

Travel the Benelux

Visit the Atomium a Brussels icon

by **Tim Clark**

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Looking like a set built for a science-fiction movie, appearing futuristic and bizarre at the same time, the Atomium might make you wonder whether it is a sculpture or architecture. A tourist attraction that draws over half a million visitors every year, the Atomium is both public art and a museum.

Completed in 1958, meant to last only six months, the Atomium still stands as a key landmark of Brussels. Designed to resemble a molecule from an iron crystal, the Atomium consists of nine 60-foot diameter stainless-steel spheres connected by a series of tubes.

The main pavilion and icon of the 1958 World's Fair, called Expo 58, the

Atomium symbolized a faith in scientific progress and the vision of a modern technological world for a better life for mankind. More than 41 million visited Expo 58, which opened with a call for world peace and economic progress by King Baudouin I of Belgium. "Building a world for the modern man," was the slogan of Expo 58.

Designed by engineer André Waterkeyn and architects André and Jean Polak, the Atomium has the shape of a molecule of an iron crystal magnified 165 billion times. Standing 335 feet tall and weighing 2,500 tons, the Atomium took 18 months to build. The tubes connecting the spheres enclose escalators and stairs, with the central

tube holding an elevator.

After falling into disrepair in the 1990s, the Atomium underwent a 22-month renovation from March 2004 until February 2006. More than 6,000 faded aluminum plates were replaced with new shiny stainless steel plates. To help pay for the renovation costs, pieces of the old aluminum were sold to the public.

A visit to the Atomium begins with an exhibit on the 1958 world's fair and details of how the structure was built. Temporary art and science exhibits fill some of the other spheres that are open to the public. The current exhibit, "Discover the Power of Light," runs through Sunday. The next exhibit "Modernika" which

is a celebration of post war Belgian architecture opens Monday.

Schoolchildren can spend the night in the Kids Sphere and sleep in mini-spheres designed by Spanish artist Alicia Framis. Intended for ages 6 to 12 and groups of 10 to 24 children with their accompanying adults, the sleepover must be within the framework of a school project.

The top sphere houses a restaurant that offers panoramic views of Brussels. Belgium Taste is open for lunch from noon until 3 p.m. and dinner from 7 to 9 p.m. with no Sunday dinner service.

Open every day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. the Atomium is worth a visit just to take a photo of its iconic exterior.

Outside the gate



(clockwise) A painter creates an idealized image of the Atomium. • The median in front of the Atomium is a popular place to take a photo. • Seen from below, the Atomium looks like an M.C. Escher artwork.



For your GPS:
Avenue de l'Atomium
Brussels 1020