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French in Belgium

Learning French in Belgium is not a mainstream choice, with the result that there are relatively few options for language learners in the country. This means, however, that students will be able to immerse themselves in a unique country that offers them an authentic and quirky language context.

This is a nice cosy country, with a lot of art and culture and European institutions," says Corine Vandebussche at Babel Full Language Service, located in Bruges, in the northwest of Belgium.

Referring to "institutions" such as the European Union and Nato, Vandebussche underlines the serious political infrastructure that makes Belgium its home. Brussels, in fact, is often referred to as the capital of Europe because of its situation as a hub of the continent, with many financial companies making it their base. A multilingual country with a diverse population, Belgium is also instantly accessible, with a proud heritage.

Its most famous trademarks include beer and chocolate, as well as other culinary specialities such as *moules marinières* (mussels), *frites* (chips) and waffles. Brussels boasts many beerhouses, and charming cobblestone

squares as well some impressive architecture. "Brussels is a fantastic city for culture lovers, with countless museums, exhibitions and places to visit," says Venla Gilles of Langues Vivantes in the city. She adds, "It is also very easy to take day trips to other places in Belgium and neighbouring countries."

Bruges is another of Belgium's famous cities, with the entire historical city centre included on Unesco's World Heritage list. With cobbled alleys and romantic canals, Bruges is known as the Venice of the north. Vandebussche says most of their clients opt for one-to-one immersion courses, while the only accommodation option is local b&bs.

The same situation applies at Thema Language School in Brussels, which indicates that demand is only moderate at the school. Nevertheless, Olivier Guilmain says the school attracts clients from France, Russia, the UK, Spain and Italy.

At Dialogue Languages in Spa, Jean-Luc Godard argues that Belgium is in fact a perfect location in which to learn French. "Coming from a multilingual country, Belgian teachers know several languages and can easily understand the difficulties faced by Dutch, English and German speakers, and can help them overcome these difficulties rapidly and efficiently," he says. "They teach the French language as a communication tool rather than a vehicle for the French culture."

Given the school's location in Spa, Godard says students can visit the famous thermal baths or go for a walk in their free time, although he underlines that all courses offered at his school are very intensive.

Gilles is also proud of Belgium's ability to teach the French language. She says students choose the country as a study destination often because they have had "previous contact with Belgians", as well as the fact it has European Union institutions and related businesses and good connections to the rest of Europe.

Again, underlining the more "boutique" service provided at lesser-known French language learning locations, Tom Delanoy at Open Context in Brussels also points to small group classes. "To enhance the learning experience, the groups are kept small," he says, "between three and six students. The teacher is both an expert in the field of foreign language acquisition and a French native speaker." ●

Selection of programmes available

Location	Name of school	Min. length of course	Minimum age of students	Accommodation available
Bruges	Babel Full Language Service	10 hours	5	b&b
Brussels	Langues Vivantes	1 week	18	yes
Brussels	Open Context	1 day	16	none
Brussels	Thema Language School	1 week	16	b&b
Spa	Ceran Lingua International	1 week	10	yes
Spa	Dialogue	1 day	18	yes

PHOTOGRAPH: TOURISM BRUGES, DANIEL DE KIEVITH