

Fifth Estater Reports on European Travels

Thomas Haroldson

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To be a teenager in western Europe today is to enjoy a freedom of movement only dreamed about by American young people. During the summer, while most American kids are sitting home watching reruns on T.V., their European counterparts are out on the road.

Of course, the geographical makeup of the Continent makes travel not only possible, but irresistible.

Imagine, if you can, that Paris was located in Benton Harbor; that Amsterdam was in Mackinaw City; that London was in Green Bay, Wisconsin; that Geneva was in Columbus, Ohio; and that Spain, the Riviera and Italy were down on the Tennessee-Kentucky border.

If these places were actually so close to Detroit, I doubt that there would be more than a handful of kids left in the city during the summer. And, of course, that is exactly what happens in Europe.

As soon as the schools close everyone over twelve years old splits for somewhere. The modes of travel vary, but no one stays home because they lack transportation. If all else fails one can always walk, and that's what many of them do. A hike from Detroit to Tennessee really wouldn't be too bad if you knew that the Riviera and Italy were down there waiting for you.

European parents, traditionally strict with their children, become surprisingly permissive during the summer months. Kids as young as fourteen years old are turned loose to roam unescorted from one end of Europe to the other. Teenage couples set off on a two month trip together and no one even blinks an eye. In fact, it is not uncommon to see some kids traveling completely alone without a companion of any kind.

The cost of travel is almost infinitesimal. Since most teenagers either ride a bike, hitch-hike or walk the cost of transportation is nil. Cost is also kept down by the wide availability of camping sites.

The freedom European teenagers enjoy seems to have a good effect on them. They're much more mature than the average American teenager, and, in many ways they are even more mature than the average American adult. They have an intelligent and relaxed attitude toward life, which spares them many emotional growing pains.

For one thing, they apparently have fewer sexual hangups than American kids. One day in southern France I saw an uninhibited girl change her bathing suit at the beach. The young people around her, including several young guys, gave her only a casual glance. There were no stares, no leers, no snickers, no bad jokes. Nothing. Everyone minded their own business and behaved like mature human beings.

It would be interesting to see how a group of American teenagers (or adults) would behave in a similar situation.

Unfortunately, the rich life that European teenagers enjoy during the summer cannot be duplicated in America. The United States is too vast, its cities are too new, and its people are too hidebound to ever provide a comparable atmosphere for traveling. In addition traveling in the United States is so expensive that few adults, much less teenagers, can afford to go anywhere.

So—save your money, learn how to pack a rucksack, and keep an eye out for inexpensive chartered flights. Behind the plastic facade of travel literature there's a young vibrant Europe worth getting to. Inexpensive pensions, dormitories and youth hostels that are available, often free of charge to traveling students.

If need be, the average traveler can get by fairly comfortably on less than a dollar a day.

But Europe today is quite prosperous, and most kids can afford to splurge once in a while. To save time, many of them travel long distances by train, and only use their bikes for local touring. In order to take their bikes along on the train, all they have to do is ride them into the station and hand them over the counter to the baggage master.

It's about as simple as checking a hat, and about as inexpensive.

Generally speaking second class express trains are so cheap that almost anyone can afford to travel at least partially by rail. For example, the cost of a ticket on the luxurious Holland Express, between Hamburg and Amsterdam (about 250 miles), is only ten dollars.

Next to the roads of Europe, where one may drive by a hundred young hitch-hikers in fifteen minutes, the greatest concentration of teenage travelers is to be found in the train stations. The stations are for many a home away from home—and for good reason. In the major ones a traveler can shave, shower eat and sleep for practically nothing. In Munich a counter lunch of sausage buttered rolls and beer costs only thirty-five cents.

By the way, there is virtually no minimum drinking age in Europe.



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