

Tips for U.S. Travelers Going to Holland or Western Europe

Introduction

These tips are not intended to identify everything that is different about U.S. and European culture but hopefully they include most of the major differences that can startle and confuse first time visitors. If you find an error or important omission, please feel free to email me at the address shown at the bottom of the document. Have a great trip!- Russ Funk

Understanding the language

Surviving in a country where you can't speak or understand the language could be a major undertaking, but English speakers really have it easy in Europe. Many Europeans speak English as a second language (especially in Holland). Employees in Post Offices, restaurants and hotels speak some English more often than not. Phrase books such as those written by Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) can come in handy. Some restaurants have an English menu if you ask or you can ask the waiter to help you translate the various dishes. Remember to speak slowly and simplify your conversation to use easily understandable words. Don't use slang.

Before you leave the U.S.:

- Allow plenty of time to obtain your passport. Forms and instructions are available at any U.S. post office.
- Make a photo copy of the first few pages of your passport and keep the copy in a different place than where you keep your passport. If your passport gets lost or stolen, the photo copy will help speed up getting a replacement from the U.S. consulate. A photo copy left at home in a place accessible to friends in an emergency is worth considering.
- Try to find maps of where you are going. Maps in the native language will spell the names of cities the way you will see them on street signs, maps in English often do not.
- Make a list of any U.S. phone numbers that you may need to call in an emergency.
- Take a bar of soap, emergency toilet paper and a wash cloth.
- Be forewarned about U.S. customs restrictions, read the "U.S. duty" section below.
- Take a major bank card (such as Visa) and at least one backup card (perhaps from a different company such as MasterCard). If you take a debit card, also take a credit card.
- Find out from your bank how to report a stolen or lost bank card in Europe.
- Test your bank cards at an ATM in the U.S. at least once to make sure they work properly. Remember your Personal Access Numbers, you will need them at ATMs.
- First time visitors to Europe might consider carrying a few hundred U.S. dollars (or travelers checks would be safer) that could be converted to the local currency if they fail to get their bank cards to work properly at an ATM.
- Check with the State Department (www.state.gov/) to see if they have any travel warnings about the countries that you are going to visit.

- Check to see whether vaccinations are necessary (www.cdc.gov/travel). If you need them, see your doctor at least 4–6 weeks before your trip to allow time for shots to take effect.
- If you are going to drive a car, find out whether your car insurance will be valid in Europe (probably not). Some types of credit cards provide for free car rental insurance, check with your bank. Rental car companies will be more than willing to sell you an expensive insurance policy.
- If you are going to rent a car, make reservations in advance from the U.S. for the best prices.
- Find out how your health insurance policy works if you get sick or injured in Europe.
- Consider taking a phrase book (such as the ones that Rick Steve’s writes) and a dictionary for the language of the countries that you are visiting.
- Consider making hotel reservations for at least the first night if you are traveling in the busy season or visiting a popular location.
- Find out the European phone numbers to access your long distance telephone provider (this is the second cheapest way to call home. The cheapest way is to have the person in the U.S. call you).
- Notify your bank that you will be traveling to Europe and using your bank card. Some banks have been known to deactivate cards when they are used in Europe, suspecting that they have been stolen.
- Bring a doctor’s prescription for any prescription medicine that you take out of or bring into the U.S.
- If you are a member of an automobile club, such as AAA, check with them for European driving information and instructions on how to use affiliated automobile clubs in Europe.

Entering Europe

Pass Control

You will need to show your passport and perhaps answer a few questions when you enter Europe.

Customs

Your checked in luggage will be returned to you when you enter Europe to go through customs. There is a remote possibility that your bags may be inspected at that time for restricted items.

Restricted items

You should carry a doctor’s prescription for any prescription drugs brought into Europe.

Sending mail

Stamps are available at the Post Office (called the “Post”) or at many stationary stores. When asking for stamps, be sure to tell them that the letter is going to the United States and that you want to send it by airmail. Stamps purchased in one European country must be mailed in that country.

Using the phone

In Europe, the universal emergency phone number is 112 (there is no charge to call this number from a pay phone or mobile phone).

Time differences- Before calling Europe from the U.S., remember that Europe is ahead in time so you must add 6 hours to the local East Coast time to get European time or add 9 hours to the local West Coast time to get European time.

To call Europe from the U.S.

Dial the U.S. international access code: 011

Dial the country code of the desired county that you wish to call (Holland is 31)

Dial the desired European phone number (without any preceding 0 on the number)

Note that calls to Europe from the U.S. have been historically less expensive than calls to the U.S. from Europe. The cheapest way to initiate a call from Europe to the U.S. is to use a U.S. long distance carrier and follow their instruction to reach their long distance network.

To make a call within a European country

(from any type of phone including a pay phone or mobile phone)

Dial the entire European phone number including a preceding 0.

Time differences- Before calling the U.S. from Europe, remember that the U.S. is behind in time so you must subtract 6 hours from the local European time to get U.S. East Coast time or subtract 9 hours from the local European time to get West Coast time.

To make a call from a European country to another country

(from any type of phone including a pay phone or mobile phone)

Dial the international access code for the country that you are calling from (00 is the standard access code for many European countries including Holland).

Dial the country code of the desired county that you wish to call (Holland is 31, Germany is 49, the U.S./Canada is 1)

Dial the desired phone number (without any preceding 0 on the number)

Using a pay phone

Pay phones are easy to use. During business hours, in some countries, you can call from a phone inside the post office (called the "Post" in Europe) and then pay the person at the counter when you are done. Or you can purchase a telephone card from the Post and make calls at any time from pay phones. The cards will allow calls to anywhere in the world but can only be used in pay phones in the country where you purchased the card. Pay phones also accept Euro coins, and in some countries, major bank cards. Like in the U.S., the quantity of pay phones is diminishing with the popularity of cellular phones.

Using a cell phone

Most U.S. cell phones won't work in Europe because they use a different system (GSM is the EU standard). If you want to use a cell phone to stay in touch with colleagues or family members in the U.S. during your trip, consider the following options:

1) Find a U.S. cellular phone service provider that has an agreement with service providers in Europe. Not many do this. One such service provider is www.t-mobile.com. You will have to buy or rent a phone that is both U.S. and Europe compatible. This option will be unpopular if you have friends or clients in Europe since they will have to call the U.S. in order to reach you in Europe.

2) Rent a cellular phone for Europe. Businesses are available on the Internet to do this. Check what country of origin the phone will be registered. Clients or friends in the U.S. or Holland may be reluctant to have to call Great Britain to reach you.

3) Purchase a pre-pay cell phone in Europe. Cell phones (called mobile phones in Europe), can be purchased at mobile phone service stores for a few hundred Euros or less. Foreigners without a billing address or credit history will probably be limited to using a service that uses a pre-pay card. When you buy a phone from one of these stores, they come with an electronic chip that plugs into the phone to identify your phone number and other system parameters to the phone system. You then purchase a “pre-pay” card to buy your talk time in advance. Try to find a phone that you can set to display an English menu if you need that. Don’t expect the directions that come from the store to be printed in English. When you listen to your voice mail or when others leave you a voice message, don’t expect the menu or instructions to be in English.

Pre-pay cards can be purchased from the stores where you purchased the phone or from other retail shops including gas stations. You can only use a card designed for use with your service provider, not a competitor. With some providers, the cards can only be purchased in the country where you bought the phone. Some phones don’t work outside the country where they were purchased. Some phones can be connected to a laptop computer’s modem to allow Internet access. The phone systems are running out of phone numbers, so service providers are starting to disable chip phones that aren’t used often enough. These things need to be considered and discussed with the service providers before you purchase a phone or select a provider. Pre-pay cards have an expiration date and when transferred to your phone account, the credit has a limited life. Outside your service area, you must also pay for long distance charges which are much higher than they are in the U.S.

Finding travel help

Some European countries such as Holland have an excellent network of information centers for visitors. In Holland, this organization is called the VVV (pronounced fay fay fay). Practically every town in Holland has a VVV visitor center.

Time zone differences, jet lag and flight time

You lose time when you fly to Europe. From the East Coast of the U.S., you lose 6 hours and from the West Coast, you lose 9 hours. Many flights from the U.S. arrive in Amsterdam around 7 or 8 a.m. local time. This would be 10 or 11 p.m. pacific time (the previous night) if you flew from the West Coast and 1 or 2 a.m. Eastern Time if you flew from the East Coast. In any event, the time change has eliminated much of your sleep time and it is now a new day. The long flight time to Amsterdam (9 hours 45 minutes from Seattle, 8 hours 15 minutes from Minneapolis and 7 hours 10 minutes from New York JFK) also adds to the fatigue. Plan on being very groggy the first day in Europe and be very careful if you plan to drive. Napping helps, but too much napping can make it more difficult to sleep through the night, compounding the problem.

On the trip back to the U.S., you gain back the time that you lost flying to Europe which makes for an exceptionally long and tiring day. Its not a bad idea to go easy the following day to let your body adjust. Flight time from Europe back to the U.S. is even longer because the flight is against the jet steam. From Amsterdam to Seattle, the flight time is 10 hours 10 minutes; to Minneapolis 8 hours 50 minutes and to New York JFK, 8 hours.

Both the U.S. and Europe observe daylight savings time at the same periods of the year.

Driving

Renting a car


For the best prices, always make car reservations from the U.S. The car rental company may require the use of a credit card, not a debit card. Some rental companies may require the same credit card that was used to reserve the car to be used to pay for the rental.

Parking

Parking can be a problem in crowded cities. Some large cities such as Amsterdam require a special permit to park in the downtown area. Consider parking outside the city and taking public transit. Rather than placing them by each car, most European parking meters are centrally located on each block. You tell the machine how long you want to park and it tells you how much to pay, then gives you a receipt. You put the receipt on your dash board with the date and time showing so the police can see it.

Some parking lots dispense a ticket to you when you enter the lot. When you are ready to leave, you give the cashier (or an automated machine) the ticket, pay the amount due and then get the ticket back. The ticket can now be used to open a gate allowing your car to leave the lot.

Some small towns allow free parking for a limited time such as one hour. The police enforce this by having drivers place a cardboard clock on the dash board of their car set to the time that they left their car. You can purchase a clock from a visitor center (such as the VVV in Holland). If you park without a clock in areas where this is in force, you

will be ticketed.  This is a sign indicating the need for the clock.

Driving safely

Use extreme caution when driving on divided highways, especially the German autobahns. The slow lanes are often clogged with big trucks (many more than normally seen in the U.S.). The faster lanes have cars traveling at a minimum of 75 MPH and in Germany, much faster. Since most tourists rent economy cars, they must decide whether to drive their Opals, Fiats and Renaults in the slow lane with the heavy trucks or challenge the BMWs, Mercedes and Porches for the faster lanes. The combination of slow trucks passing each other and race cars passing each other results in a very dangerous situation. Before you pull out to enter the middle or fast lane, use your mirrors to really analyze the speed of the cars behind you. It is extremely hard to estimate the speed of an overtaking car in a mirror, even if it is traveling at speeds over 100 MPH. Most high speed drivers won't slow down when they overtake you. They often come up directly behind you planning to pass at the last possible second. If you are in the middle or fast lane, most high speed drivers behind you won't slow down. They will flash their lights and try to estimate when you will return to the right lane, leaving no safety margin and clearing your fender by just a few feet. Play it safe, judge the speed of cars behind you carefully before pulling out.

Speed limits

Unless marked otherwise, the speed limit in towns is 50 km/h (approximately 31 MPH), and 80 km/h (50 MPH) in the country. On divided highways (what we call freeways), the speed limit is 120 km/h (74 MPH) unless marked otherwise. Obey speed limits. Photo radar is used everywhere (even on the freeways) and is set to catch you if you exceed the limit by even a few km/h. And yes, the ticket will reach you at your home in the U.S. through your rental car company.

Rules of the road

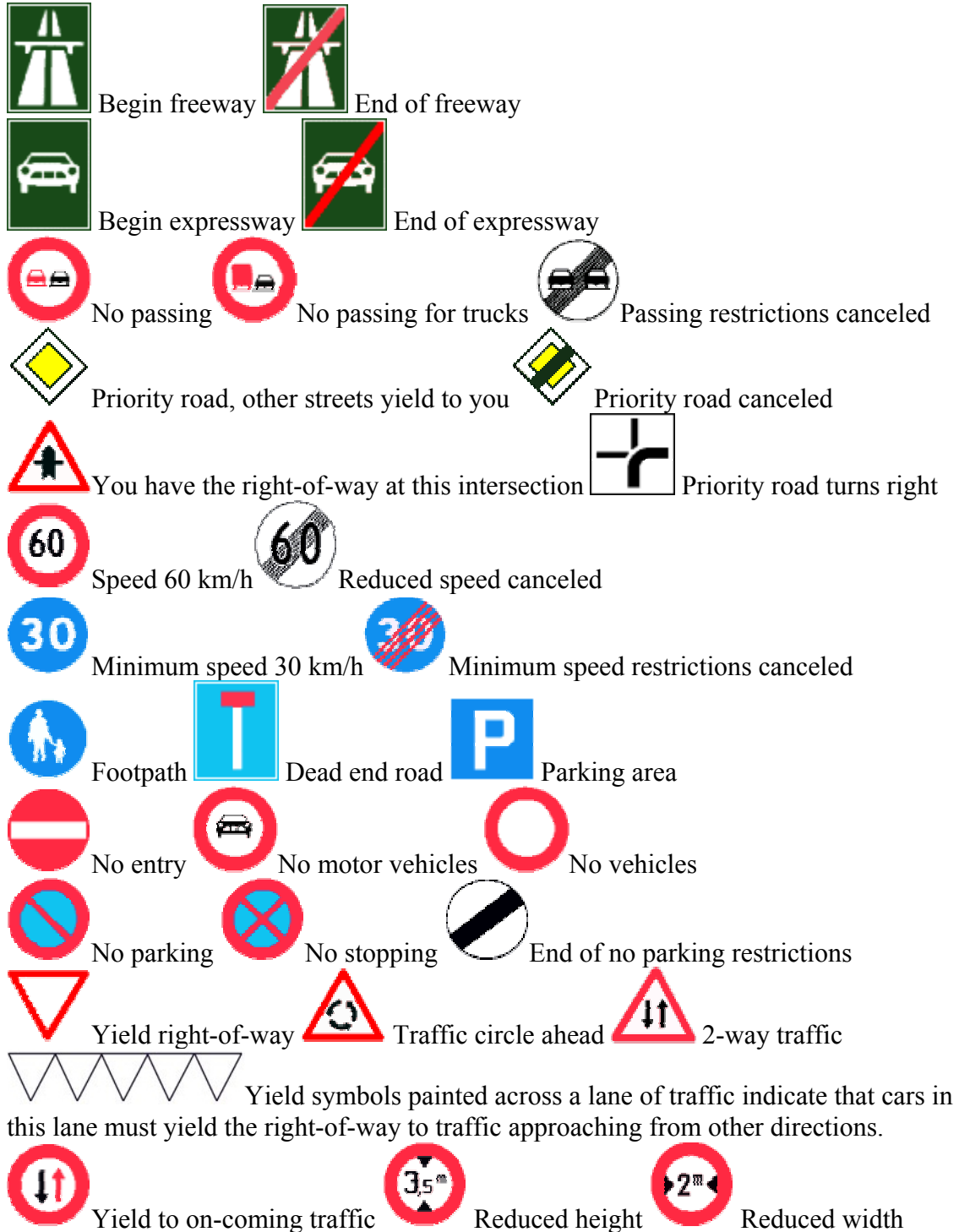
- Right turns on a red light are not allowed unless there is a sign specifically allowing it.
- Intersections are often marked with one direction having yield symbols painted across the lane in a row. These symbols are that lane's clue to stop and yield the right-of-way and the other direction's clue to take the right of way.
- In a totally unmarked intersection, the car on the right has the right-of-way.

Gasoline

Gas stations along major highways are self service. Most accept major bank cards such as Visa and MasterCard. Don't expect your U.S. gasoline card to work in Europe even if the name of the gasoline company is the same. Expect the cost of gasoline to be 3 to 4 times more expensive in Europe.

Road signs

If you are going to drive in Europe, you need to be familiar with the road signs. Check with an Automobile Club for more information about driving in Europe. The following road signs are just a sampling of signs that are very important or particularly confusing to U.S. drivers. More information can also be obtained from www.travlang.com.



Good manners

There is a tendency for travelers to look for flaws when they travel abroad. Instead, try finding things that are better than at home. This will give you a positive outlook on your adventure and not burden Europeans with endless stories of how much better things are in the U.S. Just because things are different in Europe doesn't mean that they are bad.

Here are a few social considerations:

- It is customary to remove your shoes when entering someone's house.
- When in public, talk softly with your fellow travelers and assume that everything you say is being heard and understood by the people surrounding you.
- When eating, all foods (including pizza and French fries) are to be eaten with a knife and fork.
- It is considered polite to keep your hands on the table (and not on your lap) while eating. It's interesting to notice that most Europeans eat with a fork in their left hand and a knife in the right, all during the meal.
- Don't ask for a doggy bag or take food out of a restaurant.
- When answering the phone, it is considered polite to identify yourself when answering.
- Coffee or tea is a social necessity in Europe. If you are offered coffee or tea in a social setting, be sure to accept one or the other even if you don't drink either at home.
- If you are invited into someone home, don't eat cookies or other food items on the coffee table until you are invited to do so by the hostess, and then only take one. Don't take another unless invited to do so again by the hostess.
- Sunday is family day so don't plan to visit people on Sunday unless you are specifically invited to do so.
- Europeans respect and appreciate a handshake.

Appropriate dress

T Shirts and blue jeans are not appropriate attire in some European settings. If you are attending a function in Europe or engaging in social activities, show some respect for your host and dress appropriately for the occasion. For example, if you are invited to sit in the VIP section of a horse show, wear something that you would wear to a business function in the U.S. Most Europeans dress more formally than Americans, even on the street.

The metric system

Europe uses the metric system of weights and measures. This system differs from U.S. conventions as follows:

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>U.S. unit</i>	<i>Metric unit</i>	<i>To convert from the U.S. to the Metric unit</i>	<i>To convert from the Metric to the U.S. unit</i>
Speed	miles per hour	kilometers per hour (km/h)	MPH x 1.61 = km/h 1 MPH = 1.61 km/h 10 MPH = 16.1 km/h 100 MPH = 161 km/h	km/h x 0.62 = MPH 1 km/h = 0.62 MPH 10 km/h = 6.2 MPH 100 km/h = 62 MPH
Distance	miles	kilometers (km)	miles x 1.61 = km 1 mile = 1.61 km 10 miles = 16.1 km 100 miles = 161 km	km x 0.62 = miles 1 km = 0.62 miles 10 km = 6.2 miles 100 km = 62 miles
Distance	feet	meters (m)	feet x 0.305 = meters 1 foot = 0.305 meters 10 feet = 3.05 meters 100 feet = 30.5 meters	meters x 3.28 = feet 1 m = 3.28 feet = 39.4" 10 m = 32.8 feet 100m = 328 feet
Distance	inches	centimeters (cm)	inches x 2.54 = cm 1 inch = 2.54 cm 12 inches = 30.5 cm	cm x 0.394 = inches 1 cm = 0.394 inches 10 cm = 3.94 inches
Volume	gallons	liters (l)	gallons x 3.79 = liters 1 gallon = 3.79 liters	liters x 0.264 = gallons 1 liter = 0.264 gallons
Volume	quarts	liters (l)	quarts x 0.95 = liters 1 quart = 0.95 liters	liters x 1.05 = quarts 1 liter = 1.05 quarts
Volume	cups	deciliters (dl)	cups x 2.63 = dl 1 cup = 2.6 dl 2 cups = 5.3 dl	dl x 0.381 = cups 1 dl = 0.381 cups 4 dl = 1.52 cups
Weight	pounds	kilograms (kg)	pounds x 0.454 = kg 1 pound = 0.454 kg	kg x 2.2 = pounds 1 kg = 2.2 pounds
Temperature	degrees Fahrenheit	degrees Celsius	(°F -32) x 0.56 = °C 30 °F = -1 °C 40 °F = 5 °C 50 °F = 10 °C 60 °F = 16 °C 70 °F = 21 °C 80 °F = 27 °C 90 °F = 33 °C 100 °F = 38 °C	(°C x 1.8) +32 = °F 0 °C = 32 °F freezing 10 °C = 50 °F 15 °C = 59 °F 20 °C = 68 °F 25 °C = 77 °F 30 °C = 86 °F 40 °C = 104 °F 100 °C = 212 °F boiling
Pressure (as in tire pressure)	pounds per sq. inch (PSI)	kiloPascal (kPa)	PSI x 6.9 = kPa PSI x 0.069 = bar 30 PSI = 207 kPa 30 PSI = 2.07 bar	kPa x 0.145 = PSI bar x 14.5 = PSI 200 kPa = 29 PSI 2 bar = 29 PSI

Electric power

Europe uses a different electric standard than the U.S. as shown below:

Electrical plug/ receptacle configuration: European outlet standard versus the U.S. (North American) standard

Frequency: 50 Hz in Europe versus 60 Hz in the U.S.

Voltage: 220 – 240 Volts in Europe versus 110 – 125 Volts in the U.S.

Look at the appliance that you intend to take to Europe. If the appliance is labeled to operate in a frequency and voltage range that includes both the U.S. and European standards, (for example if it says 110 – 240 V., 50/60 Hz), you are in luck. You will only need to purchase a plug adapter that is available at any travel store in the U.S. They only cost a few dollars. However, you must never use an adapter to plug a U.S. appliance into European power if the frequency and voltage specifications do not include the European standards. Appliance failure and fire may result. If your appliance is not rated for European electric power, you may still be able to operate it by using a power converter or a transformer as described below:

Transformer- A transformer lowers the voltage of European power down to the U.S. standard but it does not change the frequency. The frequency remains at 50 Hz. Transformers weigh quite a bit and the lightweight ones that you can take with you are limited to the amount of electric power that they can supply, typically 50 Watts. Before using the transformer, look at the appliance that you are going to connect to it and confirm that the power consumed by the appliance is less than the rating of the transformer. Transformers are only suitable to supply power to certain types of appliances such as electric shavers and toothbrushes, cassette tape players, radios and small battery chargers. Read the transformer instructions for more details. Note that clocks will run slower on 50 Hz power.

Converter- A converter lowers the voltage of European power down to the U.S. standard in such a way as to produce harmonics that can damage certain types of equipment. Converters can supply more power than a transformer of the same weight, typically 1600 Watts. Converters are only suitable to supply power to certain types of appliances such as portable hair dryers, irons, hot pots, heating pads, electric blankets, mixers and blenders and incandescent lamps. Some converters have a minimum as well as a maximum power output rating (for example, your hot plate might have to be rated between 50 and 1600 Watts in order for the converter to work correctly). Read the converter instructions for more details.

Neither transformers or converters- Neither transformers nor converters may be suitable for certain appliances including typewriters, table top hair dryers, camera and slide projectors, movie lights and equipment, sewing machines, power tools, respirators, vacuum cleaners, heavy duty appliances and computers. See the manufacturer's instructions for more details.

Power converters and transformers are available in U.S. travel stores. Both can be purchased in one easily packable unit that has a switch to select the desired mode. Read the directions that come with it carefully to prevent damage to the unit or to your appliances. Most units come with their own plug adapters that will work in many different areas of the world.

Video standards

Europe uses a different video format standard than the U.S. So video tapes from the U.S. can not be viewed in European VCRs and vice versa. Note that with VHS tapes, it is only the tape formatting that is different between the U.S. and Europe, the tapes themselves are physically the same. Likewise, U.S. TV sets will not operate in Europe and U.S. camcorders and VCRs can not be connected to European TVs. However, if you have an important VHS video tape that you want to show in Europe, it can be copied into the European “PAL” standard in the U.S. at selected video editing shops. This costs about \$20. Before purchasing video tapes in Europe to view in the U.S., be sure the box says “NTSC”. This is the U.S. video format standard. DVDs purchased in Europe will not work in the U.S. unless the DVD is formatted in the “NTSC” format and has a “region code” that can be read by the DVD player. The U.S. and Europe have different DVD “region codes”.

Drinking the water

Water is not normally served in restaurants. Many Europeans drink wine or beer with their meal. If you want water, just ask for it but expect to be asked if you want carbonated water (with gas). If you don’t want it carbonated, just ask for “no gas”. The domestic water in Western Europe is safe to drink. Obviously, don’t drink from streams or fountains.

Shopping

Don’t expect to buy groceries or go shopping in the evening or on Sundays. Store hours vary by country but typically, stores close around 5 or 6 p.m., sometimes later on Thursday or Friday. Stores in some countries close at noon on Saturday. Shops and stores are almost universally closed on Sunday. In some countries, businesses are closed 2 or 3 hours for lunch. However, large gas stations and restaurants are open daily.

“Centrum” is a European word for the city center. Many towns and cities don’t allow driving in the centrum. In those places, shoppers must pay to park outside the area and walk in.

Finding a toilet

In Europe, asking for a “toilet” is pretty universal. However the universal symbol for the toilet are the letters “WC” (water closet). In some European countries, the toilet is cleaned by a person who expects to be tipped (typically 20 – 50 Euro cents) when you leave the rest room. You can tell that this is expected because a person is standing by the restroom door watching over a bowl of coins. The type of coin gives you an idea of how much to pay. Making change is possible. If you don’t have any money or the right type of change, just smile and keep on walking but be prepared for a tongue lashing. Keep moving.

Laundromats

Laundromats in Europe are very rare if you can find one at all. Plan to wash you clothes in the sink or make arrangements with the hotel in which you are staying.

Money

Understanding the Euro

Countries in the European Union now have a common currency called the Euro. The symbol for the Euro is €. It looks like a capital “C” with two bars through the middle of it. There are 100 Euro cents to one Euro. Check with a financial institution (<http://finance.yahoo.com/m3?u>) to find out the current exchange rate between the Euro and the Dollar.

Bills and coins are available as follows:

Euro bills: €, €10, €20, €50, €100, €200 and €500

Euro coins: 1, 2, 5, 20 and 50 Euro cents, and €1 and €2

Each European Union country issues a different version of the Euro coins (the backs are different) and different versions of bills but they are all interchangeable between the countries.

Using an ATM

The easiest way to obtain cash in Europe, (and historically the best exchange rate) is to withdraw it from a cash machine (called a geld-automat or bank-automat in many countries), using your Visa or MasterCard. Using a debit card at an ATM is more affordable than getting a cash advance with a credit card. Most cash machines have an English language option or are easy enough to operate. The green button is universally the “ok” button. A cash machine is located in the baggage claim area of Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport. It is in a secure area before customs that is not open to the outside public. This machine allows at least a €500 withdrawal but other cash machines across Europe may limit you to a lesser amount. Some cash machines do not give a receipt.

Using your bank card

A bank card is an important tool for U.S. travelers in Europe. It allows 24-hour access to cash without having to find a bank that is open or having to exchange currency. A bank card also allows you to make large purchases such as for gasoline, hotel expenses or gifts, without having to use cash. Note that some smaller stores and restaurants may not accept bank cards. Typically grocery stores only accept special debit cards that are only available to Europeans. Some stores or cash machines may only take Visa or MasterCard, but not both. Carrying at least one of both cards makes good sense.

Debit card limitations

Some car rental companies will not accept a debit card and will insist on a credit card. Debit cards have been found to not operate certain pay phones in Germany even though they display the Visa logo. If you plan to use debit cards in Europe, consider also carrying a credit card just in case you run into a similar debit card limitation.

Currency exchange

There are two exchange rates for foreign currency, one for each direction. For example, one rate describes the cost in U.S. dollars to purchase one Euro and the other rate describes the cost in Euros to purchase one U.S. dollar. If you do the math, the two rates do not equal the same €/\$ or \$/€ ratio because the money changer is making a profit on the transaction in both directions. While it is possible to exchange money at larger U.S. banks before leaving the country, this can take weeks and is probably the most expensive option. U.S. currency and traveler's checks can also be exchanged in European banks. However, most U.S. travelers prefer to use their bank cards at European ATMs to obtain local currency because it is very convenient and historically been the best exchange rate.

Security

Violent crime is very low in Europe but pick pockets and purse snatchers are very common especially at train stations and other public places of assembly. Thieves often cut purse straps with a knife. Keep your passport, bank cards and cash in a safe place. Money belts that are worn under the clothing are a good option but can be inconvenient when your passport needs to be retrieved when checking into a hotel, to change money, or to board a plane.

Conventions that you need to know:

- The second floor of a building in the U.S. would be considered the first floor in Europe.
- The use of commas and periods for numbers is reversed from the U.S. convention. For example, in Europe €1,000.50 would be written €1.000,00
- The number 7 has a dash drawn through the middle of it so it won't be confused with the number 1.
- The number 1 is not drawn as a single vertical stroke but as two strokes. One is vertical and the other stroke slopes from the top of the vertical stroke down to the left.
- Time in Europe is spoken and written in the 24-hour "military" format. 6 p.m. is described as 18:00. One minute after midnight is 00:01. HINT- To convert 24-hour time to 12-hour time, just subtract 12 hours from it. 15:00 minus 12:00 equals 3 p.m.
- In Europe, the month/day/year format is day/month/year. For example, in the U.S., January 15, 2002 would be written 01/15/02. In Europe, it would be written 15/01/02.
- Don't expect soft drinks to have ice. Consider yourself lucky if they are cold.
- If you stay in one of the less expensive, rustic hotels, you may find that you have to share a toilet or bathroom with other guests. Some rooms have a sink or a shower but no toilet. This inconvenience is more that offset by the historical experience. Newer hotels have all of the modern conveniences, but expect to pay more.
- Hallways in some hotels are kept dark to save electricity. Push buttons are located near each door to turn the lights on for a period of time.
- Some hotels do not furnish soap so bring a bar with you.
- Most hotels include breakfast in their room price. Ask when you check in and inquire where it served and during what hours. At a minimum, breakfast normally consists of bread, an assortment of cheeses and meats, and coffee or tea to drink.
- Don't get angry if your waiter or waitress ignores you during and after the meal. In Europe it is customary for them to leave you alone. If you want them to come back, you will need to make eye contact.

Returning to the U.S.

VAT refund

European purchases are taxed at a high (up to 25%) tax rate called the VAT. If you reside in the U.S. (or any country outside the European Union), you should be able to get a tax refund at the airport when you leave if don't use the product in Europe and follow the following instructions:

1. You must spend at least €136 per shop per day and get a receipt.
2. You must leave Europe within 3 months of the purchase.
3. When you leave Europe, you must find the VAT refund office at the airport and show the official your purchases, your receipts, your passport and your airline ticket.
4. After the official writes you a check, you can cash it at a bank at the airport (for example at the ABN AMRO bank at Schiphol).

U.S. duty

Foreign purchases (called articles) are subject to U.S. duty. U.S. residents are normally allowed to bring \$800 worth of articles into the country duty free. Duty is normally a flat rate of 4% on the first \$1000 above the \$800 exemption. If the value of the articles exceeds \$1400 per person, then all articles that you are bringing into the county must be declared on a form, including their fair retail value in U.S. dollars. Have receipts available to present if asked by the customs officer. To avoid paying duty on personnel possessions that you plan to take out of the country and then return with later (such as computers and expensive watches), either carry the receipts with you or have the items "registered" by a custom's agent before you leave the country. Note- When you see "duty free shops", this only means that duty is not required to be paid to the country in which the shop is located. See (www.customs.ustreas.gov/) for more details on duty.

Immigration and naturalization

You will need to show your passport and present a customs form that you have to fill out on the plane. The officer may ask some questions about your trip.

Agriculture inspection

It is important to clean any soil or manure off your shoes before packing them in your suitcase to leave Europe. You will be asked on the custom's form whether you visited a farm or ranch during you stay in Europe. If you did, be sure to mark "yes" and then explain to the officer how you cleaned you shoes before packing.

Customs

Your checked in luggage will be returned to you when you enter the U.S. to go through customs. The customs officer will look over your customs form. There is a remote possibility that your bags may be inspected at that time for undeclared articles or restricted items. Drug sniffing dogs are usually also present at that time. After customs, you return your bags onto a conveyer belt to continue to your destination.

Restricted items

Restricted items include drugs, fruits, vegetables, plants products, soil, meats, meat products, birds, snails and other live animals or animal products. Check with customs, (www.customs.ustras.gov/), for more information.

You should carry a doctor's prescription for any prescription drugs taken into Europe or brought into the U.S.

Suggestions or comments? Mail to rfunk@dovecreekonline.com.

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