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Management School

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your attention to
this special feature
on Belgium!

The articles have originally been published in

voor m/v met talent
Vacature.

11X BEST OF BELGIUM

Dear reader,

Admittedly, people do not come to Brussels for the wonderful climate. And yet, many foreigners who come here to live and work often never want to leave. We explain why in this magazine. Our journalists sought and found 11 good reasons to move to Belgium. Because, yes it's true, this country has a lot more to offer than just beer, waffles and chocolate...Belgium is located in the heart of Europe, unemployment in Flanders is currently at an all-time low and many companies are waiting impatiently for your talent. This English edition of Vacature was created especially for you, with information about our labour market and, of course, Belgian job openings for international talent. See you soon in Belgium?

Marian Kin
Editor in chief
Vacature

- 1X** Live for next to nothing
- 2X** Fine and copious dining
- 3X** Small player, international role
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1

Brussels is a relatively cheap city for expats, such is the conclusion of a study conducted by ECA International consultants. Last year, the monthly rent for an 80m² two bedroom apartment was 990 euro including taxes. Brussels ended up sharing 20th place with Helsinki in the

Buying a house in Brussels is also a good and reliable investment.

list of Europe's 36 most expensive cities compiled by ECA International. Worldwide, the capital came in at 48th out of 92. Brussels is therefore somewhere in the middle of the rankings. The average rental price in Europe, according to the study, is 1150 euro per month, 15% higher than in the Belgian capital. The

most expensive city in Europe is London (2508 euro per month) followed by Moscow (2383 euro per month). Rental properties in both cities are 2.5 times as expensive as in Brussels. The average rental price for a similar apartment in Paris costs 1650 euro (third most expensive in Europe) and in Amsterdam 1500 euro (sixth most expensive in Europe). The

Belgian capital is at approximately the same level, in terms of cost price for a rental apartment, as Zürich, Rotterdam, Barcelona and Frankfurt. The most expensive city in the world for renting an apartment is Tokyo (2707 euro per month).

Brussels and Belgium are also below the

**COST OF
LIVING**

Living in Brussels, half as cheap as London

text

Dominique Soenen

photos

Tom Daenens, Michel Wiegandt, Corbis, Ultima Vez

Rental and real estate prices in Belgium are low compared with other countries. Belgium is also one of the cheaper countries for buying real estate.

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European average when it comes to buying a house or apartment, as demonstrated by a study conducted by real estate agents, ERA Europe in 2006. In Europe, Belgium is one of the cheaper countries for buying real estate. Countries such as France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain and Ireland are all more expensive than Belgium. Even on comparison with the capitals, Belgium scores well: only Berlin is cheaper than Brussels. Worth noting: house prices in Belgium rose in 2006 and the first half of 2007 by some 18.7%. Nonetheless, it is expected that housing prices will not go up as quickly in 2008. For the first half of this year, the growth rate was a mere 8.1% (as per the Federal Department of Finance, Small Business, Commerce and Energy). In addition, there is also a certain real estate bubble which, according to

figures from international real estate agents Knight Frank, is causing price drops in Denmark (-9.6%), Great Britain (-3.9%), Germany (-2.5%) and Ireland (-8.1%). Those who regard buying a house as an investment consider the Brussels real estate market to be a good investment. According to the study 'Emerging Trends in Real-Estate-Europe 2008' by PricewaterhouseCoopers, real estate in Brussels is a safe investment that is not prone to heavy fluctuations. 500 real estate experts from 27 countries ranked Brussels as the 14th most advantageous place for investing in real estate.

CHEAP COST OF LIVING

Although Brussels is smack in the middle of Western Europe, a region that rates pretty highly when it comes to cost of living, life here is not all as

expensive it would seem. In the list of cities with the highest cost of living compiled by Mercer consultants in March this year, Brussels comes in at just 39th overall. Brussels did, however, climb five places on Mercer's list compared with the same time last year. One of the reasons for this was the weak US dollar and the strong euro. Cities are ranked against New York as the standard with an index of 100. Compared with that point of reference, Brussels' cost index weighed in at just 92.9. The most expensive city in the world is Moscow (142.4), followed by Tokyo (127), London (125) and Oslo (118.3). A host of other, similar European cities are more expensive to live in than Brussels, including Rome (103.9), Milan (111.3), Zürich (112.7), Geneva

(115.8), Paris (109.4), Dublin (103.9), Amsterdam (97) and Madrid (96.7).

Yvonne Traber from Mercer, about the study: "The traditionally expensive cities are still to be found in Western Europe and Asia. It is mainly the low exchange rate of the dollar and the strength of the euro that are behind the shifts in relation to last year. The study confirms that the cost of living is going up, predominantly in response to rising food and petrol prices, although the increase is not uniformly felt everywhere you go. That's because there have also been decreases in the price of electricals and other consumer goods." The study takes into account the cost price of more than 200 products and services (housing, transport, food, clothing, entertainment, etc.). ■

“Belgians put plenty of time, effort and money in cooking and eating”

text
Nirman Arora



As an expat, while deciding to come to Belgium, we envisage a small country in the west of Europe with a population of approximately 10 million that has a short history starting as a kingdom in 1830. Before that, this country has been a part of the Roman Empire, Germany, France, Spain and also Holland. We can trace the impressions of all these cultures invading Belgium. Belgian food and cuisine is not an exception to that which has started developing its own style only in the 19th century. And still, for me it is difficult to define the real Belgian cuisine because all regions in Belgium have their own traditions and recipes. One thing distinguishing Belgium is that it is a country of big cuisine rather than fine cuisine.

While talking of Belgian cuisine, I cannot start from any other food item than the ‘French’ fries, which the Belgians invented and which are extremely popular and tasty. They are called frieten in Flemish or frites in French. The best place to enjoy Belgian frites is at a French fries stand which is usually strategically placed in busy squares.

Most of the traditional meals at home or in restaurants are composed of meat (or eventually seafood), warm or cold vegetables, boiled potatoes and sauce. Almost all restaurants provide a fair number of vegetarian meals in their menu as well.

He describes the Belgian cuisine as rich and modest. Indian expat Nirman Arora, academic assistant at the university of Ghent, is a food lover with a special weakness for Belgian chocolate, beers and sprout.

What I like about Belgians is that they like cooking and eating and they tend to put plenty of time, effort and also money in it. People are invited at home for a dinner evening or they go together to a restaurant to spend the evening there.

Of course as Belgians like cooking and eating, I found plenty of very typical dishes and recipes. Remembering their names has always been a tough task for me but one cannot forget to relish their taste. These are some of the most popular ones I could find in almost every restaurant: stoofvlees met frieten (pork meat cooked in dark beer, served with a brown sauce and french fries), hesperolletjes (warm ham rolls with cooked chicory and cheese sauce), waterzooi (pieces of chicken meat cooked together with vegetables and potatoes in a white sauce), hutsepot (vegetables and potatoes cooked together, served with sausages or pork meat). Brussels sprout is my favorite which is also typical for Belgium. These are a kind of small green cabbages, first cooked in water and afterwards in butter or margarine.

Not to forget the real Belgian artillery meant to conquer peoples’ hearts. Belgium is really famous because of its large collection of artisanal beers. Whereas in Germany, Holland and France and other European countries, I could find a couple of beers only most of them just pils beer with an alcohol percentage of 4 to 5%. In Belgium you have thousands of beers, in all tastes, colors and strengths, varying between 4 and 20%. I noticed that most Belgians prefer beer to wine and tend also to enjoy beer together with hot meals instead of the typically white or red wines like people usually do in France. Some of the very popular and nice Belgian beers I enjoyed are: Stella, Jupiler, Leffe, Duvel, Geuze, Kriek, and Witteke.

Appreciating the sweetness of Belgian people, the famous Belgian chocolate and pralines, cakes and sweets have become a kind of my weakness. Belgian

chocolates are controlled by government to see if enough pure cacao and butter are used for making it. Belgians distinguish melkchocolade (with fewer cacaos and more cream) and fondant or volle chocolade (with more cacaos and less cream). Overall, I would say I find Belgian cuisine rich and modest which has the capacity to assimilate and accommodate the food lovers from across the globe. ■

Belgium also excels in gastronomy

That Belgian food is more big cuisine than fine cuisine, as the Indian expat Nirman Arora puts it above, applies first and foremost to the country’s traditional fare. Fine cuisine, however, abounds in the country’s many gastronomic restaurants. Belgium offers a huge range of eating experiences with a dominant emphasis on very good French, Italian and local cuisine. It enjoys an international culinary reputation and boasts several restaurants with one or more prestigious Michelin stars. Compared with the Netherlands, Belgium has a larger number of restaurants with one Michelin star (78 in Belgium vs. 64 in the Netherlands) despite having a smaller population. (DS)

Three stars: De Karmeliet (Bruges), Hof van Cleve (Kruishoutem)

Two stars: Bruneau (Bruges), Clos St-Denis (Kortesseem), Comme Chez Soi (Brussels), Hostellerie Sint-Nicolas (Ypres), Hostellerie Le Fox (De Panne), Pastorale (Rumst), Sea Grill Radisson SAS (Brussels), ‘t Molentje (Zeebrugge), ‘t Zilte (Mol)

B



All the world at home in Belgium

Belgium is a small country, but with the presence of international institutions such as NATO and the European Commission, not to mention a whole series of international companies, it is also the home base of a large international community.

Admittedly, Belgium is not all that well known wherever you go but Brussels is a name that rings a bell with most people. The reason is simple: Brussels is the institutional capital of Europe and also plays host to NATO's European headquarters. The reason

One in ten companies in Brussels comes from outside the country.

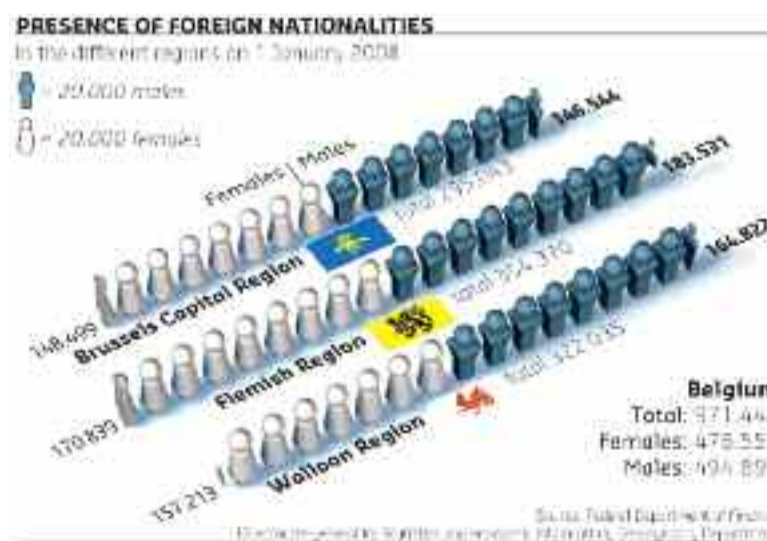
for this international presence lies in Brussels' specific advantages and, by extension, those of Belgium: namely its central location in Europe, the fact that it is a multi-lingual country, its pro-European legislation, the presence of different cultures and the population mix. Alongside NATO, Brussels is also home to: the permanent representatives of the Commission and the Council of the European Union, the General Staff of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), the Benelux secretariat, the diplomatic corps of non-EU and non-NATO member states, embassies, international press (there are 800 foreign journalists working in Belgium on a permanent basis), lobby groups, visitors, experts and speakers and international banks. Around 3% of the population of Brussels are public servants at the European Union. If interns, temping staff, freelance interpreters, lobbyists, regional representatives, press services and their families are included, the figure is more

like 10% or 105.000 people. In total, around one third of the inhabitants of the Brussels Capital Region are from abroad or of foreign origin.

In addition to European and other political institutions, a large number of international companies also have a presence in Brussels. One of the indicators of international presence and for internationalization is the Transnationality Index, compiled by Unctad (United Nations on Trade and Development). For the year 2000, Belgium occupied first place worldwide with an index of 75.6%. Neighbouring countries, i.e., the Netherlands (33.7%), Germany (slightly

below 20%) and France (a little over 10%), are a long way below that figure (source: Unctad, World Invest Report, 2003).

It is also striking that the technology sector is very well represented in and around the capital city. According to recent data from Agoria, the technology industry federation, 2 in 3 companies and 90% of the jobs in this sector in Brussels are in the hands of foreign companies. These figures are very high compared with other sectors: 1 in 10 companies and 40% of employment are in the hands of international companies. Especially technology companies from neighbouring France, the Netherlands and Germany see the advantages of Brussels according to Agoria. ■




**WORKING
PERMIT**

A labour card after just 10 days

In Belgium, foreign employees are issued with a worker's permit and labour card within ten to fifteen days. As such, the country has one of the fastest and most flexible procedures in Europe.

There is a good reason why companies in Belgium seldom have cause to complain about the procedures for attracting foreign employees: the country has one of the fastest and most flexible procedures in Europe. "To start with, Belgium is more flexible towards qualified personnel than our neighbours," explains Jos Barbé, Head of the Department for Migration in Flanders. "The salary criterion for qualified personnel in Belgium is 34 261 euro per annum, both for seconded employees and

ge, it takes less than 10 to 15 working days before the permit is issued to the employer and the labour card is sent to the commune. In some cases, the approval period is even shorter. For employees in bottle neck professions, the procedure takes just five days."

COMPANIES DO THE ADMINISTRATION

The procedure is very simple for foreign employees. Jos Barbé: "It is up to the company to complete

also felt in other areas. "Once a foreign employee receives a labour card from us and takes it to the Belgian embassy abroad, the latter is able to issue a residency permit immediately. Qualified employees can then register at the commune in which they live with their residency permit and labour card. The labour card is therefore the basis for the provision of a residency permit."

For a number of categories of foreign employees, the procedure was made even simpler in October 2007 when the labour card was abolished. This applies to scientific researchers who come to Belgium in the framework of a guest arrangement with a recognized research institution and earn a minimum of 34 261 euro per annum, managers of international subsidiaries who come to work at the company's headquarters and earn more than 57 162 euro per annum or employees who come to follow a course, test prototypes or conduct certain (urgent) repair work. For employees who come to follow a course, the length of time is limited to three calendar months, for the testing of prototypes, an exemption applies of maximum four weeks per calen-

dar year and for urgent repair works, maximum five days per month. If the course is longer than three months, the employer can still make use of the rapid procedure for acquiring a labour card B. Employees who qualify for an exemption from the labour card can apply for a visa from their Belgian embassy on the basis of their relevant documents - employment contract for managers and other employees, guest invitation for scientific researchers, etc.

TEMPORARY ASSIGNMENT

As of May this year, there is a further simplification of the procedure in force for certain foreign employees. For companies registered in another member state of the European Union, it has become easier to second non-EU employees to Belgium for a temporary assignment. A Moroccan employee working for a French construction company in France, for instance, can be seconded to Belgium immediately after his recruitment. In this case, the employee must have a French residency permit valid for at least the duration of the works in Belgium and have an employment contract in France. ■

"Employees in bottle neck professions are given a labour card within five days."

Jos Barbé, Head of Department Migration in Flanders

employees of a Belgian company or division. In the neighbouring countries, the salary barrier is higher. But that is not the only advantageous condition. Since 2003, expats can acquire a labour card for any profession. That is not the case in most European countries." Belgium is, moreover, the fastest country when it comes to issuing worker's permits and labour cards. Barbé: "On aver-

and file all the forms which include an application form, the employment contract, degree and medical certificate, required to determine the applicant's fitness for work. In the case of applications for extensions, salary slips are also requested to ensure that the engagement in question has been carried out correctly."

The flexibility of the procedure is

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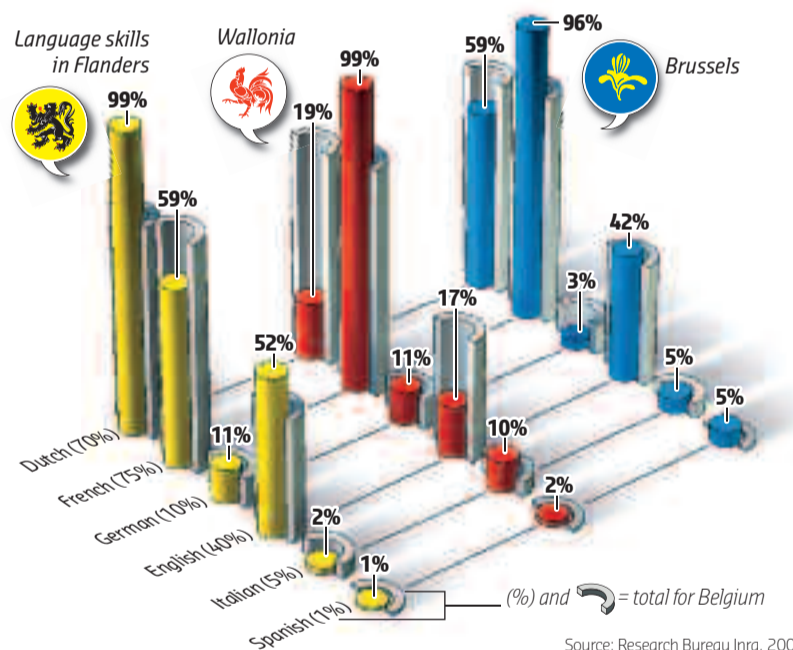
LANGUAGE SKILLS

1 in 2 Belgians speak 3 'foreign' languages

Belgians are proud of their language skills. Three quarters of the population speak at least one foreign language. A slightly smaller percentage can express themselves fluently in at least two foreign languages. Handy, if you are coming to Belgium to live and work.

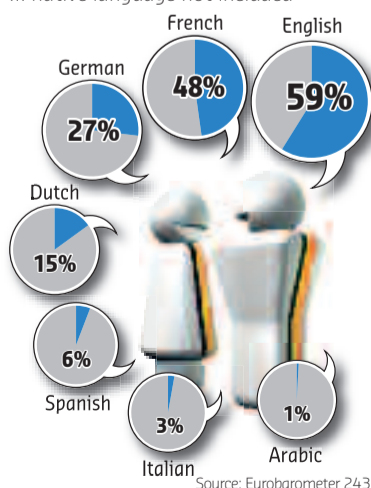
FLEMISH SPEAK BETTER ENGLISH THAN WALLOONS

The Belgians' language skills differ depending on the region. From a survey conducted by the research bureau Inra on behalf of the European Commission, it appears that 59% of Flemish speak French and 52% of them speak English. Among the Walloons, only 19% speak Dutch and 17% English. General language skills in Brussels, however, are closer to those of Flanders.



HOW MANY BELGIANS SPEAK...

... native language not included



As inhabitants of a small country with no fewer than three official state languages (Dutch, French and German), Belgians are driven by necessity to demonstrate better language skills than inhabitants of their larger neighbours. According to the Eurobarometer of February 2006 which included a survey of language skills of inhabitants of the European Union, 74% of the Belgian population speaks at least one 'foreign' language. The European average is 56%. 67% of Belgians speak at least two foreign languages, which is the official objective of the European Union for every European inhabitant. In that regard, Belgium is in fifth place in Europe. 53% of Belgians even claim to speak three foreign languages. Note: these figures represent what the inhabitants themselves think about their language skills, which

does not always correspond with reality. It is worth noting that in the European Union, there are seven countries where the majority of the population does not speak a single foreign language (Ireland, Great Britain, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Spain and Romania).

Only 26% of Belgians do not speak a single foreign language.

In Belgium, only 26% of the population does not speak a single foreign language. The survey also reveals that 56% of the inhabitants of Belgium speak Dutch as their mother tongue, 38% are French-speaking, 0.4% German and 8% other languages. (Because more than one answer to the question was possible, the total is slightly above 100%.) ■

6

PARTNERS
AT WORKA job for partners
within 17 weeksNet Expat helps
partners to find a job

"On average, around 40% of the partners of expats seek employment in their new country of residence," says Alain Verstandig from Net Expat, a support bureau that works for companies with expatriate employees. Net Expat helps partners compile a realistic 'partner professional plan', tests the partner's skills and knowledge, inquires into personal objectives, provides specific training for applying for jobs, negotiating and networking and helps with job selection on the local market.

"Net Expat finds work for 82% of such partners within a period of 17 weeks. In Belgium, the opportunities are somewhat broader than in most other countries because English is usually sufficient." There are also advantages for partners of expats who seek employment: they sometimes have a very specific profile that is in demand among certain companies. "The wife of an Indian expat, for instance, was hired by a multinational in order to develop the Indian market. In any case, the jobs partners of expats are given, are often project-related, usually for a period of two to three years. They are often jobs at management level – from junior manager to higher – because they are typically well qualified."

French native Stéphan Boerhof came to Belgium a year ago in the wake of her Dutch husband. Originally against her better judgement because she thought Belgium was grey and boring. But after one year, she has a wholly different outlook on things. Thanks to the flexible labour card for partners of expats, she had the chance to give her career a whole new direction.

French native Stéphan Boerhof ended up in Belgium last year. "My husband works for Nissan Europe and was offered a management position in Antwerp. I worked in the communications department of the same company but I was playing with the idea of doing something different for a long time. I had a university degree in Applied Languages but I was most interested in beauty. Immediately after arriving in Belgium, I followed a course to become a beauty specialist. Net Expat then helped me find a new job. I now work at a beauty institute in Leuven but from October I will manage a spa."

Partners of expats in Belgium can get a labour card for any profession. Were you attracted to the idea of coming to Belgium?

Stéphan Boerhof: "Absolutely not. I had already come to Brussels a couple of times because of my job at Nissan and I didn't like it at all. I thought Brussels was dirty, old-fashioned and depressing. Since then, however, my experience has been completely different. I have a lot to thank Belgium for. In France I may never have found the motivation to change track professionally. I wanted to find a new job within a year and I've succeeded."

Did your husband's company help you find work?

"Yes. They put me in touch with Net Expat which helped me find a job in Belgium. Financially, that was extremely helpful. For large companies, it is

fairly common practice to help partners find a job. Only normal, in my opinion, because the partner's ability to find work is a determining factor in the success of the expat adventure. In the end, it's quite

"You can get far with English here."

French native Stéphan Boerhof followed her husband to Belgium

a sacrifice: you leave everything behind for your husband and your husband's company. It's only right that there is something in return."

You speak English, French and Dutch. With those skills you could probably have found work easily without Net Expat?

"Yes, but I was looking for a very specific job in the beauty sector which isn't that easy. Moreover, there are a whole host of issues you're not aware of as a foreigner: you don't know how best to write an application letter, what you can expect at a job interview, how to compile a CV, etc."

Is it easy to find work as a partner of an expat?

"Relatively easy, especially if you're looking in and around Brussels. My experience is that you can get far with English here. In the Netherlands, however, you really do have to speak Dutch." ■





French native Stéphan Boerhof followed her husband to Belgium:
 "It is easy to find work here, especially if you are looking in and around Brussels."

7

TAXES

Belgian taxes attractive for expats

In terms of taxation, Belgium does not quite stand out from other countries from an international perspective. However, for foreign managers, scientific researchers and specialized personnel, there are attractive conditions.

Belgium is not necessarily so expensive when it comes to taxes, even though international comparisons paint a different picture. Foreign managers seconded to Belgium can, for example, profit from special tax conditions. "Belgium regards managers and specialized personnel who are seconded to Belgium on a temporary basis as non-residents, even if they actually live here", explains attorney Luc Vanheeswijck, specialized in taxation for foreign managers. "As a result, they are not taxed in Belgium on income from capital held abroad nor on inco-



>

me earned from work done outside Belgium. They are only taxed on income paid for work carried out in Belgium, at the same rate as regular Belgian residents. It is normally the case that everyone who resides in Belgium is taxed on their global income." In addition, Belgium offers the advantage, compared with other countries, that the term 'temporary' is not further specified in the legislation. Contrary to the Netherlands, for instance, where the temporary nature of the secondment is limited to five years. "This legislation, moreover, not only applies to managers but also to personnel who cannot easily be hired in Belgium. In such cases, the employer must provide evidence that this condition has been met. Alongside managers and specialized personnel, the legislation applies to directors and scientific researchers."

The special tax conditions also have another important benefit, explains Luc Vanheeswijck. "It is assumed that working in Belgium entails certain extra costs. A part of these costs are borne by the

"Managers, scientists and specialists are only taxed on work carried out in Belgium."

Luc Vanheeswijck, an attorney specialized in taxation for foreign managers

employer, the so-called 'costs inherent to the employer'. This part of the costs is also considered tax-exempt. It includes such costs as education, annual travel to the country of origin, the difference in housing costs between both countries, the difference in cost of living and the difference in taxation rates. The latter is highly significant. If you come from a country where the rate of income tax is 35% and you go to a country where it is 50%, then you pay 15% more tax. Employers may reimburse the employee this difference free of tax."

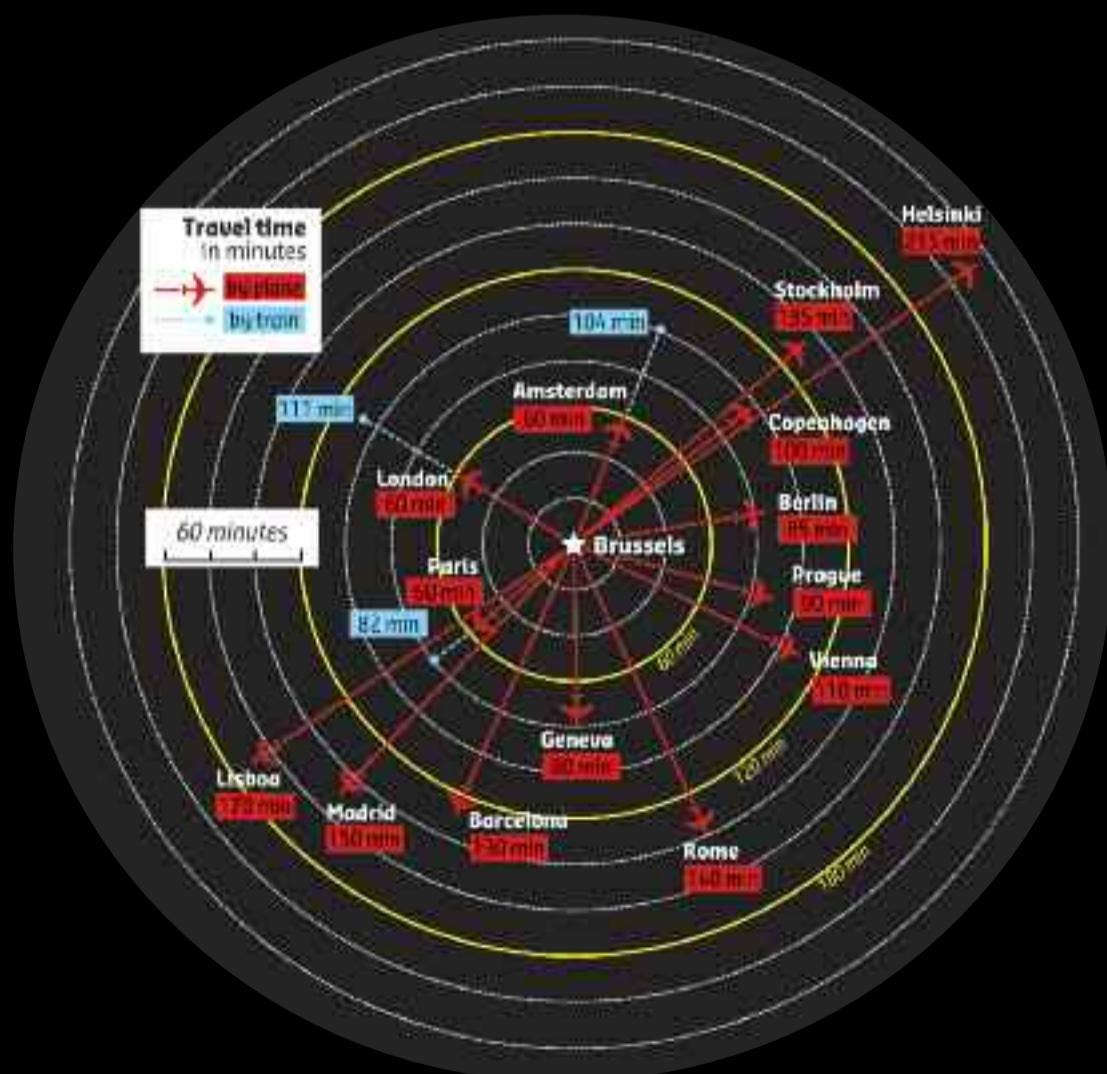
"But, there is a but: the amount of 'costs inherent to the employer' is not unlimited," says Vanheeswijck. "The legislation makes a distinction between one-off costs such as relocation costs, furnishing costs, etc. where there is no limit. There is, however, a cap placed on the tax-exempt reimbursement of costs such as housing and general living costs. The maximum amount is 11 250 euro, with the exception of education costs which are unlimited. There is also a special rule for supervising employees of audit and coordination offices (headquarters) and scientific research centres or laboratories: for them the limit is 29 750 euro." ■

To London, Paris and Amsterdam in no time

From Belgium, the rest of Europe is within easy reach. Belgium's location is the country's biggest single asset.

Belgium is located in one of the most densely populated and most commercial regions of the world. It is an integral part of the 'Blue Banana' megalopolis (also known as the 'Grande Région'), a multinational European metropolis of more than 85 million inhabitants constituting the centre of Europe in terms of economy, innovation and power. The region spans from Liverpool via

London and Belgium across to the German Ruhr region and down to the north of Italy. The megalopolis represents two thirds of Europe's GDP. The region contains four of the world's ten largest airports (London Heathrow, Charles de Gaulle Paris, Frankfurt am Main and Amsterdam-Schiphol). It also plays host to many international institutions such as the International Court of Justice



8

LOCATION

(The Hague), the capital of the EU (Brussels), the headquarters of the European Central Bank (Frankfurt am Main) and the headquarters of Europol (The Hague). This multinational region is also renowned for its international culture, entertainment and fashion.

From Belgium, all major cities in the region are within easy reach by air or high speed train. The various HST lines whisk you from Brussels

The various HST lines whisk you from Brussels to Paris, London and Amsterdam in just 1h22, 1h51 and 2h44 respectively.

to Paris, London and Amsterdam in just 1h22, 1h51 and 2h44 respectively. Two large airports (Brussels-Zaventem and Brussels South (Charleroi)) and a number of smal-

ler airports (Liege, Deurne and Ostend) account for a large number of air connections. Brussels Airport (Zaventem) has scored the highest accolades in Europe for punctuality for several years running (source: Association of European Airlines).

Belgium's prime location is combined with highly developed transport infrastructure from ports and railways to waterways and motorways. It has an extensive road network, the second densest in Europe. A large number of multinationals have a European Logistics Distribution Centre (ELD) in Belgium as a result of the location and local logistics expertise.

According to figures of the Federal Department for Mobility and Transport, there were more than 450 ELDs in Belgium in 2006. ■

9

EDUCATION

Belgium, where international schools feel at home

Belgium plays host to a large number of international schools. This is thanks to the presence of several international institutions and multinationals which account for the capital's largely international community. Of the approximately 35 international schools and educational institutions across the country, no fewer than 27 schools, colleges and universities are located in Brussels. The lion's share of these is aimed at children and teenagers between 3 and 18 years (pre-school, primary and secondary education). The language of instruction in the majority of the schools is English. Some schools also offer the opportunity for smaller groups to follow classes in other languages (German, Spanish, Portuguese,

etc.). In addition, there are specific schools for specific nationalities such as the Japanese School of Brussels, the Scandinavian School of Brussels, the Lycée Français Jean Monnet, the British School of Brussels, the Brussels American School and the Internationale Deutsche Schule. The latter offer curricula which follow that of the country of origin. None of these international schools is subsidized by the Belgian government, with the exception of the Ecole Internationale Le Verseau in Bierges (in Waver, near Brussels). This means that the yearly tuition fees at these schools can be fairly high, depending on the age of the student (on average between 5,000 euro and 20,000 euro). >

70 nationalities at the desks of the International School of Brussels

The International School of Brussels, nestled on the edge of the capital, is one of the largest and oldest international schools in Belgium. Under the motto 'Everyone included, everyone challenged, everyone successful', the private school can lay claim to some 70 different nationalities under its wing.

The International School of Brussels (ISB) is proud of its location. Understandably so because it lies within the borders of the former hunting grounds and the accompanying castle in the green surrounds of Watermaal-Bosvoorde. ISB, aimed at children and teenagers between 2.5 and 18 years of age, used to be primarily based on American curricula. "The ISB was founded in 1951 by Americans who wanted to stay in Europe after the war", explains the school's principal Kevin Bartlett. "The approach is different now, although there are still traces

of those American roots: we are the only international school in Belgium that plays American Football and we have a very well-developed sports programme. Fielding some 60 teams, the ISB also has the largest athletics programme of all international schools in Europe. We also enjoy partnerships with other institutions such as Harvard University."

The school is primarily aimed at children of employees and managers from the international corporate world but also for children of non-EU diplomats. European diplomats

typically make use of the European School which is virtually free of charge. At the beginning of the new school year, ISB had a total of 1500 pupils. Approximately one quarter of that figure is American. "Their parents are employees of American companies based in Brussels. Apart from a growing number of Asian pupils, the number of Belgian, Dutch and French pupils is also on the rise. Belgian children come here because they wish to follow an international education or because they want to further their studies or work abroad. In any case,

our doors are open to everyone, including the handicapped and those with learning difficulties."

The International School of Brussels has made technology one of its chief weapons. The school has been transformed into a WiFi zone and all students are equipped with a tablet pc. "They've been given even newer models than we have", laughs Bartlett. "They are a handy way for us to communicate with the students and it gives them a head start in working with computers."



Among the 1,500 pupils of ISB is the 17 year old Nicole Reichert from Brazil. She lives in Kraainem with her parents for three and a half years now. Her father works for the Belgian-Brazilian brewing company, Inbev. In the

“I wanted to come here because of the extensive sport programme and because I can speak Portuguese here.”

17-year old Brazilian, Nicole Reichert. Her father works for Inbev.

beginning it was very difficult. But in an international school like this it's easier to find your feet.”

Fellow student, Billy Muirhead (16) from the USA: “You end up in an international group here which broadens your perspective on things. That's something I'll always carry with me.” ■

10

**SOCIAL
SECURITY**

Social security: mainly the employer pays

Belgium offers very high standards of healthcare, which foreign employees can enjoy to the full. Or at least in some cases.

Belgian legislation distinguishes two categories of foreign employees: seconded employees, who come to Belgium on a temporary basis, remain in the employ of the company in the country of origin and who remain insured there and expatriate employees who work for the Belgian division of a company. “Employees of the latter category have a right to Belgian social security. They pay social security contributions like all Belgian employees and have full access to the benefits of the Belgian healthcare system”, says Bruno De Pauw of the International Agreements directorate of the National Office for Social Security.

“In principle, foreign employees of the first category, namely seconded employees with a temporary assignment do not have access to Belgian social security. An exception to this are employees originating from one of the countries of the European Economic Zone (the European Union of 27 countries plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and

Switzerland). These employees combine the two systems: they pay contributions in their homeland but have access to the necessary medical care in Belgium. Because Belgium has a very well developed healthcare system, this is often a very advantageous situation for employees. They pay the lower contributions of their home country but enjoy the broad coverage of the Belgian system.”

Seconded employees from outside the EU fall, in principle, outside the safety net of the Belgian healthcare system. In principle, that is, because there are bilateral agreements between Belgium and certain countries outside the EU which, among others, cover healthcare. “There are bilateral agreements with countries with which Belgium has good economic relations and where there is a large volume of employee movements, such as the United States. However, not all bilateral agreements include rules relating to healthcare.” Where there is no bilateral

The International School of Brussels has made technology one of its chief weapons. The school has been transformed into a WiFi zone and all students are equipped with a tablet pc.



> agreement or the bilateral agreement does not include a section on medical costs, then the national legislation of the two countries concerned will apply. "As a foreign employee in Belgium, in that case, you qualify for healthcare or a child benefit if you work for a Belgian employer or a Belgian operational division of a foreign company. Expats who fall outside that arrangement usually have private insurance."

FULL COVERAGE

How good is the Belgian healthcare system compared with other countries? That question is difficult to answer. The various systems for social security differ markedly from one another and are therefore difficult to compare. The financial contributions for social security, however, can be compared. "In Europe, we are the second most expensive after France. Neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands and Germany are a little cheaper, Luxembourg is a lot cheaper. On the other hand, however, you get a much more comprehensive coverage in Belgium of, for instance, medical costs compared with other countries. The cost of the Belgian healthcare system, moreover, is mainly for the employer's account. In Belgium, employees pay just 13.07% of their salary in social security contributions, which is very little compared with other countries.

"Belgium's child benefit is the second highest in Europe."

Bruno De Pauw from the International Agreements Directorate of the National Office for Social Security

Employers pay much higher social security contributions, more than 30%. In many cases, it is thus more expensive for companies to expatriate employees to Belgium."

The minimum average reimbursement rate of Belgian public medical insurance is approximately 75%. "There are countries where the average reimbursement amount is higher; however Belgium affords considerable liberties in comparison with other countries: you can go to the doctor, health benefit fund, hospital, etc. of your choice. Such freedom of choice is only possible in other countries via private insurance schemes." The Belgian system, in addition, is very generous when it comes to child benefits. "In Europe, we are in that respect at the second highest level. Children following higher education continue to qualify for child benefit until the age of 25. In other countries, the upper age limit is 18 years. Also unique in Belgium: the more children you have, the higher the allowance." ■

Belgium is bubbling



CULTURE

Belgium is a unique country for culture fans. Bart Van der Hertten from the Flemish Department for Culture, Youth, Sport and Media: "For foreigners it is always remarkable that you can see an international quality production here almost every day and that at a very low price. The government provides considerable subsidies for the cultural sector. I do not have the exact figures at hand, but compared with the situation abroad, Belgium scores well in terms of ticket prices. The performances on offer are also top quality. It is Flemish Government policy to attract the better foreign productions to Flanders as well. All the major art institutions in Flanders have an explicitly international charter."

INTERNATIONAL VISION

Toon Berckmoes from CultuurNet Flanders: "Belgium's main advantage is that there are many dif-

ferent large, historical cities within a short distance of each other. The cultural landscape in these cities is also highly attractive. For people interested in dance and theatre, Belgium is a virtual paradise. We are a world centre for dance and in the domain of fashion, lifestyle and shopping, Antwerp also enjoys prime of place." That the international level of the performing arts is not just PR talk can be demonstrated on the basis of a few figures. A study conducted by the Flemish Theatre Institute in 2004 reveals that approximately one third (34%) of all performing arts productions toured internationally. And around half of all Flemish dance productions also included an international play list.

The cultural performances in Flanders and Brussels are extensively catalogued in the Flanders Culture Database. A study conducted in 2006 reveals that the



Belgium is a veritable Mecca for international culture fans. Its myriad of historical cities is home to an equally diverse array of top class dance, theatre, film and music.

with culture

It is Flemish Government policy to attract the better foreign productions to Flanders.

largest cultural domains are those of film and music (16% and 20%). In Brussels, the volume of cultural entertainment on offer is immense: almost double the number of events per 1.000

“For foreigners it is always striking that you can see an international quality production here almost every day.”

Bart Van der Hertem from the Flemish Department for Culture, Youth, Sport and Media

inhabitants in comparison with Flanders (196 events in Brussels compared with 108 in Flanders), while Flanders nevertheless offers a

very attractive bill of events. Some Brussels theatres, including the Kaaithater and Royal Flemish Theatre, make a conscious effort to attract foreign visitors by not only offering bilingual productions

(French/Dutch) but also displaying English subtitles for a number of its performances. Also of interest to visitors is the fact that all cinemas in Flanders and most in Brussels screen films in the original language with dual subtitles (French/

Dutch). In Wallonia, non-French speakers are catered for to a much lesser extent in cinemas as the majority of films are dubbed. ■

But ...



Don't forget your umbrella

Let's be honest: the weather is not one of Belgium's main attractions. The statistics are clear: in 2007, the average temperature was 11.5% (day and night), there were 204 days with precipitation and only 23 summery days where the temperature rose above 25°C (Source: Federal Department for Finance, Small Business, Commerce and Energy). In 2007, the mercury rose above 30°C on but two occasions. Last year's data is fairly representative of the weather in Belgium in recent years. The mild climate is normally characterized by fresh and humid summers and relatively mild and wet winters. There may be slight improvements on the horizon for the past two decades have seen changes to Belgium's typical weather patterns according to a study of the Royal Meteorological Institute. The average temperature between 1988 and 2007 is two degrees Centigrade higher than the period 1833-1909. The average temperature over the past two decades was 10.8°C. Since 1988, Belgium has apparently been on the receiving end of more sun but also less wind compared with the earlier period. Less good news: compared with 100 years ago, Belgium is also getting more rain (+12%). The rise in precipitation is primarily felt during winter (+25%) and to a lesser extent in the summer (+8%). Conclusion: don't forget to pack an umbrella if you come to Belgium. ■

Do these 11 reasons seduce you for a career in Belgium? Have your say:

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