



Belgian landmark: the Atomium is just one of the many unique event spaces that Brussels offers planners



Retail therapy: designer boutiques



Sweet treat: the land of chocolate



Libation: 450-plus beers to sample



Unusual and versatile event space: the Museum of Natural Sciences' Dinosaurs Gallery

BACK TO BRUSSELS

Brussels is closer than ever before to the UK thanks to Eurostar, which now whisks delegates from London to the Belgian capital in a blistering one hour and 51 minutes.

The speedy journey provides UK groups with the perfect opportunity to discover – or rediscover – the destination's fantastic C&I offering.

Belgian Tourist Office Brussels & Wallonia director Françoise Scheepers says there are in excess of 151 reasons to visit Brussels and recommends that planners check out www.brussels151.com for inspiration. The website provides seasonally flavoured, bright ideas for activities and attractions in Brussels that will surprise and impress even those who think they know it well.

As the European Community's decision-making centre, Brussels is a heavyweight when it comes to providing a business environment that is sure to facilitate productive, inspirational conferences and

meetings. However, the city retains its charm and feel as a festive, European village bristling with culture, interesting architecture, fine cuisine and of course, unique venues.

Brussels' cultural offering is unrivalled, says Brussels Convention Bureau managing director Hervé Bosquet. "Situated at the crossroads of the Latin and Germanic cultures, Brussels has, over the centuries, developed a way of life that's very much its own," he says. "Cultural life in Brussels is highly developed and offers visitors numerous museums housing famous collections, dynamic musical and cultural institutions and international scale exhibitions that you really shouldn't miss."

Many of these venues offer event spaces, which provide delegates with the rare opportunity to meet and network against a backdrop of fine art and precious artefacts.

Among the newest and most unique venues is the Museum of Natural Sciences' Dinosaurs Gallery,

which opened in October last year. The venue's Els Dever, who deals with marketing and partnerships, says that at 3,000m², the gallery is home to the largest dinosaur exhibition in Europe. With the Dinosaur Gallery and several other spaces in the museum available for events, the venue is versatile enough for conferences or unique functions. "The building dates back to 1905 and has been restored both inside and out," says Dever. "We installed a new exhibition space and there's a new gallery of evolution that is scheduled to open in 2009."

Gourmet cuisine

The boutiques, restaurants, markets, antique stores and shops bursting with fine food that pepper Brussels are key to the way of life in the destination. "You'll discover an astonishingly cosmopolitan city, gourmet cuisine served by some 1,500 restaurants and more than 450 Belgian beers to be sampled in brasseries packed with charm,"

says Bosquet. "But Brussels also means trendy shopping and a green city providing an endless number of unusual routes to follow."

Avenue Louise and Boulevard de Waterloo are to Brussels what the Champs Elysées is to Paris and offer myriad luxury shopping opportunities. Full of couture houses, and home to well established Belgian designers, Avenue Louise is the place to go for international designer clothing. Meanwhile, big brand fashion names including Gucci, Chanel and Louis Vuitton, can be found on Boulevard de Waterloo. Fashionistas should also make a pilgrimage to Dansaert, the fashion district, where young up-and-coming Belgian designers sell their original creations.

Chocolate lovers will be in heaven in Brussels. Delegates don't have to go far to find shops, including the likes of Marcolini, full of Belgium's sweet, signature export.

The Sunday markets, situated in the Sablon and Marolles districts are a goldmine for treasure hunters and



THE HIGH-SPEED RAIL LINK HAS PUT THE C&I AND GOURMET DELIGHTS OF THE BUSINESS CAPITAL OF EUROPE JUST TWO HOURS AWAY

provide an excellent post-conference activity with a distinct Belgian flavour.

As the capital of Europe, Brussels' politically and historically important buildings, including the Parliament and the institutions of the EU, UK groups will find fascinating. "This is where Europe was created and is being built day after day," says Bosquet. "With some 1,000 press reporters and 1,200 NGOs, Brussels is an international business centre that, for decades, has been proving its ability in terms of both quality and quantity to host the most important delegations."

Business hub

Its position as such an important business hub means that Brussels is well equipped with C&I facilities. "Whether you're bringing ten or 10,000 people together, Brussels' greatest achievement is to offer you whatever fulfils your expectations in an original setting," says Bosquet. "With super equipped auditoria, meeting rooms with historic cachet,

Art Deco and Art Nouveau buildings and imposing exhibition centres, there's no doubt that Brussels offers added value in the form of an extremely professional and prestigious setting."

Among the most exciting developments in the pipeline is the opening on 20.09.2009 (at 20:09) of Square Brussels Meeting Centre. The former Congress Palace is undergoing extensive renovations and will offer auditoria capable of seating up to 1,200 and a 4,000m² hall in the heart of Brussels.

Investment in venues is ongoing and former stock exchange 19 Grand-Place House is one that has been refurbished recently.

The investment extends to hotels, many of which have undergone make-overs or built from new. The five-star Sofitel Brussels Europe opened in September 2006, Novotel Brussels of Grand'Place was refurbished in 2007 and Brussels Toison d'Or is being renovated to five-star standard and will be

relaunched as Sofitel Brussels Le Louise this year. Hotel Bloom!, which offers 306 rooms painted by European artists, along with 12 meeting rooms, has had a major facelift and renovations will continue until the end of April. Conrad Hilton, which has 269 rooms and 16 meeting spaces, is undergoing refurbishments, due for completion in summer. And Starwood Hotels has chosen Brussels as the location for its first European Aloft property. It is due to open next year.

"These developments and the new hotels breathe a new lease of life into Brussels' C&I industry," says Scheepers. "If you want to bring a sense of change, a completely unique background and euphoric atmosphere to an event, Brussels is the perfect destination."

Brussels' vast array of activities, venues, hotels and cultural offerings will no doubt entice UK groups to stay much longer than just one day in the vibrant destination. ■

CLIENT VERDICTS

Brussels Convention Bureau took a group of some 100 UK C&I planners to Brussels in December. Here's what they had to say about the destination:

Paul Vousden, The Corporate Compass

Brussels is only 1.51 hours away from London, so even though it's a foreign country, it's so close by. I was impressed with the range of facilities. The range and quality of the hotels available is exactly what I am looking for. I will definitely pitch the destination to clients.

Elizabeth Yareham, Campden Publishing

I think Brussels is particularly suited to financial and business events. The destination provides a good business environment and has a lot of kudos attached to its name. The five-star Sheraton Brussels Hotel is stunning and the city's architecture and markets are excellent.

Marilyn Levi, Corporate Entertainment Consultancy

I have used Brussels before, when I brought over 60 delegates from the music industry. We went to the Grand-Place, had a guided walking tour and a gastronomic meal at Roy d'Espagne, which is a famous brasserie. I always knew Brussels was suitable for a day-event but now I see it provides many more possibilities, especially with the High Speed Eurostar connection.

Steve Pinnock, Performance & Event Management

The high-speed Eurostar connection should make a significant difference to business in Brussels because, for UK groups, it is now more accessible than some UK destinations and it is such a comfortable way to travel. Brussels is full of character and it is reasonably priced.

CONTACT DETAILS

IN THE UK

Belgian Tourist Office
217 Marsh Wall, London E14 9FJ
Contact Philippe Marée, trade manager MICE customers:
Telephone 020 753103991
Email trade@belgiumthelaceto.be
Web www.belgiumthelaceto.be; www.brussels151.com

IN BRUSSELS

Brussels International – Tourism & Congress
18, rue de la Violette, B-1000 Brussels
Telephone + 32 25 49 50 52
Email as@brusselsinternational.be
Web www.brusselsinternational.be