

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Europe

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Finding the best museums, historic sights, food, and architecture
  - ▶ Discarding misconceptions before you go
  - ▶ Traveling to the most intriguing cities and attractions
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**E**urope offers a roster of the world's most exciting cities, romantic landscapes, outstanding museums, historic sights, culinary creations, and architectural wonders. In this book, we guide you to the best of the best.

In order to make your trip as smooth and hassle-free as possible, you need to start planning a few months before you leave. You'll be dealing with things such as passports (see Chapter 9), rail passes (see Chapter 6), plane tickets (see Chapter 5), and foreign currencies (see Chapter 4). But for now, just sit back and dream of the possibilities.

You can sail past time-washed palaces and grandiose churches on Venice's Grand Canal for the price of a bus ticket. You can splurge on a five-star meal or people-watch from a sidewalk cafe in Paris. You can wander through the Tower of London, ground zero for so much English history over the last 900 years. Or you can drain creamy mugs of Guinness while clapping along to traditional Celtic music on a pub crawl through Dublin.

You may want to gaze in stupefied wonder at the famed scene of *God Creating Adam* on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling in Rome. Or you may linger over breakfast in a revolving restaurant atop Switzerland's Schilthorn Mountain, surrounded by snow-covered peaks and glacier-filled valleys. How about a picnic lunch on the Greek island of Santorini, hundreds of feet above the Mediterranean amid the ruins of a Mycenaean city?

Europe, with all its bewitching and unforgettable sights, is yours to discover, experience, and enjoy. To get you started on your European adventures, this chapter gives you a selection of what we consider to be the "best of the best" choices. The highlights in this chapter are also tagged with the Best of the Best icon in the destination chapters of this book.

## Europe





## The Top Museums

Europe is home to some of the world's greatest museums, displaying a cultural kaleidoscope of Western and worldwide art and artifacts, dating from prehistoric times to the present day. Classical busts, Renaissance paintings and sculptures, Impressionist landscapes, Cubist portraits, contemporary installations — in the museums of Europe, you'll find incredible riches from every epoch and in every style.

- ✔ **The Louvre (Paris):** Our short list has to start with the **Louvre** (see Chapter 13), one of those great treasure-trove museums that dazzles with ancient sculptures (including that armless beauty *Venus de Milo*), Egyptian mummies and medieval artifacts, and some true icons of Renaissance art, including da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Delacroix's ultra-French *Liberty Leading the People*.
- ✔ **Musée d'Orsay (Paris):** After exhausting yourself at the Louvre, you can cross the Seine River to visit an old train station that's been transformed into the **Musée d'Orsay** (see Chapter 13). This museum picks up the thread of French art where the Louvre leaves off, highlighting the best from the Romantic period onward, including the world's greatest collection of crowd-pleasing Impressionists such as Manet, Monet, Degas, Cézanne, Renoir, Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat, and more.
- ✔ **The Vatican Museums (Rome):** One of Europe's greatest collections, the **Vatican Museums** (see Chapter 19) inspire at every turn. The Vatican's Painting Gallery houses Raphael's *Transfiguration* and Caravaggio's *Deposition*. The antiquities collections preserve some of the world's greatest examples of ancient Greek, Egyptian, Etruscan, and Roman sculpture. This is where you find the former private papal apartments, frescoed by Pinturicchio and Raphael, and, of course, the perennially awe-inspiring Sistine Chapel, with its ceiling frescoed by Michelangelo.
- ✔ **The British Museum (London):** You can get up close and personal with artifacts from the dawn of human history at London's renowned (and admission-free) **British Museum** (see Chapter 10). Fabulous examples from every epoch of the ancient European, Mediterranean, or Middle Eastern worlds are on view: Celtic treasure hordes; the Parthenon Sculptures of Greece; remains of Assyrian palaces; the Rosetta stone, which helped archaeologists crack the language of hieroglyphics; intricately decorated Greek vases; and superb examples of Egyptian mummies. And that's just the beginning.
- ✔ **Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid):** In the **Prado** (see Chapter 22), you get to enjoy masterworks by the greats of Spanish art — courtly and insightful works by Velázquez, dark and tragic images by Goya, elongated and uniquely colorful canvases by El Greco, and nightmarishly surreal paintings by Hieronymus Bosch.

- ✔ **The Galleria degli Uffizi (Florence):** Take a stroll through the **Galleria degli Uffizi** (Uffizi Galleries; see Chapter 20), a veritable textbook on the development of Italian painting during the Renaissance. Compared to the great museums of other cities, the Uffizi is small, but it houses an embarrassment of riches, from earlier works by Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Botticelli (the goddess-on-a-half-shell *Birth of Venus* and flower-filled *Primavera* both hang here) through the height of the Renaissance, represented by da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo.
- ✔ **The Deutsches Museum (Munich):** Overloaded on art and ancient relics? Head to the **Deutsches Museum** (see Chapter 15), one of the world's greatest science and technology museums. Here you'll find fleets of early Mercedes, eye-popping electrical demonstrations, a hangar full of historic aircraft, lab benches where famous experiments in nuclear physics took place, and giant machines used to dig tunnels under the Alps. This informative and often hands-on museum is a delight for all ages.

## The Top Historic Sights

Europe is the wellspring of Western culture, a living textbook of human history. Europeans think in terms of centuries and millennia, not decades. Americans may speak of the '60s; Italians just as breezily refer to *il seicento* (the 1600s). Europe allows you to dip into history at just about any point. You're surrounded by it in every city you visit.

- ✔ **Best Greek and Roman ruins:** You can see remnants of the ancient Greek and Roman empires and the remains of massive temples some 1,500 to 3,000 years old at the **Acropolis** or **Ancient Agora** in Athens and at **Delphi** (see Chapter 24). In Rome, you can wander through the **Roman Forum** and explore the ultimate sports arena of the ancient world, the **Colosseum** (see Chapter 19).
- ✔ **Best prehistoric sites:** Prehistoric standouts include the brooding standing stones of **Stonehenge** (see Chapter 10), in England; the ruins of the ancient Minoan city of **Akrotiri** (see Chapter 24), on the Greek island of Santorini; the Stone Age passage tomb of **Newgrange** (see Chapter 12), in Ireland; and remnants of the earliest settlements of what is now Paris, excavated under the square in front of **Notre-Dame Cathedral** (see Chapter 13).
- ✔ **Best castles:** You'll find castles and fortified structures from the Dark Ages and Middle Ages (from A.D. 500 to 1500) strewn across Europe. Pride of place goes to the **Tower of London** (see Chapter 10), with its bloody legends and famed crown jewels; **Edinburgh Castle** (see Chapter 11), glowering atop a volcanic hill in the center of the city; and **Pražský Hrad** (Prague Castle; see Chapter 18), with its soaring cathedral and half-timbered lane of old alchemists' shops.

- ✓ **Best medieval neighborhoods:** The medieval era saw the development of now-major cities throughout Europe, leaving behind a legacy of fascinating cobblestone medieval quarters such as the **Altstadt** of Bern (see Chapter 17), the **Staré Město** in Prague (see Chapter 18), **Trastevere** in Rome (see Chapter 19), and the **Barri Gòtic** in Barcelona (see Chapter 23).
- ✓ **Best hill towns:** Tiny hill towns and hamlets sprang up between A.D. 500 and 1500, and this book describes the best of them, including **Chartres** in France (see Chapter 13), **Innsbruck** in Austria (see Chapter 16), the Tuscan hill towns of **Siena** and **San Gimignano** (both in Chapter 20), and Spain's time capsules of **Toledo** and **Segovia** (both in Chapter 22).

## The Top Culinary Delights

European cuisine runs the gamut from stick-to-your-ribs **rösti** (deluxe hash browns spiked with ham and eggs) of the Swiss Alps to France's traditional **coq au vin** (chicken braised in red wine, with onions and mushrooms). Mix in the fabulous **pastas** of Italy, the dozens of types of **sausage** in Prague and Munich, and the incredible yet unknown **cheeses** of Ireland, and you're in for a festive feast every day of your European journey.

- ✓ **Best Mediterranean meals:** The cooking of Italy (see Chapters 19–21) goes far beyond **pasta**, which is merely considered a *primo*, or first course. For your *secondo*, or second course, you can sample Adriatic **fish** in a Venetian trattoria patronized by local gondoliers, dig into a mighty **bistecca fiorentina** (an oversize T-bone brushed with olive oil and cracked pepper and then grilled) in Florence, or dine on **saltimbocca** (wine-cooked veal layered with sage and prosciutto) in a Roman restaurant located in the ruins of an ancient theater.

A night out in Madrid (see Chapter 22), where dinner starts at 10 p.m., may mean a traditional **roast suckling pig** in a restaurant unchanged since the days when Hemingway was a regular, or a giant Valencian **paella** (rice tossed with a seafood medley) to share with everyone at the table under the wood beams of a country-style inn. Meanwhile, Barcelona (see Chapter 23) has become one of Europe's hottest dining destinations, with fresh seafood right out of the Mediterranean and highly imaginative takes on Catalan cooking.

- ✓ **Best British meals:** England (see Chapter 10) once had a reputation for serving the worst food in Europe. Traditional favorites still include **shepherd's pie** (ground lamb capped by mashed potatoes), **fish and chips**, and **bangers and mash** (sausages and mashed potatoes). But, oh, how times have changed. Much to Paris's chagrin, London now enjoys the **hottest restaurant scene** in Europe, and its celebrity chefs and designer dining spots surf the crest of modern cooking trends and serve the hippest fusion cuisines. Even the old traditional dishes taste better now that they've been "rediscovered."

- ✔ **Best bets for a sweet tooth:** French and Italian pastries are divine, but you can also sate your sweet tooth in Vienna (see Chapter 16), home of the **Sachertorte**, the original Death by Chocolate. And what better way to cap off a night of clubbing in Madrid than to join the locals for **churros y chocolada** (fried dough strips you dip in thick hot chocolate) as the sun rises? Don't worry: You'll do so much walking on your trip that you probably won't gain too much weight . . . assuming of course you don't discover the **gelato** (super-rich ice cream) of Florence (see Chapter 20) or **sticky toffee puddings** in England (see Chapter 10).
- ✔ **Best beer and wine:** You can savor some of the finest wines in the world in France, Italy, and Spain, or take a swig from a liter-sized mug of beer in Germany. But did you know that **Eastern European beers** are finally getting the recognition they deserve in Prague (see Chapter 18)? And rightly so, because all Pilseners, and what became Budweiser, originally hail from the Czech Republic. And how about the **heuriger** in Vienna (see Chapter 16)? These small, family-run wine estates serve up their white wines accompanied by simple, hearty Austrian dishes.

## The Architectural Highlights

Europe's famous cathedrals, palaces, and castles draw visitors from around the globe. You can enjoy the sight of devilish gargoyles and marvel at the ancient rose windows in Paris's **Cathédrale de Notre-Dame** (see Chapter 13), gape at Michelangelo's *Pietà* sculpture and Bernini's towering altar canopy in Rome's **St. Peter's Basilica** (see Chapter 19), and admire magnificent creations of medieval masonry and Renaissance engineering everywhere in between.

- ✔ **Chartres Cathedral (beyond Paris):** **Chartres Cathedral** (see Chapter 13) is a study in formal Gothic, from its 27,000 square feet of stained glass to its soaring spires and flying buttresses.
- ✔ **Westminster Abbey (London):** Britain's most revered church, **Westminster Abbey** (see Chapter 10) has been the site of coronations and the final resting place of kings and queens for some eight centuries.
- ✔ **St. Mark's Basilica (Venice):** The multiple domes, rounded archways, and glittering mosaics of **St. Mark's Basilica** (see Chapter 21) hint at how this great trading power of the Middle Ages sat at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures; it's as much Byzantine as it is European.
- ✔ **The Duomo (Florence):** When the Renaissance genius Brunelleschi invented a noble dome to cap **Florence's Duomo** (see Chapter 20), Europe's architectural landscape changed forever. For the first time since antiquity, domes started sprouting up all over Europe. Visit Florence's original, and you can clamber up narrow staircases

between the dome's onion layers to see just how Brunelleschi performed his engineering feat — and get a sweeping panorama of the city from the top.

- ✔ **Residenz Palace and Schloss Nymphenburg (Munich):** In the 17th and 18th centuries, powerful kings governing much of Europe claimed they ruled by divine right and built palaces to prove it. The Bavarian Wittelsbach dynasty ruled for 738 years from Munich's **Residenz Palace** and the pleasure palace outside town, **Schloss Nymphenburg** (see Chapter 15).
- ✔ **Hofburg Palace (Vienna):** The Hapsburg emperors set up house-keeping in the sprawling **Hofburg Palace** (see Chapter 16), where the chapel is now home to a singing group known as the Vienna Boys' Choir, and where museums showcase everything from classical statuary and musical instruments to medieval weaponry and the imperial treasury.
- ✔ **Buckingham Palace (London):** You can line up to watch the Changing of the Guard at **Buckingham Palace** (see Chapter 10), and even tour the royal staterooms in August and September, when Her Majesty Elizabeth II isn't at home.
- ✔ **Versailles (beyond Paris):** A short train ride from downtown Paris brings you to the palace to end all palaces, **Versailles** (see Chapter 13), where Louis XIV held court, Marie Antoinette kept dangerously out of touch with her subjects (who were brewing revolution back in Paris), and the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I was signed.
- ✔ **Neuschwanstein (beyond Munich):** Tourists aren't the only ones looking to recapture a romantic, idealized past. Mad King Ludwig II of Bavaria was so enamored with his country's fairy-tale image that he decided to build **Neuschwanstein** (see Chapter 15) in the foothills of the Alps south of Munich. This fanciful 19th-century version of what Ludwig thought a medieval castle *should* look like is a festival of turrets and snapping banners that later inspired Uncle Walt's Cinderella Castle in Disneyland.
- ✔ **La Sagrada Família and La Pedrera (Barcelona):** Lest you think architectural innovations are all relics of the distant past, head to Barcelona (see Chapter 23), where one of the greatest architects of the early 20th century, Antoni Gaudí, used his own unique riff on Art Nouveau to design everything from surreal apartment buildings, such as **La Pedrera**, to the wild, futuristic church, **La Sagrada Família**, still under construction.