

Brussels, Belgium



Report made by

- **Name:** Joan
- **Social media handles:** @joan_pahisa (Twitter, Instagram), @joanp (TabiFolk)
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General information of the city

- **Name of the city and country:** Brussels, Belgium
- **Description:** Old and modern Europe coalesce in the city, with solid glass buildings in the European quarter coexisting with airy Gothic and Baroque-style spires in the Old Town. Brussels, capital of Europe and home to the European Parliament, is know for its picturesque Grand Place, its unique Atomium and its Belgian chocolate.

Transportation accessibility

- Subway accessibility in Brussels is quite complex, as even if nearly 70% of stations have got elevators from the street to the platforms, to board the subway in most stations there is still a gap plus a 15-20cm step. Here is a **map of the “accessible with assistance” stations**, as written in French and Dutch.

- Said assistance can be from a companion, from yourself (if you can manage the step on your own) or from an assistance service that you have to book (the assistance service is available from 7am to 10pm).
- You can book it in advance through this **online form** (choose “I wish to make a reservation” and “PMR-assistance in the metro” on the 2nd page of the form) or by phone at +32 (0) 2 515 23 65 (include the 0 and remove the +32 only if calling from a local phone).
- You can also book it once at the station through a yellow button with a wheelchair sign on contact points found at the entrance of each station. However, depending on the time of the day and on the station (whether there’s staff on that specific station or not), waiting times can be up to one hour.
- Having to book subway trips in advance in most stations (as most of them don’t have staff in place), makes it pretty unusable for people visiting the city.
- It is recommended to board the first car, so the driver can see you. Also, in some models, there is a specific space for wheelchairs.
- The bus system is nearly 100% wheelchair accessible. Nearly all buses have got automatic ramps for wheelchairs to board and almost all stops are also wheelchair accessible.
- To board, just give a sign to the driver or push the wheelchair button near the second door.
- The bus is the recommended transport for wheelchair users, as, even though it’s not written, by courtesy you will ride for free as paying machines are on the front door and wheelchairs board through the second door.
- As for the tramway, lines 3, 4 and 9 are mostly inaccessible. Lines 7 and 9 are more accessible. Similarly to the subway, even if platforms are wheelchair accessible, there are usually steps to board the tram, so stops are considered “accessible with assistance”.
- On trams, when there is a step to board, said assistance must be provided by a companion. You need to push the wheelchair button on the second door, your companion needs to pick up a portable ramp from the inside of the car, deploy it and store it again after use. You can find **information on stop and tram accessibility here**.
- Next stops are announced both on tramways, subways and buses. All subways and newer buses and tramways also have loudspeakers for incoming line announcements.
- For other kind of regional trains within Brussels or to other cities in Belgium, you can book assistance in advance either by phone, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp or online. Here is the **website that explains how** and all the time constraints, both for booking and for traveling.

- Around 10% of taxis in Brussels are wheelchair accessible. You can book them online at **Taxis Verts** or by phone (+32 (0) 2 349 49 49). Here is a **list with other companies offering accessible vans or taxis** throughout the Brussels region.
- **Score: 2.5/5.** Even though, 70% of subway stations have elevators, nearly all of them have a gap plus a 15 or 20cm step to board. Assistance needs to be booked and, in most of stations, as there is seldom staff in place, you need to do it in advance, rendering the service nearly unusable for visitors, if they cannot manage said step on their own. Accessible stations underway are being adapted under this “accessible with assistance” method, which, if assistance is not available anytime, totally destroys the meaning of accessible. Fortunately, buses are nearly 100% wheelchair accessible, free of charge by courtesy for wheelchair users and, thus, are the recommended means of transport.

Streets accessibility

- Streets in the historic center of Brussels are mostly paved with small cobblestone. Most of it is uneven and difficult to traverse with manual wheelchair users with smaller front wheels. Always keep an eye on the ground. The older the cobblestone, the worse it is.
- Many of the sidewalks in the historic center and some in other areas of the city are also paved with cobblestone (either small or with bigger stone tiles). Maintenance could be better, as every now and then, with small cobblestone sidewalks, there are missing pieces creating dangerous gaps on the sidewalk.
- Sidewalks not made of cobblestone are usually made of concrete, thus are way better to wheel, although maintenance could be better and bumps are not uncommon.
- While curb cuts are common, missing curb cuts are more common than in other major European cities, so don't be surprised to see wheelchairs wheeling on the streets.
- Zebra crossings on small cobblestone sidewalks do not have tactile pavement leading to them.
- Not many of the newer wide-tile or concrete sidewalks have tactile pavement either.
- Some traffic lights on wider crossing have audio signals, although not all do.
- While there are areas in Brussels where streets are mostly flat, around the historic center and near popular tourist attractions, there are many steep streets (Grand Place would be its lowest point).
- A recommendation for wheelchair users is to roll on downhill streets (minding the uneven sidewalks) and to use buses on the way up. For bus routes you can use Google Maps.

- Around the Grand Place area, streets are pedestrian only (with cobblestone), so, even if wheeling them is complicated, you will not have to worry about cars.
- Accessible public restrooms are rare.
- **Score: 2/5.** Brussels is the city of cobblestone. The older the cobblestone, the worse it is, so expect a bumpy ride while visiting the city, both on streets and on sidewalks. Uphill streets around the center, missing curb cuts every now and then, lack of tactile pavement, along with the ever-present cobblestone, make it an unfriendly walk for people with mobility impairments. Use buses as much as you can.

Restaurants & shops

- Less than 30% of shops and restaurant entrances are wheelchair accessible.
- Many inaccessible places have more than 1 step (from 2 to 4) at the entrance, making it difficult for even the most mobile wheelchair users.
- Even when entrances are accessible, steps or stairs inside are also common.
- However, entrance accessibility is improving little by little, although it has a long way to go.
- Luckily, cafés or restaurants with terraces are common near squares, so these are usually a safe bet for an accessible place to eat (if it is not raining).
- Nevertheless, as restaurants are common in the city, you will always find a place to eat, although maybe not what you were looking for.
- Supermarkets are also a good bet for accessible entrances.
- Accessible restrooms are nearly nonexistent in restaurants (most restrooms are either underground or on a higher floor and you need use stairs to access them). Also, in said accessible restrooms, accessibility compliance in many of them is also questionable (missing grab bars, not enough space to turn, etc.).
- If you are in the centre of Brussels and need a toilet break, you should go to the public library MuntPunt, near the Opera. Both in the library and in the café attached to it, there are accessible toilets, the ones in the library are paying and the one in the café is free (tip by [Eleonora](#) from TabiFolk community).
- Another cool tip by Eleonora are a couple of places to eat. [WOLF](#) food court near the city center, where you can order from different stalls and sit in a common wheelchair accessible area both indoors or outdoors or the food court at Gare Maritime, although some of the counters to order and pick up are very high, so you may need to ask for assistance from the staff.
- **Score: 2/5.** Few entrances are wheelchair accessible and many have more than one step to access. When the weather is good, terraces in restaurants around squares or food courts, such as WOLF, are your best bet. Anyway, with some extra wheeling, you

will always find a place to eat, as there are many options around, though it may not be what you were looking for. Accessible toilets are also an extremely rare sight.

Hotels & accommodation

- There are many options for accessible hotels and increasing. You can find many of them through the filters of websites such as Booking. Nevertheless, it is recommended to always confirm accessibility with the hotel by phone or by e-mail.
- Here is a **list of hotels with wheelchair accessible** rooms with either roll-in showers or accessible bathtubs.
- Lower budget options, including some wheelchair accessible hostels are found in the outskirts of the city. Poor transportation accessibility make them less convenient.
- AirBnB apartments have the same accessibility problems regarding entrances (or a bit worse) as restaurants and shops explained in the previous section, so few are wheelchair accessible.
- **Score: 3.5/5.** There are many accessible hotels in the mid-high budget range in the center of Brussels. Lower budget options are in the outskirts of the city and transportation issues make them less convenient. AirBnB apartments and the likes are mostly wheelchair inaccessible.

Tourist attractions accessibility

- The Grand Place and the historic center are one of the main tourist attractions in Brussels. Streets surrounding it and the square itself are paved with small cobblestone and tours of the City Museum and the Town Hall are not wheelchair accessible as there are steps at the entrance and no elevators in the buildings either.
- Nevertheless, even if the ride is rough, the unique sights will probably compensate the effort of moving around and there are also accessible restaurants with terraces all around.
- Manneken Pis is another of the attractions in the historic center. It's 400m away from the Grand Place. As it's on the street, it is wheelchair accessible, although, at times, there are crowds around making it difficult to position yourself nearby. Nevertheless, with a bit of patience, you will be able to have a close look at the famous bronze sculpture.
- Mont-des-Arts is a beautiful vantage point in the center of the city from where to enjoy good views and small tailored gardens. While the 3 of its "levels" or observation decks are wheelchair accessible (doing some detours to the street running along it to avoid stairs), said street is steep, although with good sidewalks, so, for manual wheelchair users, it may be better to go from top to bottom. You can get to the top either by taxi or by bus (stops near Place Royale, lines 38 and 71).

- Atomium is another of the top attractions in Brussels. Only its upper sphere (the observation deck) is wheelchair accessible through an elevator. The rest of spheres are only accessible through stairs or escalators. Admission is free for persons with disabilities, presenting a disability card.
 - As it's far from the city center, getting there by bus takes a long time and by subway it may present accessibility issues (check the [Transportation section](#) for more details).
 - Some of the temporary exhibits in Atomium, as well as passing through the tubes connecting spheres, may cause epileptic seizures due to sound and light effects. [For more information on Atomium, you can check its website.](#)
 - To mention a good example of great overall accessibility, you can visit the Musical Instrument Museum, near Place Royale. Here are all its [accessibility features](#).
 - Also, the European quarter, where the European Parliament is, has better overall street and sidewalk accessibility than the rest of the city, so it's more friendly towards people with mobility impairments.
 - Other attractions in the city, such as churches or cathedrals are a bit of a hit or miss with accessibility, while some can only be viewed from the outside, due to steps at the entrance (e.g. the church in Place Royale), others have side entrances that are wheelchair accessible (e.g. the cathedral of St. Michel and St. Gudula, that can be access through the gift shop, although cobblestone and high curbs on the sidewalks around make it difficult to find an "accessible" or feasible route).
 - Finally, the Park of Brussels, next to Place Royale, is mostly wheelchair friendly, as the ground is mostly made of compact dirt paths.
- **Score: 2.5/5.** Most outdoor attractions, such as, the Grand Place or Mont-des-Arts, are feasible on a wheelchair (better if it is electric, has some kind of power assist or has bigger front wheels), though be ready for rough cobblestone and steep streets anyway. However, many indoor attractions are not wheelchair accessible due to steps, stairs or a lack of elevators. For instance, only the top observation deck of Atomium has elevator access. Also, few of the attractions offer accessibility for people with visual or hearing impairments. The Musical Instrument Museum is a pleasant exception.

Getting there

- Brussels has two main airports, Brussels Airport (BRU), getting flights from around the world, and Charleroi Airport (CRL), which is 55km away from the city and is mostly served by European low-cost airlines.
- From Brussels Airport, the most wheelchair accessible option to the city center is the bus (lines 12 and 21) that gets you from the airport to near the European Parliament in about 30 minutes. There are buses every 20 minutes.

- Another option is to get a wheelchair accessible taxi (see the [Transportation section](#) for more details).
 - Finally, there is also a direct train from the airport to the city center. Unfortunately, if you need assistance to board the train, you have to book assistance at least 3 hours in advance from the train's departure time (also see the [Transportation section](#) for more details on booking assistance for train rides).
 - If you get to CRL airport, a taxi ride to Brussels costs around 100€. There is also a train that takes 2 hours from the airport to the city center. Again, assistance to board the train needs to be booked in advance.
 - You can also get to Brussels from other European cities (e.g. London, Paris, Amsterdam, etc.) by train. You will most probably arrive at Gare du Midi station located in the south of the city. In order to book for assistance, you should do so from the train operator company (Eurostar, ICE, Thalys, TGV) when buying the tickets.
 - From Gare du Midi to the city center there are both subway (see the [Transportation section](#) for subway accessibility) or bus connections.
- **Score: 4/5.** From Brussels airport to the city center there are two accessible bus lines that get you there in about 30 minutes. Assistance for other options needs to be booked in advance.

Overall accessibility score

- **Score:** 16.5/30. Overall **2.8/5 stars**.
- **Summary:** Get ready for the fight with cobblestone and other mobility mishaps and for the fact that Brussels' accessibility doesn't match by far its weight as the capital of Europe. What does indeed match it, though, is its magnificent historic center that still make it a must see destination. Pretty good accommodation and "getting there" accessibility somewhat save the day.