

Lessons Learned in 43 years of European Travel

I have been traveling to Europe for 43 years and have learned a lot of lessons the hard way. Anne has been traveling to Europe since 1989. Here is a list of our best ideas & lessons learned.

Before the Trip

- 1. Plan what is most important to see on the trip & make sure you have arranged a sensible way to see the site.** This may sound silly but many key places you may want to visit are often very hard to visit without several transfers. Let me give you an example. Several years ago, we had a Eurorail pass with limited days. Prior to start of using our 15 days, we had one extra day. We were in France & I wanted to see Mt. St. Michel in Normandy. Without doing my homework, I got us to Le Havre, about 100 miles north of my desired attraction. We never made it to Mt. St. Michel. Turns out it is very difficult to go by train alone to Mt. St. Michel. The point is simple—you must plan your connections & have a clear idea of how to get there.
The second most common mistake is to not know when the key site is closed. Museums and art galleries are the biggest problem but palaces and castle also can be closed on just the day you want to visit. Also check for local holidays, festival or special showing for extra closed dates. Fortunately, most key attractions have web sites that let you know about hours and days of operations.
- 2. Decide if you are a hotel reservation traveler or are you going to go without reservations.** In a lot of places winging it is fun, especially with rail travel around major cities. You can wind up staying in great places for very reasonable rates. The down side is no place to stay—we were aced out in Heidelberg one year due to an international Girl Scout convention. On the reverse side, we once stayed in a prime luxury London hotel for about 1/3 the normal price by using the hotel reservation booth at the train station. If you decide to go the reservation route, make sure you have an exact route to find the hotel once in the city. It does not make any sense to make a reservation & then have no idea how to find your place—you lose the advantage of no wasted time during the trip. Trust me, after 12 hours of flying to Venice, you do not want to stumble around this confusing city looking for your hotel with all your bags. If you go the no reservation route, try to have one bag & a carry-on at the most. We find for young, really adventurous folks like to travel without reservations but we always make them in advance now days—wasted time in Europe finding accommodations just does not make sense.
- 3. Plan, Plan, Plan!** Here is a list of things that need to be done for a relaxed trip. Packing list. Call credit cards to tell them you are traveling to Europe. Pet care plan. Mail & newspaper plan. Grass cutting plan. Emergency access to your home while away plan. Trip insurance plan. Buying Euros prior to leaving US plan. Transport to airport. Transportation to Europe & return. Transportation while moving from one place to another. What to see & do plan. Hotel reservation plan. See my checklists to help make your planning easier.
- 4. Have an emergency plan.** This is a what-if-plan. All but the lost luggage have happen to us. First, buy trip insurance. Anne had to cancel a trip once when it looked like my mother would

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suddenly die—saved us over \$3000.00. Make 3 copies of your passport, credit cards & IDs you take on the trip—leave one with you emergency contact in US & each carry a copy. Even though we always carry money belts, I forgot to zip mine & dropped all my credit cards & IDs along with \$230 US dollars. We realized the mistake after only 30 minutes & after a brief search determined the cards were gone. We called & cancelled the cards within one hour of our loss. We also learned that because Anne had different cards, our trip was not ruined. Report the loss to the police—unbelievably; when we went to the local Paris police station, someone had turned in all my lost items, to include the cash! Have a back up visit plan—what will you do if a transportation strike, etc? Depending on the situation, car, train fly or bus could be options. Protests, declaration of wars, soccer hooligans—know what is going on in the places you are going to visit & avoid hot spots—even when these events happen while we were traveling, most dangerous situations were only in one part of the city we were at & the rest was safe. The point is be aware. If you are separated from luggage always have one change of clothes, so you can go a couple of days until the situation is fixed.

5. **Research some guide books before you go.** Know what you want to see, budget for entrance fees, & know what days certain sites are closed. Also figure out how to get to the attraction that fits your style of travel. Ask at the hotel you are staying for help to get to where you want to go. Taxis are some time essential & your hotel can often keep you from being ripped off. Our preferred method is to walk, then subway, maybe bus, finally cab or private limo (from Rome to cruise port of Cittivichia for example). Or better yet, let us plan these details for you.
6. **Fees count.** Pick a credit card & debit card with the lowest possible international fees. My goal is 1% or less. Normal fees included transaction fees, currency fees & international transaction fees.
7. **Electronics.** Traveling with electronics in Europe is a given in today's world. Europe uses 240 volts instead of the 110 volts in the US. Bring only electronic devices that are 100-240 volts complaint. You will also need adapter plugs to fit into the outlets. England & Ireland use a different plug than is used on the continent of Europe. Also expect few places in your room to plug in your appliance to recharge during your trip. My experience with converter devices is poor—they often just do not work or destroy your costly electronic device. We usually travel with iPads, 2 iPhones & our iPods. We use Halo pocket power system to charge up these items—on plug into the wall and it can charge all our things. It also is a reserve battery system when our device batteries run down. We also carry Europe 2 adapter plugs or more for the outlets to charge up our stuff. We have taken a Garmin but find this GPS very unreliable—we wandered around Paris a few years ago with luggage following the Garmin instructions to find our hotel and it just did not work properly.
8. **Apply for your passport, if needed, at least 3 months prior to departure.** Go to our web site, www.dreamdestinations.com, Click on the ABOUT section & look under the resources tab, to learn what is required.

Some countries require a passport to be valid for 6 months after the end of the trip or they will deny you entry. Some cruise lines will keep your passport for a few days (don't worry its normal

& they will give you a receipt). Also some hotels will require you to give them your passport, it is very common so do not worry, although recently there has been less holding passports—sometimes they only need your passport number on check in.

9. **Some countries require visas along with passports.** Currently Russia, Belarus, the Ukraine (currently under US travel warning—maybe suspended), Georgia and Turkey require visas.
10. **Carry-on bag advice.** In your carry-on bag pack all medications, eyeglasses, sunglasses, valuables (jewelry), a change of clothes and anything necessary to make your flight more comfortable. Carry an ample supply of any medications. IDs, credit cards, money, passports need to be with you at all times until you are in the ship or you land and are out of the airport. We always make 3 copies of our cards and the front page of our passport—Anne keeps one, I keep one and we leave one home with a relative. Keep track of your valuables carefully—it is easy to lose track of them if you are not careful. Do not take any extra credit cards that you will not need or use. Ladies consider carefully what jewelry you take. We always take a picture of valuables we take prior to leaving. Just remember—any checked suitcase could be lost—if it's that important **carry it with you!**
11. **Try not to over pack.** Anne & I try to take one suitcase and one carry-on each. The size of the suitcase depends on the length of the trip. We think a spinner suitcase is best (4 wheels) so that it will not fall over (I accidentally let Anne's 2 wheel case fall over on one trip & it cracked our net book screen). Most airlines will charge you steep fees for a bag that weights more than 50 pounds. Try to take clothes that match together so you can wear an item at least twice or three times. Wash and wear clothing helps limit the amount clothes you need. Rolling your clothes helps us get more in less space. Laundry services are available in Europe, but we often just do a small in-room wash. We both use packing cubes to help organize our items. Even when I unpack, I just throw the packing cube in the drawer—less to pack later. You may want to take a picture of any high dollar item you are taking or make a detailed packing list with specific description (an example, Blue Microfiber Travel Smith Blazer). We have done both.
12. **You may want to consider buying supplementary baggage insurance.** This is especially true if you travel with expensive clothes. If your luggage is lost, report the loss immediately with the airlines as soon as you realize that your bag(s) are damaged or missing. Get a copy of the report for your records. Also, ask the airline agent for a written authorization to buy "reasonable and necessary" items (toiletries and a change of clothes) to cover you until the suitcase(s) arrive.
13. **Get a Phone Plan.** If you plan to call home, get an international phone plan. If you do not get a plan and use your phone, it can run into hundreds of dollars, especially if your data plans are running and you have not turned off your data roaming feature on your mobile device. Texting can be one option that cost less, but check with your carrier before you go.
14. **Buy Travel Insurance.** We always buy travel insurance; not only does it cover you for possible financial loss; it can help you continue a trip when problems arise.

Flight Tips

15. **Always lock your luggage with a TSA approved lock.** It might deter a potential thief.
16. **The TSA limits the size of all liquids to a one quart clear plastic bag.** No one individual bottle may be over 3 ounces. Our website www.dreamdestinations.com has a link to the TSA on the resources section so you can get any of your questions answered about the latest rules. Do not carry coins in your pockets; put them in your carry-on bag.
17. **Bring travel size toiletries.**
18. **We always carry money belts.** See my money plan checklist to help you plan to safeguard your money and to have the resources you need to have to have a safe, fun trip. Foreign coins cannot be changed in banks or at currency exchanges—they only accept folding money. Try to use them before you leave the country or prepare to keep them as mementos. On our website on the European Destinations landing page, there is a power point about Smart Money Travel Tips (www.dreamdestinations.com).
19. **Reconfirm your flight 48 hours prior to departure.** Arrive 2 ½ hours prior to departure for an international flight, 1 ½ for a domestic flight.
20. **Jet lag and flight discomfort tips.** To minimize jet lag and lessen travel discomfort of sitting for long periods, wear comfortable clothes and shoes. If it is an overnight flight, try to sleep; avoid caffeine, alcohol and heavy meals. Drink plenty of water! Anne carries an eye shade, ear plugs, slipper socks and an inflatable pillow—I carry an inflatable pillow and ear plugs.
21. **Move on the plane.** Try to move at least every two hours or so, if possible, to help prevent your joints from stiffening. Raising your feet will help circulation and minimize swelling in your feet and ankles. We also do leg/foot exercises to help our circulation.

Medical Tips

22. **Medical Alerts.** Consider wearing a medical alert bracelet if you have a medical condition such as allergies or reactions to certain medications.
23. **Carry a small first aid kit.** We always carry a very small first aid kit. Mine has band-aids, 4 antiseptic towelettes, antibiotic ointment, some Tums and some aspirin. Also it is wise to carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer.
24. **Check your medical insurance.** Verify that your medical insurance covers you while traveling outside the US. Please note—Medicare does not provide coverage outside the US. The large cruise ships have a doctor on board, but it may not be covered by your medical insurance. Please check prior to your trip.

First Day Tips

25. **Have a solid first day plan.** This may be the toughest travel day—an 8-10 hour flight, immigrations, get any checked luggage, a transfer to your hotel or new city, maybe all is in a foreign language. On my first trip, my friend & I had a flight & a Euro Rail pass, a map and after

landing realize we did not have a plan to find a place to stay. In the middle of old town Frankfurt we were sitting in a square and an elderly gentleman approached us and ask if we were Americans. After a short conversation, he ask if we had a place to stay—I guess not too hard to figure out since we both had backpacks. He took us to a local place—“Zimmer frie”—in German a room to rent. It was great, good price and I got my first taste of kindness and help from Europeans, but I learned a valuable lesson—have a place to stay the first day. The first day is a day you could easily lose track of luggage, purses, small carry-ons—you are tired and mistakes happen. Lessen the chance by a solid plan. A transfer to your hotel from the airport or train station can be the difference of a great trip start and is almost always worth the extra money. We always do this in new cities and often in old cities just for the convenience.

Out and About Tips

26. Prior to leaving your room for the last time, double check to make sure you did not leave anything, especially small items like phone chargers. It is easy to do.
27. Anne is our photo guru (if you have seen any of our trip photos on our web site, you know how good a photographer she is). We always bring extra camera batteries and several digital camera disks. One trick to help us remember where shots are taken is to take a picture of a town name on a sign post or other identifying feature. On a Rhine river cruise, we actually took photos of castles and then their names on a map to help us identify them.
28. We always carry at least one backpack (ours fold up) when we go out for the day. You might consider making a shopping list & a budget. One word of advice—if you see something special and it seems reasonable, get it! In Tallinn, Estonia, we once saw a really nice piece of Amber jewelry but did not know if it was a good deal. Later we decided to return and buy it but had considerable trouble finding the exact store again. We ultimately found it but it taught us if it looks like a pretty good deal, go for it. Also, it is a good idea to know what the best buys at your ports are. Again in Tallinn, we learned this lesson the hard way. Since Anne had bought some pashimas earlier, we decided not to buy some handmade shawls in Tallinn—big mistake—turns out they were super values!
29. Before you buy something, consider how you plan to get it home. You may like it in the store but consider the hassle of getting home, especially if it is breakable. Shipping home may be an option but works best with larger stores. Shipping means more costs, paperwork, insurance and what type of shipping method (mail, UPS, FedEx) you want to use.

Return to the USA Tips

30. Check our web site for the latest on Customs Regulations. You will have to fill out a Customs form (one per family) and go through immigration when you return home.
31. **RELAX and HAVE FUN!** Europe is our favorite destination for a trip—you get it all, great food, and a chance to visit some of the most unique places in the world. Thanks for allowing **Dream Destinations** to help you plan your vacation. We appreciate your business.