

Discovering The Netherlands and Belgium



These countries may be small in size, but they have no shortage of awe-inspiring destinations and one-of-a-kind experiences that have travelers wondering why they didn't discover them sooner.

By Christine Aebischer

A walk through the streets of The Netherlands

or Belgium reveals a world steeped in history and Old World charm, where a typical day might include exploring a museum, wandering through a flower market and, of course, sampling the local cuisine. In fact, the food alone may be reason enough for some people to make the journey: between the cheese, chocolate, fries, beer and seafood (to name a few), the options are endless and mouthwatering. Both countries boast countless cultural offerings, from the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam to the Grand-Place, or main square, in Brussels. History buffs, art aficionados, nature lovers, fitness enthusiasts and foodies alike will find myriad activities to fit their interests, making these countries ideal destinations, especially for travelers looking for a new way to see Europe.

History and Culture

The word "medieval" comes to mind while exploring the city of Bruges in Belgium, due to the authentic facades — some of which date back to the 12th century — that have been strictly preserved. In other parts of the country where smog had discolored these facades, the cities have restored them to their original grandeur and even banned cars, making the areas pedestrian-only, to prevent it from happening again, according to Sigrid Braeckveldt of McCabe World Travel, a Virtuoso agency.

In The Netherlands a must-see is the



Kinderdijk (meaning "children's dike"), according to Pascale LeJeune of Brownell Travel, where visitors walk or boat through 19 windmills built around 1740. For vacationers visiting in the spring, LeJeune insists on seeing the Keukenhof, a vibrant park with over 7 million tulips, daffodils and hyacinths. Brussels also displays a flower tapestry in August, where the Grand-Place is transformed to display the drapery made entirely of flowers, and festivities such as concerts, theater performances and chocolate and beer tastings take place for the approximately week-long event.

While both The Netherlands and

Belgium are known for their many museums, for those looking for a different kind of exhibition, the Belgian Comic Strip Center in Brussels is worth the stop. The work of famous Belgian cartoonist Hergé, known for The Adventures of Tintin, as well as various other artists are on display in the former Waucquez Warehouse, an Art Nouveau building by the famed architect Victor Horta. "It's a different side to see of the city," shares LeJeune.

Another important part of the Belgian culture, according to LeJeune, is the many beguinages throughout the country. Beguines were religious women who created



enclosed communities, including churches, houses and gardens, within towns to serve their spiritual needs. Many of them are now open to the public to visit, and Bruges and Gent are famous for their beguinages.

“It’s such a nice and quiet environment to embrace in so many busy cities,” says LeJeune.

Cuisine

One of the most challenging decisions travelers may face in The Netherlands and Belgium is choosing what to eat, because there are so many enticing choices. Both countries boast famed seafood dishes, from moules et frites (mussels and fries) to sole nourmand to shrimp that can only be found in the North Sea. LeJeune recommends the Michelin-starred Vermeer in Amsterdam. “The grilled sole filets with roasted fennels is quite tantalizing, as you have never eaten such great Atlantic sole fish,” she explains. “This fish is nothing like the sole they sell in U.S. markets.” For classic Belgian dishes, LeJeune also suggests Aux Armes de Bruxelles: she recommends the eel in green sauce.

While there is no shortage of Michelin-starred restaurants in these countries, Braeckveldt prefers the local eateries for the most authentic meals. “To me the true food is going to be in the little mom-and-pop places with their specialties,” she shares. These places offer dishes that won’t be found at the high-end restaurants, but are some of the most delicious, she explains.

Beyond multi-course meals, both countries boast smaller eats, such as crepes, waffles, cheese, chocolate and fries that are just as delectable. Nearly every town in Belgium has a “fritkot,” or a snack stand specializing in fries, usually found near train stations. Belgium takes great pride in its fries — as they are the true inventors of the snack, insists Braeckveldt — and they are served on their own with various sauces or on the side of many dishes. The key, shares Braeckveldt, is cooking them twice, at different temperatures, for a soft inside and crispy outside.

There is also no shortage of beer to wash down all that food, as both countries are known for their brews. In earlier times, when water was not always safe to drink, priests and monks made beer or wine instead. Now some of those brews date back centuries and are still being made in churches and abbeys, according to Braeckveldt. Belgium holds one particular brew that has been referred to as



Dutch windmills of Kinderdijk



the best beer in the world, Westvleteren 12, which is produced by the monks of Saint Sixtus Abbey. Because the monks are opposed to resale, buyers are limited in the amount they can purchase, according to Isabelle Gray of Gray & Co., a travel company specializing in custom journeys for active travelers. She describes the flavor as nutty and yeasty with hints of coconut and caramel, and explains that it has an unusual content of live yeast and residual sugars.

Recreation

The Netherlands and Belgium also are ideal countries to explore by bike, as they offer thousands of miles of flat land, are bicycle-friendly, and have so many sights to take in. “Biking in the city centers is the best way to see a lot of their beauty,” says Gray. “There are bike paths everywhere, so it is also a safe way to see and enjoy



PHOTO ©TIAGO FIOREZE

The Keukenhof



Amsterdam

the architecture, nature and history.” In fact, many travelers are looking for a more active vacation, shares LeJeune. “They want more and more of an active and unique experience,” she explains.

Southern Belgium, which used to be known for its coal mining, offers mountains and hilly terrain ideal for hiking, shares Braeckveldt. The southern town of Spa is also known for its Formula 1 racing and offers one of the most famous tracks in the world. The less well-known town of Friesland in the northwest of The Netherlands is famous for its speed skaters and handball,

according to LeJeune, and is also a hidden gem for beautiful sailing routes.

For more of a luxurious destination, the coastal Belgian city of Knokke-Heist offers a yearly luxury fair, called Eccentric, featuring brands such as Veuve Clicquot, Jaguar and Tesla Motors. The 2014 fair, the theme of which was bohemian chic, offered a mix of luxury and beauty, art and culture, gastronomy, travel and fashion exhibits.

“It’s a little hidden gem,” says Braeckveldt of her native Belgium. “It’s a little bit forgotten, but it’s definitely worthwhile and it definitely merits exploring.”