

Travel

BAGGAGE TAGS TO BRAG ABOUT

Plain ol' luggage? Kick it up a notch and stand out in the carousel crowd. **3H**



Sunday
November 26, 2006

www.star-telegram.com



INSIDE: Utah's Arches National Park offers incredible scenery and trails for all speeds of hikers. **4H**

Rite of passage

Five cities, two weeks and a lifetime of memories. Here's how to make the most of a backpacking trip through Europe.

By **BRIAN WOODDELL**
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

After months of planning and saving, there we were: Seven of us, three women and four men between 19 and 21, got off the planes and found our packs in the underbelly of Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Fiumicino airport. For two weeks, we would travel and learn and explore Europe.

Right after a nap. Jet lag, it seemed, could temporarily kill any and all vacation excitement.

We were there to "do Europe," and "do" it we did. Five cities in two weeks meant seeing everything as quickly as possible. When we flew home, we brought more than dirty laundry and sore feet. We realized why young adults have been backpacking across Europe for decades.

We had stories about swimming in the (frigid) Mediterranean Sea and being cursed at by an irate Italian man on the streets of Rome. We learned that tourists should always be ready to "drop some euro" for the W.C. and that chocolate cereal, which can be found in almost any grocery store, makes a great meal any time of the day. And we figured out that in Europe, "old" means something completely different from what it does in the United States.

Everywhere we stayed was clean and safe, and in several hostels, we managed to get a room of seven beds to ourselves. One night in a hostel, or a hotel with several bunk beds in each room, will cost about \$20 a person. It's not private, but it provides a way to meet other backpackers.

Here's a taste of our trip to help like-minded travelers plan — if you want to go next summer, now is the time to start.

More on EUROPE on 2H



Every night, the Eiffel Tower glows with thousands of lights, including flashing bulbs that make the tower sparkle on each hour. Inset photo: It's customary to toss a coin into the Trevi Fountain in Rome, thereby ensuring your return to the Eternal City.

EIFFEL TOWER PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN WOODDELL. SETE/ILLUMINATIONS PIERRE BIDEAU; INSET PHOTO: BRIAN WOODDELL

Europe: Some do's and don'ts of backpacking across the Continent

CONTINUED FROM 1H



STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN WOODDELL

St. Peter's Square, shown from the roof of the basilica, can welcome thousands of worshippers during speeches by the pope.

Rome, days 1-3

Where we stayed: M&J Hostel
What we did right: We made ourselves get up early to see the city, even though we were tired, and we spent the extra 11 euros each to see Palatine Hill.
What we did wrong: Food. We didn't know where to go or how

much to spend, so our meals weren't very good, except for the one time we tried authentic Italian pizza. *Molto bene!*
What we saw: The Vatican, the Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, Palatine Hill, the Colosseum, the Forum, the Spanish Steps, Villa

Borghese
Don't miss: Gelato (ice cream) in front of the Spanish Steps at dusk.
Avoid: The metro. Downtown is small enough that walking isn't a problem, and the subway is way too crowded.

Venice, days 4-6

Where we stayed: Villa Dori (an inexpensive hotel)
What we did right: We stayed outside the touristy part of Venice, so we were able to see typical Italian life.
What we did wrong: This city is a huge tourist trap. Spend a day and a half at the most. We were there too long.
What we saw: Islands of Torcello, Murano and Burano; the Grand Canal; San Michele Cemetery
Don't miss: Torcello and its ancient church. It's one of the least-spiced parts.
Avoid: Gondolas. They're a rip-off at \$80 plus tip.



STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN WOODDELL

You can see typical Italian life on the island of Murano, known for its blown glass, in Venice's northern lagoon.

Paris, days 7-9

Where we stayed: A church in central Paris
What we did right: By staying in a church, we saved about \$20 a person each night. Talk to your place of worship for contacts abroad.
What we did wrong: We weren't there long enough to see Versailles and a few more museums. In addition, we didn't check to see when things were closed. The Musee d'Orsay (with its Monets and Renoirs), for example, wasn't open the day we tried to visit.
What we saw: The Louvre, Eiffel Tower, Le Centre Pompidou, La Sainte-Chapelle, Sacre Coeur Basilica, Notre Dame Cathedral, La Grande Arche de la Defense
Don't miss: The Eiffel Tower at night, La Sainte-Chapelle (near Notre Dame) or La Grande Arche at the far northwest end of the Champs-Elysees.
Avoid: The elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower. If you take the stairs, you save money and time by avoiding the huge line.



STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN WOODDELL

Sacre Coeur offers a fine view of Paris from Montmartre, an area known for its bohemian life.

Barcelona, days 10-11

Where we stayed: Sea Point Youth Hostel
What we did right: We had been going nonstop, so we took time to relax on the beach.
What we did wrong: We relaxed too much and didn't plan enough time to see parts of this great city, including the former Olympic venues.
What we saw: The Mediterranean Sea, Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Familia, Parc Guell
Don't miss: Parc Guell, an extensive park designed by Antoni Gaudi that sits on a hill. It provides an awesome view of the city.
Avoid: Certain beachgoers. Beaches in Barcelona are clearly top-optional, and that isn't always a pleasant sight.



STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN WOODDELL

The lushly planted Parc Guell offers visitors an oasis in the bustling city of Barcelona.

Madrid, days 12-14

Where we stayed: Hostal Metropol
What we did right: Visited during the prince's wedding, so the whole city was clean and decorated to the hilt.
What we did wrong: Visited the city during the prince's wedding, so security was extra tight, and the streets were clogged with tourists.
What we saw: Parque del Buen Retiro, the Royal Palace, Museo del Prado
Don't miss: Churros con chocolate. There's a shop near Plaza Mayor that sells this traditional Spanish snack of sweet bread sticks dipped in a mug of thick hot chocolate. Go there, and go often.
Avoid: Having your passport stolen, missing your flight home and sitting for three hours in Madrid's American Embassy (true story).



STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN WOODDELL

Madrid's Royal Palace makes for a regal residence.

In retrospect, my friends and I did nothing perfectly, and there are many things we'd change if we could go back. But because this was the first time any of us had been to Europe without Mom and Dad, we figure we did a pretty good job.

Brian Wooddell,
bwooddell@star-telegram.com

Planning tips

Planning your trip can be fun, and the Internet makes it a breeze.

- Many hostels have Web sites or are listed on sites such as www.hostels.com, which often includes prices, photos and online reservations. It's not a big deal, though, if you don't have reservations or don't know where to stay. Hostels are built for tourists, so they are usually well marked. You can always ask other groups of young travelers as well.

- Information on trains can be found through Rail Europe at www.raileurope.com. And you can always check out blogs and personal Web sites from

people who've traveled Europe extensively and know the best ways to get around.

- As far as money, watch the exchange rates before your trip and budget accordingly. Almost everything costs more in Europe. Plan to spend \$20-\$30 a day for basic necessities, not including a fancy meal.

- If you plan early, things will go more smoothly. Don't forget to throw out your plans if something better comes along, though. Just remember: You're probably not coming back for a long time, so make the best of it.

Unconventional things to remember

- You don't speak (insert language here), so don't assume natives speak your language, either. Take time to learn some phrases, and be ready to apologize for butchering pronunciation.

- They don't speak Spanish in Spain (sort of). In Barcelona and the Catalonia region, they speak Catalan, a language that evolved from Latin centuries ago. Almost everywhere else, they speak Castellano, which is the same Spanish you learned in class, even though it sounds nothing like it. Don't expect your two semesters of high school Spanish to get you anywhere.

- No matter how hard you try, you will look like a tourist. Keep your money and documents in a secure place.

- Learn to say "carafe of water" in every European language. Often, carafes are free, unlike the tiny bottles you'll be served if you simply order "water."

- Refills are seldom free (except for your carafe), and few waiters will ever tell you that.
- If you cross a national border via train, prepare to hand over your passport. The natives do this all the time. Make sure you have a couple of paper copies of your passport handy.

- The gentle rocking motion of an overnight train is anything but. Bring sleeping pills if you use them, and upgrade to a larger bed instead of a tiny couchette or a regular seat.

- Rail passes and frequent-flier miles make excellent Christmas gifts. That will cover the two most expensive parts of your trip.

- Trains give you a cultural experience, but discount airlines might be cheaper.

- Eat at least one good meal in each city you visit. After all, you're probably not coming back anytime soon.

- Tipping guidelines are different everywhere. Check a guide book, and don't be afraid to ask natives about the local practice.

- Learn words for foods you don't like so you know what to avoid on the menu.

- Before you drink alcohol, make sure someone will remember the way back to where you're staying.

- For everyday meals, check out the neighborhood grocery store. A baguette with cheese, ham and mustard makes a great lunch.

- Remember how much is in your checking account. Chances are European ATMs won't tell you your balance.

- Plan some time away from your group to keep tensions from building.

- Pack a towel. Besides the obvious uses, it can keep you warm or protect that glass thing you bought for Mom.

— Brian Wooddell

CRUISE SPECIALS

Carnival

Sail From Galveston

5 Night MEXICO

From \$299

7 Night CARIBBEAN

From \$499

Rates per person, dbl. occ., select dates, gvt. taxes additional.

The Emerald CRUISE SHOPPE
A Division of Emerald Travel & Cruises

(817) 481-8413

www.emeraldtravel-cruises.com

SAVE on dining and entertainment!

Dial 817-335-4837 for details on Press Pass.

HAWAII
Call hawaii.travel.com and save \$\$\$ on trips.

817-430-3823

Country	Sell	Buy
Australia	0.839	0.711
Canada	0.932	0.797
England	2.032	1.756
Euro	1.372	1.191
Japan	0.009	0.008
Mexico	0.999	0.081
Hong Kong	0.141	0.117
Switzerland	0.8733	0.746

Foreign currency in US Dollars
Source: Gulliver's Travel/American Express
Rates effective 11/22/06, subject to change.

Foreign Exchange Services
80 Countries Buy / Sell
Gulliver's Travel
American Express 817-924-7766

15-Day French Canada Cruise & Northeast Tour

Tour Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Hyde Park. In Montreal, board your 5-star ship, Holland America's *ms Maasdam*. Cruise to Quebec City via St. Lawrence River and Saguenay Fjord. Visit Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia; Bar Harbor and Boston. Prices start at only \$1798 USD (per person, double occupancy) including taxes, the motor coach tour with daily escorted sightseeing and 7 nights in hotels, & the 7 day deluxe cruise. Add \$550 USD air from Dallas / Ft Worth. Departs May 25, 2007.

Call for brochure 7 days a week:
YMT Vacations 1-800-922-9000
America's First Choice for travel since 1967!
Ad number P-1229

LIKE A HOLIDAY GIFT TO YOURSELF
(MINUS THE WRAPPING PAPER).



\$235*

800-HOTEL-DEL • hoteldel.com
or contact your travel professional

Taxes and \$22 daily resort charge are not included

HOTEL DEL CORONADO™

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

*Offer valid 11/13/06 through 1/12/07. Starting rate shown is per room, per night, and based on availability for double occupancy. Not valid for groups or in conjunction with any other offers. Reservations for this offer must be made in advance and length of stay requirements may apply.

THE KSL RESORTS COLLECTION • KSLRESORTS.COM
LA COSTA RESORT AND SPA • RANCHO LAS PALMAS RESORT & SPA • HOTEL DEL CORONADO