BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
With an area of 11,787 square miles (30,528 square kilometers), Belgium is slightly larger than Maryland. It is generally flat, with increasingly hilly terrain near the southeast Ardennes forest. The highest elevation is only 2,275 feet (693 meters). Almost 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
Belgium has known heavy conflict as well as great achievement in art and commerce. Modern Belgians are descendants of a Celtic tribe whose courage was admired by Julius Caesar. In the fifth century, Germanic Franks took control and established the Merovingian Dynasty, later followed by Charlemagne's 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.

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 was fought in Bastogne and in central Belgium, where U.S. divisions held off massive assaults by German troops who were attempting to reach the Allied port located at Antwerp. 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 gained independence from Belgium. 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.

Because of its vulnerability and small size, Belgium has favored European cooperation and integration since the 1940s. It was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and serves as that alliance's headquarters and home to the European Union (EU) headquarters, making it an important city for 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.

THE PEOPLE

Population
The population of Belgium is about 10.4 million and is growing at 0.1 percent. More than 97 percent of the people live in cities or towns. Belgium's overall population density is one of the highest in Europe. The Walloons occupy the south (Wallonia) and comprise 31 percent of Belgium's population. The Flemish (58 percent) live in the northern half (Flanders). A German-speaking minority (1 percent) lives east of Wallonia. Almost 10 percent of the country's population is not Belgian. Many Italians, Spaniards, and North Africans (mainly Moroccans) work in Belgian industry. Brussels (with a population of about 1,800,000), Antwerp (1,000,000), and Ghent (240,000) are the largest cities. Because of Brussels's international importance, nearly one-fourth of the city's inhabitants are foreigners.

Language
French and Dutch (Flemish) are the primary official languages of Belgium. French dominates in southern areas and the capital, and Dutch is more prominent in the north. As a Dutch dialect, Flemish is written the same as the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands and has a similar grammar, but it is pronounced differently. About one 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, 85 percent of its people speak French.

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 considered to be Catholic. Protestants and other groups comprise the remaining 25 percent. 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. 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.

General Attitudes
Two separate countries seem to exist within Belgium due to major differences in language and culture. However, the Flemish and the Walloons have shown a remarkable ability to live together through open discussion and compromise. Conflicts tend be political and economic; the groups are not antagonistic on an individual level.

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. Nevertheless, Belgium's geographical position in Europe also makes the people cosmopolitan and open to interaction with those outside Belgium. Both the Walloons and the Flemish have a love for life and live it to the fullest, working and playing hard. A mixture of material wealth, good living, and family values is the lifestyle most Belgians want to have. Individuals generally like being regarded for their social achievements, good housing, and pleasant living conditions.

Like those in other European countries, Belgians are struggling with their feelings toward immigrants. Most people accept them and would like to see their living conditions improved. Yet very little is done to integrate some immigrant groups into mainstream society. This tends to alienate immigrants, especially their children born in Belgium, so violence sometimes erupts in immigrant sections of large urban areas.

Personal Appearance
Belgians follow European fashions and dress well in public. Extremely casual attire is reserved for the privacy of the home. Men who wear hats remove them in buildings. Suits and dresses are standard in offices.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings
Belgians greet each other with a handshake, which is often quick and light. The phrases used for greeting depend on the region. A typical greeting in Dutch is Goeiedag (Good day); the French equivalent is Bonjour. Informally, and if familiarity permits, one would say Hallo (Hello) in Dutch and Salut in French. English and German greetings would not be
out of place in Brussels and some other cities. 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. Belgians use first names only with friends and relatives; otherwise, they address people by last name. In professional circles, there is a growing tendency to call each other by first name once a working relationship has been established. When leaving a group, Belgians usually shake hands with and bid farewell to each person in the group.

**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 (or appetizers if invited for a meal).

**Eating**
Most Belgians eat three meals a day, with the main meal served around 6 or 7 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. Meals are a social and cultural event 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**
Even though young people are becoming more independent, the family is still a strong and vital part of Belgian society. More than a third of Belgian households include children. Of this number, about a tenth are single-parent homes. The average family has one or two children. Although both parents often work outside the home, women are still responsible for most household duties and child care. Families often take excursions on holidays and Sundays. In Flanders, married couples seldom live with their parents, except in rural areas where families share farmland.

In the past, Walloon extended families shared a large single house, but today they live separately. Still, they often remain in the same town or city as the rest of their family. In fact, throughout Belgium, mobility tends to be low, and people settle in or near the towns in which they were raised. Family and community roots are important to Belgians. The elderly are generally well respected, but 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.

**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. Nearly two-thirds of the population owns a home, and nearly 90 percent of those homes are dwellings where single families live, each with an average of five rooms. A little more than 10 percent of Belgians live 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’s a sign of real friendship to be invited into a Belgian home.

Belgians tend to have a strong social consciousness. As a result, there is considerable support for “social housing companies” that 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. Evictions are difficult even if tenants do not pay their rent, and water and electricity cannot be shut off easily if bills remain unpaid.

**Dating and Marriage**
Group dating usually begins by age 16, but dating behavior may vary according to regional traditions. Younger teens use public transportation and bikes at first, but when they reach driving age (18), they prefer to use private cars for dating. Young people go to movies, dances, and cafés. Long engagements are common.

Many Belgians live together before or instead of marrying. Only civil marriages are recognized by the government, but most couples also have a Catholic religious ceremony attended by relatives and friends. The religious ceremony must be preceded by a civil one, and it is usually attended by only a few relatives. Belgian brides traditionally carry a special embroidered handkerchief on the wedding day. The
memento is kept as a family heirloom.

Life Cycle
On the whole, Belgians are a highly secular people. Nevertheless, many parents observe traditional Catholic rituals, especially with their children. Babies are usually baptized within a few weeks of birth, and many people keep the tradition of choosing a godfather and godmother (pete and meter in Dutch, and parrain and marraine in French) for their newborns. At 11 or 12, many Belgian children—even those who otherwise never go to church—receive their holy communion. This is part religious ceremony, part family feast and party. Some Belgian parents, avowed non-believers, have come up with a secular alternative to the communion festivities—a “feast of free thought.”

After a person dies, many but not all families will hold a Catholic funeral service. At Catholic or secular services, mourners all bring an envelope containing a card of condolences and personal messages for the grieving family. Towards the end of the service, the mourners, in turn, will receive a card with a picture of the deceased and some appropriate text.

Diet
Belgians eat a rich variety of foods, including pork, game birds, fish, sausages, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, breads, and soups. Wine, beer, or mineral water is often served with meals. Belgium is famous for mussels, chocolates, beer (three hundred varieties), waffles, and french fries, which Belgians claim to have invented. French fries are served with mayonnaise rather than ketchup. Breakfast consists of a hot drink along with rolls or bread with jam or jelly. A snack at 4 p.m. is not unusual. 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
Participation in sporting activities is nearly universal; cycling and soccer are most prominent. Many Belgians like to play a game called boules, a form of lawn bowling. Beaches in the northwest and beautiful 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. Local festivals, as well as national ones like Carnaval, are popular. Most families go on a one-month vacation each year; however, many are now taking shorter vacations during the year when their children are out of school. Most schoolchildren have a week off in November, two weeks at Christmas, one week in February, and two weeks at Easter.

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
Fairs, festivals, parades, and religious holidays are an integral part of the Belgian way of life. Official holidays include New Year’s Day, Easter Monday, Labor Day (1 May), Ascension Day, Whitmonday (Pentecost), Independence Day (21 July), Assumption (15 Aug.), All Saints’ Day (1 Nov.), Veterans’ Day (11 Nov.), and Christmas. Carnaval is celebrated in February or March, depending on the city. This festival is characterized by parades, parties, and colorful costumes. Local spring and fall cultural and folklore festivals, such as the Holy Blood Procession in Bruges, take place throughout the country.

SOCIETY

Government
Belgium is a constitutional monarchy under King Albert II, who holds executive power with the prime minister. (Yves Leterme, the last prime minister, remains as a caretaker until a new government is formed.) The king is a symbolic unifying force, while the prime minister and his 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 Flemish-speaking ministers.

All governments have been coalitions, meaning no single political party has ever had a majority in Parliament. Parliament has two chambers: a 71-seat Senate and the more powerful 150-seat Chamber of Representatives. Parliamentary elections are held at least every five years. Belgium’s major political parties are split along linguistic lines. The voting age is 18. Belgium has an independent judiciary that is equal in power to the executive and legislative branches. The country is divided into 10 provinces, or provincien.

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, recent disagreements over constitutional reforms and the division of powers between regions has led to political deadlock and instability.

Economy
Belgium’s economy is diversified and highly industrialized;
its labor force is highly skilled. Only a small part of the labor force is involved in agriculture, yet Belgium grows more than enough food to be self-sustaining. About three-quarters of the population 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 ratio. The economy has experienced modest growth in recent years, and 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. Buses and streetcars are widely available, but most people also own cars. All freeways are lit at night. 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. An increasing number of people have high-speed internet access in their homes.

Education
Public education is free and compulsory between ages six and eighteen. Many Flemish families send their children to schools operated by the Catholic Church and subsidized by the state. A large portion of the federal budget is allotted to education, and 20 percent of the population is enrolled in school at any given time. All students learn either Flemish or French and may choose to study additional languages (usually English). Beginning at age 14, students have opportunities to choose among different career and educational paths. Comprehensive examinations determine one's entrance to higher education, which is highly subsidized by the state. Those who do not go on to a university receive training in their chosen careers at vocational and technical schools. Schools for the arts are also popular. Adult literacy is nearly universal.

Health
Socialized medicine provides for the health care of all citizens. Doctors and clinics are private but are paid out of public funds. The cost of Belgium's comprehensive welfare system has contributed significantly to the country's budget deficits. Health concerns are similar to those in the United States, as is the quality of care. Although the water is generally safe, Belgians drink bottled water rather than tap water.