

# Destination Central Europe

The bright lights of Paris, the towering history of London...been there, done that. You're looking for the hidden heart of Europe – the chance to savour both vibrant folk traditions and city street parties, to witness the architectural legacies of fallen dynasties and revel in a diverse range of landscapes. Well, you've come to the right place – central Europe has all this and more.

Cultural treasures are spread across all nine of the central European nations, as attested by the 80-plus Unesco World Heritage-listed sites in the region. Medieval Old Towns, ancient ruins, richly embellished opera houses and castles galore dot the landscape. Some of the world's great composers were born here, as was the oompah band. Lovers of the arts can trace the origins and accomplishments of favourite musicians, writers and painters by visiting their birthplaces, drinking in their haunts and enjoying their output in concert halls, cinemas, bookshops and galleries.

For those seeking pleasures that are more down to earth, the region's natural beauty provides more than enough opportunity for adventure. You can ride the rails up to a Swiss mountain peak, hike the Black Forest or bike past aquamarine glacial lakes in Alpine Austria. Alternatively, you can watch migrant cranes roost on the Hungarian plains, canoe in a Polish lake or climb up sandstone fissures in the Czech Republic. And since central Europe stretches from coast to coast, you might also choose to bask on a Baltic Sea beach in Poland or enjoy freshly caught calamari along the Adriatic in Slovenia.

If you want big-city excitement, you can have that too: beer-loving Munich, mystical Prague, imperial Vienna and design-driven Zürich are all attractions of the region.

In some ways, the territories of today's central Europe had more in common pre-WWI than they do post. The royal house of Habsburg had influence in every country in the region at some point or another (save for Poland), whether through confederation or crown. In 1914, when Habsburg archduke Franz Ferdinand's murder precipitated WWI, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria were all part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

After WWII the rise of nation states and the creation of the Iron Curtain separated central Europe into distinct entities, East and West. Forty-plus years of communist rule left an industrial concrete mark on the easternmost nations, but that period of history has long since gone. (Restoration work on the Berlin Wall art began in mid-2009 – after all, it had been 20 years since the barrier crumbled and artists celebrated.) Though you'll see vestiges of the old East-West divide – environmentally aware tourist infrastructure is more developed in the West, for example – boundaries have blurred. Prices are rapidly equalising, and the hold-outs from the EU are Switzerland and Liechtenstein, not the eastern nations.

In fact, not only have all the eastern central European states joined the EU, they've become part of the reduced border controls implemented under the Schengen Agreement. At the time of writing, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia use the euro as their currency, while Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary are expected to convert within the next few years.

The development of a united Europe has not always gone smoothly here, however. A no-confidence vote by the Czech parliament in 2009 came halfway through that nation's six-month term as EU president and some questioned its fitness to lead the union. But it was the economy that was the hot topic across Europe in 2008–09, as credit crunches, bank rescues and lay-offs hit hard. In Germany, for example, the question of whether to prop up the ailing car manufacturer Opel dominated the political scene in an election year. Even fiscally conservative Switzerland took action, with the central bank buying up foreign currencies to stem the Swiss franc's appreciation against the euro. (The government also agreed it would respond to overseas requests for information in tax-evasion cases, eliminating a smidge of the country's famous banking anonymity.) According to a report by the Economic Intelligence Unit, Poland was the only European country with an economy expected to expand in 2009.

Whether or not collapsing economies fuel xenophobic fires can be debated, but central European nations all have issues with racism to greater or lesser degrees. In 2009 Slovak policemen were caught on tape humiliating four Roma boys who'd allegedly robbed and injured an elderly lady; Amnesty International judged that Austria's judicial system was plagued with racism; and *Der Spiegel* reported that neo-Nazism was on the rise in Germany.

During tough times spectator sports are a great diversion, and central Europe is rife with football fever: Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2006, Austria and Switzerland cohosted Europe 2008, and Poland will be one of the sites of the Europe 2012 tournament. Ice hockey comes close to rivalling football for popularity in several countries in the region, particularly in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the latter is gearing up to host the IIHF World Championships in 2011. Given the mountainous geography here, it's no surprise that central European nations fair well in winter sports; you can watch the Ski-Jumping World Cup Championships in Slovenia every March.

At least for now, snow is very much on the mind of those that make their living from Alpine tourism. According to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), climate change could affect two-thirds of the ski areas across the Alps by 2050, rendering skiing impossible under 1500m. So it's understandable that the Alpine nations have a particularly strong environmental focus. Recycling and green building practices are already big in Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, while the Swiss have developed carbon-free ski resorts to offset the environmental impact of their ski-crazy country.

So there's no better time to get to Central Europe than today, really – with cheaper beer and still-abundant winter snow, what more could you want? After all, whether you're wandering among high-meadow wildflowers or along the narrow lanes of a former Venetian port, listening to traditional folk music in a village or operatic falsetto in a city, skiing in Slovakia's High Tatras or Austria's Alps, you're in the heart of the heart of Europe.

# Getting Started

With few bureaucratic hurdles to jump in central Europe, you can easily plan for a trip here as much or as little as you like. All of the countries in this book participate in the Schengen Agreement, which reduced intra-European border controls. Of the EU member states (all countries included here except Switzerland and tiny Liechtenstein), only Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have not yet converted to the euro.

During blow-out festivals and the summer holidays (from June through to August), some amount of booking ahead may be warranted if you're particular about the places you stay. And plotting out at least a general course can steer you toward money savings (hint: minimise time in Swiss cities and maximise time in rural Slovakia). No matter what you decide, we always recommend leaving some time to wander – life's best adventures are often unexpected.

## WHEN TO GO

Mild weather and less crowds make May (spring flowers) and September (new wine) ideal months to visit the countries of central Europe. July and August are the hottest months, and the busiest in terms of tourists, but they offer the fullest range of activities, events and services available. Cultural festivals take place year-round, so you'll never lack for something to do. In general, prices climb during summer (at least from June through to August) and at Christmas and Easter times. By travelling outside of peak seasons, you may snag lodging bargains, but some attractions in the easternmost countries close between October and April.

If skiing is your thing, the wintry months from December to April are for you – be it atop the continent's most dramatic peaks (Switzerland) or at some of its most affordable ski resorts (Slovenia and Slovakia). Note that the highest trails may not open for hiking until June or July.

## COSTS & MONEY

This stretch of the continent may indeed leave you scratching your head over the vagaries of capitalism – just how can the same item differ in price so much over a few hundred kilometres? *Vive la difference*, indeed! That said, although it was once a truism that Eastern European countries were cheaper than those in the west of the continent, the rise of the EU has certainly challenged this assertion. Lodging prices in Bratislava, Slovakia, for example, have climbed close to the levels of neighbouring Vienna (without offering a commensurate setting).

A bare-bones day of hostels and store-bought food can usually be had for €45 per person. To allow for stays in medium-range accommodation, restaurant-cooked meals and regular visits to museums and bars, plan on spending from €100 per day in less-expensive destinations to a *minimum* of €150 per day elsewhere when travelling solo. (Note that two or more people sharing a hotel room will cut these costs.) Accommodation is likely to make up the bulk of your daily expenditure but some excursions and travel fares (most noticeably in Switzerland) can munch through a daily budget in a trice. Families and friends travelling together should look into group train passes (see p615). Shopping at local markets and cooking in self-catering apartments (which often have multiple beds) is another great way to save money if travelling en masse.

See Climate Charts (p594) for more information.

ATMs are easy to find in towns (not in villages) throughout most of the region. The most popular currencies are the euro, US dollar and British pound; it's possible to exchange other currencies in the capitals and large cities. Credit cards (Visa and MasterCard, mostly) are widely accepted, although you won't be able to solely rely on these in rural parts of the region's eastern countries. Travellers cheques are also accepted across the region, though they are a dying breed.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Central Europe contains vast areas of pristine Alpine landscape, thick forests and delicate ecosystems worth protecting. In general, the countries in the western part of the region have well-established green initiatives and ecological protections. According to the 2008 Environmental Performance Index, Switzerland tops the global list of countries ranked by environmental performance, with its advanced and dense railway system, carbon-free ski resorts and 169 marked routes for hikers and cyclists. Germany and Austria are not far behind in their own green initiatives. Further east, while there is a deep bond felt with nature, systemic eco-enterprise has only just begun.

To find long- and short-term volunteer opportunities in Europe, check in at [www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com).

## Getting There & Away

Though low-cost carriers continue to proliferate in central Europe, so do the associated carbon gasses. All but the furthest outposts of the region are well connected by rail to the UK, Western Europe and beyond. Intercontinental travellers will have a tougher time of getting there green. If you opt for short air hops, consider offsetting your carbon emissions through websites such as [www.climatecare.org](http://www.climatecare.org) and [www.carbonneutral.com](http://www.carbonneutral.com).

## Slow Travel

If you have time, consider taking it sloooooow. The countries in this book all have marked cycling trails. Not only will you be going green by cycling across Europe, you get to connect with local communities in a way that's impossible on a fly-by. Follow the **Eurovelo 6** ([www.eurovelo6.org](http://www.eurovelo6.org)) track and you could make your way through parts of Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary. **Eurovelo 9** ([www.eurovelo.org](http://www.eurovelo.org)), the Amber Route, starts at the Black Sea in Gdańsk, Poland, and wends its way through the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovenia before making its way to the Adriatic. For more on bike tours, see p592. Too fast for you? Hike instead of bike. The E3 European walking route traverses Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

You can buy almost anything in the countries of central Europe that you might have left at home, but if you require specific medicines, it's best to stock up on these before your departure. Consider notifying your bank and your credit card companies to expect charges and withdrawals from abroad. Most visitors will be able to travel visa-free for 90 days, but if you're from a far remote land, double check (see p601). Other things to think about bringing:

- A Swiss Army knife with bottle opener/cork screw (they're pricey in-country!).
- Lonely Planet's *Central European Phrasebook* – so you don't get an offal surprise when ordering from a menu.
- Flip-flops and a towel – de rigueur at thermal baths and pools regionwide (they also come in handy at hostels).
- Herbal teas or instant decaf; in-room hot-pot options are usually highly caffeinated.

## SUSTAINABLE SLEEPS

- **L'Aubier, Val de Travers, Switzerland** The glowing white-and-natural rooms at this small hotel look out on the associated organic farm in a green mountain valley. Try the site-made carrot cheese for a treat; see p551.
- **Naturfreundehaus, Grindelwald, Switzerland** Attend environmental awareness seminars and visit the owners' pet trout at the 'House of Nature' chalet; see p565.
- **Lint Hotel, Cologne, Germany** Rooftop solar collectors provide heat and hot water at this 18-room lodging in the centre of Cologne's Old Town pedestrian district; see p265.
- **Die Fabrik, Berlin, Germany** An old factory has been recycled into a partially solar-powered hostel-like hotel with no TVs or phones in the room to waste resources; see p179.
- **Aquacity, Poprad, Slovakia** This sprawling geothermal- and solar-run waterpark and its hotels and apartments garnered recognition as a World's Leading Green Resort in 2008 from the World Travel Awards; see p477.

## Accommodation & Food

More and more lodgings these days use energy-efficient lighting and offer not to wash your sheets daily (whether out of activism or economic interest). For those using more stringent green criteria, once again there is a bit of a geographic divide. Ecohotels and resorts are more common in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. Wherever you travel, guest houses and small inns are character-filled options, and are usually more likely to be locally owned than big chain hotels. Camping is another viable alternative. In Germany, look out for ecologically responsible camping grounds sporting the Green Leaf award from the Allgemeiner Deutscher Automobil-Club (ADAC) motoring association.

Shopping at local vegetable and fruit markets also helps support the community, and produce is primarily organic. Restaurants serving locally sourced and organic meals are not uncommon in the westernmost countries of the region – heck, you can even have organic meat in your schnitzel at some places. Elsewhere, you're most likely to find wholefoods served at vegetarian and vegan restaurants, which are more prevalent in the capital cities in the easternmost countries.

## Responsible Travel Organisations

**Backroads** ([www.backroads.com](http://www.backroads.com)) Environmentally committed tour company that organises biking, hiking, multisport, and single and multicountry trips (cycle the Czech Republic and Austria or walk your way through Hungary, Poland and Slovakia etc).

**Bio-Hotels** ([www.biohotels.info](http://www.biohotels.info)) Started in Austria, this association of hotels provides wholefoods and organic-oriented options; it now has members across central Europe.

**Connected Traveler** (<http://connectedtraveler.com>) Educates travellers on how to discern the best ecotourism options and standards. Lists guides in Europe.

**Europcar** ([www.europcar.com](http://www.europcar.com)) Has one of the lowest emissions car-hire fleets in the world. They have Smart Cars, hybrids, and ethanol-powered autos for hire, and work with a carbon-offsetting partner.

**European Centre for Eco Agro Tourism** ([www.eceat.org](http://www.eceat.org)) A network of more than 1300 small-scale lodges and farms that provide rural, ecofriendly lodging. Also certifies environmentally friendly establishments throughout Europe.

**International Ecotourism Society** ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)) Provides training for emerging ecotourism businesses, lists eco-outfitters and offers discount trips available by auction.

**Linblad Expeditions** ([www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com)) Tour company that encourages travel philanthropy, supports local microbusinesses and sources food locally. One itinerary starts in Prague and then cruises the Danube through Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary.

Train is the only way to travel between major cities in environmentally friendly Austria; they don't want no stinkin' carbon-emitting long-distance buses.

Learn how you can live – and travel – more responsibly at the World Wildlife Federation's site [www.panda.org/how\\_you\\_can\\_help/](http://www.panda.org/how_you_can_help/)

**Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) Maintains an eco-directory of sustainable tour operators, runs an environmental certification program and facilitates carbon offsetting and other environmental donation programs.

**World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms** ([www.woof.org](http://www.woof.org)) In return for your volunteer labour you can learn organic ways while you stay down on the farm in Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the Czech Republic.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

- *Alpine Points of View: A Collection of Images of the Alps* (2004), by Kev Reynolds, entices armchair travellers with engaging short text and stunning photos.
- *Routledge Companion to Central and Eastern Europe since 1919* (2008), by Adrian Webb, should help clear the cobwebs of confusion surrounding recent history.
- *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (2002), by Will Guy, comprises essays examining the fate, and speculating on the future of, one of Europe's most maligned and fascinating ethnic groups.
- *Kaffeehaus* (2002), by Rick Rodgers, is a delightful look at Prague, Vienna and Budapest – from inside their splendid coffee shops. Recipes galore included.
- *New Europe* (2007), by Michael Palin, details the BBC author's journey through former communist countries for his TV travel series.
- *Historical Atlas of Central Europe* (2002), by Robert Magocsi, visually illustrates how boundaries in the region have shifted, from tribal origins to modern times.
- *Court, Cloister & City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800* (1997), by Thomas Kaufmann, provides a multilayered context for all those museums, castles and monasteries.
- *National Geographic Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to Eastern Europe* (2007), by Ruth Ellen Gruber, is the perfect companion piece for anyone travelling in the area in search of lost and remaining Jewish culture.

A satirical travel guide and deft Lonely Planet send-up, *Molvania: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (by Santo Cilauro et al) creates a fictitious land in Europe that's the 'next big thing'.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Central Europe Online** ([www.centraleurope.com](http://www.centraleurope.com)) Subscription site with the region's news headlines, updated daily.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Book buying, hotel booking and the Thorn Tree travellers forum for shared traveller's tips.

**Central Europe Experience** ([www.gotocentraleurope.com](http://www.gotocentraleurope.com)) Regional introduction and travel specifics for Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria.

**Gemut.com** ([www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com)) Travel features on Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com](http://www.inyourpocket.com)) A snappily written, up-to-date compendium of events and listings in Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, among others.

**Real Beer** ([www.realbeer.com/edu/central\\_europe](http://www.realbeer.com/edu/central_europe)) Czech and German beer news dominates the central European page.

The acclaimed *Stalin's Nose* (1992), by Rory MacLean, is the surreal and darkly funny tale of the author's travels through Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland mere weeks after the toppling of the Berlin Wall.

## MUST-SEE MOVIES

- *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) In this crowd-pleasing comedy set in East Berlin, a young woman falls into a coma just before the onslaught of capitalism. When she wakes up, her family shields her from the shock and hilariously goes about restoring the old communist ways, pretending the Wall never fell.
- *The Sound of Music* (1965) Sure, you've seen it 14 times already, but you need to practise your lines before prancing around Salzburg's

### AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY WAY TO TRAVEL

Long a passionate advocate for the environment, Gabor Oban started his career as a science and environmental studies teacher before deciding to create and become managing director of **Ecotours Ltd** ([www.ecotours.hu](http://www.ecotours.hu)) in the late 1990s. The tour company has since branched out from his home country of Hungary to offer eco-oriented nature and adventure itineraries in central and Eastern Europe, and the Americas.

**Have you seen a rise in environmentally aware travel recently in central Europe?** Definitely, ecotourism is stronger year by year in this region. Before 1989 hardly any ecotourists dared to venture to the eastern part of Europe. After political changes the most curious and adventurous started to come, first in relatively small numbers. They spread the word. In the past five years there are more and more ecotour operators and also young NGOs, clubs and associations who organise different activities.

**What types of experiences are most sought-after?** Visitors come to the region mainly for the following ecotourism activities: bird-watching, wildflower/botanical tours, large mammal-watching tours (bear, red deer, elk, wolf, bison); and bat tours are becoming more and more popular. Butterfly and dragonfly tours are relatively new, but quickly became favourites. However there are regional differences in the countries we work in: the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland are very strong in hiking, rock climbing and rafting possibilities, as well as mountain birding and wildlife watching. Besides the above activities, the Mediterranean Sea and caving are strong magnets in Slovenia. Austria has excellent biking routes and well-organised kayaking and canoeing. Hungary additionally offers really great birding and butterfly watching, plus botany tours with special Pannonian endemic flora and a strong horse riding tradition.

**What advice do you have for readers who want to travel more responsibly?**

Stay and eat at local, family-owned accommodations and restaurants, preferably those who care about the local environment; reuse and recycle; consume local, natural products and bio-food whenever possible; and buy folklore and souvenir items from local people, not at supermarkets. Also support ecotourism operators who can ensure all the above points, plus are involved in local environmental projects and spend part of their profit on habitat and species protection.

Schloss Mirabell gardens. C'mon, all together now: 'Doe, a deer, a female deer...'

- *Kafka* (1991) Not much to do with the real Kafka, but Prague and its castle never looked so beautiful in black-and-white surrealism. Jeremy Irons plays the role of an insurance clerk with a secret passion for writing. He seeks to uncover a dastardly plot in the bowels of the castle.
- *Latcho Drom* (1993) Tony Gatlif's hauntingly beautiful musical travelogue follows the historical migration of Roma culture across modern-day Eastern and central Europe. Eschewing dialogue, subjects sing and dance their story.
- *Schindler's List* (1993) Steven Spielberg's film is considered one of the greatest of all time for the skilful and uncontrived way it tells the tale of one man who saved hundreds of Jews from certain death. Considered to be *the* film made about the Holocaust.
- *The Pianist* (2002) Your trip to Poland won't be the same after this stirring film featuring Oscar-winner Adrian Brody as the last pianist to play live on Polish radio before the Nazis arrive in the Warsaw ghetto. This touching masterpiece by Roman Polański doesn't glorify its protagonist as a hero; he is but a lucky and wilful survivor.
- *Heidi* (1968) Follow cloyingly sweet Heidi on her quest to be reunited with her beloved grandfather in this, the most popular version of the pigtailed legend. You'll want to re-enact scenes from this classic groaner about the poor orphan while skipping though the Swiss Alps: 'Grandpa - wherefore art thou?'
- *The Third Man* (1939) Trying to find some remnants of post-WWII Vienna will become an obsession after this great film noir by Carol

Wildflower fanatics should scope out which Alpine blooms sprout when at [www.alpineflowers.net](http://www.alpineflowers.net).

Reed. Joseph Cotton is an alcoholic author of pulp novels who falls into the pit of intrigue and suspicion that the shattered city has become. It begins with the line, 'I knew the old Vienna, before the war...'

- *Zentropa* (1991) Lars von Trier's mesmerising film captures the engulfing creepiness in the air in post-WWII Germany. The action takes place in the subconscious, or perhaps in a dream, as we follow Jean-Marc Barr as a second-generation German-American who arrives in war-torn Germany and finds himself over his head in unfathomable intrigue.
- *Kráska v nesnážích* (Beauty in Trouble; 2006) This delightful and insightful drama follows a Czech family as three generations try to navigate the tumultuous transition from communism. Their troubled existence is disrupted when they cross paths with a kind-hearted and wealthy émigré who has returned to settle his dead mother's estate.

Endangered reptiles were relocated to new habitats before construction of the environmentally aware Brandenburg International Airport was begun outside Berlin.

# Events Calendar

Attending a festival can be a great way to go local: mingle with residents, experience the culture, eat local foods and hear some great music. Crowd-aphobes may want to steer clear, though! Below we've listed some of the region's top picks; look for more events in each country section.

## FEBRUARY

**KURENTOVANJE** Tue before Lent  
This parade (p525), including its horned-and-feathered, sheepskin-covered Carnival characters with painted masks, highlights the 10-day celebration leading up to Shrove Tuesday in Ptuj, Slovenia.

**KARNEVAL/FASCHING** Tue before Lent  
The pre-Lenten season is celebrated in Germany along the Rhine and in the Black Forest and Munich (p291).

## MARCH–APRIL

**BUDAPEST SPRING FESTIVAL** Mar  
Hungary's capital welcomes spring with a cornucopia of popular opera, classical music and ballet, performed both in gilt concert halls and on open-air stages (p314).

**EASTER FESTIVAL OF SACRED MUSIC** 2 weeks leading up to Easter  
Petrov Cathedral serves as the blessed background for six Lenten concerts held in Brno, Czech Republic (p143).

## MAY

**PRAGUE SPRING** mid-May–early Jun  
Czech composer Bedřich Smetana inspired this Prague classical-music festival (p111). It kicks off with a parade from Smetana's grave to the performance hall where his opera *Má vlast* is staged.

**VIENNA FESTIVAL** mid-May–mid-Jun  
Opera plays a key role in the wide-ranging program of arts that is held in Vienna, Austria, every summer (p49).

**DRUGA GODBA** late May–early Jun  
Ljubljana, Slovenia, hosts a festival of alternative and world music (p503) at a sprawling monastic complex that dates back to the 13th century.

**KHAMORO** last week in May  
Traditional and contemporary music, and 'Gypsy jazz' performances are part of this festival celebrating Roma culture (p111) in Prague.

## JUNE

**WROCLAW NON STOP** Jun-Jul  
Quirky art installations, alternative movies, music, theatre and dance are all part of this month-long festival (p415) in Wrocław, Poland.

**ROCK OTOČEC** late Jun or early Jul  
Slovenia's biggest open-air concert (p527) rocks for three days each summer in Novo Mesto.

**VÝCHODNÁ FOLKLORE FESTIVAL** late Jun or early Jul  
Folk dancers and musicians from across Europe perform at Východná and several other small towns in eastern Slovakia, for one weekend each July (p490).

**CHRISTOPHER STREET DAY** last weekend in Jun  
Begun in 1978, this Berlin celebration (p291) is one of the oldest gay and lesbian festivals in the world.

**BRATISLAVA CULTURAL SUMMER FESTIVAL** Jun-Sep  
More a series of concerts and performances than a true festival. Slovakia's capital has its cultural dance card filled all summer long (p461).

## JULY

**JEWISH CULTURE FESTIVAL** 1st week in Jul  
Scholarly discussions, concerts, films, theatre performances, art and memorial sightseeing are all part of the week-long celebration of Jewish culture (p394) in Kraków, Poland.

### KARLOVY VARY INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

early Jul

International celebrities often appear at this Czech Republic festival (p126), which screens more than 200 films each year.

### MONTREUX JAZZ FESTIVAL

early–mid-Jul

A distinct air of glamour surrounds this famously fabulous Swiss festival (p549), during which the world's biggest names in the jazz scene play to rapt audiences for two weeks.

### BAŽANT POHODA

mid-Jul

Rock, pop, alternative, hip hop, techno, world music – for one weekend you can hear it all in Trenčín, at Slovakia's open-air music festival (p466).

### WARSAW SUMMER JAZZ DAYS

3 weeks in Jul

This summer concert series (p381) attracts international artists such as Wynton Marsalis and Natalie Cole, as well as Polish performers.

### LJUBLJANA FESTIVAL

Jul-Aug

Slovenia's top cultural event (p503) includes music, dance and theatre performances in and around the city's historic sights.

### SALZBURG FESTIVAL

late Jul-Aug

Some 250,000 people crowd into the quaint city of Salzburg, Austria, for this world-renowned classical music and theatre festival (p68), which began in 1920.

## AUGUST

### ZÜRICH STREET PARADE

early Aug

Love mobiles cruise along the street while about a million ravers and revellers lap up the fun in a giant Swiss celebration of life, love and techno music (p570).

### SZIGET MUSIC FESTIVAL

mid-Aug

The week-long outdoor international-music bash (p314), complete with camping, on Óbuda Shipbuilding Island in Budapest features world music (including Romani), rock, ska, indie and hip hop – pretty much a little of everything.

### DEBRECEN FLOWER FESTIVAL

mid-Aug

Flower-clad floats parade through town as part of a week-long street fair with international music and food in eastern Hungary (p355).

### ST DOMINIC'S FAIR

3 weeks in Aug

Craftspeople and artists exhibit their wares while orchestras, street performers and cabarets round out the party atmosphere in Gdańsk, Poland (p426).

## SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER

### ARS ELECTRONICA FESTIVAL

early Sep

Science and art collide in a very cool and techie way during this futuristic, five-day festival (p59) in Linz, Austria.

### COWS' BALL

mid-Sep

A zany weekend of folk dance, music, eating and drinking marks the return of the cows from high pastures to the valleys in Bohinj, Slovenia (p513).

### OKTOBERFEST

mid-Sep–early Oct

What might just be the biggest public festival in the world: some six million people guzzle 5 million litres of beer and 400,000 sausages each year in Munich, Germany (p213). Music and madness abound.

## NOVEMBER–DECEMBER

### CHRISTMAS MARKETS

late Nov-Dec

Winter Christmas Markets are held across central Europe. The most famous are in Vienna (p49) and Nuremberg (p223), Germany, but just about every Old Town has at least a small crafts fair. Drink mulled wine and find a unique (or kitschy) present for that special someone.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### A CAPITAL TOUR

Two Weeks / Berlin to Bern

Spend the first few days of your whirlwind tour (two to three days per capital) in the dynamic, delightfully idiosyncratic party city of **Berlin** (p167), the capital of reunited Germany. Then ride the rails to sprawling **Warsaw** (p375); its reconstructed Old Town first became the capital of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania in the mid-16th century. After a few days, travel south to view mystical architectural beauty (not to mention savour great beer) in **Prague** (p100), the Czech seat of power. The imperial opulence of the long-reigning Habsburg Empire is still evident in Austria's capital, **Vienna** (p40). But don't satiate yourself on coffeehouse culture here, because awaiting you are the cafes of Hungary's capital, **Budapest** (p305, where modern and momentous buildings sit side by side. If you have time, detour to **Ljubljana** (p497) in Slovenia and tiny **Vaduz** (p365) in Liechtenstein; otherwise World Heritage-listed **Bern** (p555), the Swiss capital fought over by Holy Roman and Habsburg Empires alike, is your next (and final) stop. It's so beautiful, it's no wonder everyone wanted a piece of it.

This 3000km tour will introduce you to the region's contemporary urban life and at the same time give you a feel for its grand history.



## THE GREEN DANUBE

### Two Weeks / Regensburg to Budapest

Build on Johann Strauss' classical attempt to capture the mood of the central European terrain by travelling green (instead of blue) in a slow-travel exploration of this wide and wonderful watercourse. Begin your trip with a riverview meal in Germany's **Regensburg** (p224), a city replete with historic constructions, including a Gothic church hewn from limestone. You'll have to bike to Passau, Austria (OK, there are trains, too), where you can board a boat to **Linz** (p58). Visit its stunning riverside art gallery riverside before cruising on to **Melk** (p57), which is dominated by an intimidating Benedictine monastery. The most beautiful castle- and vineyard-crowded river section, the **Danube Valley** (p57), begins here and stretches on to **Krems an der Donau** (p57), which has a pretty cobblestone centre. Meandering on, **Vienna** (p40) is your next port of call. Take a break to tour the imperial city and maybe have a splash in the Alte Danube before boating on to the Slovakian capital of **Bratislava** (p456), where on one side of the river there's some strikingly ugly communist real estate, while on the other there's the rabbit-warren Old Town and the city's ancient castle. Follow the Danube east as it marks out the border between Slovakia and Hungary before sweeping south in the grand arc called the **Danube Bend** (p322), where there's prime birdwatching. At **Esztergom** (p327) you can gaze up at the awesome walled basilica high above. From here you and the Danube flow south to **Budapest** (p305). Renting a bike and tootling around the park on Margaret Island, midriver, seems a fitting end to your Danube adventure.

**Go with the flow and follow the course of the Danube as it surges 770km from the south of Germany through Austria and Slovakia to Hungary. Medieval townships, thriving modern cities and diverse landscapes compete for your attention along the way.**



## WORLD HERITAGE SIGHTS

Three Weeks / **Bellinzona to Białowieża National Park**

Unesco's World Heritage list contains more than 80 of central Europe's cultural and natural gems, and a sampling takes you to all the region's states but one (alas, little Liechtenstein has yet to garner recognition). Start in Switzerland at the lovely trio of lakefront castles in **Bellinzona** (p577), located at the conversion of several valleys. When you've moved on to Germany, you can compare these with the timber-and-stone **Wartburg** (p197) in Eisenach, where composer Johann Sebastian Bach was born. You'll want to get to Potsdam early, since daily tickets to see its celebrated rococo palace, **Schloss Sanssouci** (p184), often sell out. Pressing on, the medieval townscape of **Kutná Hora** (p121), outside Prague, awaits. Silver ore mined here was minted into the hard currency for central Europe in the 14th century. To the south in Austria, Salzburg's **historic centre** (p64) has more baroque architecture than entire countries do – of course it made the list. The Unesco roll-call continues when you arrive in Slovenia at the **Škocjan Caves** (p517), where you cross an unimaginably deep chasm by footbridge. You'll likely have to pass through Vienna to get to Győr and the incredible collection of ancient texts at **Pannonhalma Abbey** (p330). Continue your medieval history lesson in **Bardejov** (p487), Slovakia's well-preserved Gothic-Renaissance town with 15th-century walls. Traverse the Tatra Mountains to get to the eight listed sites around **Kraków** (p388). The Old Town and the salt-sculpture-filled Wieliczka Salt Mines are interesting, but the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps are the most chilling. Your last stop? The region's farthest eastern reaches, at **Białowieża National Park** (p387). The major drawcard is the magnificent European bison, once extinct outside zoos, which has been successfully reintroduced here.

Soaring mountains, plunging caves, medieval towns, ancient fortresses, national parks – what don't you see in the course of this 3900km tour of central Europe's World Heritage sites? Consider this Unesco's best of the best.



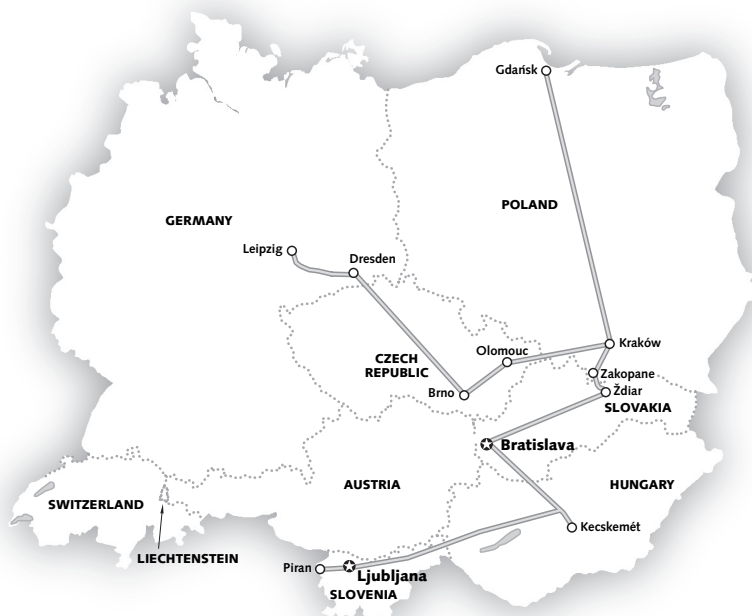
# ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

## EASTWARD BOUND

One Month / Leipzig to Piran

Avoid the tourist hordes by taking this tour into lovely, little-populated areas in the eastern stretches of several countries. Start in **Leipzig** (p192) and find out why Bach, Wagner and Goethe all lived here. Make a brief stop in the reconstructed baroque city of **Dresden** (p186) before slipping into the Czech Republic, where you can sample contemporary Moravian life without the crowds in the university town of **Brno** (p140). From here, travel east to **Olomouc** (p145), a small town that has an astronomical clock and architecture on par with Prague's. And if you like medieval construction, you'll love **Kraków** (p388), nearby in Poland. From here catch an overnight train north to the lively Baltic Sea town of **Gdańsk** (p423) and the beaches beyond. You'll have to backtrack through Kraków before spending several days enjoying nature (and reasonable prices) in **Zakopane** (p406) and across the Slovakian border in **Ždiar** (p476), both in the in Tatra Mountains. Stopping at every footpath cafe along the Old Town streets will keep you busy for a day or two once you've moved on to **Bratislava** (p456). If you're lucky, a street fair will be going on in **Keckskemét** (p346), where you can admire the Secessionist architecture and eat apricot jam. You'll need to transfer in Budapest if you're taking the trip down to pleasant little **Ljubljana** (p497). Though Slovenia's green-space-filled capital is still relatively undiscovered (and you now know the difference between Slovenia and Slovakia), your real goal is the Adriatic shore. Your journey ends in the romantic port of **Piran** (p520), dining on fresh seafood and wandering Venetian alleyways.

This 2900km-long, eastern-oriented trip offers less glitz, but fewer tourist groups to contend with. Small-town surprises, interesting architecture and lively port towns characterise this road less travelled.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### CASTLE SPOTTING

Anyone harbouring a fortress fetish will love central Europe, where a mixture of monarchic egotism and a centuries-old siege mentality has resulted in an abundance of impressive – if not downright intimidating – castle architecture. Start big, with the magnificent 1100-year-old bulk of **Prague Castle** (p108). Once you've finished marvelling at St Vitus Cathedral and strolling down Golden Lane, check out the stunning confines of **Wawel Castle** (p389) in Poland's capital, Kraków, and the World Heritage-listed **Wartburg** (p197) in Eisenach, Germany. For a more whimsical experience, have a look at the Bavarian follies of **Neuschwanstein** (p226) and **Hohenschwangau** (p226), near the town of Füssen. In Slovenia, search no further than the oh-so-picturesque cliff-top **Bled Castle** (p510). **Eger Castle** (p351) offers fine views of the surrounding Hungarian countryside, while a similarly grand vista is offered from **Schloss Vaduz** (p365) in Liechtenstein. Montreux's lovely **Château de Chillon** (p549) and Salzburg's **Festung Hohensalzburg** (p64) are completely lit up at night. Follow the torchlight parade during summertime night tours, complete with medieval-costumed guides, at **Trenčín Castle** (p465) in western Slovakia, or attend the festival of ghouls and ghosts at the fairy-tale-like **Bojnice Castle** (p468), further east.



### LIQUID DELIGHTS

A sipping (or slurping) tour of the region doesn't have to mean the continuous elimination of brain cells and a throbbing head each morning. Conducted with a sense of moderation and an awareness of the consequences of overindulgence, a tippie tour of central Europe will instead initiate you into some memorable local social customs. *Pivo* (beer) is the mother of all drinks in the Czech Republic. Pay your respects to this fine fluid by visiting **Plzeň** (p130), the birthplace of pilsner. For another beery treat, visit Munich at the end of September to chug your way through **Oktoberfest** (p213). Germany's **Moselle Valley** (p244) makes a different but just as pleasing impression on the palate with its trademark wines. In Hungary you can acquire a taste for Bull's Blood, the medium-bodied red table wine produced in **Eger** (p351), or for the sweet dessert white produced **Tokaj** (p354). Meanwhile, a trip to the Slovenian plateau of **Karst** (p516) will leave your lips stained ruby with Teran wine. Up the alcoholic ante in Austria's lovely **Mayrhofen** (p80) with a sip of schnapps. After the lifting of a 100-year-old embargo, the potent drink absinthe is now being distilled in **Val de Travers** (p550), Switzerland. The stand-out drop in **Poland** (p369) is vodka – sample it countrywide.



## NATURAL HIGHS

Central Europe's beautiful countryside accommodates numerous exhilarating activities, from hiking under forest canopies and paddling slowly down wide rivers to snowboarding down steep, powdery slopes. Hikers can stride through **Bohemian Switzerland National Park** (p125) in the Czech Republic or follow challenging ladder-assisted trails up waterfall-filled gorges in **Slovenský raj National Park** (p482). Speaking of climbing, those who love hauling themselves up sheer rock faces should head for the **Adršpach-Teplice Rocks** (p139) in the Czech Republic, while mountaineers should try their hands at scaling the **Bavarian Alps** (p226) in Germany. Water sports in the region include kayaking around the glacier-gouged **Great Masurian Lakes** (p439) in Poland, and swimming at Hungary's **Lake Balaton** (p335), one of Europe's largest lakes – when it freezes over in winter, skating becomes the activity of choice. Cyclists can spin their wheels around Germany's **Rügen Island** (p208). The more adventurous can try canyoning or mountain biking at **Bovec** (p515) in Slovenia, or skydiving or night sledding at **Interlaken** (p563) in Switzerland. Skiing and snowboarding is offered at **Stubai Glacier** (p77) near Innsbruck, Austria, but life can't go downhill any faster than it does in Switzerland's **Jungfrau Region** (p564) or in the shadow of the Matterhorn at **Zermatt** (p553). Of course, it's cheaper to shooosh the slopes in Slovakia's **High Tatras** (p474).



## A HISTORY LESSON

Transport yourself back in time to significant events and periods in recent central European history by tackling the following history-soaked itinerary. To most visitors **Bad Ischl** (p72) is simply a relaxing spa resort in Austria's Lake District, but it was here in 1914 that WWI was declared by a holidaying emperor. Another place with a strong WWI connection is **Kobarid** (p515), a town that bore witness to the fierce fighting in Slovenia's Soča Valley. WWII reached its nadir at **Terezín** (p123), a concentration camp in the Czech Republic where 35,000 people died, most of them Jews. A less grim historical episode can be reimagined in Bern's **Einstein Museum** (p556), where a guy by the name of Albert decided that some things are relative. In the outer Kraków suburb of **Nowa Huta** (p394) you can get a glimpse of a communist-era version of paradise, and in **Malá Fatra National Park** (p468) you can learn all about Slovakia's 18th-century version of Robin Hood, Juraj Jánošík. The most recent momentous event in the region's history can be invoked by tracing the ruins of the notorious **Berlin Wall** (p174).



# The Authors



## LISA DUNFORD

### Coordinating Author, Slovakia

Lisa has been fascinated with Europe since childhood, probably because her grandfather came from a part of the Carpathian region that was Hungary, then Czechoslovakia and now Ukraine. She studied in Budapest during university, and after graduation worked in Bratislava. She learned the language, danced on the main square the night Slovakia became an independent nation, and made lifelong friends. Though she returns to Europe often, Lisa, her husband, and their dog currently call East Texas home. Lisa also wrote the Destination Central Europe, Experiencing Central Europe, Getting Started, Events Calendar, Itineraries, Regional Directory and Transport in Central Europe chapters.



## BRETT ATKINSON

### Czech Republic

Brett has been travelling to Europe for more than 20 years, and has honeymooned in Slovenia and Bosnia, written about Hungary's communist past, and island-hopped in Croatia. On his second extended research trip to the Czech Republic, he attempted to really get off the beaten track, especially if this meant seeking out interesting out-of-the-way microbreweries. When he's not on the road for Lonely Planet, Brett lives with Carol in Auckland, New Zealand. Fortunately his local microbrew emporium produces a damn fine Bohemian pilsner, ensuring the world's best beer is never far away.



## NEAL BEDFORD

### Austria

In his heart Neal will always be a New Zealander, but after living in Austria for the past decade he must finally admit that an ever increasing part of him now calls this land of mountains, valleys and rivers home. From his base in Vienna he has travelled the length and breadth of Austria on a number of occasions, searching for the boldest Feuerwehrest, the biggest summer solstice bonfire, and the best local *Brauerei* (brewery). He is constantly amazed at the country's beauty, and at how grumpy the Viennese can be.

## LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).



### STEVE FALLON

**Slovenia**

Steve has been travelling to Slovenia since the early 1990s, when a travel-publishing company initially refused his proposal to write a guidebook to the country because of 'the war going on' (it had ended two years before) and a US newspaper of record told him that their readers weren't interested in 'Slovakia'. Never mind, it was his own private Idaho for over a decade. Though he *still* hasn't reached the top of Mt Triglav (next time – *domen*, promise!), Steve considers at least part of his soul Slovenian and returns to the country as often as he can for a glimpse of the Julian Alps, a dribble of *bučno olje* (pumpkin-seed oil) and a dose of the dual.



### TIM RICHARDS

**Hungary, Poland**

Having transferred with an international teaching organisation from a two-year stint in Egypt, Tim spent a year teaching English in Kraków in 1994–95. He was fascinated by the massive postcommunist transition affecting every aspect of Polish life, and by the surviving remnants of the Cold War days. He's since returned to Poland repeatedly for Lonely Planet, and has been delighted by his reacquaintance with this beautiful, complex country. When he's not on the road for Lonely Planet, Tim is a freelance journalist living in Melbourne, Australia, and writes on various topics: travel, lifestyle, the arts, technology and pets. You can see more of his writing at [www.iwriter.com.au](http://www.iwriter.com.au).



### CAROLINE SIEG

**Germany**

Half-American and half-Swiss, Caroline Sieg has spent most of her life moving back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, with lengthy stops in Zürich, Miami and New York City. When not cycling around Berlin's Tiergarten or Hamburg's waterways in an effort to work off a daily dose of *Kaffee und Kuchen* (coffee and cakes), Caroline can be found commissioning guidebooks in Lonely Planet's London office.



### RYAN VER BERKMOES

**Germany**

Ryan Ver Berkmoes once lived in Germany. He spent three years in Frankfurt, during which time he edited a magazine until he got the chance for a new career – with Lonely Planet. One of his first jobs was working on the Germany chapter of an early edition of this very book. Later he worked on the 1st edition of Lonely Planet's *The Netherlands*, a country where they pronounce his name better than he can. These days he lives in Portland, Oregon. Learn more at [ryanverberkmoes.com](http://ryanverberkmoes.com).



## NICOLA WILLIAMS

### Liechtenstein, Switzerland

Ever since Nicola moved to a village on the southern side of Lake Geneva, she has never quite been able to shake off that uncanny feeling that she is on holiday – a garden tumbling down the hillside towards that same glittering lake and the mysterious Jura mountains beyond is her wake-up call. Nicola has lived and worked in France since 1997, and when not flitting to Geneva, skiing or dipping into the Swiss countryside, she can be found writing at her desk. Previous Lonely Planet titles include *France; Provence & the Côte d'Azur; Languedoc-Roussillon; Tuscany & Umbria; Milan, Turin & Genoa*; and *Piedmont*.

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