

Faremax Travel Guide to Western Europe

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Preface

The area between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, in modern-day Iraq, is often called 'The Cradle of Civilization'. It's where humanity first began to develop cities, bureaucracies, literacy and systems of government. But if it's in the Middle East that civilization was born, it is - arguably - in Western Europe that it grew up. Like so many adolescences, that growing up was turbulent, passionate, unstable and fascinating. The balance of world power may have shifted westward from Europe today, but Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Greece retain their influence - both in the modern political structures of their individual cultures and (with the exception of Switzerland) their role as the economic drivers of the European Union - and their importance as the crucible in which the modern world was forged.

In this short guide we're going to look at the major countries of Western Europe, find out a little about the culture of each, and discover some of the many opportunities for the tourist this amazing continent offers.

If you're a first-time visitor to Western Europe, there are a few things you should take on board while planning your trip. Remember that although it covers a relatively small area of land - about the same as the continental United States - you can't expect to take the whole region in during the course of a single whistle-stop tour. A month of traveling from country to country will give you a good sense of the place, but you would only have experienced a fraction of one percent of what these countries have to offer.

Remember, too, that the cultures and expectations of different European cultures vary wildly. Although Western Europeans have spent much of the past fifty years welding together the EU out of the many values they have in common, they are still content to celebrate their differences in culture, language, art and cuisine.

If there's one thing that really unites Western Europeans, it's a shared vision of the future and their role in it. There's a tendency among affluent non-Europeans to see Western Europe as a kind of museum, a grand civilization preserved in amber for the leaders of other nations to learn from. As far as Europeans are concerned, there is nothing quaint about their home continent; they rightly perceive both the EU and some of its constituent countries (most notably Germany and the UK) as major world powers in their own right - economic, cultural and scientific contributors with a global reach. The economy of the European Union is as large as that of the United States, and growing.

Finally, it's probably a good idea to make a detailed itinerary before you travel whichever part of Western Europe you are visiting. One of the problems of traveling in this part of the world is that there is so much to see, the first-time visitor can be quite overawed and simply get lost in a mess of indecision. Which castle or historic town to check out next? Which mountain to climb? Which cuisine to sample? Which journey to take? Spend some time before you travel to Europe sifting through the guidebooks and making a list of the things you would like to see and do. That will save you time in the long run, and help you enjoy this incredibly diverse part of the world in digestible chunks.

Chapter 1: Greece

It's Greece we're going to look at first, which may seem something of an odd choice. Sticking out into the Mediterranean Sea between the Aegean and the Adriatic, nudging against Asia Minor in the east and the former communist states of the Balkans to the north, Greece defies classification as either Western or Eastern European. Its major religion, Orthodox Christianity, is definitely of the east, while its westernized consumer economy and its longstanding role within the EU give it a more western feel.

The things that really make Greece stand out as a country of Western Europe are the values and philosophies it gifted to the world. Democracy was born here, as were the ideas of men like Plato and Socrates which, although we often don't realize it, underlie the entire western way of thinking and behaving.

For all that its thinkers essentially created western civilization, Greece is perhaps a little on the margins of western culture today - not a backwater, exactly, but not one of the makers of modern European manners. The area in which Greece most certainly excels, though, is looking after visitors. There aren't many countries in the world that can genuinely claim to offer something for everyone, but Greece is one of them - it has snowy mountains, beaches to rival anything in the Caribbean or Pacific, and more history and culture than you could take in over the course of several lifetimes.

Before we step ashore, it's worth taking some time to look at the "Jewels of Greece" - the offshore islands in the Aegean and the Mediterranean that have been famous for their beauty since ancient times. Although there are several archipelagos, the Greek islands can roughly be divided into two groups: those lying off the west coast of mainland Greece in the group dominated by the Ionian islands of Corfu, Cephalonia, Ithaca, Leucas and Zante; and those lying off the east coast, in the Aegean Sea, to the north of Crete. The Aegean Islands are more numerous than the Ionian Islands, and until recently were more heavily visited by tourists. Islands like Delos, Euboea, Samos, Lesbos, Limnos, Patmos, and Rhodes in the Cyclades and Dodecanese groups have been popular destinations with European tourists since the 1970s.

The Greek islands may be spread over a wide area, and even have rather strongly varying cultures from island to island, but the things that make them popular with visitors are universal. For a start, the climate is as near perfect as anything on earth; although things can get pretty hot, it's very rarely humid and oppressive, and evenings can be cool with light breezes - perfect weather for sitting on the terrace of your holiday villa with a glass of chilled wine and some crusty bread, olives and feta cheese, the great staples of Greek cuisine.

The Greek islands are so popular that it can be quite hard to find somewhere truly out of the way and isolated, especially on the larger and more popular islands such as Rhodes and Lesbos. The Ionian Islands used to be the place to go for the discerning traveler seeking a little peace and tranquility, but even they have experienced an increased influx of tourists over the past decade, many of them brought to Cephalonia by the success of Louis de Berniere's novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and the subsequent movie of the same name. There has been some controversy over the extent to which the Greek islands have been given over to the demands of tourism, but whatever the arguments they remain one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Because of the stunning beauty of the islands, mainland Greece is sometimes a little overlooked as a vacation destination. In fact the interior has a lot to offer visitors.

Cities like Athens and Corinth may get a little hot and crowded, but there's no way you can fault their impeccable credentials as centers of European culture. Be warned that the heat combines with the frantic pace of city life in Greece to create a significant smog problem in some cities, especially Athens. Although this has been mitigated somewhat in recent years by government-enforced environmental measures, the atmosphere in downtown Athens in the middle of the day in summertime can still be pretty unbearable if you're not used to it – asthmatics take note. Probably the best way to explore Greek cities is to get up early in the morning and look around until the day begins to get really hot, and then it's probably time to retire to the shade for a light lunch and a siesta before venturing out again in the evening.

If ancient but smoggy cities begin to get you down after a while, head inland to the cool, forested slopes of the Pindus Mountains, where you can find great hiking and cycling opportunities to help you wear off the effect all those olives and chunks of feta have on your waistline.

Chapter 2: Italy

You wouldn't think it today, but Italy has, for the past two thousand years, been one of the most divided countries in the world. In fact, only in the past century or so has it been really accurate to describe Italy as a single country. For years following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the whole Italian peninsula consisted of dozens of territories and city-states which spent most of their time fighting each other. There's a pretty convincing argument that Italy has never really regained the unity that was imposed upon it by the Romans. Even today, in many senses, Italy is a divided country. The most obvious split is between North and South. The North is a rich, highly industrialized region – and its people are sometimes inclined to look askance at their poor, rural southern cousins.

All of this, of course, stems from the fact that most Italians feel their chief loyalty to their home town or local region rather than to the country as whole. Back in the nineteenth century, an Austrian diplomat said that the word 'Italy' was 'a geographical expression' - meaning of course, that the word could hardly be used in a political or social sense to describe the constantly bickering people of the Italian peninsula. Today, these divisions are most clearly represented in Italian political life, which is a mess of small parties and coalitions, from all extremes of the political spectrum, constantly fighting each other for power.

If you're visiting Italy you probably won't have enough time to get mixed up in politics - although it can be pretty interesting to witness one of the regular political rallies and demonstrations that take place in major cities. Don't be intimidated by the large numbers of beefy riot police that always attend these events, often to the extent of outnumbering the actual demonstrators. Politics in Italy is treated rather like a spectator sport or a family day out, so violence and intimidation are rare.

This capital of Italy is Rome - and it is here that we'll start our brief tour of the country. Rome is one of those cities that is accustomed to being important. For two thousand years it has played a major role in world affairs, first as headquarters of a mighty empire, and, latterly, as the spiritual home of the Catholic Church. But for all its importance, Rome can still feel like a rather provincial place. It's not a particularly huge city by modern standards, and despite the influx of professionals and politicians from all over Italy and the world, it still retains a strong local identity.

If you're visiting Rome, there are a number of sights that you absolutely must see. Chief among these is the ancient Roman Forum. Lying right in the center of the city, close to the River Tiber, this small space was once the nerve center of an administration that stretched its fingers as far north as Great Britain, as far east as Iraq, as far west as Portugal and as far south as North Africa. One of the things that always strikes visitors to the forum is just how compact it is. The Roman Empire, for all its cruelty, was one of the most efficient systems of government ever to exist. An area that covered a large percentage of the known world was successfully administered for centuries by not many more than a hundred central officials, all from working within a few hundred yards of this spot.

If you stand in the center of the Forum with the river area to your left, you'll find yourself facing the Capitoline Hill. In Roman times this was the site of the Temple of Jupiter, the holiest place in the Roman world. On the Hill today sit the Capitoline Museums, which are full of artifacts and displays dedicated to the history of the city. Behind you and little to the left is the Palatine Hill, covered in the ruins of the houses and

palaces of the great families that ruled the city. Directly behind you is the Via Sacra, the 'sacred way' the leads out of the Forum. If you follow it you'll shortly find yourself outside the Colosseum, probably the most famous place of public entertainment in the ancient world. Once again, the overriding impression that visitor gets is of an awful lot crammed into a very small area. No matter how many times you visit Rome, you'll never cease to be amazed by the fact that such a small place, based around a city center little larger than a modern village, so successfully dominated the world of its time and left a legacy so strong that it influences our politics and thought to this day.

About half an hour's walk from the Forum you'll find the Vatican, the city within a city that to this day is the headquarters of the Catholic Church and home of the Pope. As well as been the administrative center of a living empire - albeit a religious one - the Vatican is the home of one of the greatest art collections in the world. Although you may have to queue for a little while to get in, and security these days is tight, it's well worth it to see some of the greatest paintings and sculptures in the world. Don't do what some visitors do and charge through the museums at a breakneck pace in search of the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo's famous painted ceiling, ignoring many of the other great art works on display. Linger and admire the other famous collections. The Raphael rooms in particular contain some of the finest frescoes in the world. The great thing about the Vatican museums is that once you're inside very few restrictions are placed upon you as a visitor. You can get really close some of the world's most famous paintings, and enjoy them in their original settings.

It would be very easy to write a whole book about Rome, but there is much else in Italy for a tourist to enjoy. Exactly where you should go depends on what you're interested in; if you're in search of authentic Italian culture you should head south from Rome. Although southern Italy - or the 'Mezzogiorno' as it is known - is in places very impoverished, the local way of life is much closer to traditional Italian cultural values than the way of life in the north of the country, which has become as Americanized as much of the rest of Western Europe. You should especially consider heading south if you are yourself of Italian descent. Most Italian immigrants to the USA came from southern Italy and Sicily, searching for a new life and trying to escape from the grinding poverty that was endemic there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The most distinctive of southern Italian cities is Naples. Dominated by the sinister cone of Mount Vesuvius, and close to the ruins of the ancient Roman town of Pompeii, Naples is a striking and somewhat crazy city. It's often said that it's very unwise to drive in Italy unless you're a native, because of the eccentric and frantic dangerous driving habits of the Italians. As far as the city of Naples is concerned, this warning needs to be upgraded: unless you have been born and raised in the place, getting behind the wheel of an automobile is suicide.

Aside from its automotive problems, Naples is a city with a lot going for it. If you like eating, Naples is one of the best cities in Italy to visit. The local specialty, of course, is pizza - a dish which started as cheap peasant food and his wound up being exported all over the world. But even today, many experienced travelers would argue that the very best pizza in the world is found in a city of Naples. This is because of the abundance of fresh, quality ingredients; the local tomatoes and sardines are, in particular, unforgettable.

While you're in Naples, you should make a point of visiting Pompeii, the Roman town that was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in the 1st century A.D. Because it

lay undiscovered for centuries, encased in layers of ash, the preservation of the old town is near miraculous. You can stroll down streets that the Romans once strolled down, look into their houses and enjoy fantastic views of the mountain that destroyed them.

Another part of southern Italy that's worth exploration is the Amalfi coast. Centered around the ancient, cliff top town of Amalfi, and characterized by winding, hairpin cliff roads, this is one of the most dramatic parts of Italy. Although in recent years it has attracted a greater degree of tourism the area remains relatively unspoiled. It's still quite possible to find deserted inlets, quiet beaches, and tiny country taverns serving just about the best food you'll taste anywhere for very low prices.

Head north from Rome and you'll find yourself in a very different country. The great cities of northern Italy are hives of commercial activity, major centers for the fashion world and leading cultural hot spots. Northern Italy is also very mountainous, bordering as it does with the Alps, Europe's greatest mountain range. Around the city of Turin, home of the 2006 Winter Olympics, there is superb skiing to be had.

In the cities themselves there is a greater sense of sophistication than you'll find in the south. A major occupation for Italians of all ages is shopping. If you're interested in fashion, a trip to Italy would not be complete without a day at least in the city of Milan. As well as been the spiritual home of opera, Milan is the center of the world fashion industry - despite what the people of Paris may have to say about the matter. The department stores and boutiques of Milan couldn't be said to be cheap, but if you're on a budget it's still worth taking a tour around to soak up the atmosphere and marvel at the beautiful people spending fortunes on what, after all, are just clothes.

If your interests are less tied up with capitalism and more focused on culture, ditch Milan and take the first train to Venice. The English writer Anthony Burgess had this to say about that city: "despair of man and go to Venice, you will despair no more. If human beings can build a city like this, their souls deserved to be saved." Spend just a few hours in Venice and you'll start to see where Burgess was coming from. The city was originally built on small, muddy islets and sandbanks, enclosed by the lagoon which to this day protects it from violent Adriatic storms.

As with Rome, so with Venice: though the area of the city is limited by the islands upon which it stands, that is so much crammed into the small space that to see it all would take a considerable amount of time. There are, however, several things that you absolutely must see while you are in the city. Chief among these are the Doge's palace and the Cathedral of St. Mark in Piazza San Marco. Both structures date from the glory days of the Venetian Republic. Unlike so many other cities and states during medieval times, Venice continued to offer citizens a vote in the ancient Greek tradition. Although the franchise was not open to all - Venice could in no way be called a democracy - the openness that resulted, combined with the city's position as a strategic port, ensured that it flourished for centuries until finally reduced to the sidelines by the development of new trade routes and the ambition of that celebrated bringer-low of the great, Napoleon Bonaparte.

The Doge's Palace is a bizarre, gothic fantasy, its elegant windows and tracery betraying medieval European influences as well as the influence of the architecture of the Arabs, a people with whom the Venetians had regular commercial contact. The interior is just as spectacular. The great globes of the Map Room and the spectacular, rich paintings

to be found in the Great Council Chamber are evidence, if any were needed, that this was once of the great intellectual, artistic and commercial centers of the world.

The Cathedral of St. Mark is just next door. The people of Venice always had rather an uneasy relationship with the Catholic Church, and, although conventionally pious, often found themselves falling out with the reigning Pope. Not that you'd think this from the interior of the cathedral, which is surely one of the richest and most spectacular in Western Europe - possibly only rivaled by the great cathedrals of northern England. Although like many Old Catholic places of worship the interior of the cathedral is rather gloomy and mysterious, it is still quite easy to imagine yourself a Venetian, attending mass in the glory days of the Republic.

You don't have to travel far from Venice to enjoy wonders of a very different kind. The Veneto - the territory that traditionally belonged to Venice on the Italian mainland - is green, hilly and beautiful. As the hills get steeper, the country rises to the great mountain range of the Dolomites, and, to the east, the mountainous border with Austria.

Chapter 3: Austria

To the first-time visitor, Austria seems a very different country from its near neighbor Italy. And, in a lot of very superficial ways, so it is; as soon as you cross the border you become aware of a much more Germanic atmosphere. Towns and villages are tidier, public transport systems more efficient, the people rather more reserved and everything just a little bit more expensive.

In fact, one of the problems the Austrians have traditionally had is that they have for hundreds of years had to live in the shadow of their Italian neighbors. At times, Austria has even ruled portions of northern Italy, including Venice and the Veneto. For these reasons, cultural relations between the two countries have not always been easy. The Austrians are, in a sense, caught in no-man's-land - trying to occupy the middle ground between the formality of the Germans to the north and the natural effusiveness of the Italians to the south-west. This seems to have turned them into a somewhat insular people. Once you get to know the Austrians they can be exceptionally friendly – it just takes a little while. Their country is beautiful, and if you like the outdoor life you will be very happy there.

The city of Vienna is one of the most relaxed and quiet of Europe's capitals. Lying mostly on the west bank of the river Danube, Vienna has barely sprawled, and all the city's most interesting sights are contained within 'The Ring' - a wide, orbital boulevard built in nineteenth century to open up the medieval heart of the city. Within the Ring you will find royal palaces, museums of art and history, many shopping opportunities and any number of places to eat. In some ways, however, the sense of relaxation is a facade: the Viennese remain a somewhat formal and reserved people, superficially friendly enough, but slow to open up to strangers.

The twin themes of careful management and relaxed formality continue throughout the rest of Austria. There is very little about the country that is physically unattractive, and the Austrians are known as people who appreciate beauty. To witness this at first hand you need only visit the city of Salzburg, the setting of the musical *The Sound of Music*. Salzburg, which is surrounded by some of the most beautiful scenery in all of Europe, is the spiritual home of Austrian music making. The composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born here - something that visitors to the city are not allowed to forget for even a moment. There is a regular Mozart Festival, as well as all kinds of other music-making throughout the year. Salzburg is almost as famous for its architecture as it is for its music. The city's splendid baroque buildings, set against the dramatic backdrop of the Austrian Alps, is a sight you'll struggle to forget once you have seen it.

South of Salzburg is the area known as the *Salzkammergut* - roughly translated, the name means "salt cellar country". The origins of this delightful name come from the region's famous salt mines, which were once the chief source of supply for most of South East Europe. It is a mountainous area, with steep slopes, thick forests and deep blue lakes. Probably the prettiest of the villages in the *Salzkammergut* is Hallstatt, which nestles at the foot of a mountain by the shores of the Hallstattersee Lake. So thin is the stretch of land upon which the village sits that there is no room for a rail line. Rather, visitors to the village have to dismount from the train on the far side of the lake and take a ferry to the village center on the other side.

One thing you will notice about Austria is the extent to which the eating habits of its people are different from those of their Italian neighbors. Italians love pasta, salad and

fish. Austrian taste in food tends towards bulkier, fattier, meatier meals. In fact, if you like meat, this is one of the best countries in the world to visit. The classic dish is Wienerschnitzel - escalope of pork. Meat dishes are served with a wide variety of salads, potatoes and different types of bread. If you are vegetarian you are going to have problems in Austria. While you should get along just fine in Vienna, out in a rural areas vegetarianism is regarded as a metropolitan eccentricity and is barely catered for – although local hotel and pension owners will almost certainly bend over backwards to fix something up for you. If you are content to eat fish, you should have few problems.

If, on other hand, you enjoy a drink you're more or less in paradise. Although wine snobs sometimes make a big deal of belittling Austrian vineyards, the country produces some of the best light, fresh whites to be had anywhere in the world. Even better than Austrian wine, is Austrian beer. The national brews tend to be pale, dry and flavorsome; best served ice cold in a large glass or stein, they are notoriously easy to drink. Like Germany, the Scandinavian countries and the UK, Austria has a well-established beer culture. Most restaurants will serve a fine local beer and in the cities and larger towns you'll find beer cellars that offer a wide range of different drinks, often accompanied by meals or snacks.

Despite its charming looks, to this day Austria remains somewhat in the shadow of its neighbors. Italy, Germany, and Switzerland don't necessarily have stronger cultures than Austria: it is simply that Austria, lying caught between them, seems to have blended the best of all three without coming up with something truly original and distinctive itself.

Chapter 4: Switzerland

Switzerland is, in many ways, an oddity. Positioned deep in the heart of Europe and completely landlocked, it is nevertheless one of the few European nations that is not a member state of the European Union. The reasons for this non-membership are buried deep within Swiss history. To this day, Switzerland is not in principle a single polity – it is, rather, a confederation of small independent states known as Cantons. The Cantons still have an enormous degree of autonomy, and Swiss government is decentralized to the extent that public referenda are held on many major political decisions. The Swiss Cantons can reasonably claim to be the longest lasting democratic institutions in history. The results of all of this independence is that the Swiss have traditionally looked with mistrust on the rest of Europe, which, after all, has spent the best part of the previous two millennia in the control of despots, kings, and oligarchies.

But the reluctance of the Swiss to join in the political integration of the rest of Western Europe is based on more than just a sense of independence. Switzerland has long been the banker of Europe. Billions of dollars in cash and gold bullion is hidden away in bank vaults beneath the streets of Geneva and other Swiss cities. Swiss banking law ensures anonymity for account holders, meaning that over the years the country has been a favored repository for the wealth of some of the world's more dubious characters. Switzerland has grown rich on the back of the banking trade; to join the European Union would necessarily mean abandoning some of the laws that make it an attractive place for storing gains, ill-gotten or otherwise.

The country itself is - at least superficially - the model of what a modern western state should look like. Among the native population poverty is virtually nonexistent. The cities are sparkling clean, the highways broad and level, the houses immaculate, the automobiles large and the scenery spectacular. The price that is paid for this luxury and security is one of the highest costs of living in the world. Not that this bothers the Swiss greatly, as they have one of the highest average incomes per capita in the world. For visitors, however, this economic success can spoil the enjoyment; clear blue lakes and mountain views have a habit of losing their sheen when the coffee you're drinking as you admire the view costs eight dollars a cup.

If you're prepared to take your own coffee you can enjoy Switzerland with a greater degree of peace of mind. This is truly one of the most amazing countries in the world in terms of its natural wonders. Great mountains like the Eiger and the Matterhorn rise gracefully above glaciers and green valleys. Making yourself understood in Switzerland is also delightfully easy - the country is officially trilingual, the recognized languages being French, German and Italian. On top of that, everyone - but everyone - speaks English. In fact, not only do the Swiss speak English, they often speak it better than Brits and Americans - or least with a greater degree of grammatical accuracy.

Swiss culture is a little harder to penetrate. If you've seen the movie *The Third Man* you may remember Orson Welles' assertion that a thousand years of peace and tranquility only inspired the Swiss to invent the cuckoo clock - while their neighbors in war-torn Italy were busy producing some of the greatest art the world has ever seen. Although there is a grain of truth in this, it's not entirely a fair assessment of Switzerland's contribution to Western European culture and thought. During centuries of oppression, Switzerland was one bright light of freedom - a place where competing

strands of thought could fight it out in the debating chamber and in the pages of books, rather than in the courtroom of the Inquisition and on the battlefield.

Chapter 5: Germany

One European country that's been the site of more battlefields than most is Germany. Today, it's the economic powerhouse of the continent, and despite the recent difficulties brought about by Reunification shows every sign of maintaining its financial dominance and its industrial strength. To foreign eyes modern Germany can have something of a grim image - it is often considered by outsiders to be a country dominated by the needs of business.

That is an ill-informed view. Overshadowed as it is in the imagination - at least in the aesthetic stakes - by the likes of France, Italy and the UK, Germany is in many places and many ways a deeply beautiful country. It is, on the other hand, the one European nation where it is quite possible to get a sense of the whole without a visit to the capital city. Berlin is neither an ugly nor a boring place, but it can be a little faceless. It is not as quintessentially German as many other of the country's other major centers, such as Cologne and Hamburg. The city was pretty much completely destroyed at the end of the Second World War. The level of reconstruction is frankly staggering, with old blocks rebuilt as good as new and gleaming skyscrapers rising from the rubble. If ever a phoenix rose from the ashes, it's Berlin. The price - some would argue - is a de-nationalization; as if in its struggle with its past Berlin has shed its German identity and become a world city.

The real Germany is to be found elsewhere, and probably the best place to find it is wherever the Germans are doing what they do best: having fun. That assertion may jar a little with a few preconceived ideas many people have about German stiffness and formality, and it is certainly true that as a nation they value correct behavior and respect the proper way of doing things. But these characteristics shouldn't be allowed to overshadow the fact that the Germans are people who like to have a good time and know how to have one.

One of the reasons why Germany is such a great place for family vacations is that German notions of enjoyment tend to be heavily family oriented - a trait they have in common with the Italians. The best way to experience this first hand is to book your vacation at an appropriate time and in an appropriate place to coincide with one of the multitude of local celebrations and festivals that happen all year round.

Probably the best and the most truly German of all the country's festivals are the annual Christmas markets. Although you'll find the greatest density of these in the Rhineland area of western Germany, you'll find one or more in every town and city and in many villages. These are not highly commercialized gatherings. Rather, they consist of a number of small stalls each in its own wooden hut, grouped together in a public square or any other convenient space. The range of items on offer is unpredictable, though you can be pretty sure that any Christmas market will have a large number of craft stalls, clothing stalls, and outdoor cafes from which you can buy hot snacks, coffee, cakes and the wonderful Gluhwein - German mulled red wine, which is served hot, loaded with delicious spices.

Christmas markets typically begin a couple of weeks before Christmas Eve, the date on which, every year, they cease trading. During that time they can get very busy indeed, with markets in the big cities such as Cologne receiving hundreds of thousands of visitors. The atmosphere is invariably good-natured, and providing you don't mind crowds you should find a visit to the markets a great way of spending a couple of days of

your vacation. German Christmas markets are also very popular with French and British visitors, many of whom take a vacation at this time of year specifically to travel to Germany and do some Christmas shopping.

If you intend to visit Germany at a different time of year, say during the summer, you'll discover that the Rhineland is one of the most beautiful areas of Europe. A mixture of high culture, beautiful towns, extensive hillside vineyards and great places to eat and drink, this part of Germany is among the most popular with tourists. But it's not the only area that the tourist should consider visiting. In the South for example, the region of Bavaria is very popular with visitors of all types. Green and mountainous, this is classic Germany - it's in Bavaria you'll find the best views, the prettiest towns and villages, the best beer and, of course, people wearing lederhosen, the distinctive leather shorts still worn by traditionally-minded locals.

To the minds of other Western Europeans, the west and south of Germany have always been the prime locations for visitors. This is probably because during the period of the Cold War it was very difficult for Westerners to visit East Germany. To a large extent, many of the east's best features were forgotten by the tourist industry. But now the whole country has opened up again and a long period of redevelopment is reaching its climax. Even though it tends to be a little flatter than western Germany, the east of the country has a lot to offer. The cities of Leipzig and Dresden, although all but destroyed during the war, have been lovingly rebuilt and restored to their former glory. This has been a long process, and in many cases has only recently been completed. For example, Dresden's largest church, the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady), was completely destroyed by the bombing raids of the RAF in 1944 and 1945. Although barely even a shell remained, the task of rebuilding was undertaken and progressed steadily through the decades until the church was reconstructed in 2005. Germany has taken a distinctly different approach to the business of post-war reconstruction from that taken by the majority of European nations. In most cases the effort that's been made has been directed towards reproducing the pre-war architecture and layout of devastated cities. While town planners in the UK and France saw devastation as an opportunity to build something new (and often something cheap, nasty and horrible), their opposite numbers in Germany saw an opportunity to reconstruct fragile old buildings stronger than before. If you're a US citizen you can take pride in the fact that many of the historic centers of German cities were rebuilt using American money via the Marshall Plan financial aid scheme – although it's probably not a good idea to point this out to the locals.

Germany has a more interesting culinary culture that it is sometimes given credit for. Often considered to be a country where meat and potatoes - and not much more - take pride of place on kitchen shelves, German cooking at its best is rich, lively, and imaginative. If you're going to be staying in Germany for any length of time, you'll have to make sure that your stomach is well-adapted to large volumes of food. It's not that the Germans eat a great deal more than most people as such, but rather what they do eat tends to be starchy and fatty, with a heavy emphasis on leaving the table feeling full and satisfied. As a nation they also have a very sweet tooth. Cakes and pastries are outstandingly popular and are served at all times of the day, often with coffee.

Chapter 6: The Low Countries

The German fondness for sweet things is shared by many of their cousins in the Low Countries. Belgium, especially, has constructed what seems like a whole culture on the foundations of chocolate. Belgium is kind of a curious place to visit, simply because most people's expectations are either low or nonexistent. Even the Belgians themselves would find it hard to disagree with the assessment that the last time they made a splash in European affairs was the mid '50's BC, when their predecessors - the wild tribe known as the Belgae - gave Julius Caesar something of a run for his money during his conquest of Gaul. Since losing that particular war, the Belgians have seemed content to have spent the past two thousand years doing nothing much in particular. It's unfortunate, then, that just about every major European war of the last ten centuries seems to have passed through their territory and, in many instances, simply stopped there and wrought devastation. The Belgians are a pretty innocuous people who have done little to deserve this. The fact that they have done little of anything should not be held against them; that are friendly, kindly, gentle people who have established prosperous businesses and a happy stable society on the back of the relative tranquility of their national character.

Many Belgians reading this will be quick to point out that the history of their country has been pretty much dominated by the actions of its neighbors - Holland and France. The other country that has had a significant impact on this part of Europe, though you might not guess it from looking at the map, is Spain. In the middle of the second millennium AD the Spanish kings got hold of this part of the world as a result of the complex interplay of dynastic marriages, wars, and treaties that dominated Western Europe during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. The territory of the Spanish Netherlands actually encompassed much of modern Holland and Belgium. This area, along with parts of northern France, is usually known as Flanders and is famous for the richness of its farmland. Obviously the Spanish were pretty pleased to get their hands on all of this, and the people of Holland in particular spent the best part of two hundred years trying to kick them back out. With a little occasional help from the English they finally got rid of their Spanish overlords and set about forming their own nation states.

With all due respect to the people of Belgium - and indeed of Luxembourg - Holland is by far the most interesting country in this part of the world. By rights, large portions of it should simply not exist, reclaimed as they have been from the sea. To this day, much of Holland's territory is technically below sea level and has to be protected by a complex system of dikes and sea defenses. The majority of the country is very, very flat, and provides a very fertile environment for arable farming. Everybody knows the Dutch clichés: that it's a land of tulips and windmills populated by blue-eyed, blonde-haired, hearty clog-wearing natives.

These days the Dutch tend to prefer wearing sneakers like the rest of us, but the cliché doesn't offer an entirely false impression; The Netherlands remains the single biggest cultivator of flowers for commercial sale in the world, and is still a country of windmills - although today they are more likely to be generating electricity for one of the ecologically-friendly enterprises for which the Dutch have a commendable national passion than grinding flour for morning bread.

For most visitors, the highlight of the Low Countries is the city of Amsterdam. Despite what a lot of people think, Amsterdam is not the capital of the Netherlands. That honor goes to The Hague, a much more respectable and altogether more boring city than

Amsterdam. Even within the Netherlands, Amsterdam has something of a reputation as a friendly and hospitable sink of depravity and vice, but its appearance belies its seedy reputation. Like Venice, it is a city of canals and fine architecture, most beautiful during the spring and fall. The seedy side of Amsterdam is confined to the notorious red light district. With the exception of this area, Amsterdam is as family-friendly a city as you will find anywhere in Western Europe. While it's true that the city authorities have a relaxed approach to soft drugs, and in particular to cannabis, this has not transformed Amsterdam into something rotten and decadent. Consumption of cannabis is confined by law to licensed cafés, and you are no more likely to come across drugged up teens lounging in the streets than you are in any other western city. Truth be told, Amsterdam is significantly safer than the majority of American cities of comparable size.

There is more to this town than sex and drugs, too. For centuries, Amsterdam has been one of the great ports of Northern Europe. Like other seafaring cities, it has benefited from a great degree of cross fertilization from other cultures and is now the home of several significant art collections and museums. Like many places in Holland you'll find the natives are very friendly and pleasant, and willing to welcome visitors from wherever they come in the world.

Despite this – or maybe even because of it, as we shall see - Holland has recently had some flirtation with extreme right-wing politics. This is mainly the result of large-scale emigration from Africa and Eastern Europe. The Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular, are very proud of their tradition of tolerance and acceptance. However, many Dutch people feel that their capacity for tolerance is being stretched to the very limit by the burden that immigration places upon the Dutch economy. There is also a degree of concern that their liberalism is permitting illiberal tendencies to take root in their country - the particular fear is that the Netherlands will become a haven in Europe for Islamic extremism. A couple of years ago the charismatic, right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated for voicing fears about the impact hard-line Muslims might have on Dutch culture. The fact that this is the first political assassination in the Netherlands for four hundred years is testament to the stability of its political settlement and ability of its people to get along with one another and with outsiders.

Chapter 7: The United Kingdom

Next we travel across the water to one of the most remarkable nations of all. The United Kingdom, although it no longer has its empire, remains a dominant player on the world stage, exercising power and influence out of all proportion to its size. The reasons for this are complex, and the subject of intense debate between historians. It's probable that the British have inherited their adventurous, innovative nature from the many races and tribes they are descended from. The ethnic English, especially, are among the most bastardized people on the planet. In truth they can barely be said to have their own ethnicity at all - being descended from a mess of Anglo-Saxons, Romans, Celts, Danes, Norwegians, Jutes and Normans.

The culture created by these people, along with their immediate neighbors the Scots and Welsh did not get off to a good start. The history of Britain for several hundred years after the decline of Roman rule was one long story of rebellion, civil war, treachery, cruelty, starvation, and general nastiness. For years the British Isles were seen as a backwater by the rest of Europe - particularly so by the glittering courts of France and Spain. That attitude remained unchanged even when the British landed on the continent and started doing what they did best: causing trouble for people who probably didn't really deserve it.

That reputation for barbarism and backwardness began to change during the Renaissance. British culture, spearheaded by London, produced an explosion of talent - literary, military, political, and scientific. Ultimately, the British used the talents gifted to them by their uniquely diverse inheritance to rule a third of the world.

For all that its global reach has diminished, the UK is as frantic a place now as ever it was. Do not be fooled into thinking that the stereotypical image of the bumbling and faintly eccentric Englishman - as represented abroad by the likes of Huge Grant - is at all representative. UK remains at the center of world politics, culture, and research. However, what the British do very well - and this is particularly true of the English - is quietly cover up their own achievements. "Showing off" has never been looked on kindly in British culture, and the tradition of self-effacement continues. The flip side of this is a certain smugness that can pervade British - and, especially, English - culture. This seems to be one the English trait that is most irritating to outsiders. It's bred of the simple belief that there is no better way of doing things than the English way, and that, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the United Kingdom still rules the world.

If you're visiting the United Kingdom then a trip to London is a must. It's the biggest city in Western Europe and one of the most interesting and lively for the tourist. There are a number of sights worth seeing, but most of the best ones are concentrated in two main areas.

The so-called West End of London is not at all ancient. In the seventeenth century, in the immediate aftermath of the English Civil War, London experienced a building boom. The original city, about a mile to the east, was too small to accommodate the growing population. Wishing to get away from the smelly and rebellious mob, Londoners with enough money began to move west, closer to the Royal Court at Whitehall. Villages like Kensington and Chelsea were heavily developed until they ultimately became part of Greater London. Even today it's important to get your nomenclature right in London. The actual City of London is a single square mile,

formerly surrounded by walls. Today it is the heart of the city's financial district. The West End is, technically, part of the separate city of Westminster.

A walk around the West End itself can be great fun. It is a mixture of busy shopping streets and thoroughfares such as Regent Street and Piccadilly, interspersed with lovely green parks. Probably the best of these is the Royal Park of St. James, which lies immediately to the west of Piccadilly Circus. If you've had a stressful day of shopping and the sun is shining, there are few London pastimes more relaxing than heading to St. James' Park, hiring one of the many deckchairs, and having a snooze in the sun.

Also of interest in the West End are the London museums, including the Science, Natural History and Victoria and Albert Museums. Entry is free. The London museums are so huge that you could easily spend a whole week looking around them, so it's best to plan your trip carefully in advance. If museums are your thing you should also not neglect the British Museum in Bloomsbury, a short taxi ride away.

Further to the east, the City itself is not that interesting, although a tour around the Bank of England's museum in Threadneedle Street can be informative and entertaining for older kids, as can the museum of London, with its displays about the old Roman city of Londinium, which now lies directly underneath the City and gave the 'Square Mile' its original outline. The most interesting sights in this part of London are a little to the south of the City proper, on the south bank of the River Thames. Here you will find the Tate Modern art gallery, and, best of all, the famous reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. If you feel like spending an afternoon stepping back into Elizabethan London – maybe without some of the more unpleasant smells - a trip to the Globe is a must. You can even see a Shakespeare play performed as the great man originally intended it.

Outside of London, you will find that England has an absurd amount of interesting stuff crammed into it for such a small country. The UK is actually one of the most densely populated of western countries, although you only really appreciate this when you try to drive somewhere and get stuck in a huge traffic jam. However, hiring a car is a great way to get around, especially if you're heading to the more remote areas further north. The country has a great road network and is officially the safest place to drive in the world.

Many people rave about the beauty of southern England, but frankly it is overrated compared to the north. Head up the motorways to areas such as the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District to enjoy some of the finest natural landscapes anywhere in the world. These areas can get quite crowded at peak periods, though it's never too difficult to escape the crowds by heading to more remote counties such as Northumberland in the far north-east of England. Northern England also has some fine towns, featuring beautiful medieval architecture as well as great opportunities for shopping, eating and drinking. If you love great architecture, the northern cities of York and Durham have what are arguably the world's finest medieval cathedrals.

Heading south again, the University towns of Oxford and Cambridge, both within an easy drive of London, are fascinating and beautiful places. Oxford's High Street is a popular shopping area and while you're there you can take guided tours of some of the University's famous colleges. Cambridge is equally lovely, and a classic English afternoon may be spent punting on the River Cam between the city center and the picturesque village of Grantchester. Students at both Oxford and Cambridge are bound by

ancient traditions that require them to parade through town on certain important days and wear formal dress for exams. The rest of the UK's large student population is completely unaffected by such rules, and spends most of its time supporting the great British Pub industry - in the UK, the age at which one may buy and consume alcohol is 18, unlike most states of the U.S where it is 21.

While you are in Cambridge, don't neglect the opportunity to drive up to the beautiful Lincolnshire coast. Towns such as Boston and Skegness are truly representative of "deep England" - you can see the English way of life carried on here much in the way it has carried on for hundreds of years. Lincolnshire is also the spiritual home of the national dish: fish and chips, although a superb version can also be found farther north in the Yorkshire coastal town of Whitby.

English food, in general, is massively underrated. This is largely the result of a five hundred year campaign of negative propaganda led by the French, trying to get their own back following their defeat in the Napoleonic Wars and dozens of other conflicts in which the Brits have cheerfully trounced them. The three central dishes of English cuisine are fish and chips, roast beef with Yorkshire pudding and the so-called full English breakfast: a fried combination of eggs, bacon, sausages, black (blood) pudding, beans, mushrooms, tomatoes and fried bread. Any of these dishes, properly prepared, can easily rival anything served by haughty waiters restaurants of Paris.

One of the most popular vacation destinations within the UK itself is the south coast, stretching from Kent in the east to Cornwall in the far south-west. There are some lovely beaches around here, especially at Brighton, Bournemouth, and Penzance. It can get very crowded, and if you are planning to drive to the south-west in particular you should aim to leave early as the roads quickly become packed.

Don't forget, either, that the UK is the world's leading producer of popular music. If you like live gigs or clubbing then the great cities of Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle and Birmingham with their large student populations are the places you must visit.

England, of course, is only one part of the United Kingdom, even though it tends to be culturally and economically dominant. Scotland has a strong identity of its own. The cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, although quite different from one another, provide a distinctly Celtic contrast to English cities further south. Be sure to visit Edinburgh Castle - which is still the Headquarters of the British Army in Scotland - and check out the shopping opportunities in Princes Street (Edinburgh) and Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow. If you're visiting either city around the Christmas period remember to wrap up warm - because of its northerly latitude and the geography of the land and the surrounding Atlantic Ocean, Scotland often picks up the tail end of Arctic Weather systems, and conditions have often been known to be similar to those in North Norway and Greenland.

Outside of the cities, Scotland is wild and beautiful. The Scottish Highlands provide endless opportunities for hikers and skiers. The latter group will find great slopes in the Aviemore and Glencoe regions, a couple of hours north of Edinburgh and Glasgow. There are also an excellent range of outdoor opportunities around the west coast town of Fort William, including skiing on the slopes of Aonach Mor, hiking on the great mountain plateau of Ben Nevis and the Grey Corries, world class mountain biking

opportunities in Leanachan Forest and sailing and sea kayaking on the water of Loch Linnhe.

Scotland is also famous for its many offshore islands such as Mull, Skye, Lewis and the Shetland Islands. These also present many opportunities for the outdoor enthusiast as well as a richly diverse culture. If you find yourself on one of the Scottish Islands, there are two things you must do: first, visit a whisky distillery for a fascinating insight into how Scotland's most famous export is made; second, after you've enjoyed a dram, search out some local music making. Scottish folk music is among the liveliest in the world.

Scotland is one of the best areas in the UK to eat. It produces some very fine meat from Aberdeen Angus cattle and some of Europe's best seafood. The national dish, of course, is haggis - the minced up lungs and intestines of a sheep enclosed in a skin made from its stomach. This may sound revolting, but haggis - which has a semi-moist, crumbly texture and is heavily spiced - is one of the most delicious dishes you will find in the British Isles. It is traditionally served either as part of a fried breakfast or with "neeps and tatties" - mashes turnips and potatoes.

Heading back south again, the principality of Wales is an area of the UK often overlooked by outsiders. In many senses it is two countries in one, with a stronger north-south cultural divide than England itself. North Wales, and especially the county of Gwynedd, is largely Welsh-speaking. Although there are significant enclaves of English, most notably in the University towns of Bangor and Aberystwyth, this is effectively a foreign country as far as most English and even south Welsh people are concerned. Most people, however, are bilingual in English and Welsh. Gwynedd is dominated by the craggy, wild mountains of Snowdonia, known in Welsh as Eryri: the land of the eagles. If you enjoy hiking this is a great area to visit. On the Lleyn Peninsula there is even superb surfing to be had in the waters of the Irish Sea.

South Wales, although almost as mountainous, is a very different place. More heavily populated and dominated for years by heavy industry and coal mining, it still retains some areas of outstanding natural beauty, in particular the Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire coastal region.

Across the Irish Sea, Northern Ireland is in many ways very like Wales, though its natural beauties have been underappreciated for years because of the troubles. Northern Ireland is politically a province of the United Kingdom, separate from the independent state of the Republic of Ireland in the south of the island. The majority of the population of Northern Ireland - sometimes known as Ulster - are protestants, and in general wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. A sizeable minority, however, are Catholic and in general wish to secede from the U.K and form a single independent state with the rest of Ireland. The bad old days of the IRA and sectarian violence are now gone, and the province remains part of the U.K. It won't be long however - probably a couple of decades - before the Catholic population, which has a record of breeding more quickly than the Protestants, will equal the Protestants in size. So there remains a possibility that Northern Ireland will one day be unified with the Republic through a wholly democratic process.

The province itself, as well as being beautiful, is one of the friendliest places in the UK; the city of Belfast, for so long associated with nothing but bombings and shootings, is actually one of the most pleasant and attractive cities in Western Europe. It

has a vibrant nightlife, some great pubs and restaurants and is the home to Queen's University, one of Britain's most successful colleges.

Chapter 8: The Republic of Ireland

Over the border from Ulster, The Republic of Ireland is a country that is strangely like, and at the same time strangely unlike, the rest of the British Isles. Its capital, Dublin, is a quaint city that can in many places seem just like a provincial English town. But you would have to walk around with your eyes shut and your hands clapped over your ears for this impression to last more than a few, fleeting, moments. If nothing else, the sound of the city gives it away as being a quintessentially Celtic place. The sheer musicality of the Irish accent is one of the things that gives Dublin, and in fact the whole of Ireland, much of its unique charm.

That's not to say that either the country or its capital city are remotely old-fashioned or backward. Ireland has one of the most dynamic economies in Europe: a few years ago, financial journalists christened the country "the Celtic Tiger" - explicitly comparing it to the so-called Tiger economies of the Pacific Rim. Ireland has worked very hard to earn such a flattering sobriquet. Far from being a backward country, populated by the colorful yokels of popular imagination, Ireland has established itself as one of the leading centers for information technology in Western Europe. No less a firm than Apple computers has made Dublin the base of its European operation, citing the ease with which it is possible to find educated and personable staff, and the open attitude of the Irish government to incoming business.

In fact, 'openness' is a word that might have been invented to describe Ireland and the Irish. To find evidence for this assertion, you only need spend an evening, preferably in spring or summer, wandering the streets of Dublin. The prime area of the city for having a good time is Temple Bar. Close to the River Liffey, Temple Bar is a relatively small district, but within it you will find everything you need to have a great night out. As well as traditional Irish pubs, you can find upscale restaurants and cafés rubbing shoulders with theaters and music venues. The buildings are quaint and colorful, and during the summer months many are festooned with brightly-colored hanging baskets of flowers. This is a city that prides itself on its appearance. Although there are areas of Dublin which appear functional and even a little ugly, this is one of the very small number of world cities which has managed to retain, in its center, a sense of charm and attractiveness unspoiled by too much modernity.

Outside the capital this effect is even more pronounced. Towns like Cork and Wexford manage to function as thoroughly modern settlements, while at the same time retaining the honeyed appeal of their roots and providing tourists with a glimpse of the past that is charming without being overly conservative or patronizing. It is as well to remember when touring these peaceful, sleepy places, that it is much less than a century since they were subject to the ravages and internecine strife of the Irish Civil War, as rival factions struggled for power in the wake of the fledgling Republic's independence from Great Britain. Those days are gone, and even the memories of the sectarian tensions that caused so many problems further north in Ulster are beginning to recede, little by little, into the past.

During the centuries of British rule, rural Ireland was often regarded – with some reason – as a wild and savage place. The Anglo-Irish aristocratic elite, which generally consisted of old Norman families that had settled in the country following the Conquest of Britain the eleventh century and stayed there ever after, tended for safety's sake to confine themselves to a region within twenty miles of Dublin. This was 'The Pale'. The

wild Gaelic tribesmen who lived ‘beyond the Pale’ were a constant source of terror to the colonists, until gradually, starting in the sixteenth century, the rest of Ireland was subdued – mostly by a series of English expeditions led by luminaries such as Queen Elizabeth’s favorite, the Earl of Essex, and the Republican Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell – who, as the mastermind behind the overthrow and execution of King Charles I is a pretty controversial figure over the water in England - is remembered with particular hatred in some parts of Ireland for the vicious way in which he ‘pacified’ the locals. Ireland was the Iraq or Vietnam of its day, with the forces of a global superpower being constantly harried by the guerrilla tactics of insurgent groups. Back then – as in Iraq now – the motivation of the insurgents was primarily religious: the Catholic Irish hated having their religion suppressed by the vigorously Protestant English.

Today, the Republic of Ireland is an up and coming place in many ways. Not least among these is its reputation for fine cuisine. Ireland has long been famous for the quality and freshness of its seafood. Dublin Bay prawns are justifiably famous, as are the sublime shellfish to be found off the west and south coasts of the country. Recently, the southern county of Cork has established a fine reputation as a major center for great cooking. The small coastal town of Kinsale is particularly well-known for the quality of its restaurants and the fresh ingredients it is possible to buy in its markets. Cork is also leading the way in a great new Irish tradition of cookery education. Cooking skills can be learned in a friendly and relaxed environment, usually as part of a one or two week vacation.

Kinsale itself is a very attractive town, and, while it is rather like many other small fishing ports on the south coast of Ireland, it’s an excellent representative of the type. There are several superb restaurants serving the freshest of fresh sea food straight in from the town’s fishing dock, as well as excellent cuts of meat and fresh vegetables from farms inland. An excellent way to digest a fine Kinsale dinner is to spend half an hour wandering along the town’s sea front, getting a few good lungfuls of good Atlantic air.

And don’t forget to have a drink, either - Guinness, as brewed in the St. James’ Gate Brewery in Dublin. This dark, heavy beer – or ‘stout’, as it should properly be known - is one of the defining symbols of Ireland, and one of the products most associated with the country in the minds of outsiders. If you’ve drunk Guinness in the US or the UK, you haven’t really tasted the real thing: the drink in those countries is made under license by local brewers. Irish Guinness, it is said, is superior in every way. The Guinness from St. James’ Gate does taste different from the stuff made elsewhere – though whether this is anything to do with the mysterious and mythical qualities of the ‘Liffey water’ used to make it, or just the techniques and skill of the brewers and the pub landlords who look after it, is a moot point.

The best place to enjoy a pint (or three) of Guinness is, of course, in a traditional Irish pub. The ones in the center of Dublin can be very nice, but they’re often marketed with the tourist trade in mind, so you can sometimes come away with the impression that you’ve been drinking in an Irish theme bar such as you might find in New York or London rather than in the genuine article. Most Irish pubs have a distinctly less clichéd feel than most of these places – or at least a lower rate of staff and patrons wearing leprechaun costumes and novelty Guinness hats – preferring to cultivate a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. After the introduction of a comprehensive smoking ban a year or so ago, Irish pubs have also lost their reputation as smoke-filled drinking dens in which the

density of atmospheric pollution sometimes made it quite hard to see from one side to the other of even quite small rooms. One of the chief attractions of the average Irish pub, apart from the Guinness, is the very high quality of the music on offer. This isn't confined to traditional folk music, either, though there is no better place to hear an Irish fiddle band: in pubs up and down Ireland you can hear jazz, blues, soul, rock and all other genres of music. You're dealing with a talented, passionate and fun-loving people.

Chapter 9: France

France is a big, spacious country. It has more or less exactly the same number of people as the United Kingdom spread over more than twice the land area. It is a country of great contrasts, from the cool, rainy and rugged country of Brittany in the north, to the hot and sunny Mediterranean landscape of Provence in the south-east. Any exploration of France should start with Paris, which, despite being one of Europe's smaller Cities, is one of the most consistently interesting.

One of the first things you'll notice when you visit Paris is how wide the streets are. The city was extensively rebuilt by the Emperor Napoleon III in the middle of the nineteenth century. This great nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte had good reason to know about the revolutionary tendencies of the people of Paris: one of their frequent revolts against established authority had brought him to power. Because he himself did not want to fall victim to yet another revolution, he arranged for the boulevards to be built extra wide. The Parisians had a habit, when rebelling against their masters, of barricading streets to prevent the movement of loyal troops through the city. Napoleon and his architect, Baron Haussmann, reasoned that wide streets are harder to defend in this way and arranged for the spectacular open-plan layout of the city as we see it today.

A really good way to get your bearings in Paris is to take a boat trip along the River Seine. Like so many medieval cities, Paris has grown up around its river and some of the best architecture, from the Pont Neuf to the Cathedral of Notre Dame, is within a stone's throw of its banks. One of the most picturesque parts of Paris is the Ile de France, an island in the Seine that affords great views of Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower.

The Tower itself was built in the nineteenth century by the great French engineer, Louis Eiffel, the man who was also the brains behind New York's Statue of Liberty - presented to the American Government by the people of France on the hundredth anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. The journey up the Eiffel Tower in high speed, high capacity elevators is probably more fun and rewarding than the view from the top which is, frankly, a bit dull. Paris is a very large, very white city, which when seen from above, looks quite homogenous. It is interesting, however, to appreciate the view across to Montmartre and the Basilica of Sacre Coeur with its golden dome. The Parisians have something of a thing about golden domes; they have also put one on the top of Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb in the sanctuary of Les Invalides, which is also very close to the river.

But for a people who clearly value quality architecture, they are not as conservative in their tastes as the Italians, Germans or British. Take a stroll to the Pompidou Centre in the Beaubourg, one of the city's more recent art galleries, for a good example of their innovative taste for building. The structure, designed by British architect Richard Rogers, has been built 'inside out'. All the piping and ductwork is on the outside of the building and painted in bright colors. The Pompidou Center overlooks a very traditional, attractive piazza which is rimmed by coffee shops and cafés and which, on summer days, is often the haunt of street musicians and caricaturists.

Paris has no shortage of galleries and museums. Probably the most famous is the Louvre, a royal palace of which Louis XVI had no further need after being beheaded by revolutionaries in 1792. The Louvre contains a huge collection of art and artifacts, and usually has as many as half a dozen visiting exhibitions. It includes such famous pieces as

Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa and the armless Venus di Milo, sculpted by an anonymous Greek in approximately the second century BC.

On the subject of Leonardo Da Vinci, it's worth noting that fans of Dan Brown's novel the *Da Vinci Code* should not attempt to use this august volume as a guide book to the city. Brown seems to not to have done even the most basic research on Paris prior to writing to his book – apparently not even bothering to spend five minutes looking at a map of his locations. His geographical descriptions of Paris are, more often than not, completely inaccurate - and he describes paintings in the Louvre which are not actually even in France. Don't let this distract you from your enjoyment of the Mona Lisa, though. Leonardo himself probably didn't regard it as his greatest work - he would probably have preferred *The Last Supper* - but to modern eyes the enigmatic smile of La Gioconda is endlessly fascinating.

There are several interesting things to see immediately outside of Paris, though you would be well advised to use public transport to reach them, as driving on the Paris Peripherique (ring-road) is virtual suicide for outsiders unfamiliar with the distinctive driving habits of the French.

Disneyland Paris has arguably not been the success that the Disney Corporation hoped it would be when it was launched more than a decade ago. Although it remains popular with visitors from other parts of Europe, the notoriously snobbish Parisians have refused to warm to it. It is, in a technical sense at least, entirely comparable to its US counterparts, although some would say it lacks some of the atmosphere of the originals. Besides, if you're traveling to Europe from the USA, what's the point of visiting an attraction you could easily visit back home?

Far more interesting is the Palace of Versailles, which lies about eighteen miles outside of Paris. This huge complex of buildings and beautiful ornamental gardens was commissioned by Louis XIV, the grandfather of the unfortunately guillotined Louis. Work commenced in the late seventeenth century, at a time when France was both excessively rich and by far and away the dominant political, economic, and military power in Europe. Louis, sometimes known by the nickname "the Sun King", successfully prosecuted wars against Spain, the Netherlands and a variety of other small powers, expanding French territory, filling his coffers with gold - and, by laying the blueprint for modern absolute monarchy inadvertently sowed the seeds of the Revolution that would finish off his descendant.

Revolutionary uprisings were the last thing on the minds of the builders of Versailles. Like many French chateaux ("castles"), it is in no sense a defensive structure, but rather a building dedicated to luxury, excess, and the demonstration of royal majesty and power. A tour of the Palace and its gardens is very worthwhile, especially as the building has played a significant role in later world history. Versailles' Hall of Mirrors was the conference room used to sign the Peace Treaty which finished the First World War in 1919. This Treaty has gone down as one of the biggest mistakes in diplomatic history; by imposing ridiculous and savage demands on defeated Germany. It provided a climate to which German democracy was weakened and the rise to the power of the Nazis, during the 1920s and 1930s, made possible.

Elsewhere in France, the way you want to spend your vacation is only limited by the distance you are prepared to travel and the money you are prepared to spend. This is truly a country of contrasts, offering something for everyone. Enthusiasts for the

outdoors will find everything they could ever want in the Alps and the Pyrenees. Lovers of culture need only go to one of the country's great cities to be confronted with an embarrassment of artistic riches.

If you love architecture, you'll love France. It has such an abundance of chateaux that you could spend several lifetimes exploring them all. As we observed with Versailles, French chateaux are not always constructed with a military purpose in mind. In fact, the word can be used to refer to any large building, whether it was originally built as a dwelling or a fortification. It's also used to refer to vineyards, even if the "chateau" in question is little more than a shack in a corner of the field where the grapes are grown. Although France has medieval castles just like any other European country, the great period of chateau building began in the sixteenth century and lasted for two hundred years until the French Revolution swept away the aristocracy and its money at the end of the eighteenth.

Probably the most famous of all chateaux are to be found in the Loire Valley, on the Atlantic seaboard of France. As well as being a great place for admiring stunning architecture, this area contains some of the most beautiful countryside in Western Europe. In recent years, it has become especially popular with second home owners from the United Kingdom - you shouldn't worry about the character of the area being spoiled. However, as the local authorities go to great lengths to preserve the local land and culture, and the incomers are generally very sympathetic to the French way of life.

Further South, towards the borders with Spain and Italy, even more foreign visitors to France can be found. They come, of course, in search of snow; the Pyrenees and the French Alps have some of the best ski slopes in the world. Maybe this is a slight overstatement, but it's fair to say that the most popular French ski resorts suffer from bad overcrowding. Quieter areas, however, are often overlooked and are usually not very far away. If half of all the skiers that yearly descend on the French Alps headed west towards the Pyrenees, the problem with congestion would not be so severe.

Of course, when you are in France it would be very unwise to overlook the possibilities for great eating and drinking. French wine is the most famous in the world, and despite the claims of New World and Australian winemakers, is in general probably the best available. That's not to say that there is no such thing as bad French wine. The cheap stuff you buy by the gallon in plastic tubs from supermarkets is often barely drinkable - although that doesn't prevent the locals knocking it back with apparent enjoyment.

The most famous French wines are the reds produced in Burgundy and Bordeaux, in the west of the country. In these regions there are many hundreds of vineyards, ranging from very large, established estates to a couple of fields sown with vines by local farmers to make wines for their own tables or for sale to passing tourists. It's pretty difficult to work out how good a wine will be simply from the name and reputation of the producer without knowing anything at all about the vintage. A small, amateur operation can produce a truly spectacular wine, while every now and then one of the major chateaux will produce a vintage that seems barely worth using as vinegar.

One of the problems many visitors to France have is deciding what the French love more: their food or their wine. The truth of the matter is that most French people consider the two to be inseparable. The truth about French food is that it is, indeed, excellent - mostly because French cooks lavish so much love and attention on it.

However, this passion for food is also one of the great weaknesses of the French national cuisine. France has fewer restaurants serving international food than any other western nation - the French, it seems, simply cannot come to terms with the idea that any other nation is remotely as good at cooking as they are. The result of this has been a certain amount of stagnation in the national cooking culture. While neighboring Germany and Great Britain have been enriching their national eating habits with influences from Africa, the Americas, and especially Asia, the French have in general scorned other people's cooking. This has led to some considerable decline in France's world standing as a nation of cooks - there are now more Michelin-starred restaurants in London than there are in Paris.

This does not detract from the simple truth that basic French cooking can be simply wonderful. French cooks are the kings and queens of sauce makers, and have an uncanny ability to make delicious dishes out of the most unlikely ingredients. One of the highlights of French cooking is charcuterie - the art of and preserving meat, usually in the form of sausages and salamis, in such a form that they stay safe to eat for long periods of time. Although some of the less appetizing parts of porcine and bovine anatomy are often used in the process of making charcuterie, the end result is invariably delicious. The other great triumphs of French cookery are its stews and casseroles. Recipes like Coq au Vin and Boeuf Bourguignon are among the great masterpieces that can be produced in any kitchen. It should come as no surprise that both make heavy use of red wine in the cooking process.

Chapter 10: Spain

Cross over the Pyrenees, and you arrive in the Iberian Peninsula and country of Spain. Although it is on the periphery of Western Europe, and much of it is hot, arid and rugged country, Spain is not really a place on the margins in a cultural sense. Spain was dragged into the Roman Empire during the first century BC by the efforts of the general Pompey the Great. Pompey spent several years subduing the savage tribes he found in the area, mostly as a means of enhancing his political prestige back in Rome. When he had finished, the Romans, somewhat to their surprise, found themselves with province relatively close at hand that was larger than Italy itself and immensely rich in natural resources - especially silver. Very soon the country was covered in silver mines, manned by hundreds of thousands of slaves who were kept in conditions of abject misery.

The Romans held on to Spain until the collapse of their empire in the fifth century AD. After that, the whole peninsula, including the lands that would become both Spain and Portugal, fell into the hands of successive nations of marauding barbarians. This was not to last for long, however, because in the eighth century another great civilization came along to occupy Spain, via Africa. This was the Arabs, who had recently been stirred from desert lethargy on the Arabian Peninsula by the religious fervor inspired by the prophet Mohammed. The Muslims occupied Spain for several hundred years, being pushed steadily southwards by Christian crusaders from all over Europe, until all they held was the region of Andalusia on the southern Mediterranean coast of Spain.

Eventually, they were driven even from that, back into Africa. Muslim culture has left a strong impact upon Spain, as well as a genetic legacy that can be seen even today in the coffee-colored skin of the modern people of the province of Andalusia. Much of the architecture of the region is also strongly Arabic in flavor: you only have to look at the great palace of the Alhambra to see how deep the Eastern influence runs in this, the most apparently westerly part of Europe.

In some ways Spain is very culturally different from its near European neighbors. Even Portugal is arguably more like France and Italy than Spain, which seems to stand proud and aloof from other Latin nations. One of the chief differences lies in the very organization of the Spanish day. Because the climate is so hot and dry in central Spain, the working day begins a little earlier than in more northerly parts of Europe, and stops for a long break - the siesta - between the middle of the day and the late afternoon. During the siesta, shops and businesses are closed. Upon re-opening, most stay open until around seven in the evening. Because the effect of this is to push back the events of the day, and because hot weather often has a negative effect on appetite, the Spanish tend to eat their evening meal at a time that most Americans - and most other Europeans - would consider unreasonable late. It is not at all unusual for Spanish families, especially those without young children, to defer their evening meal to ten or half past.

One of the most distinctive of Spanish national dishes is tapas - if the word 'dish' can be used to describe a form of food that encompasses such a wide range of ingredients and modes of preparation. Probably the best English translation of the word is 'nibbles': a dedicated tapas bar - of which there are a large number in Madrid, and in Spain generally - will serve its specialties in small dishes on the bar counter or perhaps on a small side table. Customers mix and match their tapas, usually eating it with the accompaniment of a cold beer or a glass of red wine.

The tapas themselves can range from a bowl of roasted nuts through to bruschetta-like bread and dips and (more often in coastal regions) complex seafood parcels that can almost begin to resemble sashimi.

Dry and arid though it is in many inland areas, Spain has always been heavily dependent on the sea for survival and prosperity. In pre-automotive times this was the result of the fact that the Iberian Peninsula was effectively an island; the high peaks of the Pyrenees to the north were steep, dangerous, racked by storms and plagued by robbers - they were, in other words, a much more formidable barrier to travel and commerce than the surrounding ocean. So Spain - and, to a lesser extent, its Iberian neighbor Portugal - became maritime powers almost by default. The days when treasure ships and men o' war plied the waters of the Spanish Main have long gone, but the warm waters of the Mediterranean, along with the slightly cooler ones of the Atlantic, are still crucial to the Spanish economy. To this day, millions of tourists flock to Spanish beaches every year in search of the country's excellent climate and reputation as a vacation destination. However good it may be at swelling the national economy, from the point of view of Spanish national identity and culture this has been more of a mixed blessing. However, if you like sun and sand, then by all means head to the south and east coasts of Spain, where you'll find, respectively, the Costa del Sol and the Costa Brava.

The Costa del Sol is almost completely urbanized: one long strip of development stretching for miles along the Andalusian coastline around the city of Malaga. A lot of the hotels and resorts were thrown up in a hurry in the sixties and seventies with little regard for looks, or even tiny attempts to fit the coastal landscape. These were the days when tourism from northern Europe was exploding, in line with growing economies and rising standards of living. The fascist government of General Franco - which had managed to survive the re-democratization of Western Europe by the western Allies in 1945 by the simple expedient of staying out of the Second World War - saw an opportunity to bring in huge sums of foreign exchange, and leapt at it. Back then, environmental and ecological concerns were barely considered, and aesthetics were the preserve of the aristocratic rich and the educated. The Costa del Sol vacation developments appeared virtually overnight, and remain one of the most hideous blights on any natural landscape anywhere. The area's one, tiny redeeming feature is that it is one of the best places in Europe to play golf - dozens of world-class courses have been built to cater for the needs of the expatriate British community, a group of people seemingly created by God to underline the point that wealth and good taste are not only unrelated but usually mutually exclusive.

The Costa Brava, on the northern stretch of the east coast, north of the beautiful city of Barcelona in the province of Catalonia, is a little less bad. The name literally translates as "rugged coast" - and a quick drive around will soon show you why. The coastline is rocky, and inset with many coves, creeks and tiny beaches. Because of this, the amount of urban sprawl has been limited, so while the Costa Brava is by no means consistently attractive, it is nowhere as hideous as its cousin on the south coast. Indeed, if you're seeking the attractions of a Spanish beach vacation but you also like to soak up culture as well as sun, the Costa Brava isn't such a bad area to visit. If you get bored with lying around in the sun, you can easily pay a visit to Barcelona - easily one of the great cities of Europe, despite being surrounded by so much tack.

Your other option for a slightly more rewarding day out in this part of Spain is to visit one of the small coastal villages that have been untouched by the worst excesses of

tourist development - usually because they are protected by rocky surrounding country - and which still make a living through the fishing trade and by catering for more discerning visitors from overseas. A great example of this type of village is Cadaqués, which lays a couple of hours' drive to the north of Barcelona.

Cadaqués is a pretty fishing port with traditional whitewashed and painted houses and a deep, blue harbor. As well as being beautiful in itself, Cadaqués has become famous as a favored hideaway of some of Spain's great twentieth century artists. Salvador Dalí had a house here, and it was a popular vacation retreat for Pablo Picasso. Both are long dead now, but the slight tang of bohemian glamour they brought to Cadaqués lives on.

To consider Spain a land exclusively made up of tourist traps interspersed with the odd hidden gem does not really do it justice, however. Although many regions of the south and east of the country have indeed suffered greatly in terms of beauty (if not in terms of wealth) as a result of the tourist industry, others have been barely touched at all, or have at least succeeded in attracting a type of visitor more inclined to respect the natural virtues and culture of the country.

The north of the Spain, for example, contains some truly outstanding areas - dramatic national parks, exquisite towns and green valleys. This part of Spain is more exposed to the full ravages inflicted by oceanic weather systems coming out of the North Atlantic and the Bay of Biscay, and therefore has a higher annual rainfall than the rest of the country. The flipside of this is a cooler climate and a more lush and verdant countryside.

The northern coastal region of Asturias, for example, is almost completely unlike the over-commercialized hellholes of the Mediterranean coasts. It is home to any number of lovely towns and villages, as well as the dramatic, snow-capped mountains of the Picos de Europa. This area was extensively fought over during the bitter Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. One of the final stages of the war was a last-ditch attempt by republicans and communists to stem the advance of the fascist forces of General Franco. Although the defense was bloody and heroic, it ultimately failed, leaving Franco and his fascist cronies' masters of Spain for forty years. Franco certainly brought stability to a country paralyzed by political factions, but the cost was high: thousands of opponents and suspected opponents of his regime were tortured, imprisoned and executed with little or no show of judicial process. Although it is gradually fading from living memory, the Civil War remains an emotive issue in Spain to this day, with many older citizens still polarized into pro- and anti-Franco camps.

Chapter 11: Portugal

The final country to mention on our brief tour of Western Europe is Portugal. Although it has existed in its current form ('The Portuguese Republic', to give it its full title) for less than a century, Portugal is one of the oldest independent nations in Europe. It is also one of the most distinguished: at the height of Portugal's greatness as a seafaring nation in the Renaissance, it sent forth expeditions that helped to discover and map some of the most far-flung parts of the globe. The Portuguese crown accrued great wealth as the country's navigators rounded the Cape of Good Hope and became the first Europeans to systematically colonize India.

Rather to the regret of its people, one senses, Portugal is neither a dominant economic or political power today - in fact, it is the poorest nation in Western Europe. That is very much a relative state, however, and the Portuguese still have a much higher standard of living than their close neighbors in North Africa. This has not prevented many poorer Portuguese migrating northwards to France and the UK in search of agricultural work. Although the wages paid are low by the standards of those countries, from the point of view of rural Portuguese workers they are very attractive.

Most tourist visitors to Portugal flock to the Algarve, an immensely popular, rather overdeveloped area that somehow manages to be more attractive and classy than its Spanish equivalents. But there is far, far more to Portugal than just lying around on a beach. Aside from the historical and cultural delights of Lisbon, the country has some wonderful architecture and landscapes. Portuguese building styles are particularly interesting, fusing French, Spanish and Islamic styles with a strong hint of the English architectural sensibility - the British and Portuguese are ancient allies, and the use of Portugal as a military and naval base by British forces for long periods of time has left a legacy of Anglophilia as well as a tangible contribution to the nation's gene pool - many Portuguese, especially in the cities of Lisbon and Porto, are descended from British soldiers who were based here during the wars against the first Napoleon in the early years of the nineteenth century.

To get a sense of Portuguese architecture at its most stunning, visit the Palace of Pena in the mountainous Sintra region, close to Lisbon. This colorful, nineteenth century folly was built on the ruins of an older palace that was destroyed in the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, an event which killed thousands of Portuguese but presented the survivors with a great opportunity for rebuilding in modern styles. The palace is a rich mix of gothic, baroque, classical and vernacular styles, all gaily painted in a way that's a marked contrast to the stern grayness of large public buildings in more northerly zones of Western Europe.

The other aspect of Portugal's close relationship with Britain is the long-standing trade in Port wine, of which the former country is the world's biggest consumer. Ancient, intermarried Anglo-Portuguese families still manage the trade from bases in the city of Porto. Porto is well worth exploring in itself. Situated at the mouth of the River Douro, it is a relaxed, attractive city whose hot climate is pleasantly offset by Atlantic breezes that fan in from the wide mouth of the river.

Epilogue

So that's it for our whistle-stop tour of Western Europe. Compact, rich in both natural and man-made, this is an area of land and a group of related cultures that have had an impact on the development of the modern world out of all proportion to their size. To try to appreciate the whole in the course of a short tour might be enjoyable, but it would take more than one vacation to do full justice to Western Europe, its peoples, mountains, forests, towns, cities, and its buildings - and its richly varied national identities and histories.