



Belgium 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Burglary; Religious Terrorism; Riots/Civil Unrest; Religious Violence; Drug Trafficking; Fraud; Financial Security; Counterfeiting

Europe > Belgium; Europe > Belgium > Antwerp; Europe > Belgium > Brussels

3/16/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Belgium is a highly developed European country with a modern economy and excellent infrastructure.

Post Crime Rating: Low

Crime Threats

Belgium remains relatively free of violent crime, but low-level street crime is very common. Muggings, purse snatchings, and pickpocketing occur frequently, particularly in the major cities. Thieves often loiter in transportation hubs like the Metro (subway) and train stations to take advantage of disoriented or distracted travelers. One common trick is for the thief to ask you for directions while an accomplice steals your luggage. Thieves typically seek small, high-value items (smart phones, MP3 players).

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Another growing problem, especially in Brussels, is theft from both moving and parked vehicles. There has been an increase in smash-and-grab incidents.

Additionally, there has been an increase in home burglaries and residential property theft.

Cybersecurity Issues

Belgium has excellent Internet services, which makes using social media very easy and convenient.

Other Areas of Concern

In Brussels, pickpocketing, purse snatching, and theft of light luggage/laptops are common at the three major train stations: the North Station (Noordstation or Gare du Nord); the Central Station (Centraal Station or Gare Central); and especially the South Station (Zuidstation or Gare du Midi, the primary international train hub). Small groups of young men sometimes prey on unwary tourists, usually at night and often in Metro stations in Brussels.

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Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

You may encounter road conditions that differ significantly from those in the U.S. Belgium's road network is generally well-built and maintained, but you may encounter potholes, even on principal roads. Sufficient lighting exists on major highways and cities, but on rural roads, it is often insufficient or nonexistent. Belgian rules for right-of-way differ from those in the U.S., and new drivers should thoroughly understand these rules before driving. For instance, traffic coming from the right generally has priority at uncontrolled intersections and roundabouts, even if coming from a smaller street.

The maximum speed limit on highways is 120 kilometers (72 mph) but is not always posted. The maximum speed in urban areas is normally between 50 km and 70 km (30-52 mph); however, in the Brussels city limits, many parts are 30 km per hour. While Belgian authorities strictly enforce speed limits, many Belgians still drive significantly faster than the posted limit. Claiming ignorance may not prevent you from getting a significant fine for speeding, and your vehicle may be impounded if you cannot pay the fine on the spot. Belgium authorities have placed numerous fixed photo-speeding cameras around the city and utilize mobile photo-speed camera systems throughout the city and on highways.

Belgian police conduct breath analysis checks for alcohol use, particularly at night and during major holidays. The legal limit for operating a motor vehicle is .05 percent blood alcohol content.

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Roadside assistance and information on road conditions are available in English from Touring Mobilis, Tel: 02 286-3040. Belgian police will also provide information on road conditions, Tel: 02-642-6666. Emergency services are efficient and responsive. For police emergencies, dial 101 within Belgium. For all other emergencies, dial 112.

Do not leave your valuables in plain sight in a vehicle. Thieves will sometimes position themselves at traffic lights to scan for valuables in stopped cars. If they see a purse or other valuable item, they break the window and steal the item before you have time to react. Always drive with your windows up and doors locked. Whenever possible, park your car in secure areas or parking garages.

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation is excellent in most parts of Belgium and used by much of the population. Inter-city trains, metro trains, trams, buses, and taxis are utilized to make moving around the country very easy. Labor strikes or unrest can cause delays or cancellations of services for several days at a time.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Belgian airports are excellent and provide departure points to all over Europe. Airline travel

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to/from Belgium is considered safe and reliable.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: High

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

- On May 24, 2014, a terrorist attack at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels left four people dead.
- On January 15, 2015, Belgian counter-terrorist units foiled what was described as an imminent terror attack, when they killed two gunmen and wounded another in a shootout in Verviers, near the German border.
- On August 21, 2015, on a Thalys train from Amsterdam to Paris, a terrorist attack was thwarted when an armed gunman was subdued by passengers. The armed gunman boarded the train as it made a stop at Gare Midi in Brussels.
- In the days right after the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, Belgian authorities raised their terror alert level throughout the country to Level 3 (probable attack) and to Level 4 (imminent attack) for the Brussels Capitol Region. This was only the second time it has been raised to Level 4 since World War II. As part of the ongoing investigation into the Paris terror attacks, it was revealed that several of the terrorists originated from Belgium and potentially conducted the planning in Brussels.

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As with other countries in the Schengen area, Belgium maintains open borders with its neighbors, allowing the possibility of terrorist operatives entering/exiting the country with anonymity. Belgian law enforcement and security officials, in close cooperation with neighboring countries, maintain an aggressive and effective anti-terrorism program.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

In 2015, there has been no openly anti-American/anti-Western sentiment displayed by large groups or organizations. There were only a small number of incidents of social media postings that displayed anti-Western statements.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

Prior police approval is required for all public demonstrations, and police are present to ensure adequate security for participants and passers-by. Nonetheless, spontaneous

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demonstrations do take place in response to world events or local developments. Even demonstrations that are meant to be peaceful can become violent and unpredictable; you should avoid them if at all possible. In general, larger public demonstrations are announced on the Demonstration Notices page on the U.S. Embassy Brussels website.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

While not widespread and frequent, there have been incidents of religious violence. Anti-Semitic acts (assaults, harassment, graffiti on public buildings, comments on websites and Internet forums) and threats increased compared to 2013/14. On February 9, two men physically assaulted a young Jewish man who was wearing a yarmulke. In July, the chairman of a trade union in the European Commission (EC) verbally insulted and violently assaulted another EC official at a café in Brussels in the belief that she was Jewish.

Additionally, there were increased reported incidents of hate speech and anti-Muslim graffiti due to the increase in Muslim migrants seeking asylum in Belgium. After the November Paris terrorist attacks, there were even more reports of anti-Muslim sentiment and incidents of harassments and assault.

Post-specific Concerns

Personnel-Background Concerns

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Individuals with disabilities may find accessibility and accommodation very different from what you find in the U.S. Although Belgian law requires that any new building with public or community space be accessible for persons with disabilities, many existing buildings and the public transportation systems are less adapted. General information on the accessibility of tourist accommodations, public transportation, museums, etc. can be found on the Belgian Tourist Office's website.

Drug-related Crimes

While not a major crime problem, drugs are common and available. There have been cases of people being drugged at nightclubs.

Police Response

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

The police agencies are considered very good and responsive. All reports of crime are taken seriously, and local police do their best to investigate and resolve criminal cases.

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While you are traveling in Belgium, you are subject to all local laws. Foreign laws and legal systems can be vastly different than our own, and criminal penalties will vary from country to country. If you break local laws, your U.S. passport will not help you avoid arrest or prosecution. Persons violating Belgian laws, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested, or imprisoned. Penalties for possessing, using, or trafficking in illegal drugs in Belgium are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. There are also some things that might be legal in the country you visit, but still illegal in the U.S.

Belgian law requires that everyone carry official identification at all times. This ID must be displayed upon request to any Belgian police official. U.S. citizens who are not residents will need to present their U.S. passport or valid driver's license.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Based on the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, bilateral agreements, and customary international law, if you are arrested, you have the right to request that the police, prison officials, or other authorities alert the U.S. Embassy of your arrest and to have communications from you forwarded to the Embassy. To ensure that the U.S. is aware of your circumstances, request that the police and prison officials notify the U.S. Embassy as soon as you are arrested or detained.

Crime Victim Assistance

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If you or someone you know becomes the victim of a crime, you should contact the local police and the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. The local emergency line is 101 for police assistance. For all other emergencies, please dial 112.

The U.S. Embassy can assist with the following:

Replace a stolen passport;

Help you find appropriate medical care if you are the victim of a violent crime (assault, rape);

Put you in contact with the appropriate police authorities and assist in contacting family members or friends; and

Help you understand the local criminal justice process and direct you to local attorneys, although the local authorities are responsible for investigating and prosecuting the crime.

The Belgian "Commission for financial assistance to victims of intentional acts of violence" provides financial compensation, under specific circumstances, for victims of crime and for those who have suffered injuries and consequent loss caused by such incidents. The Commission also provides for dependents or immediate family members of homicide victims. For more information, contact the Commission at +32 2 542-7208, +3225427218,+3225427224,+3225427229,or +3225427244; or by e-mail at commission.victimes@just.fgov.be or commissie.slachtoffers@just.fgov.be.

Medical Emergencies

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High-quality medical facilities are widely available. The large university hospitals can handle almost every medical problem. Hospitals may not necessarily have staff members who are fluent in English.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

The Embassy's Consular Section maintains a list of English-speaking doctors, which can be viewed here: <http://belgium.usembassy.gov/service/medical-facilities-doctors.html>.

Recommended Insurance Posture

You cannot assume your insurance will go with you when you travel. It is very important to find out before you leave. You need to ask your insurance company two questions: Does my policy apply when I am out of the U.S. and will it cover emergencies like a trip to a foreign hospital or an evacuation? In many places, doctors and hospitals still expect payment in cash at the time of service. Your regular U.S. health insurance may not cover doctor and/or hospital visits in other countries. If your policy does not go with you when you travel, it is a very good idea to take out another one for your trip. For more information, please see our medical insurance overseas page.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

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For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/belgium>.

OSAC Country Council Information

The Regional Security Office (RSO) at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels is proud to host Belgium's OSAC Country Council. For more information on the Country Council, including the times and locations of meetings, please call +32 2 811-4776 (from the US, dial 011-32-2-811-4776). To reach OSAC's Europe team, please email OSACEUR@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy, Consular Section

25 Boulevard du Régent

B-1000 Brussels

Call-In Hours for Consular Section:

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Mon-Tue-Thu: 2.00 p.m.-4.00 p.m.;

Wed: 8.00 a.m. - 12.00 p.m.;

Fri: 11.00 a.m. - 1.00 p.m.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Telephone: 011-32-2-811-4000 (available 24/7)

Fax: 011-32-2-811-4546

UScitizensbrussels@state.gov

Website: <http://belgium.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

Belgium is a party to the Schengen Agreement. This means that U.S. citizens may enter Belgium for up to 90 days for tourist or business purposes without a visa. Your passport should be valid for at least three (3) months beyond the period of stay. You need sufficient funds and a return airline ticket. For additional details about travel into and within Schengen countries, please see our Schengen fact sheet. Visit the Embassy of Belgium website for the most current visa information. If you need additional information about entry requirements, including visas for employment or study in Belgium, you can contact the Embassy of Belgium

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at 3330 Garfield Street NW, Washington, DC 20008, tel (202) 333-6900, fax (202) 338-4960 or one of the Belgian Consulates General in Atlanta, Los Angeles, or New York. Detailed contact information can be found on the Embassy of Belgium website.

Non-EU citizens staying in a private residence must register with local Commune authorities within three days of arrival. You must request any change in visa or resident status through Commune authorities. You must complete any such request prior to the expiration of the current status. You should note that given the substantial requirements to change status, it is nearly impossible to do so within the 90 days permitted to remain in Belgium without a visa under the Visa Waiver Program.

Since April 1, 2007, non-Belgian employees and self-employed persons or their employees who carry out short-term assignments in Belgium must declare these activities in advance. This mandatory "Limosa" declaration applies to: (1) Employees and apprentices who come to Belgium to execute certain temporary work and who, because of the nature of their short term assignment, are not subject to the Belgian social security system; (2) Self-employed individuals and self-employed apprentices who come to work in Belgium temporarily, irrespective of whether they are subject to the Belgian social security system.

If you are going to live in or visit Belgium, please take the time to tell our Embassy about your trip. By registering with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), we can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements, and help your friends and family get in touch with you in an emergency.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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Scams

Scammers have victimized U.S. citizens in Belgium. A common scam involves an Internet friend or partner who is reported to have been detained by immigration authorities in Belgium en route to the U.S. and will not be released unless funds are paid to the “traveler” for Belgian customs fees. In every case, these reports have been determined to be confidence schemes. Several U.S. citizens have lost thousands of dollars in such scams. Funds transferred in response to such offers can rarely be recovered. Information on fraud schemes can be found on the Department of State's International Financial Scams website. The point of the scam is to make the target believe that the message is coming from Belgium when it is really coming from another country. U.S. citizens in the U.S. who have been victimized by Internet crime should report it to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center. U.S. citizens in Belgium who have been victimized should contact the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels (Tel 011-32-2-811-4057). Depending on the circumstances, the Regional Security Office can then direct you to the appropriate Belgian, U.S., or international law enforcement agency.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

You should always be watchful and aware of your surroundings. Be alert and pay attention to what the local news media have to say about current local events.

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While most monetary transactions are available (cash, credit cards); U.S. money orders cannot be negotiated. Personal checks may only be cleared through a bank at which a person holds an account, and clearance can take two to four weeks. Banks and exchange facilities that are not equipped with devices to identify counterfeit currency may refuse U.S. dollar denominations of \$50 and \$100. Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) are widespread and accept most U.S. ATM cards for fund withdrawals. If you want to purchase Euros, you are likely to find a more favorable exchange rate at banks than at money exchange facilities located at tourist locations, train stations, and airports.

We advise you to pay particularly close attention to your personal belongings when in Metro and train stations. Thieves watch for people who put their luggage down and are inattentive for even a moment. It is a good idea to hold onto your hand luggage and not to place carry-on luggage on overhead racks in trains.

You should carry only a minimum amount of cash, credit cards, and necessary personal identification. We advise U.S. citizens to avoid wearing expensive jewelry and watches.

Do not buy counterfeit and pirated goods, even if they are widely available.

If residing in Belgium, utilizing a home alarm system is extremely beneficial, especially if you travel frequently. Ensure that you lock your windows and doors while not at home, even if you are just going out for 10 minutes. While staying at hotels or small inns, utilize the in-room safe for your valuables and if the room does not have one, take valuables with you or ask the front desk to lock the items in the hotel safe.

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As with any usage of the Internet, one should practice good cybersecurity measures. While using public wi-fi, protect passwords and be cognizant of people around you who may be “shoulder-surfing,” or trying to obtain your personal information.

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