

News Letter



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Contact Centre:
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Introduction

› By Michiel Schokking, Owner Taking Up Residence

Welcome to the March edition of our (PDF) newsletter.

This month Belgium is featured. Belgium has been successful in positioning itself as an influential global player thanks to the presence of the European Union and NATO headquarters in Brussels, and by hosting one of the world's largest ports in Antwerp.

For those planning a move to Belgium in the near future, visit the www.takingupresidence.com website for the the latest tips and information on Belgium.

In this issue, [Laga](#), the largest immigration practice in Belgium with offices in Brussels , Antwerp, Diegem and Kortrijk provides an overview and comparison of the immigration processes for highly skilled workers in Belgium, the UK, Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Spain.

An overview of business culture do's and don'ts when doing business in Belgium is also included, as is a refreshing article from our Guest Contributor, Sezin Koehler about managing your expat expectations. Also new in this edition are the Personal Observations of Life in Belgium , provided by [TUR - Expat Web](#) members and readers.

We are very happy to see that the Expat Web group has so quickly developed into an effective network for more than 5,500 professionals worldwide. The successful collaboration between Expat Web and TUR has proven effective in providing our members with information, interviews and resources for those living abroad or relocating to another country, whether it is to study, work or retire. With TUR expanding its country profile offerings with Singapore and new Products and Services for Expats (both second quarter, 2010), we hope to establish an even better platform to guide your travels or move abroad.

Feel free to post your feedback on the [Expat Web forum!](#)

Many thanks,
Michiel Schokking



Work Toward Greater Mobility and Flexibility

› *By Matthias Lommers, Lawyer at Laga*

International mobility and flexibility have become key factors in today's business climate. However, immigration procedures in Europe are continually changing, while remaining complex and stringent in most countries. Moreover, compliance with local employment and social security rules is strictly controlled, and severe sanctions are imposed for non-compliance.

In order for businesses to employ staff from abroad in Belgium, international recruits are required to follow strict guidelines for migration. At present, employees from abroad must apply for work permits, produce E-documents, hold satisfactory social documentation that can be adapted properly to contracts and payroll requirements, and comply with migration rules. The entire process seems complex and stringent for both the employer and foreign employee, but when compared to the processes in neighboring countries, the Belgian migration rules are not the most difficult to comply with.

The Laga law firm has the largest immigration practice in Belgium, and the biggest hurdle in our immigration practice is the absence of an elaborate immigration policy on a larger European level. This is further compounded by the shortage of highly skilled professionals in the European labor market. EU member states have entered into a battle for brainpower and are trying to attract as many third country professionals as possible by easing their immigration rules for these professionals over the past few years.

This mêlée for brainpower has resulted in more and more changes, making the ability of immigration professionals attempting to advise clients on EU immigration increasingly difficult. It is for this reason, that Laga organized a European Immigration Survey.

Published on a biannual basis, this survey located at <http://www.takingupresidence.com/download/ImmigrationStudy-2009-Laga.pdf> is the result of co-operation between Laga and its foreign member firms. It aims to provide an objective overview of the immigration processes to be complied with following the employment of third-country highly skilled

workers in Belgium , the UK , Germany , Italy , France , the Netherlands, and Spain .

In the first part of the study, a brief overview of the immigration processes in the different countries is provided, and then a comparison of the necessary requirements is given in the second part. The comparison shows that the Belgian migration (work permit) process is by far the fastest and easiest in terms of compliance. Looking at the time it takes to process a work permit application in Belgium (about 2 weeks), and what the conditions are in order to obtain a work permit for a highly skilled employee (earning at least 36.355 EUR gross on a yearly basis in 2009), we can conclude it has become easier for foreign professionals to secure employment in Belgium in comparison to neighboring nations.

Belgian immigration authorities (Ministry of Employment and Ministry of Internal Affairs) are constantly looking for means to facilitate the immigration processes, especially for highly skilled employees of large corporations with European headquarters in Belgium, and for individuals coming from investing countries.

Recent developments, such as the fast-track visa service, the work permit exemption for managers employed with EU headquarters, and the installation of the service for economic migration, have resulted in an easier and faster migration process for foreign expats.

Matthias Lommers

Lawyer

T. 0032.2.800.70.69

[Mlommers@laga.be](mailto:mlommers@laga.be)

Regional Division Encourages Compromise

› *By Diana Heeb Bivona, Senior Editor*

Despite its relative small size and modest economic power in comparison to its neighbors, Belgium has been successful in positioning itself as an influential player in the global environment. Thanks in part to NATO in Brussels, and one of the world's largest ports in Antwerp, the country continues to attract a multitude of Natocrats, Eurocrats and multinationals that could rival the most cosmopolitan of countries.

The country's accomplishments are somewhat startling when you consider its lack of internal cohesiveness due to deep cultural divisions. The Dutch-speaking Flemish in the north and the French-speaking Walloons in the south are deeply entrenched culturally in their respective regions. Even the federal structure of the country was set up to foster the cultural distinctions and strong regional self-identity found throughout the country.

Surprisingly despite the differences between these ethnic groups, which are often significant and sometimes divisive, most Belgians have perfected the art of negotiation and compromise. It is therefore no stretch for someone working with the Belgians to appreciate that before making any decision, issues go through a long often-bureaucratic process of critical discussion, and are given substantial attention before any final decision is proffered.

Belgians are careful and prudent when forming business relationships, so appreciate that it will take time for trust to develop. While third party introductions are not necessary, they can prove helpful in gaining an introduction and initiating a conversation.

Group or team harmony is paramount. Therefore, if working as part of a team, mastering the skill of conflict avoidance will serve you well. Subtlety and diplomacy are also highly valued, whereas a tendency toward confrontation will not be well received. It is also best to refrain from engaging in open disagreement if you are in a meeting. While you can expect to attend many meetings, most will be for information dissemination and for sharing ideas, as most decisions are made by senior firm members and delivered from the top-down.

Regional differences influence business culture as well, and can often come into play, especially when it comes to communication. For instance, the Flemish tend to prefer directness in their speech, generally saying what they mean. Walloons on the other hand, like the French, favor more rhetoric and tend to be more verbose.

For those visiting Belgium or working with Belgian counterparts, you may want to stick with English, especially if you are unsure what your counterparts speak (French, Flemish, German or English). English remains a "neutral" language and does not identify you with one particular fraction or another, which could potentially cause some friction, particularly if you communicate with someone in

the wrong language, i.e. a Flemish associate in French! As most Belgians are well versed in English, using English should not be an issue regardless of the region.

Belgians are open and engaging people who are outwardly welcoming and friendly. Remain conscious that regional cultural differences can be significant and remain respectful and accommodating of those differences, and you are sure to do well.

Visiting, Relocating and the Journey In Between

› *By Sezin Koehler, Guest Contributor*

Visiting a country and relocating to a new country are two very different experiences, even if they may happen to be the same country. There are a number of reasons to visit a place: Maybe you're going on holiday, maybe you've got family or friends to see, maybe it's a place you've read about and always wanted to check out.

Deciding to relocate somewhere for the long term also comes with its unique set of reasons: Maybe you visited once and want an extended stay, maybe you've been transferred by your job, maybe you've always dreamed of being an expat living in that particular place. What experienced travellers and permanent expats learn very quickly, and sometimes painfully, is that our experience visiting a location may not be an appropriate yardstick on how actually living in a place can be.

I had visited Istanbul for the first time when I was 17. Ten years later, I moved there with my husband, only to find that my great visit a decade earlier would not determine how I felt living there. Time, circumstances and life had changed, and the Istanbul I found myself living in was far from the place it appeared to be at first glance. My initial experience of the beauty and history of the city was overshadowed by the difficulties of being an independent American woman living in a predominantly conservative Muslim part of town. The modern, European Istanbul that I saw during my visit was very different from the industrial suburb I called home for a year. However, I had the absolute opposite experience concerning India. I had visited India with my grandparents when my family was living in Pakistan during the early 1990s. We

spent 10 days doing the cliché must-do India things, like visiting the Taj Mahal and going on nature safaris. It was not until a few years later that my mother, working for UNICEF, was then transferred to New Delhi. While I remember loving our trip to India, living there was a significantly more magnificent experience. The culture and land is so diverse, one needs a great deal of time to be able to explore and understand the varied nature of Indian history, culture and people. The five and a half years I lived in New Delhi were among the most amazing in my life. All of the opportunity it gave me to explore not just New Delhi and its environs, but travel throughout the nation and its subcontinent, changed my view of the world as a whole.

I currently live in Prague, Czech Republic. I had never visited here before relocating four years ago, and if I had visited, I probably never would have agreed to relocate. The weather is horrible, ethnically it is not a very diverse place, and...did I mention the weather is horrible? Nevertheless, negative traits of Prague aside, I have found my creative center here and I am constantly amazed at the never-ending supply of artistic energy available to me. If I had only visited Prague, all I would have seen would have been the tourist sites and nightlife. I would not have been able to know how beautifully alien this place can be, and how each day brings with it a new sense of inspiration and momentum.

What it comes down to is that we as expats may never know where we will end up next, and what will bring us there. It may be somewhere we simply dreamed of or actually visited. Regardless, it is always a very personal decision. The important thing is to keep an open mind and ease up on the expectations that the place will or won't be for us. After seeing the film *In Bruges*, the city itself has moved up on my list of places to visit, although I have never really had any desire to live in Belgium. Then again, one never knows when the next place will grab the spirit and hold fast.

As a Third Culture Kid, Sezin has literally lived all over the world since birth. Born in Colombo, Sri Lanka to a Lithuanian-American mother and Singhalese-Tamil father, Sezin then went on to live in Zambia, Thailand, Pakistan, India, California, Switzerland, France, Spain, Turkey and currently calls Prague, Czech Republic home.

Personal Observations of Life in Belgium

Recently, we asked members and readers to share their personal observations about living in Belgium. Here are just a few excerpts of the comments received:

Moshe Haviv, VOIP Systems, Belgacom International Carrier Services

I would like to point some things that struck me and still do since I arrived in Belgium...

- Free Internet access is almost nonexistent except for McDonalds and Ekki (a health food place with branches in Brussels and Antwerp).
- Except for medium and upper range places (except for Ekki but including McDonalds), you have to pay for the toilette- some 50 Euro cents.
- Finding directions, a specific address except for the center of town, was and still is difficult for me. For some reason street names, even for very long streets are placed only at the start and at the end.
- For someone new the usage of two names for each place, one in French and the other in Flemish might be confusing (Antwerp-Anvers, Mechelen-Malin, etc.). For some time, I thought Anvers and Antwerp were two closely placed towns!
- There is almost no bus service between cities in Belgium. I could not find one. When there was a train strike, and I was living in Antwerp and my work was in Brussels, I had to stay at home...

Elzine Zeijlstra, Product Manager chez Environment Acoustics

The biggest pro is that Belgium is an extremely easygoing country to live in. In Belgium, nobody puts their nose into your business. You can find anything, do anything, get very fast and easily to London, Paris, Köln, and Amsterdam.

Although Brussels is the capital of Europe housing is still far cheaper than in those other just mentioned European cities and there is enough choice for anyone....

The biggest cons are the taxes (if you don't work for the EU where they have not got the same high taxes as we have), and if you do live here for a bit longer, of course the Belgian political problems between the Flemish and the Walloons...

Anne Egros, Global Executive Coach

Why I love Brussels:

- The Art Nouveau Buildings: For me, it is like when I was in New York City, I had my head looking up to admire the architecture while walking. This literally cheers me up!
- So many nice, cosy, good food restaurants: It is very lively at night in Brussels, people seem to enjoy being in groups or romantic couples dining "aux chandelles."
- Open Markets: I live near place Flagey where an open market is there every Saturday. The farmers market in the Place du Chatelain is also very nice on Wednesdays. You can talk to the producers directly, and taste some products, lovely.
- The International Community: There are so many events for expats. I enjoy meeting new people every week. People respond quickly to new ideas and a lot of businesses are owned by independent consultants. Being a foreigner here is relatively easy even if you don't speak French, as English is spoken everywhere inside the Brussels capital.
- The "A la Magritte" surrealistic ideas like totally closing Brussels to cars on Sunday of the "mobility." I found it funny to see bikes, rollers and hear no noise except children playing in the streets.

Things I do not like:

- When bureaucracy becomes absurd such as waiting 6 to 10 weeks to get a Belgium ID and driving licence even if you are an EU citizen.
- Bad Customer Services (it is really shocking that people here do not care if you buy or not buy their stuff!). Very few sales people will go the extra-mile to help you. Such a great difference compared to the USA.
- Creating a company or becoming an independent: I did the whole process and got a notice that I have to pay about 600 Euros every 3 months for social and medical state insurance even as an expat. I do not use the Belgium system at all. Also, I found it absurd they ask for your diploma. I have a doctorate so it was no problem but for other foreigners it can be challenging to show the equivalence. Again, a huge difference [compared to the] USA where you can create an LLC online within less an hour.
- The traffic can be terrible, but I think this is the case for major big cities around the world.