

INDULGE YOUR FAIRYTALE DREAMS AT SOME OF THE GRANDEST PALACES AND CASTLES IN EUROPE, AND EXPERIENCE LIFE LIKE A ROYAL.

FAIRYTALE FANTASIES

The history of Europe is written not just in the great events of the centuries, but in the walls of the grand buildings of its mighty rulers.

The landscape is home to thousands of palaces and castles, the former – and sometimes current – residences of royals, emirs and emperors.

Some were built to protect the powerful occupants from attack, while others were summer retreats to show off their impressive wealth. Here, we select a few to help you indulge your fairytale dreams.



TOPKAPI PALACE



BRIDGE OF SIGHS



ALHAMBRA PALACE



A GREAT ESCAPE

Go behind the walls of Doge's Palace on St Mark's Square and you'll enter the seat of a powerful empire known fancifully as the 'Most Serene Republic of Venice'. But what went on in this building wasn't always peaceful. Linked to the palace by the Bridge of Sighs over the Rio di Palazzo, lie the torture chambers and cells the notorious lover Casanova was forced to call home. He made his escape in 1756, but others weren't so lucky. The bridge takes its name from the belief that prisoners would sigh as they made their way across it and saw the beauty of Venice for the last time. If you wander the labyrinth of rooms in the palace, you'll see priceless works of art including Tintoretto's 'Paradise' covering an entire wall of the Grand Council Chamber, where the dukes would plot their battles against the Ottoman Empire.

HIDDEN HAREMS

Speaking of the Ottoman Empire, at the height of its power in the 16th century, it extended from the Danube to the Persian Gulf and from the Caspian Sea to Morocco. The centre of this formidable state was Istanbul, and the heart of Istanbul was Topkapi Palace. Founded by Mehmed II in 1459, this vast residence of the sultans was fashioned over the following four centuries in an Oriental style with courtyards and gateways. Only a favoured few would make it beyond the first, bustling with traders. Now you can get closer to the harems and private quarters to see examples of the sultans' wealth in the Throne Room and Treasury; from copper plates in the Confectionery House, where sweets were produced, to the emerald-studded Topkapi Dagger and one of the world's largest diamonds.

A CROWN JEWEL

The fortified citadel of the Alhambra Palace is Europe's most glorious example of Islamic architecture. A royal residence of the Nasrid emirs of Al-Andalus, this complex of palaces is predominantly Moorish and Renaissance in style. Overlooked by the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada, the fortress was protected by the banks of the River Darro. Venture beyond the forbidding walls and you'll get an appreciation of its splendour at the Palacios Nazaríes, the lion fountains of the Patio de los Leones, and the reflecting pools of the Patio de los Arrayanes.

After the fall of the Nasrid dynasty in 1492, the Alhambra Palace became the court of the Catholic monarchs and it was the Holy Roman Emperor, King Charles V, who left his mark with the monumental Palacio de Carlos V. Although by the time it was finished, he was long dead.

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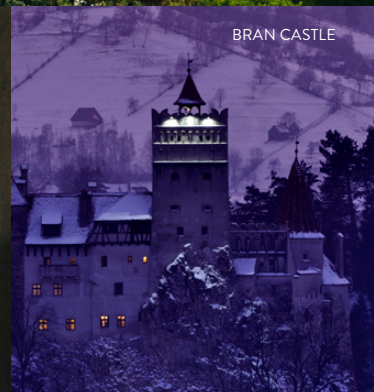
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SPIEZ CASTLE



VLAD THE IMPALER



BRAN CASTLE

SUMPTUOUS SUMMERS

The immense Schönbrunn Palace was the summer residence of the Hapsburg rulers of imperial Vienna. Its interiors are a mass of Rococo swirls and shimmering chandeliers across an astonishing 1,441 rooms. It was in the Mirror Room that the six-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart performed to Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Franz I. But the most famous residents were Emperor Franz Joseph and his wife Empress Elizabeth, affectionately known as 'Sisi'.

Built in the mid 18th century on the site of a former hunting lodge, the palace is surrounded by picturesque parkland alive with Neoclassical follies, fake Roman ruins, and Europe's oldest zoo.

TALL TALES

Nestled in dense forest in Transylvania, the story of Bran Castle is worthy of a tale as famous as the fictional one that draws people here. Bram Stoker was inspired to write 'Dracula' by the bloodthirsty antics of a 15th century prince called Vlad the Impaler who, as son of Vlad Dracul, would use the name Dracula 'Son of Dracul'.

But Stoker never went to Transylvania, and it's now thought that Vlad the Impaler never set foot in Bran Castle. The true story is a bit of marketing magic by the communist authorities looking to increase tourism to the area in the 1960s. By linking Vlad Țepeș – Vlad the Impaler's Romanian name – this Gothic castle on the mountain pass between Transylvania and Wallachia entered the history books.

SWISS MODESTY

Loved more for its setting than architectural splendour, Spiez Castle is surrounded by vineyards and overlooks one of the prettiest bays in Europe. If you go to the top of the tower, the reward is stunning views of the Bernese Oberland, where the luxury trains of the Swiss Railways journey through the mountains and valleys. A walk through the castle is a trip through 1,000 years of the stories of its former residents, including the nobleman Franz Ludwig von Erlach, who fathered 37 children with his two wives. The carved ceiling in the Banqueting Hall makes it the most beautiful of the rooms, while a stroll in the grounds reveals an aromatic herb garden. To try the local wine, we recommend you go to the village and sip a glass as you gaze at the lake.

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