

Three Top Belgian Properties

A five-star Brussels icon, a large complex outside the city and a manor house

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

Many American travelers dismiss Belgium as an obligatory entry to or exit from another European destination. They never consider it a priority for a dedicated, extended stay, and that is a mistake.

Belgium merits consideration far beyond a forced airport stopover for all types of clients. And here they'll find some of Europe's most impressive hotels and resorts, ensuring their stay is both unique and first-class.

Brussels

Hotel Le Plaza (www.hotel-leplaza-brussels.com) is along Boulevard Adolphe Maxlaan and within walking distance of Brussels Grand-Place and upscale shopping streets. This 1930s, five-star hotel is one of the city's most venerable luxury properties. With a rich history that includes hosting some of the world's most renowned celebrities and politicians, its well-appointed, meticulously maintained facilities no doubt retain much of the hotel's original charm, a look patterned after Paris' George V Hotel.

The hotel underwent a substantial renovation in 1996, a thorough overhaul that holds up without blemish to this day.

Its 193 rooms, comfortably spaced among seven floors, include a generous collection of standard rooms and suites that are all sparkling and spacious.

Traditional rooms (137 total) combine a warm blend of pleasing colors, perfect to soothe the most weary leisure or business traveler. There's a generous assortment of more than 50 suites, including five Executive Suites with separate meet-



Prestige room at Hotel Le Plaza in Brussels

ing areas and one Plaza Suite, a sumptuous penthouse space of 750 square feet, complete with salon, private balcony, and every imaginable high-tech convenience.

Some of the hotel's amenities include a fine-dining restaurant, The Esterel, with its accompanying bar; fitness center; 24-hour concierge services; the lavish Plaza Theatre that accommodates parties up to 800 guests; and nine meeting and function rooms that serve up to 250 attendees.

The hotel pays 10 percent commission. Contact Axel De Sambucy for VIP guests (axel.desambucy@leplaza-brussels.be); www.leplaza-brussels.be; +32 2 278 01 00.

La Hulpe

For those needing easy access to downtown Brussels, yet in search of a more sedate living experience than the capital city can offer, the newly opened **Dolce La Hulpe Brussels** (www.lahulpe.dolce.com) is the perfect solution.

The massive complex occupies a

former IBM training campus, a 14-building expanse totaling more than 450,000 square feet of living and working space, all nestled peacefully in the forest of Soignes, just nine miles from Brussels. Although marketing efforts target business travelers, the leisure market cannot be overlooked.

La Hulpe's four-star guest rooms, which include 181 standard rooms, 70 executive guest rooms, 12 conference suites and a grand Segoya Suite, all present tasteful views of the Soignes Forest or the resort's Feng Shui Garden. The upscale, contemporary rooms come with full amenities, including air-conditioning, flat-screen TV, free Wi-Fi, work desk, VOIP telephone, safe and mini-bar.

La Hulpe's fitness center offers a full-featured spa and fitness center, suitable for the most discriminating leisure traveler. With an indoor pool, sauna, Turkish bath, generous assortment of cardio and weight-training equipment, tennis court,

volleyball court, mountain bike rentals, and jogging trails, one need not venture into Brussels to pursue a full-day's adventure.

Two capable restaurants add a professional culinary element that rounds out a visitor's experience. L'Argan, the less formal of the two, doubles as a 320-seat group eating and breakfast room. Tre-O is a sleek, intimate space for 54 diners, whose executive head chef, Pascal Marcin, presents a three-pronged approach to each menu item (chicken prepared three ways, foie gras prepared three ways, etc.).

Those seeking relaxation with a spirit in-hand are well served: Badian Lobby Bar offers a full line up of drinks in an open, meet-and-greet atmosphere, complete with fireplace and TV room. The Oak Bar presents a sedate, intimate room—the perfect place to unwind with a late-night drink.

The resort pays 10 percent commission. Agents with requests for VIP clients can contact Paul VanWijk (paul.vanwijk@dolce.com); +32 2 290 98 00.

The Belgian Countryside

Known by locals as the "Versailles of the Ardennes," **Manoir de Lebioles** (www.manoirdelebioles.com) was constructed in the early 20th century on a hill above the town as a summer palace for royalty. It was neglected and fell into disrepair at the end of the 20th century, before undergoing substantial renovation and reopening to the public in September 2006.

Today, the manor's warm, lush lobby opens to reveal meticulously kept gardens and an expansive terrace, the Ardennes hills unfolding gently in the distance.

Inside, 16 lavish rooms and suites (the latter a reflection of size only, not amenities or character) integrate harmoniously into the property's regal personality, with bold, rich tones and materials. No room is like another, each



Manoir de Lebioles Hotel (top); Sequoia Suite at Dolce La Hulpe Brussels (bottom)

having been meticulously crafted to take advantage of the individual layout of each space. The Suite Royale is the hotel's top room, a decadent 750-square-foot space located within the manor's alcove. With two fireplaces and views of the gardens, it's truly a first-class setting.

What the rooms share is overflowing elegance that leaves visitors feeling pampered if not privileged. Whether it's soaking in a tower room bath, enjoying an in-room breakfast in a nook overlooking the Ardennes, or reading a book by a crackling in-room fireplace, each room awards its guests with sumptuous decadence. Standard amenities include air-conditioning, flat-screen TV, DVD and CD players, and Wi-Fi. All bathrooms are richly appointed and include bidet, bathtub and shower stall. Wooden flooring sets a clean, sleek look.

No mention of the manor would be complete without equal emphasis on its world-class cuisine. Chef Olivier Tucki, an acclaimed European chef, is a master at preparing fresh, local ingredients that

Resources

Several airlines provide direct service from the United States to Brussels, including American, Continental, Delta, Jet Airways, Northwest, United, US Airways and Brussels Airlines.

Information and Tours

For detailed information on Belgium, contact the **Belgian Tourist Office** at 212-758-8130 or visit www.visitbelgium.com. The tourist office (www.visitbelgium.com/touroperators.htm) can recommend dozens of capable tour operators.

Dining

Superb dining experiences abound throughout Belgium, with more than seven dozen Michelin-starred restaurants. For a detailed listing, visit www.visitbelgium.com/restaurants.htm. For photos and reviews of hundreds of Belgian restaurants with a focus on the Brussels region, visit www.sensum.be.

Shopping

Brussels presents shopping opportunities for every budget and taste. Those seeking fashion will find great selections along **Antoine Dansaert Straat**. For those with a longing for an upscale and trendy environment, the area around **Avenue Louise** abounds with the top international names.

All visitors should pay a visit to **Gallerie St. Hubert**, a 160-year-old, glass-roofed collection of high-end shops and cafés comprising Europe's oldest shopping arcade.

arouse the senses in full gastronomic vigor. Preparations favor light, healthy cuisine with sophisticated presentation; menus are seasonal and constantly changing.

Top clients can take advantage of the property's helipad, bypassing the 90-minute drive from Brussels.

The resort pays 8-10 percent commission. Contact Peter Biesmans for VIP requests (manoir@manoirdelebioles.com); +32 49 87 79 1900. ■