



Primer Belgium's History and Geography

History

Belgium was originally settled by a Celtic people called the Belgae. They were described as the bravest of all the Celtic tribes. This belief was supported by the fact that they were the hardest to conquer. Caesar faced a strong resistance and it took him four years to conquer them. However, in 100 BC, the Belgae were conquered by the Roman Empire.

The Belgae tried to revolt against the Romans, but the empire was too powerful. When the Roman Empire eventually fell, Belgium was invaded by Germanic tribes. Throughout history, Belgium was ruled by many different empires, including the Spanish and the Habsburg Empire of Austria. Over time Belgium became the center of European industries such as textiles, commerce, and art. In 1795, Belgium was captured by France. After Napoleon was defeated, Belgium was given to the United Kingdom of Netherlands in treaty negotiations.

The Belgians revolted against the Dutch and finally gained their independence in 1830.

Belgium is a small European country that shares borders with France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Belgium is home to about 11 million people and is about the same geographical size as the state of Maryland.

Start the Discussion:

Take some time to talk about what you may already know about Belgium.

What comes to mind when you think of Belgium?

What is interesting to you about this country?

Although small in size, Belgium is known for its incredible architecture, scenic towns, and unique large cities and of course chocolate and waffles.

Government

Belgium is a culturally diverse country. The government is a constitutional monarchy and is divided into three regions: Flanders (Dutch-speaking) in the north, Wallonia (French-speaking) in the south, and bilingual Brussels in the middle.

Brussels is the largest city and capital of Belgium. The city has a population of 1.2 million and serves as the capital of the European Union and is home to the NATO headquarters.

Leopold I was a German prince who became the first King of the Belgians following the country's independence in 1830. In Belgium the role of the King is to formally appoint the ministers who are responsible for running the government. The royal office of King is always held by a descendant of Leopold I. The current King of Belgium is Philippe, who ascended the throne in 2013, when his father stepped down. He and his wife, Queen Mathilde have four children. King Philippe's eldest daughter, Princess Elisabeth, age 18, is first in the line of succession.

Sophie Wilmès is Belgian's Prime Minister. She is the first woman head of government of Belgium.

Did You Know?

The definition of the word spa means any mineral spring considered to have health-giving properties. The town of Spa in Belgium is where the word 'spa' comes from. The town of Spa is famous for its natural mineral springs. People as far back as ancient Roman times used to come to the town to bathe in the famed cold springs for health and healing purposes.

Geography

Belgium borders the North Sea and has three main geographical areas: the coastal plains, the central plateau, and the Ardennes uplands. Inland from the coastal plains, the land is mostly flat and has many canals. There are also valleys, caves, gorges, and three major rivers. To the east of the Meuse River, forested hilly areas of land rise to the mountains of the Ardennes Region.

The northern area is considered the most fertile and much of the land there is used for livestock and agriculture. The main crops in Belgium are sugar beets, potatoes, wheat, and barley.

Belgium is also a heavily industrialized country and almost all of the industrial centers are in the north. Antwerp, one of the largest cities in the country, is the center of

petroleum refining, plastics and petrochemicals. It has also been a major focus of the diamond trade since the 15th century, and today, over eighty percent of the world's rough diamonds pass through Antwerp to be polished and shaped before going on to jewelry stores.

Culture

Hard work and an appreciation for culture are important values to Belgians. Strong family values are vital to Belgian society. Extended families live in separate homes, but often settle in or near the town where they were raised. The main religion in Belgium is Roman Catholicism, which is the largest religion in Belgium.

Odd but true, the Belgian national symbol is a peeing boy. Manneken Pis, Dutch for "Little Pissing Man" is a landmark bronze fountain sculpture in the center of Brussels, depicting a naked little boy urinating into the fountain's basin. It was put in place in 1618. The current statue is a replica and the original is kept in the Brussels City Museum. Manneken Pis is the best-known symbol of the people of Brussels. He is said to represent their sense of humor and their independence of mind. The little boy has over a thousand different costumes for all kinds of occasions and his outfits are changed up to three

times a week.

Food and culture go hand in hand. Waffles in Belgium are a good example of this. Waffles were first made in the Middle Ages, and were sold as street-side snacks by vendors outside churches in Belgium. Agriculture was the main economy back then and barley and oats were easily available. There are two types of waffles that originated in Belgium. These are known as the Brussels waffles and Liege waffles.

Brussels waffles are big, light and rectangular and are traditionally eaten with powder sugar and whipped cream. Liege waffles are denser and have a rich flavor. The Brussels waffle is what is most commonly known as the Belgian waffle in the United States. It was introduced to America at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City as the 'Belgian Waffle', since most Americans did not know where Brussels was. This treat from Belgium has been a hit ever since.

This study will continue to explore the unique heritage, culture and history of this charming country.

The next Primer will detail the turmoil of the First and Second World War, and why Belgium is considered 'The Battlefield of Europe'.



Clockwise from above:
Manneken Pis, King Leopold I,
Belgian Royal Family

