1 The Best **Full-Day Tours**

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The Best in One Day

1. Grand' Place
2. Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles
3. L'Ilôt Sacré
4. Galeries St-Hubert
5. Mokafeé, De L'Ogenblik
6. Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée
7. Brasserie Horta
8. Cathédrale des Saints Michel et Gudule
9. Palais des Beaux-Arts (BOZAR)
10. Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts
11. Manneken-Pis
12. L'imaige de Nostre Dame

Brussels is not just about the Grand' Place and the huge buildings of the European Parliament. It's full of surprises, so I recommend you get a feel of the city through its own mix of the sacred and profane: the best of its art and local history, a taste of Art Nouveau, comics, elegant shopping and, of course, beer. **START: Métro to Bourse.**

1 ★★★ Grand' Place. It never palls. Every time I emerge from one of the crowded, cobbled, medieval streets into the Grand' Place, I marvel at this perfect Flemish Renaissance square. Even the crowds of tourists can't destroy the feeling that I've stepped into an Old Master painting. Lined by its guild houses and Hôtel de Ville, the Grand' Place was the administrative heart of a city made prosperous by 17th-century commerce. *See p 8.*

2 ★ kids Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles. I'm always surprised that the Museum of Brussels isn't busier. Housed in the Maison du Roi (King's House), a late 19th-century reconstruction of Charles V's original 1515 building, it's an easily digestible mix of objects from tapestries to silver and gold illustrating the city's history. Large-scale models and pictures on the second floor build an image of old Brussels. Children should make for the third floor and the extensive wardrobe of the Manneken-Pis statue (see bullet 11). Over 650 national costumes from around the world have been donated by misguided visiting heads of state. *45 mins. Maison du Roi, Grand' Place. ☎ 02 279 43 50. www.brucity.be. Admission 3€. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Closed public holidays. Métro: Bourse.*

Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles.

Grand' Place

To get the full wow factor, stand in the middle with Brussels' town hall, the 1A **Hôtel de Ville**, to your left. Guided tours take in its elegant official rooms; for the full Gothic effect, you can even book your wedding here. Many of the old guild houses were named after the first buildings on the site, not the guilds (trade associations) that later occupied them. Nos. 1–2, 2A the grand **Baker's House** with a gold head of St Lambert, patron saint of bakers, was purpose-built as the guild house; today it contains the Roy d'Espagne bar/restaurant. No. 3, 3A **La Brouette** (note 'The Wheelbarrow' over the door) belonged to the tallow (candle) merchants; No. 4, 4A **Le Sac** (The Sack) to the cabinetmakers and coopers; No. 6, 5A **Le Cornet** (The Horn), covered in marine symbols, was the boatmen's guild house. No. 9, 6A **Le Cygne** (The Swan) became the butcher's guild house in 1720. The revolutionary 19th-century philosophers Karl Marx and Friederich Engels drank in a bar in what is now an expensive restaurant, **La Maison du Cygne**. The single façade of 7A **Nos. 13–19** is decorated with busts of nineteen dukes of Brabant, the eldest sons of the ruler and traditional heirs to the throne; the tailors occupied Nos. 24–25 before it became 8A **La Chaloupe d'Or** bar/restaurant. *30 mins. Hôtel de Ville guided tours 3.15pm Tues & Wed; 4€.*

Le Cygne became the butcher's guild house in 1720.

3 L'Ilot Sacré. Walk out of the square on the northeast side into L'Ilot Sacré (the Sacred Island), a maze of narrow medieval streets that are as crowded today as they were when the rue du Marché aux Herbes and rue de la Montagne were staging posts on the lucrative trade route between Bruges and Cologne. The rue des Bouchers is lined with restaurants, serving fish as well as the meat that gave the street its name, 'Butchers' Street'. 🕘 ***15 mins.***

4 ★★ Shopping in the Galeries St-Hubert. Just north of the Grand' Place, three glass-vaulted galleries—the de la Reine (Queen's), du Roi (King's) and des Princes (Princes')—make up the mid-19th-century Galeries St-Hubert. I love the mixture of people here: serious readers make for venerable **Tropismes**, 11 galerie des Princes (☎ 02 512 88 52 ww.tropismes.be) for its range of books in French; chocoholics' dreams are answered at **Corné Port-Royal**, 5 galerie de la Reine (☎ 02 213 62 22 www.corne-port-royal.be) or **Neuhaus**, 25–27 galerie de la Reine (☎ 02 512 63 59, www.neuhaus.be). Those after genuine quality lace go to **Manufacture Belge de Dentelles**, 6–8 galerie de la Reine (☎ 02 511 44 77); while the accessory-challenged are in **Delvaux**, 31 galerie de la Reine (☎ 02 512 71 98 www.delvaux.be), buying expensive handbags. 🕘 ***1 hr. Rue du Marché aux Herbes. Métro: Gare Centrale***.

5 ★ I always recover from a retail assault with a coffee at **Mokafe** (9 galerie de Roi; ☎ 02 511 78 70; $); or opt for a seasonal dish from the daily menu at **De l'Ogenblik** (1 galerie des Princes; ☎ 02 511 61 51; $$).

6 ★★ kids Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée. It's right that the country of Tintin opened Europe's first museum devoted to the ninth art—the comic strip ('bande dessinée'). It's housed in the former Waucquez warehouse, a wholesale draper's built by Victor Horta in 1906 in Art Nouveau style. Inside, Tintin, Snowy and Captain Haddock, Spirou, Gaston Lagaffe, the Smurfs, Lucky Luke and countless other famous names from Belgian comics illustrate the strip's

The glass-vaulted Galeries St-Hubert.

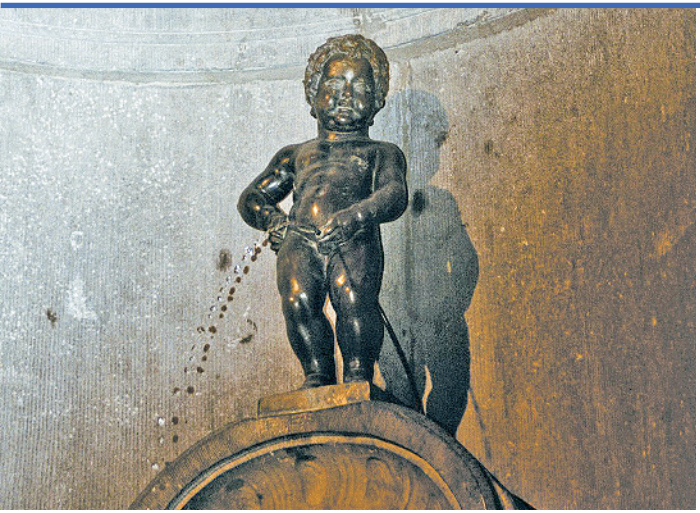
history. Odd room settings are irresistible to photographers. Changing exhibitions also dip in and out of the museum's vast collections. 🕘 *1 hr. 20 rue des Sables.* ☎ *02 219 19 80. www.comicscenter.net. Admission 7.50€. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Métro: Botanique or Parc.*

7 ★ kids **Brasserie Horta.** The bar here is often frequented by parents waiting for children who can't be prised away from Tintin. The menu runs from Belgian classics to pasta to meatballs, though I've yet to spot a tourist ordering the horse stew, just like grandma used to cook. *20 rue des Sables.* ☎ *02 219 19 80. www.brasseriehorta.be $$.*

8 ★★ **Cathédrale des St-Michel et Ste-Gudule.** Modeled on Notre Dame in Paris, the mainly 16th-century French Gothic church overlooks the town—though any grandeur is spoiled by surrounding office buildings. Members of the Belgian royal family are married and crowned here (though not buried: that privilege belongs to Notre-Dame de Laeken, p 72, bullet 8). Protestants in 1579 and then in 1793, the invading French Republican Army, stripped the interior of its treasures, but look for the 16th-century stained glass windows where religion is tempered by secular power in the form of Emperor Charles V and his family. Try to catch Sunday mass at 10am for Gregorian chant by the cathedral singers. 🕘 *45 mins. Parvis Sainte-Gudule.* ☎ *02 217 83 45. www.cathedralestmichel.be. Mon–Fri 7am–7pm (Winter to 6pm), Sat 8.30am–3.30pm, Sun 8.30am–2pm. Treasury 1€: Mon–Fri 10am–12.30pm, 2pm–5pm; Sat to 3.30pm, Sun 2pm–5pm. Métro: Gare Centrale.*

9 ★★ **Palais des Beaux Arts (BOZAR).** Designed by architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) in, rather surprisingly for him, Art Deco style, and finished in 1928, this is one of the most dynamic of Brussels' arts centers, staging cutting-edge exhibitions from national and international artists and classical music concerts and performances. *See p 125, bullet 10.*

Entrance to the Palais des Beaux Arts.



Mannekin-Pis is Brussels' best-known character.

10 ★★★ Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts. This blockbuster of a museum is divided into the Musée d'Art Ancien (15th–18th century), the Musée d'Art Moderne (19th century onwards), and a René Magritte museum, opening in 2008. It's huge, so pick and choose, something I find almost impossible when faced with Flemish primitives like Rogier van der Weyden (1399–1464), and the finest collection of works by Pieter Brueghel—father (1525–69) and son (1564–1638)—Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) and Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). Then there's the extraordinary journey through the Symbolists, Surrealists, and an eye-opening collection of native artists. *See p 26.*

11 kids Manneken-Pis. Make your way down through the gardens of the Mont des Arts to rue St-Jean. Galerie Bortier is a rather dusty 19th-century arcade of shops selling secondhand books and prints. From rue Lombard turn left into rue de l'Etuve for two classic city sights. To your right, a cartoon painted on the side of a house shows Tintin, Captain Haddock and Snowy escaping from their hotel via the fire escape. To your left, hordes gawp at Manneken-Pis, the bronze statue of a small boy peeing merrily away which has, bizarrely, become the symbol of Brussels. *20 mins. Métro: Bourse.*

12 ★ L'Imaige de Nostre Dame. If you've restrained yourselves all day, it's time to try a glass—or several—of Belgium's famous golden nectar. Tucked away in a cul-de-sac off rue du Marché aux Herbes, this 2-room space has wooden tables, friendly staff, and even a Dutch dresser. Oh, and its beer range is legendary. *Impasse des Cadeaux.* ☎ *02 219 42 49. $.*

The Best in Two Days

1. Place du Grand-Sablon
2. Notre-Dame-du-Sablon
3. Place du Petit-Sablon
4. Palais de Justice
5. Palais d'Egmont
6. Palais Royal
7. BELvue Museum
8. Le Musée des Instruments de Musique
9. Café de MIM
10. Saint-Géry/Sainte-Catherine

Start with my favorite Brussels pastime of people-watching from a pavement café, then go from posh, conservative Brussels to the newly fashionable areas west of the Grand' Place, where Brussels was born. **START: Tram 92, 94 to Petit Sablon**.

Place du Grand Sablon.

1 ★ Place du Grand Sablon. A great place to start the day, where high-end Brussels congregates and wealthy ladies rub shoulders with antique dealers taking a break from their shops lining the 17th-century square. There's also a good weekend antiques market (Sat 9am–6pm, Sun 9am–2pm). The smell of freshly baked bread entices you into a bakery/deli, **Le Pain Quotidien**, 11 rue des Sablon (☎ 02 513 51 54; $), past the wooden shop counter to the conservatory at the back. **Wittamer**, 13 place du Grand-Sablon (☎ 02 546 11 11; $) is a real Brussels institution, with a great terrace. Try their hot chocolate. ◴ *1 hr. Bus 95 to Grand Sablon.*

2 ★ Notre-Dame-du-Sablon. Religion and fashion have always gone hand in hand, so when Margaret of Austria (Emperor Charles V's Regent) joined the cult of the Madonna whose statue was believed to have arrived here by divine intervention, the wealthy followed and the church was rebuilt in the 15th century as Notre-Dame. The flamboyant Flemish edifice has two Baroque chapels—built for the Turn and Taxis family whose wealth came from setting up the first public postal system in Europe in 1516—tombs of other wealthy families and richly colored stained glass windows, though its altarpieces are now in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (p 11, bullet 10) and Maison du Roi (p 7, bullet 2). ◴ *20 mins. Rue de la Régence.* ☎ *02 511 57 41. Mon–Fri 9am–6.30pm, Sat, Sun 10am–7pm. Closed Nov 20. Tram 92, 94 to Petit Sablon.*

3 ★ Place du Petit Sablon. I love the sense of peace and history (and the shade on a sweltering day) of these small formal gardens, laid out in 1890. Statues of the dashing Counts of Egmont and Hoorn, executed in 1568 for joining a rebellion against the savage rule of King Philip II, dominate a large fountain while 48 small statues representing Brussels' medieval guilds surround the gardens. ◴ *15 mins. Place du Petit Sablon, rue de la Régence. Tram 92, 94 to Petit Sablon.*

4 Palais de Justice. This monstrous carbuncle of a building dominates its surroundings. Conceived by King Leopold I in 1833, it was left to his son, megalomaniac Léopold II

Place du Petit Sablon.

to build. Its architect, Joseph Poelaert, became the most hated man in Brussels and died in a mental asylum before it was finished, apparently cursed by a witch from Marolles. The interior is equally formidable, striking terror into guilty and innocent alike. From nearby place Poelaert there are views of the city's church towers, turrets and in the distance, the Atomium (p 75, bullet 9). *20 mins. 1 place Poelaert. 02 508 65 78. Mon–Fri 9am–3pm. Closed public holidays. Métro: Louise.*

5 Palais d'Egmont. This palace, built in 1534 for the mother of the executed count (bullet 3), was rebuilt in the 1890s and now houses Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Britain, Ireland and Denmark signed the treaty admitting them to the European Economic Community (now European Union) here in 1972. *10 mins*.

6 ★ Palais Royal. This rather squat palace isn't favored by the current royal family, who prefer leafy Laeken (see p 72). Its gilded formal rooms, full of overstuffed furniture, are open to the public when the royals are on summer vacation; don't miss the tapestries in the Goya salon and some over-the-top chandeliers in the Throne Room. External photographs are best left until after dark, when the building is floodlit. *30 mins. 1000 place des Palais. 02 551 20 20. www.monarchie.be. 25 Jul–16 Sep, Tues–Sun. Métro: Trone. Tram: 92, 94 to Royale.*

7 ★ BELvue Museum. Housed in a private residence originally annexed by Léopold II for the Palais Royal, the museum offers an easily digested overview of recent Belgian royal history. The vaulted cellars of the Coudenberg Palace show what is left of the foundations of the great hall built by the ruler, Philip the Good, in the 1450s. The comic figures of Quick and Flupke, Hergé's 'little rascals', were on temporary display when I was last there, an exhibition only incongruous to tourists; to Belgians, comics are just as important as medieval brick vaults. In the summer a café in the courtyard garden serves light lunches, coffee and cakes. Then make your way through Place Royale, past a statue of Godefroy de Bouillon (1061–110), a medieval hero and leader of the First Crusade. *45 mins. Bellevue Hôtel, 7 place des Palais. 070 22 04 92. www.belvue.be. Admission 3€. Oct–May Tues–Sun 10am–5pm, Jun–Sept 10am–6pm. Métro: Trone. Tram: 92, 94 to Royale.*

8 ★★★ kids Le Musée des Instruments de Musique (MIM). What do you do with an old department store? The Belgians turned this 1899 Art Nouveau building (formerly Old England department store) into the hugely popular Musical Instruments Museum. It now displays hundreds of instruments from its collection of 7,000, the biggest in the world. Don your headphones, approach the displays and music played on the instruments

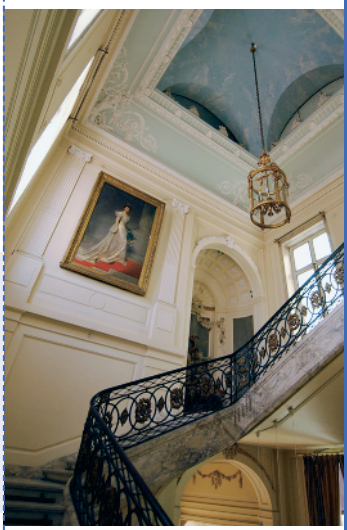
Le Musée des Instruments de Musique in the Old England Building.

you're looking at pipes up. Walk from booming Tibetan temple trumpets to tinkling clavicords; hear the medieval Cornemuse, depicted in paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, and glaze over at the purity of a 16th-century flute. Don't miss the prototype of the saxophone, invented by the Belgian Adolphe Sax. 🕘 *1½ hr. 2 rue Montagne de la Cour.* ☎ *02 545 01 30. www.mim.fgov.be. Admission 5€ (extra for exhibitions), free 1st Wed of the month from 1pm, and for kids under 12. Tues–Fri 9.30am–5pm, Sat, Sun 10am–5pm. Closed public holidays. Métro: Porte de Namur or Gare Centrale. Tram: 92, 94 to Royale.*

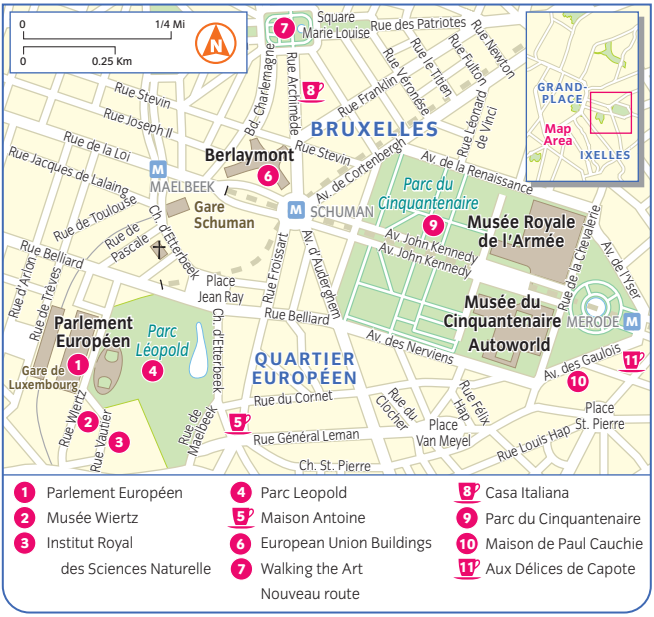
9 ★ kids **Le Musée des Instruments de Musique.** The restaurant at the top of the museum is wonderful on sunny days when the open-air terrace offers views over Brussels. Men in business suits go for steak and chips or the catch of the day; tourists in a hurry can opt for salads or pasta instead. ☎ *02 502 95 08. $$.*

10 ★★ **Saint-Géry/Sainte-Catherine.** From the museum, walk to the Grand' Place, over the Boulevard Anspach and into Place St-Géry (15 mins), or catch the 95 bus to Bourse and walk from there. Legend has it that Place St-Géry is the birthplace of Brussels, which expanded from a 6th-century chapel here into the medieval town. St-Géry has been reborn as the latest hip and happening area, with clusters of bars to hang out in. The surrounding streets and rue Antoine Dansaert have attracted fashion designers, who now challenge Antwerp as Belgium's premier design city. To the north, Place Sainte-Catherine is the heart of the original working port and fish market. The river was paved over, but the area retains a quayside feeling; it's the place for restaurants serving the freshest fish washed down with a chilled Moselle wine. *See p 64.* 🕘 *2 hr. Avoid Sundays and Mondays when the fish is less flappingly fresh and many shops and restaurants are closed.*

Inside the BELvue Museum.



The Best in Three Days



1. Parlement Européen
2. Musée Wiertz
3. Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelle
4. Parc Leopold
5. Maison Antoine
6. European Union Buildings
7. Walking the Art Nouveau route
8. Casa Italiana
9. Parc du Cinquantenaire
10. Maison de Paul Cauchie
11. Aux Délices de Capote

Love it or hate it, the Quartier Européen is as much a part of the capital as the Grand' Place. Wandering around it makes a good start to a day that also takes in some older grand designs—those of Léopold II, plus the Art Nouveau delights of Square Ambiorix. It's a day for walking, so wear a stout pair of shoes, and kick off with a coffee in any of the little cafés lining the Place du Luxembourg.

START: **Bus 95 to Place du Luxembourg.**

1 ★ Parlement Européen. A walkway through the station at the end of Place du Luxembourg takes you through the main European Parliament building, housing the parliament's various committees (debates take place in Strasbourg, France). The workings of the European Union are so labyrinthine that it's not worth trying to figure them out; just take the short tour to get a glimpse of the beast housed inside.

The building is known locally as the 'Caprice of the Gods', for both its reference to a higher power and resemblance to a well-known brand ('Caprice des Dieux' is a French cheese). 🕘 ***30 mins. 43 rue Wiertz. ☎ 02 284 34 57. Admission free (take ID). Mon–Thurs 10am & 3pm, Fri 10am (arrive 15 mins early). Bus 95 to Place du Luxembourg.***

2 Musée Wiertz. Romantic painter Antoine-Joseph Wiertz

(1806–65) was so popular in his day that the government built him a studio in return for it and his works passing to the state on his death. A bit of a megalomaniac, he fancied himself the equal of Rubens and Michelangelo—though perhaps few others concurred. 'Interesting' is one word you might apply to his work, or perhaps shocking, obscene, sadistic or erotic. Pictures like ***The Premature Burial*** (complete with body trying to get out of its coffin) are the stuff of nightmares. 🕘 ***30 mins. 62 rue Vautier. ☎ 02 648 17 18. www.fine-arts-museum.be. Tues–Sun 10am–noon, 1–5pm. Closed public holidays. Métro: Trone.***

3 ★★ kids Musée des Sciences Naturelles. Everybody loves a dinosaur and they have some unique specimens at Brussels' natural history museum, in a section which has been part of a wider (and much needed) refurbishment. Back on display and better than ever are the skeletons of the iguanodons found at Bernissart, near Mons, in 1870, as well as that perennial favorite, good old T. rex. 🕘 ***1½ hr. 29 rue Vautier. ☎ 02 627 42 11. www.naturalsciences.be. Admission 4€, free after 1pm 1st Wed of the month and for kids under 5. Tues–Fri 9.30am–4.45pm, Sat, Sun 10am–6pm. Métro: Trone.***

4 ★ kids Parc Léopold. Gently sloping Parc Léopold is so full of trees that the looming European Union buildings get blotted out by foliage all summer. The pond at the foot of the park, fed by the Maelbeek stream, attracts a surprising variety of bird life, from mallards to parakeets; trees surrounding it were originally part of Léopold II's botanic garden. Industrialist Ernest Solvay (1838–1922) built the Institut Solvay here, a complex of five scientific centers that attracted the likes of Marie Curie and Albert Einstein. Today the mix of architectural styles gives it a fairytale feel. 🕘 ***1 hr. Rue Belliard. Métro: Maelbeek, Schuman.***

The European Parliament Building is known by locals as the Caprice of the Gods.

One of the dinosaurs in Musée des Sciences Naturelles.

5 **Maison Antoine.** If you feel the need for fuel, go for the best fries in town served with a choice of 28 sauces at this famous ***friterie***. You can take them to the pleasant Chez Bernard at No. 47 to eat over a beer. ***Place Jourdan. $.***

6 **European Union buildings.** For an idea of the sheer size of the EU administration, look at the Centre Berlaymont, shaped like a huge cross of St Andrew to the north of Parc Léopold. It was the home of Europe's bureaucracy, the European Commission, from 1967 until the discovery of asbestos closed it in 1991. Now re-opened, it once again houses the Commission, and with its flags flying out front, has become the symbol of the European community. The Charlemagne Building next door houses more of the Commission's huge, and growing, administration. *15 mins.*

7 ★ **Walking the Art Nouveau route.** I love the contrasts of Brussels and, within 2 minutes, you go from something of an architectural mess to the cohesion of the Art Nouveau style that flowered from the 1890s until World War I. Square Ambiorix and its radial streets are full of architectural gems that show just how attractive residential Brussels can be. Square Marie-Louise, part of the area's development in the 1870s, has a central garden with ponds, fountains and a great view

Flags outside the European Union buildings.

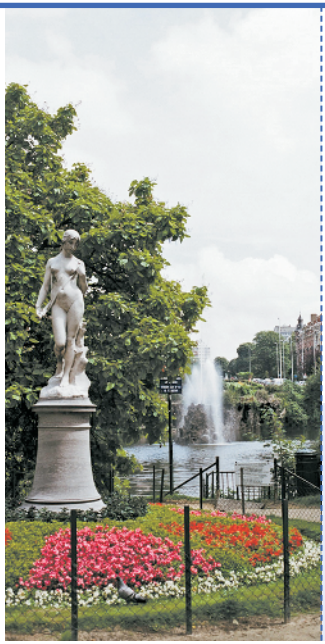
over Brussels. Just wander the streets and you come across the sinuous, undulating ironwork of balconies and windows; and of gems like 34 rue Taciturne by Paul Saintenoy (1862–1952); the Hôtel Van Eetvelde and Maison Deprez-Van de Velde, at 4 and 3 avenue Palmerston (designed by Victor Horta); houses by Armand Van Waesberghe (1879–1949) at 5, 8 and 19 square Gutenberg; the thin, oddly embellished façade of the Saint-Cyr house at 13 square Ambiorix, built in 1903 by Gustave Strauven (1878–1919) for the painter, Georges de Saint-Cyr; and the house designed by Paul Mamesse (1877–1956) in 1898, at 103 rue Charles-Quint. Some are being restored; others are crumbling; all are private homes. See Chapter 2, The Best Special-Interest Tours, p 21. *1 hr. www.brusselsartnouveau.be*

8 ★ **Casa Italiana.** Cinzia and Luca Forte's Italian deli sells hams and salamis, first-pressed olive oil and balsamic vinegars to the EU's Italian community. You'll have to get in early to grab one of the 7 tables at the back for a plate of homemade pasta or the dish of the day. *39 rue Archimede. ☎ 02 734 91 40. www.casaitaliana.be $$.*

9 ★★★ **Parc du Cinquantenaire.** The Arc de Triomphe leading into the eastern museum area of this park is as bombastic as its famous Parisian counterpart is elegant. It dwarfs everything around it, just as intended. The park was the grandest of Léopold II's schemes, a place for the world to marvel at the glory of Belgium. It was to be somewhere to show off her industry in international exhibitions, much as the 1851 Great Exhibition in London had. Léopold II commissioned the Parc and its palace to mark the 'Cinquantenaire' (50-year celebration) of Belgium as an independent country in 1880. The original plans for the exhibition halls were expanded in 1888 so that 'all the knowledge of the nation' could be displayed. Today those halls house the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, the Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire Militaire, Autoworld and the Ateliers de Moulage. *See p 31–33.*

Walking the Art Nouveau route.

10 ★ **Maison de Paul Cauchie.** Don't miss the exterior (the inside is only open the first weekend of the



The central fountain in Square Marie-Louise.

month) of this restored Art Nouveau building of 1905 that showcases the architectural and artistic talents of Paul Cauchie and his wife, Lisa. It illustrates why early 20th-century Brussels was such a seductive city. The façade's gilded mural is reminiscent of works by Czech painter Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939) and Austrian Symbolist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918). ***45 mins. 5 rue des Francs. ☎ 02 673 15 06. Admission 4€. 1st weekend of month and by appointment 11am–1pm, 2–6pm. Métro: Merode.***

11 Aux Délices de Capoue. Go on, reward yourself with an ice cream in this tearoom among the ladies who shop and stop here any day of the week. There are 40 different flavors of ice cream to tempt you, from almond milk to mandarin sorbet. ***36 avenue des Celtes. ☎ 02 733 38 33. $.***

The impressive façade of Maison de Paul Cauchie.