# Historic Castles – Europe's Power Demonstration

Castle (ancient Roman "castrum" and "castellum"), and the old Germanic "burgus", once related to military architecture, have become an interchangeable term for an encloistered, inhabited fortification, for medieval residences of noble people seeking a safe abode in fortified settlements sometimes as large as towns (e.g. Edinburgh, Carcassonne, Prague's hradjin).
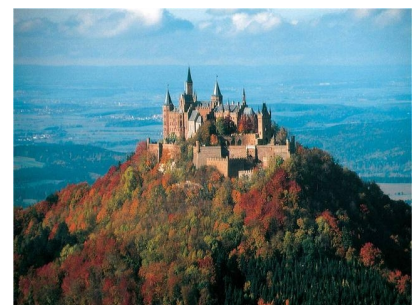
Since 16th century these awe-inspiring constructions have also ranked as "Schloss" (Germanic) or "zamek" (Slavic) describing a closed fortress or noble residence often secondary to "castle fortress", "château fort", "citadel", "Burgschloss", "hrad", and their exotic synonyms qasr قصر, kalah قلعة, kasbah قصبة (Arabic) or chengbao 城堡 (Chinese).

All these "castles" have served as defenses and homes for a ruler or general public. As appalling, forbidding and thrilling they may appear, they document the iconic blatancy of power and deterrence well conceived in stone and rock, few of them being truly "romantic" such as the not-to-be-missed "fairytale castle" Neuschwanstein.

Any listing of castles, their focus on Europe and historic architectural styles (Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, classicistic, historicizing) as well as their backgrounds and geographic settings remains discriminatory. A selection of six outstanding examples emphasizes therefore on historical contexts in the shaping of Europe, leaving romanticizing behind the more realistic aspirations: pomp and power.

## 1. Burg Hohenzollern (Germany)

If frustrated with Germany's gloomy Plassenburg (Kulmbach, Bavaria) as a manifestation of the mightiest Renaissance castle fortress (12th cent., reconstruction 1557) and its legacy as family prison and Nazi technology centre, one may follow its noble House of Hohenzollern. This family of Prussian kings and German emperors in 1819 created a storybook masterpiece of neo-gothic mock-medieval "knight's castle" on mount Hohenzollern (Swabia), a military architecture towering on an 855 m high butte at the rim of the Swabian Jura with views as far as the Black Forest and Swiss Alps.



## 2. Chambord (France)

The world's most splendid Renaissance castle was built by French King François I in 16th century. As the king strived for the emperorship of the Holy Roman Empire (then ruled by a Spanish–German–Austrian conglomerate), his dream castle Chambord expressed the power of a strong French kingdom. The numerous turrets and chimneys symbolize the social and cultural order at these days, matching with a "new Jerusalem" and "Third Empire of Eternal Peace". This most outstanding castle of the Loire valley, however, had only remained a supersized hunting castle and magic tourism magnet.



### 3. Versailles (France)

Also longing for the control over Europe, the unpopular founder of absolute monarchy Sun–King Louis XIV had fled Paris and since 1661 built Europe's number–one castle residence named Versailles after the preexisting farmland. Together with the vast and stern gardens (Le Nôtre) the mighty Baroque–style Versailles not only housed a royal household of some 10,000 people, but also was the political and cultural centre of France until the 1789 revolution.

### 4. Würzburg (Germany)

Napoleon (1769–1829), the third strongman of France seeking supremacy over Europe, encamped three times in Germany's most exemplary Baroque castle, the Würzburg Residenz (Bavaria). Built in 1719 it was the seat of a prince–bishop controlling a tiny principality favored by Main River and enticing vineyards. The catholic bishop understood himself as an absolute monarch, for which he copied Versailles. Although without the grandeur of a castle garden, the bishopric residence with resplendent Italian wall paintings had a craftiness described by UNESCO as "… unique artistic realization (with)… originality of creative spirit and international character of workshops".

### 5. Schönbrunn (Austria)

The fever of representative 18th cent. Baroque palaces had also hit large empires. Austria's power was demonstrated in 1743 by Empress Maria–Theresa in Schönbrunn ("beauteous fountains") at the outskirts of Vienna, where Schönbrunn Palace emulated Versailles to function as summer residence, cultural and political center of the Habsburg monarchy until the end of the Austro–Hungarian Empire in 1918. Today the castle attracts not only with a substantial number of 1441 exquisite rooms, but also with an extended recreational public park, the oldest zoo in the world and a hilltop construction called "la gloriette" – a symbolic "monument for the just war"…

## 6. Windsor (England)

Neither the rise of Austrian-Habsburg power nor of colonialist Great Britain would have been possible without England's involvement in Europe's 18th century reshape (War of the Spanish Succession). After the Commander-in-Chief John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722) had defeated France and her Bavarian allies in the decisive Battle of Blenheim (1704: on the Danube River in Bavaria), the new power shift had also its significant influence on English architecture. His Grace the Duke was awarded by England's Queen Anne with the Blenheim Palace (near Oxford), that mighty castle now advertised as Britain's greatest palace that is rivaled only by Windsor castle (west of London), the largest inhabited castle in the world and home to Queen Elizabeth II.

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