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EUROPE'S FLASH DIGS AT BUDGET PRICES

SOME backpackers are so hell-bent on saving money that spending the minimum amount of dollars becomes an Olympic sport and the pleasure of travel rates a distant second. That's why so-called Flashpacking has become so popular. If you are unfamiliar with the term, it means staying at hostels that offer a lot more than a basic bunk and packing decent clothes, laptops, credit cards, cameras and mobiles.

Backpacking with "toys" has become a major hit with GAP year students and the over-40s on extended trips. And the hostel industry, especially in Europe, has stepped up to the plate. There's much less of a risk of nasty surprises these days, too, with review ratings that list a hostel's pros and cons in no uncertain words. And, most importantly, the more you save on accommodation, the more you have to spend on food and drink.

Like many European World Heritage-listed towns, Bruges has been restored and renovated to within an inch of its life. Day-tripping Europeans tend to overrun the streets and souvenir shops on weekends, but don't let the tourist trap look put you off. Bruges is crammed with good restaurants and bars, and boasts Michelangelo's Bruges Madonna, the only major work to leave Italy during the maestro's lifetime.

The Bauhaus Hostel in Bruges, on centrally-located Langestraat, also doubles as a budget hotel with all the mod cons. Whether you book a dorm room or one of the private flat rents from 430 euros a week for up to four people, the cleanliness is next to godliness rule holds.

Bruges means beer and even before you head out to one of the town's many bars, the hostel offers guests a Belgian beer sampler. Once fortified, you can join the only public brewery tour in town at De Halve Maan. If vintage beer and champagne are more your style, make tracks to De Kelk. The premises may be small but the beer list is vast at t' Brugs

Beertje, including Boon Mariage Parfait Kriek, an unsweetened cherry lambic brew. Go to www.bauhaus.be.

Located in a 19th century school once attended by George Bernard Shaw, the Avalon in *Dublin* is viewed as hallowed ground. Conveniently close to Temple Bar, educating guests remains a major goal. A free three-hour tour of Dublin leaves from the reception at 10.45am every day - hail, rain or shine. *Dublin* magazine has given the thumbs-up to the on-site Bald Barista Cafe for serving the best espressos in Dublin. There's plenty of craic (Gaelic for fun and entertainment) every night and a warm welcome in spite of the large size of the hostel. Go to www.avalon-house.ie.

Only serious penny-pinchers won't be tempted to trade up.

The Guinness Storehouse is Ireland's number one attraction and you can enjoy delicious snacks and main dishes cooked in the "black stuff" in four restaurants and bars - from mussels in Guinness sauce to Guinness bread and Guinness cured smoked salmon. Enjoy a Black Velvet cocktail in the Gravity Bar with panoramic views of the Dublin skyline after a brewery tour. Just standing at the bottom of the world's largest pint glass is reason enough for a visit to this amazing venue.

Vienna is full of interesting one-off hotels such as the Altstadt and the same principle applies to the city's hostels. There's a bit of an Ivy League overtone at the newly renovated Hostel Ruthensteiner, even though the rooms are a bit small, because a lot of business comes from word-of-mouth. The location is good, too. Not far from the Westbahnhof railway station and Mariahilferstrasse,

Vienna's main shopping street. My grandmother came from Vienna and always berated us with the line: "We didn't ask if you played a musical instrument; we asked which one you played". This endearing musical tradition endures. The Ruthensteiner offers musical instruments for guests to provide "free entertainment" or to show off their talent. Go to www.hostelruthensteiner.com.

The hostel bar serves draught Ottakringer beer but wine lovers will gravitate to the world-famous heurigen in Grinzing. The best heurige in this touristy area is Henglhasselbrunner, owned by the Hengl family who has been making wine for over 400 years. For piece and quiet, head across the Danube to the wine villages of Stammersdorf and Strebersdorf.

Anyone who can afford it should stay at the Parador de Granada, Spain's most popular parador (Spanish hotels in heritage buildings such as palaces and castles). It costs a mint and is housed in a 15th century convent on the grounds of the fabled palace. But if your budget can't stretch that far; try The Oasis hostel in the old town. The winding streets and alleys hereabouts semaphore their Arabic heritage, so don't arrive too late if you're spooked by the dark.

Part of the Spanish-based Oasis hostel network, the accommodation is dorm room-only with rates beginning at 13 euros per night with breakfast. Added bonuses include a free tapas tour, the open roof terrace with panoramic views of Granada and you can buy entry tickets for the Alhambra at reception so you don't have to queue. Don't miss Casa Enrique in Puerta Real, widely acknowledged as Granada's most beautiful historic bar and famous for its outstanding selection of wines from Andalucia and Rioja. Go to www.oasisgranada.com.

It must have taken the owners two seconds to come up with the name of the Czech Inn in Prague. Featured in every

major English-speaking newspaper from *The New York Times* to *The Guardian*, you'd be mad to look for a budget hotel. Even the dorms look as if they could feature in an IKEA catalogue and cost from 11 euros a night. While prices for the private rooms, designed by Czech architect Olga Novotna, begin at a modest \$65 per person per night. Go to www.czech-inn.com.

The Czechs aren't only master brewers. Prague is full of wine merchants and one of the best is Sudova Vina Moravska Delikatesy where you can sample some of the best vintages from Moravia. Great Czech cheeses, sausages and cured meats, too.

The Germans opened the first youth hostel in 1912 and standards are uniformly high throughout the country. Rated as one of the top-10 youth hostels in Germany, the Pfefferbett Hostel is located within an old brewery site in Prenzlauer Berg, one of the most jumping parts of eastern Berlin. The decor is Berlin-cool-meets-industrial chic even in the dorms. But the double rooms with phones and showers are available from only 17 euros per person per night, so only serious penny-pinchers won't be tempted to trade up. Alexanderplatz is only two train stops away and Pfefferbett is only a 15-minute walk to World Heritage-listed Museum Island. Latte macchiatos are served in the on-site cafe and there's also a beer garden, and the surrounding revamped industrial complex also boasts art galleries, clubs and restaurants. Go to www.pfefferbett.de.

For a last night blow-out, dress up and head for the new Waldorf Astoria hotel. The Art Deco-inspired Lang Bar, named after iconic movie director Fritz Lang, is one of the best people-watching perches in Berlin. Better yet, as a special treat book a one-night package, which includes a limo from the airport and a glass of champagne on arrival. 



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