

2014 FAWCO Conference at the AWCB, proposed theme:



Brussels: A World of Possibilities

In Brussels, Belgium, there is a world of possibilities. Forest Gump said it best: "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get." Brussels is also a lot like this same box of chocolates. There are hidden treasures and surprises everywhere and you never know what you are going to find, but chances are, it will be something special.

Let's start with the weather, one of our favorite topics in Belgium. While yes, admittedly, we do get a lot of rain, we also have quite a variety. We have been known to experience weather from each and every season in a single day. But inhabitants of Belgium are a hearty bunch, adapting to our weather patterns as necessary. A little rain doesn't stop us, a bright umbrella or colorful rain hat is all that is needed to keep going. And of course sunglasses are a necessity, mostly because we are not used to seeing the sun, so when it does appear, one must take necessary precautions.

Belgium also offers an assortment of languages. With three official languages, one must pay attention when crossing internal borders from one community to the next. As expats, we have plenty of opportunities to enhance our own language skills – and learn the nuances about speaking which one where.

Politics add yet another element of excitement. One day, not long ago, the government was functioning, the next it wasn't. Eventually, Belgium achieved the new world record for going the longest without a functioning government (even achieving a mention in the Guinness Book of World Records). But at least it was a peaceful 535 days.

Brussels is home to the European Union, the headquarters of NATO and SHAPE, thus making it the unofficial capitol of Europe. As such, the country is enriched by many different foreigners, who make Brussels their home away from home. It truly is the heart of Europe.

Tourists are directed to Grand Place to take in the architecture and then pointed towards Mannequin Pis (a pint-size statute of a little boy peeing). Shoppers will be directed to Avenue Louise (the Madison Avenue of Brussels) and also to the Sablon, where Pierre Marcolini displays chocolates as if they were jewels. The next stop on a typical tourist's agenda, is usually Midi station -- to find the next train to Brugge.

But residents of Brussels will tell you that there is so much more to the city than Mannequin Pis. In Uccle, home to many of Belgium's rich and famous, there is the Royal Observatory. Ixelles is Belgium's version of trendy Soho. Anderlecht is home to one of the most prestigious soccer teams and Watermael Boitsfort boasts the greenest commune in Brussels with 60% of it in the Forêt de Soignes, a forest that dates back to the early middle ages. History buffs will enjoy exploring Waterloo, the legendary site of Napoleon's last stand.

But there is also much, much more. There are specialty markets for vintage and antique lovers and small designer shops on quaint, quiet streets. It is possible to find a local, fresh market any day of the week. And speaking of food, Brussels has an impressive 16 Michelin restaurants. If that's not enough, there are even more just outside the city limits. But any local resident can also point to at least one or two favorite brasseries, pubs or cafés and direct palates to just about any desired cuisine.

Belgium is of course known for its beer, 1,317 different kinds to be exact, and etiquette calls for each one to be served in the proper corresponding glass. Any tavern in Brussels can assist in a wide tasting variety. A pot of "mussels in Brussels," is also highly recommended. Chez Léon, near the Grand Place, offers an authentic experience with many flavors to choose from. Fried potatoes might not sound like much of a delicacy, but once visitors have experienced their first cornet of Belgian frites, no other French fry will ever hope to measure up. Be sure to try a different dipping sauce each time.

And that brings us back to that lovely box of chocolate. One need not be a chocolate lover, to find a favorite piece. White, milk, dark, filled with fruit, cream or nuts, there is a flavor for everyone and a chocolate shop on every corner. In a city defined by its own diversity, there is guaranteed to be something special for everyone.