Central Europe and the Low Countries

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Central Europe

Central Europe is located in northwestern continental Europe. This region includes four major countries: France, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. There are other smaller nations found in this region, like Andorra and Liechtenstein. Central Europe encompasses parts of the Alps and the North European Plain. The Rhine and the Danube Rivers also flow through this region.

Central Europe Menu

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France

France

Paris

France is located south of the United Kingdom, across the English Channel. France is a globally influential nation with a strong national identity. Paris is the capital and most populous city of France. It is centrally located in the northern part of the country, along the Seine River. Paris is a major center for commerce and culture. It is home to several famous cultural landmarks, like the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Notre Dame Cathedral, and the Louvre Museum.

The French Empire once controlled colonies in North America, South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This colonialism spread French culture and the French language to many parts of the world. Most French colonies eventually gained independence; however, France still maintains a few overseas territories.

Modern France is an important part of the international community. It is a founding member of NATO and the EU. It is also one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council. France is also a major center for western culture. It has greatly influenced art, science, philosophy, food, and fashion.

Germany

Germany is located south of Denmark, between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Germany faced many challenges during the twentieth century, including the devastation of both World Wars. The country was divided after the end of World War II. Democratic West Germany was controlled by the U.S., UK, and France. Communist East Germany was controlled by the Soviet Union. The German capital of Berlin, located in East Germany, was also divided. A heavily guarded concrete barrier called the Berlin Wall was built to isolate democratic West Berlin from communist East Berlin.

During this time, the United States and Western Europe formed a military alliance called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO. The USSR and Eastern Europe also formed a military alliance called the Warsaw Pact. This conflict was called the Cold War, since neither side declared war nor attacked the other.

Communist states in Europe began to collapse in the late twentieth century. The Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989. East Germany officially reunited with West Germany in 1990. Despite the setbacks caused by decades of communism, Germany has become a stable democratic society. It has the largest national economy in Europe, and is the most populous European country, excluding Russia. Germany is also one of the founding members of the EU.

Switzerland

Switzerland is a landlocked country located east of France and south of Germany. It is a diverse country with four official languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. There is no such thing as a Swiss language. The Alps dominate the southern part of the country. These mountains attract many tourists for skiing and other recreation. Switzerland also specializes in banking and financial services. Swiss banks are considered stable and secure, partially due to Swiss neutrality.

Switzerland has a strong commitment to neutrality. The country did not participate in either World War. It is not a member of NATO or the European Union. In fact, Switzerland did not even join the United Nations until 2002. Neutrality has helped Switzerland promote international cooperation. For instance, Switzerland has hosted peace negotiations between other nations. It is also the headquarters of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.
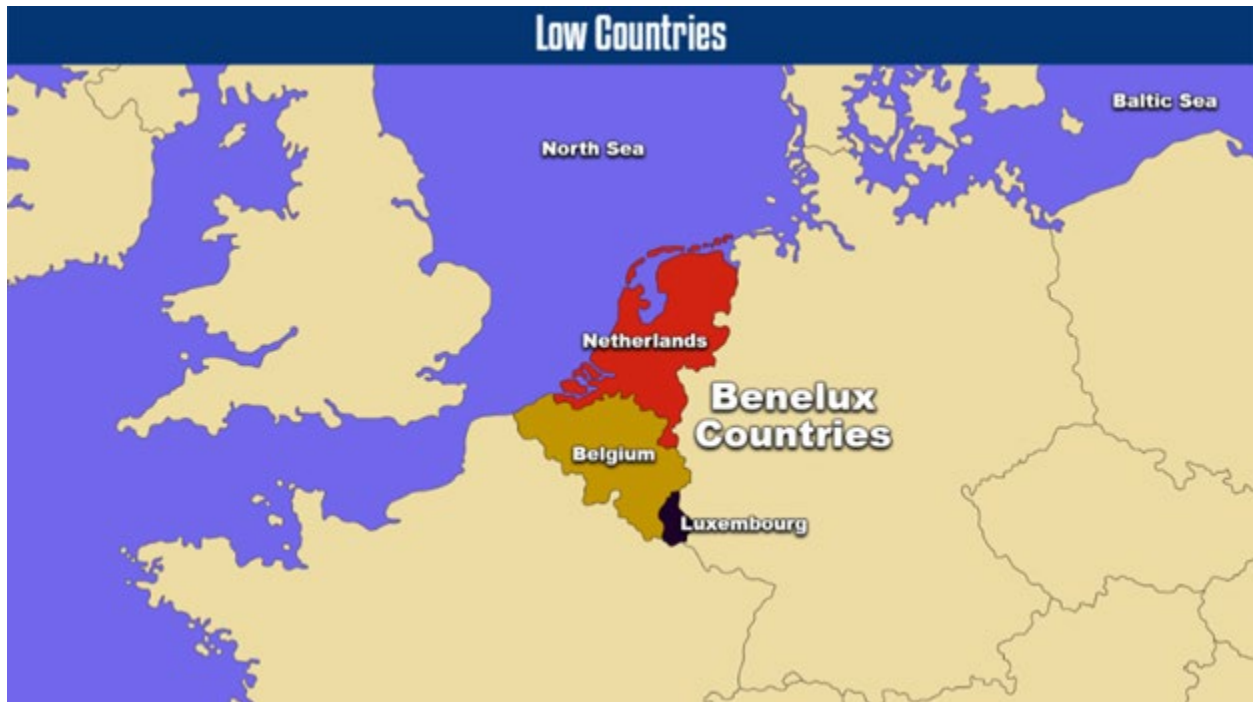
Austria

Austria is a landlocked country located south of Germany and east of Switzerland. The Alps dominate the landscape in the south and the west. Vienna is the capital and the most populous city of Austria. Vienna is located on the Danube River and is an important center for commerce and culture. In fact, the city of Vienna was once home to famous composers like Beethoven, Schubert, and Mozart.

This small nation was once a part of a larger empire called Austria-Hungary. The empire was dissolved after the end of World War I, and Austria experienced decades of political unrest. This included annexation by Nazi Germany in World War II. It also included Allied occupation after the Second World War. Allied forces withdrew in 1955, after Austria agreed to remain neutral and separate from Germany.

Austria joined the European Union in 1995. The nation has a developed economy, a skilled workforce, and a high standard of living. German is the official language, and Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion.

Low Countries

The Low Countries are located on the southern coast of the North Sea. This region includes Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. The Low Countries are made up of coastal plains that are below or slightly above sea level. These countries are also called the Benelux Countries, which is a combination of the first letters of each country's name.

Low Countries Menu

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Belgium

Belgium is located on the coast of the North Sea, between France and the Netherlands. Belgium is a small nation with three official languages: Dutch, French, and German. Flanders is an area of northern Belgium, mostly populated by native Dutch speakers called the Flemish. Wallonia is a region in southern Belgium, mostly populated by native French speakers, called the Walloons. Tensions between the Flemish and Walloons have created a culturally and politically divided nation.

Belgium is mostly urbanized with one of the highest population densities in the world. Roughly 98% of Belgians live in urban areas like Brussels. Brussels is the capital of Belgium. It is also the capital of the European Union and the headquarters of NATO.

Netherlands

The Netherlands is located on the coast of the North Sea, between Belgium and Germany. Much of the country is located at or below sea level. In fact, the name "Netherlands" actually means "lower countries." The people of the Netherlands, called the Dutch, started building dikes around the thirteenth century. Dikes are large embankments used to hold back the sea and prevent floods. Later, the Dutch began to drain water from the land using pumps powered by windmills. This created areas of reclaimed land, called polders.

Over hundreds of years, the Dutch began using advanced engineering to create more polders. Windmill pumps were replaced by steam-powered pumps, which were later replaced by electrical pumps. Today, 26% of the Netherlands is reclaimed land that is located below sea level.

The Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. This also means it is highly urbanized, with more than 90% of the population living in cities. Dutch is the country's official language, but many residents learn one or more foreign languages. It is also a founding member of NATO and the EU.

Luxembourg

Luxembourg is a small landlocked nation surrounded by Belgium, France, and Germany. This entire country is slightly smaller than the state of Rhode Island. Despite its size, Luxembourg has one of the world's highest GDP per capita. The country's major industries include banking, steel manufacturing, and information technology. Luxembourg has three official languages: Luxembourgish, French, and German. Luxembourgish is a German dialect that incorporates French words. Luxembourg is also a founding member of NATO and the EU.