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BRUSSELS
AHEAD OF THE CURVE

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Brussels, the capital of 500 million Europeans, boasts a diverse and multicultural population with a range of architectural styles. It is a city with a contagious creativity, characterized by a touch of surrealism and humor, and a strong sense of sociability and enjoyment of life. Despite all these recognizable traits, none of them fully capture its true essence. With its possible designation as the European Capital of Culture in 2030, the city is now a sought-after destination for associations and association events.



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Boardroom \ The Best Resource for Associations

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Brussels, the capital of Belgium, holds a unique place on both the European and global tourism maps. It has established itself as a major international city while also offering a perfect blend of business and leisure opportunities. This allows visitors and residents alike to experience a comfortable lifestyle that is fulfilling both professionally and personally, all year round. The city's position as a hub of activity, combined with its accessibility and livability, has cemented its status as a sought-after destination for those looking for a well-balanced quality of life.

MAJOR GATEWAY FOR ASSOCIATIONS

A city with a harmonious blend of urban and green spaces, as well as industrial and cultural influences, Brussels has been attracting international and European associations for some time. In fact, it has positioned itself as a major gateway for over 2,400 organizations, making it a priority to support them in achieving their international business objectives.

Since 1919, the capital of Belgium has had favorable legislation that provides a specific status for international associations. This has led to the evolution of association setup in the city, which has closely

paralleled the developments in international social and economic spheres. Over the years, the focus of these associations has shifted from scientific societies and industry trade federations to a more diverse range of sectors, including finance, medicine, culture, sports, and more recently audio-visual, digital, e-commerce, and fintech. This continuous diversity and innovation in the association landscape makes Brussels a hub for creating partnerships and fostering collaboration, as well as for exchanging knowledge, experience, and new ideas.

"International associations have a significant impact on our destination that extends beyond their direct economic contributions, such as the creation of jobs and the generation of overnight stays through their meetings," says visit.brussels CEO Patrick Bontinck. *"Non-profits organizations and professional societies play a key role in the European democratic process by providing decision-makers with consolidated data and positions for the sector they represent. Moreover, Brussels is a city open to the world and international associations participate in this openness by encouraging dialogue and international exchanges."*

The presence of the European Union, NATO, and over 15,000 lobbyists, along with the regular convening of summits for 28 heads of state and the presence of more than 1,000 press correspondents, definitely contribute to the openness

Bontinck refers to. Other factors, such as its central location, accessibility, professional services, high-quality universities and hospitals, and the presence of organizations like the Federation of International Associations of Belgium (FAIB) and the European Society of Association Executives (ESAE), also make Brussels a desirable destination. The capital of Europe consistently ranks high in the Union of International Associations (UIA) rankings, outperforming many of its larger competitors.

"As our headquarters is based in Brussels, with more than 1100 European members, we have regular engagement with the European institutions," says Mohamed Mezghani, Secretary General, International Union for Public Transport (UITP). *"UITP interacts with decision makers to advance sustainable urban mobility, and we benefit from being in the city for this level of face-to-face engagement."*

Elisabeth Van Ingelgem, the Director of Strategy and International at visit.brussels, emphasizes the broader impact that international associations have on the city beyond their direct economic activity related to their events. According to Van Ingelgem, these associations bring a range of benefits to Brussels, including education, knowledge exchange, participation in European democracy, and image enhancement. *"Given the significance of these benefits, it is essential for visit.brussels to ensure that these*

associations feel supported and comfortable in the city. To meet these expectations, we have developed additional services, even those that are not directly related to the organization of events, to make the experience as positive as possible for these groups," she says

A few years back, Brussels joined the Global Association Hubs Partnership, alongside Washington, Dubai, and Singapore, to foster the growth of associations in key regions and better serve their members abroad. *"By participating in GAHP, visit.brussels has joined other world capitals that are 'like-minded' and leaders in their respective regions",* continues Van Ingelgem. *"This way we ensure we continue to make a difference by bringing that extra something to the associations that are headquartered here. This partnership can also be used to serve associations directly by helping them develop their activities globally."*

EXTRA SOMETHING

That "extra something" refers to the unique association ecosystem present in the region, which sets it apart from other cities in the world. In the case of Brussels, this ecosystem encompasses association education, making it a hub for association executives to network and learn. Associations of associations play a crucial role in this ecosystem by offering a range of educational opportunities. For instance, ESAE organizes monthly online and in-person workshops, UIA's bi-annual Brussels Roundtable is a highly attended event, and FAIB's lunches-debates provide a platform for discussions and finding solutions. Other initiatives include the Brussels International Association Forum (BIAF) organized every year by ASSOCIATIONWORLD.

Visit.brussels also offers its own educational opportunities, such as the series of four webinars known as Brussels Insights. These sessions are designed specifically for the leaders of international associations and supporting organizations, helping them to adapt to today's rapidly changing environment and the evolving expectations of their members, society, and policymakers. The Brussels Insights sessions are meant to



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complement the annual European Association Summit (EAS), hosted by visit.brussels as well. Its mission is to bring together international and European associations and non-profit organizations for the purpose of knowledge transfer, peer-to-peer exchange, and sharing of best practices.

Additionally, the Executive Master in International Association Management at Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management offers a comprehensive education program aimed at addressing the current challenges faced by the association sector in today's economy. The curriculum is focused, practical, and action-oriented, providing participants with the tools and knowledge necessary to become efficient and effective leaders in international association management.

As Brussels continues to grow and adapt its international presence in these challenging times, it demonstrates its resilience by taking advantage of opportunities and ensuring that its strategy will bring benefits to all in the long run.

How Brussels Convention & Association Bureau can help

In an effort to maintain its position as the premier destination for international organizations, visit.brussels has established the Convention and Association Bureau to support these organizations in achieving their business objectives. The Bureau offers support in four key areas:

- *First-stop Shop:* The Bureau serves as a single point of contact for associations, providing guidance and information related to setting up and running an organization in Brussels.
- *Training Opportunities:* The Bureau centralizes information on training initiatives and education opportunities for associations.
- *Networking:* The Bureau provides opportunities for association executives to meet, network, and exchange information.
- *Global Association Hubs Partnership (GAHP):* Through its partnership with Destination DC, Dubai, and Singapore, Brussels offers a unique platform for international associations to develop their global strategies.
- *Association headquarters:* visit.brussels can prepare application documents for the establishment of association HQs in Brussels upon request.



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An Obvious Choice for Association Events

The numbers speak for themselves: the most recent UIA ranking brings Brussels at the top of the list of cities for meetings and congresses. When it comes to adding value to an event Brussels seems to be a first choice among national and international associations. The city's intellectual capital, sense of positive impact, access to decision-makers and variety of venues are determining factors that add value to conferences.



FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE SECTORS

Local thought leaders are present in governing bodies of hundreds of international associations, providing solid ground for their and other like-minded associations to bring their event to Brussels. This influence is at its strongest within five key economic sectors: Healthcare, Sustainable Economy, Digital Economy, Biosciences and Finance & Trade.

With 7 university hospitals and 24 healthcare centres in the wider region, the city is a leader in the Healthcare sector. From oncology (19% of all clinical trials related to cancer worldwide are conducted in Brussels) to a fine-tuned network in public health (50% of the Brussels citizens have given their consent for the Electronic Medical Records system - E-Health), the city is well advanced in the field. The ecosystem boasts the highest number in Europe for clinical trials per capita and second worldwide.

The city's social and environmental sustainability strategies, policies and performances brought Brussels in the top 10 destinations of the GDS-Index worldwide in 2020. With heavy investment in renewable energy sources, strict demands for new buildings and urban circular economy, Brussels has attracted a lot of associations active in the field of sustainability. The Annual Carbon Capture & Storage Summit, Sustainable Energy Week and many other clean-tech events find fertile ground for discussions with the numerous policymakers based in the city.

From emerging start-ups to multinational headquarters, the Brussels digital ecosystem has penetrated all economic sectors, creating strong collaborations between government, academia, and businesses. 2,000 ICT companies and technological incubators are based in Brussels, including Google, Amazon, and Philips. The

sector includes Computer Sciences with many specialties that are well developed in local academic and research institutions, especially Software and Data Science, Artificial Intelligence, and its applications.

The region enjoys a strong Biosciences scene, as the 200 pharmaceutical companies operating there prove. In fact, Belgium is the second largest pharma exporter in the world. It is attractive soil for innovation in the field, with rates higher than its neighboring countries. Bright example in clinical research is Pfizer, with different sites across the city creating opportunities for innovation.

Due to the favorable conditions for their growth, Brussels also hosts a diverse array of R&D organizations that form a thriving ecosystem. This ecosystem is further bolstered by the presence of bioscience multinationals such as GSK, Baxter, J&J, UCB, IBA, Abbvie, Eurogentec, among others, which have a significant impact on the growth and development of startups and SMEs.

Financial Services, Business Services and Commerce & Trade are naturally developed in Brussels as the city is the heart of the EU institutions. In fact, in order to keep up with the demand in the sector, Brussels has established a lot of business schools with professors who are members of relevant associations.

Harnessing the rich expertise and knowledge which Brussels has acquired in these fields, relevant conferences can raise their profile, create more value for the delegates and leave a legacy. Networking and collaborating with expert local stakeholders is a twofold win: attendees are more engaged and interested in exchanging and finding new ideas while the local community benefits from the results this meeting of great minds brings.



MAXIMUM EXPOSURE FOR AN EVENT

Brussels is swarming with international associations headquarters and is considered the world's top association city. The ecosystem that has been created is unique and is constantly growing with new partnerships. Incoming events can tap into these collaborations to promote their mission.

To complete the picture, Brussels has the highest concentration of EU officials, diplomats, decision-makers, lobbyists, and journalists. Brussels-based and visiting journalists actually have their own social and business meeting place at the Press Club. Press conferences, public debates among media, representatives of the European institutions and more find their voice and spread the news across Europe. It is a true hub for international media and press agencies.

As a result, finding the right people to connect with and interesting business opportunities to make an event more valuable and meaningful for the delegates is easy. Additionally, conferences do not go unnoticed at a place where so many high-level private partners, public authorities, and journalists coexist. This kind of exposure also contributes to building an association's membership with skilled experts.

What is important is that it is all happening in one city without language restrictions. No matter where delegates come from, Brussels has it covered: with 183 nationalities living there and official interpreters and translators in the 24 official EU languages, everyone feels at home.

TRANSPORTATION HUB

Access to the city is undeniably a plus when organizing an event in Brussels. Over 200 direct destinations are served by the close-to-the-city airport, and it is the centre of Europe's densest high-speed train networks. Big cities like Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Cologne are less than a two-hour train ride to the city centre. And the return of night trains offers even more sustainable travel options.

A safe space for associations

This year, visit.brussels is getting closer to the EU Bubble with the upcoming inauguration of a brand new office in the immediate vicinity of the Schuman district (avenue d'Auderghem 63). This "safe space" is intended to become the key meeting point in Brussels for the ecosystem of international associations. By contributing in welcoming and animating the association community, visit.brussels hopes to bring considerable added value to the associative landscape and indirectly contribute to accelerating the development of a positive business tourism for the capital.

Once you are in the city, its compact size facilitates easy and sustainable transportation. Metro, bus, and tram lines run through the entire city, whereas there is always the option of walking to many hotels, convention centres and tourist attractions if you are staying in the city centre. Its strategic location gives Brussels an advantage for easy access that few cities can enjoy.

SERVICES FOR MEETING PLANNERS

Bringing an association event to the city is a team effort and the Convention and Association Bureau visit.brussels go out of their way to help event planners at every step of the process. International business events with up to 10,000 participants can enjoy free support programs from bidding and making the right contacts to optimizing the development of an event and the participation of the attendees.

The team of experts can assist with building a bidding strategy and suggest various support sources and even prepare a bidding book. They are also the link between organizers, attendees and the right local stakeholders who may vary for each conference. Through the Growth Support Program (for 500+ participants) the Bureau can help promote an event globally and locally to increase attendance. Furthermore, they provide welcome support to attendees who wish to connect to the host city. The 'Tell your delegates' online brochure promotes, in that regard, bleisure by informing event planners and delegates about the cultural activities in the city - there are 23,000 events year-round in Brussels!

SUSTAINABILITY ABOVE ALL

Brussels is a city where conferences offer more than knowledge exchange; they become hubs of positive environmental and social

impact. Responsible business tourism is a top priority for Brussels since it helps not just the environment but also the local community.

visit.brussels is committed to sustainability and can help planners find sustainable venues and businesses and social equity solutions. The annual digital brochure 'Let's Meet' identifies all existing labelled options and simplifies the selection of responsible partners. Choosing the right district for an event is also important as it minimizes transfers and maximizes accessibility (use of e-bikes and e-scooters, bike-friendly accommodation and venues, hotels accessible to people with reduced mobility).

The team gives associations access to the latest Brussels Sustainable Events Guide and Circular Economy Guide in order to get the conversation started and match the right activities to the right event. They will analyze with each association the possible support, grants and funding a sustainable and accessible event can access.

Virginie Lurkin, manager of the Convention Bureau at visit.brussels, says: *"In essence, we are directing our efforts towards promoting tourism that has a beneficial effect. Our goal is not just to be sustainable, but to consider the long-term advantages that both leisure and business travelers can bring to the destination, including economic, cultural, social, and environmental benefits. Additionally, we are reviewing our loyalty program to ensure it aligns with our overall vision for tourism."*

Meeting planners have also the opportunity to experience all that the city and the Bureau have to offer before bringing the event to Brussels. Four times a year visit.brussels organize short guided tours to introduce organizers to new trends, places and activities that constantly pop up in Brussels. These Seasonal Events are free for meeting planners (groups of up to 40 people) and aim to

Meeting Facilities

In such a dense ecosystem of policymakers, academics, journalists and association executives, the right infrastructure for meetings of all forms and sizes is necessary. Within its six districts, the city of Brussels has long met the need for large convention centres, unique venues, meeting hotels and virtual studios all of which offer diverse solutions for diverse demands especially on the sustainability front.

In the heart of the historical and cultural centre and close to the European institutions, the all-glass SQUARE-Brussels Convention Centre is a modern venue able to host up to more than 6,000 participants. The venue is close to all kinds of hotels, easily accessible by metro and close to the international train station.

Part of the city's industrial heritage, the Tour & Taxis venues offer multiple upscale adjacent event spaces, each with their different atmosphere, being for 2 or for 10,000 guests.

In a different district, at the foot of the Atomium, the Brussels EXPO is easily reachable by car (large parking facilities) or metro. Its main halls are Event Hall 10 (a ready-to-use and modular black box for up to 2,000 pax, Palais 12 (plenary room for 2000 until 9500 pax), as well as a wide range of other meeting rooms, including 3 studios for digital events.

inspire the return to onsite business events and present the newest places and latest trends for delegates and conferences.

BEYOND CONFERENCE CENTRES

With over 200 venues, Brussels is full of original meeting spaces. This is the pride and joy of the destination. There are only very few places in the world where you can hold a conference in a museum of fine arts, for example!

When looking for more spice for an event, the Brussels Special Venues Associations has created a selection of 36 unique venues spread across the city to choose from. A wide range of styles, atmospheres, surface areas, and layout possibilities are found in charming buildings like Autoworld, House Grand Place, Atomium, or Train World.

The picture is complete when you add the many conference hotels for all price ranges. From the DoubleTree by Hilton in the city with a plenary room of 630 sq. to the Cardo Brussels Hotel (opening in 2024) with 15 meeting rooms, the choice is endless. Additionally, there are many trendy co-working spaces for event hire (eg. Topos, Silversquare) as well as virtual studios for online events (eg. Bluepoint, Transforma XL, Pentahotel).



Brussels in Action: Three Ambassadors Share their Experiences

Brussels is a leading destination for international meetings and events. If it has become one, it's partly thanks to the Brussels Meetings Ambassador Programme, created by visit.brussels, which gives voice to the experts who proudly support the city and help to strengthen its reputation.



Brussels Meetings Ambassador Programme acknowledges the expertise and enthusiasm of local ambassadors, who are passionate about their city and are eager to share their knowledge with others. These ambassadors serve as the voice of Brussels, highlighting the city's unique features, strengths, and benefits to potential attendees and stakeholders. Through their efforts, the Brussels Meetings Ambassador Programme has the ability to mobilize speakers, participants and sponsors and helps to solidify Brussels' reputation as a leading destination for international meetings and events. The initiative not only focuses on the present, but also has a forward-thinking aspect that aims to pinpoint potential ambassadors in specific centres of excellence for the future.

This honorary program offered by visit.brussels provides various resources, activities, and services to assist key players in enhancing their bid for an international event. Over the course of its existence, about 150 Ambassadors have successfully hosted over 80 trade fairs, congresses, and annual events in Brussels, attracting approximately 500,000 attendees. Additionally, they are in charge of planning more than 60 large scale-events in Europe's capital city.

Boardroom met with three Brussels' Meeting Ambassadors and here is what they had to say.

Malgosia Bartosik, is Deputy CEO of WindEurope. For her, to be headquartered in the European capital is crucial:



"The so-called «Brussels bubble» is actually very advantageous when it comes to shaping policies and advocating for regulatory changes. Given the current political instability, decisions are being made quickly, requiring organizations like WindEurope to be more agile and proactive in their approach. Being in Brussels puts WindEurope at the center of decision-making, offering easy access to the right individuals, networks, and information. The city is also well-connected, with multiple train routes and the Zaventem airport in close proximity."

"Brussels is also ideal for hosting smaller events. WindEurope loves organizing members' receptions, workshops, and working groups here, as there is a wide range of venues available for formal or semi-formal gatherings. The VisitBrussels team is always ready to provide innovative ideas for the location, format, promotion, and suppliers. WindEurope is eagerly looking forward to hosting their large annual conference and exhibition in Brussels again. The event typically attracts 10-12,000 people from all over the world, and has been held twice at the Brussels Expo."

Pr. **Damien Gruson**, Saint-Luc University Hospital, got the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine, to organize its General Conference in Brussels in 2022.



"Brussels has many advantages as a location for hosting conferences, particularly one like the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine. Being one of the most environmentally conscious cities in Europe, it is centrally located, making it easy to reach via sustainable modes of transportation. This location also makes it a prime destination for networking with key



decision-makers and policy-makers due to the presence of various European institutions. The city is recognized globally for its expertise in health and laboratory medicine, providing a platform for showcasing the work that is being done here."

"In addition, the socio-cultural assets of Brussels are diverse and abundant, reflecting the city's rich history, vibrant cultural scene, and unique blend of traditional and contemporary elements. Brussels' linguistic diversity has helped to create a rich cultural heritage and a thriving arts scene, with many different communities coexisting and contributing to the city's cultural richness. And of course, its offering in terms of food and drinks, starting with waffles, chocolate and beer, partake to make it an enjoyable destination!"

Tina Marolt, is Director, Events at Hydrogen Europe, the European association representing the interest of the hydrogen industry and its stakeholders and promoting hydrogen as an enabler of a zero-emission society.



"I see the city of Brussels and Hydrogen Europe as sharing common values and characteristics. Both of us have a role in uniting and representing various groups and stakeholders, advocating for European and global initiatives, and being the main agents of change for the future of our respective fields."

"Hosting events in Brussels always feels right. It's a big city but with a small-town feel, easily accessible but with a lot of different options. It offers everything that one needs to execute a successful event, big or small, from different types of venues to excellent culinary choices."

"Brussels is an all-inclusive destination which is why Hydrogen Europe has chosen to make it the location for its flagship event, the European Hydrogen Week, held yearly. With more than 3,000 attendees, the event serves as a hub for leading figures from the industry, policy makers, and researchers, each on the lookout for the latest trends. Being situated in the heart of Europe adds to the value and enjoyment for both participants and organizers."

Let's MEET in Brussels



Dare to bring your association
to the next level!


CONVENTION
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