

PLANNING A TRIP TO EUROPE

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Before leaving for Europe, or anywhere for that matter, you should first do some research. It should cover areas of personal interest applicable to the country or countries to be visited. Libraries offer a large selection of guide books that are excellent for this purpose. A minor effort will provide more events, places, museums, and historical sites to see than the average tourist will have time for.

The obstacle, concerning a trip to Europe, confronting most people is money. But a visit need not be abandoned due to lack of funds. Airfare rates drop considerably if the ticket is purchased ninety days before the flight. There are lesser price reductions for off-season tickets. Probably the cheapest way to travel once in Europe is with a backpack and a sleeping bag. For the person who does not want to camp throughout Europe the decision is whether to travel with a group on a pre-scheduled tour or to plan an individual trip.

Having been on two organized group charter tours to Europe I know most of the advantages and disadvantages. Usually these tours offer reduced airfares (although not as low as the ninety day in advance tickets). They solve the major transportation problems--from airport to hotel, from hotel to major sight seeing areas, from city-to-city. Also the tours provide comfortable hotel rooms which, during the busy season, might be impossible to obtain. These same benefits are often included in airline company travel packages.

The disadvantages, especially of airline tours, are predominantly lack of free time and sight-seeing bus jaunts one would rather avoid. Luckily on my first visit to Europe--ten days in Greece-- the entire itinerary was planned by my former Classical Mythology teacher. Consequently, all the places it included, I wanted to visit and our tour guides were knowledgeable and interested in their work. But my second trip--ten days in Italy-- was a different story. Days were wasted doing such things as looking at the Roman Forum, traveling hundreds of kilometers in a single day, and listening to a guide who kept assuring us that the mosaics at Hadrian's Villa were all marble but couldn't identify half the buildings.

The failure of the trip to Italy was its attempt to cover too large an area--from Milan to Florence to Rome to Pompeii and back again. This traveling not only wasted time but prohibited me from dwelling in places of particular interest. In Italy the tour also attempted to cover too large a cultural and historical area instead of focusing on a particular period. In Florence the focus was on the Renaissance but Rome was a chaos of ancient, medieval, modern, christian, and pagan images. Because of the jumble, individual buildings and works could not be fully appreciated. It was like going through the entire Metropolitan Museum of Art in one day. So unless you have at least a few weeks I suggest visiting one country and then only a small part

of that country.

Another problem people face when going abroad is language. Pre-arranged tours solve about seventy-five percent of this dilemma. Rooms, some meals, and basic transportation are included in the travel package, saving the tourist major worries based on communication difficulties. Actually Western Europe does not present much of a language barrier if you have any linguistic background at all. In Italy I managed quite well, with halting Italian based on high school Spanish, to use public transportation, order meals, and obtain information. Greece on the other hand, presented a problem. I found myself translating letters, not words, in an effort to locate places. At one point in Greece I was at a small airport where the flights were announced only in Greek. If I had not been with a tour group, I would have been lost. For visits to places like Greece, unless you speak the language or have plenty of time, an organized group tour is the most practical approach.

In general for a first trip abroad, a pre-scheduled tour is better than a free-lance visit to Europe. If you have a limited amount of time, money, and linguistic ability or practice, a pre-arranged tour will give you a sound base to work from. But if you have an adventurous spirit, do not panic easily, and have plenty of time to allow for missed flights, buses, trains, and siesta hours, a personally planned trip will provide the more rewarding vacation.