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# BEAUTIFUL BRUSSELS

The historic capital of Belgium is a treasure trove of culture. If a visit there beckons, let The Arts Society Brussels be your guide

ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL A HILL

Historians differ as to when Brussels was founded. The official date is 979, but the city's roots could lie in the construction of a chapel in the seventh century – a commission by the Bishop of Cambrai. Around that a small settlement grew called Broeksele, meaning 'settlement in the swamp'. Today Brussels is a city like nowhere else. It's the base of the European Union and NATO; it's also home to outstanding museums and galleries. There are swathes of green spaces and central boulevards, all created when King Leopold II (1835–1909) incorporated outlying villages into the city. He also added features such as a Chinese Pavilion (housing porcelain, paintings and more) and a Japanese Tower. Both currently under renovation, they make – along with the Museum of Japanese Art – the 'Museums of the Far East'. The city is also famed for its Art Nouveau buildings, with some 1,000 examples. In addition, many well-known figures were born here. Among them was Georges Rémi, known as Hergé, the creator of Tintin, actress Audrey Hepburn and singer Jacques Brel, famous for the enduring 1959 hit *Ne Me Quitte Pas*. If you're planning a visit, start at the City Hall on La Grand-Place and pick up your trail guides; these, below, are just some of the sights we think you shouldn't miss. 📍

## UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

La Grand-Place itself is a World Heritage Site, described as 'an architectural jewel' of Gothic and Baroque beauty. The groundbreaking Stoclet House, built by the Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann in 1905 (and housing work by Gustav Klimt), is one of the top buildings of the Vienna Secession. And the four Art Nouveau town houses Hôtel Tassel, Hôtel Solvay, Hôtel van Eetvelde and Maison & Atelier Horta are all on the World Heritage Sites list.

## STYLISH SHOPPING

Close to La Grand-Place, Les Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert is one of the oldest – and most beautiful – shopping arcades in Europe. Opened in 1847 as the world's first such arcade, you'll find shops, a theatre, restaurants, cafés and apartments – and excellent chocolates – all under one roof. Galerie Ravenstein, in contrast, was built between 1954 and 1958 with some 80 shops and is an impressive example of the International style of architecture.

## ART NOUVEAU HIGHLIGHTS

The architect Victor Horta's 1893 commission for a house for industrialist Émile Tassel is considered the first fully recognised example of Art Nouveau architecture. Among the many Art Nouveau highlights in the city, see the Horta Museum ([hortamuseum.be](http://hortamuseum.be)), which was his private home and studio. The Old England building is another flamboyant Art Nouveau structure, originally a department store designed by Paul Saintenoy and now home to the Musical Instruments Museum ([mim.be](http://mim.be)). Don't miss, too, Maison Cauchie, considered one of the most beautiful houses in the style, built in 1905 by architect and decorator Paul Cauchie ([cauchie.be](http://cauchie.be)). And we must mention our Society's cultural partner, Foundation Frison Horta ([foundation-frison-horta.be](http://foundation-frison-horta.be)), in another fine Horta building.

## TOP MUSEUMS

The Comics Art Museum ([comicscenter.net](http://comicscenter.net)) occupies a former department store by Horta and is described as 'a world full of comics'. Brussels has a strong comic strip heritage; make sure you take in the comic strip trail, comprising 56 spectacular murals. The latest is *Jardin aux Fleurs - Bloemenhof* ('Flower Garden'). The Magritte Museum ([musee-magritte-museum.be](http://musee-magritte-museum.be)) lies in an impressive neoclassical building and holds the world's largest collection of works by the Surrealist René Magritte. The Wiertz Museum is an atmospheric

site dedicated to the 19th-century Belgian Romantic artist Antoine Wiertz and is, like the Magritte Museum, part of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium ([fine-arts-museum.be](http://fine-arts-museum.be)). Take time to visit the Parc du Cinquantenaire, a large public park with buildings commissioned under the patronage of King Leopold II for the 1880 *National Exhibition*. Here, in the northern half, you'll find the Royal Military Museum ([klm-mra.be](http://klm-mra.be)) and, towards the southern half, the Art and History Museum ([artandhistory.museum](http://artandhistory.museum)). The latter even includes The Heart Museum, a collection of objects in the form of, or decorated with, a heart, owned by the late cardiologist Noubar Boyadjian. In addition see Autoworld – a great vintage car museum ([autoworld.be](http://autoworld.be)). We also recommend the Van Buuren Museum and Gardens in Uccle – a *tour de force* of Art Deco architecture filled with 16th- to 20th-century art and furniture. The gardens are a work of landscape art ([museumvanbuuren.be](http://museumvanbuuren.be)).

## WONDERFUL WALKS

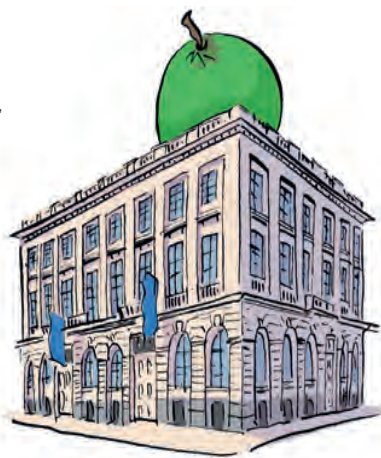
Parc d'Egmont is one of the city's loveliest but lesser-known parks, once the grounds of a palace. Look out for the statue of Peter Pan and have tea in the former Orangery. One of the best wild walks is at Abbaye du Rouge-Cloître, the site of an important abbey until the close of the 19th century.

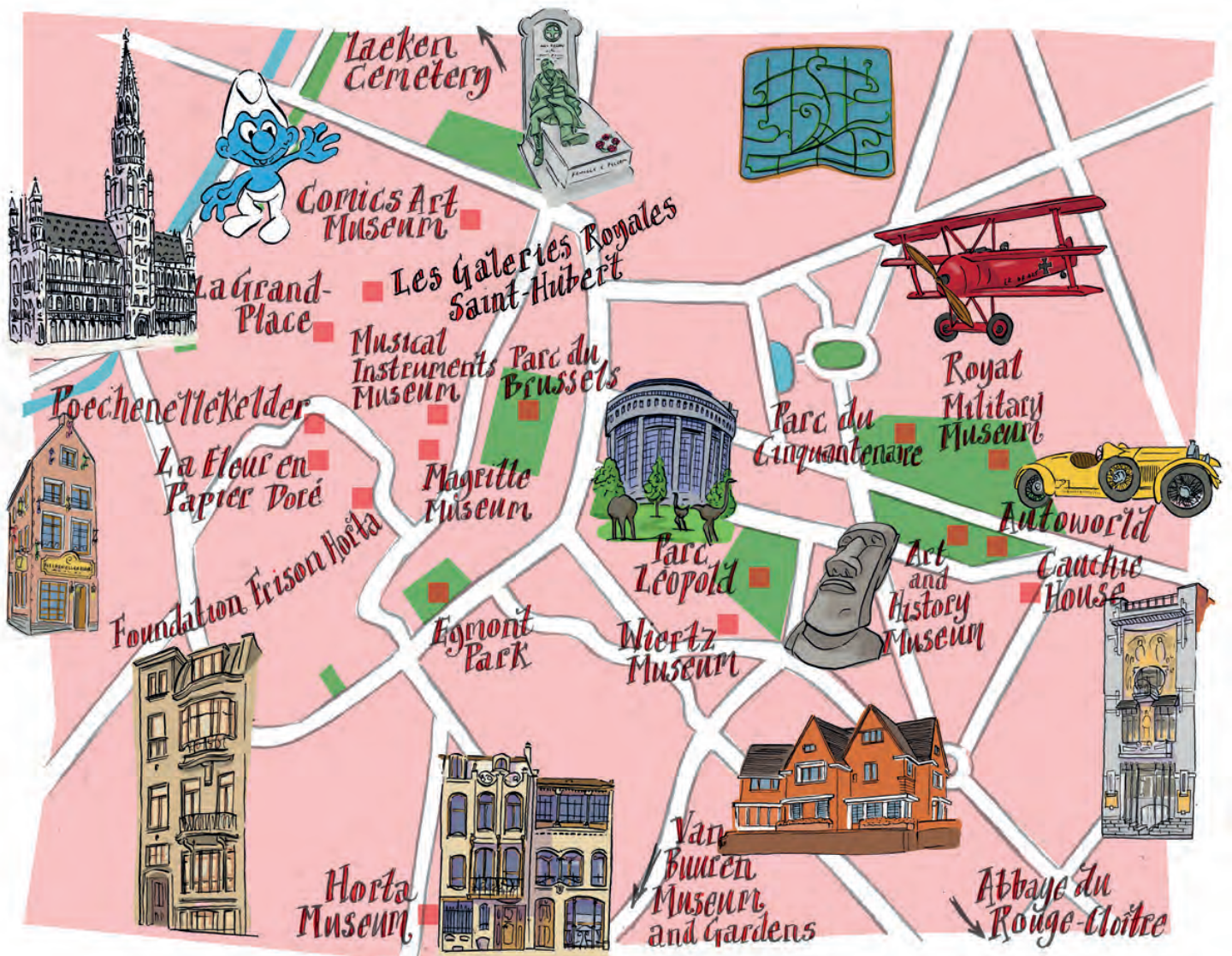
## A SHOW TO NOTE

See art from over 130 galleries from 14 countries at the *BRAFA Art Fair*, 26 January–2 February 2025; [brafa.art](http://brafa.art)

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Three sections of the Berlin Wall are to be found in the city, at Parc Léopold, the European Parliament and the Berlaymont building.
- Belgian chocolate is renowned worldwide; the country produces over 220,000 tons a year and Brussels Airport is the world's largest purveyor of chocolate.





- There is an easy-to-miss plaque dedicated to Charlotte Brontë on the Rue Baron Horta. It marks the school Charlotte and sister Emily attended from 1842–43 ([thebrusselsbrontegroup.org](http://thebrusselsbrontegroup.org)).
- Laeken Cemetery (**laeken.brussels**) is known as the Belgian Père Lachaise, after Paris's famous cemetery, being the burial place of the rich and famous. Among the sights is a bronze version of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*.
- More evidence of Rodin's influence and works lie in the city, and his first major bronze, *The Age of Bronze*, was exhibited first in Brussels.
- You can sip a glass of Belgian beer amid an eerie but fascinating collection of puppets at Poechenellekelder ([poechenellekelder.be](http://poechenellekelder.be)).
- And visitors can enjoy the art in the legendary café La Fleur en Papier Doré, once a meeting place for artists, including Magritte.



## THE ARTS SOCIETY BRUSSELS

This Society meets at Woluwe-Saint-Lambert Town Hall; find out more at [theartsociety.org/brussels](http://theartsociety.org/brussels)

### COMING UP

**11 December at 8pm:** *The Queen of Sheba: Empress or Enigma?* with Christopher Bradley

**15 January 2025 at 8pm:** *Artistic Patronage in the Reign of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella* with local lecturer Professor Luc Duerloo