



Exploring Vacations Guide

EXPLORING VACATIONS

QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

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WELCOME TO EXPLORING VACATIONS QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

Is this the year you're finally going to take that trip of a lifetime?

Well, you just couldn't have picked a better time. Air travel is becoming increasingly competitive with more convenient flight schedules, a greater choice of destinations and best of all, more affordable prices. No matter what corner of the globe you're travelling from and where you're going to, it's never been easier to get around. The internet also means it's super simple to research, plan, book and of course document your adventures from start to finish. And of course there's that old motto of 'there's no time like the present' – so what are you waiting for?

What do we do? Where should we go? How do I get there?

Fear not, friends. Read on and see how Exploring Vacations can help make your journey an experience you'll remember for the rest of your lives.

What kind of vacations do you offer?

The short answer to that question is: just about everything! While we focus on self drive, coach and escorted tours, we are more than willing to help you create your own tailor-made vacation - you call the shots, and we make it happen.

SELF DRIVE TOURS

Exploring Vacations offer a wonderful array of Self Drive tours across many parts of Europe for both seasoned travel veterans and first time novices. Our Self Drive tours don't just include a rental car, which we will of course organise as part of your package. Exploring Vacations will also design a Self Drive tour which will include an itinerary, chosen by you from a variety of packages offering trips that last from a few days to two weeks or more. We will also, as part of the selected package, arrange all of your accommodation for each night of your tour. Again, you can choose from a vast array of bed and breakfasts, hotels, farmhouses or even castles before you arrive, and we'll do all the leg work. That just leaves you to explore your chosen destinations at your leisure before arriving at a welcoming inn each night. Enjoy a good meal and a great night's sleep, then do it all again the next day.

[HTTP://WWW.EXPLORINGVACATIONS.COM](http://www.exploringvacations.com)



Why choose a Self Drive Tour?

Self Drive tours offer you the freedom to explore the countries you've decided you want to see, but with the security of knowing you won't have to look for a place to stay each night. Exploring Vacations will work with you via one of our friendly, specialist Personal Tour Operators, to put together the perfect holiday. You let us know the parts of the country you'd like to visit, the attractions you'd like to see and the types of accommodation you'd love to stay in, and we'll make it happen. If you're a first time visitor and aren't sure of the things you want to do, we'll work with you and make suggestions based on your wishes.

Once you arrive at your destination, we're still here to help, should you need us. We're only a phone call away, and we'll do everything we can to make sure your trip of a lifetime goes exactly according to plan. Our mission is to make sure that the only thing you have left to do once you get here is to get on the roads and experience the truly magical scenery, architecture and lifestyles that await you. Our experience works to your advantage; we deal with a very specific list of accommodation providers, because we know they will make your stay truly memorable. Our friends and clients tell us that this is a crucial part of the service we offer, because trying to find and arrange your own accommodation at the end of the day can be a time-consuming, frustrating—and expensive—experience.

Sounds good! But which Self Drive Tour is best for me?

We would highly recommend starting out by looking at our website, www.exploringvacations.com. There, we have listed a number of itineraries which take in the most popular regions and attractions that Ireland, England, Scotland, France, Italy, Greece and Iceland have to offer. We guide you to the most beautiful natural settings across all countries, show you where to find ancient churches and monuments, pristine mountain lakes, buzzing seaside towns and sleepy rural retreats. Maybe you'll be here for two weeks, but you only want to tour for the first week or just for a few days. No problem! Maybe you want to stick to a particular region, or on the other hand, you want to cover as much of these amazing countries as possible. Yep, we can make that happen, too.

Let's say you don't see any of our published itineraries that meet all the items on your holiday wish list. Again, this is not even a slight issue. Just let your Personal Tour Operator know what you'd like to see, when you'd like to see it and how long you'd like your Self Drive Tour to last, and we'll make sure it happens.

When it comes to the types of accommodation on offer, people's tastes vary widely. Some of our clients adore the family atmosphere of a cozy country Bed and Breakfast. Others love the pampering they receive at luxury hotels, while still more have been enchanted by the many restored and renovated majestic castles and manor homes that now offer a place to rest and relax in stately surroundings. Whatever your preference, and even if you'd like a combination of all of the above, Exploring Vacations can and will make it happen. We have trusted partners in each area of the accommodation sector with whom we have been working for years, so you can be sure of an outstanding experience, regardless of which type of accommodation you choose.

What types of vehicles do you provide?

Regardless of the type of vehicle you choose, it's important for you to know that every package we provide includes comprehensive insurance. In addition, because we know you might like to do a little extra exploring, we also offer unlimited mileage. And in the unlikely event something untoward should occur, you're also covered with a 24 hour roadside assistance package.

All of the countries we operate in have excellent road infrastructures, so undertaking a road trip in any of them is a breeze. There are regular sign posts and detailed maps are readily available, and your route is clearly set out for you each day. Oh, and did we mention there's stunning scenery all along the way too? Whatever you do, make sure to keep your camera at the ready.

Exploring Vacations can set you on your way in whatever type of vehicle best suits your needs. You can choose easy to park compact cars that offer excellent fuel efficiency, or we can get you on the road in intermediate or full-size sedans. If you want to cruise around in true style, we also have a fantastic selection of premium executive models, and if you're bringing the family along, we can kit you out in a station wagon, or 'people carriers' as we call them. Are you planning on tackling some tougher terrain or rural side roads? Consider a 4 x 4.



Ok, what's the next step?

Send us an e-mail or give us a call (you can find the contact details on our website), and tell us what you want from your visit. We'll listen closely, then we'll offer our advice...and then we'll listen some more. Once we fully understand exactly what you want to do, what you want to see, where you want to go and how you want to get there, we'll draw up a plan. Then we'll send you a full itinerary with a 'nothing hidden, nothing up the sleeves' price that covers everything in your Self Drive Tour.

Take your time and review the proposed itinerary thoroughly. If you have any questions, or if you change your mind or think of something else you want to do, or if you see anything in the package you're unsure about, contact us again. We won't be happy until we're absolutely positive that you're happy. Once you're satisfied with what we've put together for you, simply accept the final package, and we'll send you a fully itemised itinerary which will include precisely where you'll be staying during your tour, and the make and model of your vehicle. After that, we'll stay in touch and will be available to answer any and all questions right up to the time you arrive, and during your tour, too, if you need us. When you get here, your vehicle—and the vacation of your dreams—will be waiting for you.

ESCORTED TOURS

What exactly is an Escorted Tour? How is it different from a coach tour?

Everything about an Exploring Vacations Escorted Tour is designed to make your holiday completely stress free and eminently enjoyable. Every single detail of your tour is organised in advance of your arrival, from your own personal guide and driver, to your accommodation, right down to the type of vehicle in which you'll be travelling around the country.

It's really as simple as this—just show up at the airport or ferry port. Your driver will be waiting for you, and we take it from there. You can sit back and relax, watching the spectacular countryside glide past your windows, or you can pepper your guide with questions about anything and everything to do with your trip. The beauty of an Escorted Tour is that you decide everything...without having to do anything!

As with our Self Drive Tours, the instant you contact us, we will assign you a Personal Tour Operator. Together, you will start planning your own, totally unique itinerary; you tell us what you want, and we'll tell you where to find it. Every one of our drivers is a virtual human encyclopedia; they'll make sure you don't miss any of the must-see sites, and without doubt, they'll whisk you away to some places you've never heard of but which, after this vacation, you'll never ever forget.

Exploring Vacations Escorted Tours can last for whatever length of time you wish. Our pre-planned itineraries cover the most picturesque villages, historic sites and beautiful landscape each country has to offer. But you are certainly not limited to the itineraries you see on our website. If you've heard about a place you must see or an event you really want to attend, we'll design an itinerary that fills your wish list.

Escorted Tours also allow you to select from a wide range of accommodation, from the ultra-friendly bed and breakfast establishments to the finest chateaus and five-star hotels on offer. You can even choose a few of each type, if you wish, from an expansive list of recommended establishments with whom we have a long-standing relationship.

How will we be getting around?

A trip like this requires travelling in style. If you arrive in a group of up to three people, you will be motoring around in an E-Class Mercedes. Groups of from four to eight will be driven in a luxury mini-van. Let's say you decide to come in a group of from eight to 50 people. Exploring Vacations has a fleet of ultra-modern and comfortable touring coaches, so you and your family and friends will travel in supreme comfort. Every vehicle in our fleet is fully insured and covered by 24/7 roadside assistance, so you'll always be covered, and you'll always be safe.

COACH TOURS

What about Coach Tours? What are the advantages?

When you think of an Exploring Vacations Coach Tour, think 'luxury ocean cruise,' but without the sea sickness! No stone is left unturned to provide you with every comfort and cover every eventuality. We look after details like airport transfers, daily sightseeing trips, mouth watering breakfasts, evening dinner reservations, unforgettable medieval banquets and seats at delightful seaside tavernas with unforgettable views. While on tour, your package will include passes to all the major attractions en route. Without question, Exploring Vacations offers the most comprehensive, all-inclusive coach tours of any company in the world. Our reputation for amazing value and outstanding customer service bears that out.

In short, when you book an Exploring Vacations Coach Tour, you will be travelling in state-of-the art coaches, each of which has bathroom facilities, and staying in top quality accommodation. You'll see the best of Ireland, including the hidden gems, and a friendly, knowledgeable tour guide will be at your side every step of the way.

Which Coach Tour is right for me?

Every Exploring Vacations Coach Tour is filled with visits to those must-see attractions, beautiful scenery and encounters with truly interesting characters—Ireland, Scotland and England all have a lot of those to offer! We have a number of tours from which to choose, with itineraries that vary in length and which cover different regions. While we can't let you design your own coach tour, we can promise you we've put together a package that's sure to be unforgettable.

What's the accommodation like on a Coach Tour?

Exploring Vacations Coach Tours stop at a number of three and four star hotels with whom we have a long-established relationship. Every venue comes with our stamp of approval, or we wouldn't let you stay there!

How do I book a Coach Tour?

First, have a good look at our website and see if you can find a tour that you think looks right. To get things started, just send us an e-mail or give us a call (you can find the contact details on our website), and tell us which tour you're considering. Ask any questions you might have about the tour, and we'll answer them quickly and with complete honesty. Once you're satisfied with what we've put together for you, simply accept the final package, and we'll send you a fully itemised itinerary which will include precisely where you'll be staying during your tour, and details of exactly when and where you'll meet your coach to start your tour. After that, we'll stay in touch and available to answer any and all questions right up to the time you arrive, and during your tour, too, if you need us. All that's left for you to do then is climb aboard, sit back, relax and enjoy everything this beautiful little corner of the world has to offer.

Ok, I have a few questions...

Q: Do I need a visa to go to Europe?

A: All that's required for US, Canadian, Australian and EU residents to travel in any European country is a current, valid passport. If you're coming from a country other than those mentioned above, contact the nearest embassy for details. If you have young children travelling with you, as a general rule, they should have their own passports. EU residents can stay for as long as they wish, although citizens from non-EU countries such as those listed above are usually restricted to a stay of between 3 – 6 months. You may also need proof of a return ticket or sufficient funds to purchase one.

Q. What about health insurance?

A: If you're a citizen of any EU country you will receive free medical treatment at hospitals across Europe. The easiest way to present proof of cover is by carrying a European Health Insurance Card, for which citizens of EU countries can apply online.

In addition, Australia and New Zealand have reciprocal healthcare arrangements with many European countries. Citizens of virtually all other countries will be charged for almost all medical treatment, with the possible exception of emergency treatment. For this reason, it is highly advisable to arrange travel insurance, which includes medical coverage, before you come.

Another point to bear in mind is that pharmacies are limited to what they can dispense without a prescription, and many drugs readily available over the counter in some parts of the world may not be so easily obtained here. Therefore, try to ensure that you either have sufficient medication with you (in appropriately marked and labelled containers) or that you have a valid prescription and your doctor's contact details.

Finally, in the event of any medical emergency, you should dial 112 for an ambulance.

Q: What vaccinations do I need before coming?

A: Most parts of Europe have never even seen a mosquito. No vaccinations are required.

Q: Can I bring my children on an Exploring Vacations Coach Tour? And can I also bring my grandparents?

A: Only children aged 10 and over can be included on the tour, but there is no upper age limit on any tour.

Q: What kinds of food can we expect on a Coach Tour?

A: Meals are specified in your itinerary, so no surprises there! If you're having dinner in a hotel on any given night, you'll be enjoying dishes from a table d' hôte menu.

Q: I have specific dietary requirements. Can you look after me?

A: If you have specific needs, please make that known to us at your earliest convenience. We will pass your exact requirements to the hotels in which you'll be staying, and in most cases, they will be able to accommodate your dietary requests. Unfortunately, we cannot give a blanket guarantee that the hotels will be able to meet all needs.

Q: If we have someone in our group who has special needs, can they come on the Coach Tour?

A: Passengers who may require special assistance must travel with a capable and qualified companion, as Exploring Vacations drivers and guides cannot provide help to individual special needs passengers. Also, our coaches are not wheelchair accessible, so all members of the tour group must be able to get up three or four steps to get into the coach. In any event, please let us know of any special needs group members at the time you make your booking.

Q: My spouse doesn't exactly travel light. How much luggage can we bring?

A: Exploring Vacations Coach Tours permit one piece of luggage per person. The handling of that piece of luggage, which should not exceed dimensions of 30 x 20 x 10 inches, is included in your tour price. All luggage is carried at the owner's risk for the duration of the tour, unless otherwise insured, and hand baggage and smaller items like laptops, tablets, cameras, cell phones, umbrellas and coats are always under the care of their owners.

Q: Are we supposed to tip the guide?

A: This is entirely at the passengers' discretion, though most do give something. Gratuities are not included in your package price.

Q: What if something comes up and we have to cancel our trip?

A: If you cancel your tour 70 days or more before your Coach Tour, you will forfeit your deposit. If you cancel between 46 and 69 days before the tour, the charge will be 25 percent per person for the total cost of the tour. Cancellation between eight and 45 days before the tour incurs a 35 percent per person charge, and for cancellation between one and seven days, the charge will be 50 percent per person. If you have to cancel on or after the day of departure, 100 percent of the cost of the tour will be forfeited. In any event, the minimum cancellation fee will be €35 per person.

Q: What if I have to cancel a Self Drive or Escorted Tour?

A: The full cancellation policy for all Exploring Ireland tours can be viewed here:
<http://www.exploringireland.net/why-exploringireland/terms-of-service/>

Q: What happens if my Coach Tour is cancelled by the operator?

A: In the unlikely event that it becomes necessary to cancel a coach tour prior to departure, Exploring Vacations will offer the next available date at no additional land cost. If this is not suitable, we will make a full refund of all monies paid. Unfortunately, we cannot accept responsibility for any additional costs or fees associated with cancellation fees or penalties for non-refundable airfares.

Q: I've booked an Escorted Tour. Where and when will I meet my driver/guide?

A: Your driver/guide will be waiting for you in the arrivals hall of whichever airport you land in. You'll see your name on a placard, and your new best friend will be with you throughout your tour. They will also take you back to the airport for your departing flight at the end of your tour.

Q: I've booked a Self Drive Tour. Where do I pick up my car?

A: Once your booking is complete, Exploring Vacations will send you all the documentation you need for your tour. Take the necessary documents to the car rental desk in the arrivals hall of whichever airport you've flown into, and in the blink of an eye, you'll be on your way!

Getting around

Is this your first visit to Europe? Why worry about driving in a foreign country with different road rules, signage, or even driving on the opposite side of the road (where the UK is concerned)? Wouldn't you rather have someone else do the driving so you can sit back and enjoy all the scenery while a person who knows the area tells you everything you need to know?

Regardless of your answers to the above questions, there's an option to suit your every whim. If you want to move entirely at your own pace, get off the beaten track and find your own magical corner of the world, you can

opt for a trip that blends local knowledge, true style and the opportunity to design every last detail of your vacation to your own, exacting specifications, with an Escorted Tour.

If you prefer a scheduled itinerary that lets you see the many highlights that these countries have to offer as part of a group of like-minded holidaymakers, choose one of our many coach tours.

Set your clocks

England, Ireland and Scotland all use Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). At the end of March, they also switch to daylight savings time, although this is not guaranteed to happen on the same date as in America. Iceland also uses GMT but does not partake in daylight savings. On the continent you'll need to move forward a few hours depending on where you are: Greece is GMT +3 hours, while France and Italy are +1 hour. Under normal circumstances, however, you will be a minimum of five hours ahead of the US east coast, six hours ahead of the central states and eight hours ahead of the west coast. Going the other way, GMT is eight hours behind the Far East and 10 hours behind Sydney, Australia.



EXPLORING VACATIONS

QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

IRELAND

Getting to Ireland

The world seems to be getting smaller all the time, but that's not a bad thing; it just makes it easier for you to pack your bags and come to Ireland! For example, did you realize that if you're in New York or Boston, you're actually closer (considerably closer!) to Dublin than you are to Los Angeles?

In the past, most flights from America stopped in Shannon, but the vast majority now fly directly into Dublin. The number of non-stop flights from American destinations has increased greatly over the past few years, with airlines like Delta, US Airways, American Airlines, United and of course our own Aer Lingus offering a wide selection of flights from an ever-increasing number of cities. And the best part is, when you're travelling home to America the pre-immigration service at Dublin Airport now includes pre-customs clearance as well. So no more collecting baggage and racing to meet your connecting flight – bliss!

If you're thinking of visiting us from Europe or the UK, you'll find that low cost airlines have made flights to Ireland less expensive than a meal in a good restaurant. Check online for prices from Aer Lingus and Ryanair, but look out for deals from other carriers, too. You could also consider using one of the car ferry companies, a number of which offer excellent packages for a car, driver and up to three additional passengers.

No visas are required for visitors from the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or any EU country; just bring your passport. All you have to do is go online, call your travel agent, and book that flight.

Hurry up; we can't wait to see you!



When's the best time to go?

The easiest way to answer that question (in typical Irish fashion) is to ask another one: When can you get here? It's fair to say that every season offers its own benefits, and if you're worried about arriving here and finding nothing to do...don't. That never happens in Ireland!

There is no 'bad' time to visit Ireland. Whether you prefer indoor or outdoor pursuits, you'll have plenty of options all year round. The climate is best described as 'moderate'; it never gets too hot, even at the peak of summer when temperatures seldom sneak over 80 degrees Fahrenheit (or 26 C). While snow isn't unheard of in this country, many parts of Ireland could go several winters without seeing the white stuff, and our grass stays green 12 months of the year.

Every season offers its own special advantages. In the summer, festivals, summer fairs and outdoor concerts abound on the island. The Irish sporting calendar is also in full swing; you can find golf tournaments (including PGA events), cycling races, horse racing and of course, the native sports of hurling and Gaelic football being fiercely contested at venues all across the country. At the height of summer, it stays light until 11pm and gets light again before 5am.

When August arrives, Irish music lovers the world over flock in their tens of thousands to whichever city is hosting the annual Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (pronounced Flah Kee-ole noch Erin), the all Ireland music championships. In 2015 the Fleadh is being held in Sligo, and in 2016 Ennis in county Clare looks like the best contender for this amazing week-long event, which sees Irish musicians aged from age 5 to 95 partake in an incredibly diverse array of song, dance and musical instrument competitions.

The onset of autumn sees the culmination of the sporting season, with whole counties 'going mad' if their teams are involved in the football or hurling finals. Such is the fervour of Irish sporting fans that it would not be unusual for some of them to spray paint their car—or even their entire house!—in their county's colours in the run-up to the championship game. This is perhaps all the more amazing when you consider that each and every team is made up entirely of amateur sportsmen. A county team could be made up of doctors, dentists, bartenders and builders, and unlike professional sports teams, each member of an Irish football or hurling team must hail from the county for which he or she plays (yes, they have women's teams, too).

Once the kids have gone back to school in September the roads open up and the countryside starts to explode in a beautiful array of vibrant colours. As the temperatures begin to drop, so too do the prices in even the finest hotels and the most charming bed and breakfast establishments. Autumn is a wonderful time to head west, kiss the Blarney Stone, take part in the not-to-be-missed Bunratty Medieval Banquet, explore the Aillwee caves or go hill walking and soak up the breathtaking scenery of Ireland's unique landscape. The Irish theatre scene goes into full swing, with both professional and fabulous amateur productions in venues from Donegal to Wexford. Speaking of Wexford, each year this seaside town in the Sunny Southeast plays host to the Wexford Opera Festival, one of the most famous in all of Europe.

During the winter months, some people opt to head to warmer climates...they don't know what they're missing! In every Irish city, town and village, you'll find a B&B, pub, hotel or even a castle with a roaring hot open fire and an even warmer welcome. Until you've snuggled up next to those crackling turf flames with a hot scone covered in lashings of Irish butter, locally produced strawberry



jam and a big dollop of fresh cream, along with a nice hot cup of Irish tea (or even better, an Irish coffee) ...well, you just haven't lived. It gets dark early, so head for the local pub and grab a bite to eat before the traditional music session (called *seisún* in Gaelic) gets underway, then sit back and listen to the local musicians lashing out jigs and reels on their fiddles, accordions and bodhrans (a uniquely Irish hand-held drum, pronounced bow-ron).

Winter is a great time to wander around Ireland at your leisure, when you'll find no shortage of low cost accommodation. You'll still have plenty to see and do, including plenty of outdoor sports and activities like fishing and golfing. The vast majority of Irish golf courses remain open all year round, and green fees are considerably lower in the winter.

Spring, regardless of what the scholars say, starts in March. Quite naturally, that most famous of all Irishmen, St. Patrick, draws lovers of all things Irish to these shores from around the world. If you are

lucky enough to be here on the 17th of March and you can make it to Dublin, you'll see arguably the world's best St. Patrick's Day parade winding its way through the bustling streets of Ireland's capital city. In Ireland, St. Patrick's is not just a single day; it's a multi-day festival with activities and festivals across the country. If you can't make it to Dublin, don't worry – parades are held in just about every town that has a pulse, and there isn't a hotel or pub in the country that won't be featuring special offers on food and drink, with a large helping of traditional Irish music thrown in for good measure.



What kind of clothes should I pack?

Regardless of what time of the year you decide to visit us, you should know that the only thing certain about the Irish weather is that there's nothing certain about the Irish weather! It could be cool in the morning and warm in the afternoon, or it could be quite pleasant at breakfast time, and then get blustery and showery after lunch.

Think layers—nothing too heavy - and things that are easy to take off and put on without much warning, especially if you plan to be outdoors a lot. Also, there's no point in denying it; you're going to need an umbrella and a raincoat. It rains on average more than 200 days of the year in Ireland (some Irish people would say, 'Is that all?'). In fact, there's an old joke about an Irish farmer talking to a tourist about the weather. The farmer points to a hill in the distance and says to the tourist, "See that hill over there? Well, if you can see that hill it means rain is coming." The tourist replies, "What if I can't see it?" to which the farmer states earnestly, "Then it's already raining!"

As a (very) general rule, daytime highs in the summer average about 60F/15C in the northern part of the country and about 70F/20C in the south. It stays cooler along the coast during the summer, and milder in the winter, when daytime highs average between 40F and 46F/5C to 8C. Spring and autumn temperatures fall somewhere between the other seasons, so you can see, Ireland never really suffers from extreme variations in temperature.

Currency

Republic of Ireland

The euro is the currency of the Republic of Ireland. One euro consists of 100 cent. Notes are €5, €10, €20, €50, €100, €200 and €500. Coins are 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c, 20c, 50c, €1 and €2.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the currency is sterling. One pound sterling consists of 100 pence. Notes are £5, £10, £20, £50 and £100. Coins are 1p, 2p, 5p, 10p, 20p, 50p, £1 and £2.

Credit Cards

Any credit cards that bear the Visa or MasterCard symbol will be widely accepted in Ireland. Visitors with other cards should ask in advance or check if the card is on display where they wish to use it. Credit cards are possibly the most secure and convenient method of paying for any purchases you may wish to make while in Ireland. They are particularly ideal for major purchases, and they let you withdraw cash from selected banks and ATMs.

ATMs are usually linked to international money systems such as Cirrus, Maestro or Plus. Bear in mind however that many transactions incur currency conversion fees, and credit cards can also incur substantial interest charges if you use them for cash advances.

Banks

Banking hours in Ireland generally speaking run from 10am to 4.30pm, from Monday to Friday. Some banks in the larger towns and cities may be open on Saturdays, but even in small towns and villages, ATM cash points can be found. Irish ATMs accept most credit and debit cards for cash withdrawals.

VAT and Tax Refunds

To be able to claim a tax refund, you must be a non-EU visitor to Ireland. Look for 'Tax-Free Shopping' signs in the windows of participating stores. The vast majority of souvenir shops and major retail outlets participate in the tax refund scheme. To get your (sales) tax refund—which currently runs at 23 percent on most Irish goods - you must complete a valid tax refund document obtained from the retailer and present the tax refund document and goods to the Customs desk or designated tax refund stand upon departure from the EU. A customs officer will check the goods and validate the tax refund document. You can receive your refund on the spot at some airports. If this isn't the case when you depart, mail the validated document to the specified address, and the refund will be issued, often in the form of a credit to your credit card.

Please note that refunds only apply to goods being taken out of the country, and not for any service charges incurred during your stay. In addition, VAT and tax refunds are not available to EU residents.



Embassies and Consulates

Irish Embassies and Consulates

Australia Embassy – Tel 02-6273-3022; E-mail irishemb@cyberone.com.au; 20 Arkana St., Yarramula, Canberra, ACT 2600

Canada Embassy – Tel 613-233-6281; E-mail ottawaembassy@dfa.ie; 130 Albert St., Suite 1105, Ottawa, Ontario K1- 5G4)

New Zealand Consulate – Tel 09-977-2256; E-mail consul@ireland.co.nz; Level 7, Citibank Bldg, 23 Customs Street East, Auckland

UK Embassy – Tel 020-7235-2171; 17 Grosvenor Pl, London SW1X 7HR

USA Embassy – Tel 202-462-3939; website www.irelandemb.org; 2234 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20008



Embassies and Consulates in Ireland

Australia Embassy – Tel 01-664-5300; Website www.australianembassy.ie; 2nd floor, Fitzwilton House, Wilton Tce, Dublin 2

Canada Embassy – Tel 01-417-4100; 4th floor, 65 – 68 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2

UK Embassy – Tel 01-205-3700; website www.britishembassy.ie; 29 Merrion Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

USA Embassy – Tel 01-668-8777, E-mail webmaster@state.gov; 42 Elgin Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

A taste of Ireland...delicious!

More than 150 years ago, people left Ireland in their millions because they couldn't get enough food when the potato crop failed. For most of the 20th century, when people thought of Irish food, they thought 'bacon and cabbage' or bland porridge. If you wanted a bite to eat with your pint of Guinness, the bartender could offer you a ham sandwich, a cheese sandwich, or in the more upmarket establishments, a ham and cheese sandwich.

Those days are long gone and good riddance! Irish food, made from the most natural of locally sourced ingredients, has become the envy of the culinary world. Pubs now serve meals that could easily have come from the finest of restaurants, and as for the restaurants themselves, the most difficult decision you'll have to make is which of the amazing beef, seafood, lamb or poultry main courses to choose.

Find a venue (there are many to choose from) that serves afternoon tea. You'll be presented with a multitude of hot, freshly baked scones and outrageously delicious pastries, scrumptious sandwiches and cakes that will leave you wondering if you'll even be bothered to eat dinner that night (don't worry, you will!).

To promote the produce of which they are so understandably proud, many farmers' markets have popped up all over the country. You can stroll around the different stands and see fresh fruits and vegetables that were still in the ground or on the vine the day before. Sample the delicious homemade cheeses and delight at the smell and taste of the loaves of Irish soda bread.



You can also check the following sources to catch up on what's new in the world of Irish food:

www.bestofbridgestone.com – extensive list of artisan producers, plus the best restaurants serving their produce.

www.irelandmarkets.com – a frequently updated list of local farmers markets

www.irishcheese.ie – the farmhouse cheese-makers association, with details of even the smallest dairy farmers producing their own brand of cheese

www.slowfoodireland.com – organisation supporting small producers, with details of social events promoting Irish food right across the country

When you're reading over the menu, look for local produce listed in the main courses. You'll find starters like Dublin Bay prawns and main courses like Wexford roast rib of beef. This signifies the pride the local farmers have in the produce they supply, and the confidence the restaurant or hotel has in the food they present to you.

Try Galway Bay oysters with Guinness—you just can't get more Irish than that! In Cork, try any of the locally produced ham. If you go to Kerry, you've got to try the lamb. Each area has its own specialty, so if you love your food, a trip around Ireland is a genuine gastronomic delight, just waiting to be experienced.

If you really want to impress the locals, study these different Irish foods. If you can tell your waiter or waitress that you know what's in these dishes, you'll immediately go up in their estimation.



Irish Food Glossary

Barmbrack: One of the few yeast leavened breads made in Ireland. This delicious fruited bread is normally associated as a Halloween treat, with little charms or rings wrapped in greaseproof paper and hidden inside the loaf.

Black Pudding: A thick sausage made from well-seasoned lard and oatmeal, with the addition of pig's blood. It is served sliced and fried, often with eggs. It used to be an accompaniment at supper but is increasingly seen on breakfast plates as part of a good old-fashioned Irish fry-up.

Boxty Bread: A flat round bread, marked in floury farls and made from mashed potatoes, flour, and buttermilk, and leavened with soda. Served hot with a goodly amount of Irish creamery butter, you might not bother looking at your main course.

Champ: Hot mashed potatoes served with a pool of melted butter. Each spoonful is dipped in the butter. Go on, enjoy yourself! You can diet when you get home.

Dublin Coddle: Traditional Saturday night supper in Dublin, this dish is said to prevent hangovers. It is made up of chunks of bacon and pork sausages, stewed with sliced onions and potatoes and seasoned with salt and pepper and served like a thick soup. It tastes as good as it smells.

Colcannon: Scottish dish of hot potatoes mashed with another well-cooked vegetable (frequently cabbage or turnips) and served with melted butter.

Corned Beef and Cabbage: Well, you'd be disappointed if it wasn't included somewhere in this guide. Pickled brisket is slowly simmered in water. Near the end of the cooking time, wedges of cabbage are added and everything is cooked till tender. The meat is then sliced and served with the cabbage wedges; the broth can be reserved to use as a soup base for another meal.

Crubeens: Pig's feet. The locals won't believe you knew what that one was!

White Puddings: A type of thick sausage made from well-seasoned oatmeal and lard boiled in sausage skins. Usually sliced, then breaded and fried before serving, white pudding is another staple of that wonderful meal known as the Irish fry-up.



What Ireland is made of...

If you travelled from the most northerly tip of the island in a straight line to the most southerly point, you would have gone 486 km (just 302 miles). It's an even shorter journey from east to west, at just 275 km, or 170 miles. In fact, it's a bizarre and little-known fact that no matter where you are in Ireland, you're less than 100 km from the sea!

Yet in that relatively small land mass, you will find an incredible variety of landscapes. To name but a few:

The Burren: Stretching across northern Co. Clare from the Atlantic coast to Kinvara in neighbouring Co. Galway, the Burren is a unique limestone landscape that was shaped underneath the mighty Atlantic Ocean millions of years ago, before rising to the surface after an enormous geological cataclysm. It is a tremendously bizarre place - hectares upon hectares of silvery limestone stretching across jagged hills and rocky valleys. And yet, in the summer the Burren comes to life in an explosion of colour, as exquisite and rare wildflowers bravely spring up from narrow fissures. One awestruck tourist staring out his car window described the Burren in hushed tones with this gem: "It's like God grabbed every rock he could hold in his hand and scattered them here."

You'll also find ancient burial chambers, medieval ruins and the incredible Ailwee Caves in this landscape that looks as though it belongs on a distant planet.

Bog lands: Over one-sixth of Ireland is covered by bogs, which is a type of natural wetland whose main characteristic is a thick mat of partially decomposed plant material and highly acidic water. The conditions for bog formation are abundant in some regions of the Northern Hemisphere, and



particularly in Ireland. In addition to being unique ecosystems, bogs have also been useful as a source of burnable fuel known as peat. For generations dating back as far as recorded history, Irishmen have been cutting peat into shapes like long bricks. They then stack them to dry before transporting them back home to be burned in the stove or open fireplace. Bogs start out as slow moving rivers.

Mountains: The topography of the island of Ireland features hilly, central lowland composed of limestone, surrounded by a broken border of coastal mountains. The mountain ranges vary greatly in geological structure; in the south, they're composed of ancient red sandstone, separated by limestone river valleys. The limestone valleys appear as deep green grooves that tend to run in an



east-west direction. Granite is the predominant material in the mountains of Galway, Mayo, and Donegal in the west and north-west, as well as in Counties Down and Wicklow on the east coast. A basalt plateau covers much of the north-east of the country.

The central plain, broken in places by low hills, is extensively covered with glacial deposits of clay and sand. This part of the country is heavily dotted with large areas of bog land, together with numerous lakes. The island has experienced at least two general glaciations. Throughout the country, ice-smoothed rock, mountain lakes, glacial valleys and deposits of sand, gravel and clay mark the passage of the giant icebergs that once covered this section of the globe.



Communications

If you bring an iPad, laptop, Kindle or any other kind of rechargeable device with you, please remember that Ireland uses 220v power and a 3-pin plug. This means the voltage is different to that in the US and Canada, and the plugs are different even to those used in the UK. However, this problem is easily sorted out - simply pick up a universal AC adaptor which will allow you to safely and easily recharge your electronic devices. You'll find them in all major airports and electrical stores. Once you arrive, you'll find that Wi-Fi coverage in Ireland has improved dramatically in recent years. The vast majority of hotels offer free Wi-Fi access to their guests, as do an increasing number of B&B's, coffee shops, restaurants and even pubs.

Mobile or cell phone coverage in Ireland has also greatly improved over the last decade. In fact, Ireland has a population of four million people, and a recent survey showed there are four million mobile phone devices being used in this country. Once you arrive in Ireland and have switched on your phone, it should link automatically, through global partnership agreements with your phone service provider, to one of Ireland's main providers. Vodafone and O2 are the most likely to link with your phone. Be aware that roaming charges in this country, while they have come down over the past few years due to European legislation, are still high. Consider purchasing a 'ready to go' (also known as pay as you go) phone from an Irish provider. Most come with free minutes as part of the purchase price, and this could save you considerable money if you plan to make even an average number of calls while you're here.

If you're calling Ireland from abroad, our international code is 353. Dial your own international access code, then 353, then the Irish area code (minus the 0) and the local number. For example, the area code in Dublin is 01, and local numbers all contain seven digits. Therefore, if you were dialling the Dublin number 765 4321 from abroad, you would dial your own international access code +353 1 765 4321.



Recommended travel literature if you're coming to Ireland

- Freewheeling Through Ireland – Edward Enfield
- Round Ireland with a Fridge – Tony Hawks
- A Ghost Upon Your Path – John McCarthy
- Jaywalking with the Irish – David Monagan

Best Irish movies ever made

- The Commitments (1991), directed by Alan Parker
- The Field (1990), directed by Jim Sheridan
- My Left Foot (1989), starring Daniel Day Lews, directed by Jim Sheridan
- The Quiet Man (1952), directed by John Ford
- Angela's Ashes (1999), directed by Alan Parker
- The Guard (2011), directed by John Michael McDonagh
- What Richard Did (2012), directed by Lenny Abrahamson
- Once (2006), directed by John Carney
- The Snapper (1993), directed by Stephen Frears
- The Butcher Boy (1992), directed by Neil Jordan

Best Irish novels ever written

- Ulysses -- James Joyce
- Dracula -- Bram Stoker
- The Importance of Being Earnest -- Oscan Wilde
- Gulliver's Travels -- Jonathan Swift

Best Irish albums of all time

- Achtung Baby (1991) – U2
- Astral Weeks (1968) – Van Morrison
- Live and Dangerous (1970) – Thin Lizzy
- The Joshua Tree (1987) – U2
- I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got (1990) – Sinéad O'Connor
- Everybody Else is Doing It, so Why Can't We? (1990) – The Cranberries
- If I Should Fall From Grace with God (1980) – The Pogues
- O (2003) – Damien Rice
- Hozier (2014) – Hozier
- Fitzcarraldo (1995) – The Frames

Why choose Ireland?

If you have to ask, it just shows that you've never been here. Ireland truly is a land with something for everyone. It doesn't matter if you're a surfing fanatic, a history buff, a whiskey connoisseur, a hill walker, mountain climber, sailor, golfer, cyclist, song writer, author, food critic, bird watcher, angler, honeymooner, amateur archaeologist, treasure seeker, thrill seeker, theatre buff, foodie, someone seeking long-lost relations or someone looking for a good time, quiet time, crazy time, down time or all of the above. In Ireland, you can find most of these things...before breakfast! Ireland is known as 'the land of saint and scholars' and this nation is lauded the world over for its welcoming nature, its charm, quick wit and unbridled enthusiasm for life. It's not for nothing we greet our visitors with the Gaelic phrase, 'Cead Mile Failte', which translates to 'a hundred thousand welcomes'. But don't take our word for it – come and see for yourself.



EXPLORING VACATIONS QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

ENGLAND

Getting to England

The most obvious way to get to England from most long-haul destinations is to fly directly to London. Non-stop flights to London operate from a huge number of cities, with the two largest airports in England being London Heathrow and London Gatwick. If you're flying in from Europe, you could also fly directly into London Luton, London Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham or Liverpool. The national carrier is British Airways, but the airlines that fly to London are almost as numerous as the visitors that arrive every day. As always, check with your travel agent, or online at websites such as Expedia, Travelocity, Flights.com and Orbitz.

England covers approximately two-thirds (central and southern) of the island of Great Britain. It is directly bordered by only two countries, both of which are members of the United Kingdom. Scotland is England's northern neighbour, and Wales borders England to the West. In addition, France is a mere 21 miles (33 km) across the English Channel, and the two countries are now effectively connected by the Channel Tunnel. If you're in the mood for breakfast in London followed by lunch in Paris, the train journey from Victoria Station in the centre of London, to the Gare du Nord in Paris, takes just two hours and 20 minutes. You can also reach a variety of English destinations by ferry.

So in short, getting to England couldn't be easier, whether you're travelling from elsewhere in the UK, from nearby EU countries, or even further afield. This country has international as well as domestic travel down to fine, efficient, smooth-running art – so don't ever mock its inhabitants for their never-ending love of queuing again!

Shakespeare's birth place



When's the best time to visit England?

The thing about England – honestly – is that it looks good all year round. The Christmas markets in the Cotswolds are as picture perfect as the breathtakingly beautiful wildflowers that bloom all summer long. The nightlife in London's Soho is as wild, crazy and wonderful in October as it is in June. The soccer fans in Liverpool, Manchester,

Birmingham and Newcastle scream just as loudly in the autumn rains as they do when the sun is shining in the springtime.

Even though the country is relatively small in geographical terms, the variations in terrain and the close proximity of the Atlantic Ocean mean you won't have to travel too far to find contrasting weather conditions. In spite of the fact that England is considerably more densely populated than any of the United States, when you get here, you will find a country made up mostly of rolling hills, with the Pennine Mountains to the north, the spectacularly picturesque area known as the Cotswolds in the Midlands, the wonderfully unspoiled Lake District and the mysterious, wind-swept Moors.

England even boasts the (arguably) second largest harbour in the world, which is located at Poole, on the south-central coast. Dotted around the coast, mostly to the south of the mainland, are a large number of relatively small islands which are considered part of England. The largest of these is the Isle of Wight, which covers 381 square kilometres (just more than 147 square miles). Interestingly enough, the island which boasts the largest population – Portsea Island, with 147,000 inhabitants – measures a mere 9.36 square miles in size.

As a general rule, England experiences four distinct seasons. It would not be unusual for temperatures to exceed 30 degrees Celsius (86 Fahrenheit) for many days in the summer, though the average high in the months of July and August is just under 21C (70F). In the south and east of England,

Berkeley Castle in the Cotswolds



those averages would be approximately two degrees higher. Likewise, in the winter, the country can experience temperatures which fall well below zero, but the average daytime low hovers just above freezing.

Unlike England's neighbours Ireland and Scotland, the weather tends to remain more stable during the day, making it easier to plan what to wear. If you plan to be here in the winter, pack warm sweaters; if you're visiting in the summer, bring T-shirts, shorts and light clothing, and for the

autumn and spring, it would be a good idea to throw some rain gear into the suitcase.

England is truly a holiday maker's dream, with something for everyone. London is every woman's shopping paradise, between the world-famous Harrod's Department Store, Oxford Street's innumerable high street stores, the boutiques of Knightsbridge and even Petticoat Lane (where a bustling street market can be found every Sunday) offering the latest fashion trends. The night life in London is legendary, and the musicals and plays in the West End will rival anything that New York's Broadway has to offer. Buckingham Palace is a must-see, and for the truly adventurous, catch the nightly 'Bus Trip to Murder', which is a guided bus tour of the sites where, in 1888, each of Jack the Ripper's victims were found, along with stops at allegedly haunted venues such as the Tower of London, where Sir Walter Raleigh's headless ghost has reportedly attempted to push unsuspecting guards down steep flights of stairs. The bus stops at what from the outside appears to be a magnificent example of Jacobean architecture, Charlton House in Greenwich. This is reportedly the most haunted house in the world, and the ghost of William Langhorne, the previous owner, is the only apparition ever to have been cited for rape. A contributor to this guide actually went on this tour with his wife. As they entered Charlton House, the wife asked, "Do you smell that? There's the strongest smell of lavender!" The contributor couldn't smell anything, but imagine both his and his wife's reaction once they got to the top of the stairs and the guide reported that many of the women who claimed they had been attacked by the ghost also reported that instants before the attack they noticed an incredibly strong smell...of lavender! Needless to say, the writer and his wife quickly left the building. When he heard what had happened, the driver told the couple that he could never bring himself to even go into Charlton House.

The truth is, there's no bad time to visit England - this country's magic never runs dry. No matter the time of day or time of year, if our countryside fails to win you over (impossible, by the way!), our cities certainly will. With more things to do, more places to see and more fun to be had than you could possibly cram into a dozen vacations, right now would be a good time to get started.

Charlton House, Greenwich...the most haunted house in the world?



What clothes should I pack?

England has been blessed with a temperate climate. That means that no matter what time of year you visit, you're unlikely to meet any extreme weather. Winter often sees light dustings of snow in places, but temperatures rarely stray too far below freezing. Spring has a good balance of sunshine, light rain and the occasional overcast afternoon. Summer, if you're lucky, has long sunny days, clear skies, and warm temperatures, while from September onwards evenings will get cooler and the rain clouds will appear again.

It may sound like common sense, but you should keep it in mind to pack for the season; bring some thick warm layers for winter, some lightweight, breezy items for summer, and something in between for spring and autumn. Unfortunately, in this part of the world it's just a fact of life that rain can happen at just about any time of year. So a rain jacket and an umbrella should be an essential addition to your suitcase – just in case!

If you're planning on checking out some hip London nightlife, bear in mind that many of the more upmarket establishments have a dress code; that means 'proper' shoes (i.e not flip flops, tennis shoes or anything similar) and no shorts or t-shirts for the most part. In other words, make an effort to dress nicely! If you're more of outdoorsy, adventurous type, then don't forget some hard-wearing, preferably waterproof hiking shoes, as well as a hat and sunglasses to keep the sun off your face (when it appears).

Currency

In England, the country's currency is sterling. One pound sterling (£1), consists of 100 pence. As of February, 2014, one pound was worth US \$1.50, \$1.86 Canadian dollars, \$1.89 Australian dollars, \$2.01 New Zealand dollars, €1.34 (euro), 1.31 Swiss francs and 5.65 Polish Zloty.

Sterling coin values are 1p, 2p, 5p, 10p, 20p, 50p, £1 and £2. A £5 coin is also minted but is intended as a commemorative coin and is not generally accepted by most retail outlets. Sterling notes come in £5, £10, £20, £50 and £100 varieties. Again, several notes of higher denominations are in circulation, but shops, hotels, bars and restaurants will be very hesitant about accepting them. It is also worth mentioning that the other UK countries produce their own coins and notes, which vary in appearance from those of England. However, the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland notes and coins will be perfectly acceptable in any English retail outlet. If your travel plans also include Ireland, however, or France, Germany, Spain, Italy or many other EU countries, you will need to convert your currency to euro.

Credit cards

Any credit cards that bear the Visa or MasterCard symbol will be widely accepted in England. Visitors with other cards should ask in advance or check if the card they wish to use is on display where they wish to use it. Credit cards are possibly the most secure and convenient method of paying for any purchases you may wish to make while abroad. They are particularly ideal for major purchases, and they let you withdraw cash from selected banks and ATMs.

ATMs are usually linked to international money systems such as Cirrus, Maestro or Plus.

Bear in mind, though, that many transactions incur currency conversion fees, and credit cards can also incur substantial interest charges if you use them for cash advances.



Banks

Standard banking hours in England are from 9.00 or 9.30am to 3.30 or 4.00pm, Monday to Friday. Some banks will stay open until 5.30pm or later one evening per week, and many are now opening on Saturday mornings, from 9.00 or 9.30am until lunchtime. For the most part, banks stay open during lunch.

VAT and Tax

You are eligible for tax free shopping if you are a resident of a non-EU country and are travelling back home after visiting the UK. That means the VAT normally added to products and services will be refunded to you when you're departing. However, the drawback is that not all retailers participate in the scheme (it's at their own discretion, not the law's), and you can only get VAT refunds for goods bought within the last 3 months. So if you're planning a long stay, you may not be entitled to any refunds. Refunds are not applicable to service charges, goods already opened and used, goods that need an export licence (excluding antiques), unmounted gemstones, and certain more specific items such as boats and cars!

To get your VAT refunded, ask for a VAT 407 form when purchasing the goods – you may be required to show proof of eligibility (i.e. your passport or other proof of nationality). Fill out the form and when you arrive at customs when leaving the UK, show the goods and the completed forms. You can receive your refund at the customs booth of the airport or in some cases from the retailer, who will process the refund for you.

Embassies

English Embassies and Consulates

Australia Embassy - Tel +61 (0)2 6270 6666, Email australia.enquiries@fco.gov.uk; Commonwealth Avenue, Yarralumla, Canberra

Canada Embassy - Tel +1 416 593 1290, Email britcon.toronto@fco.gov.uk; 777 Bay Street, Suite 2800, Toronto, Ontario M5G 2G2

Ireland Embassy - Tel +353 (1) 205 2700, www.gov.uk/government/world/ireland; 29 Merrion Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

New Zealand Embassy - Tel +64 (0)4 924 2888, www.gov.uk/government/world/new-zealand; 44 Hill Street, Thorndon, Wellington 6011

USA Embassy - Tel +1 202 588 6500, Email britishembassyenquiries@gmail.com; 3100 Massachusetts Avenue, Washington DC 20008

Embassies and Consulates in England

USA Embassy - Tel +44 (0)20 7499 9000, <http://london.usaembassy.gov>; 24 Grosvenor Square, London W1A 2LQ

Canada Embassy - Tel +44 (0)20 7004 6000, <http://canada.embassyhomepage.com>; Canada House, 1 Trafalgar Square, London SW1Y 5BJ

Australia Embassy - Tel +44 (0)20 7379 4334, Email consular.lhlh@dfat.gov.au; Australia House, Strand, London WC2B 4LA

New Zealand Embassy - Tel +44 (0)20 7930 8422, Email aboutnz@newzealandhc.org.uk; New Zealand House, 80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TQ

Ireland Embassy - Tel +44 (0)20 7235 2171, www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/great-britain, 17 Grosvenor Place, London SW1X 7HR



Anne Hathaway's cottage, Shottery, England

A Taste of England

Mealtimes are an institution in England, and English food has long traditions associated with it stretching as far back as medieval times and beyond. This country favours meat, potatoes, fresh country vegetables and boatloads of gravy for its dinners, followed by gloriously gooey and messy desserts - along with perfectly springy sponge cakes - all washed down with multiple cups of proper English tea. Around 70 (yes 70) per cent of England's land is used for agriculture, from growing crops, fruits and vegetables to breeding cattle and everything in between. Whatever part of the country you find yourself in, you'll never be far away from some fresh, locally grown produce. Get ready to loosen your belts!

There are certain quintessentially English meals that you should most definitely try before you leave; in fact it's almost a crime if you don't! Portions for each one are abnormally large, so you may find it challenging to fit them all in to one day (all the more reason to extend your stay a while longer). But then, they're each so succulent and tasty that you may want to try anyway.

Start off your day with a Full English Breakfast. Like it's Irish counterpart, this is basically a feast of meat on a plate. Sausages, bacon, eggs (fried, scrambled, or any way you like them), beans, white pudding, grilled tomatoes, mushrooms, toast with butter, and hash browns (fried potato cakes) all have a place on your massive dinner plate, and don't forget the obligatory mug of tea to go with it. Various side dishes also accompany this 'fry-up' in different regions; hog's pudding in Cornwall, or oat cakes in the North Midlands, for example. If that all sounds like too much for breakfast, don't worry; plenty of restaurants offer it as an 'all day breakfast' from morning to evening.



Lunchtime on Sundays in England are traditionally associated with roast dinners. As you may have guessed, everything in this meal is roasted - leaving the cook free to have a lazy afternoon knowing everything is being roasted to perfection in one big oven. The practice originated several centuries ago when devout church-goers celebrated the Lord's day with a slap up meal with all the trimmings. During the week they would likely have kept any frivolity to a minimum, especially on Fridays when most people kept away from anything except fish. Sunday roasts usually consist of beef or lamb, potatoes, vegetables such as carrots, brussel sprouts, broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, a generous helping of gravy, and a yorkshire pudding on the side.



Afternoon Tea is next on the list, and is particularly enjoyable in between the monster meals of a full English breakfast and a Sunday roast. As well as the compulsory steaming teapot, indulge in sweet cakes, pastries, tarts, and scones, with a dollop of fresh cream on top of everything. It all comes on dainty tiered cake trays that make everything look almost too pretty to eat.

If you still haven't had your fill, the last essential English

eat is fish and chips. From fancy gourmet versions in top class restaurants to the glorious greasy take away chip shop incarnation, fish and chips are everywhere and simply must be tried. The closer you are to the sea, the better the quality is likely to be. Squeeze some lemon juice on the batter of your humongous portion of fish, spread a little tartar sauce on top, and get a small tub of mushy peas to go with your crispy golden chips (it's important to eat your greens after all). Enjoy!

English food glossary

Yorkshire Pudding: An essential part of the traditional Sunday Roast, a Yorkshire Pudding is a crispy on the outside, doughy on the inside pastry made from a batter of eggs, flour and milk. Just what you need to soak up your gravy.

Toad in the Hole: A Yorkshire Pudding crust filled with sausages, vegetables and onion gravy. Mouth watering, to say the least.

Bubble and Squeak: Made with leftovers of a roast (most commonly potatoes and brussel sprouts, but everyone has their own variations), bubble and squeak consists of mashed up vegetables fried in a pan until brown on both sides. Simple but surprisingly tasty!

Beef Wellington: Beef wellington is steak like you've never had it before. Coated with pate, wrapped in puff pastry and baked to perfection so it's brown on the outside and pink in the middle.

Cornish Pasty: A staple snack originating in Cornwall, melt in the mouth pastry is filled with beef, swede, potato and onion, folded into a D-shape and crimped on one side. Finding the best one is a rite of passage if you find yourself in the Cornwall area.

Bangers and Mash: Another simple but eternally popular dish, bangers and mash is merely a healthy dollop of creamy mashed potato, topped with some thick sausages and smothered in gravy. Trust us, it's damn good.

Cottage Pie: Comfort food at its finest. Cottage pie is a steaming layer of minced beef, gravy, carrots, onions, peas, and any other vegetables that tickle your fancy, topped with a thick layer of mashed potato and put in the oven until crispy on top.

Jellied Eels: If you're feeling brave, try this delicacy of chopped eels that have been boiled in stock and allowed to cool and set, forming a jelly. Traditionally eaten cold, this dish originated in East London.

Trifle: This glutinous dessert is made in one huge bowl, layered with custard, fruit, sponge cake soaked in sherry, jelly, and whipped cream. Be warned; it gets messy!

Spotted Dick: Despite what you may think given the name, this is in fact a tasty dessert! Made from dried fruit and suet pastry and rolled up into a circular pudding shape, try it with custard to make it extra tasty.

What England is made of



In the history of the world to date, it is virtually impossible to think of any country that has had a greater impact on the development of civilization as we know it today than a certain small island situated at the north-eastern edge of the Atlantic. This nation has no physical attachment to mainland Europe, yet it has been influential beyond measurement in European affairs, both past and present. Today, the younger members of the Royal Family attract pop star status, while the head of the family (and the country itself) commands global respect, even though she has no power to create or implement legislation, declare war or increase taxes.

This country, of course, is England; a nation no greater in geographical size than Alabama (the mainland measures just 130,395 square kilometres, or approximately 50,000 square miles). England is less than one-third the size of California, yet its population (53 million) exceeds that of America's most densely populated state by some 15 million people. Of course, England had something of a head start in getting its population boom started. The first recorded California Mission was established in 1769, near what is now San Diego. London on the other hand, was founded in 43AD!

The list of historical figures hailing from England is far too long to list here. Where would you even begin? Shakespeare, Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, Sir Isaac Newton, The Beatles, David Beckham, Lady Diana, Charles Dickens and Admiral Horatio Nelson are all English names most residents of the civilized world would recognize. What about Isambard Brunel, the creator of the Great Western Railway? Then there's Alfred the Great, who defeated the Vikings in 896 and effectively became the first King of England. Did you know that both the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy claim Alfred the Great as their founder?



The true beauty of England today, for the 30 million people who visit here each year, is that the English have mastered the art of preserving their history, their heritage, their culture and the sites and scenery that have all played their roles in the country's true greatness. In addition, England has an uncanny knack of presenting its history in a modern, upbeat, 'today' kind of way that both attracts and entralls people of all ages. Whether you're visiting Shakespeare's home in Stratford-upon-Avon, taking in a London West End Theatre production like Phantom of the Opera or hill walking one of the hundreds of graded and marked trails in the spectacular Pennines, you'll find that life in each place moves at exactly the right pace, providing the perfect blend of energy and tranquillity.

Without question, England is immensely proud of its place in world history, of its breathtaking countryside, of its immense natural and human resources...and rightly so. These treasures are protected, nurtured and preserved, and they are presented to visitors in the same way an immensely proud grandparent would present their newest grandchild to adoring friends and neighbours. There's only one way to discover what England is truly made of however – hop on a plane, train, boat, or even bike and see it for yourself!





Communications

England is well equipped to cater for overseas visitors, and whatever you need to make your phone (as well as all of your other technological devices) stay up and running over here can be easily found. In the cities, wifi coverage is more or less ubiquitous, and often free in hotels, restaurants, libraries and other public spaces. Out in rural areas coverage can sometimes be patchy and your connection may be slower, but at the very least you should be able to do basic tasks like email and web browsing in all but the most remote and isolated areas. The same goes for mobile or cell phone coverage. The main networks are Vodafone, Orange and Virgin Mobile, and if your phone has roaming capabilities (as almost all do these days) it should automatically connect to one of the three when you get off the plane. If you plan on making a lot of calls, consider buying a pre-pay sim card when you arrive. Simply pop the sim into your phone - ask a store assistant for one compatible with your network - add some credit online or in the store, and talk to your heart's content while avoiding roaming charges.

The dialling code for Britain is +44, and there is an additional regional code which differs depending on what city or county you are in - in London the city code is (0)20, and in the majority of cases you will need to dial the additional 0. If you're calling abroad from the UK, simply dial 00, then the code of the country you're calling, and then the number.

England used a rectangular three-pronged plug with a residential voltage of 230v and a frequency of 50Hz. So unless you're travelling from Ireland (and even then it's not 100% guaranteed that your devices will work) you'll need an adapter. Luckily, you can find them in literally every airport, large department store, and plenty of supermarkets, pharmacies and the like too.

Essential travel literature for England

- As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning – Laurie Lee
- Notes From a Small Island – Bill Bryson
- Rolling Through the Isles: A Journey Back Down the Roads that Led to Jupiter – Ted Simon
- Lonely Planet England – David Else, Belinda Dixon, Neil Wilson, et al.
- England's 100 Best Views – Simon Jenkins

Essential English movies

- Withnail and I (1987), directed by Bruce Robinson
- The Railway Children (1970), directed by Lionel Jeffries
- This is England (2006), directed by Shane Meadows
- Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994), directed by Mike Newell
- Monthly Python's Life of Brian (1979), directed by Terry Jones
- A Clockwork Orange (1971), directed by Stanley Kubrick
- Get Carter (1971), directed by Mike Hodges
- Trainspotting (1996), directed by Danny Boyle
- Kes (1969), directed by Ken Loach
- Hot Fuzz (2007), directed by Edgar Wright

Essential English novels

- Pride and Prejudice – Jane Austen
- Wuthering Heights – Emily Bronte
- A Tale of Two Cities – Charles Dickens
- Harry Potter series – JK Rowling
- Lord of the Rings trilogy – JRR Tolkein
- The Hound of the Baskervilles – Arthur Conan Doyle

Essential English albums

- Parklife (1994) - Blur
- Definitely Maybe (1994) - Oasis
- Back to Black (2006) - Amy Winehouse
- Rumours (1977) - Fleetwood Mac
- Lionheart (1978) - Kate Bush
- Goodbye Yellow Brick Road (1973) - Elton John
- A Night at the Opera (1975) - Queen
- Who's Next (1971) - The Who
- Pablo Honey (1993) - Radiohead
- Abbey Road (1969) - The Beatles

Why choose England?

Why would you sit down and read a history book when you can actually go and see history come alive; when you can touch it, feel its powerful attraction; when you can hear the whispers of Wordsworth and Dickens blowing on the breeze in a fragrant, brightly coloured meadow instead of staring up at you from dusty black-and-white pages?

Don't just read the legends of King Arthur, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I or Winston Churchill. Come and truly experience the places, the events, the surroundings and spirit that moulded these giants of history into the people they became.

On the other hand, you could just come and have the time of your life, cycling along mountain trails, golfing at Royal St. George's or Sunningdale, ambling through the Cotswold village of Lower Slaughter (delightful despite the name), walking in the Pennines, strolling along the pier at Blackpool...the fact is, you'll never, ever run out of places to go and things to do in England.

Don't just read history...live it in England.



EXPLORING VACATIONS QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE SCOTLAND

Getting to Scotland

There may have been a great wall dividing Scotland from the rest of the UK mainland several centuries ago, but thankfully that's all changed now! It's never been easier to cross over from England to Scotland and back again thanks to extensive high quality roadways and motorways; in fact, a road trip up the island from bottom to top (or top to bottom) is possibly one of the best ways to see the country.

If you're travelling from Ireland, Scandinavia or mainland Europe, you're just a short flight away too. More and more low cost airlines are flying direct from Scotland's two metropolises, Glasgow



and Edinburgh, to destinations all over Europe at highly competitive prices. The four main international airports in Scotland are Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Glasgow Prestwick. While some airlines offer direct flights from Scotland to the USA or Canada, London is usually the main long-haul transport hub.

This nation, with its 700 islands, is naturally equipped for sea travel too. You can catch car and passenger ferries across the water in Northern Ireland at Belfast and Larne, or even from Belgium to get here. In recent years ferry links have also been established with ports in

Scandinavia such as Denmark, Norway and Iceland. You can even catch the Eurostar train in Paris, change over in London, and arrive in Edinburgh in just eight hours. There are also plenty of rail and bus options from all over the UK too for those so inclined – bus is often the cheaper of the two.

When's the best time to go?

The good news is that Scotland looks beautiful at any time of year. With its dramatic hills, craggy cliffs, rugged coastline and sweeping fields, it's hard not to be captivated by this mystical landscape. Whether it's drenched in sunshine, covered in a thick blanket of fluffy white snow, shrouded in mist or being pelted with raindrops from a foreboding grey sky, Scotland never fails to bowl people over; and we haven't even started talking about the people or attractions yet.

The bad news however, is that Scotland has clearly defined tourist seasons. From April to September visitors flock to this stunning nation, with the most crowded months being July and August. This is no bad thing however; the cities have an even more vibrant atmosphere than usual and there's a wealth of choice when it comes to things to do. Outside of these times, particularly in the dreary winter months, certain things close up shop and transport can become somewhat more difficult, particularly in the more rural areas. The upside of this, however, is that you'll have the place more or less to yourself and finding accommodation will be no problem whatsoever.

No matter what the time of year is, however, one thing always remains the same – the Scots' love of a good hootenanny! The year kicks off in style with Hogmanay, a New Years celebration like no other that puts the ball drop in Times Square to shame – it lasts for four days for a start! This fun filled night with fireworks, dancing, street performers and plenty of food and drink is the best way to experience what Scotland is all about. The traditional torchlit processions along the city streets is a sight to behold too.

A few weeks later is Burns night, a night of traditional food and drink in honour of the legendary Scottish poet Robert Burns. Naturally, readings of his works form a central part of the festivities too. The traditional Burns Supper that goes along with it is the perfect opportunity to try out some of the more famous national dishes; haggis and neeps and tatties are always on the menu.

In April/May there's Beltane, a modern version of an ancient Celtic fire festival (known as Bealtaine in Ireland) that takes place in the picturesque setting of Calton Hill in Edinburgh, overlooking the entire city. Celebrating the arrival of summer, this atmospheric night of bonfires, drums and reenacting pagan rituals is not to be missed. August however is the jewel in the crown of Scotland's events calendar; the Edinburgh festival (or Edinburgh Fringe) is a month long celebration of the arts, with events all day every day of all types; dance performances, stand up comedy, theatre, music concerts, you name it – Fringe has it. This event draws performers and visitors alike from all over the world, and is the place to be if you want to find the next big talent in any field before they hit the big time. Some heavy hitters from all creative industries regularly turn up for the festival too, both to perform and to watch. But apart from all that, the celebrations that take place are especially vigorous and vibrant too!

Sports fans, particularly football and rugby aficionados, will no doubt want to be around when the main seasons of both kick off. For rugby, the Six Nations tournament between Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, France and Italy begins in February and is always hotly contested. Football is arguably the more popular sport in these parts however, with unbelievably tense rivalry between certain teams. A word of advice; don't wear any football jerseys out in public – at best it will cause fierce debates and at worst, possibly a punch or two!

For outdoorsy types, the best weather is often had in May, June or September, with the least rainfall and most sunshine normally falling during those months. Temperatures are often forgiving too, hovering around the 20C mark. If you're more partial to cosy pub corners and a 'dram' or too, there's no harm in choosing a different time, when the rain and wind won't make you feel so guilty for sitting inside on a nice day!



What kind of clothes should I bring?

The answer to that question depends on where you want to go and what you want to do during your time here. Hiking boots and all-weather clothing are a must if you plan on getting up close and personal with the fantastic natural landscapes of Scotland. A waterproof layer is also a must if you're heading towards the north of the country, which has the highest rainfall levels in the UK (often up to 3000mm a year) – don't forget the wellies!

People often don't realise how far north Scotland really is; it actually lies on the same latitude as Labrador in Canada, so needless to say the weather is somewhat more extreme than in England or Ireland. Snow is common, and often inevitable, during winter months on higher ground. Summer usually brings nice warm temperatures but with its heavy intermittent rain showers. Spring and Autumn are hit and miss, usually with mild temperatures and alternating overcast and sunny days.

Scots are much more laid back than their English counterparts when it comes to dress codes. You can more or less get away with wearing anything in most places – in fact being too 'dressed up' may

cause some teasing in certain places! That said, it's always a good idea to be respectful and make some sort of effort to dress appropriately for the situation.

Layers are also a good idea due to the changeable nature of Scottish weather; pack some lightweight and portable items that you can put on or strip off as the day progresses. An umbrella, some sunscreen, and some thermals (for October to March) are also worth having just in case of a worst – or best, depending on how you look at it - case scenario.

Gairloch Beach, Scotland



Currency

In Scotland, the country's currency is sterling. One pound sterling (£1), consists of 100 pence. As of February, 2014, one pound was worth US \$1.50, \$1.86 Canadian dollars, \$1.89 Australian dollars, \$2.01 New Zealand dollars, €1.34 (euro), 1.31 Swiss francs and 5.65 Polish Zloty.

Sterling coin values are 1p, 2p, 5p, 10p, 20p, 50p, £1 and £2. A £5 coin is also minted but is intended as a commemorative coin and is not generally accepted by most retail outlets. Sterling notes come in £5, £10, £20, £50 and £100 varieties. Again, several notes of higher denominations are in circulation, but shops, hotels, bars and restaurants will be very hesitant about accepting them. It is also worth mentioning that the other UK countries produce their own coins and notes, which vary in appearance. Don't worry though; English, Welsh and Northern Ireland notes and coins will be perfectly acceptable in any Scottish retail outlet. If your travel plans also include Ireland, however, or France, Germany, Spain, Italy or many other EU countries, you will need to convert your currency to euro.

Credit Cards

Any credit cards that bear the Visa or MasterCard symbol will be widely accepted in Scotland. Visitors with other cards should ask in advance or check if the card they wish to use is on display where they wish to use it. Credit cards are possibly the most secure and convenient method of paying for any purchases you may wish to make while abroad. They are particularly ideal for major purchases, and they let you withdraw cash from selected banks and ATMs.

ATMs are usually linked to international money systems such as Cirrus, Maestro or Plus.

Bear in mind, though, that many transactions incur currency conversion fees, and credit cards can also incur substantial interest charges if you use them for cash advances.



Banks

Standard banking hours in Scotland are from 9.00 or 9.30am to 4.00pm, Monday to Friday. Some banks will stay open until 5.30pm or later one evening per week (usually Thursdays), and many are now opening on Saturday mornings, from 9.00 or 9.30am until lunchtime. For the most part, banks stay open during lunch. You can withdraw money from ATMs all over the country at any time.

VAT & Tax

You are eligible for tax free shopping if you are a resident of a non-EU country and are travelling back home after visiting the UK. That means the VAT normally added to products and services will be refunded to you when you're departing. However, the drawback is that not all retailers participate

in the scheme (it's at their own discretion, not the law), and you can only get VAT refunds for goods bought within the last 3 months. So if you're planning a long stay, you may not be entitled to any refunds. Refunds are not applicable to service charges, goods already opened and used, goods that need an export licence (excluding antiques), unmounted gemstones, and certain more specific items such as boats and cars!

To get your VAT refunded, ask for a VAT 407 form when purchasing the goods – you may be required to show proof of eligibility (i.e. your passport or other proof of nationality). Fill out the form and when you arrive at customs when leaving the UK, show the goods and the completed forms. You can receive your refund at the customs booth of the airport or in some cases back to the retailer who will process the refund for you.



Embassies and Consulates

Diplomatic and foreign affairs for Scotland both on home turf and abroad are handled by the British embassies, whose contact information you will find in the England section of this guide. However, here are some honorary consulates within Scotland that can provide a limited amount of diplomatic services:

Embassies and Consulates in Scotland

Honorary Consul of Canada - Tel 07702 359 916, email canada.consul@blueyonder.co.uk; Bruntsfield, Edinburgh

Irish Consulate - Tel 0131 226 7711; 16 Randolph Crescent, Edinburgh, EH3 7HA

USA Consulate - Tel 0131 556 8315, email edinburgh-info@state.gov; 3 Regent Terrace, Edinburgh, EH7 5BW

A taste of Scotland

Scots love food, and are intensely proud of their national dishes – as you will quickly realise if you stay here long enough to have a meal. The snowy winters have made them experts in warm, filling, comfort food and the spring/summer seasons bring fruits and vegetables fresh from the fields. Although not exactly known as a refined gastronomic nation, there's still plenty of places where you can try top quality food made by world class chefs all over the country, often with a traditional Scottish twist.

You may have heard that Scotland has a certain reputation for heart attack inducing snacks, and to some extent, it's true. Revelers flock to 'chippers', kebab shops and take away restaurants after the pubs close their doors to satisfy their grumbling stomachs with all manner of creative snacks, including the infamous deep fried mars bar (for the record, you can also opt for rice krispie squares, bounty bars, crème eggs, and various other chocolatey treats if mars bars don't tickle your fancy). Although they may sound horribly unhealthy, they're 10 times more tasty than you can ever imagine, and simply must be tried – remember it's more or less illegal to diet when you're on vacation!

The single most important taste of Scotland however is the nation's national tipple; whisky. This little land produces several hundred brands of whisky, each one more flavoursome than the last. Many people compare Scotland's whiskey distilling skills to that of the vineyards and wines of the French. There are over 100 distilleries in Scotland, with four main regions characterised by the distinct flavours and techniques used by each. The Highlands is the most prolific region with a smooth and floral flavour; next is the Lowlands, with more palatable, fresh flavours; Speyside in north-east Scotland produces whiskies with a fruity, delicate taste, while Islay distilleries are well known for their smoky, peaty aromas. A visit to a distillery should be at the top of your to-do list on your visit to Scotland; if you're not interested to learn the craft of how the drink is made, then at least enjoy the free tasting on offer at most places afterwards.

It's not all about alcohol and deep fried snacks, however; Scotland has a burgeoning reputation for excellent seafood, and with so many miles of coastline it's not difficult to see why. If you're visiting any coastal areas, look for fresh oysters, scallops, langoustines, smoked kippers, or the perennial favourite, a good old serving of fish and chips. Wash it all down with a dram of whiskey or a pint or two of authentic Scottish craft beer.



Scottish Food Glossary

Haggis: Haggis is the dish most people associate with Scotland, whilst grimacing! Yes, it's ingredients may not sound too appetising - sheep's heart, liver and lungs mixed with onion, suet, oatmeal and spices, wrapped up and boiled in the animal's stomach - but it's an institution, and you have to try it at least once.

Neeps and tatties: This is the quirky Scottish name given to a fairly simple side dish; swedes and potatoes mashed and fried up in a pan. These are the traditional accompaniment to haggis.

Rumbledethumps: Common along the border regions of Scotland, rumbledethumps is basically the Scots' version of English bubble and squeak or Irish colcannon. Sautée some onions and cabbage, add mashed potato, sprinkle cheddar cheese on top and bake it in the oven.

Shortbread: Shortbread is a deliciously addictive biscuit made with butter, sugar and flour. Traditionally cut into either wedges or rectangular 'fingers', you'll find it impossible not to eat more than one of these sweet treats.

Dundee cake: This rich fruit cake is made with currants, sultanas and almonds. Allegedly it was first created for Mary Queen of Scots, and since she wasn't fond of glace cherries, almonds were substituted instead.

Cullen skink: Originating from the north east, this thick seafood soup is a common starter at formal dinners in Scotland. Traditionally made using smoked haddock, potatoes and onions, when eaten with a fresh warm bread roll it's nothing short of heaven in a bowl.

Scotch pie: The best example of comfort food ever to come out of Scotland, Scotch pie is double crusted and filled to bursting with meat. Often found with a depression or hole on top so you can add your own accompaniments like beans, peas, or gravy.

Stovies: Scotland's version of a good old fashioned stew, this is a dish with potatoes and whatever meat and vegetables you fancy. For a truly authentic, heart-attack inducing version, slow cook the potatoes in fat and stock.

Pan drops: Otherwise known as 'scotch mints', these are just what you'd expect - Scottish mints! These white round candies have a hard shell and a soft chewy centre, just what you need to freshen up your breath after a helping of haggis.

Crowdie: Crowdie is Scottish cream cheese, often accompanied by oat cakes. Soft and crumbly in texture, it is recommended to eat before ceilidh-ing and is said to reduce the effects of whiskey - but don't believe everything you read!

What Scotland is made of

Finding another country that has everything Scotland has to offer is no easy task. Where else can you find sloping hills, flat meadows full of purple heather, rocky coastlines, golden beaches, awe inspiring mountains, medieval cities, the best arts festivals on the planet, the best parties on the planet, the best whisky on the planet, and some of the most welcoming and friendly people you'll ever meet? Only in Scotland, that's where.

To the unfamiliar, Scotland may seem like just another version of England, but the truth is they couldn't be more different (despite the shared border). In fact if you even suggest such a thing, you're likely to cause extreme offence. Scotland's culture and heritage is firmly rooted in the traditions of the Celts, the land's first significant inhabitants. Scotland has its own Gaelic dialect, its own traditional dress, a rich and diverse history, and its own parliament – they even held a vote for independence from Britain in 2014 which was defeated by a narrow margin and had a record number of voters. Scots are extremely proud of their distinct culture and many make a point of identifying themselves as Scottish rather than British – so take care if you decide to embark on any politics talk!

Scotland has a long history of significant world accomplishments. Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin and started the antibiotic revolution in medicine, John Logie Baird, the inventor of television, and Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone were all proud Scots. In the world of arts, just a few Scottish legends include Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, modern-day actors Ewan McGregor and Sean Connery, and in the world of sports, current tennis champion Andy Murray.

Scotland is also a land of contrasts; the Highlands in the north are filled with mountains, lakes, dramatic and breathtaking views, while the Lowlands in the south have flat lands with rolling hills, farmlands and meadows. The coast is another thing entirely; thousands of miles long and with over 700 islands, countless inlets, rocky crags and cliffs. Scottish people have a reputation for being 'dour' or unemotional and unfriendly, but the contrasting truth is that you couldn't meet a nation of more welcoming folk, who love to laugh, party, and have a good time. In short, Scotland has it all!



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Loch Ness



Essential travel literature

- Stone voices: The Search for Scotland (2002) - Neal Ascherson
- Adrift in Caledonia: Boat-hitching for the Unenlightened (2006) - Nick Thorpe
- Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides (1785) - James Boswell
- Ring of Bright Water (1960) - Gain Maxwell

Essential Scottish novels

- Trainspotting (1993) - Irvine Welsh
- Scotland Street (2005) - Alexander McCall Smith
- The Bridge (1986) - Iain Banks
- Waverley (1814) - Walter Scott
- Black and Blue (1997) - Ian Rankin
- Lanark: A Life in Four Books (1981) - Alasdair Gray
- Docherty (1975) - William McIlvanney

Essential Scottish movies

- Braveheart (1995) - directed by Mel Gibson
- Gregory's Girl (1991) - directed by Bill Forsyth
- Ratcatcher (1999) - directed by Lynne Ramsay
- The Wicker Man (1973) - directed by Neil LaBute
- Local Hero (1983) - directed by Bill Forsyth
- Sweet Sixteen (2003) - directed by Ken Loach

Essential Scottish music

- If You're Feeling Sinister - Belle and Sebastian (1996)
- Psychocandy - The Jesus and Mary Chain (1985)
- New Gold Dream - Simple Minds (1982)
- The Man Who - Travis (1999)
- Franz Ferdinand - Franz Ferdinand (2004)
- The Bones of What You Believe - Chvrches (2013)
- The Vertigo of Bliss (2003) - Biffy Clyro

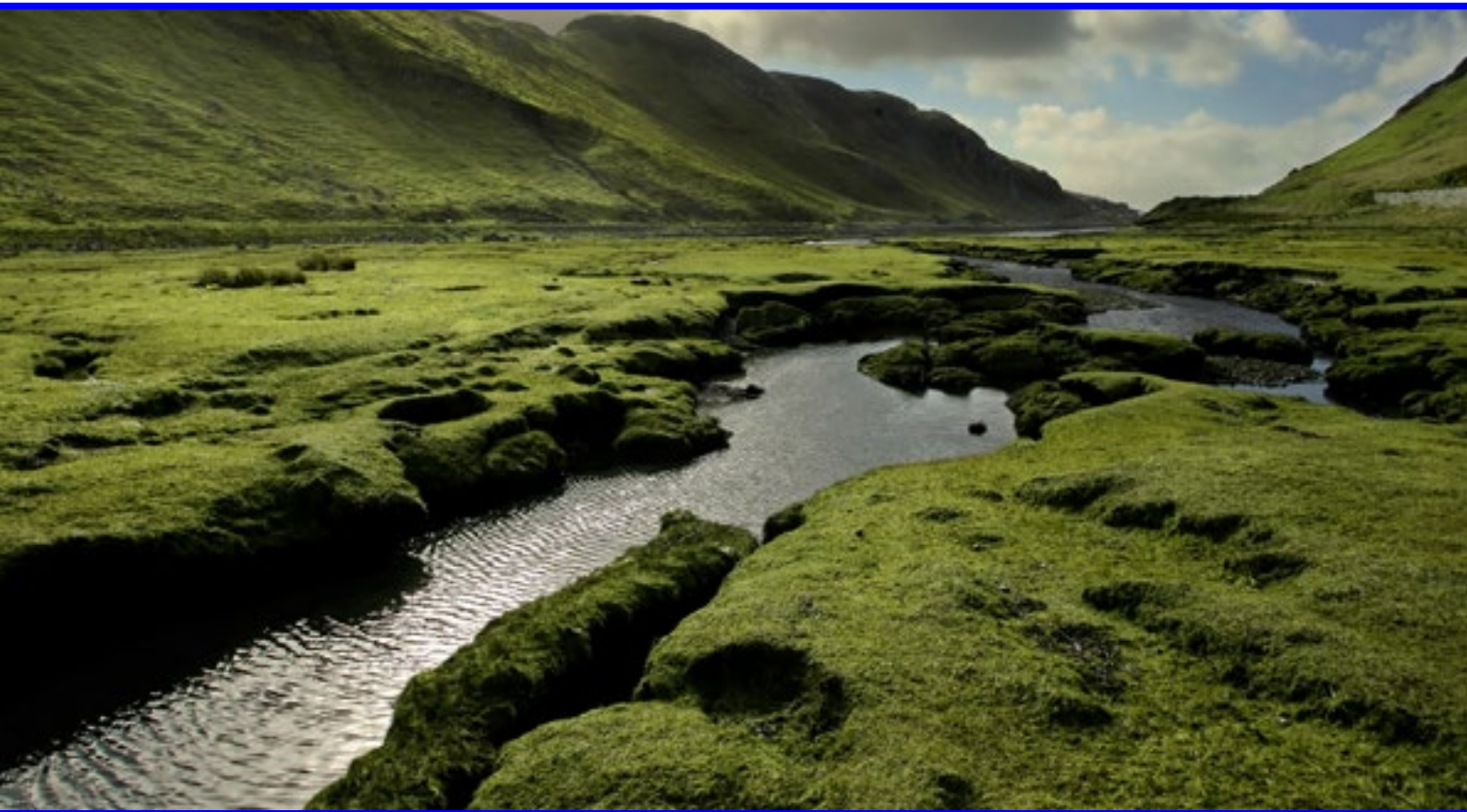
Why Choose Scotland?

The question you should really be asking is, 'why not Scotland?' This is truly a country that offers something for everyone; whether it's hiking in the upper Hebrides, unearthing medieval history in the underground alleys of Edinburgh, whiskey tasting in Speyside, becoming a football fanatic in Glasgow, or getting a culture fix at the fringe festival. It's proximity to Ireland as well as the rest of the UK and continental Europe makes it an ideal destination, either on its own or as part of a larger multi-country trip.

Scotland is a golf lovers paradise – in fact this is where the game was invented! Some of the best and most prestigious courses in the world are here, some of which host international competitions that attract some of the sport's biggest names every year. A trip to St. Andrew's should be top on your wish list, if not to play 18 holes then just to take in the inspiring surroundings guaranteed to take your breath away – whether you're a golfer or not.

Nature lovers will feel right at home with the wild and rugged landscapes on offer, from mountains and lakes to fields and beaches and just about everything else in between. You could even try your luck finding the enigmatic Loch Ness Monster if you're so inclined. If you're more of a party person, never fear; Scotland loves a good night out as much as you do, and probably more. Take your pick of the vast array of festivals on offer, make friends for life and dance the night away as only the Scots know how. This nation of gregarious, good humoured people will make you feel right at home.

Those are just a few of the most obvious reasons to visit Scotland; spend just a few hours here and you'll easily come up with several hundred more reasons yourself – so what are you waiting for?



EXPLORING VACATIONS

QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

FRANCE

Getting to France

Paris is one of Europe's biggest transport hubs, so you can catch a direct flight from anywhere in Europe – and plenty of places further afield too – and touch down in Charles de Gaulle airport in no time. If you're travelling from the UK you can also travel via the English channel either by boat or train; the Eurostar high speed train runs several times daily from St. Pancras International in London to Gare du Nord in Paris, and completes the journey in 2 hours.

Speaking of high speed trains, France has an impressive rail network that makes it possible to travel between cities and regions in just a few hours. The SNCF and the TGV provide links to Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of Italy and Spain as well as to every city and almost every big town within France.

It's also possible to travel by ferry from many points in the UK and Ireland. There is a regular ferry service from Rosslare or Cork in Ireland, Dover and Portsmouth in the UK and many places besides that land in destinations all over the northern French coast, including Calais, Roscoff, Le Havre, Cherbourg and Caen. The majority of services also take cars, making a road trip easy peasy.



When's the best time to go?

France is a great destination to visit any time of year, but certain months are better than others for different regions. For a start, it's wise to avoid going to the south coast during August. French kids finish up school then so families use the opportunity to take their annual summer holidays. The majority of them stay within France to do so, usually heading for the Riviera, so the roads become clogged, traffic jams are constant, and the combination of French holidaymakers and foreign tourists means that wherever you go, there's likely to be crowds everywhere and queues for everything. If you're planning a longer trip through several regions of France, arrange it so you hit the south either before or after this time.

In the summer months in general, France becomes swarmed with tourists. June and July also have the best weather however, so it's a toss up between crowds and climate – if you'd rather less of the latter then the shoulder seasons (April and May or September and October) are your friend, but if you'd rather get as much sunshine as possible, prepare to share with many, many others. Winters are much more manageable, but in rural areas many towns and villages 'close up shop' to tourism, so you may prefer to stick to the cities. Wine tasting is also best done during summer.

If you happen to be visiting in February, try your best to get down to Nice for the annual Carnival. Rated as one of the best in the world, it's full of colour, glitz and parties and a great way to rub shoulders with the elite. If you're heading south a little later in the year, take the opportunity to do some celebrity spotting in Cannes in May, when the world's premier film festival takes place and Hollywood starts descend on the coastal resort. May is also the month of the French Open if you're a tennis fan. Although tickets are often like gold dust, catching a game at Roland Garros is an unforgettable experience.

June sees the summer season get into full swing in France. In rural towns and villages there's a fete every weekend when locals and visitors alike gather to play boules, dance and sing to live music, enjoy traditional food and of course, sample the year's vintage of wine. Dedicated wine festivals are also a regular fixture in wine regions like Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne (among others).

If you can handle the upheaval, July is one of the best months to visit France. On July 14th the whole country shuts down to commemorate Bastille Day, or the beginning of the French Revolution. An



impressive military parade takes place in Paris and every other town and city partakes in plenty of celebrations, family fun and partying. July is also the month when the Tour de France, the greatest cycling event in the world, takes place. The cyclists whizz past many towns and villages in hilly regions – if they pass you by you're in for a treat – once you watch at a safe distance, obviously.

After the summer holiday mayhem of August, things settle back down in September, although there are still plenty of visitors to be found in the popular tourist areas. The weather is still warm and settled, and most of the country gets an air of calm once again. From October temperatures start to drop and in the north in particular, the weather becomes much more temperate. Rain is commonplace and snow is not unheard of.

For obvious reasons, winter is the best time to come for skiing, snowboarding and various other winter sports that make the mountain regions come alive. Beware that there are more school holidays in February and following their summer break in August, French families then like to take a winter ski break in the low season. Spring is often the quietest time for tourism (although the country is never empty of foreign visitors), so could be the right time for you if you want to have the place almost to yourself.



What kind of clothes should I bring?

This depends on what region of France you plan to explore. France has one of the most varied terrains in Europe, which makes for equally varied weather. Down south, sun, sea and sand is the name of the game and the region enjoys warm temperatures and a Mediterranean style climate for most of the year. So for that, bring swimwear, lots of light clothing and maybe one or two long sleeved items for after dark.

If you're heading for mountainous regions like the Pyrenees, the rugged Massif Central or the Alps, then beware that the higher you go the less predictable the climate gets. You'll need layers, and lots of them – including a waterproof jacket just in case. Don't forget some good walking shoes too; it'd be a shame to miss out on all that stunning scenery because of inappropriate footwear.

In Northern France the climate is more like that of the UK, although still usually warmer and a little more settled. There's plenty of coastline and beaches to enjoy up here too, but outside of the summer months the temperature drops and there's more chance of wind and rain, so pack accordingly.

In Paris you'll quickly notice that the natives are well dressed and well groomed. They're more than used to tourists however, so there's no pressure to dress up when you're out and about sight seeing. If you want to sample some Parisian nightlife or experience French fine dining however, you'll need to make more of an effort. Many places have dress codes even if they're not explicitly stated, so you may end up feeling under-dressed and get some curious glances from the locals.

Currency

France is in the Eurozone and uses the Euro as its currency. It comes in coins of 1c, 2c, 5c, 10c, 20c, 50c, 1 Euro and 2 Euro and notes of 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500. You'll find it difficult for any bar, restaurant or shop to accept anything bigger than a 50, and in some places you may have to forgo the small brown coins when waiting for change. At present, 1 Euro will get you 1.15 USD, 0.73 GBP, 1.50 Canadian Dollars, 1.56 Australian and 1.70 New Zealand Dollars.

Don't worry if some of your Euro coins have different designs on the back – each country has their own version, and they're all perfectly legal!



Credit cards

All credit cards are widely accepted in cities and major towns, but it's advisable to keep some cash on you just in case. Rural areas, depending on how many tourists pass through, often operate on a cash only basis. As always, beware of hefty fees and charges when using your card abroad. It's best to adopt a policy of only using it when you have to, and sticking to a debit card or cash whenever possible. Mastercard and Visa are the most widely accepted, but American Express and others are generally fine too in cities.

Banks

As in the rest of Europe, ATMs are in all but the smallest of rural villages – so you'll have no fear of not being able to access your cash when you need to. Banking hours vary from town to town and region to region but as a general rule, Monday to Friday from 9am to 5.30pm is the norm. Many close for lunch and some open for a few hours on Saturday morning. Before you go, check if your bank has a partner with any French banks; you may be able to save on exchange rates and fees this way.

VAT and Tax

France is a member of the European Union, so many visitors travelling from outside of Europe will be eligible for tax free shopping – anything you buy must be for personal and not commercial use, and there are certain limitations on the amount of goods you can import (none if you're travelling from within the EU though). As is standard in most European countries, if you plan on spending a lot and want to get your tax refunded, collect receipts and the relevant forms as you go and get the paperwork stamped and signed in the airport before you leave.

VAT of 20% is added to the majority of goods in France, and 10% to services like restaurants and transport. There is a 5.5% tax on food, drinks and books. It is standard to include the VAT and service charge on the bill in bars and restaurants, so there's no need to tip on top of that. However, most locals will still leave a few extra coins if they felt the service was good, so visitors should follow suit.



Embassies and Consulates

Embassies and Consulates in France

Canada Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-44-42-29-00; Email paris-consulaire@international.gc.ca;
35 Montaigne Avenue, 75008 Paris

USA Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-43-12-22-22; Web <http://france.usembassy.gov>;
2 Avenue Gabriel, 75008 Paris

New Zealand Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-45-01-43-41; Email nzembassy.paris@fr.oleane.com; 7 ter,
Rue Leonard de Vinci, 75116 Paris

Australia Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-40-59-33-00; Email information.paris@dfat.gov.au;
4 Rue Jean Rey, 75724 Paris, Cedex 15

Ireland Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-44-17-67-00; Web <http://www.embassyofireland.fr>;
12 Avenue Foch, 75116 Paris

UK Embassy – Tel 33(0)1-44-51-31-00; Web <http://www.gov.uk/government/world/france>;
35 Rue du Faubourg St Honore, 75383 Paris, Cedex 08

French Embassies and Consulates

Canada Embassy – Tel 1(613)-562-37-35; Email plotoque@ambafrance-ca.org; 42 Promenade
Sussex, Ottawa, Ontario, K1M 2C9

USA Embassy – Tel 1(202)-944-60-00; Email info@ambafrance-us.org; 4101 Reservoir Road, NW,
Washington DC 20007

New Zealand Embassy – Tel 64(4)-384-25-55; Email amba.france@actriz.gen.nz; 34-42 Manners
Street, Wellington 6011

Australia Embassy – Tel 61(2)-621-601-00; Email info@ambafrance-au.org; 6 Perth Avenue,
Yarralumla, ACT 2600

Ireland Embassy – Tel 353(1)-377-5000; Email chancellerie@ambafrance.ie; 36 Ailesbury Road,
Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

UK Embassy – Tel 44(207)07-31-000; Email presse.londres-amba@diplomatie.gouv.fr; 58
Knightsbridge, Lonon SW1X 7JT

A Taste of France

French cuisine is one of the most loved and one of the most respected in the world. Regardless of how simple or complex they are to make, all French dishes have a certain flair that you won't find in any other country; it's no wonder it has such a stellar reputation for fine dining. Since it's also the best producer of wine and cheese in the world, expect to see lots of both in French cooking; rich, creamy sauces, succulent red meat, inventive soups and farmhouse vegetables are hallmarks of the cuisine. Oh, and garlic – lots of it!

For breakfast, a pastry or some bread with a steaming hot coffee is sufficient for the natives. Relatively large lunches are often the norm after that, usually consisting of multiple courses (although in cities a quick bite on the go is just as prevalent). Starting with an appetiser of soup, salad or perhaps pate before a main course of meat and vegetables (with a side of bread or sometimes potatoes), the meal will finish up with a cheese course and a small dessert. It's not uncommon to have a glass of wine – French people savour their national tippie and drink for taste and pleasure rather than the alcoholic effects. Having had a sizeable lunch, locals will usually have dinner quite late in the evening, and again it will be a multi-course affair with the addition of an aperitif (light alcoholic drink along with small snacks like nuts or olives) before the meal starts.

If you do nothing else during your stay in France, try as many different cheeses and wines as you can. Blue cheese and softer white cheese are commonplace, and almost every town seems to have their own. Bleu des Causses, Neufchatel, Picodon, Selles-sur-Cher and Tomme des Cevennes are just some names from a long list to watch out for.

It would take an entire book to walk through French wines properly, but if you've come primarily to discover the various vintages, then you should make a point of visiting Burgundy, the Rhone Valley, Bordeaux, Loire and of course Champagne – five of the best wine making regions in the country (which, considering it's the best wine country in world, is really saying something). There's nothing better than setting off on foot or bike with a packed lunch and touring the vineyards while the sun shines. If you visit a winery, wine-makers will often let you have a sip for free if you ask nicely.



French food glossary

Pain Au Chocolat: A quick breakfast snack for many a French family, Pain Au Chocolat is a sweet, puffy, flaky, rolled pastry with two shots of chocolate in the centre. Perfect with a morning coffee and usually accompanied with a croissant, they can be eaten hot or cold.

Steak Tartare: Not for the squeamish, steak tartare was popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, but is becoming a rarity as people's health concerns grow! It is raw minced beef served with a raw egg, onions, capers and seasonings. If you try, make sure you do so in a reputable and hygienic establishment!

Gratin Dauphinois: With origins in the heart of the alps in the 18th century, Gratin Dauphinois is rich, hearty and comforting. Potatoes are thinly sliced and layered in a dish with cream, butter and garlic, then baked to perfection.

Tarte Tatin: Hailing from just outside of Paris – the Hotel Tatin to be exact - Tarte Tatin is a dessert of upside down pastry with caramelised fruit (usually apples) on top. Made by mistake by an overworked chef in the 1880s, it became famous all over France and later further afield too.

Boeuf Bourguignon: A Burgundy staple, boeuf bourguignon is beef braised with red wine, combined with garlic, onions, mushrooms and seasonings. Originating as a peasant dish, it's now one of the favourites of French haute cuisine.

Pot-au-feu: Translating as 'pot on fire', pot au feu is a simple, hearty family stew usually made with beef and root vegetables like carrots, turnips, leeks, celery and onions. Often served with potatoes or bread (or sometimes even rice or pasta), it's a real make your own recipe kind of dish.

Soupe a l'Oignon: A typical starter dish, French Onion Soup is much more appealing than you might think. Meat and onion stock is topped with a mountain of croutons and cheese for a dish that warms you from the inside out. Comfort food at its best.

Cassoulet: Hailing from the south of France, cassoulet is essentially a slow cooked casserole, usually made using duck meat, pork skin and white beans – although pork sausage, goose and even mutton can also be included.

Escargot: Although considered to be more of a tourist gimmick than anything else, Escargot are still a popular item on French restaurant menus. The snails are served in the shell and removed with a special tongs and fork, and usually laden with garlic.

Crème Brûlée: A creamy vanilla custard base is topped off with a crust of hard caramel in this quintessential French dessert, which you'll see on every menu in every restaurant regardless of how high or low-end it may be.



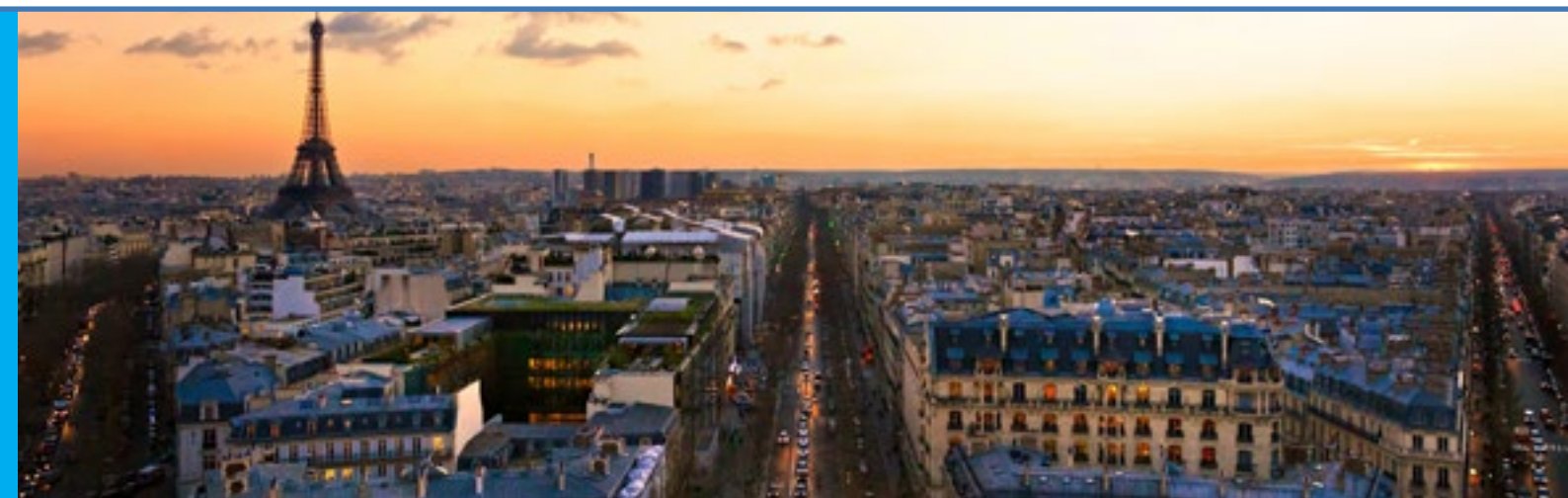
What France is made of

France is a country that has held a significant amount of power - both in Europe and the rest of the world - for centuries. The region has been populated since Neolithic times, and it's entirely likely that some of the first inhabitants of the British Isles initially came from France. With the power gained steadily throughout the middle ages came an enormous amount of culture, history and sophistication in all areas; politics, art, food, you name it. With one of the most varied terrains in Europe and something to offer every type of traveller, it's not for nothing that this country is the most visited in the world.

French people often garner negative character traits from outsiders – many think of them as rude, vain, unhelpful or even snooty – but the reality of the situation is often missed. French people are very proud of their language, their culture and their traditions, and they like to put their best foot forward when the above are on display for visitors. The secret to a native's heart is to attempt to respectfully participate in their culture rather than look at it (or worse, disrespect it) from afar. They'll appreciate the effort and be much more open if you do. France is swarmed with tourists all year round most of whom are considered loud and intrusive by French standards – so it pays to put yourself in their shoes once a while.

The influx of visitors shows no signs of stopping however when the country has such world-class attractions on offer. Peer at some of the world's most loved works of art in museums around the country; the Louvre is the jewel in the crown in this regard, but it's also merely the tip of the iceberg. Better still, you can see the sights they were based on and explore the studios where they were made. Matisse, Monet, Cezanne, Gauguin, Degas, Renoir, Manet and many more all called France home.

Art is just one of the many strings on France's bow. The Lascaux caves are the oldest example of prehistoric cave art in the world, the French Riviera is the playground of the world's elite, Notre Dame and Moulin Rouge tell a much better story in the flesh than you'll get from any book or film, and Mont St Michel has to be seen to be believed. And that's before we get to the Pyrennes and the Alps, the swathes of vineyards, and another little thing called the Eiffel Tower. In short, France has it all.



Communications

Like any other major European destination, France is well equipped when it comes to communication – be it internet, telephone, post or anything else. While as little as 40 years ago they were considered far behind the times (especially where phone coverage was concerned), they've made a highly successful effort to catch up and now have the same standards you'd expect in England, Scotland or Ireland.

The four mobile operators are Orange, SFR, Bouygues Telecom and Free, all of which offer pre-paid sim cards for visitors who'll need to make a lot of calls during their stay. As always, beware of mobile data when you're travelling, as you could face hefty roaming fees for internet usage if you're not careful. Luckily, wi-fi is available everywhere in the big cities and towns. If you plan on going off the beaten track to out-of-the-way communes and vineyards however, don't expect coverage.

The dialing code for France is +33, and each region has a further code; 1 for greater Paris, 2 for the North-west, 3 for the north-west, 4 for the south-east and 5 for the south-west. As for charging, the standard 220-240v two-prong socket that's standard in many other European countries is used. The country is well used to visitors so finding an adapter will be a breeze.

Should the need arise for you to post something, La Poste is the national postal carrier and is highly efficient, expect overseas packages to take a number of days to reach their destination depending on the distance travelled and the size of the package.



Essential French travel literature

- A Motor Flight Through France (1908) - Edith Wharton
- The Man Who Married a Mountain (2005) - Rosemary Bailey
- Yellow Studio (2008) - Stephen Romer

Essential French movies

- Breathless (1960) – directed by Jean-Luc Godard
- 400 Blows (1959) – directed by Francois Truffaut
- Amelie (2001) – directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet
- La Vie En Rose (2007) – directed by Olivier Dahan
- The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928) – directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer
- La Haine (1995) – directed by Mathieu Kassovitz
- The Artist (2011) – directed by Michel Hazanavicius
- Three Colours: Red (1994) – directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski
- The Piano Teacher (2001) – directed by Michael Haneke

Essential French novels

- Madame Bovary (1856) – Gustav Flaubert
- Les Miserables (1862) – Victor Hugo
- The Count of Monte Cristo (1844) – Alexandre Dumas
- The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1831) – Victor Hugo
- The Stranger (1942) – Albert Camus
- Candide (1759) - Voltaire

The Three Musketeers (1844) – Alexandre Dumas

Essential French music

Random Access Memories - Daft Punk (2013)

No Promises - Carla Bruni (2007)

The Very Best of Edith Piaf – Edith Piaf (2002)

Oncle Archibald - George Brassens (1957)

Ferré 64 - Léo Ferré (1964)

Before the Dawn Heals Us – M83 (2005)



Why choose France?

Quite simply, there are thousands of reasons. France is about to hit record levels of 100 million visitors per year, and it's easy to see why. First, there's the City of Love. Paris is probably the most photogenic capital city in the entire world, and the epitome of European lifestyle and culture for most. Sophistication, culture, art, and centuries of history are all here for the taking – not to mention some unforgettable views of one of the most recognisable towers on the planet.

It's not all about city slicking in France however. While there's plenty of stunning urban landscapes to wander around, there's even more natural beauty on offer. Snow capped mountains, golden sand coasts, rolling hills dotted with historic villages, vineyards – we could go on. Whether you're an adventure enthusiast or one for leisurely strolls on a sunny afternoon, France is just the ticket.

Oh, and did we mention the food and drink? It's so much more than snails and frog legs. How about freshly baked baguettes and croissants every morning? One of over 350 different cheeses to snack on with some beautifully crafted soups? Souffle, tarte tatin, crepes, cassoulet, ratatouille and coq au vin as you've never tasted them before? And then there's the small matter of something to wash it down with. France is home to the best wines in the world, and no matter what region you choose to travel in you'll be inundated with choice - and all of it will be fantastic. Come with an empty stomach, a thirsty throat, a culture-focused mind and a fully charged camera and you're in for a major treat.



EXPLORING VACATIONS QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

ITALY

Getting to Italy

As one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, getting to Italy is a doddle. Trans-continental flights stop off in Rome and you can fly to all of the major Italian cities from almost anywhere in Europe. Being centrally located on the European continent and jutting out into the Mediterranean, travel by road or by ship is also possible from many locations, especially Greece and Croatia (by ferry) and France, Switzerland or Austria by car, bus or train.

Italy is only a few hours away from anywhere in mainland Europe, northern Africa, or Scandinavia, so it's the ideal choice for both short breaks and longer holidays. There is a good infrastructure

within the country too if you plan on travelling to several regions. Flights and cars are generally more convenient than public transport like trains or buses, but regardless of which form of transport you use, you'll get to where you need to go easily (if perhaps not so efficiently).

As an European Union Member State, the usual rules (or lack thereof) apply for visitors travelling from other EU countries. Tourism is a big industry here so tourist visas are available for the majority of other countries for varying periods (usually three months). There are restrictions on working on certain visas, but you'll be



having way too much fun to even consider working – trust us on that one. Italy is well used to the steady flow of tourists, so you're unlikely to encounter any trouble entering or leaving the country... provided you don't break any laws while you're there!

When's the best time to go?

The first thing to consider when deciding when to go to Italy is the weather. There can be stark contrasts between the northern and southern halves of the country. In the north, it's perfectly pleasant from April to September, with temperatures heating up a little more in July and August. April, May and September are a cooler in general, especially at night, so if you're not a fan of intense heat or intense cold then this could be the time for you. From October to March temperatures drop, rain and

fog is more common and in the winter, snow is a regular occurrence. This is especially true of areas on higher ground - perfect if you like winter sports.

The south is a different story entirely. It's a purely Mediterranean climate, with pleasant temperatures and lots of sun all year round. Rain is rare even in winter, and while temperatures can occasionally get a little chilly, you'll never need a hat, scarf and gloves like you will up north. The downside is that in the summer months, especially August, especially in cities, and especially inland, it can get stiflingly hot. You may want to work in a break at the sea to cool off if you're travelling around this time.

There's another thing to note about August however; this is when Italians take their own holidays, meaning that the beaches and coastal resorts become extremely busy. Prices for everything go up, queues get longer, and traffic gets more infuriating. The cities do empty out however, but this has advantages and disadvantages; on the one hand, they're left entirely for tourists to roam around, but on the other, there is no sense of the typical Italian atmosphere that makes these cities so special.

Italians love any kind of celebration, and they have plenty of them throughout the year encompassing their many passions of art, music, sport, and life in general. Music lovers should make it their business to head to Umbria, specifically Perugia, in July. This is when the Umbria Jazz festival takes place, and it's one of the most important jazz festivals in the world. Music greats such as BB King, Miles Davis, Eric Clapton, Lady Gaga, Alicia Keys, Elton John and Prince have all graced its stage over the years - it's really not to be missed.

From late summer to the onset of winter, Italians go football crazy. Serie A is the major Italian league, and the fans are some of the most passionate in the world. Seeing world class teams like Juventus, Milan and Internazionale in action is an experience all sports lovers will find unforgettable, for the atmosphere as well as the skill of the players. Matches are held all over the country and while tickets are hard to come by for the big matches, you could still get lucky.

Those who prefer the finer things in life like opera and wine will be happy to know that there is plenty to keep them entertained all year round. However, the summer or autumn months are the best when exquisite performances take place in open air (and often thousands of years old) amphitheatres and wineries have their best produce bottled and ready to go.

During the winter months things may get a little quieter, but by no means do they grind to a halt. The north of the country comes alive when the first snow falls, with visitors and locals alike flocking to the mountains to get their fix of skiing, snowboarding, and every other winter sport you care to think of. If you happen to be touring around in February, do whatever you can to get to Venice. Their elaborate and stunning Carnevale festival takes place over two weeks, full of costume parades, masquerade balls, and general fun and merriment before the Lent begins on Ash Wednesday.

Finally, a spectacle that's worth witnessing whether you're religious or not is any public ceremony that takes place in the Vatican. Easter in particular is an especially vibrant occasion, when thousands of pilgrims fill the gigantic St. Peter's square at the doors of the Basilica to hear the Pope say mass (and maybe even make an appearance afterwards).

What kind of clothes should I bring?

Italy has been blessed with a warm and sunny Mediterranean climate, so unless you're heading for the mountains up north, there's no need for heavy coats, scarves or gloves. During the summer months it can get quite hot and the sun sticks around until well into the evening, so a hat and sunglasses are essential. Italians are fond of dressing well, but they are very laid back in general and won't bat an eyelid if you don't make the same effort. Cities like Rome and Milan however are quite cosmopolitan and fashion conscious, so some bars and restaurants may have a dress code. Bring some nice shoes and a shirt, dress, or smart outfit if you plan on getting a feel for the sophisticated side of Italian life.

It's also worth keeping in mind that many churches and religious sites (including St. Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel) will not let you enter if you're exposing too much skin, so pack a pair of lightweight long sleeves and trousers. From late autumn, through winter and into early spring the temperatures do drop a little. You'll still encounter pleasantly warm temperatures during the day, but when the sun sets you'll most likely need a light jacket to keep out the mild chill. The exception is the northern half of the country, including cities like Venice and Turin, where snow can be quite common in winter and cold temperatures stick around for a few months.

Other useful items to keep in your suitcase include a swimsuit, supportive shoes for the many steps and hills in some cities, and of course, plenty of spare batteries for your camera, because we guarantee you won't stop using it from the moment you set foot off the plane.



Currency

Italy is part of the European Union and uses the Euro as its currency. The Euro comes in notes and coins, notes in denominations of 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5 and coins of 2 euro, 1 euro, 50 cents, 20c, 10c 5c, 2c and 1c. You'll have problems finding anyone who will accept notes larger than 50, and you should avoid using large notes for small purchases if possible. At the time of writing, exchange rates are:

1 Euro = 1.12 US Dollars, 1.57 Australian Dollars, 1.77 New Zealand Dollars, 0.72 British Pounds Sterling, and 1.48 Canadian Dollars.

It's not customary to leave large tips in restaurants like in the US. A few extra coins after you've paid the bill is perfectly acceptable - a little more if you've received especially good service. Taxis and bartenders don't expect any tip, but hotel porters may appreciate a little something.

Credit Cards

In the big Italian cities all major credit cards will be accepted and you are unlikely to encounter any problems. In rural areas, small villages, and certain areas of the south of Italy that don't see as many tourists passing through, things could be a little more difficult. If you're taking a road trip outside the cities or major tourist destinations, then take some cash with you before you go as the majority of them will not have any facilities in place for taking payments by card.

Italians tend to use credit cards for bigger purchases like restaurant and hotel bills rather than a bottle of water from a shop, for example - in fact many places have a minimum spend needed to use a credit card. So even if you are in a popular tourist spot, it makes sense to have some 'walking around' money in your pocket (although not too much, just in case you fall victim to petty crime). US visitors should take note that while generally accepted, some vendors may refuse to take American



Express cards. Visa, Mastercard and all others are usually fine.

Banks

If you need to enter a bank in Italy, beware that their opening hours are a little different to other countries. Most open from around 8.30am to 1pm, then close for lunch for a few hours, and open again for another hour or two in the afternoon, usually from 3pm to 4.30 or 5pm. They do not open on Saturdays, Sundays, public

holidays, and sometimes the afternoon before a public holiday. In large tourist centres and cities, there are usually some exceptions.

VAT & Tax

Italy's equivalent of VAT is IVA, and it works exactly the same way as in most other countries. Most goods are subject to 21% IVA (some exceptions like books are at a lower rate of 4%) and services

have 10% IVA added. It is standard for the tax to already be included in the price or on the bill, so you usually won't come across any surprise costs.

As with the other countries in this guide, non-EU citizens are eligible for tax refunds on goods if exporting them out of Italy. However, there are certain restrictions in place. You must purchase goods with a minimum total cost of E155 per merchant (only on one business day) and they must remain packaged and unused until they have passed customs inspections when you leave. As usual, you should obtain refund forms in each store and will need to fill in your passport and contact details before you present them to customs.

Embassies and Consulates

Italian Embassies Abroad

Australia - 12 Grey Street, Deakin, Canberra ACT 2600 - Phone 0061 26273 3333 -
Email ambasciata.canberra@esteri.it - Website <http://ambcanberra.esteri.it>

Canada - 275 Slater Street, 21st Floor, Ottawa, Ontario - Phone 0016 13 232 2401 -
Email abasciata.ottawa@esteri.it - Website <http://ambottawa.esteri.it>

Ireland - 63-65 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4 - Phone 00353 1660 1744 -
Email ambasciata.dublino@esteri.it - Website <http://www.ambdublino.esteri.it>

New Zealand - 34-38 Grant Road, Thorndon, Wellington 6011 - Phone 0064 44735 339 -
Email ambasciata.wellington@esteri.it - Website <http://www.ambwellington.esteri.it>

United Kingdom - 14 Three Kings Yard, London W1K 4EH - Phone 0044 020 731 22200 -
Email ambasciata.londra@esteri.it - Website <http://amblondra.esteri.it>

United States - 3000 Whitehaven Street, NW, Washington DC 20008 - Phone 12 02 612 4400
Email - visiti.washington@esteri.it - Website http://ambwashingtondc.esteri.it/ambasciata_washington

Embassies in Italy

Australian Embassy - Via Antonio Bosio, 5, 00161 Rome - Phone 0039 06 852 721 -
Email info-rome@dfat.gov.au - Website <http://www.italyembassy.gov.au/rome/home.html>

Canadian Embassy - Via Zara 30, 00198 Rome - Phone 0028 06 85444 2911 -
Email consul.rome@international.gc.ca - Website <http://www.italy.gc.ca>

Irish Embassy - Piazza di Campitelli 3, 00186 Rome - Phone 0039 06 697 9121 -
Website <http://www.embassyofireland.it/>

New Zealand Embassy - Via Clitunno 44, 00198 Rome - Phone 0039 06 853 7501 -
rome@nzembassy.it - Website <http://www.nzembassy.com/italy>

American Embassy - Palazzo Margherita, Via Vittorio Veneto 121, 00187 Rome -
Phone 0039 06 46 741 - Website <http://italy.usembassy.gov>

Communications

Wi-Fi is easily found in all corners of Italy, although by law all public wireless access points must keep records of your online activities. You'll be asked to register and may be asked for identification in some places too. 3G coverage is widespread and 4G is available in big cities, but as always, beware of roaming charges. If you're planning on signing up to one of the Italian networks, beware of the small print. On the plus side, most public access is free to use, and if your connection is in your own hotel room, it's considered private and you won't be subject to registration.

Italy's international phone code is 39, so to dial start your number with 00 39, then the regional code, then the full number. Unlike most other countries, in Italy you must always include the regional code, even if you're calling a phone in the same region as you. The only exception is the emergency number - simply dial 112. If travelling from the USA, note that your phone will not work unless it's tri-band. You can easily purchase a local SIM card when you arrive, but again you will need identification.

If you want to post some post cards or use the Italian postal service for sending packages home, be warned; it's notoriously unreliable and usually twice as expensive as other European countries. If you're within reach of a border with France, Austria or Switzerland, it would definitely be a better idea to cross the border and send your package from there. Even Slovenia's postal system is more efficient than Italy's! If you must post from Italy, look for the red post boxes - these are the public ones. Black post boxes in tobacco shops are plentiful, but run by a privately owned company and known for their even worse service



A Taste of Italy

Italy is one of the great gastronomic destinations of the world, so whatever you do, don't come here if you're on a diet. Italian cuisine uses lots of olive oil, garlic, tomatoes and cheese, with plenty of mediterranean vegetables, fresh bread, and of course, lots and lots of pasta. Although quite diverse and with no set rules, it is generally said that the northern half of the country is characterised by its hearty, meat and potato based meals while the southern half uses more seafood, vegetables, pizza and pasta.

Eating is an important family institution in Italy. The evening meal is as much about socialising as anything else, and they will eat anywhere between three and five courses over as many hours. The meal starts with 'antipasto', small appetisers like bruschetta or cold meats. Next comes the 'primo', usually a pasta or rice dish that serves as the first course rather than a full meal. The 'secondo' is the main meal, a meat or fish course that usually comes with a 'contorno', or another smaller side dish, often vegetable based. Finally, they'll finish up with dessert or 'dolce', and maybe a coffee to call it a night. Italians eat quite late in the evening and stick to small light meals during the day. Cappuccino is the typical breakfast, and espresso or standard black coffee is usually taken throughout the rest of the day.

Every region in Italy has its own speciality of almost every popular food; different shaped pasta, different cheese, different breads and cured meats, and of course, different wine. Always ask about what the local speciality is, because it will most definitely be the best choice – and you'll win praise from the locals for trying something other than the tried and tested tourist favourites. Naples is the home of pizza, Bologna is where bolognese began, and so on. The country has nearly 800 varieties of cheese – some of the more well known include parmesan, ricotta, mozzarella, and gorgonzola.

As for drinks, Italy loves wine, but beer, liquer and coffee are all taken seriously too. You won't want to miss the opportunity to try a Chianti, Brunello or Barolo right from the source, while Peroni and Birra Moretti should be on your 'must try' list if you're a beer lover. Limoncello and Grappa, made from lemon and grape respectively, are common after dinner liquers, intended to aid digestion rather than get your drunk! Both are very strong, so don't over do it if your waiter leaves the bottle on the table for you to help yourself.



Italian Food Glossary

Bruschetta: Fresh crusty baguettes sliced up and topped with finely chopped tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and a sprinkling of basil. Bruschetta makes the perfect light antipasto to start off your meal and can be topped with anything, although tomatoes are the tradition.

Gnocchi: Tiny dumplings of potato based dough are cooked and then smothered with tomato sauce and a sprinkling of Italian cheese like ricotta, mozzarella or parmesan. A real 'comfort food' dish, and can sometimes be a little heavy so best tried in small portions.

Penne all'arrabbiata: A staple in Italian restaurants around the world, penne pasta gets an accompaniment of spicy tomato based sauce with plenty of fiery chillies and flavoursome garlic. Simple to prepare but with quite the kick, if made right.

Carbonara: On the opposite end of the scale is carbonara. A typical Rome dish, it consists of spaghetti or tagliatelle with a cream-based sauce including eggs, cheese, generous helpings of black pepper and little diced pieces of bacon. Delicious!

Bolognese: The quintessential Italian dish, bolognese is spaghetti with a meat and tomato based sauce. Created in Bologna and dating from the 18th century, and is traditionally served with a lot less meat than us non natives are used to.



Lasagne: Another home cooking favourite, lasagne is layers of flat wide pasta with meat sauce, bechamel sauce, topped off with a large helping of cheese and baked in the oven until soft, gooey and delicious.

Prosciutto: A dry cured ham that is very thinly sliced and served uncooked, either as part of an antipasto platter with other meats, olives, cheeses and so on or sometimes on top of crusty bread. Either way, its unique flavour is unmissable.

Risotto: A north Italian dish, Risotto is creamy, sticky rice cooked in broth with many variations of vegetables, meat or cheese added in. Best eaten in small quantities, as it's very very filling.

Gelato: You'll never find ice cream as good as this anywhere else in the world. Italians are serious about their gelato and treat it as a craft. Gelato parlours are in every town and city and any flavour you could possibly dream up, you'll find easily.

Tiramisu: The name translates to 'pick me up' and tiramisu is a light, creamy dessert consisting of layers of lady fingers dipped in coffee with whipped marscapone and sugar, topped off with cocoa.

What Italy is Made Of

Along with Greece, Italy is the birthplace of Western culture. Thousands of years ago the country's inhabitants already had a fully functioning society almost as advanced as our own, with the exception of our modern technology. The ancient Romans had underground water systems in cities, paved roads and an efficient democratic political system. Thankfully their legacy has been painstakingly protected, meaning Italy has the greatest number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the World. Everywhere you go, there will be ancient ruins to explore and high art from the world's greatest artists to marvel at.

Modern Italy is just as good too; from the mouth watering cuisine to the cutting edge fashion industry, the flashy sports cars and zipping mopeds to the constant atmosphere of living life to the full. And that's before we even mention the landscape; alpine lakes and mountain ranges, sweeping sandy coastlines, rolling hills lined with cypress trees and neat farmlands, and tiny villages nestled among them that have remained virtually unchanged since the Renaissance.

The Northern half of Italy's boot shaped borders is arguably the more beautiful half. It starts with the soaring snow-capped peaks of the Alps, which slope down towards the stunning Dolomites and form an unforgettable backdrop for the lake district (Como, Garda, Lungo, etc.) - it's good enough for George Clooney to have a home there, after all. The lakes then make way for the breathtakingly beautiful Tuscan landscape, full of soft hills, cypress trees, vineyards and orchards, and cities brimming with classical architecture and art.

Further south, the landscape gets a little more flat so it's all about the coasts. Luckily, they're lined with beaches and blue sea, and the Mediterranean lifestyle is prominent. You'll see ferraris and fashionistas hanging around in seaside towns, and can expect lighter, more refreshing food with a heavy emphasis on Mediterranean vegetables. While many people neglect the south in favour of the north - not to mention the unnecessarily bad reputation it's gotten for itself in recent years - but the upside to that is less crowds and more time to see everything!

Don't forget the islands too; Sicily and Sardinia are both part of Italy and well worth working into your trip; or even as a trip on their own. If you thought life on the mainland was pretty laid back, wait til you get a boat out to one of the above!

Essential travel literature

- Italian Journey (1816), Wolfgang Von Goethe
- Under the Tuscan Sun (2003), Frances Mayes
- The Sea and Sardinia (1921), DH Lawrence
- Italian Neighbours (1992), Tim Parks

Essential Italian Novels

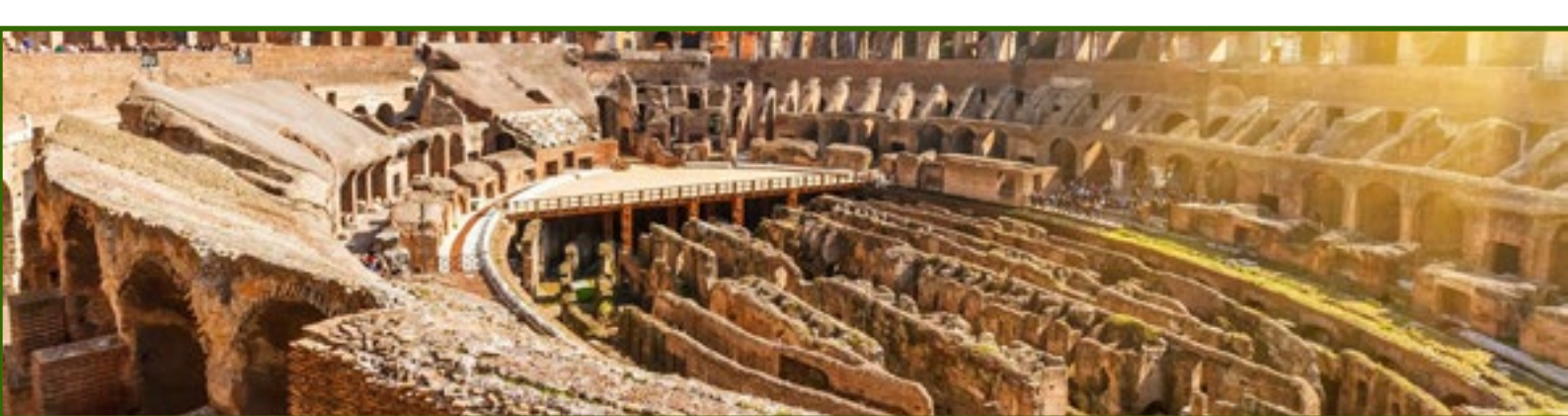
- The Name of the Rose (1980), Umberto Eco
- The Baron in the Trees (1957), Italo Calvino
- If On a Winter's Night A Traveller (1979), Italo Calvino
- The Betrothed (1827), Alessandro Manzoni
- My Brilliant Friend (2011), Elena Ferrante
- Foucault's Pendulum (1988), Umberto Eco
- Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay (2013), Elena Ferrante

Essential Italian Movies

- Cinema Paradiso (1988) – Directed by Giuseppe Tornatore
- La Dolce Vita (1960) – Directed by Federico Fellini
- Life is Beautiful (1997) – Directed by Roberto Benigni
- La Strada (1954) – Directed by Federico Fellini
- The Great Beauty (2013) – Directed by Paolo Sorrentino
- Bicycle Thieves (1948) – Directed by Vittorio De Sica
- The Conformist (1970) – Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci
- Il Divo (2008) – Directed by Paolo Sorrentino

Essential Italian Music

- Luciano Pavarotti – The Ultimate Collection - 2007
- Andrea Bocelli – Amore - 2006
- Ennio Morricone – The Very Best Of - 2000
- Zucchero – Bluesugar - 1998
- Jovanotti – Ora - 2011
- Club Dogo – Mi Fist - 2003
- Modena City Ramblers – Dopo Il Lungo Inverno - 2006
- Eiffel 65 – Europop - 1999
- Vasco Rossi – Sono Innocente - 2014



Why choose Italy?

The western world has a lot to thank Italy for. In fact, we have everything to thank them for. Italy is the birthplace of the English language (largely derived from Latin), the Renaissance (which progressed society on all levels), taught us so much about the history of the world through ancient Roman artefacts, and has provided us with copious different types of delicious food! A trip to Italy means lots of sun, plenty of tasty treats, picture perfect scenery untouched by modern urbanism and of course, a front row seat to an unforgettable display of thousands of years of fascinating history.

It's not for nothing that Italy is one of the world's premier tourist destinations. For culture vultures and history lovers, the appeal is obvious. But don't be fooled into thinking that Italy is a one trick pony. Like adventure sports? Head for the mountainous north and you can ski, hike or bike to your heart's content. Prefer city living and shopping 'til you drop? Milan is one of the world's premier fashion cities and Rome has plenty to offer too (as do the other major cities, for that matter). More of a sun, sea and sand type of person? There's 7,600km of coastline to explore, much of it lined with beaches. Oh, and there's a small matter of the culinary delights too. From top to bottom Italy is full of regional specialities, not to mention the wine!

In short, no matter what your preferred vacation type, Italy has it all. And furthermore, the climate, people and lifestyle is perfect for de-stressing and living life to the full. You'll find it difficult to meet a local that doesn't give you a smile or some friendly conversation; even in the chaotic cities. And with the slow pace of life, relaxed way of living and endless sunshine, you'll never want to leave



EXPLORING VACATIONS

QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

GREECE

Getting to Greece

Greece is up there among the most popular tourist hotspots of Europe, so getting there shouldn't pose a problem to most. As a member of the European Union, citizens from any of the EU member states can stay in Greece for as long as they like. Most other countries can obtain a tourist visa without too much hassle, and in many cases you won't even need to fill out any paperwork for a short term visit (although you will most likely have to pass through immigration at the airport).

Athens and Thessaloniki are the two big transport hubs in Greece, dealing with the majority of international flights and other forms of transport. If you're planning on doing some island hopping without hitting the mainland however, plenty of low cost airlines fly to airports on the bigger islands

like Rhodes and Corfu. If you're coming from mainland Europe with a car in tow (or if plane travel isn't possible for other reasons), your best bet is to hop on a ferry from Italy - major ports like Venice and Trieste have a regular schedule to many different parts of Greece.

While there are bus and train links between Greece and other countries, these are somewhat limited and mostly serve nearby Eastern European cities like Sofia and Belgrade. They're also a little slow compared to western European services. If you absolutely must travel by land from surrounding countries, you're best off hiring a car to do so.

When's the best time to go?

Greece's stunningly sunny climate makes it possible to visit any time of year and have a good time; even in winter when the temperatures become a little chilly, a light jacket should see you through. The more important thing to consider is the crowds - this is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, after all. In fact, Greece welcomes several million visitors per year and the peak is - naturally - during the summer months of July and August.



Since tourism is such an important industry to Greece, they are well equipped to handle the floods of visitors that turn up every summer. However, there are times when things are just so busy that standards can slip and accommodation, ferry crossings etc. just can't keep up with the demand. If you're planning to visit during peak season, be sure to reserve everything you need to well in advance. Similarly because of the demand, prices tend to peak around then too.

As with many other Mediterranean destinations, the shoulder seasons (May - June and September - October) strike the ideal balance of the best weather with most reasonable prices and manageable crowds. The winter months are the least busy as far as crowds are concerned, but this comes with a price; on the islands in particular many hotels, attractions and ferry services shut down completely. It can be difficult to get from place to place, and more advance research is needed to ensure you get to see and do everything you want to. The same goes for off the beaten track destinations on the mainland, but the large tourist hubs and cities should still be fine.

Greece is quite religious as a country, and most of their public holidays coincide with events in the religious calendar such as Easter, the Pentecost and the Assumption. However, note that the Greek Orthodox church operates on slightly different dates than other Christian denominations, and these events are often a few weeks later than they would be in the UK, US and other countries. Assumption Day in particular (15th August) is a great time of celebration for Grecians, with summer festivals taking place in towns and cities. Easter is equally vibrant and involves parades and fireworks, and the beginning of Lent (usually around February or March) is marked with a large scale carnival with costumes, more parades, and unique celebrations that differ from region to region. Coinciding your visit around any of these religious festivals makes for a great opportunity to delve into typical Greek life.

As well as the major religious holidays, many islands and regions have their own holidays and festivals that can take place at just about any time of year. Of course, if you find yourself in Greece on the same year as an Olympic Games, paying a visit to Olympus is an absolute must; you may even see the original olympic torch on its parade around the world to the games destination.

When the crowds of summer holiday tourists are gone, there are often many interesting cultural events taking place in various parts of Greece throughout autumn and winter, such as film festivals, art exhibitions, music festivals - and anything else you can think of! In contrast to the religious holidays, national holidays like Independence Day are a much more sombre affair, with most locals choosing to celebrate it privately. Public celebrations aren't really the done thing.



What kind of clothes should I bring?

Greece's climate is divided into two. The coast, the islands and the lowland areas are all distinctly Mediterranean, with warm temperatures and long hours of sunshine from March right through to October. In the summer months it can get extremely hot during the afternoons, but things cool off again when the sun sets. If like most tourists you're visiting these areas during this time, shorts and t-shirts will be your friends. Don't forget a hat and sunglasses too - you'll need them to keep your face protected from the strong summer sun.

During winter expect a little more rain and cooler - but still very pleasant - temperatures. Shorts and t-shirts may still be fine for during the day, but once the sun goes down you'll definitely need a light jacket or sweater to keep the chill at bay.

The highlands and mountainous areas of Greece are a different story. They enjoy an Alpine climate, which means more rain in summer and often frost and the odd snow shower in winter. These regions also offer excellent opportunities for hiking and outdoor adventures, so pack accordingly if you're working the mountains into your itinerary; think solid boots, light waterproof layers and a warm jacket, just in case.

As far as dressing to impress goes, there's no need to in Greece. The locals are very casual and will think no different of you whether you're wearing sandals and shorts or a three piece suit - although you may get some funny looks if you wear the latter in such a warm climate. The only strictly enforced dress code is at religious sites; women are expected to cover their shoulders and both men and women should wear something that reaches below the knees on the bottom - i.e trousers or a long skirt rather than shorts.



Currency

Greece is currently in the midst of a complicated financial crisis, however at the time of writing things had reached a tentative state of stability. The country still uses the Euro and it looks like things will stay that way for the foreseeable future. The Euro comes in denominations of 500, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5 notes and 2 euro, 1 euro, 50 cents, 20c, 10c, 5c, 2c and 1c coins. Don't expect many people to be willing to accept the larger notes.

While ATMs can be found everywhere, getting cash from them is troublesome at best. To be safe, it's best to bring enough cash to cover your whole trip - but remember not to carry it all with you when you're out and about. Take what you need for the day and store the rest securely. The good news surrounding all of this is that prices remain relatively low in Greece, even in the popular tourist areas.

At present, 1 Euro will get you:

\$1.13 US Dollar

\$.1.46 Canadian Dollar

\$1.55 Australian Dollar

£0.73 British Pounds Sterling

Credit cards

Most larger outlets in Greece should accept your credit card if you wish to pay that way, and all of the major ones (Visa, Mastercard, Maestro, Cirrus etc.) are fine to use. Some smaller business may be reluctant to do so however, as accessing cash is a very real daily problem for all Greek residents, regardless of whether it's a small island or a major city like Athens.

There have been some recent reports of tourists having their cards rejected when attempting to use them in Greece, but the details surrounding the reports are unclear. If in doubt, call your bank ahead of your trip, and if you have specific plans that you know will require a hefty payment, it's never a bad idea to ask if you can pay in advance.



Banks

Another consequence of the financial crisis in Greece is that banks have limited opening hours. It's all subject to change as the situation progresses, but at the moment most banks are only permitted to open on weekday mornings, generally from around 8am - 2pm. Long queues are now the norm, both in banks and at ATMs, and bringing identification along with you is essential too.

VAT and Tax

It is standard for VAT to be automatically added into the cost of most items, so you won't get any nasty surprises when it comes to paying your bill. In Greece VAT is known as FPA, but it's exactly the same in all but name. All EU citizens who purchase goods in Greece are obliged to pay this tax, but the good news is that anyone from a non-EU country can get the tax refunded. Ask for a tax-free shopping form when you're playing, fill it out, and hand it over at the designated place in airport customs. You'll be refunded either in cash there and then or on your credit card at a later date.

As of July 2015, the usual VAT rate of 13% on food and drink is set to rise to 23% - but many of the islands avail of a reduction due to their reliance on tourism. It's unclear as yet how long this increased rate will be around for.

Regarding tipping, as all of your taxes and service charges will be included in your bill there's no obligation to leave an additional tip, but it is customary to round up to the nearest ten in restaurants and for other services.

Embassies and Consulates

Embassies in Greece

US Embassy - 91 Vasillissis Sohpias Avenue, 10160 Athens - Phone +30 210 721 2951 - Email athensamemb@state.gov - Website athens.usembassy.gov

Canadian Embassy - 48 Ethnikis Antistaseos Street, Chalandri, 152 31 Athens - Phone +30 210 727 3400 - Email athns@dfait-maeci.gc.ca - Website www.canadainternational.gc.ca/greece-grece/

UK Embassy - 1 Ploutarchou Street, 106 75 Athens - Phone +30 210 727 2600 - Email athens@fco.gov.uk - Website www.gov.uk/government/world/greece

Irish Embassy - 7 Leoforos Vasileos Konstantinou, 106 74 Athens - Phone +30 210 723 2771 2 - Website www.embassyofireland.gr

Australian Embassy - Coin Avenue Kifisias et Avenue Alexandras, Ambelokipi 115 10, Athens 115 23 - Phone +3- 210 870 40 00 - Email ae.athens@dfat.gov.au - Website www.greece.embassy.gov.au

Greek Embassies Abroad

USA - 2217 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington DC 20008 - Phone +1 202 939 1300 - Email gremb.was@mfa.gr - Website www.mfa.gr/washington

Canada - 80 MacLaren Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2 OK6 - Phone +1 613 238 6271 - Email gremb.otv@mfa.gr - Website www.greekembassy.ca

United Kingdom - 1A Holland park, Kensington, London W11 3TP - Phone +44 20 7229 3850 - Website www.mfa.gr/uk

Ireland - 1 Upper Pembroke Street, Dublin 2 - Phone +353 1676 7254 - Email gremb.dub@mfa.gr - Website www.mfa.gr/dublin

Australia - 9 Turrana Street, Yarralumla, Canberra ACT 2600 - Phone +612 62733011 - Website www.greekembassy.org.au - Email gremb.can@mfa.gr



A Taste of Greece

Resting on the shores of the Mediterranean, it's no surprise that Greek cuisine is based on the same ingredients as the other nations sitting on this same sea; namely fresh fruit and vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, and garlic, along with an additional perennial favourite; the olive. With so many islands within their reach, seafood is naturally a large part of Greek cuisine. Meat is a staple in any main dish too - usually lamb, beef or chicken. Couple this with feta cheese and add in some influences from the eastern borders (i.e Turkey and the Middle East) like cumin, pita breads and rich sauces, and voila - you've found the secret to Greek food.

Breakfast for the locals is an eat on the go affair, usually picked up from the nearest bakery. Delights like savoury filled pastries or fresh crusty bread are taken to the nearby coffee shop (Kafeneion) to be washed down with 'Greek' coffee - thick, strong, black and sweet - or on a hot day a frappe, i.e. an instant iced coffee. Most people stop for a few hours in the afternoon to avoid the hottest part of the day, and will use this time to have their main meal. This is a serious affair - it's still customary for whole families to return home from work or school and all sit down together over multiple plates of appetisers, salads, bread, and a few main dishes too. Everything is shared around the table amongst everyone, and the whole meal lasts for at least a few hours - Greeks never rush their food!

After the meal everyone will lie down or relax for another hour or two before returning to work for the first few hours of the evening. Therefore they won't eat again until at least 8 or 9pm at the earliest - usually later - and the final meal of the day will be light. A salad, some pita bread with dips, or a few small snacks are the norm. It's often accompanied with a few alcoholic beverages; Greeks drink as part of a meal rather than as an activity in itself like some other countries. Ouzo is the national tippie, an anise-flavoured clear spirit that turns cloudy when water is added. Coming in second is raki, the Greek equivalent of Grappa, followed by a wide variety of regional wines. While beer is easily found, the indigenous brands aren't anything to shout about. Most people stick to popular imported brands like Heineken or Amstel.

Although fast food is making its way into Greek culture, fresh ingredients and home cooked meals are still where it's at. You'll easily find fast food chains, but if you want the typical Greek experience, try eating like the locals do. You won't regret it.



Greek food glossary

Moussaka: Moussaka is to Greece what lasagne is to Italy; a quintessential classic. Ground meat in tomato sauce is layered with strips of eggplant (or sometimes potato) and topped off with a thick bechamel sauce before being baked to perfection in the oven.

Baklava: This sweet treat consists of chopped nuts wrapped in filo pastry, made super sweet with a generous helping of syrup to stick it all together. They come in many different shapes and variations, but all are rich and irresistible.

Tzatziki: Tzatziki is the classic Greek accompaniment to grilled meat, flatbreads, or anything that needs a nice dip to go with it. Strained yoghurt is mixed with cucumber, garlic, salt, olive oil, lemon juice and usually a healthy handful of herbs like mint, dill or parsley.

Keftedes: Greece's unique version of the meatball is keftedes, commonly served as an appetizer with tzatziki and pita bread. They are fried until crispy and golden, with lots of spices added in too for an extra kick.

Dolmathakia: Eat like the ancient Greeks did with some dolmathakia - rice, nuts and herbs wrapped up in grape leaves. These are another classic appetiser and make for a light and refreshing start to a meal.

Spanakopita: Spanakopita is a filling and hugely satisfying Greek dish. Essentially 'spinach pie' it's a mixture of spinach, feta cheese, egg, onion and seasoning wrapped up in filo pastry. Can be found as a classic 'pie' or in small triangular parcels.

Fassolatha: This hearty white bean soup is a meal in itself, and perfect for cooler winter weather (which does happen in Greece from time to time). There are two varieties; red, with a tomato base, and white, which is served with lemon.

Avgolemono: As the name suggests, this is a simple sauce of eggs, lemon and broth, used for basically anything that needs some sauce! Soups and stews are the usual incarnations in Greece, particularly as a pork and celery stew or as chicken soup.

Youvetsi: Youvetsi is hearty Greek cooking at its finest. It's a casserole of sorts made with beef or lamb in a rich tomato sauce, along with orzo pasta and a hefty helping of kefalotyri cheese on top, baked for 2 hours until it's a gloriously gooey mess.

Gyros: This is Greece's version of the kebab - thin strips of moist meat shorn off a rotisserie, added to warm fresh pita bread, with tzatziki and vegetables thrown on top. The perfect lunchtime snack on the go - you won't be able to get enough of these.

What Greece is made of

Most visitors have a specific ideal of Greece in their minds before visiting; white washed stone houses overlooked by ancient temples, with picture perfect beaches below and sleepy villages and tavernas lining the winding roads in between. While that's certainly something that does exist, Greece is much more varied than that. Leaving the sunkissed islands and historic structures aside, there are also soaring mountains, lush wine-producing valleys, cosmopolitan cities, and a range of architecture and interesting sights belonging to the pre-historic, medieval and modern ages as well as classical times.

The most popular region in Greece as far as tourism goes is the islands. There are hundreds of islands and huge variety between them. Just a few of the heavy-hitters include Mykonos, Rhodes, Kos, Corfu, Santorini, Naxos, and Zakynthos. All have a mix of beaches, nightlife, cultural attractions, and beautiful scenery.

The Peloponnese is also technically an island, although it's only just cut off from the mainland by the Corinth Canal and is considered part of the mainland. This lush peninsula is full of the best of everything Greek; fascinating historic sites, beautiful coastlines, and a huge plethora of cultural attractions. A more relaxed option if hopping from island to island every few days isn't your thing, or if you want to avoid wild nightlife on some of the more popular islands.

On the mainland is the world famous city of Athens and plenty more of Greece's most popular spots, including Meteora, Delphi, Olympos National Park and Thessaloniki. This is prime territory for road trips and is the best of both worlds; cultural sights and cosmopolitan cities on one hand, and beautiful unspoilt scenery and the laid back Mediterranean lifestyle on the other.

With so many islands and such lengthy coastline, Greece has developed an extensive ferry service that runs from just about anywhere along the coast to any of the islands. This makes combining a little bit of everything described above into one trip a doddle, so don't be afraid to pick and choose the best of every region and work it all into one trip of a lifetime.

As well as the regions and their highlights, there's the Greek people, Greek food, Greek architecture and the Greek lifestyle to experience too. The locals will treat you like a long lost friend or family member within 2 minutes of conversation - even less if you make an effort to speak some Greek to them! Share a leisurely meal over an evening, overlooking some of the magnificent collection of buildings every Greek town has - that's Greece as it's meant to be experienced.



Communications

Greece is no stranger to wifi, and you'll find it everywhere in the big cities. On the islands, there will usually be at least one or two coffee shops around that can get you connected, or failing that, plenty of internet cafes (although some of these can be expensive). Hotels and accommodation - unless it's in a very remote location - will offer wifi as standard, although it may not be free.

If you need to make calls while you're here, cheap international SIM cards are readily available. However, buying an international calling card can often be the cheaper option. For as little as one or two euros you can get up to an hour of calls. Pre-pay in shops or kiosks, then all you need to do is dial the number on the card, enter a pin code, and talk away.

The Greek postal service is very hit and miss, so we recommend keeping everything with you if at all possible rather than posting it back home on your travels. There are first and second class mail services, and all international post is taken by airmail. Your letter or package could arrive in as little as 3 or 4 days, or it could take 6 weeks - and there is never normally any particular reason for the delay!

If you're worried about the unusual Greek alphabet or the locals' English speaking ability, don't be. Students learn English as standard in school and in the tourist areas you'll have no problem finding someone with at least conversational English. Road signs in important areas always include both Greek and English too. Learning a few Greek phrases like 'good morning' or 'thank you' is always appreciated however, even if it isn't necessary.

Essential Greek Travel Literature

- North of Ithaka - Eleni N. Gage (2005)
- My Family and Other Animals - Gerald Durrell (1956)
- Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese - Patrick Leigh Fermor (1958)
- Three Ways to Capsize a Boat - Chris Stewart (2009)

Essential Greek Movies

- El Greco - Yannis Smaragdis (2007)
- My Big Fat Greek Wedding - Joel Zwick (2002)
- Zorba the Greek - Michael Cacoyannis (1964)
- Dogtooth - Yorgos Lanthimos (2010)
- O Drakos - Nikos Koundouros (1956)

- A Touch of Spice - Tassos Boulmetis (2003)
- Eternity and a Day - Theo Angelopoulos (1998)
- Voyage to Cythera - Theo Angelopoulos (1984)

Essential Greek Novels

- The Last of the Wine - Mary Renault (1956)
- The Magus - John Fowles (1965)
- Zorba the Greek - Nikos Kazantzakis (1964)
- Apartment in Athens - Glenway Wescott (2011)
- Gates of Fire - Steven Pressfield (1998)
- Fire from Heaven - Mary Renault (1969)
- Nights of Rain and Stars - Maeve Binchy (2004)
- The Persian Boy - Mary Renault (1972)

Essential Greek Music

- Flou - Pavlos Sidiropoulos (1978)
- Ballos - Dionyssis Savopoulos (1970)
- The Very Best of Maria Callas - Maria Callas (2003)
- Persepolis - Yannis Xenakis (1971)
- TommyLand: The Ride Tommy Lee (2005)
- Tell Me Why - Steve Agnello (2006)
- At Her Very Best - Nana Mouskouri (2001)
- Heaven and Hell - Vangelis (1975)

Why choose Greece?

If the thousands of years of fascinating history or the sun soaked climate didn't already make you want to visit Greece, there's plenty of other elements to this beautiful jewel of a country that will tip you over the edge. First and foremost; the people. Those welcoming, passionate, laid back locals will never make you feel like you don't belong - in fact, that they'll treat you just like a family member. Generous, easy-going and great company, a visit to Greece will make you feel like you're returning to some forgotten homeland; no matter how far away your real roots lie.

Secondly, there's the food. Fresh Mediterranean vegetables and a 'just in time' approach to cooking - meaning that ingredients are prepared (and sometimes only bought) only after you've placed your order; means that everything is irresistibly fresh, all the time. Savouring those mouth watering meals is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the relaxed pace of life in this country; just what you need to de-stress and unwind from the hectic life of more 'western' countries.

Of course, the history is worth a mention to. Greece is the birthplace of democracy and western culture, and many of the ruins are so well preserved that if you took away the digital cameras and modern clothing, it would be almost like stepping back in time. Everywhere you look the legacy of the ancient Greeks has left its mark - something you won't find in any other country on earth.

Finally, it's no secret that Greece has had its fair share of problems in recent years. Tourism is one of the most important industries to the Greek economy, and as far as visitors are concerned there's never been a more cost-effective time to go. Competitive prices and cheap food and drink are just one of the many, many additional reasons to visit Greece as soon as you can!



EXPLORING VACATIONS QUICK-PLANNING GUIDE

ICELAND

Getting to Iceland

Iceland has exploded in popularity as a tourist destination in the past few years, so there are now multiple options for getting there. For obvious reasons, the fastest is by plane. WOW Air is Iceland's low cost airline that offers cheap flights from several European destinations and a handful of North American ones. This means that Iceland is now a popular stop-over destination for people travelling between Europe and the US or Canada. Of course, there are plenty of other airlines who fly in and out of Iceland too at increasingly competitive prices.

The only international airport in Iceland is Keflavik, 40km away from the capital Reykjavik. The customs and immigration process is stringent but efficient, even at peak times. Although not a member of the European Union, Iceland does participate in the Schengen Agreement, which means that residents from most of Europe and a handful of other countries don't require a visa to enter for short term leisure stays. If you're travelling from outside of the 'Schengen Zone', you'll most likely have to go through an additional immigration check before you head to passport control.

The only other alternative to flying is boat. During summer and to a lesser degree in winter there is a regular ferry service from Iceland's Eastern coast from Scandinavia (namely Denmark). There are occasional chartered services from other areas in Northern Europe. As tourism increases however more ferry routes are likely to open up, so keep a look out.



When's the best time to go?

This is the most important question you need to answer when planning your trip to Iceland. Summer and Winter offer up two very different experiences. During the summer months you can avail of almost endless daylight, a packed calendar of music and cultural festivals, full accessibility to the entire country, and the warmest temperatures. During winter however, you can see Iceland at its icy, snowy best, catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights, partake in various adrenalin inducing snowsports, and truly get into the festive spirit without the huge crowds of summer in tow.

As always, there are advantages and disadvantages to each. With summer comes peak tourist season. If you don't pre-book accommodation at least several weeks in advance, you'll be homeless. All of the major sights will be chock a block with fellow tourists and coach tours, which can spoil the magic somewhat, and of course you'll face price hikes too. In winter the adverse weather closes off certain areas of the country on a regular basis - sometimes for a few weeks at a time - which can make it difficult to get from place to place. Fog, rain, and blizzards don't make for the best sightseeing or hiking conditions, and despite winter tourism rising in popularity, many hotels and attractions shut up shop for a few months. Your choice will depend entirely on what you want to experience on your trip.



If like many people you're hell bent on seeing the Northern Lights, peak activity occurs in December and January. However, it's complete pot luck - first you need low light pollution (which means getting away from the south west and the coast), then you need clear skies, and finally you need the lights to actually make an appearance, as there's no guarantee that they will. The longer the nights, the better your chances of seeing them, so winter is ideal.

March and April sees the return of spring and the kicking off of some intriguing cultural festivals. Check out DesignMarch, a celebration of Iceland's world class architects, designers and artists, or Beer Day - a commemoration of the end of prohibition in 1989 and a prime opportunity for sampling some infamous Icelandic nightlife. From May onwards Iceland's wildlife emerges from wherever it was hiding for the winter. Puffin spotting, whale watching and a host of other animal-oriented activities are on offer.

When June, July and August come around, it's live music time. There are multiple amazing festivals in Iceland encompassing a broad range of genres. Ones to watch include the alternative ATP (All Tomorrow's Parties), Braedhslan (pop/rock), and jazz and folk music festivals too. Plus, there's the midnight sun to help keep you up all night and partying til dawn, such as it is. Winter is not immune to this however, as one of the most popular festivals - Iceland Airwaves - takes place in November.

Things generally quiet down around the end of October and start of November, as Icelanders brace themselves for winter. Temperatures drop and hours of darkness stretch out once again, but that just means there's more time to experience some Icelandic hospitality, to take the chill out of your bones in one of the many hot springs, and to cuddle up in a cosy bar or cafe as you wait for the Northern Lights to make their first appearance of the year.

The best hiking is, for obvious reasons, during summer, as are the majority of other outdoor adventure activities (with the exception of snow-based ones). But with the right guides and enough experience, winter hiking offers a once in a lifetime experience. Just remember that if you're driving to and from your starting points, you'll most definitely need a 4WD.

In short, Iceland has so much to offer any time of year and you can be guaranteed to have a great time whether you go in the depths of winter or the height of summer. Just remember to prepare for all types of weather, do as much planning and research as you can before you go, and for God's sake, don't forget your camera!



What kind of clothes should I bring?

Despite the name, Iceland isn't a winter wonderland all year round. While the summer temperatures might not be up to Mediterranean standards, it can still reach a pleasant 20 - 25 degrees celsius. In the depths of winter, daytime temperatures hover in or close to freezing point. There's a famous joke in Iceland however that goes 'if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes!' The climate is notoriously changeable and while you can usually predict ballpark temperatures at any given time of year, nothing else is certain. Rain happens all year round, snow is a given in winter and not unheard of during any season, and the sun can make an appearance just about any time - even at midnight thanks to the country's northerly location.

The vast majority of Iceland's attractions are natural wonders, which means you'll be spending lots of time outdoors and should prepare for all scenarios. Good hiking shoes are a must if you're planning on tackling a trek or two, as is a thermal base layer, warm fleece and pants and a lightweight waterproof and windproof top layer. Otherwise, you should be able to get by with a standard wooly hat, gloves, scarf and a good quality warm coat. In summer layers are key - always keep something waterproof close to hand and something warm to cover up with if the weather turns. Don't forget your bathing suit either - nothing warms you up better than a dip in a hot spring, and there's always at least one or two within easy reach.

Icelanders don't place a high importance on how you dress and dress codes aren't strictly enforced in bars and restaurants. However, you may feel a little more 'at home' if you pack an outfit suitable for hitting the town in. Planning your trip to coincide with the Christmas season or New Year's Eve makes for an unforgettable experience. Icelanders know how to celebrate and will be more than willing to include you in their activities.

For a compromise of potential Northern Lights sighting and enough daylight to get out and see some of the country, October or February is a good bet. You'll also enjoy the lowest prices and the least crowds, as these months are a nice halfway point between high and low seasons. You may even get lucky with some mild, settled weather, as has happened in the last few years.

Currency

Iceland's unit of currency is the krona, which comes in denominations of 5000, 2000, 1000 and 500 (notes) and 100, 50, 10, 5 and 1 (coins). At the time of writing exchange rates are as follows:

1 Euro = 141 kr

\$1 Australian Dollar = 90 kr

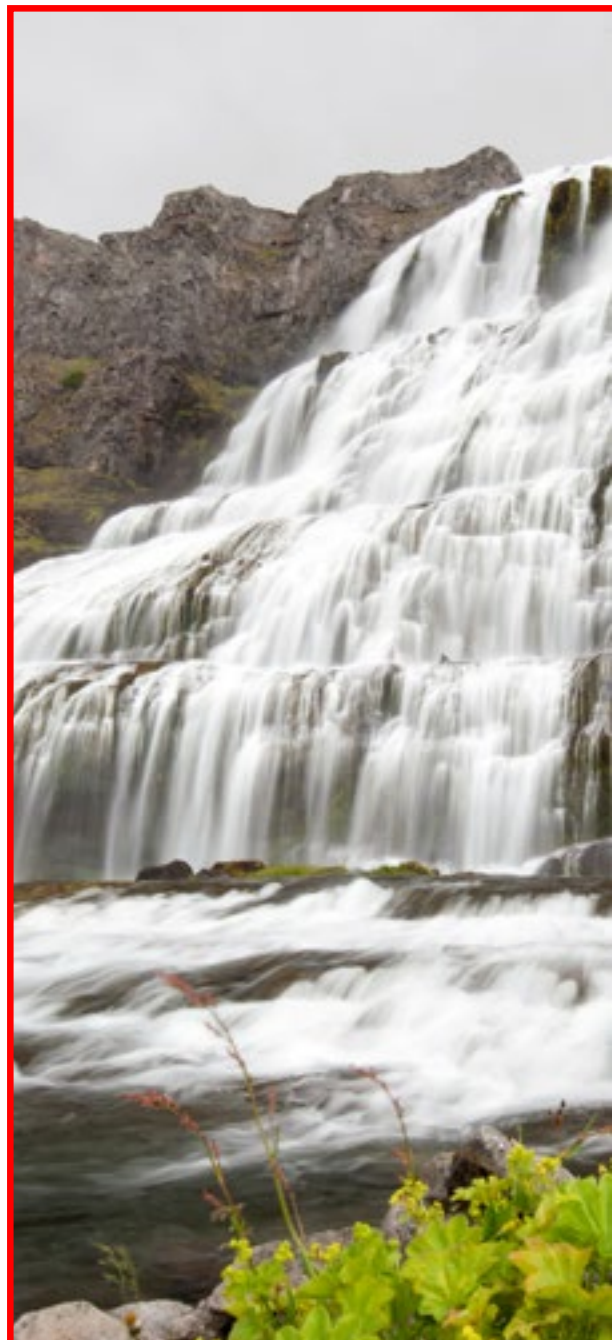
£1 British Pound = 193 kr

\$1 Canadian Dollar = 95 kr

\$1 US Dollar = 124 kr

\$1 NZ Dollar = 85 kr

If possible, try to refrain from using large notes for small purchases, as some shops and restaurants - especially in smaller towns and villages - will be reluctant or unable to exchange them. It can be somewhat difficult to obtain Icelandic currency abroad, but don't worry; currency exchanges are plentiful. Travellers cheques are accepted in major tourist destinations, but usually only in US Dollars or maybe Euros. You can expect to pay around 500 kr for a takeaway coffee, around 2000 kr for a meal in a low-end restaurant, 1000 kr for a large (500ml) bottle of local beer, and upwards of 900 kr for a short taxi journey. Buying food from supermarkets tends to be much cheaper than eating out.



Credit cards

Debit and credit cards are widely accepted everywhere in Iceland - in fact, Icelanders use their credit cards much more than cash. Mastercard and Visa users will encounter no problems - American Express cardholders may run into some difficulty outside the big tourist centres, but it's unlikely. Keep in mind that most petrol stations - especially those in remote areas - operate on a pay in advance basis with credit card only - i.e you'll need to submit your card details before the petrol pump unlocks, then once you're done, your card is charged. For that reason, it's a good idea to get your hands on a chip + pin card if you don't already have one - and don't forget to memorise your pin number too!

Banks

Banks are generally open from 9am - 4pm, Monday to Friday. If you need to change currency when you're here, the banks offer the best deals. ATMs are easily found in all but the smallest towns. The country's biggest banks are Arion Bank, Islandsbanki, Landsbankinn, and MP Bank. All can be found in Reykjavik and you'll see most all over the rest of the country too.



VAT and Tax

Service and VAT are always included in prices as standard in Iceland. Tipping isn't required, although if you received exceptional service in a restaurant an extra coin or two is always appreciated. There is no need to tip bartenders, taxi drivers etc, - but if you really feel a gesture is necessary, just tell them to keep the change. There is a misconception that tipping is offensive in Icelandic culture - it's not, it's just not the norm.

VAT rates currently stand at 24% for the standard rate and 11% for the reduced rate. The reduced rate applies to food, goods for human consumption, accommodation etc - good news for tourists! Tax free shopping is available for visitors who are permanently resident outside of Iceland. You'll need to obtain a refund cheque from the retailer and produce it along with the goods you bought and proof of foreign residence at airport customs. You must have spent a minimum of 6000 kr and you must be exporting the goods within 3 months of your purchase. Your paperwork will be signed and stamped, and the National Bank of Iceland will issue your refund. Keep in mind that customs officials are under no obligation to issue you with a refund - but generally speaking if you're just taking home souvenirs and the like, you won't have a problem.

Embassies and Consulates

Icelandic Embassies Abroad

Canada - 360 Albert Street, Suite 710, Ottawa, ON K1R 7X7 - Phone +1 613 482 1944 - Email icemb.ottawa@utn.stjr.is - Website iceland.is/ca

United Kingdom - 2A Hans Street, London SW1X 0JE - Phone +44 020 7259 3999 - Email icemb.london@utn.stjr.is - Website iceland.is/uk

United States - House of Sweden, 2900 K Street NW #509, Washington DC 20007-1704 - Phone +1 202 265 6653 - Email icemb.wash@utn.stjr.is - Website iceland.is/us

Australia - 2/45 New Beach Road, Darling Point, Sydney NSW 2027 - Phone +61 29365 7345 - Email iceland@bigpond.net.au

Ireland - Cavendish House, Smithfield, Dublin 7 - Phone +353 1872 9299 - Email brian.oneill@goregrimes.net

New Zealand - 22 Jellicoe Street, Freemans Bay, PO Box 443, Auckland 1140 - Phone +64 9379 4720 - Email ebarratt@sanford.co.nz

Embassies in Iceland

Canada - Tungata 14, 101 Reykjavik - Phone +354 575 6500 - Email rkjvk@international.gc.ca - Website www.canada.is

United Kingdom - Laufasvegur 31, 101 Reykjavik - Phone +354 550 5100 - Email info@britishembassy.is - Email www.gov.uk/government/world/iceland

United States - Laufasvegur 21, 101 Reykjavik - Phone +354 595 2200 = Website iceland.usembassy.gov

Ireland - 106 Asbud, 210 Gardabaer - Phone +354 554 2355 - Email davidsch@islandia.is



A Taste of Iceland

Icelandic cuisine has a reputation for being, shall we say, unpalatable. You'll no doubt have heard tales of fermented fish, sheep's heads and other horrors. Don't be fooled; while those are considered delicacies, they're not eaten on a daily basis and there's much more to Icelandic food than that. Unfortunately for vegetarians, it does heavily rely on meat and fish. However in Reykjavik and the larger towns there are usually vegetarian options available in restaurants.

As an island nation, there's plenty of delectable seafood to be found in Iceland. Hofn on the south coast is the home of the best langoustines you'll ever eat, and all kinds of fish, shellfish, and other sea creatures can be found in every town without searching too hard. Iceland also has a long standing tradition of whaling, but this is a thorny subject. Many people have environmental and ethical concerns about the practice. If you want to try it, ensure you've done some research into where and how your chosen restaurant has obtained its whale meat - the same goes for puffin, which is a protected species.

Non-seafood lovers will be glad to know there's plenty of lamb and beef to found in Iceland too, usually served with huge dollops of potato and bechamel sauce with some hearty vegetables like turnip, carrots, peas and onions. There are numerous different types of traditional breads to accompany it all too. Of course, it's not all Icelandic cuisine - there's a wide choice of restaurants encompassing all kinds of cuisine, including fast food.

'Thorramatur' is an eating tradition that takes place between late January and early February (Thorri season), where groups of families and friends gather to enjoy a selection of traditional dishes. The acquired taste of hakarl (fermented shark) and hrutspungsar (pickled ram's testicles) make an appearance, but plenty of 'normal' foods are served up too. Thorlaxsmessa is a similar festive event taking place on 23rd December where cured skate (skotuveislur) is served.

Coffee culture is alive and well in Iceland, with numerous cafes to be found in every town. At night, they seamlessly transform into bars and the tipple turns from coffee to alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol is expensive, but there are lots of indigenous beers to try if you so wish; check out Egils, Olvisholt and Vifillfell for starters. Brennivin - otherwise known as 'black death' - is a clear, unsweetened schnapps that claims the title of Iceland's national beverage. Shots of this potent alcohol are taken on special occasions, but be warned - it's strong stuff! It's a rite of passage for everyone to pick up a hot dog - the nation's favourite fast food - before heading home from a night out. Don't miss out on Iceland's unique take on this world famous favourite.



Icelandic food glossary

Skyr is light yoghurt-like dairy product that has been a part of Icelandic cuisine for over 1000 years. Usually served with warm milk, a sprinkling of sugar, and maybe some berries if you're feeling fancy, it makes a refreshing dessert - or breakfast!

Pylsur: Iceland's unofficial national dish is Pylsur - that's hot dogs to you. Hot dog stands are everywhere, and you should eat one like the Icelanders do - with fried and raw onion, sweet mustard and a traditional 'remoulade' sauce (mayo, capers, mustard and herbs).

Rugbraud: You probably know this as rye bread - dense, dark in colour, and sweet in flavour. In Iceland there's also another variety called Hverabraud, or 'hot spring bread' which is placed in a wooden cask and buried in the ground near a hot spring to bake.

Kleina: The usual accompaniment to a coffee, kleinurs are knotted pieces of flat dough, which are then deep fried. Think doughnuts, with a different shape. If you've visited other Scandinavian countries, you'll be familiar with this sweet treat as it's popular at Christmas time.

Hangikjot: A traditional festive food, Hangikjot is tastier than it sounds. Roughly translated as 'hanged meat', it's any form of meat (although most commonly lamb) that has been strung up and hung from rafters to be smoked. Served with potatoes in bechamel sauce or in between some bread.

Hardfiskur: This is a 'fish jerky' of sorts, dried outdoors by the wind and torn into strips and served with warm butter. A favourite snack for Icelanders, it's eaten in the same way as potato chips in other countries; with lunch, during a movie, and so on.

Laufabraud: An Icelandic Christmas tradition is the making of laufabraud, thin, flat, round pancake-like bread with beautiful geometric patterns cut into it. It is then briefly fried in oil before being eaten. Delicious, and wonderfully festive.

Hakarl: The most well known of 'traditional' Icelandic foods is hakarl - fermented shark meat. It's definitely an acquired taste, to say the least. Thankfully Icelanders don't eat it on a day to day basis, and it's usually reserved for special occasions.

Kjotsupa: Mouth watering, heart warming kjotsupa - or meat soup - is just what you need to get rid of the chill of Iceland's wintery weather. Small pieces of meat, rice, potatoes, turnips, carrots, onions and herbs are boiled for several hours and served up piping hot.

Flatkaka: Flatkaka is a round rye flatbread, sometimes baked on hot stones. Similar to a tortilla but with a different flavour and texture, it is usually cut into halves or quarters and served with hangikjot, smoked salmon or lots and lots of melted butter.

What Iceland is made of

To be frank, Iceland is like no other country on earth. Underneath the glistening glaciers of the surface is a geological wonderland of spouting geysirs, bubbling mud pools, fresh lava fields, roaring waterfalls and of course; rumbling volcanoes. And that's just along the coast! The country's interior is a starkly beautiful network of mountains, valleys and hiking trails, capped with snow during winter but revealing a myriad of otherworldly colours once the ice melts away.

This island is all about natural beauty. There are only 300,000 people living in the entire country (compare that to the 8.5 million people who live in London or New York alone), so there's more than enough fresh air to be had and unspoilt landscape to be found; in fact, that's what most of Iceland consists of. The majority of the population live in the south western part of Iceland, with the rest of coastline dotted with small towns and villages at regular intervals.

The Westfjords are sparsely populated by humans, but teem with wildlife like puffins, arctic foxes and seals, who make their homes among the rugged cliffs and caves. The northern coast is the territory of whales, who can be spotted year round; back on land there are countless lava fields and geothermal areas to be explored. The east is home to more fjords and breathtaking landscapes, while the south coast has some of the most awe inspiring scenery you'll ever see, from glaciers to waterfalls and everything in between.

As well as unforgettable nature, Iceland has an intriguing history too. The legacy of the country's primary inhabitants - the Vikings - can be seen everywhere. The language is almost unchanged, the mythology is a significant part of the culture, and most of the inhabitants can trace their genealogy back to some Viking leader or other. This has manifested itself in the Iceland natives of today, who are industrious, creative, determined, and most of all welcoming (once you get to know them).

Despite the remote location however, Iceland is a thoroughly modern place. Its people are tech savvy and every well educated and its politics and society are much more progressive than many other European nations; it has the highest gender equality in the world, for example, and 90% of its workforce are members of labour unions. During the financial crisis of 2008, it made the decision to let the banks go bust and wipe out many citizen's savings. The bankers were thrown in jail, the economy is now booming, and tourism has skyrocketed. They may not always do things the usual way, but they sure make it work for them - and that's just the tip of the iceberg that is this beautifully breathtaking country.



Communications

Iceland has its own language that closely resembles that spoken by 13th century Vikings. While it does have similarities to other Scandinavian languages, they are by no means interchangeable. Icelandic is notoriously difficult for visitors to wrap their tongues around, but never fear; the entire population has at least a little bit of English and most of them are more than capable of having a full conversation in English.

If you're planning on going off the beaten track, going hiking, or road tripping through remote areas, it is vital that you have some way of contacting people in case of emergency. Icelandic weather can change dramatically in an instant and there are countless stories of unprepared tourists getting themselves into trouble. Depending on your carrier, your phone may pick up signal in or close to towns and villages in Iceland, but if you want to play it safe for when you go 'off road' it's best to pick up a local sim when you arrive. The biggest operators in the country are Siminn, Vodafone and Nova. Iceland's international country code is 354. The emergency number is 112.

In Reykjavik and the larger towns you'll find plenty of cafes, hotels, etc. with decent wi-fi. Libraries and colleges often have public computers that are free to use. Icelanders are tech savvy people and one of the top internet users in the world - even petrol stations offer free wi-fi! In smaller towns it's usually still readily available in hotels and guesthouses, although you may have to pay a small fee to get connected.

Iceland's postal service is reasonably efficient should you need to use it. Stamps are available to purchase in just about every hotel, grocery store or tourist information centre as well as post offices. The last post collection of the day is usually around 5 or 6pm, and it does not operate on weekends.



Essential Iceland Travel Literature

- Frost on My Moustache - Tim Moore (1999)
- Letters from Iceland - WH Auden and Louis MacNiece (1936)
- The Iceland Traveller: 100 Years of Adventure - Alan Boucher (1989)

Essential Icelandic Movies

- The Secret Life of Walter Mitty - Ben Stiller (2013)
- Jar City - Baltasar Kormakur (2008)
- 101 Reykjavik - Baltasar Kormakur (200)
- The Deep - Peter Yates (1977)
- Children of Nature - Friðrik Þór Friðriksson (1991)
- Cold Light - Hilmar Oddsson (2004)
- When the Raven Flies - Hrafn Gunnlaugsson (1984)
- Of Horses and Men - Benedikt Erlingsson (2008)

Essential Icelandic Novels

- Independent People - Halldor Laxness (1934)
- Jar City - Arnaldur Indridason (2000)
- The Blue Fox - Sjon (2003)
- Silence of the Grave - Arnaldur Indridason (2006)
- From the Mouth of the Whale - Sjon (2008)
- Voices - Arnaldur Indridason (2006)
- The Swan - Gudbergur Bergsson (1991)
- Reply to a Letter from Helga - Bergsveinn Birgisson (2010)

Essential Icelandic Music

- Post - Bjork, 1995
- Agaetis Byrjun - Sigur Ros, 1999
- Beneath the Skin - Of Monsters and Men, 2015
- Stick Around for Joy - The Sugarcubes, 1991
- Love in the Time of Science - Emiliana Torrini, 1999
- The Ghost that Carried us Away - Seabear, 2007
- Otta - Solstafir, 2014
- Silkidrangar - Samaris, 2014

Why choose Iceland?

It's impossible to fit all the reasons to visit Iceland into one short section - whole books could be filled on the subject. The country really does have a magical vibe - from the lava lamp marvels of the Northern Lights, to the midnight sun, to the glassy glaciers and the grumbling volcanoes, it really is like diving into the pages of a fantasy novel. As well as that, there are killer cultural events to take in too - the booming music scene and festivals are just one example.



It's important to note that the unbelievable visitor experience offered up to tourists is the work of a population of 300,000 - less when you remove those who work outside of the hospitality and tourism industry. Furthermore, the country sees three times as many visitors as that pass through every year, and that figure is growing by roughly 10% year on year.

So while Iceland still remains largely unspoiled, with free natural attractions and enough space for everyone to enjoy, that may all be completely changed in a few short years. Already hotels are shooting up in various remote towns and villages, but it's still difficult to find accommodation during peak season without booking well in advance. It's unclear how much increased tourism will affect the country's unique environment, but one thing's for sure; progressive Icelanders will do whatever it takes to keep their country as beautiful as it is now, and that most likely means tourist taxes or introduction of admissions fees.

The introduction of low air fares to Iceland means that the floodgates have opened to visitors from mainland Europe. So if you want to experience Iceland's spectacular scenery, unique history, cosmopolitan culture and warm people - and if you want to do it without a million other tourists waiting in line behind you - now is the time to go.

Get Your Quote

Simply follow the link below to receive your no-obligation quote:

[HTTP://WWW.EXPLORINGVACATIONS.COM/CONTACT-US](http://www.exploringvacations.com/contact-us)

Client Testimonials

"I have the highest regard for Robin Shortt and his company, Exploring Ireland. My 95 year old Mom, my sister and I took a very special trip in October that was expertly planned by Robin. Every detail was in order including pre trip planning, lodging, sights, and transportation provided by our driver/guide, Ben."

Karen Hunter, Colorado

"I want to say thank you from Canada, myself and my three sisters stayed in Ireland this fall and loved it. We took the five day bus tour of southern Ireland and feel so lucky to have experienced such great scenery, accommodations and Irish hospitality. Thank you so much for making a dream come true."

Rose Anne Pescod

"Staff of Exploring Ireland, Wow is all I can say! Hotels were, pleasantly, what I expected, the meals were very good and plentiful; the tour guide was very informative. Our driver was excellent, as the roads are quite trim; he kept us safe and sound. This was a good trip to get a feel for the different areas of your Island country. There were many times we wanted to stay longer at a location, but perhaps another time. Great choice of hotels and B&B for accommodations. Thank you for a memorable trip."

Michele A. Slauson



"We would just like to drop you a note to say 'thank you' to you (and Exploring Ireland) for organizing our dream trip to Ireland. We told you what we had in mind and somehow you managed to put together the perfect itinerary with the right mix of sights and interesting places to stay. Loved being in the castles, but also enjoyed the B&B's and hotels. We fell in love immediately with all that Ireland has to offer: the misty mountains, green valleys, beautiful ocean, amazing food, quaint villages, vibrant cities, pubs and music and last but not least, wonderful people. The trip was 10/10, all that we'd hoped for and more Thank you so much again for all your patient assistance along the way. Keep up the great work at Exploring Ireland!"

Elizabeth & Michael

"Ireland was just stunning!! Many thanks to Exploring Ireland for making the trip a success! The accommodations were lovely all around... very clean, neat, and inviting with friendly, helpful hosts. It is difficult to select my favourite experience... but it's a tie between driving the Ring of Kerry and visiting St. Kevin's in Glendalough. We ended up using the great driving map provided by Exploring Ireland more than the GPS. Overall an excellent experience!!"

Melanie Weaver

"I just wanted to thank you for all you did to set up our Exploring Ireland Trip. The self drive tour with all B&B's (8 Sept – 22 Sept) was wonderful. We met so many great people and felt welcome just about everywhere we went. Both guests and hosts gave insightful commentary on local things to explore and we were guided more than once to some great restaurants and pubs for dinner in the evenings as well as to some "off the beaten path" places to visit. I had the best time we have ever had on a vacation. All of the other accommodations were each unique and special. All in all we had a really wonderful time. Thank you for all your effort in making this happen for us."

Stephen Black CA

"I'm sorry it has taken me this long to contact you but I wanted to express how wonderful my trip was to Ireland. The accommodations was exceptional, in particular my stay at Youghal at the Aherne Seafood and Townhouse (which you recommended as a destination) and of course, in Wicklow at the estate along the Irish Sea. Both were incredibly unique spots. The food and accommodations at Aherne are truly outstanding! Thanks for all of your help and guidance on putting my trip together. It was a marvellous success and I've told many people about it. In fact, I was doing a travel blog during the entire trip. Many people are excited about coming and for others it brought back memories of having been here before."

Doug

"That was the most amazing trip we've ever been on. Everything you arranged for us was perfect so both my husband I want to thank you. The day we drove around the Ring of Kerry was picture perfect. We had to decide whether to drive Dingle or go to the Cliffs of Moher, and Moher won out. They were breathtaking and impossible to photograph and do them justice. We've been raving about you to all of our friends and family so you may get a few more calls from Ontario. What a holiday. Thank you both again."

Mary McMurrin

"I just wanted to let you know how great of an adventure our group had in Ireland! Everyone we came in contact with was super friendly. We made quite a bit of friends in Clifden, and we doubt they'll ever forget us! I have recommended your travel agency to many friends & family here in the States! Without your help in planning our places of stay, we would never have thought to see all the places we did! Again, thank you for aiding in our AWESOME Adventure in Ireland! We had a blast!"

Kim Hartman

"We had a marvellous trip! Our driver was absolutely incredible! He was a superstar- he worked with us and helped us know what we could do and made suggestions based on what we were talking with him about wanting to see – we saw FAR more than we ever thought we would based on his hard work and knowledge!!! Our hotels were excellent and offered excellent food and service. Our driver took GREAT care of my father who is 84 and my mother in law who is 74. He made sure they were included and saw as much as they could without feeling like they were holding the trip experience back at all!! We came away from our vacation with awesome memories of the land of our heritage with our family together, which is everything we hoped for. Thank you for assistance and patience!"

John Walling

"Thank you for an absolutely marvellous vacation, and also to say how much we appreciated our driver, He went out of his way over and over again to be sure our trip was as memorable as possible, and by the end of our holiday, we viewed him not just as a driver, but as a dear friend. Our travels would not have been as good without him. We will always recommend your company. We wanted to add an additional comment regarding our hotels. Each one was absolutely amazing and even better than expected. Once again, thank you for all your hard work in putting our entire trip together. Each one on the trip applauds a job well done!"

Brenda Gates IL

"Well, my travelling companions and I are back in Ottawa as of last night, Wednesday, Sep. 26th. WHAT A TRIP!!! My travelling companions join me in expressing our sincere thanks for everything you have done for us! Truly remarkable! Looking up your site on Google and trusting that you would set up our itinerary to accommodate us was one thing, but to set up our B&B so close and handy to the many wonderful places we saw and many things we did, was just.FANTASTIC! All four of us were taken by the beauty of your country, taken by the charm of the Irish and amazed by the scenery, the greenery and the pride of the Irish. THANK YOU!! I for one will not hesitate to recommend EXPLORING IRELAND to family and friends. . . True Irish Experience!"

Gordon Hadley Ontario



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Toll Free From USA & Canada - 1 888 451 3744
International - + 353 44 9349941

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