

TRAVEL



Neuschwanstein Castle, in Germany, served as the inspiration for Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle.

Photos by Dreamstime / TNS

Where to find Europe's best castles

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European castles are some of the world's most iconic and historically significant structures, many dating back to the Middle Ages. They were primarily built for defense against enemy invaders, housing nobles and royalty or asserting power over a religion. And there are thousands of these edifices dotting the picturesque European landscape. What is it about castles that draw travelers like moths to a flame? Perhaps it's because we find ourselves living within the pages of a fairy tale for a brief moment in time. Let's look at our favorite places to find awe-inspiring magnificent European castles.

Neuschwanstein Castle, Germany

One of the most beautiful castles in Europe and likely the most recognizable in the world, Neuschwanstein served as the inspiration for Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle and it's easy to see why. It's magnificent. Originally built in Bavaria as a private retreat for King Ludwig II in 1886, the majestic structure sits atop a rugged rock ledge surrounded by stunning scenery. The castle features a range of fantastical and fairy tale elements such as towers, spires and elaborate ornate interior rooms.

Château de Chantilly, France

Located an hour from Paris, this incredibly beautiful historic castle is known for its stunning architecture, rich history and vast grounds, surrounded by a 7,800-acre park, which includes forests, lakes and meticulously designed gardens. The château consists of several buildings, the most prominent the Grand Château built during the 16th century by the Montmorency family and later expanded. Its mix of Renaissance and Classical architectural styles include a striking façade, elegant interiors, and impressive art collections. The Musée Condé includes works by famous artists like Raphael, Delacroix, and Watteau.

Alcázar of Segovia, Spain

This historic castle is one of the country's most iconic and well-preserved fortresses, its origins dating back to Roman times. The castle's dramatic, fairy-tale-like appearance with a distinctive turreted roof and rounded towers makes it look like something straight out of a medieval fantasy. And panoramic views of the surrounding landscape and city are amazing. One of its most notable features is the stunning architecture, an impressive blend of Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance styles. Inside, beautifully decorated rooms include a Royal Hall, Throne Room and the elegant vaulted ceilings in the Hall of Kings. The castle is believed to have inspired Disney World's Magic Kingdom Cinderella's Castle.

Bran Castle, Romania

Located on the Transylvanian side of Central Romania, Bran Castle is home to one of the most historical legends. Often referred to as "Dracula's Castle," it is one of the country's most famous landmarks due to the association with the Dracula legend, the fictional character created by Bram Stoker in his 1897 novel. The real connection however is with Vlad the Impaler, a 15th century ruler known for his brutal and violent meth-



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ods which included impaling his enemies. Visitors can tour rooms which include eerie dungeons, secret passages, medieval furniture, weaponry and art.

Prague Castle, Czech Republic

One of the largest castles in the world, Prague Castle or Pražský hrad in Czech, sits atop a hill overlooking the city of Prague and has been the seat of the kings, emperors and presidents for over a thousand years. The castle complex is a stunning blend of architectural styles, with buildings ranging from Romanesque to Gothic and Baroque, reflecting the various eras of its long history. Its origins date back to the 9th century, built as a fortified seat but over time, it evolved into a grand palace. One of the most prominent features of the Castle is St. Vitus Cathedral, a towering Gothic masterpiece that dominates the city skyline and home to the tombs of kings with stunning stained-glass windows, intricate stone carvings and impressive spires.

Buda Castle, Hungary

This Budapest castle absolutely dominates the Budapest skyline. The stunning historic complex, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been the seat of Hungarian royalty since the 14th century. The castle boasts a rich blend of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architectural styles and though visitors can explore its beautiful courtyards, enjoy impressive panoramic views of the city and dive into the deep history surrounding the castle, it is the nighttime that brings a magic to the castle. We highly suggest an evening river cruise to see this palace in all its glory.

Blarney Castle, Ireland

This medieval stronghold steeped in myth and magic nestled in the emerald landscapes of County Cork is most famous for its legendary Blarney Stone. As the legend goes, those who kiss the stone will be blessed with the ability to speak with eloquence and persuasiveness. Thousands of visitors flock to the castle each year to kiss the stone, though the medieval fortress with defensive walls, towers and a central keep are totally worth checking out.

Moszna Castle, Poland

This 17th century picturesque castle located in the small village of Moszna features an eclectic blend of Baroque,

Neo-Gothic and Neo-Renaissance architectural styles. The stand-out of the castle is the impressive number of turrets – 99 in total and 365 rooms within the castle. The expansive grounds feature stunning gardens, lakes and wooded areas and the interior of the castle boasts opulent rooms including a library, dining halls and a variety of picturesque salons.

Windsor Castle, United Kingdom

Though there may be more opulent castles located throughout Europe, Windsor Castle in Berkshire, is the oldest and largest inhabited castle in the world. Founded by William the Conqueror in the 11th century, it has been the home of 40 monarchs and is open to visitors throughout the year. A highlight of the castle is St. George's Chapel, a stunning example of Gothic architecture and the burial place of numerous monarchs including Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. It was also the wedding site for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018 and famous for its Changing of the Guard ceremony at the castle's entrance.

Predjama Castle, Slovenia

Located in southwestern Slovenia, this fascinating castle looks like something straight out of a fairytale. It was built into the side of a 123-meter-high limestone cliff just outside the village of Predjama as a fortress. The castle's location made it almost impregnable due to its massive cave system with an escape tunnel, a feature visitors can access during a combined castle/cave tour.

Eilean Donan Castle, Scotland

Scotland has so many magnificent castles, but Eilean Donan is likely one of the most beautiful you'll ever see. Located at the point where three lochs meet in the Scottish Highlands, its dramatic setting on a rocky island perch surrounded by rugged landscape makes it a popular spot for tourists and photographers. The castle was a filming location for "The Highlander" and "James Bond: The World is Not Enough." Built in the 13th century or earlier, the castle was constructed as a defensive stronghold to protect the region from Viking raids. Largely destroyed during the British Jacobite rising in the 1700s, the fortress was lovingly restored in the 20th century featuring a blend of medieval and more modern elements.

TRAVEL TIPS

How safe is air travel in the U.S. and the world? Here's a close look

An American Airlines regional jet collided with a Black Hawk helicopter over the Potomac River, killing 67 people. A private medical jet crashed in Philadelphia, with 7 lives lost. A Delta Air Lines flight to Amsterdam returned to Minneapolis-St. Paul for an emergency landing on due to a mechanical issue, with no one hurt. And that was just one recent week in aviation. But even in the wake of these incidents, how dangerous is flying, really? Is this part of a new trend? And what is the deal with air traffic controllers? Let's break it down with data and facts – and a little commentary.



How unusual was the D.C. crash?

It's important to remember that the tragedy at Washington, D.C.'s Reagan National Airport was highly unusual for any U.S. airline – if not incredibly rare. Before that, the last U.S. commercial airline crash was in February 2009, when a Continental turboprop plane crashed near Buffalo, New York, killing 50. The intervening 16 years sometimes felt like a golden age of U.S. air safety. There was exactly one U.S. airline fatality in all that time, caused when a Southwest 737 engine exploded midair in 2018. And while our fading memories of the 1970s to the 1990s might include quite a few news stories of large-scale aviation tragedies, the last high-casualty accident in the U.S. was back in 2001: the American Airlines Airbus crash in Queens that killed 265, just two months after 9/11.

Putting it all in perspective, the skies have been remarkably peaceful in this century. And by the way, Joe Biden was the first president since Calvin Coolidge to have no domestic airline crash fatalities on his watch.

But what are the odds of being in an accident?

For the big picture, we can look to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which issues its annual Air Safety Report for global aviation. The 2024 report hasn't come out yet, but last year the IATA called 2023 the "safest year for flying by several parameters." "At this level of safety, on average a person would have to travel by air every day for 103,239 years to experience a fatal accident," the IATA said in the 2023 report.

Meanwhile, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study from August 2024 claims that air travel has gotten roughly twice as safe each decade since the 1960s, thanks to advances in technology and training and work by U.S. agencies. "The risk of a fatality from commercial air travel was 1 per every 13.7 million passenger boardings globally in the 2018-2022 period," the study finds.

How does that compare to traffic deaths?

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 29,135 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the first nine months of 2024. That works out to about 106 fatalities per day – so on the very day of the D.C. disaster, far more people likely died on U.S. roads. It's a cliché, but true: The most dangerous part of a flight is the drive to the airport. (Personally, I've had some frightening airport Ubers.) In fact, if you really want to ensure you'll live to see tomorrow, you might want to get on a plane right now.

How about air traffic controllers?

It's no secret that the FAA has a national air traffic controller shortage, which may have contributed to the D.C. collision. ATC staffing is also a factor in an alarming increase in runway near-misses, which reached a recent high in 2023. Nationally, controller staffing is only at about 72 percent of the FAA's target. Whereas Reagan National had a 2024 target of 28 air traffic controllers, only 19 were on board as of September 2023.

But is the D.C. tragedy part of a systemic problem?

It's impossible to say, especially before the National Transportation Safety Board completes its investigation into the crash. The NTSB said it would release a preliminary report within 30 days. For now, the best guess is the Potomac tragedy was a standalone incident. If something similar were to occur in the near future, it would be cause for further concern and action. For example, after two similar Boeing 737 MAX crashes in Ethiopia and Indonesia in 2018-2019, there was a worldwide, two-year grounding of the model.

What about the 737 MAX, anyway?

After those two major international crashes in which 346 people died, Boeing's newer 737 MAX was rightfully thrust into the center of a safety scandal. After Boeing corrected flaws in the MAX's flight control system, the model returned to the skies by late 2020. Then in January 2024, the MAX struck again, when the plug door on an Alaska Airlines MAX 9 blew out mid-flight. Miraculously, no one was killed, but the most scandalous aspect of the story may be that Alaska Airlines had previously barred the very same aircraft from taking long overseas flights. All 737 MAX 9 planes with door plugs were again grounded until they were confirmed to be safe. If you're skeptical as I am, you might still view the 737 MAX with at least one cocked eyebrow. I have even considered personally boycotting the MAX due to all the drama. Nevertheless, I have flown on a MAX a few times since 2021 – with Icelandair, United and American – and lived to tell the tale.

– Simon Peter Groebner / The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)