

europa – at a glance

One of the most rewarding things about travelling through Europe is the rich variety of cuisine, customs, architecture and history. Adding to this variety is the number of very different languages you'll encounter on your travels. Most languages spoken in Europe, including English, belong to what's known as the Indo-European language family, believed to have originally developed from one language spoken thousands of years ago. A number of European languages are represented in Roman script, which can make them a little more accessible for English-speaking travellers. Other alphabets in use include Cyrillic (used for Russian, for example) and Greek. They can be a little confusing, given their vaguely (and often misleadingly) recognisable shapes, but learning their scripts is easily achievable.

The Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) all developed from Vulgar Latin, which spread through Western Europe during the rule of the Roman Empire. The freedom with which English has borrowed Latin-based vocabulary means you'll quickly recognise many words from these languages. The Germanic languages – Dutch and German – are more closely related to English. The Scandinavian languages form the northern branch of the Germanic languages tree, having developed from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings. Their big advantage is that, being so closely related, once you've got the hang of one language, the others should seem quite familiar. Greek, the language of the Iliad and the Odyssey, forms a single branch of the Indo-European language family and uses Greek script.

The Slavic languages are a branch of the Indo-European language family and share a large amount of basic vocabulary. They originated north of the Carpathian mountains and are now divided into Eastern (Russian), Western (Czech and Polish) and Southern (Bulgarian and Croatian) subgroups. The languages traditionally associated with the Orthodox Church (Russian, Bulgarian and Macedonian) use Cyrillic alphabet, while those influenced by the Catholic Church (Czech, Slovak, Polish, Croatian and Slovene) use Roman alphabet. Romanian, the only representative of the Romance languages in Eastern Europe, is more closely related to French, Italian or Spanish.

Finally, Turkish and Hungarian are part of the Ural-Altaic language family, which includes languages spoken from the Balkan Peninsula to northeast Asia.