France and its Benelux neighbors rank as major economic and cultural centers of the world. The word Benelux comes from combining the first letters of three countries’ names: Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

France

The largest country in western Europe, France is slightly smaller than the state of Texas. France’s landscape includes high mountain ranges that separate the country from Spain, Italy, and Switzerland. In contrast, most of northern France is part of the vast North European Plain. A network of rivers, including the Seine (SAYN) and the Loire (LWAHR), connects the different regions of France. Most of these rivers are navigable, or wide and deep enough to allow the passage of ships.

Most of France has a climate that is ideal for agriculture. The rich soil in the North European Plain makes France an important food
producer. In many French towns, you can find open-air markets displaying an abundance of fresh farm produce.

**France’s Economy** France’s well-developed economy relies on agriculture and manufacturing. Most people, however, work in service industries such as banking, commerce, communications, and tourism. Tourists from all over the world visit France’s historic and cultural sites, such as palaces and museums. They also come to enjoy the blue skies, rocky cliffs, and lovely beaches of France’s Mediterranean coast.

France produces more food than any other nation in western Europe. It ranks as the second-largest food exporter in the world, after the United States. Yet only 5 percent of French workers labor on farms. Their success is partly due to France’s fertile soil, mild climate, and modern farming methods.

French farmers grow grains, sugar beets, fruits, and vegetables. They also raise beef and dairy cattle. In addition, vineyards are a common sight. The grapes are used to make famous French wines. Olives are grown along the warm, dry Mediterranean coast.

France’s natural resources include bauxite, iron ore, and coal. France has small petroleum reserves and little hydroelectric power. How does the nation power its industries? About 80 percent of France’s electricity comes from nuclear power plants.

Workers produce a variety of manufactured goods, including steel, chemicals, textiles, airplanes, cars, and computers. France is a leading center of commerce, with an international reputation in fashion.

**The French People** “Liberté . . . Egalité . . . Fraternité” (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity)—France’s national motto—describes the spirit of the French people. The French share a strong national loyalty. Most French trace their ancestry to the Celts, Romans, and Franks of early Europe. They speak French, and about 90 percent of them are Roman Catholic.

France’s government is known as the Fifth Republic. A republic is a strong national government headed by elected leaders. A powerful president, elected for a five-year term, leads the nation. The French president manages the country’s foreign affairs. He or she appoints a prime minister to run the day-to-day affairs of government.

About three-fourths of France’s 59.8 million people live in cities and towns. **Paris**, the capital and largest city, has a population of more than 10 million people, which includes its suburbs. The city is home
to many universities, museums, and other cultural sites. Outstanding cultural figures who lived in Paris include the writer Victor Hugo and the painters Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Each year, millions of tourists go to the City of Light, as Paris is called. They visit such sites as the Eiffel Tower, the cathedral of Notre Dame, and the Louvre (LOOV), one of the world's most famous art museums.

What is the main religion in France?

The Benelux Countries

The small Benelux countries of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg have much in common. Their lands are low, flat, and densely populated. Most people live in cities, work in businesses or factories, and enjoy a high standard of living. All three nations are members of the European Union. They are also parliamentary democracies with constitutional monarchies.

Belgium About the size of Maryland, Belgium touches France, Luxembourg, Germany, and the Netherlands. Lying near major industrial regions, Belgium has long been a trade and manufacturing center. Belgian lace, chocolate, and diamond-cutting all have a worldwide reputation for excellence. With few natural resources of their own, the Belgian people import metals, fuels, and raw materials from less-developed countries. They use these materials to make and export vehicles, chemicals, and textiles.

Most Belgians are Roman Catholic. The country has two main cultural and language groups. The Flemings in the north speak Flemish, a language based on Dutch. The south is home to the French-speaking Walloons. Tensions sometimes arise between the two groups, especially because there is more wealth and industry in the north than in the south. Most Belgians live in crowded urban areas. Brussels, the capital and largest city, is an international center for trade.

The Netherlands The Netherlands—about half the size of Maine—is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Sometimes called Holland, its people are known as the Dutch.

Netherlands means "lowlands." Nearly half of this small, flat country lies below sea level. Without defenses against the sea, high tides would flood much of the country twice a day. The Dutch build dikes, or banks of soil, to control and confine the sea. Then they drain and pump the wetlands dry. Once run by windmills, pumps are now driven by steam or electricity. These drained lands, called polders, have rich farming soil. The Dutch build factories, airports, and even towns on them. The Delta Plan Project, completed in 1986, consists of huge barriers that keep the North Sea from overflowing the countryside during storms.

High technology makes small farms so productive that the Dutch can export cheese, vegetables, and flowers. The Netherlands ranks third in the world—after the United States and France—in the value of its agricultural exports. Because machines make farming more productive, most people work in service industries, manufacturing, and trade.
About 90 percent of the Dutch live in cities and towns. **Amsterdam** is the capital and largest city. Living in a densely populated country, the Dutch make good use of their space. Houses are narrow but tall, and apartments are often built on canals and over highways. Some of Amsterdam’s most famous people are the painters Rembrandt van Rijn and Vincent van Gogh. You may have read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This Dutch teenager’s autobiography tells how she and her family tried to hide from the German Nazis during World War II.

About two-thirds of the Dutch people are Christian. A small number of immigrants are Muslims. The people of the Netherlands speak Dutch, but most also speak English.

**Luxembourg** Southeast of Belgium lies Luxembourg, one of Europe’s smallest countries. The entire country is only about 55 miles (89 km) long and about 35 miles (56 km) wide.

Despite its size, Luxembourg is prosperous. Many **multinational companies**, or firms that do business in several countries, have their headquarters here. It is home to the second-largest steel-producing company in Europe and is a major banking center as well.

Why is Luxembourg so attractive to foreign companies? First, the country is centrally located. Second, most people in this tiny land are **multilingual**, or able to speak several languages. They speak Luxembourgian, a blend of old German and French; French, the official language of the law; and German, used in most newspapers.

**Reading Check** What industries are important in Luxembourg?