



A taste of **EUROPE**

If it's your first visit to Europe and you want to make the most of your time while making new friends, a Topdeck tour for 18 to 39 year-olds is one way to have an unforgettable experience. **SARAH WEEKS** hops on board for a taste of everything European from French pastries and Swiss chocolate, to Italian wine and German nightlife.

LONDON, ENGLAND

Most Topdeck tours start and / or finish in London, which is also the main gateway to Europe. London can easily be reached by a variety of long-haul flights but if you're looking for the very best in service and comfort, look no further than Singapore Airlines. Even if you're not flying business class, you can still enjoy five-star service from their comfortable economy class where you will find ergonomic seating, providing maximum knee and leg room. The Singapore Girl is synonymous

with impeccable service standards and their in-flight menu reflects a unique Asian flavour. Why not add on an overnight stop in Singapore on the way there and / or back? Breaking up the inevitable long-haul flights with a Singapore Stopover Holiday can make the journey more enjoyable and with plenty of attractions, shopping, cuisine and accommodation options, a 24-hour stopover can easily be filled.

London is a great city with plenty to do but a day trip beyond this is a must do during

your visit. The English Bus specialises in unique small group guided tours of London. Their Bath, Stonehenge and Secret Places tour is one of their most popular and visits three UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Stonehenge is by far one of the oldest sights in all of Europe - it's estimated to be around 5,000 years old! It's also probably the most mysterious with many theories as to what it's been used for and how it was formed. Tour guide and business owner Chris Horsey provides a wealth of information about the

area and the small sized group allows more time to ask questions and focus on specific areas of interest. Bath is a charming Roman-style city set in the beautiful English countryside and Chris shows you all the best parts including the Royal Crescent, the Jane Austen Centre and of course the original Roman Baths.

smallcarBIGCITY is exactly what it's name suggests - exploring one of the world's biggest cities in a very small car, a classic Mini Cooper to be precise. Having only started two years' ago, this small tourism business has shown over 2,500 tourists around London. From half an hour to three hours, your private guide will show you the very best of what this city has to offer in the best mode of transport with the ability to weave in and out of London's busy traffic – it's very unique! Their Great Escape tour is the most in-depth, visiting all of the major landmarks and attractions in the city centre such as Buckingham Palace, Tower Bridge, West End and much more!

Once you've seen the pleasant side to London during the day, you can then explore the streets as darkness falls and discover this city's violent and bloody past on The Blood and Tears Walk. From Jack the Ripper to Sweeney Todd, actor and tour guide Declan McHugh will take you on a journey through London's criminal history and play out some frightening mind games as he takes you on a journey to the dark side. Declan's other main interest is Shakespeare, so if you like this walk, you'll also enjoy some literary treats during the day.

Madame Tussauds has attracted millions of visitors for more than 200 years and it's no wonder why with it's interesting collection of wax models from royalty to celebrities and even the more morbid characters in it's Chamber of Horrors. You can experience the glitz and glamour of being at an A-list party with the Beckhams, pose for a royal photo with Kate and William or hop into a black cab and take a journey back through time on the Spirit of London ride.

And no visit to London is complete without a ride on the London Eye, offering spectacular views of the city from high above. It's an excellent way of seeing a bird's eye view and to gain scope of how large and spread out London is. A River Cruise is also the perfect way to compliment this attraction, which conveniently departs regularly from the pier below the Eye. As you cruise past notable buildings and landmarks, the on-board tour guide provides an interesting commentary about the River Thames and it's

history.

Well situated within the London tube network, The Montcalm London City opened its doors in June this year to business travellers and weekenders at the former Brewery. This Grade II listed building has been dramatically transformed into a very upscale hotel with a chic modern design, matched with excellent service. The 235 bedrooms all feature luxurious king size beds with suites. The Chiswell Street dining rooms are also popular with both guests and locals alike with a fine dining selection to match their equally fine service.

Baglioni Hotel in Kensington is the height of five-star luxury in London's most desirable address, opposite Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. The hotel's Italian influence is evident from its elaborate furnishings and classic styling of each room. The suites feature an open plan lounge with a spacious bedroom and elegant marble-floor bathroom. Additional features which make this accommodation stand out, is it's butler service, the option to dine in-room or in the restaurant and free wi-fi internet.

St Pancras Renaissance London Hotel is a magnificent piece of architecture with a lot of history. Opened in 1873 as the Midland Grand Hotel to receive travellers arriving at St Pancras Station adjacent, this Victorian masterpiece features a Gothic influence including gold leaf ceilings, hand-stencilled wall designs and a dazzling grand staircase. Over the years, the hotel unfortunately fell into a state of disrepair and was eventually abandoned and at one point was even considered for demolition! Luckily a local investor thought this property was too good to loose and this city treasure was lovingly restored as a hotel and reopened in May this year. The hotel now boasts 245 rooms including 38 stunning Victorian suites, which feature a personalised butler service and private club for dining.

Umi Hotel is the departure and arrival point of the European Odyssey Topdeck tour and is conveniently located in the Bayswater / Notting Hill area, not far from Hyde Park and Paddington station. With 117 rooms, guests can choose from either single, twin, double or family rooms and if you upgrade to a Grove Room, you will also receive complimentary coffee, tea, snacks, bottled water and bathroom robes.



PARIS, FRANCE

Departing from London, our tour bus is loaded full of tourists and luggage – a familiar sight for the next 18 days. Our tour guide Monika tells us although we don't know each other now, we will become good friends by the end of the tour. After a quick meet and greet, it's an easy ferry ride across the English Channel from Dover to Calais as we make our way to the famous City of Lights. We are treated to an evening tour of this enchanting city before heading to the colourful Montmartre area for dinner and a chance to taste French cuisine – complete with cheese and wine.

One of the many benefits with travelling on a Topdeck tour is the amount of free days to do what you like. Your tour guide can offer advice and suggestions on what to see and do so with that in mind, we take the opportunity to see the main tourist sights in Paris – the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Champs-Elysees, The Louvre and Notre Dame Cathedral – all within easy walking distance of each other. As one of the most visited cities in the world, Paris offers something for everyone, whether it be learning about art and culture at the museum or simply enjoying a coffee while watching people walk by.

LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

After two wonderful romantic nights in Paris, it's off to stunning Switzerland where you are blown away by the scenery. First we notice evergreen fields with adorable chalets perched high up in the mountains overlooking the sparkling Lake Lucerne. A

cable car is the only way to reach our accommodation, which sits at over 1,700m up Mt Rigi. A traditional Swiss dinner with cheese fondue as we watch the sunset over The Alps, is the perfect way to end a long day.

The following day we make our way back down the mountain to catch a ferry across Lake Lucerne to the lovely city of Lucerne. This picturesque city holds many treasures including Chapel Bridge, the Church of St. Leodegar and the famous carving of a dying lion at the Lion Monument. Shopping here is excellent with a selection of famous Swiss brands such as the Swiss Army Knife – just be prepared to dig deep into your wallet! After exploring this delightful city, we make our way back up the mountain to the summit of Mt Rigi, also known as the “Queen of the Mountains” offering breathtaking views of the surrounding Alps.

FLORENCE, ITALY

Making a reluctant descent down the mountain, our tour continues to beautiful Italy for art, food, fashion and culture. A stop in Pisa, best known for its famous Leaning Tower, breaks up a day of driving. Considered by many to be the birthplace of the Renaissance, Florence has some of the world's most beautiful architecture and art – an easy place to fall in love with! Our first night here is spent exploring the local cuisine and we attempt to tackle the famous Florentine steak.

The following day we are taken on a city tour by a local tour guide, who provides an

in-depth history on the many important landmarks, including The Duomo, the largest brick and mortar dome in the world and The Florence Baptistery, renowned for its three sculptured bronze doors. The Piazza della Signoria is the main hub of the city and contains many significant pieces of art. A tour of a local leatherworks will show you how to tell the fakes apart from the genuine – not as easy as you may think! Tonight we take a trip to a family-run Tuscan vineyard where we enjoy fine Italian wine and the best homemade pasta I've ever had.

ROME, ITALY

Today we wind our way to Rome, but not before stopping in the medieval city of Orvieto, rising high above the steep cliffs. The major sight is The Duomo, where a miracle is said to have taken place. With a history spanning 2,500 years, it's easy to see why Rome attracts seven to ten million tourists each year. Our tour visits the opulent Trevi Fountain, the truly ancient and wondrous Pantheon and awe-inspiring Colosseum, arguably one of Rome's most iconic archaeological sites and regarded as a wonder of the world.

The following day we are given a tour of the Vatican, which attracts over four million tourists each year. You can avoid the queues if you're part of a guided tour group. The Vatican Museum displays an immense collection built up by the Roman Catholic Church throughout the centuries, including The Sistine Chapel painted by Michelangelo, widely believed to be his crowning achievement and will leave you standing in awe. A peak inside The Colosseum is a must, as well as sipping an espresso

outside a busy café, or hitting the shops for some retail therapy.

VENICE, ITALY

Today we depart the “capital of the world” for the “floating city” of Venice, renowned for its beautiful labyrinth of winding canals, architecture and artworks. We enjoy a stop in Verona, the setting of William Shakespeare's famous play Romeo and Juliet and visit the famous balcony and courtyard where the love scene takes place – the wall leading to the courtyard is covered in romantic love messages.

Stretching across 117 small islands, Venice is an engineering marvel, with marble churches built atop ancient posts driven deep into the mud banks. Interconnected by bridges and serviced by a beautiful network of canals, Venice is a romantic city, where you really must let yourself get lost in. Today we visit two places where traditions are being kept alive – a Murano glass factory and a lace school. Both are famous products of Venice and we get the opportunity to see how each is beautifully and skillfully hand crafted after being passed down through generations. Later we explore St Mark's Square, St Mark's Basilica and the Bell Tower with its panoramic views of the surrounding islands. And of

course, what would a trip to Venice be without a relaxing gondola ride down the famous Grand Canal, with the one you love.

TYROL, AUSTRIA

We continue on to Tyrol, where we are given the opportunity to experience an adrenaline rush of choice – from a challenging mountain bike ride through a forest, to a skydive high above the alps. I vote for something in between – paragliding. The thought of jumping off an alpine mountain strapped into a harness with a parachute scars me, but I am determined to give it a go and my excellent guide made it so enjoyable, I want to do it again and again! Afterwards, we make our way back down to our delightful chalet to experience the Austrian cuisine with a beer tasting and hearty dinner.

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

From a feeling of adrenaline, to a feeling of unease, we make our way to Mauthausen Concentration Camp enroute to Prague. This Nazi-controlled concentration camp was one

of the largest labour camps during WW II and was labelled "grade III" which meant it was the toughest and mainly used for extermination of inmates through labour. Walking through this place and seeing the gas chambers and the infamous "Stairs of Death", one gets an eerie feeling as you imagine the atrocities that took place, claiming hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. Ironically, this is the first day of our tour where it has rained continuously, reflecting the sombre occasion.

Prague is home to many famous cultural attractions, which survived the violence and destruction of 20th century Europe, including the Old Town Square containing the still-working medieval Astronomical Clock and the charming Charles Bridge. Experiencing this city by night is truly magical, but by day, it's very different with the area filled with artists and craft markets. Prague Castle, dominating the horizon across the bridge, is the biggest castle in the world and has been home to many kings over the centuries.

BERLIN, GERMANY

As we make our way into the heart of Germany, we stop in Dresden which was

bombed towards the end of WW II, killing thousands of civilians and completely destroying the entire city. Fortunately, restoration work has since helped reconstruct this charming city for millions of tourists to continue to enjoy.

Our German tour leader gave us an in-depth history lesson on this fascinating country. Berlin staged a revolution, was headquartered by fascists, bombed to bits, ripped in half and finally reunited – and that was just in the 20th century!

Today you can see remnants of the city's colourful past everywhere you look – parts of the Berlin wall are still standing, the Reichstag, where the seeds of the Nazi Regime were first planted in 1933, the Brandenburg Gate, a symbol of the city and Checkpoint Charlie, the best known crossing point between former East and West Berlin.

Our Third Reich tour takes us on a journey not just through the city and its Nazi history, but also a journey through time as he recreates the scene that led to WW II. The rest of the day we enjoy the many museums, check out the local fashion and cuisine - and of course the amazing nightlife at the many nightclubs.

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

From cheese production to clog making, The Netherlands is famous for many traditional products and our journey to Amsterdam stops off at a local farm, to see how Gouda cheese is created from start to finish, including a tasting.

Amsterdam has impressive architecture, lovely canals that weave through the city, great shopping and friendly locals. The city offers something different at night and it is fun exploring the nightlife and local restaurants and bars. We're given the opportunity to experience a sex show. Yes, it is as the name suggests, so you do have to be open-minded for this "entertainment". As well as prostitution being legalised, smoking cannabis is also legalised which attracts a large crowd of party-goers. Whatever your taste, you'll be sure to have a good night out!

The following morning we take a bike tour, the best way to experience Amsterdam and where nearly everyone owns one – that's 800,000 bikes! Next it's time to check out Anne Frank's House where she wrote her famous diary while in hiding during German-occupied Holland. Walking through the


cramped spaces, you really get a feeling of what it must've been like to creep around the house while hiding from the Nazi Germans. Our final night on the tour is spent enjoying a canal cruise and a few drinks with our fellow travellers who have now become good friends.

On our last day, we make a reluctant return to London but not before a stop in Bruges in Belgium, known as the "Venice of the North". This postcard perfect city has a certain charm about it and boasts some of the best chocolate (although Switzerland is my personal favourite) and a very good selection of beer. You can either take a canal boat, horse-drawn carriage or cycle around this city, but the best way to explore it is by foot, enjoying all the parks along the way. The tour ends as it starts with a ferry ride from Calais, where the wonderful white cliffs of Dover greet us. A perfect end to an amazing journey, which I'll never forget!


● Sarah Weeks and Craig Wrightson travelled to Europe courtesy of Topdeck and Singapore Airlines.

TOP TIPS

- Europe can get quite hot so make sure you always keep hydrated with a water bottle, but just remember to pace yourself for toilet stops on driving days!
- Exchange your required currency before arriving in your destination – it saves on time and money.
- Take a neck pillow – you'll appreciate the naps on board the coach, especially with such a full-on itinerary.
- Take a wi-fi device, as most accommodation includes this service free of charge and it's more affordable than mobile roaming.
- With so many different languages spoken throughout Europe, it can sometimes be handy to learn a few common phrases and greetings

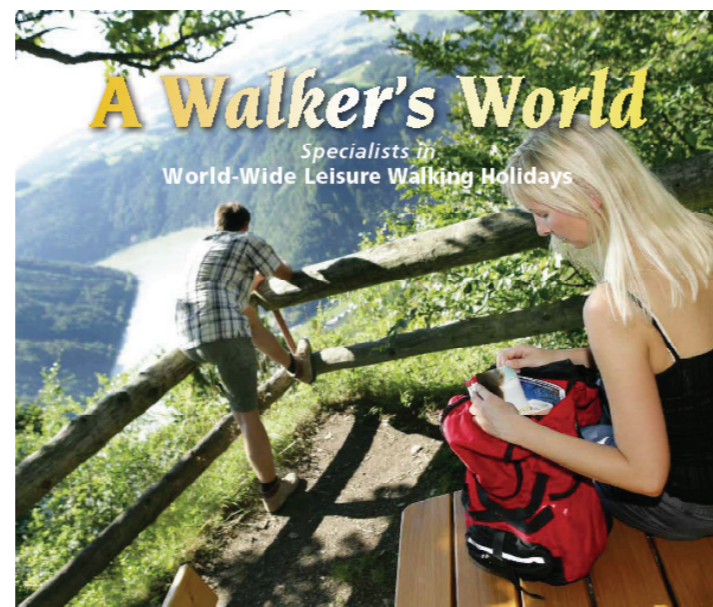


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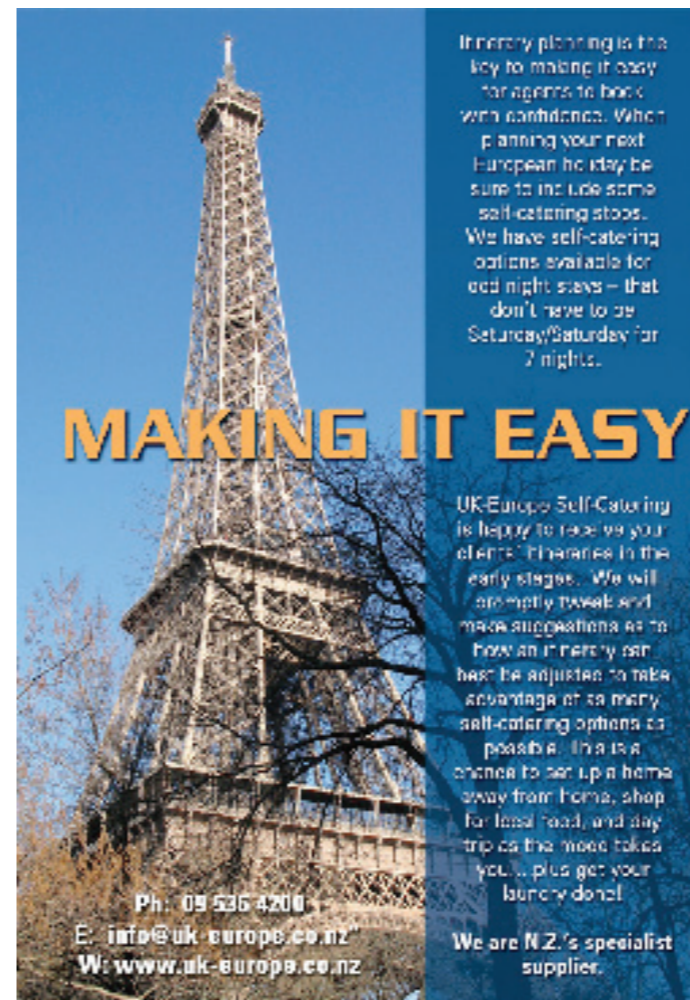


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