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## Ten Off the Beaten Path European Travel Destinations



Terry Ward

### By Terry Ward

2010-10-20 14:57:53.0

The U.S. State Department's Oct. 3 travel alert announcing the "potential for terrorist attacks in Europe" in popular tourism destinations such as Germany and France sparked fear in many Americans, and frustrated many people, too, with its vagueness.

Touristic sights in cities like Paris and transportation hubs, such as airports and railway stations across the Continent, were singled out as places for Americans to remain vigilant. Sure, you could cancel your trip to Europe—or you could consider the warning as a good reason to get creative with your travel plans. Head off the beaten tourist path in Europe; bypass the major attractions and big urban centers and leave the hectic airports and train stations in a hurry to make for these delightful, off-the-radar destinations instead.



Terry Ward

### AZORES, PORTUGAL

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During the high season, you can fly nonstop from Boston (five hours) and Oakland, CA (summer only) on charter flights with SATA International airline to the Azores — a cluster of nine exotic islands in the Atlantic Ocean belonging to Portugal and located roughly 900 miles from the mainland.

Alternatively, it's a short two-hour hop from Lisbon to Azorean destinations like Pico and Faial, two serene islands where volcanoes dominate the landscape, sperm whales spout just off shore, and an underwater world of volcanic lava flows and fumaroles delights divers who make the journey.

The island of Sço Jorge is reminiscent of Kauai's famed Na Pali Coast, with Technicolor green cliffs plunging sheer and steep into this lonely stretch of the Atlantic. Picturesque Portuguese villages throughout the islands usually center on a church and plaza lined with a few cafes.

You'll eat incredibly well in the Azores, too, with everything from mahi mahi to clams plucked from pristine coastal rocks of São Jorge on local menus. Wine lovers shouldn't miss the red wines from the slopes of Pico's volcano.



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## BERGÜN, SWITZERLAND

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If Norman Rockwell had envisioned a town to paint in the Swiss Alps, chances are it would have looked a lot like Bergün — a village of roughly 550 inhabitants that abuts a high mountain pass in the canton of Graubünden in Switzerland. During the snowy winter months, locals transport everything from groceries to their kids atop old-fashioned wooden sleds that they pull through town.

While few American tourists know the place, Swiss visitors descend from Zürich (2.5 hours away by train) and beyond for some of the most atmospheric sled runs imaginable. You ride a train up the mountain along a UNESCO World Heritage — designated route that rolls over vaulted stone viaducts to the top of the sled run, then warm up with some mulled wine or a hot chocolate before sledding your way back to town under moonlight or a sky filled with stars.

There's a small station in Bergün, and world-class resorts like St. Moritz and Davos are about an hour away by train.

Outside of ski season, there's hiking and mountain biking — not to mention just wandering the cute village streets past traditionally painted houses — to while away your perfect Alpine moments.



Terry Ward

## CANAL DU MIDI, FRANCE

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One of Europe's most stunning waterways, the UNESCO World Heritage — designated Canal du Midi in the South of France, stretches for roughly 150 miles between the towns of Sète and Toulouse. Through a series of waterways that spring from it, the canal, which was built in the 17th century, ultimately connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.

A visit here — whether aboard a luxury river barge such as the Tango or while pedaling a bike through medieval towns like Carcassonne and Narbonne-takes you past impossibly beautiful village scenery, local markets and iconic French landscapes.



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## LAGO DI GARDA, ITALY

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Situated between Venice and Milan in Northern Italy, the Garda Lake is Italy's largest lake and a popular tourist destination, especially for northern Europeans. Few American tourists make it here, however, as they're more likely to be drawn to larger Italian cities and the country's south.

In fact, you're more likely to find shop owners along the Garda Lake fluent in German than in English — but it's easy enough to make yourself understood.

The crystal clear lake is dotted with swans and the odd ferry transporting people to points along the lakeshore. Rugged mountains make for a beautiful backdrop to the shimmering blue water.

As appealing as the natural beauty of this place is the charm of lakeside towns such as Lazise, on the eastern shore, where you can linger over a gelato while watching boats bob in the pretty port or grab a cappuccino on a sun-splashed terrace.

The peak months of summer are very busy with tourists, but autumn is an especially appealing time



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to visit this part of Italy, with the sunshine still in full effect and interesting local festivals celebrating things like olive oil and regional wines on the calendar.



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## MOUSTIERS-SAINTE-MARIE, FRANCE

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Named one of France's most beautiful villages (and in a country like France, that's saying a lot), the hilltop town of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie (about an hour and a half northeast of Marseilles and the Côte d'Azur) appears to be plucked straight from a Middle Ages fairy tale.

The town's tiled homes and shops tumble down a steep mountain wall with a stream gurgling through its heart.

Stop for a crepe in a cute café, have a sip of water directly from the town's bubbling fountain, then head off to explore the nearby Gorges du Verdon, where water the color of a blue daiquiri flows from a gorge of narrow red cliffs and gaping caves into beautiful Lake Sainte Croix.

Nearby, acre upon acre of lavender fields and olive groves make for many a perfect Provence photo moment.



Terry Ward

## MUNDAKA, SPAIN

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Drawn by the promise of perfectly peeling waves, surfers tend to hone in on some of the most beautiful places in the world in their pursuit of the Endless Summer. The small village of Mundaka in Northern Spain's Basque country is one such corner of paradise.

Billabong hosts a world surfing championship here every year, in October. But even if riding and watching waves is not your thing, there's plenty of reason to visit Mundaka as part of your authentic travel itinerary. Traditional Basque architecture-white buildings with red roofs-dominate the townscape.

There's a small, very scenic port. And the town's narrow cobbled alleyways are the perfect place to find a traditional restaurant serving Basque specialties, including seafood dishes inspired by the fruits of the Bay of Biscay.

The town hosts festivals throughout the year, too, so you might be lucky enough to be here when traditional dances or performances of the Basque flute take place.



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## OBERSTDORF, GERMANY

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About two hours south of Munich, Oberstdorf, Germany — a popular place for skiing and hiking in Southern Bavaria — is a quaint town in the Allgäu region of the Alps where you can hear the clinking of cattle bells and find farmers selling fresh dairy products from their barns, right in the middle of town.

Apart from its skiing and snowboarding draws during the winter months, Oberstdorf is known as a destination for wellness vacations year round, with most hotels offering sauna and spa facilities and an emphasis on hydrotherapy and fresh mountain air as part of any wellness routine.

And while you won't find many American tourists here, you can count on plenty of German visitors, as well as the odd Austrian (the border is very near).

For local food, you can't go wrong with the cured meats and cheeses served at every Oberstdorf hotel breakfast buffet.



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## SYLT, GERMANY

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Many visitors to Germany aren't aware of the country's hundreds of miles of beautiful dune-fringed coastline along the Baltic and North Seas. It's safe to say that nearly all Germans, however, have heard of Sylt — during the summertime, the North Sea island is the German equivalent of the Hamptons, and celebrities descend to bunk in the pretty, straw-roofed traditional houses and linger in cafes in the posh town of Kampen.

During the off-season months, the island's appeal comes in a quiet rural vibe and miles of windswept beaches backed by towering dunes. Germany's only oyster farm is found here, too, and sampling the delicious bivalves is a must during your visit.

When you're not walking on the beach or traipsing along trails in the dunes, you can shelter in a gemütlich café with a hot drink while watching squalls whip their way across the North Sea.



Ben Wadewitz

## TEXEL, HOLLAND

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Fewer than 50 miles north of Amsterdam's busy city center, in the town of Den Helder, you can hop the ferry to Texel, one of Holland's pretty North Sea islands. The landscape is flat as a ribbon, for the most part, and criss-crossed with canals that sometimes freeze in the winter months, drawing locals outside to enjoy their country's national winter pastime-ice skating.

During the warmer months, you can go wadlopen, walking on the wadden-areas offshore that are usually underwater but become exposed during low tide, revealing a fascinating walk-through experience during which you'll find interesting crustaceans and other sea critters.

Throughout the year, the weekly market held on Mondays in the island's main town, Den Burg, is a fun chance to sample favorite Dutch foods including kibbeling — delicious fish bits fried in batter and served with a tangy remoulade sauce for dipping. Pick up a bottle of the local tippel, Juttertje, to bring home.



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## **ABERSTYWTH, WALES**

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Inland Wales is rich with rolling green hills, tumbling ruins and stone villages plucked straight from a storybook. But it's worth venturing to the coast to experience the university town of Aberystwyth, home to the country's oldest law school and a beautiful foreshore lined with traditional Welsh homes and hotels.

Conservation areas of the beautiful Cardigan Bay beaches nearby are home to marine birds and schools of dolphins and are worthy of a boat tour. Aberystwyth's proximity to the Cambrian Mountains makes for great hiking and mountain biking opportunities, too.

And culture vultures should put a visit to the National Library of Wales on their to-do list, to see the home of some of the most important Welsh treasures, including the oldest surviving manuscript written in the Welsh language.