

DEME’s vision is to work towards a sustainable future by offering solutions for global, worldwide challenges,



Alain Bernard, CEO of DEME

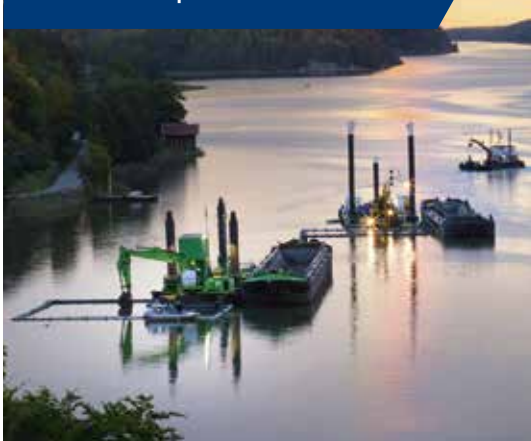
including rising sea levels, climate change, the transition towards renewable energy, polluted rivers and soils, growing population and the scarcity of natural resources. The company is developing innovative technologies in the fields of wind power, green and blue energy. Furthermore, DEME is developing solutions for remediating historic soil and water pollution, as well as limiting the environmental impact of the day-to-day operations by improving energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

THE EUROPEAN TIMES

## Solutions for the rising sea level



## Solutions for polluted rivers and soils



DEME has a leading position in a number of highly specialized and complex hydraulic disciplines. In the next decades, the world will be facing major challenges such as the effects of climate change and scarcity of resources. Through innovative thinking DEME is offering sustainable solutions in response to these future needs in various fields such as soil and sediment remediation, water treatment, coastal protection, development of green and blue energy, offshore dredging of gravel and sand, deep sea harvesting of minerals and creation of land in densely populated regions, ports and industries.



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## Solutions for reduction of emissions



## Solutions for scarcity of resources



Creating land for the future



# World-class Health Service Offers Easy Accessibility and High-quality Treatment

Regarded as one of the most generous healthcare system in Europe, Belgium was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> on the Euro Health Consumer Index in 2016, putting it ahead of countries such as Denmark, Germany and Finland. Belgium's health service is known for its easy accessibility and high-quality treatment. Scoring All Green on Accessibility, the Belgium healthcare system was noted for having among the best accessibility and fastest access to healthcare services than anywhere in Europe. With four doctors and 6.2 hospital beds per 1.000 inhabitants, Belgium is well above the OECD average.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report, Belgium offers world-leading healthcare for patients around the globe in all subspecialties. Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization, Belgium spends on average 10% of its GDP on health care on annual level, which significantly contributes to maintaining the high-level standards of healthcare.

## Hospitals equipped with the most advanced technologies

Belgian hospitals are equipped with the most advanced technologies and run by highly qualified staff. With a large number of specialised centres and internationally renowned doctors, they provide optimal care in the best conditions and have considerable capacity. The Belgium healthcare system is divided into state and private sectors, with fees payable in both, funded by a combination of Belgian social security contributions and health insurance funds. With mandatory health insurance, patients are free to choose their own medical professionals and places of treatment. There are public and private hospitals, university hospitals and polyclinics. Belgian hospitals are managed by universities, religious organisations, health insurance funds and social welfare organisations. In addition to easy accessibility and high-quality treatment, among Belgium's main competitive advantages are the





highly sub-specialised centres of excellence. Furthermore, doctors and surgeons in Belgium are known world-wide for their expertise in various kinds of medical procedures.

### Preferred destination for medical tourism

Renowned for its modern hospitals, high quality doctors and superb standards, Belgium is a great medical tourism destination. On annual level, more than 20.000 foreign medical tourists choose Belgium hospital for medical treatment, a number which is expected to increase in the following years. In addition, the prices of healthcare services are significantly lower compared to other western countries, which is among the key factors that attract medical tourists. Furthermore, Belgium hospitals strictly adhere to hygiene regulations, which is why Belgium has one of the lowest rates of secondary infections in the world, 0.5%.

### World champion in exports

With a unique location in Europe, easy access to international markets and excellent infrastructure for distribution, pharmaceuticals continue to be a driving force of Belgium's economy, representing more than 10% of the total exports. In 2016, the sector exported €40.7 billion in medicines and vaccines, and in 2015 that figure was €41.01 billion. Almost half of the exports is outbound to countries outside the EU.

### Leader in innovation and biotechnology

In terms of innovation and biotechnology industry development, Belgium is the best performing member country of the OECD. Belgium is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest pharmaceutical export country in the world and has the largest number of medicines in development in the world per capita. Furthermore, Brussels has the highest number of phase 1 clinical trials in the EU per capita. The region has also benefited from early investments in biotechnology, owing to the strong local presence of pharmaceutical companies, which were initially the main source of industrial funding.

### Innovative R&D hub

The pharmaceutical industry in Belgium continues to grow, posting excellent growth figures in terms of exports, R&D investments and job creation. Last year, the pharmaceutical companies in Belgium channelled €2.89 billion in research and development – reaffirming that the phar-

maceutical industry is Belgium's most innovative sector. This represents 40% of all private investment in R&D in Belgium, double the European average.

According to Catherine Rutten, CEO of pharma.be, "Belgian universities and research centres work closely together. Not only does this create a stimulating environment for innovation, it also translates into major R&D investment figures in the pharmaceutical sector". The number of highly qualified researchers in the sector also continues to grow. In 2016, the pharma industry employed more than 35.000 people, making the sector one of the major employers in the country; 4.500 of the people employed in the industry were active in research activities.

### Heaven for health-related start-ups

The healthcare field is changing, which is visible in the nature and scope of health entrepreneurship as well. Entrepreneurs in Belgium are venturing into the healthcare landscape, increasingly attracting investors and changing the entire sector. Tech is by far the most popular sector for start-ups, and in Belgium, health-related tech are leaders when it comes to attracting investors and the rate of success. Almost 10% of all technology companies are in healthtech. Likewise, when it comes to scale-ups, healthcare is also number one in Belgium; in fact, with 46% scale-ups, the sector scores well above the average of 39% for all sectors. Recently a Leuven-based healthcare IT start-up raised over €1 million, which is one of the many examples that show the substantial potential of this sector, which has seen persistent growth since 2009.

In recent years, many initiatives and networks have been established to support healthcare entrepreneurship, including Leuven Mindgate, Caring Entrepreneurship Fund, MedTech Flanders, Flanders Care, Voka Health Community, MIC Flanders, Le Well, etc, thus creating a real crucible of opportunities for entrepreneurs, putting Belgium on the leadership position on the European Innovation Scoreboard.

When it comes to healthcare ecosystem in Belgium, Brussels, Ghent and Leuven stand out as particular breeding grounds for new entrepreneurship in health. 55% of health start-ups are found in Flanders, 26% are found in Brussels, and 20% are found in Wallonia. The government is the most important investor for start-ups, mainly through public and semi-public investment funds. The most active funds for HealthTech are LRM, Capricorn, Qbic, Gemma Frisius Fund and PMV. The link with research organizations is strong both in the start and when the



company scales up; a quarter of the Belgian scale-ups have grown out of research institutions, mainly in sub-segments where patenting is possible, such as biotech, semiconductors, MedTech and nanotechnology. Imec and Leuven University are in the European top three universities, and Ghent University and Antwerp University are also listed among the top European universities in the sector.

## The Sunshine Act

The Belgian Law concerning various health-related matters called the Sunshine Act was adopted in December 2016, introducing several substantial changes to the current Belgian legal and regulatory framework for medicinal products and medical devices. The Sunshine Act imposes a new transparency obligation on the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries. It provides that medical device and pharmaceutical companies must provide the Federal Agency for Medicines and Health Products with information concerning all pecuniary advantages or benefits in kind granted, directly or indirectly from Belgium or elsewhere, to a number of defined beneficiaries.

## Flanders: a champion in pharma exports

Because of its reliance on open innovation, Flanders is one of the few places in the world where small, agile pharma start-ups can collaborate closely with huge industry players. Flanders is second in Europe when it comes to clinical trials, and a champion in pharma exports – the region produces a sixth of all medications originating from the EU. Flanders's health ecosystem is incredibly rich and versatile, making it ideal for any health company looking to start up in, relocate to or establish a subsidiary in Flanders. In addition to top universities, academic hospitals, research centres and incubators, Flanders' health ecosystem also includes multinational enterprises

which partner up with spinoffs, start-ups and SMEs active across many life sciences disciplines.

Flanders is ideally situated between the UK, France, Germany and Switzerland, which have significant strengths in healthcare and pharmaceutical sciences. Furthermore, four cities in Flanders – Ghent, Leuven, Antwerp and Hasselt – are home to universities, collaborations and production facilities that offer highly specialized services and resources relevant to a variety of life sciences fields. Flanders also has an extremely high concentration of human resources, and enables access to the MBI Life Sciences & Health academy, an entrepreneurial training course in both the Netherlands and Flanders; the life sciences internships at biotechnology SMEs, as part of the OPINNO program; the Flanders Training Network Life Sciences – an initiative of Flanders' universities and the VIB life sciences institute; and a broad range of training programs at VIB for life sciences and pharma researchers that cover emerging research domains and technologies.

In Flanders, investors in healthcare receive many benefits: including access to smart financing and various funding options; various government grants and subsidies for transformation, ecological, R&D and growth investments; unique tax incentives for various types of business activities and investments; a set of employment subsidies to further reduce salaries costs as well as fiscal remuneration advantages; etc.

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# European Leader in Accessibility to Healthcare Services

According to the latest health index of the Health Consumer Powerhouse, Belgium is number one when it comes to accessibility to healthcare services. Maggie De Block, Belgium's Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health, discusses the sector's challenges and structural reforms.



© Anne de Graaf

Maggie De Block,  
Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health

## European Times: How would you describe the Belgian healthcare sector?

**Maggie De Block:** In our healthcare, the patient is always central, which is why Belgium is among the European leaders in the healthcare sector. Our whole system is based on the principle of solidarity, and it must remain so; it is the strongest shoulders that bear the heaviest burden. In order to increase efficiency and overcome challenges such as an increased number of patients with chronic conditions and high prices of advanced treatment options, we carry out major structural reforms without losing focus on the patient.

## European Times: What are some recent major developments?

**Maggie De Block:** In July 2015, Belgium signed the “Pact of the Future” with the pharmaceutical industry, aimed at ensuring permanent investments in new drugs and access to the latest treatments for our patients. With this pact, the drug expenses for the patients will decrease for at least €71.4 million in the period 2015-2018. In addition, patients on innovative and sometimes life-saving treatments can rely on repayment, such as immunotherapy treatments against lung cancer or Hodgkin’s lymphoma, drugs against hepatitis C or smart sensors for patients with diabetes.

Belgium also signed an agreement with Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Austria for negotiating with the pharmaceutical industry regarding orphan drug prices. By working together, we will enlarge the potential market and reduce the prices. In addition, the four countries will also exchange information and collaborate in the area of innovation.

## European Times: Which reforms are you currently working on and which investments are needed in the health sector?

**Maggie De Block:** Every citizen is entitled to the right care, at the right time and in the most appropriate place. We have embarked on a full process of reforms of mental healthcare for children and adolescents, adults and inmates. Another important reform refers to hospital landscape and hospital financing. This reform is needed to improve the quality of care for patients and to take the hospital sector out of the red numbers. Hospitals will work together in networks to offer patients the best possible quality of care and to respond to the changing needs.

Investing in innovative treatments and developments in the field of personalized medicine is crucial for providing the best possible care to our patients. However, it is also necessary to have a balanced use of the available resources and make correct assessments. We must invest in new treatments without compromising the sustainability of the health system, but also adapt the existing systems and structures. That way we can maintain the highest quality, affordability and accessibility in the interest of patients.

# Association Dedicated to Hospitals' Progress and Development

Founded nearly a century ago, the Belgian Association of Hospitals is a non-profit association with a primary purpose to contribute to the development and the progress of the Belgian hospitals and the country's health sector in general. Representing its members on national and international level, the Belgian Association of Hospitals also focuses on management issues and improving the organization of the healthcare institutions. Willy Heuschen, President of the Belgian Association of Hospitals and Secretary General of the European Association of Hospital Managers (EAHM), discusses both associations' objectives and activities.



Willy Heuschen,  
President of the Belgian Association of Hospitals and Secretary General  
of the European Association of Hospital Managers (EAHM)

## European Times: What are main activities of the Belgian Association of Hospitals?

**Willy Heuschen:** The purpose of the Belgian Association of Hospitals is to contribute to the development and promotion of hospital science and in particular to the study of internal and external management and organizational problems in health care institutions. In this regard, the Association organizes various seminars, conferences

and congresses on annual level, and it also disseminates various publications, such as the quarterly Hospitals.be magazine. Nearly one third of the hospitals in Belgium are associated with us, and our members include not only CEOs, but nurses of medical directors as well. As an association, we represent our members in all groups – public and private bodies related to hospital supplies, medical and social affairs.

## European Times: The Belgian Association of Hospitals is a partner of the European Association of Hospital Managers. What are the main objectives of EAHM?

**Willy Heuschen:** Founded in 1970 under French law, the European Association of Hospital Managers is the umbrella association of 28 leading hospital management associations in 25 European countries. With over 16.000 individual members, EAHM is one of the world's largest hospital management associations and represents hospital managers of public and private hospitals in the European Union and at international level, serving explicitly and exclusively the public interest. Acting as an interlocutor for the health care industry, EAHM also elaborates proposals regarding the hospital sector to the European authorities.

## European Times: What is your personal message?

**Willy Heuschen:** Working together is sometimes a challenge, as the hospitals are competitors in the sector. Nevertheless, healthcare is a social pillar and I believe that cooperation and better understanding of the sector are prerequisites for fostering open dialogue and transparency. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the main focus should always be on the needs and expectations of the patients. In this sense, the networking policy of the federal government should be patient oriented and aimed at providing a better service.



Kliniek SINT-JAN  
Clinique SAINT-JEAN

H.-Hartziekenhuis Lier

## Developing Structured, Comprehensive and Accessible Patient's Care Pathways



Karolien Haese, CEO of Clinic Saint-Jean

Based on a hospital tradition that lasts for eight centuries, Clinic Saint-Jean is a highly renowned professional organization and a major hospital for patient-focused and quality-based healthcare in the Brussels region. The hospital provides a variety of medical, physical and mental health services, performing cardiac surgery, neurosurgery, radiotherapy and maternity services, with more than 2.200 deliveries annually.

Karolien Haese, CEO, points out, "The Saint-Jean Clinic positions itself with three cornerstones in healthcare management:

- the dualization of the highest management function between a Chief Health Officer and a Chief Executive Officer
- the development of transmurality patient's pathways with a global hospital responsibility
- the positioning of patients as the ultimate active stakeholders looking for added value care.

Aiming to develop a modern, multidisciplinary and transmurality medicine, the Clinic is establishing a new management model based on the definition of entire care pathways each patient is expected to follow for well-defined pathologies.

This model has the ambition to integrate all important stakeholders as active participants in the setting of those efficient patient's pathways.

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## A Hospital with Tradition Promotes Innovative Health Services



Dr. An De Cuyper, Director of H.-Hartziekenhuis Lier

The renowned health care centre H.-Hartziekenhuis Lier offers a wide range of specialized medical, medical-technical and ambulatory services. Under the motto 'A Heart for Care', the hospital's highly skilled doctors and nurses offer daily care for their patients.

With a capacity of more than 450 beds, the hospital's focus is to provide high-quality and affordable basic health care service, which meets the highest expectations of the patients. In addition, the hospital also has a state-of-the-art multidisciplinary pain center, specialized and licensed in treating acute, subacute and chronic pain. Dr. An De Cuyper, Director, explains, "We focus on Lier and its wider region. We are also working on establishing network collaboration with the hospitals of Mechelen, Bonheiden and Vilvoorde".

The hospital focuses on continuous improvement and innovation of the health care services in the region. Dr. An De Cuyper highlights, "We are developing an important master plan for a hospital reconstruction. Our focus is to provide comfortable hospital accommodation where the patient feels 'at home' and receives quality care in an efficient working environment". She adds, "We are innovative when it comes to new technologies and care programs. We have recently started the 'Joint care' program for orthopaedics, which defines the steps a patient should do before the surgery, at the hospital and the exercises after the surgery."

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# Improving Global Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Eli Lilly Benelux is part of Eli Lilly and Company, a world-wide biopharmaceutical company specializing in innovative research into new molecules of biological and pharmaceutical origin. Being one of the world leaders in the health sector with 42.000 employees on global level, Eli Lilly focuses on five specific therapeutic domains: oncology, metabolic diseases (diabetes and growth disorders), neurodegeneration, immunology and pain. The Eli Lilly brand stands for integrity, excellence and respect, and the company's greatest contribution to society is discovering medicines that help people live longer, healthier, and more active lives. These values have been leading the company over the last 140 years.

The company was founded in 1876 by Colonel Eli Lilly, who was committed to developing quality drugs that meet real needs. "His motto was to start with what you have and strive to make it better and better", Frédéric Clais, Country Manager for Belgium, emphasises. "Whether it comes to the invention of new drugs and medical devices that help patients or the promotion of welfare within our communities, we remain faithful to that endeavour and we make every effort to improve patients' lives", he adds. Eli Lilly's competitive advantages include superb quality products; highly skilled staff and continuous recruitment of the best employees; strong focus on customer satisfaction; and extensive investments in the development of new medication.

Aiming to accomplish their mission for improving people's lives by developing treatments that meet those needs that are not yet fulfilled, Eli Lilly reinvests 25% of its sales into research and development. "Our company's vision is to improve global health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is why

9.000 of our employees work in our R&D sector", Frédéric Clais explains. "Investing in people and their development for is key for success", he says. Belgium plays also an important role development of new medication. The company is collaborating with multiple hospitals and institutions. Last year, over 1.000 patients were included these clinical trials. "Belgium wants to maintain it leading positing in the implementation of Clinical Trials. Together with the Minister of Health, we are striving to keep this competitive advantage and maintain Belgium as a leading country in clinical investigation."

Eli Lilly Benelux was founded in 1969 and currently employs 250 people on three sites: their commercial centre, their veterinary site and their centre for coordination of all clinical materials for clinical trials in Europe. We do have a very open attitude for cooperation. We are looking for instance to welcome new partners with expertise in digitalization, since this is becoming an increasing opportunity in health care", the Country Manager points out.

"We believe it is our responsibility to do more. Globally, locally and personally, we devote our time, resources and expertise to advancing health and improving lives – all with the goal of making life better for people around the world. This is what makes working in the pharmaceutical industry so special. A passion I see every day within Eli Lilly Benelux", Frédéric Clais concludes.

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# Global Pharmaceutical Player with a Superb Reputation of Quality



Sophie Eykerman, CEO of Sterop

Founded 75 years ago, STEROP is a Belgian drug producing company which has grown into a global player with a superb reputation of quality. Present both on local and international markets, the primary goal of this family-owned company is to save lives and be close to the patients. The demanding quality standards, the technological skills, and the excellence of their staff further contribute to the company's success.

Renowned for their high standards of quality, STEROP has developed a wide range of pharmaceutical products,

including essential injectable or oral drugs such as tablets, syrups, etc., as well as nutrients, trace elements and medical devices. As one of the company's main competitive advantages, STEROP's export branch offers generic drugs adapted to markets' needs.

With a guaranteed 100% quality, STEROP is the leader in Belgium when it comes to injection impulse for use in hospitals, producing over a million per day with no default.

STEROP is continuously focused on the quality and the sustainability of their products, which is why the company won the award for the best exporter of Belgium. Discussing STEROP's expertise when it comes to producing the highest quality products, CEO Sophie Eykerman emphasizes, "We always invest in the core of our business – the people, the production line and the quality".

STEROP is a key player on international markets and works closely with various agents and partners, including governmental and non-governmental organizations. "We are open for new partners that have the knowledge of the market and the health sector, and share our good values and goals", Sophie Eykerman concludes.

## STEROP

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Ghent © Freesurf69 Dreamstime

# Blending History with Modern Attractions

From countless castles and medieval belfries to innovative art museums and hip cafes, Belgium offers a fantastic tourist experience for all. Nestled between Germany, France and Britain, this compact multilingual country blends the historic with the new, earning a reputation as Europe's best kept tourism secret. At the crossroads of Western Europe, Belgium has become one of EU's leading destinations both for business and leisure travellers. With friendly and welcoming people, incredible cuisine, tasty chocolates and famous beer, prestigious art cities with rich history and culture, sandy coastline, and the lush green Ardennes, Belgium definitely has a lot to offer to tourists.

## Brussels – a symbiosis of history and modernity

Brussels is one of Europe's best destinations for city breaks. As the capital of Belgium and the seat of the European Union, it is home of some of the country's main tourist attractions, which include the Grand Place, a large city square encircled by elegant historic buildings dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century; the Manneken Pis, an iconic 17<sup>th</sup> century fountain with a bronze statue of small boy, dressed in costume during festivals; the Atomium, a stunning stainless steel atom building, with the particles connected by escalators, and platforms which offer spectacular panoramas; Mini-Europe, a miniature park with Europe's landmarks; the Royal Palace, which is the palace of the constitutional monarchy, with throne and other state

rooms open for tours each summer; the Cinquantenaire, a landscaped 19<sup>th</sup> century city park with floral gardens, fountains, and museums; the Gaasbeek Castle, a Romantic-style 19<sup>th</sup> century castle with large gardens; the Palais de Justice, Belgium's imposing high court building built in an eclectic neoclassical style; the Brussels Aquarium, with sea life from five continents; etc. The city is also the home of a large number of museums. In addition to the famous Royal Museums of Fine Arts, which is a complex of museums with over 20.000 masterworks from 15<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; other museums include the Magritte Museum, the Musical Instrument Museum, the Museum of the City of Brussels, Horta Museum, Autoworld, Coudenberg, the Museum of Cocoa and Chocolate, the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History, the Museum of Natural Sciences, Halle Gate, the BELvue Museum, the Cinquantenaire Museum, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, the Brussels Museum of the Gueuze, Fin-de-Siecle Museum, etc. Furthermore, the pleasure of the city lies in wandering its streets, enjoying views from the hilltops, shopping and relishing the traditional cafés and breweries.

## Bruges – a UNESCO world heritage site

Known as an international metropolis for centuries, Bruges, the capital of West Flanders in northwest Belgium, is distinguished by its canals, cobbled streets and medieval buildings. As Belgium's most perfectly preserved medieval town, its amazing architecture attracts more than two





million visitors every year. With its wealth of interesting old buildings and its canals, Bruges still retains a distinct medieval air. In the city centre's Burg square, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Stadhuis has an ornate carved ceiling. Nearby, Markt square features a 13<sup>th</sup> century belfry with a 47-bell carillon and a tower with panoramic views.

### Antwerp – the diamond capital

The cultural capital of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern area of Belgium, Antwerp is both a bustling industrial port city and an outstanding historic centre. This charming city has long been a powerful magnet for everyone interested in fashion, art, history and entertainment. Today, Antwerp's top main attractions are its truly vibrant fashion and entertainment scene, along with its startling architectural and cultural contrasts.

### Waterloo – travelling in history

Located 16 kilometres from Brussels, Waterloo is a site that takes visitors on a trip down history lane. The place where French emperor Napoleon faced off against a coalition of British, Dutch and German forces in countryside outside Brussels and suffered his final defeat, is truly a compelling place to visit. The battle site has a number of interpretive exhibitions and museums, at the main centre near the artificial memorial mound called the Butte du Lion, in the various farmhouses used by the combatants, and in Waterloo itself. Two centuries after the pivotal event in European history, Waterloo still attracts numerous visitors, especially after the massive programme of renovation and upgrading for the bicentenary in 2015, when the new visitor centre Memorial 1815 was introduced.

### A coastline with beautiful sandy beaches

Only 50 minutes by train from Brussels, a visit to the Belgian coast is a great way to relax, enjoy the sunshine and take a break from the city lifestyle. With 65 kilometres of coast, there are several resorts and beautiful sandy beaches. The Kusttram connects all the towns from De Panne (to the southwest) to Knokke-Heist (to the northeast), and tourists can enjoy the longest tramway line in the world.

### Ardennes – a paradise for nature enthusiasts

Situated in the south-east of Belgium, the Ardennes are considered to be one of the wildest regions in the surrounding part of Europe, and are an excellent destination for hiking, mountain-biking, kayaking, rock climbing and other kinds of active holidays. It is a scenic region that is also home to a number of historic towns. Spring and summer show this lush area at its best, but cross-country skiing opportunities make a good case for winter visits.

### Hi Belgium Pass

Established in April 2017, the Hi Belgium Pass is created under the cooperation between Brussels Airlines, Brussels Airport, the Belgian Railways and several tourist offices, cities and attractions. For only €149, Hi Belgium Pass travellers can fly with Brussels Airlines from 50 airports in 18 different countries to Brussels Airport. From there they can take unlimited train rides to different Belgian cities, where they have free access to a wealth of tourist attractions for free.



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