



SPROUTING SUCCESS

The European Union may be shaking in its boots, but just like the Brussels sprout, the Belgian capital has never looked healthier

WHILE THE ORIGINS OF BRUSSELS SPROUTS ARE UNKNOWN, the first mention can be traced to the late 16th Century. The much-maligned Barbie-sized cabbages are thought to be native to Belgium, although this remains under question. What is certain, is that the tightly-leafed cruciferous vegetable was first cultivated in large quantities in Belgium, in the vicinity of Brussels, as early as 1587. Hence the name.

Belgium, however, has moved on. As has Brussels. Given the sprout's status as most vilified vegetable in the world, it comes as no surprise that Belgian chocolate exports now outrank the humble Brussels sprout — Brussels produces nigh on 172,000 tonnes of chocolate every year. These days Brussels has replaced the healthy green with the decadence of the waffle, chocolate, and the Belgian frites; distinguished from French fries by their name, and their side-serving of mayonnaise.

None of these, however, are what keeps Brussels afloat. The polyglot Belgian capital has grown from a 10th-Century, fortress-town founded by a descendant of Charlemagne to a sizeable city of 1.2 million and the principal centre for international politics. As the first country to undergo an industrial revolution on the continent of Europe in the early 19th Century, Belgium developed an excellent transportation infrastructure of ports, canals, railways, and highways, which has served the nation and its capital well, and established Brussels as a domestic and international hub in the urban centre of Europe.

Brussels has a service economy with 88 percent of all jobs being within this sector. The growth in services is naturally due in part to its status as the capital — not only of Belgium, but also unofficially of Europe. Add to this the city's history of expertise in banking and pharmaceutical research, and the picture becomes clearer. Despite being home to one tenth of

the population of Belgium, the metropolis contributes around one fifth of the national GDP, its 550,000 jobs accounting for 17.7 percent of Belgium's employment.

The city has been the hub of international banking transactions since the establishment of the Société Générale de Belgique in 1822. About sixty foreign banks operate in Brussels, making it the seventh-largest financial market in the world. It is the home base for international banking transfer and clearing companies such as Swift, Banksys and Euroclear and a spin-off ICT industry has sprung up, servicing the needs of the financial transactions industry. There are 4,500 ICT firms with offices in Brussels employing 75,000 people.

With 19 communes, a federal government and regional governments, Brussels employs thousands to service the Belgian government alone. The European Union accounts for an additional 40,000-plus jobs within the European Quarter — stretching all the way from the eastern edge of the city at Schuman to Place du Luxembourg near the centre. Mixing with the diplomats and public servants are the journalists, lobbyists, non-governmental organisations and businesses that call Brussels home. More than 2,000 foreign companies have offices here, including over 1,000 international associations.

The Belgian capital sports the world's second-largest congressional centre, hosting more than 1,000 business conferences annually, boosting the city's tourism income. It ranks as the fourth most popular conference city in Europe.

It seems the European sun is centred on Brussels. The economy is healthy and the quality of life is ranked high. Belgium rates among the top ten countries in many of the topics in the *OECD Better Life Index* and occupies a respectable 17th place in the United Nations Development Programme's *2012 Human Development Report*. It rates well in relation to life expectancy and GDP, and the Belgian healthcare system is renowned as one of the best in the world.

Not everything is rosy though. The average Belgian forks out one of the highest rates of income tax and housing prices are on the rise. With the increase of young professionals settling down in the city, it's not the cheapest place to live. This said, for expatriates the city is a blessing in tax terms — every penny spent out of the city is tax deductible.

Brussels is vibrant and innovative and contributes to Belgium's growth — the country is considered one of the world's top economic performers. From its perch overlooking Europe it looks set to remain so. That's more that can be said for the Brussels sprout. 🌱

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