

A narrow, historic European street with a canal and a bridge, viewed from a balcony. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, likely from the setting or rising sun. The buildings are tall and closely packed, with laundry hanging from lines. A small bridge with an archway spans the canal in the distance. A car is parked on the street near the bridge. The foreground shows a dark metal railing of the balcony from which the photo was taken.

Seeing the World

by Bennett Leigh

Today's fluctuating terror threat levels have heightened everyone's awareness of their surroundings—particularly U.S. service members stationed overseas. Security at overseas military installations are expected to vary with threat levels, and U.S. troops recently have even been on curfew in some European countries, so an extra wary eye comes in handy when stationed in a foreign country.



© ATOUT FRANCE/Patrice ThÉbault

But don't let heightened security keep you from experiencing one of the best things about being in the military — seeing the great treasures all around the world.

Some service members and their families say one tour overseas is not enough to see and do everything in Europe, but you certainly can optimize your time overseas and maximize your enjoyment with some careful planning and research before you go.

American forces are stationed all over Europe, but most service members are concentrated in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (U.K.). Be sure to

explore your host country, even try learning the local language (which usually scores you points with the locals!) Most Europeans are schooled in at least one foreign language, so any attempt to understand and learn their native language will most likely be appreciated. If you don't know, ask! The same goes for local customs and etiquette. Most people enjoy sharing their heritage and customs with those individuals interested enough to ask.

European countries are well-known for their extensive public transit systems. From the London Underground to the Paris Metro, subway systems in metropolitan areas are enjoyed by both locals and tourists. Trains also wind through the landscapes of most European countries, allowing residents and visitors to see more scenery from their window seats. To see more of your new home and surrounding countries, be sure to take advantage of train specials offered to European residents.

You may consider storing many of your household items back in the

continued on page 8



continued from page 7

states during your tour in Europe. Quarters and off-base housing are typically smaller than what Americans have become accustomed to in the states — plus, there's less chance of ruining your antique sideboard or extensive compact disc collection if it is safely housed back home.

And single service members ranked E4 and below are required to live in the barracks at some installations, so they should check first and plan their shipments to accommodate these tight living quarters.

Keep in mind that the electric current and even components of everyday household items to include televisions and hair dryers may differ, and transformers to convert current can be expensive. So visiting your installation's thrift store (where people PCSing back to the states many times leave their foreign-acquired possessions) may be your best bet to outfit your home comfortably without spending too much.

Which bring us to money. Many places take credit cards, but most still prefer cash — and you can often get a better deal on goods if you're willing to pay with cash. Cash in Europe now means the Euro. At press time, one Euro equaled about \$1.35 in American dollars. The United Kingdom still uses the British pound, one of which at press time equaled about \$1.58 in American dollars. For the most updated conversion rates, visit a site such as www.xe.com, which gives up-to-the-minute rates for countries worldwide.

Two benefits you will enjoy while stationed overseas are the Overseas Cost of Living Allowance (COLA), and Overseas Housing Allowance (OHA). Overseas COLA is a supplement designed to equalize purchas-

ing power between members overseas and their CONUS-based counterparts. This helps balance out the \$3 you pay for a soda, as opposed to 75 cents in the states. Be sure to shop at your local commissary and exchange for the best prices on many staples from home.

OHA compensates members for the majority of housing expenses. OHA is comprised of three components: rental ceiling, utility/recurring maintenance allowance, and move-in housing allowance (MIHA). Visit www.defensetravel.dod.mil/perdiem/ for more information and updated rates on these and other benefits.

U.S. service members who are permanently stationed, or on temporary

duty, in Europe may save nearly 20 percent on materials, services, and utilities that they purchase from German vendors with that country's tax relief program. These savings may apply to purchases, maintenance, and repairs on cars, as well as furniture, clothing, appliances and tools. Tax relief programs for the Netherlands, Belgium, U.K., and Italy use different procedures and have other restrictions. Please check with your local military community in those countries for program rules and usage details.

In order to watch television in many European countries, including Italy, Germany and the U.K., you must pay an annual "T.V. tax," which



Photo courtesy British Tourist Authority

helps subsidize the country's public television stations. The tax ranges from about \$150 in Italy to roughly \$250 in the U.K. and about \$280 in Germany. It doesn't matter how many televisions you have in your house, or how much you watch them — the tax is the same for each household. For many service members, satellite television is the only way they can watch many English-speaking channels in Germany and Italy. Check with your local military installation for more information about how to get satellite television, and what to expect to pay for it.

Most European countries have strict laws and requirements for importing firearms, so be sure to check with your new installation before bringing your collection overseas. It may be better to leave your firearms with a trusted friend or relative back home.

While active duty military members do not need visas to come to many European countries, the same is not true for their dependents. And many military personnel arrive in Europe under the belief that they can travel freely with only a military ID card. This is not the case. According to the U.S. State Department, all U.S. Forces and family members must have a passport to travel between foreign countries. A "blue tourist" passport is recommended in addition to an official passport. If military family members are authorized to accompany you overseas on your orders, they must obtain "no-fee" passports. Some military assignments may entitle the sponsor and his or her family members to official diplomatic passports.

To best forward your mail, your sponsor can contact the post office and complete DA Form 3955 up to 90 days prior to your anticipated arrival date to obtain a mailing address for you to begin forwarding

your mail. All mail received will be held for your arrival. If you are delayed in some way, you must notify your sponsor to inform the post office so your mail will not be returned to sender. If you do not have your orders in-hand, you can also mail packages for your sponsor to pick up and hold until your arrival.

For much more detailed information

about moving to Europe as a U.S. service member, visit the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) website at www.eucom.mil, or the Installation Management Command-Europe's MWR website at www.mwr-europe.com. ●

Bennett Leigh is a military spouse and a freelance writer from northern Virginia.