

# TOP TEN UNIQUE EUROPEAN CASTLES TO VISIT



Whether you see yourself as a budding historian, an artist looking for inspiration or simply a keen tourist looking to learn, it can really be worthwhile adding a trip to a local castle to your holiday itinerary the next time you are travelling in Europe. Seeing iconic castles for real, instead of just in photographs, can help to bring local and national history to life and highlight the building's unique quality. Every castle has its own personal charm, a little quirk regarding its former purpose or owner or an unusual aesthetic aspect that makes a top attraction, and the following ten European residences and fortifications are perfect examples of unique, must-see castles.

## **Eilean Donan Castle, Scotland.**

Starting with one of the more stereotypical examples of a must-see European castle, this Scottish landmark provides the sort of idyllic charm and iconic architecture and setting that tourists hope to see - a sort of postcard castle. The image of Eilean Donan Castle on its little island, set on that vast loch in front of those mountains, is familiar to many people; this makes it all the more appealing when they get to view it for real in the unique Scottish atmosphere, either on a simple hike through the highlands or one of the castle's public tours.

## **Carreg Cennen Castle, Wales.**

Moving down the UK into Wales, this next example is unique in this particular list because it highlights the stunning beauty that can be found within ruins. Castles do not have to be pristine restorations to tell a story about their life or the history of the area and Carreg Cennen, which has been left in ruins on the Brecon Beacons since 1462, arguably does a lot more to inspire visitors imaginations and feelings than the more well-known castles in other Welsh towns and cities, such as the more recognisable Caerphilly Castle.

## **Neuschwanstein Castle, Germany.**

On the complete opposite end of the scale, from these Welsh ruins is Neuschwanstein, a grand, towering residence on a Bavarian peak that bears a strong resemblance to another "castle" at a certain European theme park. This extraordinary creation from "Mad King Ludwig" makes the list because it has been so inspirational for artists and photographers across generations. Visitors are advised to take the time to view the grand spectacle of this palacial castle from the nearby trails for the full impact.

## **Hohenzollern Castle, Germany.**

This second entry for Germany shows a different side to the nation's castles and their potential as tourist attractions because this was once the ancestral home to a lineage of emperors. This is not to say that Hohenzollern - a reconstruction of the historic homes lost to war and time - is any less attractive than its Neuschwanstein counterpart, particularly when the beautiful architecture rises above the clouds; however, this high altitude does offers more of a sense of awesome dominance

than fairy-tale beauty.

## **Hohenwerfen Castle, Austria.**

Heading across the border, this Austrian castle has a different type of unique appeal for historians and tourists because it is a great example of how the role of a castle can evolve over the centuries. Some fortifications remain frozen in one period, like tiny time capsules, but there is a fluid history behind the stone walls of Hohenwerfen and visitors can learn about the transformation over its 900 year history from regal home, religious refuge and prison to the national falconry centre it is today.

## **Predjama Castle, Slovenia.**

One of the joys about exploring a castle as a deliberate tourist attraction rather than simply seeing it as a beautiful piece of architecture is that the dramatic, ancient lives that once occurred within it can brought to life in exciting ways. Predjama, which already offers enough drama in the fact that it resides in a 400ft cliff face, provides a great example of this because it uses an annual medieval tournament to showcase the lives of those that once walked the halls and watched over the chilling dungeons that can still be seen today.

## **Bouzov Castle, Czech Republic.**

Much like the Slovenian gem mentioned above, Bouzov is another example of a European castle that offers something unique to its visitors through first hand experience. Here, visitors can learn about the lives of its unique former inhabitants - the Order of Teutonic Knights from the 14th century - through guiding tours of the different rooms and chambers within the castle, from the grand Neo-Gothic chapel to the most secret of passageways.

## **Hunyad Castle, Romania.**

Neuschwanstein Castle showed the potential for artistic inspiration within castles, at arguably the highest level, but many of Europe's historic fortresses find themselves being used as inspiration in a number of literary classics too. The reconstructed Hunyad Castle may not be precisely true to the original building that held Vlad the Impaler prisoner anymore, the man that inspired Stoker's Dracula, but, despite these creative and necessary restorations, enough of the Gothic-Renaissance style remains to send shivers up a visitor's spine.

## **Castillo de la Mota, Spain.**

As some of the previous examples have shown, sometimes a castle can showcase the importance of an era or a noble family but in others it can simply be a link to one important historical figure. Isabella the Catholic is one of Spain's most famous queens and this enormous castle in Medina del Campo, a favourite among Spanish tourists, was one of her more famous residences. Castillo de la Mota is where she lived as Lady of Medina for the majority of her life, having been named princess of Asturias there when she was just seventeen.

## **Castelo De Guimaraes, Portugal.**

Last but not least, we come to a Portuguese castle that is not simply a former royal residence but rather an important symbol of an altogether different age. Situated in Guimaraes, the country's former capital, this stark and imposing residence acted as a foundation for a new monarchy as it

became the home and birthplace of Portugal's first king, Afonso Henriques - a vital landmark on the nation's history that was cemented in place by the king's baptism in the church next door.

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