

Top Chocolate Travel Destination

We've been exchanging words over which country has the best chocolate — some say it's Switzerland, others say it's Ecuador, still, others say it's the United Kingdom or the United States. While we obviously vote for America (Knoke's in Hudson, Wisconsin to be specific), let's settle on the agreeable Belgian Chocolate. This, we can all discuss.

Where did all this world-class chocolate goodness start?

When we dream of traveling Europe, we don't see much mention of Belgium; maybe because of its size (South Carolina is actually bigger) or simply because other destinations such as the France and Germany are on more bucket lists. But when it comes to chocolate, especially the creamy kind you crave, Belgian chocolate is often called the best in the world:

Belgium was once ruled by the Spanish and explorers brought cocoa beans from South America - presenting them to the Belgian community. Just like in many other places, chocolate was expensive, and a sign of luxury (thank goodness that passed). When the Belgians established a colony in Congo, they had on their hands too many cocoa beans, and started to study the possibility of selling it. Long story short, King Leopold III made Belgium the top dealer in cocoa and chocolate.

Come 1912, a Swiss man named Jean Neuhaus created the first praline, a cold chocolate shell that can contain fillings. These Belgian truffles or pralines made chocolate more interesting and tempting plainly because you could put anything inside the shells — fruits, nuts, or even more chocolate!

How are Belgian chocolates made?

Belgian chocolate not only has some of the best ingredients in the world, the production process is equally amazing. So much so that government has gotten involved: in 1884 the law demanded that 35 percent of cocoa must be used, in order to avoid usage of low quality fat sources for the chocolates. Quality! While other countries now use 5 percent vegetable fat in their chocolates, the Belgians continue to use 100 percent cocoa butter (helps to explain why Belgian chocolates are quite pricey). Belgium also prefers traditional manufacturing of chocolates and they are one of the countries that have many independent chocolatiers (we, here, cheers to that!).

When producing, Belgian chocolate makers make their chocolates in small batches so they don't have to be kept in reserve. Why? Because chocolate begins to lose its flavor when it gets stored.

It comes as no surprise that Belgium is one of the main producers of chocolate in the world. Not only that, but they are also one of the biggest buyers of chocolate on the planet. A Belgians eats an average of 6 kilograms of chocolate per year. That's almost as

much as three Hershey's 5-pound chocolate candy bars! What did we learn from this? Maybe we all *should* add Belgium to our bucket lists.