

CHINESE TOURISTS ARE FREQUENT TARGETS FOR PICKPOCKETS IN EUROPE



When talking about traveling, what are your first impressions? The Eiffel Tower and Mona Lisa in Paris, the frescoes in Florence Cathedral, the Colosseum in Rome, or the stained glass in Barcelona's Sagrada Familia? But if you ask the Chinese tourists who "conquered Europe" during this year's National Day holiday what impressed them most, aside from the scenery and food, many of them would say that their main concern was not to get robbed.

Figure-eight clasps, heavy brass locks, phone straps, sleek crossbody bags, security cardholders, and constant vigilance. Missing any one of these items and you have not only left wonderful memories in Europe but also your cash, credit cards, mobile phone, and the bags and cameras you saved up for.

Not a Stereotype

European thieves are among the most egalitarian. Celebrity, aristocrat, or common tourist, once you step on the continent, you are treated as an equal, with the same professionalism. What is their professional goal? Stealing anything they can get their hands on.

Even if you have a celebrity's retinue, you are likely to experience the same level of difficulty as an ordinary tourist. This is not an exaggeration; half-jokingly speaking, some Chinese tourists even consider "unsuccessful" theft to be an incomplete travel experience.

You may still believe these are only exaggerated words from Chinese haters longing for Byron's "city of the soul" or even from Madame Bovary, who dreamed of Paris while committing suicide. However, there are objective pieces of data.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2024 statistics, **the number of theft incidents in France, per 100,000 people, was 1,972, Italy 1,542, and Germany 1,358, all significantly higher than the European Union's average.** For reference, Japan and South Korea, two popular tourist destinations for Chinese travelers, only had 370.5 and 355.1 incidents per 100,000 people, respectively. In other words, the probability of being robbed in France is roughly five times higher than that in Japan.

On a city level, the numbers are even more astonishing. According to a 2020 security report by the Catalan regional government, 25% of theft victims in Barcelona were tourists, and when the value of stolen property exceeded 400 euros (roughly 3,000 yuan), tourists comprised up to 39% of the victims. While you are enjoying the spicy and passionate local culture in Spain's second-largest city, you may also become a victim of the "enthusiastic" local experts.

These numbers are, in fact, already conservative. In 2015, both Italy and France saw over 2,000 incidents of theft per 100,000 people, a decade-high figure. Chinese tourists were already a coveted target. In 2018, the French interior minister noted that economic crimes (pickpocketing, robbery, and fraud) targeting Asians in the Paris region had 9,676 victims in 2015, 60% of whom were Chinese.

It is not surprising that the Chinese Internet provides some of the safest, most detailed European

theft-prevention manuals: theft-prevention equipment, theft-reporting measures, even the stash location guide near the Louvre and “facial recognition” skills against Italian pickpockets. After decades of arduous exploration, Chinese travelers have become experts at avoiding becoming victims.

Why Are the Chinese Tourists Easy Marks

The issue is that, to thieves, Chinese tourists are easy targets. Stealing from tourists is the easiest way to score in Europe, and Chinese tourists, in particular, appear to be targeted more often than others. There is no doubt that one critical reason is the large number of Chinese tourists. However, the fundamental issue lies in the behavioral characteristics of Chinese tourists. As the saying goes, the devil is in the detail.

In criminology, there is a concept called the “opportunity structure.” Research shows that a concentration of people in a specific area for a short period increases the likelihood of theft. Thieves know this, and they are more inclined to target areas with a high ratio of tourists to locals, where the former are likely to be careless and can provide valuable rewards. A study on Barcelona shows that in areas with an abundant number of tourists but few residents, the level of social control is low, contributing to higher crime rates. Data from 2010 to 2018 show that 3.95% of the streets in Barcelona accounted for 50% of the incidents, with the crowded places such as the Plaza de España, Plaza de Catalunya, and Barceloneta Beach being the hotspots.

Chinese tourists, who often only have a limited amount of vacation days, are determined to experience as many of the local attractions as possible, which results in a high concentration of Chinese tourists in these areas, sometimes even in tour groups.

Another characteristic of Chinese tourists is their preference for public transportation. Taking a taxi in Europe is expensive: a ride from Charles de Gaulle Airport to the Left Bank costs 65 euros, compared to 14 euros for a public transport ticket. Hence most Chinese tourists choose to take the metro and bus. In 2024, 62.3% of tourists in Barcelona took the metro and 31.1% took the bus. Italian statistics also show that people who frequently take public transport are 5.6 times more likely to be pickpocketed than those who rarely do. As a frequent traveler on a budget, you have probably already taken the metro several times and can now calculate the odds.

The travel style also affects the likelihood. According to a Monash University study, tourists can be categorized into three groups: determined adventurers (individual tourists who love interacting with locals), comfort-seeking tourists (those who prefer package tours and only interact with other tourists), and pragmatic adventurers (tourists who seek independence but still prefer agent-planned itineraries and occasionally split from the group). The study found that pragmatic adventurers had the highest probability of being robbed (28%), about ten times that of the other two categories. Seeking both comfort and adventure turns out to be a recipe for becoming a victim of theft.

Why European Thieves Are So Hard to Catch

A common rationale is that Europe lacks sufficient coverage of surveillance cameras compared to China. This reasoning is partially correct, but only partially. The fact that Japan has fewer incidents of theft than China is also explained by this logic. It is interesting to note that the number of cameras in Paris was over 5,080 in 2025, or 2.4 per thousand people, compared to 23,281 in Tokyo’s 23 wards or 2.39 per thousand people (the number has been adjusted for population size). In other words, there is no significant difference between the two cities in terms of the density of surveillance cameras. In Beijing, this number is 32.7 per thousand people.

As mentioned above, surveillance cameras alone are not a complete solution. According to a study by Cambridge University, cameras are effective in reducing crime when combined with improved lighting and increased patrol presence, with the crime reduction rate reaching 33.9%. Simply reviewing camera footage has little effect. The deterrent effect is not related to the length of the criminal's sentence but rather to the swiftness of the trial. According to a study of England and Wales between 1994 and 2008, there was no correlation between the average length of a sentence and the incidence of theft. There was, however, a positive correlation between the length of time it took to try a defendant before a judge and theft's incidence.

European judicial systems are notoriously slow, with an average duration of 9 and 10 months for criminal cases in France and Italy, respectively, compared to 40.5% of criminal cases processed within 15 days and 69.9% within 1 month in Japan. Time to judgment in France, Italy, and Japan averaged 8.7, 22, and 3.9 months, respectively. As such, it is not uncommon that a Japanese offender has already been released from prison while his Italian counterpart is still waiting for trial.

As a consequence, it is common for European thieves to re-offend. According to the 2024 security report of Barcelona, the police arrested 452 of the most-wanted repeat offenders nearly 3,600 times and linked them to more than 9,000 incidents, mostly theft and street robbery. For many European thieves, committing crimes and serving short prison sentences are like having a full-time job.

The low cost of intercountry travel encourages potential thieves to organize into multinational gangs. A pickpocket asking for directions outside of the Louvre might be part of an international network of thieves. In 2020, a ring of 42 suspects primarily responsible for nearly 6,000 incidents and more than one million euros worth of damage in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain was busted with the coordination of Eurojust, an agency representing Spain, Romania, and Portugal. The free movement of people guaranteed by the Schengen Area and the cheap travel costs encourage these gangs to target tourists, hopping from one country to another, looking for soft targets. **Interpol and Europol would need to spend months investigating these crimes before pressing charges.**

Organized networks of thieves and the rapid flow of stolen products between countries further facilitate the operation. According to a 2026 Crown Prosecution Service report, one such network was responsible for trafficking nearly 40,000 stolen mobile phones from the United Kingdom to China between 2024 and 2025. An iPhone stolen in Europe in October might reappear in a Chinese second-hand market in a few months, completing a long journey back to its owner's country.

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