



Belgium Handbook



Introduction

Thank you again for joining a language immersion program with Xperitas. This handbook contains helpful, specific information for all our student travelers to Belgium. If your program has a guide, you will find they are a wonderful support and source of information for the program. That said, as the group leaders, you are still responsible for your students during travel. We ask that you partner with the guide as you travel and work to support them in their efforts or guidelines set for the group. We encourage you to work as a team with your guide!

CLIMATE

- The climate in Belgium is varied and unpredictable. In general, it is chilly and overcast or rainy in the spring (more so in the north) and warm in the summer; however, it can be chilly and rainy!
- Dress in layers to accommodate the variance in weather. Make sure you pack a raincoat or umbrella.
- The weather is often cooler than students expect, and you will be walking outside a lot more than in the United States. Bring warm layers, water-resistant walking shoes and gloves and a hat if needed!

CULTURAL TIP

Air conditioning is not widespread in Belgium. Don't be surprised if your host family does not have A/C.

CLOTHING

- Reference the Xperitas Belgium packing list for advice on what to bring.
- Paris is the fashion capital of the world and the French pride themselves on being well put-together. You don't have to pack dress clothes, but avoid wearing ripped jeans, short shorts, old worn-out tennis shoes or anything else overly casual.
- While staying with your host family, you should be fully dressed and ready for the day when coming down to breakfast. No pajamas at the breakfast table.
- The most valuable item you will pack will be decent walking shoes.

ELECTRICITY

- The electricity in Belgium is 230v (compared to 110v in the USA).
- Most modern electronics (laptops, Apple products, phone and camera chargers, etc...) only need to be used with a travel adapter.
- You will need a travel converter for other electronics, such as hair dryers, straighteners, curlers or razors. It is best to just leave these items (and the clunky converter) at home.

MONEY

- Contact your bank to alert them of your travel plans and inquire about what they advise and offer.
- Keep exchange rates and international processing fees in mind.
- Get a debit card with a smart chip, if possible.
- Use ATM machines once in country (make sure you know your 4-digit PIN number).
- Have 50-100€ in cash before you travel.
- In country, use small bills in small shops and restaurants, if possible.
- A backup, emergency card is a good idea in case one card is lost or stolen.

TIPPING

- Tipping in restaurants, hotels or taxis is not customary in Belgium (service charges are already included in the price).
- We suggest tipping your bus driver or guide 1-2€ per student per day (you do not have to tip for direct bus transfers).

FOOD

- While staying at your hotels, breakfast is included daily, so make sure to take full advantage of the spread! While staying at your host family's house, you may notice that breakfasts are often pretty light.
- Travelers can find food for every budget. Most restaurants are comparable in price to the
- U.S. (keeping in mind that the tip is already included). If you are looking for something quick to eat without spending a fortune, try a sandwich stand, bakery or a small café with a *prix fixe* menu.
- Stay hydrated. Ask for a *carafe d'eau* at restaurants – the tap water is safe to drink.
- Typical French mealtimes are later than in the U.S. Lunch is usually around 1:00 PM and dinner around 8:00 PM.
- Meals often last much longer than we are used to, so be patient and try to enjoy the leisurely service. If you are ready to leave, ask for *l'addition s'il vous plaît*, otherwise you might be waiting for the bill for a long time!
- Don't forget to say *bon appétit* before digging in and be sure to try new foods even if they look intimidating.

CULTURAL TIPS

Be ready to try new foods and always offer to help in the kitchen during your family stay.

Always say "Bonjour Madame/Mademoiselle/Monsieur..." when entering a shop, restaurant, or approaching a vendor, (You'll get better service!) and "Au revoir Madame/Mademoiselle/Monsieur..." when exiting or walking away.

Transportation & Lodging

PARIS METRO

- Paris has a robust public transport system and is the best way to get around in.
- Make sure to validate each ticket at the validation machine.
- Debit cards without a smart chip do not work in the ticket machines in the Paris metro (so have cash on hand).
- It is more cost-effective to buy a book of 10 tickets rather than one ticket at a time.
- Keep your unused tickets on hand in an easily accessible pocket so you don't have to rummage through your things inside the metro.
- Do not throw your ticket away until you exit the metro.

TRAIN

- Arrive at least 60 minutes before the departure of your train.
- If you have seat reservations, refer to the coach locator signs on each platform. These list coach numbers and where each car will be when the train pulls into the station. Helpful!
- Get ready to disembark (with your suitcases) at least 20 minutes before your stop and use several exits as a group. Your train might stop at your destination for only a few short minutes!

Lodging

Student hotel sleeping arrangements may involve sharing beds, as some hotels utilize a single large bed for their double rooms or two large beds for their triple/quadruple rooms. During the family stay, students may share a room with a host sibling (if applicable), but they will have their own bed.

CULTURAL TIPS

Be patient – the French pride themselves on living a slower lifestyle.

*The French also like to exercise their right to go on strike, so don't be surprised if you see a rally going on while you're there – these **manifestations** are not violent.*

If your program has a guide, you will find they are a wonderful support and source of information for the program. That said, as the group leaders, you are still responsible for your students during travel. We ask that you partner with the guide as you travel and work to support them in their efforts or guidelines set for the group. We encourage you to work as a team with your guide!

Communication

- Ask your teacher about their policy around technology use while on the program.
- We advise that only group leaders use cell phones for calling (see the Disconnecting from your Home Culture activity).
- Check with your provider regarding any international fees.
- For students, we advise use of WiFi;
 - There is often WiFi (or a computer for public use) available in your hotel, but the connection may be weak.
 - You can download messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, to communicate with people at home for free while connected to WiFi.
- A great way for the entire group to stay in communication with parents back home is via a group text or email, a student-run Instagram account, etc.
- The French *font les bises* when they greet each other – they press their cheek to the other person's and give an air kiss, up to four times, depending on the region. Ask your teacher or your host family what the protocol is in your family stay location.
- During the family stay, you may or may not have regular access to internet, though you will have the contact information of both the local Family Stay Coordinator, as well as your group leader. If you do have internet, please ask your family when it is appropriate to use it.

Health & Safety

- Be sure to keep your passport, most of your money, and your credit cards in your money belt or neck pouch.
- If there is a safe in your hotel room, lock your valuables in there while you are out. **Don't forget to check the hotel safe before checking out!**
- While traveling, pay attention to your belongings and be sure to keep your valuables close at all times. Be especially careful of pickpockets in touristy areas in Paris.
- If you carry a purse, we suggest a cross-body purse that zips shut. All valuables should be kept in front of you, never in a back pocket or a backpack worn behind you.
- Establish a buddy system and always travel in groups of three or more.
- Do not travel with valuable items.
- Remember that the Xperitas emergency line is available 24/7, but please only call it when you are experiencing a true emergency.
- Review the recommendations for travelers provided by the [Centers for Disease Control](https://www.cdc.gov) (CDC). See Current Health and Safety Updates for information about current world events and illnesses.
- Keep printed insurance card on you at all times.

Xperitas-Arranged Family Stay Experience®

- Your family is excited to meet you! The family stay is a great learning experience, so be sure to keep an open mind, do your best at practicing your French language skills, and have fun getting to know your family.
- If you submitted your family stay applications by the deadline, you should receive your host family's information about 2 weeks prior to departure.
- Respond as soon as possible when your host family contacts you.
- Keep your Facebook profile clean and try not to judge your host by his/her Facebook profile - better to get to know your host through emails first.
- As our host families are considered volunteers, it is nice to bring them a gift from your home state, and a scrapbook or photos to show them what life is like where you live (Check out the "What to Bring your Host Family" activity in the student binder).
- Electricity and gas are much more expensive in Belgium and France than in the United States. Be conscious of how long your showers are and make sure to turn off the lights behind you.
- Leave a thank you note for your hosts at your house on the last day of the family stay, as sending it via mail can be complicated.

CULTURAL TIP

The French are socially engaged people and are open to political discussions. Don't feel offended if they start a conversation about a topic that you may otherwise avoid in the United States. They are just curious!

Overall, just keep an open mind and try not to refer to stereotypes!

Code of Conduct

- Ask your teacher about your school group's specific discipline plan.
- Review the [Xperitas Code of Conduct](#) with your child before leaving for Belgium. It should be signed by parents and students and returned to the group leader.
- Do your best to honor the language commitment!