

Euro-Bash

by Carla Caldwell



Photo courtesy Deutsche Zentrale für Tourismus e.V., GNTB

GERMANY

Germany is a country of contrasts. It is a beautiful country filled with historic castles and natural beauty that have inspired books full of fairytales. There's the mountainous Black Forest which is deeply rooted in traditional German culture and home to the cuckoo clock, and fairy-tale style castles, many of which can be toured.

But there's also that modern hipster vibe punctuated by techno and rave clubs, along with festivals and parades that celebrate those styles of music.

And, there's that ugly history. Berlin, now the country's capital city, was the center of Nazi government activity in the 1930s and 1940s, and the site of the infamous Berlin Wall from 1961-1989.

Today, Berlin is home to the Jewish Museum, as well as amazing modern architecture, and offers more than 170 museums and collections and 200-plus private galleries.

While in Germany, you'll want to try one, or several, of the country's numerous themed road tours. Popular tours include Castle Road and Fairy-tale Road. The Castle Road includes more than 70 castles, medieval towns and ruins. The Fairy-tale Route passes through places where the Brothers Grimm lived and worked as well as the historical castles that inspired the tales of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel. Fairy tales come to life in open-air theatres, festivals and puppet shows along the way.

If you are stationed in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, or most any place nearby—Lucky You!

The UK's most populated area, England, with about 49 million people, is home to castles, cathedrals and rolling green meadows dotted with thatch-roofed cottages. The country can also claim William Shakespeare and one of the world's most famous department stores, Harrods. Add to that pubs with pints and shepherds pie, soccer at Wembley and tennis at Wimbledon.

The UK's other areas—Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—also offer must-see historic sites and structures, along with breath-taking natural beauty including popular coastlines.

In Germany, there are hundreds of medieval villages and castles to tour, and if you get thirsty along the way, sample the country's famous wine or beer. Germany is known for friendly, traditional beer gardens and its annual Oktoberfest. If you prefer to hang out with the country's young hipsters—called schicki-micki, or some might say the self-consciously fashionable—you won't have to look far. There is a huge subculture (The Urban Underground) that prides itself on being at the forefront of music, fashion, art and theater.

In Italy, the glorious natural beauty and historic settings featured in decades of classic movies come to life—from Roman Holiday (1953) and Three Coins in a Fountain (1954), with Rome's Trevi Fountain as a pivotal setting, to The Godfather (1972), which wasn't actually filmed in Corleone, but in neighboring Savoca and Forza d'Agro. While in Italy, you must also see Florence's famed Statue of David, Venice's one-of-a-kind canals and Rome's Colosseum, among other sites.

As you can see, there are so very many places to go and things to do. Since the list is so long, we've selected a handful of the more popular places you might want to consider.

Other popular places and events include:

The Black Forest (bordering the Alps): Traditional Germany. The area borders France to the west and Switzerland in the south. The natural beauty, with views of the Alps, and thermal springs have inspired spas and health resorts that draw people from around the world. The area is known for good wine and food, medieval towns, castles, ruins, churches, stately homes and friendly locals.

Oktoberfest (Munich): The first Oktoberfest was held in 1810 to celebrate a royal wedding. The festival has been held almost every year since then except during times of war and epidemics. Oktoberfest, which occurs in September, is one of the largest festivals held in the world. The event also includes carnival rides and sometimes a circus.

Munich, in addition to being home to Oktoberfest, has evolved into what the German Embassy in Washington, D.C. calls the playground for the wealthy and glamorous. The city has its own version of Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive, and the city is famous for art and film.

Karnival, or Carnival (Cologne): The city's annual carnival, or Mardi Gras, celebration, is thought to be second in scale only to Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The city also has an active arts scene. There are nearly 50 art museums and more than 100 galleries.

Good sources for more information on Germany:

www.germany-tourism.d—The official site of the German tourism board explains the country's various regions and provides additional information on various themed tours.

www.toeurope.eu—Tour company that arranges tours of some of Germany's famed theme areas.

www.germany.info/—Official site of German Embassy in Washinton, D.C. Provides information about travel in Germany.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

ENGLAND

If you enjoy history or have a fascination with royalty, you must spend time in London and surrounding areas. Here are a few popular places and information about each:

Buckingham Palace (London): Buckingham Palace serves as both the office and London residence of Her Majesty The Queen. The palace was first opened to tourists in 1993. During the summer, visitors can tour 19 State Rooms, which form the heart of the Palace. Rooms are ornately decorated with works by Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer, among other great artists. Interesting tidbit: If the royal flag is flying atop the castle, the Queen is there.

Windsor Castle (Windsor): The largest and oldest occupied castle in the world, is one of the official residences of Her Majesty The Queen. The Castle's dramatic site encapsulates 900 years of British history. It covers an area of 26 acres and contains, along with a royal palace, a magnificent chapel and the homes and workplaces of a large number of people.

The property includes George's Chapel, one of the country's best examples of Gothic architecture. The chapel contains the tombs of Henry VIII and his third wife Jane Seymour, and Charles I. Note that the castle is closed on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. George's Chapel is closed on Sundays as services are held all day. If you plan to visit, call ahead because the Queen often uses the castle for entertaining and state visits.

National Gallery (London): Impressive collection of European paintings from 1250 to 1900, with works from Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Cezanne and Van Gogh.

Tower of London (London): Served for 900 years as a royal palace, prison, place of execution, mint, arsenal and today houses an amazing collection of historical artifacts and the crown jewels. See crowns and other jewels worn by

the monarchy throughout history. Today, Queen Elizabeth retrieves items from the Tower to wear for special occasions. Even if you aren't into jewelry and such, the history of the people and their items is fascinating.

Wimbledon (London borough of Merton):

Tournaments are held at the famous venue throughout the year, but many Americans are most familiar with the annual Lawn Tennis Championships during the summer. The first meeting in 1877 was more of a garden party with a few hundred people. Today, close to 500,000 people attend the annual event. Dates for the 2008 tournament are June 23-July 6. Guided tours are available of the grounds and there is a museum.

Wembley Stadium (Wembley): Public tours of this fabulously rebuilt and expanded stadium, with its famous arch, are set to begin in late 2007. To book a tour you must register online ahead of time. In the meantime, go to the stadium for a concert or game of football (soccer). The stadium is also known as an excellent music venue. In March 2008, famous goth-pleasers The Cure, perform. And, as far as football at Wembley, a game is hard to beat and so is the fan watching. Football is such a passion in England, Ireland and Scotland, that some pubs do not allow patrons to wear team jerseys inside to prevent bar fights between fans of rival teams. These people are not kidding when it comes to their football. Best to stay out of their way.

Harrods Department Store (London): The famous department store, shopped by famous people worldwide, has operated in some form since 1849. During World War II, the store's fancy dress shop for women was pushed aside as were other departments, including one that offered tea parties and limos for hire for debutants, so that items including parachutes and uniforms could be manufactured onsite for the war. The store is famous for its lavish Egyptian-themed escalator, and numerous restaurants and services for shoppers. The department store was purchased in the 1980s by the Fayed family. Doti Fayad, the owner's son, was killed along with Princess Diana in a 1997 Paris car crash. Harrods covers 4.5 acres, with more than 1 million square feet of retail space.

SCOTLAND

The country's capital, Edinburg, is famous for its festivals. In August, a series of festivals are held. Later in the year, the city hosts its popular Winter festivals followed by a month-long Christmas celebration. A well-known and popular Childrens' Festival is held in the summer. One of the few things that can turn the atmosphere sour is to insult a Scot's football (soccer) team. Here, like in England, some pubs ban team jerseys to prevent fights.

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WALES

Wales, like England, is chock-full of history, myth and legend. Many people from the U.S. travel to Wales to visit the hundreds of castles and to research their ancestry (Genealogical research is also common in Scotland with U.S. visitors). Both Scotland and Wales are famous for their golf tours.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The area is beautiful, but the politics are often turbulent. Northern Ireland has a history of violent clashes between factions of Protestants and Catholics. Still, people from all over the world travel here to experience the historic sites and natural beauty. Interesting fact: Northern Ireland's capital, Belfast, is where the famous, ill-fated Titanic luxury liner was built. Even though the ship sank five days after launch, the ship remains a source of pride in the city.

ENGLAND

www.visitlondon.com—London's official Web site. Includes a city map and information on major attractions.

www.royal.gov.uk—The monarchy's official Web site. Visit this site for information on the royals' schedules and information about palaces and other sites connected to the royal family.

www.princeofwales.gov.uk—Prince Charles' official Web site (no kidding). Includes news about his travels as well as information about other members of his family and their activities.

www.wimbledon.org—Wimbledon's official Web site. Read up on tournament history and get tickets for upcoming events.

www.wembleystadium.com—Wembley's official Web site. Read about the newly redone stadium and upcoming events. Register for online tours that are scheduled to become available in late 2007.

www.harrods.com—Everything you might want to know about the famed department store.

SCOTLAND

www.edinburgh.org—Information about this lovely city, its famous castle and numerous festivals.

WALES

www.travelwales.org—Official site for visitors to Wales.

NORTHERN IRELAND:

www.discovernorthernireland.com—Official site of the Northern Ireland Tourism Board.

Photo Courtesy the Italian Government Tourist Board



ITALY

Italy is romance, history, art, food, and so much more. While in the country you will want to see Venice, Florence, Rome, the Vatican, Sicily and other famous places.

Florence

This lovely historic city is where the Renaissance began and is home to Michelangelo's famed Statue of David. While the masterpiece would be every bit at home in Paris' Louvre, the statue is here in a somewhat the somewhat smallish gallery—the Gallery of the Accademia. The massiveness of the statue overwhelms most everything else in the collection, but that's OK. The city is full of great galleries, historic landmarks and great places to eat.

Venice

The romantic canals and narrow curving streets are a must-see. There really is no place like it. It's hard to believe that people do live here when you see the historic, sun-kissed plaster structures and their window boxes flowing with flowers. It seems more like a postcard than a real place. The city is full of shops that sell its namesake Venetian glass and lace, if you need to pick up things to send to family and friends back home in the U.S. It is easy to get lost, especially at night, on the curving streets, so be careful.

Rome

Home to so much history, you have to pace yourself to take it all in. Must-see spots include Circus Maximus and the ancient Colosseum. The city is filled with history and great restaurants. Do be wary of cab drivers who have been known to take tourists on rides much longer than necessary to from Point A to Point B, to achieve a higher fare.

The Vatican

While in Rome, visit the Vatican, home of the head of the Catholic Church, and a state and city all in one. While at the Vatican, see the Sistine Chapel to view Michelangelo's famous ceiling and the Last Judgment. Also visit St. Peter's Basilica, where former Popes are entombed. Be warned there is a dress code at the Vatican. No bare shoulders or legs—even when it's way hot outside and the wait to get in is way long.

Sicily

Visit Sicily for tours of villas, wineries, olive farms, beautiful Italian landscapes and more. A beautiful place to visit and a great place to eat.

Alps

Everyone talks about the Swiss Alps, but don't count out Italy, which shares a portion of the magnificent mountain region. Bike, ski, hike or, perhaps even better—just sit and enjoy the view. ●

www.italiantourism.com—The official Web site of the Italian Government Tourism Board

www.vatican.va—The official site of the Vatican.

www.alpseurope.com—The official Web site of the Alps.

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