



I've just returned from my first trip to Europe and the United Kingdom. It was a whirlwind adventure that took me through 9 cities and 7 countries, on 10 planes, 13 trains, 6 taxis, and 4 bike hiring schemes.

I enjoyed the cosy pubs of London, saw the *très grand* monuments of Paris, experienced the superior bicycle infrastructure of Berlin and Copenhagen, and was moved by the sad history of Kraków in Poland. It was a trip filled with hundreds of memories I'll keep for the rest of my life. It was also a trip that brought many practicalities to the fore.

Things I wish I had known beforehand and hadn't stumbled upon in my research. Stuff I think others would benefit from before embarking on their own Europe adventure, whether it's part of an organised group like a Contiki tour, or self-guided. Here are my top 17 tips for having a hassle-free and amazing time in Europe:

Gear

1. Wear hard-wearing, quick-dry travel clothing

The sort of clothing you'd find at an outdoors shop, as it's just plain practical. We didn't exclusively carry this sort of clothing on our trip - we had jeans, cotton t-shirts, and so on. These garments needed washing after a time and a go in the tumble drier. About 6 hours of the whole trip was spent sitting in laundromats waiting for waschmaschinen and kleider trockner (German for washing machine and clothes dryer). Don't say you don't learn anything here!

Synthetic and merino wool outdoorsy clothes can be washed in the shower or hotel basin and dry very quickly. The best thing about merino is it takes a lot to get smelly, so you can wear it over and over.

2. Choose a backpack rather than suitcase

You can always tell the suitcase totters when you disembark onto a busy train station platform. They're the ones struggling along, trying to make their case stable on two wheels, while you try and push in front of them. With a backpack, you'll be much more agile and stairs and escalators will be fair game.



The Pacsafe Coversafe X100 Waist Wallet protects against your cards or passports being hacked, or physically stolen.

4. Invest in a good neck pillow

We flew Etihad. They supplied very basic neck pillows in economy. Very basic. I'm sure a quality neck pillow would have added a few more hours of sleep to our cumulative 48 hours in the air.

Money

5. Always have cash on you

Cash is becoming less commonly used in Australia. What, with our obsession with plastic, PayPass, and now Apple Pay and so on? That doesn't mean the rest of the world is in the same place. I asked one shop assistant in Germany why people don't use their cards as much. She responded, 'They're Germans. They like to see their money'. Fair enough. Always have some notes and coins on you*.

* *When you're carrying Kroners, you'll feel extra rich as everything is in 100s and 1000s. Until you calculate the exchange rate and then you'll feel really poor.*

No matter where you go you'll soon come across a peculiar sign. This one was on a train in Poland. It was meant to convey, 'Do not throw rubbish out the window'. Or so it seemed.

6. Be careful with airport ATMs

Shop around for currency conversion and don't use the first ATM you find. The machines conveniently located in airports usually charge high fees or commissions.

Transport

7. Get to the airport early

It's easy to think that because you've been to a few airports you've been to them all. Wrong. Until I experienced the security queue in Københavns Lufthavn (Copenhagen Airport, Denmark) I had this impression that most airports are efficient beasts. An hour and a half of waiting, very strict rules when it comes to liquids, and the way one shuffles through the scanner, and being almost the last one to board my flight had me reconsider this. Do your research and don't take things for granted - just because Coolangatta is easy peasy doesn't mean Charles de Gaulle will be.

8. Hire a bike

We found the best way to get around Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen and Warsaw was by bike. The bicycle infrastructure in each of these cities varied a lot but one thing was for sure, cycling is part of life and is a quick and fun way of exploring. Our favourite hiring scheme was 'Vélib' in Paris. You pay a small fee to access the system (1,70€ at the time of writing) and can use a bike for 30 minutes for free.

The trick is to ride for half hour or less and return the bike to one of the plentiful stands, have a look around, grab another bike, and enjoy another half hour for free. Merci, Paris.

We hired bikes in Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen, and Warsaw. The Vélib' system in Paris was without a doubt the most comprehensive and value-for-money.

9. Use public transport

Most European cities have robust networks of public transport. Intercity and intercountry high-speed trains, underground metro rail, light-rail, buses – I was quite taken by Düsseldorf, Germany. For a city smaller than Adelaide it had trams galore, an underground rail system and linked neatly with the rest of Europe with high-speed rail.

The best bit was that public transport across Europe is relatively cheap and will take you where you want to go.

10. Low-cost airlines are often very basic (and crafty)

Like with airports, not all low-cost airlines are the same. You think Jetstar is basic? Try flying some of the European low-cost carriers. I didn't read an email from one unnamed carrier as carefully as I should have and got stung 419 złoty (\$140 AUD) at the gate to check in!

Yep, some will make you check in online (no less than 2 hours before departure) and print your own boarding pass.

Safety

11. Be vigilant of swindlers and street sellers

I'll admit it, I found it quite entertaining watching tourist after tourist get duped by three cup shuffle in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. But those guys before kept winning? Isn't it uncanny they look like brothers? Have your wits about you, don't sign things or buy things from people in odd places and don't ride with strangers.



Isn't this what travel is all about? Experiencing things you could never imagine or see at home?

12. Use your hotel safe

To avoid huge transaction fees it is a good idea to withdraw more cash, less often. Keep it in your hotel safe, if they have one, to keep it well – safe. Likewise cameras, watches, and other valuables. As a further precaution, I read it somewhere recently, 'If it would ruin your afternoon if it were stolen, don't take it with you.'

General

13. Do a free walking tour

Many cities run free walking tours. The best we found was by the Free Walking Tour Foundation in Kraków. You can join when you want, leave when you want, and leave a tip if you want. A guided tour of a city or particular attraction will always give you a better understanding of it. And when it's free, what have you got to lose?



Nyhavn, Copenhagen.

14. When in doubt, ask

After getting lost many handfuls of occasions, especially in the strasse of Berlin, we soon realised it was better to ask for help than think of yourself as a master of navigation. Everyone we asked for directions or recommendations was only too happy to assist. Either in our limited grasp of the local language or in English, everywhere we travelled, including Poland, most people we met spoke good English.

Accommodation

15. Check if your hotel has air conditioning

Many European and British hotels don't. We learned this the hard way, suffering through many nights where the inside temperature didn't dip below 30! Modern accommodation usually had effective systems.

Food

16. Carry a refillable bottle

Tap water in most European cities is perfectly safe to drink. Interestingly, and as much as this is the case, you'll be hard-pressed to be served it in Polish cities. Hotel rooms usually boast free bottles of water and at restaurants, when asked, they'll bring you bottled still or sparkling for a fee - though, in złoty, the cost is negligible. When out for the day, fill up your own water bottle.

17. Eat local, drink local

Whatever you do, do not pass up the opportunity to try local food and drinks. We had the best bangers and mash with flat beer in London, beautiful bistro meals with carafes of red wine in the laneways of Paris, schnitzels as big as your head, served traditionally with a lemon wedge rather than lashings of sauce, in Dusseldorf and beautiful little pillow-like pierogi and half-litre glasses of Polish beer in the milk bars of Kraków.

I think you learn a lot about a place by sampling their food, wine, and beer. So, ignore those pizza and burger joints and immerse yourself.



When in Paris, sip black coffee and eat a plain croissant for breakfast. Seriously, the perfect start to the day.



18. Be careful when catching a cab, especially in Poland

No dig at Poland, it was a lovely country to visit. But be careful when catching a cab as the drivers are notorious for ripping people off. Rather than hailing a cab on the street or out the front of the airport, book ahead. That way you can agree on a fee beforehand.

If you do hail a taxi, ask the driver how much the fare will be before accepting it. Some hotels will allow you to book with them and their preferred taxi company at a fixed rate, especially if you're travelling to common places like the airport.

19. Pack a small set of scales

Being slugged excess baggage is the worst. Weigh your bags beforehand to see if you meet your allowance. That way you can redistribute the weight, remove items, or book more weight online for a cheaper fee.

This post was updated for 2017.

Got any handy tips for enjoying Europe? Share them with us below.