INTRODUCTION

Until now, wheelchair users and slow walkers have not had a resource—designed just for them—to guide them through Europe's highlights. The creaky, cobblestoned Old World has long had a reputation for poor accessibility. But in recent years, Europe has been making impressive advances toward opening its doors to everybody, including travelers with limited mobility. Maybe you're a wheelchair user with an adventurous spirit. Or perhaps you're traveling with a loved one who has limited mobility. Or you simply don't get around as well as you used to, but your sense of wanderlust refuses that rocking chair. This book is written for you.

Easy Access Europe

Since writing my first guidebook in 1980, my mission has been to make Europe accessible. Until now, my books have focused on *economic* accessibility—travel needn't be a rich person's hobby. With this book, I broaden that passion to include *physical* accessibility.

I've teamed up with a committed band of researchers—led by Ken Plattner—who care about those who face extra physical challenges. Ken, a therapist, has a long and impressive track record of reaching out to people with disabilities. Together, we've written this book to help guide slow walkers and wheelchair users through Europe.

I picked a handful of Europe's best and most accessible destinations: London, Paris, Bruges, Amsterdam, and Germany's Rhine River Valley. Using core material from my existing guidebooks (the most carefully updated books available), Ken and his helpers researched everything one more time for accessibility.

Ken, our researchers, and I do not have disabilities. Even so, whenever possible, a person using a wheelchair accompanied the research team to help us make a completely accurate assessment of accessibility. This also allowed us to experience firsthand the way wheelchair users are treated at each place.

Like an additional fermentation turns a good wine into fine champagne, this second research trip was designed to bring our Easy Access travelers a smooth and bubbly experience.

For simplicity, from this point on, all of us who worked on this book will shed our respective egos and become "I."

ACCESSIBILITY IN EUROPE

Let's face it: Compared to the U.S., Europe is not very accessible. It's the very charm of Europe—old, well-preserved, diverse, and very different from home—that often adds to the barriers. Many merchants, museum curators, hoteliers, and restaurateurs don't care about accessibility. My challenge is to find and describe the places that are welcoming and properly equipped.

This sounds pessimistic. But I'm inspired by the fact that, wherever I go in Europe, I see locals who have disabilities. The days of "hiding disability" are over: On the streets, in the museums, in the restaurants, and on the trains, you'll see people using wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes, and walking umbrellas to get around. If they can live rich and full lives in Europe, then you can certainly have an enjoyable and worthwhile vacation there. It's a new world out there, and anyone with adventure in their soul can take advantage of all Europe has to offer.

I know levels of personal mobility vary tremendously from person to person. You need to consider your own situation very thoughtfully in choosing which attractions to visit, which hotels to sleep at, which restaurants to dine at...and which things you might want to avoid. I'm not here to tell you what you can and can't do. Instead, I'll give you a thorough description of each sight, hotel, and restaurant to help you make informed decisions for yourself.

I've come up with various ways of letting you know what accessibility features you can expect at each building. Most important are

Accessibility Levels and Accessibility Codes.

Adapted vs. Suitable

Throughout this book, I use two very different terms to describe buildings and facilities that can be used by wheelchair riders: *adapted* and *suitable*.

An **adapted** building has been designed or retrofitted specifically for the use of people who use wheelchairs. For example, an adapted bathroom has wide doors, a roll-in shower, a specially adapted sink that can easily be accessed by a wheelchair user, and grab bars to facilitate toilet transfers.

A **suitable** building has not been specifically designed for wheelchair users, but it can still be used by people with limited mobility—that is, wheelchair users who have a greater degree of mobility (can make transfers or walk a few steps without assistance), or wheelchair users with a lesser degree of mobility who have assistance. For example, a suitable bathroom has wide enough doors for a person in a wheelchair to enter, and enough space inside to negotiate the wheelchair—but it does *not* have specially adapted toilets, sinks, or showers (for instance, no grab bars to help with transfers).

In Europe, most buildings are suitable, rather than adapted.

Accessibility Levels

This book rates sights, hotels, and restaurants using four levels, each one representing a different degree of accessibility. Determine which of these levels matches your own level of personal mobility, then use the levels as a shortcut for deciding which buildings are accessible to you.

Level 1—Fully Accessible: A Level 1 building is completely barrier-free. Entryways, elevators, and other facilities are specifically adapted to accommodate a person using a wheelchair. If there's a bathroom, it has wide doors and an adapted toilet and sink. Where applicable, the bathing facilities are also fully adapted (including such features as bath boards, grab bars, or a roll-in, no-rim shower). Fully adapted hotel rooms often have an alarm system with pull cords for emergencies. Level 1 properties are rare in Europe.

Level 2—Moderately Accessible: A Level 2 building is suitable for, but not specifically adapted to accommodate, a person using a wheelchair. This level will generally work for a wheelchair user who can make transfers and take a few steps. A person who is permanently in a wheelchair may require some assistance here (either from a companion or from staff).

Accessibility Codes

To provide more specific information on exactly what accessibility features each building has, I use a series of easy-to-understand symbols. These accessibility codes are intended to give you a quick overview of what to expect. If applicable, more specific details about the facility (e.g., exact number and height of steps, special instructions for gaining entry) are also explained in the listing.

Code	Meaning	Explanation
AE	Accessible Entryway	A level entryway with no steps or barriers and a door wide enough for an independent wheelchair user.
AE+A	Accessible Entry with Assistance	An entryway with one or two small steps and a door wide enough for a wheelchair user.
AI	Accessible Interior	A flat, spacious, barrier-free interior with enough room to comfortably negotiate a wheelchair.
AI+A	Accessible Interior with Assistance	An interior that has enough room to negotiate a wheelchair, but is not barrier-free (e.g., a few steps, narrow doors, tight aisles, and so on).
AT	Accessible Toilet	The toilet is at an appropriate height and has grab bars to allow the wheelchair user to transfer without assistance.
AT+A	Accessible Toilet with Assistance	A toilet that is suitable for a wheelchair user, but is not specifically adapted. Wheelchair users will likely need assistance.
AL	Accessible Lift (elevator)	An elevator big enough to be used by an independent wheelchair user.
AL+A	Accessible Lift with Assistance	An elevator that is small or presents other barriers to the wheelchair user, who will require assistance.
AR	Accessible Room	A hotel room big enough for a wheelchair to move around freely. There are

		no barriers to impede independent wheelchair users.
AR+A	Accessible Room with Assistance	A hotel room that is cramped and not barrier-free, but suitable for a wheelchair user who has assistance.
AB	Accessible Bathroom	A hotel bathroom specially adapted for wheelchair users, with wide entry doors, grab bars throughout, raised toilet, adapted sink, and adapted bathtub or roll-in shower.
AB+A	Accessible Bathroom with Assistance	The door is wide enough for wheelchair entry, but the wheelchair user will require some assistance to transfer to the tub or toilet (no grab bars).
❤	Heart	An establishment that has a positive, helpful attitude toward travelers with limited mobility.

Note that to receive a ❤ rating, a business must be welcoming to our wheelchair-using researcher upon arrival, and demonstrate a willingness to accommodate the wheelchair user's needs. One caveat about this rating: I assume that if one representative of the business treated our researcher well, others will also—but it's possible that you may have a different experience. (If this is the case, please send me an e-mail at rick@ricksteves.com. Thanks.)

So, for example, imagine a restaurant with one 8" entry step, a spacious and fully accessible interior, toilets that are down a narrow winding stairway of ten 6" steps, and a staff that is warm and welcoming. This place would be coded as: **AE+A, AI, ❤**, Level 2—Moderately Accessible.

Now imagine a hotel that is fully accessible, with no barriers at the entry or inside; a wheelchair-accessible elevator; and a specially adapted room and bathroom designed for wheelchair users. That hotel would be coded as: **AE, AI, AL, AR, AB,** Level 1—Fully Accessible.

Level 3—Minimally Accessible: A Level 3 building is satisfactory for people who have minimal mobility difficulties (that is, people who usually do not use a wheelchair, but take more time to do things than a non-disabled person). This building may have some steps and a few other barriers—but not too many. Level 3 buildings are best suited to slow walkers; wheelchair users will require substantial assistance here.

Level 4—Not Accessible: Unfortunately, some places in this book are simply not accessible to people with limited mobility. This means that barriers such as staircases, tight interiors and facilities (elevators, bathrooms, etc.), or other impediments interfere with passage for travelers with disabilities. Buildings in this category might include a church tower that is reachable only by climbing several flights of steep stairs, or a museum interior that has many levels with lots of steps and no elevator. I've included a few Level 4 buildings in this book, either because they are important to know about, or because the information might be useful to a non-disabled companion or to readers with limited mobility, but an adventurous spirit (such as slow walkers who can climb several flights of stairs, if given enough time, to reach a worthwhile sight).

Just because a building is Minimally Accessible or Not Accessible doesn't necessarily mean it's completely off-limits to a traveler with limited mobility. Many buildings in Europe are constrained by centuries-old construction, so Europeans have come to excel at finding ways to help you get past barriers. If you ask for assistance, a merchant or friendly passer-by will, more than likely, eagerly help you turn "Not Accessible" into "Definitely Possible."

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The **Accessibility Resources and Tips** chapter includes an array of disability organizations, books, and other resources to help you plan a smooth trip, and contains tips from experienced travelers with limited mobility.

The **Country Introductions** give you a snapshot of each country's culture and include country-specific resources for accessible travel.

Each destination in this book is covered as a mini-vacation on its own, filled with exciting sights and homey, accessible, and affordable places to stay. Using the levels and codes described above, this book provides detailed information on accessibility for sights, restaurants, hotels, tourist offices, public transportation, and so on. In the following chapters, you'll find these elements:

Accessibility gives you an overview of what kind of access concerns you can expect.

Orientation includes tourist information, city transportation, and an easy-to-read map designed to make the text clear and your arrival smooth.

Sights are rated: ▲▲▲—Don't miss; ▲▲—Try hard to see; ▲—Worthwhile if you can make it; no rating—Worth knowing about.

Sleeping and **Eating** include descriptions (including accessibility details, addresses, and phone numbers) of my favorite hotels and restaurants.

Transportation Connections covers how to reach nearby destinations by train, bus, or taxi, with a focus on only the most accessible options.

Roll or Stroll chapters offer self-guided tours of Europe's most interesting neighborhoods, while thoroughly describing each destination's accessibility and top sights.

The **Appendix** is a traveler's tool kit, with a list of national tourist offices and U.S. embassies, telephone tips, and a climate chart.

Browse through this book, choose your favorite destinations, and link them up. Then have a great trip! You'll travel like a temporary local, getting the absolute most out of every mile, minute, and dollar. As you travel the route I know and love, I'm happy you'll be meeting some of my favorite Europeans.

PLANNING

Trip Costs

Five components make up your trip cost: airfare, surface transportation, room and board, sightseeing/entertainment, and shopping/miscellany.

Airfare: Don't try to sort through the mess yourself. Get and use a good travel agent. A basic round-trip U.S.A.-to-Europe flight should cost $500 to $1,100 (even cheaper in winter), depending on where you fly from and when. Always consider saving time and money in Europe by flying "open-jaw" (flying into one city and out of another, such as flying into London and out of Frankfurt).

Surface Transportation: Your best mode depends upon accessibility concerns, the time you have, and the scope of your trip.

Trains are often—but not always—moderately accessible or better, and conveniently connect the big cities in this book (especially London and Paris, just 2.75 hours apart by Eurostar train). If you go by train, consider a Eurail Selectpass (see page *TK). Train passes are normally

available only outside of Europe. You may save money by simply buying tickets as you go.

Renting a **car** has its advantages. Most major car-rental agencies have specially adapted vehicles. Though struggling with traffic and parking can be stressful—especially in the big cities covered in this book—having your own adapted rental car means that you don't have to rely on public transportation. Drivers can figure $300 per person per week (based on 2 people splitting the cost of the car, tolls, gas, and insurance). Car rental is cheapest to arrange from the United States. Leasing, for trips longer than three weeks, is even cheaper.

When it comes to mobility, **taxis** are the great equalizer. Budget a little extra to get around in cities by taxi.

Room and Board: You can manage just fine in Europe on an average of $100 a day per person for room and board (more for cities, less for towns). A $100-per-day budget allows $10 for lunch, $15 for dinner, $5 for snacks, and $70 for lodging (based on 2 people splitting a $140 double room that includes breakfast). Note that London is a bit more expensive than the other destinations in this book (allow $120 per day in London).

Sightseeing and Entertainment: In big cities, figure $6 to $12 per major sight, $2 to $5 for minor ones, and $30 for splurge experiences (e.g., bus tours, concerts, and plays). If you use a wheelchair, you (or your travel partner) will get in free at many attractions—I've listed which ones in this book. An overall average of $15 a day works for most. Don't skimp here. After all, this category directly powers most of the experiences all the other expenses are designed to make possible.

Shopping and Miscellany: Figure $1 per postcard and $2 per coffee, beer, and ice-cream cone. Shopping can vary in cost from nearly nothing to a small fortune. Good budget travelers find that this category has little to do with assembling a trip full of lifelong and wonderful memories.

When to Go

May, June, September, and October are the best travel months. Peak season (July and August) offers the sunniest weather and the most exciting slate of activities, but the worst crowds. Because it's also the most physically grueling time to travel, many travelers with limited mobility prefer to visit outside of summer.

Off-season, October through April, expect generally shorter hours at attractions, more lunchtime breaks, fewer activities, and fewer guided tours in English. If you're traveling off-season, be careful to confirm opening times. In winter, I like to set up for a full week in a big city

Sightseeing Priorities

This book covers northern Europe's top destinations, which could be lined up for a quick one-week getaway or a full-blown three-week vacation. Combining London and Paris with the speedy Eurostar train offers perhaps the most exciting 10 days of big-city thrills Europe has to offer.

Of course, you should arrange your itinerary according to your own level of mobility—building in as much rest as you need. But for a relatively fast-paced tour of the destinations in this book, consider this plan:

Day	Plan	Sleep in
1	Arrive in London	London
2	London	London
3	London	London
4	London	London
5	Eurostar to Paris	Paris
6	Paris	Paris
7	Paris	Paris
8	Paris	Paris
9	To Bruges	Bruges
10	Bruges	Bruges
11	Bruges	Bruges
12	To Amsterdam	Amsterdam
13	Amsterdam	Amsterdam
14	Amsterdam	Amsterdam
15	To Köln, then Rhine	Rhine
16	Rhine	Rhine
17	To Frankfurt	Frankfurt
18	Fly home	

(like Paris or London) to take advantage of fewer crowds and a cultural calendar in full swing.

As a general rule of thumb any time of year, the climate north of the Alps is mild (like Seattle), and south of the Alps, it's like Arizona. For specifics, check the climate chart in the appendix.

Travel Smart

Your trip to Europe is like a complex play—easier to follow and really appreciate on a second viewing. While no one does the same trip twice

to gain that advantage, reading this book before your trip accomplishes much the same thing.

Design an itinerary that enables you to hit the museums on the right days. As you read through this book, note special days (such as festivals and colorful market days). Anticipate problem days: Mondays are bad in Bruges, Tuesdays are bad in Paris. Anywhere in Europe, Saturday morning feels like any bustling weekday morning, but at lunchtime, many shops close down. Sundays have pros and cons, as they do for travelers in the U.S. (special events, limited hours, shops and banks closed, limited public transportation, no rush hours). Popular places are even more popular on weekends. Museums and sights, especially large ones, usually stop admitting people 30 to 60 minutes before closing time.

Plan ahead for laundry, Internet stops, and picnics. To maximize rootedness, minimize one-night stands. Mix intense and relaxed periods. Every trip (and every traveler) needs at least a few slack days. Pace yourself. Assume you will return.

Reread entire chapters as you travel, and visit local tourist information offices. Upon arrival in a new town, lay the groundwork for a smooth departure. Buy a phone card and use it for reservations and confirmations. Enjoy the friendliness of the local people. Ask questions. Most locals are eager to point you in their idea of the right direction. Wear your money belt, pack along a pocket-size notebook to organize your thoughts, and practice the virtue of simplicity. Those who expect to travel smart, do.

RESOURCES

Tourist Information Offices

In the U.S.

Each country has a national tourist office in the U.S. These offices are a wealth of information (see the appendix for addresses). Before your trip, you can ask for the free general-information packet and for specific information (such as city maps and schedules of upcoming festivals). Most offices also have information for travelers with limited mobility.

In Europe

The tourist information office is your best first stop in any new town or city. In this book, I'll refer to a tourist information office as a **TI.** Have a list of questions and a proposed sightseeing plan to confirm. If you're arriving late, telephone ahead (and try to get a map for your next destination from a TI in the town you're leaving). Throughout Europe, you'll find TIs are usually well-organized and English-speaking.

As national budgets tighten, many TIs have been privatized. This means they become sales agents for big tours and hotels, and their "information" becomes unavoidably colored. While TIs are eager to book you a room, you should use their room-finding service only as a last resort. TIs can as easily book you a bad room as a good one—they are not allowed to promote one place over another. Go direct, using the listings in this book.

Rick Steves' Guidebooks, Public Television Show, and Radio Show

While my other guidebooks are written for a general audience—and are not mobility-specific—they may be helpful in your travels.

Rick Steves' Europe Through the Back Door gives you budget-travel skills, such as minimizing jet lag, packing light, planning your itinerary, traveling by car or train, finding rooms, changing money, avoiding rip-offs, buying a mobile phone, hurdling the language barrier, staying healthy, taking great photographs, using a bidet, and much more. The book also includes chapters on 38 of my favorite "Back Doors."

Country Guides: These annually updated books offer you the latest on the top sights and destinations, with tips on how to make your trip efficient and fun:

Rick Steves' Best of Europe
Rick Steves' Best of Eastern Europe
Rick Steves' Croatia & Slovenia (new in 2007)
Rick Steves' England
Rick Steves' France
Rick Steves' Germany & Austria
Rick Steves' Great Britain
Rick Steves' Ireland
Rick Steves' Italy
Rick Steves' Portugal
Rick Steves' Scandinavia
Rick Steves' Spain
Rick Steves' Switzerland

City and Regional Guides: Updated every year, these focus on Europe's most compelling destinations. Along with specifics on sights, restaurants, hotels, and nightlife, you'll get self-guided, illustrated tours of the outstanding museums and most characteristic neighborhoods:

Rick Steves' Amsterdam, Bruges & Brussels
Rick Steves' Florence & Tuscany
Rick Steves Istanbul (new in 2007)
Rick Steves' London
Rick Steves' Paris
Rick Steves' Prague & the Czech Republic
Rick Steves' Provence & the French Riviera
Rick Steves' Rome
Rick Steves' Venice

Begin Your Trip at www.ricksteves.com

At www.ricksteves.com, you'll find a wealth of **free information** on destinations covered in this book, including fresh European travel and tour news every month and helpful "Graffiti Wall" tips from thousands of fellow travelers.

While you're visiting the site, the **online Travel Store** is a great place to save money on travel bags and accessories designed by Rick Steves to help you travel smarter and lighter, plus a wide selection of guidebooks, planning maps, and DVDs.

Traveling through Europe by rail is a breeze, but choosing the right railpass for your trip—amidst hundreds of options—can drive you nutty. At www.ricksteves.com, you'll find **Rick Steves' Annual Guide to European Railpasses**—your best way to convert chaos into pure travel energy. Buy your railpass from Rick, and you'll get a bunch of free extras to boot.

Rick Steves' Phrase Books: In much of Europe, a phrase book is as fun as it is useful. This practical and budget-oriented series covers French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and French/Italian/German. You'll be able to make hotel reservations over the phone, chat with your cabbie, and bargain at street markets.

And More Books: *Rick Steves' Europe 101: History and Art for the Traveler* (with Gene Openshaw) gives you the story of Europe's people, history, and art. Written for smart people who slept through their history and art classes before they knew they were going to Europe, *101* helps Europe's sights come alive.

Rick Steves' Postcards from Europe, my autobiographical book, packs 25 years of travel anecdotes and insights into the ultimate 2,000-mile European adventure.

Rick Steves' European Christmas covers the joys, history, and quirky traditions of the holiday season in seven European countries.

Public Television Show: My series, *Rick Steves' Europe,* keeps churning out shows (60 at last count), including several featuring the sights in this book.

Radio Show: My weekly radio show, which combines call-in questions (à la *Car Talk*) and interviews with travel experts, airs on public radio stations. For a schedule of upcoming topics and an archive of past programs (just click on a topic of your choice to listen), see www.ricksteves.com/radio.

Other Guidebooks

You may want some supplemental information, especially if you'll be traveling beyond my recommended destinations. When you consider the improvements they'll make in your $3,000 vacation, $25 or $35 for extra maps and books is money well spent. Especially for several people traveling by car, the weight and expense are negligible.

There are a handful of useful books for travelers with limited mobility. Candy Harrington has written a pair of good books: *Barrier-Free Travel: A Nuts and Bolts Guide for Wheelers and Slow Walkers* and *There Is Room at the Inn: Inns and B&Bs for Wheelers and Slow Walkers*. For travel in London and Paris, we also highly recommend *Access in London* and *Access in Paris* (by Gordon Couch et al.; Access Project, 39 Bradley Gardens, West Ealing, London W13 8HE, www.accessproject-phsp.org, gordon.couch@virgin.net).

Patrick Simpson's *Wheelchair Around the World* (www.wheelbooks.com) includes an extensive bibliography with resources to assist people who have physical disabilities to plan their own trip. The *Around the World Resource Guide,* published by Access for Disabled Americans (www.accessfordisabled.com), is an easy-to-use bibliography of services and resources for disabled people.

For more resources, see the next chapter.

Maps

The black-and-white maps in this book, drawn by Dave Hoerlein, are concise and simple. Dave, who is well-traveled in Europe, has designed the maps to help you locate recommended places and get to the tourist information offices, where you can pick up a more in-depth map (usually free) of the city or region.

European bookstores, especially in tourist areas, have good selections of maps. For drivers, I'd recommend a 1:200,000- or 1:300,000-scale map for each country. Train travelers can usually manage fine with the freebies they get with their train pass and at local tourist offices.

PRACTICALITIES

Red Tape: Americans need a passport, but no visa and no shots, to travel throughout Europe. Crossing borders is easy. Sometimes you won't even realize it's happened. When you do change countries, however, you change phone cards, postage stamps, gas prices, ways to flush a toilet, words for "hello," figurehead monarchs, and breakfast breads. Plan ahead for these changes: Brush up on the new language, and use up

stamps, phone cards, and—when you're going between Britain and the Continent—any spare coins (spend them on candy, souvenirs, gas, or a telephone call home).

Time: In Europe—and in this book—you'll be using the 24-hour clock. After 12:00 noon, keep going—13:00, 14:00, and so on. For anything over 12, subtract 12 and add p.m. (14:00 is 2 p.m.). Continental European time is six/nine hours ahead of the East/West Coasts of the U.S., though Great Britain is only five/eight hours ahead.

Discounts: While discounts for sights and transportation are not listed in this book, seniors (60 and over), students (with International Student Identity Cards), and youths (under 18) may snare discounts—but only by asking. Some discounts (particularly for sights) are granted only to European residents. Most attractions and events have special discounts for wheelchair users (many are free to you, as well as your companion). A traveler with limited mobility generally may go to the head of the line for attractions and events. Don't be shy. Europe may not have as many ramps and elevators as the United States, but it's socially aware.

Watt's Up? If you're bringing electrical gear, you'll need an adapter plug (two round prongs for the continent, three flat ones for Britain) and a converter. Travel appliances often have convenient, built-in converters; look for a voltage switch marked 120V (U.S.) and 240V (Europe).

News: Americans keep in touch in Europe with the *International Herald Tribune* (published almost daily via satellite). Every Tuesday, the European editions of *Time* and *Newsweek* hit the stands with articles of particular interest to travelers in Europe. Sports addicts can get their fix from *USA Today*. Good Web sites include www.europeantimes.com and http://news.bbc.co.uk.

MONEY

Banking

Bring plastic (ATM, debit, or credit cards) along with several hundred dollars in hard cash as an emergency backup. Traveler's checks are a waste of time and money.

Before you go, verify with your bank that your card will work, inquire about fees (can be up to $5 per transaction), and alert them that you'll be making withdrawals in Europe; otherwise, the bank may not approve transactions if it perceives unusual spending patterns. Bring an extra card in case one gets demagnetized or gobbled up by a machine.

The best and easiest way to get cash is to use the readily available, easy-to-use, 24-hour ATMs (with English instructions, low fees). You'll

Exchange Rates

Throughout this book, prices are listed in the local currency. You'll use pounds sterling in Britain and euros everywhere else.

1 British pound sterling (£) = about $1.80

The British pound (£), also called a "quid," is broken into 100 pence (p). Pence means "cents." You'll find coins ranging from 1p to £2 and bills from £5 to £50. Some travelers try to kid themselves that pounds are dollars. But when they get home, that £1,000 Visa bill isn't asking for $1,000—it wants $1,800. To avoid this shock, double British prices to estimate dollars. By overshooting it, you'll spend less...maybe even less than you budgeted (good luck).

1 euro (€) = about $1.20

One euro (€) is broken down into 100 cents. You'll find coins ranging from one cent to two euros, and bills from five euros to 500 euros. To convert prices in euros to dollars, add 20 percent: €20 = about $24, €45 = about $54.

need a PIN code—numbers only, no letters—to use with your Visa or MasterCard.

Just like at home, credit or debit cards work easily at larger hotels, restaurants, and shops. Visa and MasterCard are more commonly accepted than American Express. Smart travelers function with plastic and cash. Smaller businesses prefer—and sometimes require—payment in hard cash, rather than plastic. If you have lots of large bills, break them for free at a bank, especially if you like shopping at mom-and-pop places; they rarely have huge amounts of change.

Bring some $20 American bills along for those times when you need just a little more local cash (e.g., if you're just passing through or about to leave a country).

Keep your credit and debit cards and most of your money hidden away in a money belt (a cloth pouch worn around your waist and tucked under your clothes). Thieves target tourists. A money belt provides peace of mind and allows you to carry lots of cash safely. Don't be petty about getting money. Withdraw a week's worth of money, stuff it in your money belt, and travel!

Damage Control for Lost or Stolen Cards

If you lose your credit, debit, or ATM card, you can stop people from using your card by reporting the loss immediately to the respective global customer-assistance centers. Call these 24-hour U.S. numbers collect: Visa (tel. 410/581-9994), MasterCard (tel. 636/722-7111), and American Express (tel. 336/393-1111).

Have, at a minimum, the following information ready: the name of the financial institution that issued you the card, along with the type of card (classic, platinum, or whatever). Ideally, plan ahead and pack photocopies of your cards—front and back—to expedite their replacement. Providing the following information will allow for a quicker cancellation of your missing card: full card number, whether you are the primary or secondary cardholder, the cardholder's name exactly as printed on the card, billing address, home phone number, circumstances of the loss or theft, and identification verification (your birthdate, your mother's maiden name, or your Social Security number—memorize this, don't carry a copy). If you are the secondary cardholder, you'll also need to provide the primary cardholder's identification verification details. You can generally receive a temporary card within two or three business days in Europe.

If you promptly report your card lost or stolen, you typically won't be responsible for any unauthorized transactions on your account, although many banks charge a liability fee of $50.

Tips on Tipping

Tipping in Europe isn't as automatic and generous as it is in the U.S.—but for special service, tips are appreciated, if not expected. As in the U.S., the proper amount depends on your resources, tipping philosophy, and the circumstance, but some general guidelines apply.

Restaurants: Tipping is an issue only at restaurants that have waiters and waitresses. If you order your food at a counter, don't tip.

At a pub or restaurant with wait staff, the service charge (10–15 percent) is usually listed on the menu and included in your bill. When the service is included, there's no need to tip beyond that, but if you like to tip and you're pleased with the service, you can round up the bill (but not more than 5 percent).

If the service is not included, tip up to 10 percent by rounding up or leaving the change from your bill. Leave the tip on the table or hand it to

your server. It's best to tip in cash even if you pay with your credit card. Otherwise the tip may never reach your server.

Taxis: To tip the cabbie, round up. For a typical ride, round up to the next euro on the fare (to pay a €13 fare, give €14); for a long ride, to the nearest 10 (for a €75 fare, give €80). If the cabbie hauls your bags and zips you to the airport to help you catch your flight, you might want to toss in a little more. But if you feel like you're being driven in circles or otherwise ripped off, skip the tip.

Hotels: I don't tip at hotels, but if you do, give the porter a euro for carrying bags and leave a couple of euros in your room at the end of your stay for the maid if the room was kept clean.

Special Services: Tour guides at public sites sometimes hold out their hands for tips after they give their spiel; if I've already paid for the tour, I don't tip extra, though some tourists do give a euro or two, particularly for a job well done. In general, if someone in the service industry does a super job for you, a tip of a couple of euros is appropriate...but not required.

When in doubt, ask. If you're not sure whether (or how much) to tip for a service, ask your hotelier or the tourist information office; they'll fill you in on how it's done on their turf.

VAT Refunds for Shoppers

Wrapped into the purchase price of your souvenirs is a Value Added Tax (VAT) that's generally around 20 percent. If you make a purchase of more than a certain amount at a store that participates in the VAT refund scheme, you're entitled to get most of that tax back (see sidebar for VAT rates and minimum-purchase requirements). Personally, I've never felt that VAT refunds are worth the hassle, but if you do, here's the scoop.

If you're lucky, the merchant will subtract the tax when you make your purchase (this is more likely to occur if the store ships the goods to your home). Otherwise, you'll need to do all this:

Get the paperwork: Have the merchant completely fill out the necessary refund document, called a "cheque." You'll have to present your passport at the store.

Get your stamp at the border or airport: Process your cheque(s) at your last stop in the EU with the customs agent who deals with VAT refunds. It's best to keep your purchases in your carry-on for viewing, but if they're too large or dangerous (such as knives) to carry on, then track down the proper customs agent to inspect them before you check your

VAT Rates and Minimum Purchases Required to Qualify for Refunds

Country of Purchase	VAT rate*	Minimum in Local Currency	Minimum in U.S. dollars**
Belgium	21%	€125	$152
France	19.6%	€175	$213
Germany	16%	€25	$30
Great Britain	17.5%	£20	$36
Netherlands	19%	€137	$167

**The VAT Standard Rate is charged on the original value of the item, not on the purchase price. Refund percentages will therefore be slightly less than the above rate and may also be subject to commission fees.*
***Exchange rate as of January 9, 2006*
Source: HOTREC (Hotels, Restaurants & Cafés in Europe). Please note that figures are subject to change. For more information, visit www.hotrec.org or www.globalrefund.com.

bag. You're not supposed to use your purchased goods before you leave. If you show up at customs wearing your new lederhosen, officials might look the other way—or deny you a refund.

Collect your refund: You'll need to return your stamped documents to the retailer or its representative. Many merchants work with services such as Global Refund or Premier Tax Free, with offices at major airports, ports, or border crossings. These services, which extract a 4 percent fee, can refund your money immediately in your currency of choice or credit your card (within 2 billing cycles). If you have to deal directly with the retailer, mail the store your stamped documents and then wait. It could take months.

Customs Regulations

You can take home $800 in souvenirs per person duty-free. The next $1,000 is taxed at a flat 3 percent. After that, you pay the individual item's duty rate. You can also bring in duty-free a liter of alcohol (slightly more than a standard-size bottle of wine), a carton of cigarettes, and up to 100 cigars. As for food, anything in cans or sealed jars is acceptable. Skip dried meat, cheeses, and fresh fruits and veggies. To check customs rules and duty rates, visit www.customs.gov.

TRANSPORTATION

By Car or by Train?

Each has pros and cons. Cars are an expensive headache in big cities, but are fully accessible. Groups of three or more go cheaper by car. If you're packing heavy, go by car. Trains are best for city-to-city travel and give you the convenience of doing long stretches overnight. By train, you'll arrive relaxed and well-rested—not so by car. Note that most of Europe's large train stations are fully accessible, but many others are not.

If visiting only the destinations covered in this book, you're probably best off simply buying train tickets. A car is worthless in the cities, where taxis and public transit make more sense. Connecting London and Paris is clearly easiest via the fully accessible Eurostar train. And train connections for Bruges, Amsterdam, and the Rhine are convenient, with good access.

Traveling by Train

A major mistake Americans make in Europe is relating public transportation in Europe to the pathetic public transportation they're used to at home. By rail, you'll have Europe by the tail. To study train schedules in advance on the Web, look up http://bahn.hafas.de/english.html.

While you can buy tickets as you go ("point-to-point"), you can save money by getting a railpass if you plan to travel beyond the destinations in this book.

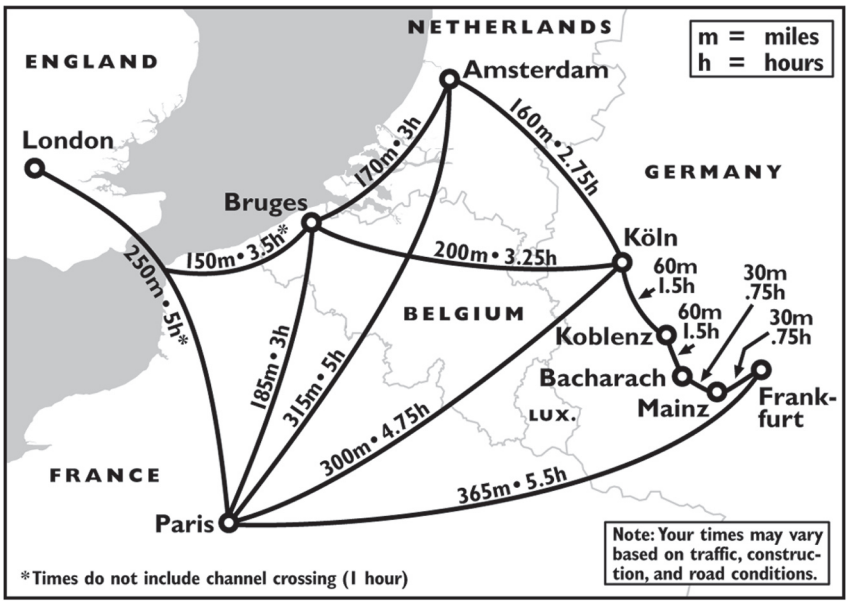
If you want to travel first-class between the destinations in this book, a Eurail Selectpass for five or six days of travel in France, Benelux, and Germany is convenient and worthwhile (starts at $325 per person for 2 or more traveling together, 5 days within a 2-month travel period). If you plan to travel beyond these destinations, the pass can actually save you money, particularly for long rides in Germany or France. However, if you're happy in second class, or if you can take advantage of discounts for wheelchair users, then point-to-point tickets are cheaper for this route. Note that a Eurostar ticket from London to the continent is not covered by any railpass, but railpass-holders and wheelchair users get discounts.

For a summary of railpass deals and point-to-point ticket options (available in the U.S. and in Europe), check out www.ricksteves.com /rail.

Car Rental

It's cheaper to arrange European car rentals in the United States, so check rates with your travel agent or directly with the companies. Most

Driving: Distance and Time



car-rental agencies offer cars that are adapted for drivers who have disabilities. Rent by the week with unlimited mileage. If you'll be renting for three weeks or more, ask your agent about leasing, which is a scheme to save on insurance and taxes. I normally rent the smallest, least expensive model. Explore your drop-off options and costs. Drop-off in another country can be very expensive.

For peace of mind, I spring for the Collision Damage Waiver insurance (CDW, about $15–25 per day), which limits my financial responsibility in case of an accident. Unfortunately, CDW now has a high deductible, hovering around $1,200. When you pick up your car, many car-rental companies will try to sell you "super CDW" at an additional cost of $7–15 per day to lower the deductible to zero.

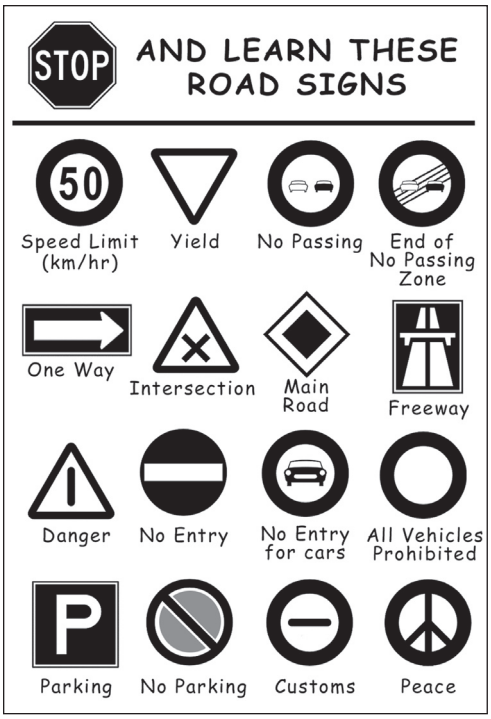
Some credit cards offer CDW-type coverage for no charge to their customers. Quiz your credit-card company on the worst-case scenario. You have to choose either the coverage offered by your car-rental company or by your credit-card company. This means that if you go with the credit-card coverage, you'll have to decline the CDW offered by the car-rental company. In this situation, some car-rental companies put a hold on your credit card for the amount of the full deductible (which can equal the value of the car). This is bad news if your credit limit is low—particularly if you plan on using that card for other purchases during your trip.

Another alternative is buying CDW insurance from Travel Guard for $9 a day (tel. 800-826-4919, www.travelguard.com). It's valid throughout Europe, but some car-rental companies refuse to honor it, especially in Italy and the Republic of Ireland. Oddly, residents of some states (including Washington) are not allowed to buy this coverage.

In sum, buying CDW—and the supplemental insurance to buy down the deductible, if you choose—is the easiest but priciest option. Using the coverage that comes with your credit card is cheaper, but can involve more hassle. If you're taking a short trip, an easy solution is to buy Travel Guard's very affordable CDW.

Driving

For much of Europe, all you need is your valid U.S. driver's license and a car. Confirm with your rental company if an international license is required in the countries you plan to visit. You probably won't need it for the destinations in this book, other than Germany. If you're traveling farther, you'd also need it for Austria, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Eastern Europe (at your local AAA office—$10 plus the cost of two passport-type photos).



While gas is expensive, if you keep an eye on the big picture, paying $4 per gallon is more a psychological trauma than a financial one. I use the freeways whenever possible. They are free in the Netherlands and Germany. The French autoroutes are punctuated by tollbooths (charging about $1 for every 10 minutes). The alternative to these expressways often is being marooned in rural traffic. The autoroute usually saves enough time, gas, and nausea to justify its expense. Mix scenic country-road rambling with high-speed autobahning, but don't forget that in Europe, the shortest distance between two points is the autobahn.

Get used to metric. A liter is about a quart, four to a gallon; a kilometer is 0.6 mile. Convert

kilometers to miles by cutting them in half and adding back 10 percent of the original (120 km: 60 + 12 = 72 miles).

Parking: Parking is a costly headache in big cities. You'll pay about $20 a day to park safely. Ask at your hotel for advice. I keep a pile of coins in my ashtray for parking meters, public phones, launderettes, and wishing wells.

Transportation at Your Destination

The most accessible way to get around town is usually by taxi (though often you'll have to transfer into the car and have the driver fold your wheelchair to put it in the trunk). Some cities have some fully accessible buses and subway routes. Other cities' transportation systems—like Paris' Métro—have very poor accessibility. I've explained your options for each destination and recommended what works best.

COMMUNICATING

Telephones

Smart travelers learn the phone system and use it daily to reserve or reconfirm rooms, get tourist information, reserve restaurants, confirm tour times, or phone home.

Types of Phones

You'll encounter various kinds of phones in Europe.

Public pay phones are on every corner. On the Continent, a few coin-operated phones still exist, but most only accept phone cards. In Great Britain, coin-operated phones are still the norm. For details on both types of payment, see below.

Hotel room phones are fairly cheap for local calls, but pricey for international calls—unless you use an international phone card (see below).

American mobile phones work in Europe if they're GSM-enabled, tri-band (or quad-band), and on a calling plan that includes international calls. With a T-Mobile phone, you can roam using your home number, and pay $1-2 per minute for making or receiving calls.

Some travelers buy a **European mobile phone** in Europe. For about $125, you can get a phone that will work in most countries once you pick up the necessary chip (about $30) per country. Or you can buy a cheaper, "locked" phone that only works in the country where you purchased it (about $100, includes $20 worth of calls). If you're interested, stop by any European shop that sells mobile phones; you'll see prominent store

window displays. You aren't required to (and shouldn't) buy a monthly contract—buy prepaid calling time instead (as you use it up, buy additional minutes at newsstands or mobile-phone shops). If you're on a budget, skip mobile phones and use phone cards instead.

Paying for Calls

You can spend a fortune making phone calls in Europe...but why would you? Here's the skinny on different ways to pay, including the best deals.

European **phone cards** come in two types: phone cards that you insert into a pay phone (best for local calls or quick international calls), and phone cards that come with a dial-up code and can be used from virtually any phone (best for international calls; note that these are not a good value when used from German public pay phones—see below).

• **Insertable phone cards,** which are widely used on the Continent, but not in Britain, are a convenient way to pay for calls from public pay phones. Buy these cards at TIs, tobacco shops, post offices, and train stations. The price of the call (local or international) is automatically deducted while you talk. They are sold in several denominations starting at about €5. Calling the U.S. with one of these phone cards is reasonable (about 2–3 min per euro), but more expensive than using an international phone card. Each European country has its own insertable phone card—so your German card won't work in a Dutch phone.

• **International phone cards**, which are sold throughout in Europe (including Britain), can be used from virtually any phone. These are not inserted into the phone. Instead, you dial the toll-free number listed on the card, reaching an automated operator. When prompted, you dial in a code number, also written on the card. A voice tells you how much is left in your account. Then dial your number. Usually you can select English, but if the prompts are in another language, experiment: dial your code, followed by the pound sign (#) then the number, then pound again, and so on, until it works. Since you don't insert the card in the phone, you can use these to make inexpensive calls from most phones, including the one in your hotel room, avoiding pricey hotel rates. Remember that you don't need the actual card to use a card account, so you can write down the access and code numbers in your notebook and share it with friends.

Calls to the U.S. are very cheap (about 20–25 min per euro). You can use the cards to make local and domestic long-distance calls as well. Buy cards at small newsstand kiosks and hole-in-the-wall long-distance phone shops. Because there are so many brand names, simply ask for an international telephone card and tell the vendor where you'll be making

most calls ("to America"), and he'll select the brand with the best deal. Some international calling cards work in multiple countries—try to buy a card that will work in all of your destinations. Because cards are occasionally duds, avoid the high denominations.

These international phone cards are such a good deal that the irritated German phone company is making them less cost-effective. In Germany, the cards are only cheap if you use them from a fixed line, like a hotel-room phone. From a pay phone, you'll get far fewer minutes for your money (for example, 10 minutes instead of 100 on a €5 card).

Some public pay phones—including all phones in Britain—are **coin-operated**. The British coin-operated phones clearly list which coins they'll take (usually from 10p to £1, with a minimum toll of 30p; some new phones even accept euro coins), and a display shows how your money supply's doing. Only completely unused coins will be returned, so put in biggies with caution. (If money's left over, push the "make another call" button, rather than hanging up.)

British phones also work with a **major credit card**. Just insert the card into the phone and dial away (minimum charge for a credit-card call is 50p). This is a handy way to make quick calls, but the rates are high, so avoid long chats.

Dialing direct from your hotel room without using an international calling card is usually quite expensive for international calls. (I always ask first how much I'll be charged.) Keep in mind that you might have to pay for local and occasionally even toll-free calls.

Receiving calls in your hotel room is often the cheapest way to keep in touch with the folks back home—especially if your family has an inexpensive way to call you (for example, a good deal on their long-distance plan, a prepaid calling card with good rates to Europe, or access to an Internet phone service, such as Skype—www.skype.com). Give them a list of your hotels' phone numbers before you go. As you travel, send your family an e-mail or make a quick pay-phone call to set up a time for them to call you, and then wait for the ring.

U.S. calling cards (such as the ones offered by AT&T, MCI, or Sprint) are the worst option. You'll nearly always save a lot of money by paying with a phone card instead.

How to Dial

Calling from the U.S. to Europe, or vice versa, is simple—once you break the code. The European calling chart on page *TK will explain the procedure. Remember that Continental European time is six/nine

hours ahead of the East/West Coasts of the U.S. (and British time is five/eight hours ahead).

Making Calls within a European Country: About half of all European countries use area codes; the other half use a direct-dial system without area codes.

In countries that use area codes (such as Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), you dial the local number when calling within a city, and you add the area code if calling long distance within the same country. For example, London's area code is 020, and the number of one of my recommended London hotels is 7282-5500. To call the hotel within London, dial 7282-5500. To call it from elsewhere in Britain, dial 020/7282-5500.

To make calls within a country that uses a direct-dial system (such as France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland), you dial the same number whether you're calling across the country or across the street.

Making International Calls: You always start with the international access code (011 if you're calling from the U.S. or Canada, or 00 from Europe). If you see a phone number that begins with +, you have to replace the + with the international access code.

Once you've dialed the international access code, dial the country code of the country you're calling (see chart in appendix).

What you dial next depends on the phone system of the country you're calling. If the country uses area codes, drop the initial zero of the area code, then dial the rest of the number. To call the London hotel from Paris, dial 00, 44 (Britain's country code), 20/7282-5500 (omitting the initial zero in the area code).

Countries that use direct-dial systems (no area codes) vary in how they're accessed internationally by phone. For instance, if you're making an international call to the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Norway, Portugal, or Spain, simply dial the international access code, country code, and phone number. But if you're calling France, Belgium, or Switzerland, drop the initial 0 of the phone number.

To call my office from Europe, I dial 00 (Europe's international access code), 1 (U.S.A.'s country code), 425 (Edmonds' area code), and 771-8303.

Don't be surprised that in some countries, local phone numbers have different numbers of digits within the same city, or even the same hotel (e.g., a hotel can have a 6-digit phone number, a 7-digit mobile phone number, and an 8-digit fax number).

E-mail and Mail

E-mail: Internet cafés are available at just about every destination in this book, giving you reasonably inexpensive and easy Internet access. Your hotelier can direct you to the nearest place. Many hotels have Internet terminals in their lobbies for guests, and some offer Wi-Fi wireless connections for travelers with laptop computers.

Mail: While you can arrange for mail delivery to your hotel (allow 10 days for a letter to arrive), phoning and e-mailing are so easy that I've dispensed with mail stops altogether.

SLEEPING

In the interest of smart use of your time, I favor hotels and restaurants handy to your sightseeing activities. Rather than list hotels scattered throughout a city, I describe two or three favorite neighborhoods and recommend the best accommodations values in each.

This book lists accommodations of various accessibility levels. I've listed several cheaper, small hotel options. But because truly accessible rooms are at a premium in some destinations, I've also listed some expensive—but plush and fully adapted—splurges.

Rooms with private bathrooms are often bigger, more recently renovated, and more likely to be accessible, while the cheaper rooms without bathrooms often will be on the top floor or not yet refurbished—and usually not accessible. Any room without a bathroom has access to a bathroom in the corridor (free, unless otherwise noted). Rooms with tubs often cost more than rooms with showers. All rooms have a sink.

Before accepting a room, confirm your understanding of the complete price. The only tip our recommended hotels would like is a friendly, easygoing guest. I appreciate feedback on your hotel experiences.

Hotels

While most hotels listed in this book cluster around $70 to $100 per double, they can be as much as $200-plus (maximum plumbing and more) per double. The cost is higher in big cities and heavily touristed cities and lower off the beaten track. Three or four people can save money by requesting one big room. Traveling alone can get expensive: A single room is often only 20 percent cheaper than a double. If you'll accept a room with twin beds and you ask for a double, you may be turned away. Ask for "a room for two people" if you'll take a twin or a double.

Rooms are generally safe, but don't leave valuables lying around. More (or different) pillows and blankets are usually in the closet or available on

Sleep Code

To give maximum information with a minimum of space, I use the following code to describe accommodations listed in this book. Prices are listed per room, not per person. When a range of prices is listed for a room, the price fluctuates with room size or season. You can assume a hotel takes credit cards unless you see "cash only" in the listing. Hotel clerks speak at least some English unless otherwise noted.

- **S** = Single room (or price for one person in a double).
- **D** = Double or Twin. Double beds are usually big enough for non-romantic couples.
- **T** = Triple (often a double bed with a single bed moved in).
- **Q** = Quad (an extra child's bed is usually cheaper).
- **b** = Private bathroom with toilet and shower or tub.
- **s** = Private shower or tub only (the toilet is down the hall).

According to this code, a couple staying at a "Db-€90" hotel would pay a total of 90 euros (about $110) for a double room with a private bathroom. The hotel accepts credit cards or cash in payment.

request. Remember, in Europe, towels and linen aren't always replaced every day. Drip-dry and conserve.

Unless I note otherwise, the cost of a room includes a breakfast (sometimes continental, but usually buffet).

Pay your bill the evening before you leave to avoid the time-wasting crowd at the reception desk in the morning.

Hostels

Consider taking advantage of Europe's impressive network of youth hostels. Of course, these vary widely in accessibility—but many are modern and likely to have at least moderately accessible facilities.

Hostels are open to all ages (except in Bavaria, where a maximum age of 26 is strictly enforced at official hostels, though not at independent hostels). They usually cost $10–20 per night (cheaper for those under 27) and serve good, cheap meals and/or provide kitchen facilities. Generally, travelers without a membership card ($28 per year, sold at hostels in most U.S. cities or online at www.hiusa.org, tel. 202/783-6161) are admitted for an extra $5. If you plan to stay in hostels, bring your own sheet (or pay $4 extra to rent one). While many hostels have a few doubles or family rooms available upon request for a little extra money, plan on gender-segregated dorms with 4–20 beds per room. Hostels can be idyllic and

peaceful, but school groups can raise the rafters. School groups are most common on summer weekends and on school-year weekdays. I like small hostels best. While many hostels may say over the telephone that they're full, most hold a few beds for people who drop in, or they can direct you to budget accommodations nearby.

Making Reservations

It's possible to travel at any time of year without reservations, but given the high stakes, erratic accommodations values, and the quality of the gems I've found for this book, I'd highly recommend calling for rooms at least several days in advance as you travel (and book well in advance for festivals).

If tourist crowds are minimal, you might make a habit of calling between 9:00 and 10:00 on the day you plan to arrive, when the hotel knows who'll be checking out and just which rooms will be available. I've taken great pains to list telephone numbers with long-distance instructions (see "Telephones," page *TK; also see the appendix). Use the telephone and the convenient telephone cards. Most hotels listed are accustomed to English-only speakers. A hotel receptionist will trust you and hold a room until 16:00 without a deposit, though some will ask for a credit-card number. Honor (or cancel by phone) your reservations. Long distance is cheap and easy from public phone booths. *Trusting people to show up is a hugely stressful issue and a financial risk for B&B owners. Don't let these people down—I promised you'd call and cancel if for some reason you can't show up.* Don't needlessly confirm rooms through the tourist offices; they'll take a commission.

If you know exactly which dates you need and really want a particular place, reserve a room long before you leave home. To reserve from home, call, e-mail, or fax the hotel. E-mail is free, phone and fax costs are reasonable, and simple English is usually fine. To fax, use the form in the appendix (online at www.ricksteves.com/reservation). A two-night stay in August would be "2 nights, 16/8/06 to 18/8/06." (Europeans write the date day/month/year, and European hotel jargon uses your day of departure.) Hotels often require one night's deposit to hold a room. Usually a credit-card number and expiration date will be accepted as the deposit. Faxing your card number (rather than e-mailing it) keeps it private, safer, and out of cyberspace. If you do reserve with a credit card, you can pay with your card or cash when you arrive; if you don't show up, you'll be billed for the night.

Hotels in larger cities sometimes have strict cancellation policies (you might lose, say, a deposit if you cancel within 2 weeks of your reserved

stay, or you might be billed for the entire visit if you leave early); ask about cancellation policies before you book.

On the road, reconfirm your reservations a day or two in advance for safety (or you may be bumped—really). Also, don't just assume you can extend. Take the time to consider in advance how long you'll stay.

EATING

Europeans are masters at the art of fine living. That means eating long and well. Two-hour lunches, three-hour dinners, and endless hours sitting in outdoor cafés are the norm. Americans eat on their way to an evening event and complain if the check is slow in coming. For Europeans, the meal is an end in itself, and only rude waiters rush you.

Even those of us who liked dorm food will find that the local cafés, cuisine, and wines become a highlight of our European adventure. This is sightseeing for your palate, and even if the rest of you is sleeping in cheap hotels, your taste buds will want an occasional first-class splurge. You can eat well without going broke. But be careful: You're just as likely to blow a small fortune on a mediocre meal as you are to dine wonderfully for $15.

Restaurants

To conserve your time and energy, I've focused on restaurants in the neighborhood close to your hotel or handy to your sightseeing. For each one, I've indicated the specific accessibility features you can expect to find.

If restaurant-hunting on your own, choose a place filled with locals, not the place with the big neon signs boasting, "We Speak English and Accept Credit Cards." Look for menus posted outside; if you don't see one, move along.

When you're in the mood for something halfway between a restaurant and a picnic meal, look for take-out food stands, bakeries (with sandwiches and small pizzas to go), delis, a department-store cafeteria, or simple little eateries for fast and easy restaurant food.

Picnics

To be able to afford the occasional splurge in a nice restaurant, I like to picnic. In addition to the savings, picnicking is a great way to sample local specialties. And, in the process of assembling your meal, you get to plunge into local markets like a European.

Gather supplies early. Many shops close for a lunch break. While

Send Me an E-mail, Drop Me a Line

If you enjoy a successful trip with the help of this book and would like to share your discoveries, please fill out the survey at www.ricksteves.com/feedback. I personally read and value all feedback.

it's fun to visit the small specialty shops, a *supermarché* gives you more efficiency with less color for less cost.

When driving, I organize a backseat pantry in a cardboard box: plastic cups, paper towels, a water bottle (the standard disposable European half-liter plastic mineral water bottle works fine), a damp cloth in a Ziploc baggie, a Swiss Army knife, and a petite tablecloth. To take care of juice once and for all, stow a rack of liter boxes of orange juice in the trunk. (Look for "100%" on the label, or you'll get a sickly sweet orange drink.)

Picnics (especially French ones) can be an adventure in high cuisine. Be daring: Try the smelly cheeses, midget pickles, ugly pâtés, and minuscule yogurts. Local shopkeepers sell small quantities of produce and even slice and stuff a sandwich for you.

A typical picnic for two might be fresh bread (half loaves on request), two tomatoes, three carrots, 100 grams of cheese (about a quarter-pound), 100 grams of meat, two apples, a liter box of orange juice, and yogurt. Total cost for two: about $10.

TRAVELING AS A TEMPORARY LOCAL

We travel all the way to Europe to enjoy differences—to become temporary locals. You'll experience frustrations. Certain truths that we find "God-given" or "self-evident," such as cold beer, ice in drinks, bottomless cups of coffee, and bigger being better, are suddenly not so true. One of the benefits of travel is the eye-opening realization that there are logical, civil, and even better alternatives. A willingness to go local ensures that you'll enjoy a full dose of European hospitality.

If there is a negative aspect to the image Europeans have of Americans, it is that we are big, aggressive, impolite, rich, loud, and a bit naive. Americans tend to be noisy in public places, such as restaurants and trains. Our raised voices can demolish Europe's reserved ambience. Talk softly. While Europeans look bemusedly at some of our Yankee

excesses—and worriedly at others—they nearly always afford us individual travelers all the warmth we deserve.

Judging from all the happy postcards I receive from travelers who have used this book, it's safe to assume you'll enjoy a great, affordable vacation—with the finesse of an independent, experienced traveler. Thanks, and happy travels!

BACK DOOR TRAVEL PHILOSOPHY

From *Rick Steves' Europe Through the Back Door*

Travel is intensified living—maximum thrills per minute and one of the last great sources of legal adventure. Travel is freedom. It's recess, and we need it.

Experiencing the real Europe requires catching it by surprise, going casual..."Through the Back Door."

Affording travel is a matter of priorities. (Make do with the old car.) You can travel—simply, safely, and comfortably—almost anywhere in Europe for $100 a day plus transportation costs (allow more for London). In many ways, spending more money only builds a thicker wall between you and what you came to see. Europe is a cultural carnival, and, time after time, you'll find that its best acts are free and the best seats are the cheap ones.

A tight budget forces you to travel close to the ground, meeting and communicating with the people, not relying on service with a purchased smile. Never sacrifice sleep, nutrition, safety, or cleanliness in the name of budget. Simply enjoy the local-style alternatives to expensive hotels and restaurants.

Extroverts have more fun. If your trip is low on magic moments, kick yourself and make things happen. If you don't enjoy a place, maybe you don't know enough about it. Seek the truth. Recognize tourist traps. Give a culture the benefit of your open mind. See things as different but not better or worse. Any culture has much to share.

Of course, travel, like the world, is a series of hills and valleys. Be fanatically positive and militantly optimistic. If something's not to your liking, change your liking. Travel is addictive. It can make you a happier American, as well as a citizen of the world. Our Earth is home to six billion equally important people. It's humbling to travel and find that people don't envy Americans. They like us, but, with all due respect, they wouldn't trade passports.

Globe-trotting destroys ethnocentricity. It helps you understand and appreciate different cultures. Regrettably, there are forces in our society that want you dumbed down for their convenience. Don't let it happen. Thoughtful travel engages you with the world—more important than ever these days. Travel changes people. It broadens perspectives and teaches new ways to measure quality of life. Many travelers toss aside their hometown blinders. Their prized souvenirs are the strands of different cultures they decide to knit into their own character. The world is a cultural yarn shop. And Back Door travelers are weaving the ultimate tapestry. Come on, join in!