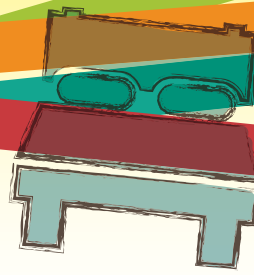


Quirky

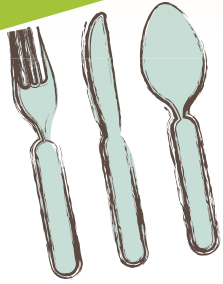
EATS

&

CLEVER sleeps



By Genevieve Northup



Have you ever wanted to toast with Dracula or dine in the sky (and I don't mean an airline meal)? Are you puzzled at how people have survived in igloos and caves? Want to know how bad prison food tastes? Well, Europe has some unconventional restaurants and hotels that will help answer these questions and pique your curiosity.

Quirky Eats



Don't let meals be an afterthought while traveling. Reserve a table for an outlandish dinner adventure.

Dinner in the Dark

Develop a newfound gratitude for the gift of sight by eating in total darkness with total strangers at shared tables. Blind or visually impaired waiters will lead you through your evening in the dark.

Nocti Vagus, Berlin, Germany: Order courses beforehand or take a gamble with the mystery menu and try to discern the components of each dish. Musical or theatrical entertainment will keep you awake during the night.

Dans le Noir, several European locations:

Prepare for culinary surprises in Paris, London, Barcelona or St. Petersburg. Fumble through a secret five-course Gastronomic Menu at the Paris location, or take a Spanish class (also in the dark) while dining in Barcelona.

To find more restaurants like these in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, visit www.dinner-dark.com.

Supper in the Sky

Fly in the sky for an extraordinary dinner. But be aware that the table isn't the only thing up high; these experiences are pricey.

Dinner in the Sky, Brussels, Belgium: Take a seat at the dining table and strap into a harness, then let a crane raise you above the city. You'll feel like you're on a thrill ride, but there won't be any unexpected drops — unless you drop a fork! You and up to 21 friends can gaze at the skyline and watch the chefs prepare gourmet cuisine *en l'air*. Availability is limited, but the business is expanding to other cities.

CulAir Sky Dining, various locations in the Netherlands: Float above Dutch cities and countryside as chef Angélique Schmeinck cooks an exquisite meal using the hot air that powers your balloon ride. Chow down on lobster, sea bass and chocolate mousse while enjoying the scenery.

A.O. Ballonreisen, various locations in Germany: Get a bird's-eye view of Deutschland and savor a four-course meal in this hot air balloon, which claims to be the world's smallest restaurant.



PHOTO: PETER LUNDSTROM, WDO-WWWW.TREEHOTEL.SE

Dining with Death

It's always Halloween at these eateries, where all things spooky are on the table.

Restaurante La Posada Maldita, Barcelona, Spain: You'll be on edge at the "inn of the damned," where sadistic doctors, scary morticians and the undead get too close for comfort as they serve your food.

Le Cercueil, Brussels, Belgium: Dare to taste a deadly cocktail, such as Vampire Blood or Corpse Juice, and order Belgian beer in a skull mug. Keep an eye on the skeletons hovering in this Coffin Bar.

Count Dracula Club, Bucharest, Romania: Dine with the infamous count in the land of vampire legends. Be prepared for cheesy frights and lots of laughs at this tourist spot.

Clever Sleeps



Unusual accommodations should be the highlight of your next holiday; you can always find fun activities, no matter where you end up.

Tree Houses for Kids & Grown-Ups

Tree houses in Europe are a step above the ones from your youth. Instead of camping in your sleeping bag and plotting against other kids in the neighborhood, snuggle in a comfy bed and sip champagne at these tree house hotels.



PHOTO: BRUSSELS IN THE SKY-WWWW.DINNERINTHESKY.COM



PHOTO: PETER LUNN FROM, WDO-WWW.TREEHOTEL.SE

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Treehotel, Harads, Sweden: Your only problem in the woods will be deciding which of the seven chic tree houses to stay in. Will it be the modern mirrored box, the funky UFO, or the bird's nest, which looks like the home of a giant pterodactyl?

Kulturinsel Einsiedel's Baumhaus Hotel, Neisseaue, Germany: Once inside your eccentric tree house, you'll feel as though you belong in a fairy tale with gnomes or talking animals. The simple furnishings, including barrel bathtubs and wooden furniture, add to the charm.

Chewton Glen, Hampshire, England: Tree house? More like penthouse. Rent glamorous digs for two to seven people, and relax in the hot tub on your veranda perched high in the New Forest National Park.

Icy Cold Chambers

If you think rainy winter days in Germany are cold, wait until you spend the night on a bed of ice. Luckily, blankets and special sleeping bags are provided at these icy accommodations.

Iglu-Dorf, locations in Andorra, Germany and Switzerland: Have a slumber party on a giant sheet of ice in a family igloo, or take a romantic respite in a couple's igloo. Dinner, breakfast, snowshoeing and sauna access are included.

Schneedorf, Ötztal, Austria: Challenge yourself on the ropes course and construct your own igloo with the help of experts. Then defrost in the nearby thermal baths.

ICEHOTEL, Jukkasjärvi, Sweden: Give a toast in the ICEBAR, watch for the Northern Lights, and snooze in the world's largest ice hotel. Warm clothing is provided.

From Prisons to Pensions

Spend the night in these former penitentiaries, where you may be treated like an inmate or a privileged guest.

Karosta Prison Hotel, Liepāja, Latvia: Play the role of prisoner at this desolate Naval jail. Follow the rules, get cozy in a barren cell, and beware of the creaks and bumps. The prison is reportedly haunted, so you may not have sweet dreams.

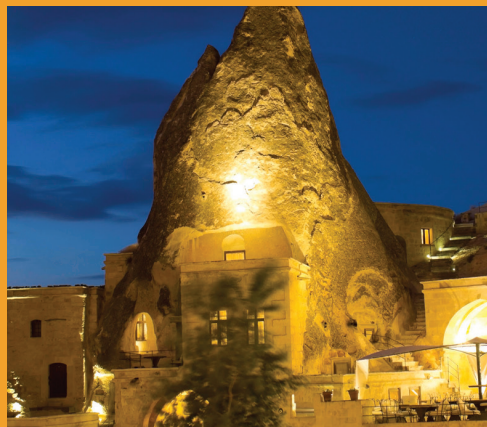
Alcatraz Hotel, Kaiserslautern, Germany: Reserve a remodeled cell or upgraded room for your next night out in K-town. It's a far better deal than a trip to the slammer if you choose to drink and drive.

Not-So-Creepy Caves

You won't be left in the dark at these cave hotels. Imagine chandeliers, stylish furnishings and room service.

Sala Silvermine, Sala, Sweden: For a secluded stay with your sweetie, tour the mines and sojourn 500 feet underground in the world's lowest hotel suite.

Matera, Italy: First settled during the Paleolithic era, the caves of Matera later became havens for the poor, and have been restored over the past several decades. Luxuriate in a lavish cave hotel that retains at least a touch of ancient history.



Cappadocia, Turkey: This prehistoric cave civilization now offers hostels, pensions and hotels to meet all budgets. Reside in a mountainside chamber or a bedroom tucked inside a fairy chimney, the area's distinctive tower-like rock formation.

Europe has even more bizarre restaurants and hotels, so give in to your imagination as you make reservations for your next vacation. You won't regret your experiences off the beaten path — they usually make for the best stories. ■

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