

Student Travel in Europe

WHERE TO START

If this is your first trip to Europe, there is no better starting guidebook than “The Rough Guide First-time Europe” by Doug Lansky. The latest edition is out on 1st February 2010. It is published by Rough Guide under the ISBN number 184836511X.

A number of websites have set up dedicated to helping first-time travellers to Europe get a sense of the place. www.bugeurope.com and www.eurotrip.com are good ones. Don't forget you can borrow UK and European travel guide books from the Student Centre at the NYU in London Academic Centre.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I'm interested in doing mainly weekend trips, how should I travel?

If you are planning to travel mainly at the weekend, the best way to travel is to fly. This is a time consideration more than anything else.

London is also the centre of the European discount air ticket network and you can get some really good deals over the internet to fly to many top European destinations (see below).

Are there any exceptions to this general rule?

Yes, if you are travelling to Paris or any Belgian city (Bruges, Brussels, Ghent) it is better to take the Eurostar train (which travels through a tunnel underneath the English Channel). Find out more information on www.eurostar.com. The good thing about the Eurostar is that you get from central London (St. Pancras) to central Paris in around 2 hours and 20 minutes and central London (St. Pancras) to Brussels in 2 hours minutes with no messing around getting to and from airports! You can travel from Brussels to other Belgian cities free of charge, as long as your journey takes place within 24 hours of your arrival/ return journey.

Are European rail passes a good idea?

A European rail pass (commonly called a Eurail pass) is essentially a “season-ticket” which allows the holder unlimited travel across Europe (by train) over the lifespan of the ticket. The website www.raileurope.com has wealth of information about the different passes available.

European rail passes are only worth buying if you plan to do a reasonable amount of international travel (i.e. 4 or 5 countries) over a period of time (from 10 days to 2 months). *For example, a Eurail is ideal for a three-week tour of Europe once the semester has finished. If you are doing only weekend trips it is a waste of money! (flying is cheaper and easier – see above).*

Where should I buy my tickets?

1. **Plane tickets.** Over the internet. A number of budget airlines have emerged who compete very effectively with the major airlines on price. Try these websites to get a flavour of the prices available:

Easyjet
Ryanair

www.easyjet.com
www.ryanair.com



Momondo www.momondo.com (price comparison website)
Skyscanner www.skyscanner.net (price comparison website)

The earlier that you can purchase the tickets, the cheaper they will be - so plan in advance! **However, be sure to wait until after your first week of classes before scheduling trips for the weekend, in case you have a make-up class or co-curricular trip that you are required to attend.**

Don't ignore some of the bigger airlines! You can quite often find surprisingly good rates on national carriers.

British Airways on www.ba.com
Aer Lingus (Ireland) on www.aerlingus.ie
Alitalia (Italy) on www.alitalia.it
Iberia (Spain) on www.iberia.com

2. **Eurail tickets.** It is possible to buy a Eurail ticket in England but it will cost you on average 20% more than if you bought it in the States. Buy the ticket online at eurail.com and either select the option to have it shipped to the UK, or have it sent to a parent (or a friend) in the US (free delivery) and have them send it over to you.

HOW CAN I SAVE MONEY?

Outside of eating nothing but cheese and bread, here are some conventional cost-savers:

1. **Taking night trains:** Sleeping on a night train (rather than spending money on a hotel room) is a great way of shaving some costs. Travelling overnight by train is also a really effective way to travel as you don't waste valuable sightseeing time, travelling (i.e. you fall to sleep in Paris next morning you wake up in Rome!).

Your Eurail ticket allows you to sleep in a seat on a train completely free of charge and people who are on a massively tight budget will do this. Most people however, will pay a little extra (average around \$30) for a bunk-bed (more properly called a *couche*) in a specially designed sleeping carriage, which makes up part of the train. This way you can sleep more comfortably than being crunched up in a seat.

I've heard horror stories about sleeping on trains, is it safe?

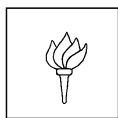
For the most part, horror stories are just that, "stories". But to feel extra safe there are a few simple little things you can do:

(a) Wear a money belt (especially one you keep inside your clothing) in which you can keep all of your essential items (e.g. passport, credit cards, cash etc.)

(b) Take a padlock and a length of metal chain to secure your luggage to the overhead baggage rail in the compartment.

2. **Staying in hostels** (as opposed to hotels)

Europe's hostels are a budget traveller's bonanza! For as little as \$20 per night you can rest your head, get a good night's sleep, have a nice shower and breakfast and embark on your next day's sightseeing in a relaxed mood.



Sounds good? Check out these websites for more information:

www.hostelseurope.com
www.europeanhostels.com
www.hostelbookers.com
www.bugeurope.com

Are hostels safe?

Yes, but again, you are in a situation where you are in contact with all sorts of people. The cheapest rooms (in a hostel) are dorm rooms that can sleep (sometimes) up to 20 people. Most hostels however provide lockers for your gear and you can also book smaller (i.e. twins and triples) in most hostels for a little more money.

So I shouldn't stay in hotels then?

No, each city in Europe has great hotel options, even for budget travellers. If you are travelling with a group of people, it can be cheaper to stay in a hotel than a hostel. This is because in many European hotels you pay by the "room" rather than by the "person" (as you would do in a hostel). This means a triple room costing \$90 per night is only \$30 per person.

Hold on, this is getting confusing, where are the best deals then?

Depends where you're going! Some places it is better to stay in a hostel (e.g. Switzerland), some places it might be better to stay in a hotel (e.g. Amsterdam). Don't worry help is at hand. The guidebook *Let's Go Europe* is a great resource for young American travellers (it is written by American students for American students).

3. Purchase an ISIC card to get discounts

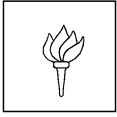
Worth its weight in gold, as it is the key to great discounts across Europe! It proves you are a student (your home college ID doesn't always work!) and Europeans believe it is important to give students a break on the cost of admission into major sites of cultural or historical significance. Therefore, for example, most of the continent's museums offer healthy (sometimes even free!) discounts on admission to ISIC cardholders.

You can purchase an ISIC card from STA Travel (located inside ULU or opposite Russell Square Tube station)

4. Eat nothing but bread and cheese!

Seriously, trying the different foods in Europe is one of the reasons you travel, so you'll want to sample the local fare. But how best to do it on a budget? Luckily most restaurants will offer a "tourist menu" (sometimes called a "formula") which offers diners the chance to eat a three-course meal with a drink for a very reasonable price. OK, so it restricts your choice to two or three options, but these selections will usually be the local speciality anyway. Ordering the "tourist menu" will save you around 40% off the *a la carte* menu. Most tourist menus are only available at lunchtime, so this is the best time to eat your main meal of the day!

One further point, it is now EU law that all places that sell food need to display their menu (i.e. prices) in the window of the establishment. So diners can work out the price they expect to pay *before* entering a restaurant.



Will my ATM card work?

Check with your bank before you travel. Bank of America customers can get “free” ATM withdrawals (you still pay 1%) at branches of BNP Paribas (France) and Deutsche Bank 24 (Germany).

How difficult will it be to travel if I don't have a second European language?

Obviously being able to speak a second European language will help you really get to know a host culture (so don't be afraid to use your high school Spanish!). It is somewhat of a callous thing to say, but people who do not speak some English are not usually too successful working in the European tourist industry. Meaning, that many of the people you will come in to contact with on your travels (hotel receptionists, waiters, ticket sellers at museums) will usually have some understanding of English.

Here's a little tip though, learn the phrase for “Do you speak English?” in the language of your host country (e.g. *Parlez-vous Anglais?*) and use it when speaking to a native-speaker of that language. It is only a common courtesy but really helps, if you're looking for help.

Which guidebook should I buy?

Travelling around Europe without a good guidebook is like trying to cycle with one-leg! As mentioned above, the guidebook *Let's Go Europe* is a great one for young American travellers.

Good alternatives are the *Rough Guide* series and *Lonely Planet* series. These again are written with a young audience in mind but are perhaps more informative on the history and cultural contexts of the sites you will see. If you are more interested in night-life than sightseeing, *Time Out* guides will be your book of choice!

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BEST KEPT TRAVEL SECRETS?

In addition to the information already given, here are some more ideas to think about as you plan your travels:

Anybody going to Scotland?

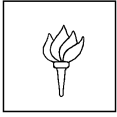
Twenty years ago a company called “Haggis Adventures” started running trips around Scotland visiting all of the scenic highlights (including the Isle of Skye – possibly the most dramatic scenery in Europe!). They are very reasonably priced and brilliant at what they do. Catch their website on www.radicaltravel.com for more information.

Anybody going to Ireland?

As fun as Dublin is (& it is a lot of fun!), Galway on the west coast of Ireland is perhaps the country's best city to base an Irish experience. Galway is absolutely charming and is the epicentre of the Celtic arts scene (therefore where you'll find the best pub music). It is located in an area of outstanding natural beauty (go to the Aran Islands and see what I mean). Again, check out www.radicaltravel.com for their tours of Ireland.

Anybody going to Paris?

In Paris, try and stay in the Latin Quarter or Montparnasse districts of the city. The Latin Quarter is very central (right next to the River Seine, the Notre Dame Cathedral and Saint Chapelle) and is the student area of the city; therefore, there are plenty of good value restaurants in the area. Montparnasse is a little further south and is a great transport hub, meaning it is easy to travel from here to any part of the city. Best of all the Montparnasse



Tower is the tallest office building in Paris and so it is easy to find your way home even if you are lost!

Anyone going to the French Riviera?

Stay in Nice but use the beaches at San Raphael or Antibes (a short journey by a regular train service from Nice). Nice itself has a stony beach and the others are much better. Basing yourself in Nice means you can go to Monte Carlo (i.e. Vegas with Ferrari's) at night.

Anyone going to Amsterdam?

Contrary to legend, Amsterdam is not all "sex, drugs and rock n' roll", it is a lovely city with lots of great things to do. Check out the recently remodelled Van Gough Museum, one of Europe's finest. The hostels in Amsterdam are a bit "unpredictable", think about staying in a hotel especially one that has the word "gracht" in its street address. Gracht is the Dutch word for "canal", therefore your hotel is on the canal side. So in the morning, you throw the curtains back and you can watch the pretty barges sail by, lovely!

Anybody going to Barcelona?

Stay in the Barri Gotic (Gothic Quarter) area of the city, especially if you are just off La Rambla (the street where, according to tradition, Barcelonans must promenade at least once a day). On the downside, Barcelona has a particular problem with pickpockets so be very careful with your belongings.

Anybody going to Madrid?

Amazing museums (i.e. Prado and Reina Sofia etc.), but for an experience you will never forget, watch a soccer game in the amazing Bernabeu Stadium, home of Real Madrid (a powerhouse of the sport).

Anybody going to Seville?

Stay in the Barrio Santa Cruz region of the city and then once you've got your bearings head across the river to the district of Triana (the gypsy quarter of the city) to catch some impromptu flamenco at Bar Anselma.

Anybody going to the beach?

Spain's best beaches are to be found on the Costa del Luz and Costa del Sol, Marbella is an especially nice resort. The best beach near to Barcelona is at Sitges (1 hour south). Young Europeans (especially those into the club scene) head to Ibiza (an island off Barcelona) for Europe's best hedonism. The only place in Europe you can "guarantee" beach weather in winter are the Canary Islands, a chain of islands off the south coast of Spain. Year-round great weather!

Anyone going to Venice?

Venice can be expensive and hard to find cheap places to stay. Limit your stay to a couple of nights- you can see most attractions this beautiful city has to offer in this amount of time. Blow your euros on a cup of hot chocolate at Florians Cafe in St. Mark's Square- stand at the bar, it's cheaper than sitting down!

Anyone going to Florence?

The world's best art and, some of Europe's best shopping. The best deals (leather goods especially) are to be found at the city's San Lorenzo market. Try and book into the Uffizi and Accademia (for Michelangelo's *David*) in advance to save queuing.



Anyone going to Rome?

Lots of budget accommodation exists around the Termini train station (check reviews on Trip Advisor first). When you've got yourself settled head to the district of Trastevere to have pizza at "The Morgue" (ask locally, everybody knows it!) – a place as Roman as Caesar's sandals.

Anyone going to Munich?

Great weekend destination! Upon arrival take one of "Mike's Bike Tours" to get to know the city. Then spend a day in Salzburg (Austria), beautiful city (1 hour away) where *The Sound of Music* (the tours are great, by the way!) was filmed and take a second excursion to Dachau, the nearest concentration camp to a major city.

Anyone going to Switzerland?

Interlaken is the place to head for, right in the heart of the High Alps! Stay at Balmer's Hostel at www.balmers.com. Not only is it the best way to do Switzerland on a budget, they will also set up numerous outdoor sports for you. So fancy skiing in the Alps, here's your place!

Anyone going to Vienna?

Like Switzerland, Austria is almost comically expensive. Therefore when in Vienna stay at Wombats Hostel at www.wombats.at. It is a great place for anyone on a budget.

Anyone going to Prague?

Another "top five meal" restaurant would have to be U Radnice (just behind the Old Town Square). Afterwards go for a beer in the elegant splendour of the piano bar of the Europa Hotel on Wencaslas Square.

Anyone going to Greece?

The islands of the Cyclades (especially Mykonos, Paros, and Ios) are beautiful, but the most fun you can have in Greece is to be found staying at the Pink Palace www.thepinkpalace.com on the island of Corfu. If all of the fun gets too much for you, hire a scooter and travel up the coast to the cove of Palaokastritsa (now this is why you come to Greece!)

Outside of the really famous places where is the best place to visit (that I might not have thought of)?

Bruges in Belgium: It is fantastic - perfect medieval city, magnificent food and drink, friendly people and chocolate (what more is there!).

TONY'S EUROPEAN CHOICES

Favourite European Cities

1. Paris
2. Florence
3. Rome

Favourite Buildings

1. Alhambra Palace, Granada
2. Pantheon, Rome
3. Opera Garnier, Paris

Chance of a lifetime

1. Hike the Cinque Terre, Italy
2. Trad music sessions in Ireland
3. Watching soccer in Barcelona

Favourite UK Cities

1. London
2. Edinburgh
3. Bath

Most overrated places

1. Amsterdam
2. Oktoberfest in Munich
3. Euro-Disney in Paris

Art not to miss!

1. Titian's *Assumption*, Venice
2. Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rome
3. Picasso's *Guernica*, Madrid