BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
Belgium is slightly smaller than Taiwan and about the size of the U.S. state of Maryland. It is generally flat, with increasingly hilly terrain near the southeast Ardennes forest. The highest elevation (Mount Botrange) is only 2,277 feet (694 meters) above sea level.

More than one-quarter of Belgium is suitable for agriculture. More than 20 percent is forested. Belgium's major rivers include the Schelde and the Meuse, both of which are navigable throughout most of the country. Belgium has a system of dikes and seawalls along the coast to prevent tidal flooding. Because of its heavy industry, the country faces problems with air and water pollution that are common in many industrialized nations.

The climate is damp and temperate. Summer temperatures range from 54 to 72°F (12–22°C); winter temperatures generally do not go below 32°F (0°C). Belgium's maritime climate is heavily influenced by the sea; fog and rain are common, and there is little snow in winter. The most pleasant months are June through September.

History
Carolagian Empire and Independence
Modern Belgians are descendants of a Celtic tribe whose courage was admired by Julius Caesar. In the fifth century AD, Germanic Franks took control and established the Merovingian dynasty, later followed by Charlemagne's empire (the Carolingian Empire). Fragmentation after Charlemagne's death eventually split Belgium into four regions, which were ruled by dukes and counts. As the 15th century approached, the French dukes of Burgundy began to consolidate territory and eventually gained all of what is now Belgium, reigning over several decades of prosperity and progress.

From the 1600s to 1830, the Belgium area was a battleground for the Protestant-Catholic wars and for battles fought by neighboring countries, including Napoleonic France (Waterloo is just south of Brussels). The territories of Belgium gained independence from the Netherlands in 1830 and united in a constitutional monarchy. However, divisions based on language continued: French speakers lived in the south, while Dutch (Flemish) speakers settled in the north. The two groups developed separate cultural and linguistic traditions but remained linked politically.

The World Wars
Belgium became a battleground again in the 20th century. Despite its claims to neutrality during both world wars, the country was overrun by conquering German armies in 1914 and again in 1940. Some of World War I's fiercest battles were fought in Flanders (northern Belgium). In World War II, the famous Battle of the Bulge, where U.S. divisions held off massive assaults by German troops who were attempting to reach the Allied port located at Antwerp, was fought in the city of Bastogne and in central Belgium. This pivotal battle helped to secure an Allied victory in the war.

Belgium remained a constitutional monarchy after World War II. From 1951 to 1993, King Baudouin I ruled as head of state. In 1960, Belgium granted independence to the Belgian Congo, in Africa. Soon after, Rwanda and Burundi also
In October 2014, a coalition of Belgium’s constitution was changed in 1993 to recognize the division of the country into three administrative regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. In that same year, King Baudouin I was succeeded by his brother Albert II.

**The European Union and Political Instability**
Because of its vulnerability and small size, Belgium has favored European cooperation and integration since the 1940s. In 1957, Belgium signed the Treaties of Rome, which created the European Economic Community, a forerunner of the European Union (EU). It was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and serves as that alliance's headquarters and home to the EU headquarters, making Brussels an important city for international business and diplomacy.

Belgium regularly negotiates the needs of both major linguistic groups as well as various minorities in order to resolve internal cultural conflicts. In 2007 and early 2008, the government faced nine months of deadlock and rumors that the country could break up along linguistic boundaries as the new prime minister struggled to form a coalition government acceptable to both French- and Dutch-speaking political leaders. In 2010, the ruling coalition broke down over disputes regarding the rights of French speakers living in Flemish areas, and elections failed to produce a new government. After 18 months of political deadlock, the eurozone debt crisis eventually forced the government to reach a coalition agreement in December 2011; Elio Di Rupo, a French-speaker, became the new prime minister.

In 2012, the Flemish separatist party won local elections and immediately began negotiations to give the north greater independence from the French-speaking south. King Albert II of Belgium announced his resignation in July 2013, citing poor health. The monarch's main role is as guardian of Belgium's unity, and King Albert intervened when the Flemish and French regions could not work together; however, some Belgians want the monarch's power to be reduced to a purely ceremonial role. Albert's son King Philippe was sworn in on 21 July 2013.

**Recent Events and Trends**
- **New government:** In October 2014, a coalition of center-right parties formed a new government. Belgium is known for conducting lengthy deliberations following each election in order to form a ruling coalition; in this case, members of Parliament took more than four months. The coalition includes both French- and Flemish-speaking parties committed to cutting government spending and lowering taxes.
- **Anti-austerity protests:** In November 2014, roughly 100,000 workers marched in Brussels to protest the government’s plans to raise the retirement age, freeze wages, and cut public services. While the march was peaceful, afterward some protesters set cars on fire and threw stones, prompting the police to arrest protesters and use tear gas and water cannons.
- **Brussels attacks:** In March 2016, explosions at Brussels Airport and Maelbeek subway station in central Brussels killed about 30 people and left hundreds wounded. The terrorist organization Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the attacks, which came days after the arrest of Salah Abdeslam, the Belgian-born suspect involved in the 2015 Paris attacks. In recent years, Belgium has experienced an influx of radical ideology among its Muslim population, and hundreds of Belgians have left to fight in Syria, many joining the Islamic State.

**THE PEOPLE**

**Population**
Brussels (with a population of about 1.8 million), Antwerp (1 million), and Ghent (240,000) are the largest cities. Belgium's overall population density is one of the highest in Europe. Because of Brussels's international importance, more than one-fourth of the city's inhabitants are foreigners.

The Walloons (who speak French) occupy the south (Wallonia) and comprise 31 percent of Belgium's population. The Flemish (58 percent) live in the northern half (Flanders). The rest of the population is comprised of immigrants, German speakers, and people with mixed Flemish and Wallon ancestry. The German-speaking minority (1 percent) lives east of Wallonia. Many Italians and Spaniards are well-integrated in Belgian society. North Africans (mainly Moroccans) are more likely to work in low-wage occupations and often face discrimination.

**Language**
French and Flemish (Dutch) are the primary official languages of Belgium. French dominates in southern areas and the capital, and Flemish is more prominent in the north.

No official differences exist between Flemish and Dutch, but the Flemish people usually differentiate between the language they speak and the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands. A variety of local Flemish dialects exist in Flanders; the Flemish-speaking people are proud of the regions they live in and use local dialects when speaking with family or friends. Most Flemish-speaking Belgians actually speak tušsentaal (in-between-language), an informal mixture of Flemish dialects and Standard Belgian Dutch, which varies slightly from the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary.

About 1 percent of Belgians speak German (also an official language). Many also speak English. Eleven percent of the population is officially bilingual. Although the Brussels region is surrounded by Flanders, the majority of its people speak French. English, Arabic, Spanish, and Dutch are also commonly spoken in Brussels, which has large communities of immigrants.

Because of the two distinct languages, French and Dutch names for the same city are often quite different. For example, the Walloon city of Mons is referred to in Flanders as Bergen (both names mean "mountains"). Generally, road signs are not bilingual; they are written in the principal language of the region in which they stand.

**Religion**
Although Belgium is primarily a secular society, 75 percent of the population is nominally Catholic. Protestants and other
groups comprise the remaining 25 percent. Most other major world religions can also be found in Belgium. All Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic clergy have official recognition from the government, and certain members receive their salaries from the state. Private religious schools may be partially subsidized by the government.

While only a fraction of the population attends church regularly, religion still plays a role in people's personal lives, mostly in connection with such major events as births, marriages, and deaths. Most cultural festivals have their origin in, or have been strongly influenced by, Catholicism. The Walloons have a history of being less devoted to the Catholic faith than the Flemish are.

General Attitudes
Belgians consider their country to be the geographical and cultural center of Europe. and the people are generally cosmopolitan and open to interaction with those outside Belgium. A strong work ethic and an appreciation of culture are important to Belgians. The people tend to have tight regional and family ties, holding to the traditions of both. Belgium is common in Romance-language cultures. The phrases used for greeting depend on the region. A typical greeting in Flemish is Goeiedag (Good day); the French equivalent is Bonjour. Informally, and if familiarity permits, one would say Hallo (Hello) in Flemish and Salut in French. English and German greetings would not be out of place in Brussels and some other cities.

When offering formal congratulations for a special event like a birthday or a wedding, men and women greet close friends with three light kisses on the cheeks. (This gesture is actually more like "kissing the air" while touching cheeks.) Female friends often walk hand-in-hand. When leaving a group, Belgians usually shake hands with and bid farewell to each person in the group.

Belgians use first names with friends and relatives; otherwise, they address people by title and last name or just by title. In professional circles, there is a growing tendency to call each other by first name once a working relationship has been established.

Greetings
The Flemish tend to greet each other with a quick handshake, which is more typical in Germanic cultures. French speakers in Brussels and Wallonia give one light kiss on the cheek, as is common in Romance-language cultures.

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Gestures
Hand gestures are used infrequently during conversation. It is rude to talk with one's hands in one's pockets. Belgians do not talk with something (gum, a toothpick, or food) in their mouths. Good posture is important, and people do not put their feet on tables or chairs. They avoid pointing with the index finger. Handkerchiefs are used discreetly.

Visiting
Belgians enjoy inviting relatives and close friends to their homes, but other socializing is usually done in public places such as cafés, bistros, and restaurants. It is rare for Belgians to visit one another without prior arrangement or at least calling ahead.

It is a sign of confidence and friendship for a Belgian to invite an outsider into the home. Once a visit has been arranged, punctuality is important; arriving more than 30 minutes late is considered rude. A Belgian host or hostess appreciates a small gift or some flowers from an invited guest. Hosts, especially those who tend to invest in home beautification, welcome sincere compliments and interest in their home. In rural communities, it may be appropriate to
remove one's shoes before entering the home. Guests are usually offered refreshments.

Eating
Most Belgians eat three meals a day, with the main meal served in the evening. Breakfast consists of a hot drink along with rolls or bread with jam or jelly. A snack at 4 p.m. is not unusual. The Flemish tend to eat earlier than the Walloons, who typically eat the main meal around 7 or 8 p.m.; in many areas of Flanders, people eat around 6 p.m. The family usually gathers for this meal, which consists of a main dish and dessert. However, many adults and schoolchildren now have a hot meal at noon at their workplace or school and eat a lighter meal or snack in place of the traditional evening meal.

Many Belgians enjoy having a rich table with a great variety of food and drinks, especially for special occasions like Christmas, Easter, and birthdays. Meals often start with a little dish (such as salted pastry or seafood) called amuse-bouche, or amuse-gueule, in French and hapjes in Flemish. This appetizer, served with wine, beer, or champagne, is followed by the first course, or voorgerecht, which often consists of soup, salad, goose liver, or fish. A main course of meat or fish, potatoes, and vegetables follows. Belgians drink wine and water with all the courses. After dinner, a great variety of local cheeses is served with baguettes. Finally, the dessert, consisting of Belgian chocolate or fruit pastries and coffee, is served. Some people also enjoy a pousse-café (shot of hard liquor) after their dessert.

Meals are social and cultural events in Belgium, and they are not to be finished quickly. The continental style of eating, with the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left, is most common. Putting one's hands under the table is considered rude. A parent normally serves individual plates for each family member. Hosts also prepare individual plates for their guests. Belgians are thrifty and do not like waste; finishing one's food is expected. It is not impolite for guests to decline second helpings. In restaurants, the tip is included in the bill. Still, one may also leave extra change if desired.

LIFESTYLE

Family
Structure
Even though young people are becoming more independent, the family is still a strong and vital part of Belgian society. The average family has one or two children. Belgian families are close-knit, but divorce rates are on the rise and blended families are becoming more common.

In the past, extended families shared a single large house, but today they live separately. Still, people often remain in the same town or city as the rest of their family. Mobility tends to be low throughout Belgium, and people study, work, and ultimately settle in or near the towns in which they were raised. Family and community roots are important to Belgians. Extended families often gather for Sunday dinner or take excursions on holidays and weekends.

Parents and Children
Children's success reflects on their parents. Most Belgian parents, if they can afford it, involve their children in sports, music, arts, and other activities, giving them expensive clothing and gifts to show society that they have good, healthy, intelligent children. Children's chores are common but are usually limited to cleaning a one's own bedroom, helping with dishes, and taking care of pets.

Belgian parents generally support their children financially until the children reach adulthood or complete university studies. The government provides a cash subsidy to families with children until the children are employed for themselves; parents sometimes give the subsidy to children as an allowance.

Married couples seldom live with their parents, except in rural areas where families share farmland. Parents are not obligated to financially support their grown adult children but often do. While the elderly are well-respected, it has become customary and socially acceptable for parents to spend their declining years in a home for the elderly, where they are visited by children and grandchildren.

Gender Roles
Although both parents often work outside the home, women are still responsible for most household duties and child care. Women are well-represented as leaders in politics and business but, on average, earn less than men in the same positions. Discrimination in the workplace is illegal, though some employers would rather recruit young men than young women, who are more likely to require maternity leave. Most women return to the workforce about four to six months after the birth of a child, but many women feel that they have to choose between having children and having a career.

Housing
"A Belgian is born with a brick in his stomach" is a popular saying that reflects the nearly universal desire among Belgians to build and own a brick home. More than 80 percent of the population lives in a house or apartment they own. Most homes are occupied by single families. Almost half of all Belgians live in a detached house. A little more than 40 percent lives in apartments, some of which are spacious and luxurious.

Most rural homes have gardens. All houses have electricity and running water, and nearly all have central heating and at least one bathroom with a bathtub or shower. The interior design of Belgian homes reflects a wide variety of styles and tastes, ranging from traditional to highly contemporary and daring. Belgians tend to value their privacy, so it is a sign of real friendship to be invited into a Belgian home.

Belgians tend to have a strong social conscience. As a result, there is considerable support for "social housing companies," which work in cooperation with the government to provide accommodation for the poor. After poor people move into these homes, many of which are renovated old properties, they enjoy certain protections: it is difficult for landlords to evict tenants, even if tenants do not pay their rent, and water and electricity cannot easily be shut off if bills remain unpaid.

Dating and Marriage
Dating and Courtship
Group dating usually begins by age 16. Younger teens use public transportation and bikes at first, but when they reach driving age, they prefer to use private cars for dating. Young people go to movies, dances, and cafés. The majority of Belgians date people they know from school, work, or social activities.

**Engagement**

Men are usually the ones who propose marriage. The man often asks the woman's father for permission to marry his daughter. Typically, both partners wear an engagement ring. Long engagements are common.

**Marriage in Society**

Most Belgians become financially stable in their mid- to late twenties and tend to settle into long-term relationships around this age. Many couples live together and have children before or instead of marrying; the number of common-law marriages is increasing.

Divorce is generally well-accepted by society; people tend to choose this option over trying to continue life together in hard times. It is not unusual for couples who have been married for over 20 years to get divorced and try to build new lives with new spouses.

**Weddings**

Only civil marriages are recognized by the government, but most couples also have a Catholic religious ceremony attended by relatives and friends. The civil ceremony, which is also usually attended by immediate family and close friends, requires the couple to go to their local city hall to register the marriage and take an oath in front of a justice of the peace. A larger religious function is typically held in a Catholic church. The groom wears an expensive suit, and the bride wears a long, white dress. As part of the tradition that the bride must carry something old, a Belgian bride traditionally carries a special embroidered handkerchief that has been in her family for generations.

The final phase of the wedding is the celebration, which takes place in a restaurant or a private house. Belgian weddings are usually paid for by both sets of parents or by the couple themselves. Depending on how much the parents want to spend, the wedding celebration can include anything from a casual outdoor barbeque to an expensive, catered four-course meal. Virtually all Belgian wedding celebrations include music, dancing, beer, wine, and some kind of food.

The party often lasts all night and into the morning. People drink large amounts of alcohol and play games. For example, the men compete with the women to see who can put more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertainer or master of ceremonies to ask money, the bride's dress is folded up to her knees; if the women give more money in a box. If the men give more money, the bride's dress is folded down to her feet again. It is common for an entertain
hundred varieties), waffles, and french fries, which Belgians claim to have invented. French fries are served with mayonnaise rather than ketchup. Belgians take great pride in the quality of their food and the variety of their cuisine—from domestically developed dishes to those adapted from other cultures. Restaurants offer a wide variety of international cuisine.

Recreation

Sports
Soccer is the most popular spectator sport. Each large Belgian city has its own professional team and its own fans; matches are closely followed on television. Cycling is also popular; in the north, families commonly go for long bike rides in the countryside on weekends. Cycling races are held during the spring and summer months throughout the country.

Tennis, bowling, swimming, ice skating, and canoeing are also popular. Participation in sporting activities is nearly universal. Children play soccer and basketball during playtime at school and practice a wide variety of sports for at least two hours a week during gym class. Older Belgians like to play a game called boudes, a form of lawn bowling.

Leisure
Watching television is a popular pastime; most programming is American or British. In the French-speaking regions, programs are dubbed in French, but in the Dutch-speaking regions, programs are subtitled. Cartoons are dubbed in both regions.

Children love to play tikkertje, or touche-touche, a game similar to tag. One child runs after the others, and when he or she touches someone, that person becomes the new "toucher." Children also love to play verstoppertje, or cache-cache, a version of hide-and-seek. One boy or girl counts to 20, and everyone else runs and hides. Once the game starts, that boy or girl needs to find someone else and run back to the starting place to scream that person's name; the person is then "in jail" or "free" everyone in jail by touching them.

Beaches in the northwestern forests in the south are popular attractions. Hiking, hunting, fishing, and pigeon racing have large followings in some areas. In pigeon racing, male pigeons are released far away from the females, and owners bet on which will be the quickest to fly back to its mate. Families enjoy picnics, the theater, and movies together. Local festivals, as well as national ones like Carnaval, are popular. Music, film, and art festivals are held year-round.

Vacation
Most families go on a one-month vacation each year during the summer; however, many are now taking shorter vacations at other times of the year. Belgian workers have around 20 vacation days per year. In addition to two months of summer holidays, most schoolchildren have a week off in November, two weeks at Christmas, one week in February, and two weeks at Easter.

Since many European countries are nearby and transportation is relatively inexpensive, Belgians often travel abroad for holidays. Madrid, London, Paris, and Amsterdam are popular destinations; some Belgians also go to the Alps in Switzerland to ski.

The Arts
Belgians are intensely proud of their rich cultural heritage, especially in art and architecture. Both ancient and modern art are admired. Belgium is known for such art masters as Pieter and Jan Brueghel, Jan Van Eyck, and Peter Paul Rubens. Castle ruins and other historic buildings are seen as national treasures. The country's numerous theaters, festivals, and museums enjoy high patronage. Belgium sponsors national ballet, orchestral, and opera companies.

The country's writers have made significant contributions to literature in both French and Dutch. Mysteries are the most popular genre for Belgian plays and novels. Belgian cartoonists are among the most famous in the world. They have created such comic characters as Tintin and the Smurfs.

Belgium is known internationally for its beautiful and delicate lace.

Holidays

Christmas
Christmas is usually a time for families to reunite. Families gather on Christmas Eve to eat a rich dinner. They exchange presents around midnight and then go to bed. On Christmas Day and Boxing Day (26 Dec.), people enjoy another large lunch or dinner with extended family members.

New Year's Eve
New Year's Eve is associated with big parties. People get together with their family and friends and have an expensive dinner consisting of lobster, oysters, foie gras, fish, or meat with champagne and wine. They then go outside to light or watch fireworks at midnight. Young people go to the closest city or town for an all-night party lasting until morning. New Year's Day is mostly spent with relatives, eating leftovers and recovering from the night before.

Carnaval and Easter
Carnaval, a celebration that precedes Easter, is celebrated in February or March. This festival is characterized by parades, street fairs, parties, and colorful costumes. Families get together to enjoy the festivities. Easter is commemorated by a church service; older Belgians are more likely to attend than younger Belgians. Parents buy Easter eggs and presents for their children, who participate in an Easter egg hunt, usually in the family's garden. Families gather for a meal and, if the weather is good, take a walk together.

Other Holidays
Local spring and fall cultural and folklore festivals, such as the Holy Blood Procession in Bruges, take place throughout the country. Belgians remember the deceased on 1 November, All Saints’ Day, when families come to cemeteries to place flowers (usually chrysanthemums) on the graves of loved ones.
SOCIETY

Government
Structure
Belgium is a constitutional monarchy under King Philippe, who holds executive power with the prime minister. The king is a symbolic unifying force, while the prime minister and the cabinet handle day-to-day affairs. The prime minister is appointed by the monarch, with approval from Parliament. The cabinet, also appointed by the monarch, contains an equal number of French- and Dutch-speaking ministers.

Parliament has two chambers: a 71-seat Senate and the more powerful 150-seat Chamber of Representatives. Parliamentary elections are held at least every four years. Belgium has an independent judiciary that is equal in power to the executive and legislature.

The country is principally divided into three regions (the Brussels-Capital region, the Flemish region, and the Walloon region) and three communities (Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking), which are further divided into provinces and municipalities.

Political Landscape
All Belgian governments have been coalitions, meaning no single political party has ever had a majority in Parliament. Belgium's major political parties are split along linguistic lines, explaining in part why the party system is fragmented, requiring coalition governments.

Constitutional reforms in 1981, 1988, and 1993 led to the organization of Belgium as a federal state. This move greatly reduced tensions related to linguistic divisions, as newly created government bodies were given greater decision-making authority over regions and communities (i.e., linguistic areas). However, disagreements over constitutional reforms and the division of powers among different administrative levels have led to political deadlock and instability.

Government and the People
Citizens of Belgium enjoy a government that is generally highly respectful of their personal freedoms, including religion, speech, assembly, and press. The national voting age is 18, and since voting is mandatory, voter turnout is almost always greater than 90 percent.

Economy
Belgium's economy is diversified and highly industrialized; its labor force is highly skilled. Only 2 percent of the labor force is involved in agriculture, yet Belgium grows more than enough food to be self-sustaining. Almost three-quarters of the labor force is employed in service industries. Belgium is one of the world's major exporters of wool, beer, and meats and is a key producer of automobiles for major foreign companies. Belgian steel, the principal export, is famous. However, because of steel- and textile-market fluctuations in the 1980s, those sectors have declined and other industries—such as engineering, chemicals, food processing, and biotechnology—have grown. Exports now include items from each of these industries. Other well-established industries include diamonds, crystal, and glass. Belgium is strong in foreign trade, partly because Antwerp is one of the world's largest seaports and because the country holds a central location among EU countries. Most Belgian trade is conducted with EU members, especially Germany, France, and the Netherlands.

Economic prosperity is available to most Belgians, and wealth is well distributed. Leaders are making rapid progress in reducing the country's debt. Because it relies on imports and exports, Belgium's economy is vulnerable to global markets. For most of the 2008 global financial crisis, the economy experienced modest growth. In 2012, Belgium's economy shrank, showing an increasing vulnerability to the eurozone crisis. Inflation has been kept under control. Belgium's currency, which was the Belgian franc until 2002, is now the euro.

Transportation and Communications
Belgium has a complete and varied transportation system, with a highly developed system of waterways, highways, and railways. Trains are the fastest and most practical form of public transportation between cities. However, many Belgians are unhappy with the railway system because of the numerous delays and cancellations caused by labor union strikes in recent years. Buses and streetcars are widely available, but most people also own cars. Bicycles are popular for personal transportation.

The efficiency of Belgium's postal system is well known. There are both public and private television and radio stations. Cable television is available in all parts of the country and offers dozens of channels. Belgium has a highly developed telephone system, and cellular phones outnumber people. A large number of people have high-speed internet access in their homes; social networking sites are popular among younger generations.

Education
Structure and Access
Public education is free and compulsory between ages six and eighteen. School supplies are, by law, given free of charge to all students. A large portion of the federal budget is allotted to education, and adult literacy is nearly universal. Many Flemish families send their children to schools operated by the Catholic Church and subsidized by the state. Starting in 2007, Belgian parents have been allowed to enroll their children in any school in the country. This gives parents more choice in deciding the direction of their children's education, but it is not usually taken advantage of in low-income and immigrant communities.

The Belgian educational system is organized into four levels: kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, and college or university. Kindergarten starts around age two or three, and primary school begins around age five. Children graduate primary school around age 12 and then enter secondary school, which lasts six years and prepares students for college or university studies or vocational training. Primary school enrollment rates approach 100 percent, and more than 80 percent of Belgian students attend secondary school.

School Life
Most classes are held Monday through Friday, from about 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Students in primary and secondary school have Wednesday afternoons off. Students are tested on their proficiency in various subjects throughout the year and may have to repeat a year of school if they do not pass the tests.

All students study either Dutch, French, or in some areas German; they generally begin to study an additional national language at age eight or nine and study English in secondary school. During the final three years of secondary school, students can decide to attend training classes for a specific vocation or university preparation classes, in which they study mathematics, science, history, and modern languages.

Most parents consider education an important part of their children's lives and do everything they can to make sure their children graduate. Parents help their children with homework and, if necessary, hire tutors to help children in specific subjects.

Higher Education
It is difficult to obtain a good job with only a secondary school diploma, so most students continue on to higher education, either at a university, a vocational or technical school, or a school for the arts. College (haute école in French, or hogeschool in Dutch) lasts for three years and offers bachelor's degrees. University (université in French, or universiteit in Dutch) lasts for five years and offers master's degrees.

Comprehensive examinations determine one's entrance to higher education. Public colleges and universities are heavily subsidized by the state. The dropout rate is high. Students often change majors several times, and it is common to find students in their late twenties still trying to decide on an area of study.

Both the French- and Dutch-speaking regions have their own public universities and colleges, as well as private Catholic institutions. Larger public universities include the Université de Liège, Universiteit Gent, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Catholic universities include the Université Catholique de Louvain and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Health
Socialized medicine provides for the health care of all citizens. Belgians can be covered by either state or private health insurance. Doctors and clinics are private but can be paid for by public funds. The cost of Belgium's comprehensive welfare system has contributed significantly to the country's budget deficits. Although the water is generally safe, Belgians drink bottled water rather than tap water, which is believed to be less healthy.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information