



**AFS Interculturele
Programma's VZW**

WELCOME TO BELGIUM
FLANDERS
GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

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1. PREPARATIONS	4
1.1. Language	4
1.2. België-Belgique: The pros and cons of a bilingual country	5
1.3. Knowledge of Belgium and your own country	5
1.4. What to bring	5
2. ATTITUDES	7
2.1. Accepting differences	7
2.2. Appreciation	7
2.3. Openness	7
2.4. Humour	7
3. DAILY LIFE	8
3.1. Your host family	8
3.2. Eating and drinking	9
3.3. Clothing	9
3.4. Religion	10
3.5. Social life	10
3.6. Language	10
4. AFS BELGIUM-FLANDERS	11
4.1. The organisation	11
4.2. AFS-activities	12
5. AFS RULES	13
5.1. International AFS rules	13
5.2. Belgium-Flanders	13
6. DIFFERENT PROGRAMS	14
6.1. Programs	14
6.2. Work placements	14
7. INTEGRATION WITHIN SOCIETY	15
8. BELGIUM IN EUROPE	16
8.1. Our country	16
8.2. Political structure	16
8.3. Climate	17
8.4. Geography	18



Dear participant,

We hope this brochure reaches you in good time so that you can absorb its information and be able to start your unique experience in **Belgium-Flanders**, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium!

We, the AFS volunteers and staff of AFS Interculturele Programma's vzw, are all looking forward to meeting you and we are happy to welcome you to our country and organisation.

During your stay in Belgium-Flanders you will participate in an "intercultural learning program". In order to make sure that we are talking the same language, let us clarify the term "intercultural learning program", and how AFS has built a program in Belgium for teenagers to give them the opportunity to **learn** and **grow** through an intensive living experience.

A program is a structure with specific goals. The two main axes of the program you will participate in are a **project** and a **family home stay**. Your participation in family life and your project will enable you to profoundly get to know the Flemish society.

However, AFS will encourage you to leave the boundaries of your host family and the project and integrate into the wider **community**, so that your face becomes familiar and trusted within the neighbourhood, within the community... This will no doubt encourage you to become a 'Flemish' person.

During your stay in Belgium-Flanders, AFS and its volunteers will of course always be there to help you make this process of integration as smooth as possible. With this brochure, we already want to make sure that you come to Belgium well-prepared. It will give you information on Belgium-Flanders and on what you can expect during your AFS-year here. Please read it carefully!

Wishing you all the very best for the coming months,

Elsk Van Den Eede
Program Coordinator
AFS Belgium-Flanders



1. PREPARATIONS

A 6 months program can seem a very long period but you will notice it is short too. So the better you are prepared, the more you will be able to make of this experience. Language preparation and knowledge about Belgium and your own country are very important.

1.1. Language

There are three official languages in Belgium. German is spoken in a very small part of the country (mother tongue of 1% of the population) near to the German border, Dutch is spoken mainly in the North (mother tongue of 56% of the population) and French mainly in the South (mother tongue of 32% of the population). Brussels being the capital is classified as bilingual (11% seen as being bilingual).

As you know, you have been placed in Flanders, the **Dutch-speaking** part of the country - the northern part of Belgium. Sometimes, the language is also called 'Flemish'. What is the meaning of 'Flemish'? As you may know, Flemish is the same as **Dutch** - the language spoken in The Netherlands. However, there are differences in accent and intonation; this of course does not stop us from understanding each other. One can perhaps compare this with the difference between British English and American English.

During our language course you will learn to express yourself in Dutch. You can already start picking up some words and sentences on these language websites: <http://www.learn dutch.org/> and <http://www.taalthuis.com/course/>.

About the Dutch language

It is a Germanic language, therefore it is related to English and German. Dutch is spoken by over 20 million people in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Dutch is still more or less spoken in the old colonies of the Netherlands - Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, and a variation of the language is spoken in South Africa.



1.2. België-Belgique: The pros and cons of a bilingual country

You are driving to Paris, following the signs for Mons in order to get onto the E10 motorway. Suddenly you realise that Mons has disappeared from the road signs. Did you miss it? Are you lost? And where is Bergen? Welcome to Bilingual Belgium where even towns have two names and depending on the language of the region you are driving through, signs will be in one language or the other just to confuse you!

But a solution has been found: the name of each town is written first in the language of that particular region. This means that Dutch is used in Flanders, French in Wallonie and both languages are used in Brussels. The following list is useful when you want to check the name of your destination before you leave home.

French	Dutch
Bruxelles	Brussel
Anvers	Antwerpen
Malines	Mechelen
Gand	Gent

1.3. Knowledge of Belgium and your own country

During our on-arrival orientation camp we will have discussions and give more information about Belgium and Flanders, but please try and do some research before you arrive. Make use of libraries and if you have more time you could always contact embassies, tourist offices, or information centres. It is also worthwhile to bring yourself up to date with national and world affairs by reading newspapers and news magazines.

Even more important than knowledge about Belgium and its language are a few basic attitudes to which we want to draw your attention.

Did you know ...

that certain types of pralines, with fresh cream or with liquor, are seldom exported and certain chocolatiers still sell their products only in Flanders. Another good reason to come to Flanders

1.4. What to bring

1. Bring a camera.
2. Bring along a few traditional recipes. Your Belgian family will love sampling foreign food and it saves the bother of having to write home for them.
3. Do not forget to bring information concerning your home town i.e. pictures of your home, your family and your neighbourhood.
4. You may want to bring some small presents for your host family. The best suggestion we can give is to use your imagination - try wandering through the isles of your favourite



department-store. You will be surprised how many clever and useful things you will find. Your family will love anything which is typical of your country.

MONEY

The Belgian currency is EURO, as in several other European countries. The Euro and the US Dollar are more or less equal in value.

It is necessary to bring some money with you for your personal expenses (movie, concerts ,stamps, gifts, personal transportation etc.).

Personal expenditure varies from person to person. Some examples: a soft drink: 1,50 – 2,00 Euro, a beer: 1,50 – 2,50 Euro, frites: 1,20 – 1,80 Euro, go see a movie: 7 – 8,5 Euro, stamps: approx. 0,50 – 0,70 Euro in Europe, 0,80 Euro rest of the world...



2. ATTITUDES

2.1. Accepting differences

If we place moral values on the customs of others, our own ideas and commitments will get in the way of 'putting ourselves in the other one's shoes' and we begin to see what we are expecting rather than what is actually there. Many things are different, without one being better than the other. You need to see things from the other point of view and not your own if you want to be able to hear what the other person is really saying.

Subtle differences are often stumbling blocks in intercultural understanding. People often do things in different cultures that APPEAR to be the same but often it is only the form that is the same, but the function is different. Look and listen and think about the 'why' but be careful not to generalise, you are staying with one Belgian family out of many.

2.2. Appreciation

The families are volunteers themselves and accept you out of friendship. They are not rewarded for this by any material means. Show them that you are grateful - not by expensive gifts - but by frequently saying 'thank you', by lending a helping hand, by showing enthusiasm and interest in what they have to offer. Appreciation is the way to building lasting bonds.

2.3. Openness

You are in Belgium to OBSERVE, LISTEN, LEARN. Take in all impressions and information you can. Do not hesitate to ask for advice from your family, from friends, from AFS and do not be afraid to be corrected. There is so much to learn and it is no loss of prestige to ask questions. Ask your family to tell you their criticism, show them if you feel uneasy about something and TALK to your family about it. They will not know something is bothering you unless you bring it into the open. Openness on the part of everyone involved is how everyone can learn.

2.4. Humour

A laugh, a smile - they are an international means of communication. This includes laughing at yourself. Being able to laugh at your own shortcomings and mistakes is a characteristic of a balanced person. A good laugh will give you the strength to correct a mistake!

We take our aims very seriously and we think that you have a very important task as an (EVS-) AFS-er but, paradoxically, you will be more successful if you do not take yourself too seriously.

IN SHORT: When you think about these attitudes you will realise that they not only apply to Belgium and AFS but that they are very important everywhere where people LIKE people and try to overcome personal barriers, whether in a family, a community or in another culture. These attitudes will always help you to 'reach' your fellow citizen.



3. DAILY LIFE

3.1. Your host family

By the time you arrive in your host family you will know something, if only a little, about them. You will have read some information of them, but then again most Belgians find it hard to put anything about themselves down on paper (who doesn't!). If your placement has been made early enough you will have most probably exchanged some information with the family. Whatever the impression you may have gathered from this, it may prove to be different from reality.

It is possible that during the first days, even though we have asked your family to treat you like a family member, nothing will be asked of you and that you will be considered more like a guest. In such a case it is up to you to take action by offering your co-operation after having carefully assessed when your help is most likely to be needed.

But whatever the question might be, do not hesitate to ask your host family. You will find that it requires a great deal of maturity, insight and tact to live with a complete stranger. Be patient if they sometimes do not seem able to 'cope' with it, and above all help them to fulfil their task by trying to act in a balanced and mature manner.

If a misunderstanding should arise, try to clear it up by talking about it. Be ready to make fun of your own mistakes and to forgive a thoughtless action of others.

We shall ask your host family, however, to tell you about special 'house rules' which they may want you to follow, such as making your own bed or not, helping with the dishes, etc. We think you will appreciate knowing this from the beginning rather than finding out yourself later.

ADDRESSING PEOPLE

There is a lot of handshaking for everybody - girls and boys alike! If you are introduced to a person you shake hands with her or him. When you meet somebody you shake hands. When you say good-bye you shake hands. It is also very common to kiss on the cheeks (1 or 3).

Do not impose wishes on your host family and do not expect anything. You have not come to Belgium as a tourist. Sightseeing is not the purpose of your stay in our country. So if your family takes you on trips, be grateful for it. If they do not, there is no need to be disappointed. You can be sure that they will be willing to show you some of the cultural, unique and beautiful places in their community. Remember that you will always have the opportunity to come back in the future as a tourist. But the opportunity to live the everyday life of a Belgian family will probably never arise again.



3.2. Eating and drinking

The local Cuisine ...

Our famous dishes are ones to remember: the frites (French fries or chips), the excellent steaks and delicious mussels, the paling-in-het-groen (eel in green sauce), the Vlaamse karbonaden (beef stew cooked in dark beer); Flemish cuisine comprises of fresh, fine food which is prepared with imagination and style.

Eating our food is part of the experience. Many people on an exchange program gain weight. If there is something that you really dislike you can say no, but do make a sincere effort to taste everything.

It is customary sometimes to drink wine or beer with food in Belgium. You may also be offered alcoholic beverages.

TABLE MANNERS

Watch your family closely and if there are uncertainties do not hesitate to ask! Usually you do not start the meal before the head of the family does, nor do you get up before everyone has finished. We take our time to eat together. Eating together is considered very important.

3.3. Clothing

Clothing is no great problem. Belgian youth dress very casually and a wardrobe consisting of a change of clothes for every day is not necessary.

If you are in contact with your Belgian family before you leave, you could ask them for suggestions as they may want to take you to places or do things that require special clothing.

ONE TIP : do bring a raincoat and an umbrella with you!!

Knowing a little about the Belgian climate might, however, help you pick out what to bring along. In the summer it is mostly warm and sunny, but also sometimes windy and rainy. The temperature during the summer months - from May to September - varies (on average) between 20 and 25° C. In the winter months the temperature can drop below zero. This cold climate can be increased by the wind-chill factor. However, you must remember that these are only average statistics. Trends in fashion also differ around the globe, so try and avoid buying too many new clothes!



3.4. Religion

80% of the Belgians are Roman Catholic. However, not many go to church on Sunday. If your family is religious and you want to accompany them to church, go ahead, but of course you have no obligations. If they are not religious they will not mind you attending a service while they stay at home, unless they have planned something special. Ask, be open, talk about this with your family.

3.5. Social life

Your social life will probably differ from what you are used to. Do not expect to be on the go all the time. Of course social life will vary greatly depending on your host family and the friends you make. Some host parents will ask you about where you are going and when you expect to be home. Respect this and talk about your family's and your *habits*.

Be aware that when you spend all of your free time away from the host family, they may feel disappointed. After all, they have offered to host you because they are curious to get to know you, not because they want to play at 'hotel'. Try to find a healthy balance between sharing time or activities with your host family and spending time with your friends.

Did you know ...

***that 29 channels are available via the Belgian television network. Perhaps you will find your favourite channel on a Belgian television set!
Flemish channels opt for subtitling foreign programmes rather than dubbing them - another proof of our international character.***

3.6. Language

Some of you have some knowledge of Dutch, some of you have none. However, for all of you the Dutch is of great importance and will need your immediate attention. We do not need to stress how much you will be missing out on if you do not make progress with the language.

Push yourself in trying to speak with people in their language. The feeling of accomplishment and happiness when you are able to communicate with someone is tremendous! Set up a routine for studying a bit every day.

Encourage each other to talk Dutch all the time. It would be too easy to talk English or French with each other all time. Families can help you to assimilate the language as quickly as possible.

☞ We have made some very large generalisations on life in Belgium. PLEASE realise that every family is different. All your families have one thing in common though : they are ready to receive you with an open heart and they are looking forward to having you with them. They will help you and try to understand you but do not ask them to adapt to your needs. Observe, ask questions and try their ways...



4. AFS BELGIUM-FLANDERS

4.1. The organisation

In Belgium there are 2 AFS organisations: Belgium-Flanders and Belgium-French. You will be in touch with staff and volunteers of Belgium-Flanders. Its members are former AFS-ers, their parents, former host families and people who share the ideals of AFS.

4.1.1. The local chapters

On the local level we have AFS-chapters which consist of returnees and former host and sending families. Each chapter is divided into a youngsters chapter and a parents chapter. They are both headed by a chairman. The chapter is among other things responsible for finding you a suitable host family, and for organising activities for their host students. The chapter members dedicate a lot of their free time to AFS!

Next to this AFS has three regional chapters which consists of returnees of the Community Service or of the European Volunteer Service program. We call this the '18+ Chapters'. During your stay in Belgium they will organise different fun activities for you and the other participants.

One member of one of the 18+ chapters will be personally responsible for keeping in contact with you; he is your **contact person or counselor**. Please let this person know whenever you encounter a problem, or even just when you want to let someone know what a great time you're having! (S)he is there to listen to you and to help you out if necessary!

4.1.2. The office

The office's task is in the first place to help the volunteers doing their wonderful job. However, if you have any questions about the program, feel free to call/e-mail us. We are there to help you out as well.

The AFS BFL office is located in Mechelen and is open Monday to Friday, 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. You can write or call the office with any questions or concerns during your stay.

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Program Director : **Helga Schepers**

Program Coordinator EVS and Vocational & Community Service Program: **Elsk Van Den Eede**

Program Assistant : **Sarie Pieraerts**

Counselling Coordinator: **Christine Delattre**

Make sure that you never keep a problem to yourself. The volunteers and staff have lots of experience and might be able to help you, or to make you see things from another perspective. We can also help others see things from a different perspective and perhaps understand you better. Nothing makes us sadder than to discover that a participant has been struggling with a problem for months and has never attempted to let us know about it. Whatever you have to tell us, you can count on our discretion. We will never make your personal details or correspondence public without your consent.

4.2. AFS-activities

There will be three nationally organised orientations and a number of local get-togethers for all participants staying in Belgium-Flanders. Presence at the national orientations is obligatory, so keep these dates free!

Here are the dates of the nationally organised activities. You will receive the dates of the local activities from your 18+ chapter.

- **Arrival orientation**, immediately upon arrival: 16 to 19 February 2008
- **Language lessons**, twice a week in February and March.
- **Midstay orientation**, 18 to 20 April 2008
- **End of stay orientation**, 26 to 27 July 2008
- **Program ends** on 8-9 August 2008



5. AFS RULES

5.1. International AFS rules

5.1.1. Driving a car or other motor vehicles during your stay:

For EVS-participants: is allowed

if you have an insurance for it and

if you have given a copy of the insurance to AFS Belgium Flanders.

For non-European participants: is only allowed when this is required by the project, when the project has an insurance for you (and has given a copy of the insurance to AFS BFL) and when you have an international driving license.

AFS BFL is not responsible for any damages or liability for claims by third parties, participants or CS providers.

5.1.2. It is forbidden for AFS participants to hitchhike

5.1.3. NO Drugs

Any participant violating any one of these rules will be sent home immediately.

5.2. Belgium-Flanders

5.2.1. Travelling in general:

It happens that you want to visit Amsterdam, Paris, etc. and off course you are free to do so in your free time or during the weekends but please keep following remarks in mind.:

- you discuss it with your host parents and employer,
- you always inform the AFS office of your travel plans and sign a travel waiver when needed. This is not to check on you, but to know where you are in case of emergency.

5.2.2. Visits:

- If you have visitors, don't expect your host family to give them food or lodging. Visitors can stay in youth hostels or hotels. We do not encourage visitors, as such visits may severely disturb your process of adaptation and fitting in.



6. DIFFERENT PROGRAMS

6.1. Programs

As soon as you arrive in Belgium you will find out that you are not the only person coming to Belgium on an exchange program. You will meet many others the first week during the on-arrival training. You will also find out that not everybody participates in the same program.

Some will be participants of the **Vocational Program** (from Panama...): they will work in Belgium as trainees in different companies. Others will be here on the **Community Service Program** (from Bolivia, Paraguay, Mexico, Japan...) and will work as volunteers in social projects. Others will come from European countries like France, England, Spain, Greece, Finland, Germany, Italy, Austria, ... joining the **European Voluntary Service (EVS) program**.

We think it is important you get to know each other the first week so you can make some friends in your new country.

6.2. Work placements

Before you come to Belgium you know off course where you will be working, but this is only information on paper. During the first week you will have the chance to visit your project or company and we will clarify all you must know on your placement. The purpose of this visit is getting to know the workplace, discussing the job description and working hours, signing a contract when needed, etc.

It is usual in Belgium to prepare lunch (bread) before leaving home in the morning. In most companies and organisations there is a separate room with coffee and drinks to take your lunch. In some places it's also possible to buy your lunch in a canteen or in a nearby shop.

YOU AND YOUR WORKPLACE

Some basic rules:

Don't be late for work and at meetings.

Avoid frequent and long telephone calls.

Talk to your boss if you wish a day off.

Respect the smoking and non-smoking areas.

Avoid long coffee breaks.

Don't be afraid of trying to talk Dutch instead of English.

When being a new person at a workplace, it is important that you try to make the best of it. The more you involve yourself, the more the organisation will recognise your skills, abilities, experience and professional knowledge: show an interest by involving yourself in various assignments. Ask questions, come with suggestions or ideas. Socialise with your colleagues. They can become great friends. This also is an opportunity to experience Belgian people. Be positive and open minded. Do not hesitate to talk with your contact person at your working place if you have problems with assignments, work routines or colleagues.



7. INTEGRATION WITHIN SOCIETY

In the first instance integration takes place when you begin to live with a host family; the family is the smallest and most important social link in our society.

AFS also targets its exchange program campaign at the workplace. These are the ideal places for integration. The company or the project is the most suitable environment for the integration of people within the same age group.

However, AFS also thinks that this process of integration can go further. Integration within the community in which you will be living will no doubt encourage you to become a 'Flemish' person within the circle of the traditional Flemish environment. You are encouraged to integrate yourselves into the whole community rather than stay within the boundary of your host family or workplace. Therefore you will be encouraged to step out into the open so that your face becomes familiar and trusted within the neighbourhood, within the community...

AFS wants to motivate participants such as yourself to integrate into the society of the host country. The process of integration and becoming a part of society can be achieved in many ways, like e.g. becoming a monitor of a local youth movement

AFS sees that this type of integration is beneficial due to the following reasons:

- you will become familiar with all aspects of living together here in Flanders (this is a type of intercultural learning)
- the voluntary work and socio-cultural work which you may involve yourself in is more relevant than ever in our society
- it is a 'different' form of learning
- it can stimulate and encourage young people like yourself to hopefully continue doing such work in the future
- it can provide directions and/or be a preparatory stage for the selection of a particular field of study in higher education
- during an AFS-program you will most definitely benefit from the things that are there to be explored but you will also be expected to contribute to the integration process!

AFS believes that integration into society is a continuous process. It therefore should be continuously stimulated.



8. BELGIUM IN EUROPE

8.1. Our country

Belgium is one of the smallest countries in Europe. It has an area of 18.846 square kilometres.

The country is bordered to the north by the North Sea and The Netherlands, to the east by The Netherlands, the German Federal Republic and the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg, to the south and west by France. The Belgian frontier, which is extremely irregular and therefore unusually long (1.445 km or 870 miles) includes very few natural boundaries. It has been laid down chiefly by international treaties.

Flanders and its history

Who has not heard of `Bruges the Beautiful'? The town is also referred to as the Venice of the North! And what about Antwerp, the port on the banks of the river Schelde, where the painter P.P. Rubens lived. And we must not forget the world-famous zoo in the heart of this city. What about Ghent with its historic medieval castle - Gravensteen, and an overwhelming number of baroque guild houses.

The central location of Belgium has made the country into a geographical digest of western Europe. Though small, the area comprises of a selection of geographical features which characterise this part of the European continent.

Because of the central location of Belgium it is economically a staging post for international trade and traffic. Culturally, the border between the Latin and Germanic cultures crosses the country from east to west.

Thanks to this central location the capital city of Brussels has become the headquarters of two major international organisations : the European Union (E.U.) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (N.A.T.O.).

In addition, many other international bodies and private companies are represented in Belgium.

8.2. Political structure

Belgium has been independent since shortly after the Revolution of 1830. It is a federal state with a rather complex character.



8.2.1. THE HEAD OF STATE

The present Head of State is King Albert II, sixth King of the Belgians, since 1993. The King stands above religions and ideologies, above political beliefs and debates, above economic interests. In this way he performs the role of an impartial arbitrator. The King does not have a lot of actual political power, his function is for the largest part symbolic and representative.

8.2.2. Linguistic regions and cultural communities

As Belgium is located at the junction of the Latin and Germanic cultures, there are two main cultural communities in the country: the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking community (see map in 1.1). The two regions are separated by the linguistic frontier which crosses the country from west to east. In principle each region is unilingual, i.e. the language of the region is the official language used by the public, authorities, in schools etc. After the First World War a German language region was also annexed to Belgium. This constitutes a third cultural community in the eastern part of Belgium, but it has a far smaller population. As the capital of Flanders, Belgium and Europe, Brussels is officially bilingual (French-Dutch) – although the majority of the population speaks French.

As Belgium is a federal state, each region/community has a certain degree of autonomy. Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part) and Wallonia (French-speaking part) have their own autonomy on cultural, educational and economic matters. Brussels, although situated in Flanders, is a bilingual area with a certain degree of economic autonomy. All of them can elect their own government and executive power, that can pass their own laws (on the items they are responsible for). The federal government has as responsibilities: defence, economics, external affairs, social security...

Belgium is also a member state of the European Union. As a result, Belgian, Flemish, Walloon and Brussels politics are influenced – and will be even more in future – by the European politics.

Try to make sense of that!

8.3. Climate

DID YOU KNOW...

that it sometimes rains ..and rains.

Statisticians disagree on whether the average number of days with rain (not always much, but some) is 200 or 220, but you can optimistically note that the 165 or so rain free days are something to look forward to!

Belgium enjoys a temperate climate of the oceanic type : the proximity of the sea reduces the harshness of winter but also makes for cooler summers.

The weather is influenced alternately by cold air from the north and hot air from the south. This produces regular but moderate rainfall.



As the country is small there is no substantial variation in regional climates. However, there is some variety in areas that are further from the sea and in the Uplands. The average temperature is 9.50° Celsius along the coast, 9° Celsius in the centre of the country and 7.5° Celsius in the higher land in the eastern parts.

8.4. Geography

Belgium has three major geographical areas: lower Belgium (up to 100m above sea level), central Belgium (between 100 and 200m above sea level) and upper Belgium (from 200 to over 500m above sea level).

Lower Belgium begins in the west at the coast, which extends in a straight line for 65 km. Inland from the coast lie the “polders”, a flat and fertile area part of which lies below sea-level. Between the western polders, the rivers the Leie and the Scheldt, are the Flemish lowlands, a sandy region which is hilly in places. The Kempen lie in the east of the country. The soil in the Kempen is poor and the landscape comprises conifer woods, heathlands, ponds, marshes, pastures and corn fields.

Behind the Flemish lowlands and the Kempen lies central Belgium, with its low and very fertile clay plateaus. The heavily urbanised Brabant has its own lush green carpet, the forest of Soignes, a remnant of the huge forest that covered a large part of the country in Roman times. Furthermore, central Belgium boasts Hainaut in the west and Hesbaye in the east, both fertile areas with large farms and extensive fields and pastures.

Upper Belgium, the most sparsely populated and densely wooded part of the country, begins south of the rivers Sambre and Meuse. It is a fertile area which is regarded primarily as a tourist attraction on account of the beautiful valleys of the Meuse and the Ourthe and its numerous historical monuments. In the south of Upper Belgium are the Ardennes, a region alternating between a magnificent, wooded area with natural beech forests and specially grown fir trees, and plateaus and deep valleys. The Ardennes are a natural tourist attraction, and its southernmost part has a milder climate than the rest of the country.

Beer, but which one?

As soon as you set foot inside a cafe the first thing you think of is: which beer shall I have? If you just order 'a beer' the waiter may not be aware of the certain beer you are after. This is because there are up to a hundred different kinds of bottled beer to be found on the shelves in some of the average Flemish cafes.