



20 Essential tips for the perfect European holiday

by

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Planning

1. Have a realistic budget, including what you'll need for spending money. If you're a 4-star kind of person allow enough in your budget to cover this standard of accommodation, remembering that some European cities are very expensive.

Remember, too, that your European holiday may well be a once in a lifetime trip, and it's often worth 'blowing the budget' once in a while if there is something you really want to do. There's nothing worse than returning home and wishing that you had allowed a little extra in your budget to cover the 100 Euros for a cable car ride in Switzerland, or a gondola ride in Venice if it's something you've always wanted to do. And hey, dinner on the Eiffel Tower might be far more expensive than you'd ever normally spend on a meal, but you're not going to eat there every day! Try and allow a little 'excess' in your budget for that 'must do' extravagance.

2. Have a realistic itinerary - visiting 10 countries in three weeks is no fun (and little value!) if you have to spend long days on the road or on a train getting from A to B. Quality time spent at a destination is always recommended over the quantity of places visited.

3. Know what's closed when. If you are desperate to visit the Louvre but you're only free day in Paris is a Tuesday, you are going to be disappointed! Planning ahead can save you missing out on seeing the attractions you want to visit.

4. Check maps of cities in which you'll be staying so you can choose your accommodation to suit. A bargain hotel that's located 40 minutes out of the city by public transport may not end up being the bargain you thought when you take into account your transport costs.

5. Allow plenty of time to apply for your passport or to renew your current passport if it's going to expire soon (your passport should have at least six months' validity from the date you return to Australia). You should also check if visas are required for any of the countries you'll be visiting and allow time to apply for them if necessary.

Booking

6. Choose a travel agent, ideally one that specialises in European holidays. The first-hand experience and knowledge of a travel consultant who has travelled regularly to Europe and has visited the places you'll be visiting can be invaluable.

7. Book early to take advantage of early bird deals on airfares, car hire, cruising, etc. Generally speaking, the further in advance you can book your flights and other travel requirements, the more money you'll save. Airlines generally release their 'early bird' fares around September/October each year for travel to Europe the following year. Booking and paying in advance can save you hundreds of dollars. Booking well ahead can also secure you better rates on car hire, rail tickets, accommodation, etc - as demand increases closer to the date of travel, prices often rise.

8. Pre-book and pre-pay for as much of your accommodation, sightseeing and transport as possible. This way, you've already covered the majority of your expenses and you don't have to dip into your holiday 'spending money' to pay for large expenses. As one traveller recently remarked, "Pre-booking everything may reduce the spontaneity but it certainly takes the stress out of travelling."

9. Buy 'skip the line' tickets for major attractions like the Louvre, Vatican, Eiffel Tower, etc before you leave home. It's not uncommon to wait in ticket queues to some of Europe's major attractions for over two hours in Summer - and that's just to buy the entry ticket! Buying your ticket in advance gives you fast-track entry.

10. Ensure you have adequate travel insurance to cover you against cancellation fees, medical expenses, loss and theft of luggage, etc.

On a recent trip to Europe, my husband was struck down with a kidney stone attack and ended up in a French hospital for five nights. Whilst it was a worrying time (and quite inconvenient of him!), we were reassured knowing that the medical expenses and incidentals incurred as a result of having to re-route our itinerary, would be covered by our insurer. Had we not spent a few hundred dollars on travel insurance we would have been over \$6000 out of pocket, and if he had required hospitalisation in Switzerland, the bill may well have been closer to \$15,000.

11. Consider pre-booking an arrival transfer at your arrival destination in Europe. After the long flight from Australia you may not be in the best frame of mind to tackle the local public transport system, particularly with suitcases in tow. A pre-booked transfer means you'll be met at the airport and transferred directly to your accommodation.



Packing

12. Be aware of luggage allowances for your flight as excess baggage fees can be high. If you are travelling on a low-cost airline within Europe, be sure to check the baggage allowance as these airlines often only allow 15 kilograms per person compared to 20 kilograms on most international carriers from Australia. If you are travelling on a coach tour within Europe or the UK, check the luggage allowances of the tour company.

13. For the long flight to Europe I always carry a neck pillow, ear plugs and an eye mask in my carry-on luggage as they are very helpful when it comes to getting comfortable when you are ready to sleep. Only recently I've started using an eye mask but I find it really blocks out the light and the 'goings-on' around me.

14. Sturdy but comfortable walking shoes are a must. Forget fashionable - when you are walking on cobblestone streets all day or on alpine tracks, comfort is the order of the day.

15. Take good maps or download them onto your phone, iPad, etc. There's nothing more frustrating than going round in circles trying to find your accommodation or a restaurant you want to visit when you have absolutely no idea where it is!

16. Consider taking a travel money card, available from most banks and financial institutions. These cards can be used just like ATM cards but allow you to pre-load them with foreign currency. You choose how much to load onto your card and lock in the exchange rate at the time of purchase.

On Holiday

17. Save on the cost of meals by enjoying picnics. A few basic items from the local market or supermarket can make a delicious lunch and when you eat it by the Seine, on a Swiss mountainside or in St Mark's Square, it will taste twice as good!

18. Be aware of international roaming fees when calling or sending text messages to family and friends from your mobile phone. Consider purchasing a phone card for the country you are visiting and call home from a public phone box. Skype is another great way to stay in touch. As long as you have an internet connection (beware of excessive connection rates at hotels, etc), you can call or message your friends via Skype on your phone, iPad or laptop.

19. Learn a few words of the local language - not only is it polite, it's also fun. Greeting a person in the local language is a must and you should try and learn a few basic phrases so you can ask directions to the toilet and find out how much something costs. Even if you make an appalling attempt, the locals will be appreciative of the fact that you're prepared to have a go and you'll get a much better response.

20. Travel with an open mind. Things won't be exactly the same as they are at home – if they were, there'd be no point in travelling! Try new foods, cope with the shops closing between 12 noon and 2pm, stumble your way through a greeting in a foreign language. By embracing the local culture you will be much better for it.

Bon Voyage!





About the Author

I first visited Europe in 1988 whilst working as a travel consultant – and it was love at first sight! After a 14 day Contiki tour, a Greek island cruise and visiting my boyfriend's (now husband's) family, I vowed to return and see more of this amazing continent.

Twelve years later with my husband and two sons in tow, that's exactly what happened and it has led to an even stronger desire to keep on exploring more of Europe.

I've been lucky enough to have visited Europe nine times (so far!), adding up to many months of travel, each time sampling a variety of holiday styles - from driving holidays to cruises and travelling by train. I have so many wonderful memories from my European holidays and I have a real passion for helping others to enjoy the same amazing experiences.

In 2007 whilst I was starting to plan our family's third European family holiday, I realised there was a need for a comprehensive online European travel directory aimed at Aussie travellers. Sure, there were thousands of different styles of accommodation and tours on the web, but they were all on different websites which meant surfing from one site to another to another – and getting totally confused!

This prompted me to start my own business www.holidaystoeurope.com.au to give travellers the widest range of European travel options on one website.

As well as a huge range of accommodation, tours, sightseeing and transport options, the website also offers a complete range of resources to help in the planning of a European holiday. My regular destination articles and blogs, travel tips and itinerary planning ideas, give you the best start to your European holiday.

I hope you will have the opportunity to experience a wonderful European holiday and create your own magical memories just like I have been able to.

- Carolyn Schonafinger



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