

FASCINATING CATHEDRALS OF EUROPE

EXTRAVAGANT, ECCENTRIC ... SOMETIMES EVEN EERIE

By Genevieve Northup

When traveling in Europe, cathedral spires often seem as numerous as souvenir shops and restaurants. Notre Dame, the Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's Basilica are on everyone's bucket list. But some of the most fascinating European cathedrals and chapels are not such well-known tourist attractions.

Sainte-Chapelle | Paris, France

Of course, you should see Notre Dame while in Paris, but do not miss the much smaller gem, Sainte-Chapelle. In fact, if you're not looking for it, you're quite likely to miss the nearby church, largely obscured at street-level by more recent structures. Completed in 1248, Sainte-Chapelle was commissioned by Louis IX as a shrine for purchased Christian relics. Among these was Christ's Crown of Thorns, which cost more than the chapel's construction. Today, these relics are on display at Notre Dame.

Sainte-Chapelle consists of an upper chapel, where royalty worshipped, and a lower chapel for servants. The lower chapel's centerpiece is the oldest mural in Paris, a rendering of the Annunciation dating back to the 13th century. The upper chapel is known for 15 dramatic, colorful stained glass windows illustrating more than 1,100 biblical scenes in astonishing detail. Two-thirds of the stained glass is original, surviving Paris' tumultuous history. Sunlight shining through the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows creates a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors and shapes. Plan your trip on a clear, sunny day for the best show.

Sainte-Chapelle and the La Conciergerie are the oldest remnants of Paris' first royal palace. Purchase a combined ticket and after touring the chapel, visit La Conciergerie to see where Marie Antoinette spent her final days awaiting execution.

Sainte-Chapelle is located on Ile de la Cité and can be reached by metro, train or bus. For more information, browse <http://sainte-chapelle.monuments-nationaux.fr/en>.



Sainte-Chapelle

Rosslyn Chapel | Roslin, Scotland

Though Rosslyn Chapel was central to the plotline of "The Da Vinci Code," its real history is as sensational as fiction. In 1446, William St. Clair, the third prince of Orkney, initiated construction of the Collegiate Chapel of St. Matthew (now called Rosslyn Chapel). Historians speculate that a grander structure had been planned, but construction halted shortly after St. Clair's death in 1484.

During the Reformation, the chapel quickly deteriorated, as worship was forbidden. Restoration efforts in the 1700s proved futile, and the intrigue of this foliage-covered, dilapidated chapel inspired many literary works, including Sir Walter Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" and William Wordsworth's "Composed at Roslin Chapel During a Storm."

In 1842, Queen Victoria ordered that the sanctuary be restored, beginning a new chapter in the chapel's saga. Today, it remains under the care of the St. Clair family and is open to the public, though renovation continues.

The ornate Gothic façade offers a prelude of the incredible interior. Stepping into Rosslyn Chapel is an overwhelming experience – the lavish 3-dimensional stone carvings cover an expanse 42 feet high and 69 feet long. Every nook and cranny appears to be painstakingly decorated to tell a story. Sculptures depict life in rural Scotland, stories from the Bible, pagan figures and Masonic symbols.

Many of Rosslyn Chapel's carvings present unsolved mysteries. The meaning of the symbols represented in the "Musical Cubes" has yet to be unequivocally explained. Additionally, a window border depicts maize, a flora unknown in Europe until after Columbus' voyage to America years after construction ceased. The greatest enigma involves the chapel's most intricately carved column, supposedly created by an apprentice who drew inspiration from his dreams. The master mason was so envious of the superior craftsmanship that he killed the student.

You'll find more curiosities and may even unravel a new puzzle during your visit. Rosslyn Chapel is located just outside of Edinburgh and can be reached by catching the Lothian Bus 15. For more details, visit the chapel's website: www.rosslynchapel.org.uk.

Sedlec Ossuary | Kutná Hora – Sedlec, Czech Republic

In the late 13th century, the abbot of Sedlec's monastery returned from the Holy Land with soil from the sacred grounds where Jesus was crucified. The hallowed earth was spread at the cemetery, sparking notoriety and eventual overcrowding during the Black Death epidemic and Hussite wars. In the early 1400s, the Cemetery Church of All Saints was constructed with an ossuary, which became the new resting place for the remains of thousands.

It wasn't until the late 1800s that the ossuary took on a life of its own, when woodcarver František Rint arranged the bones that had been in disarray for centuries. The Church of All Saints' conventional exterior gives no illusion to the macabre décor of the ossuary chapel, nicknamed "The Bone Church."

The bones of more than 40,000 people create an unsettling and beautiful tribute to history, spirituality and the departed. A coat of arms, bell-shaped displays, vases and garlands are made entirely of bones. A central chandelier showcases each bone in the human body, and

Rint left his mark with an autograph spelled out in bones.

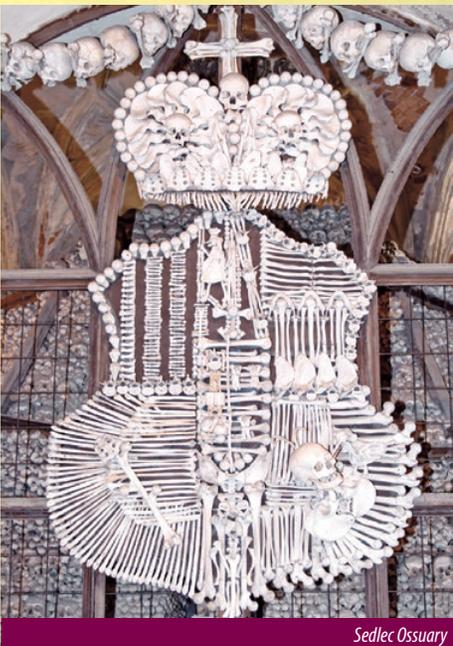
The ossuary is approximately an hour from Prague. To reach The Bone Church (www.ossuary.eu), take a train stopping at Kutná Hora's main station. From there, you can take the bus or a taxi, or walk the mile to the chapel.

Braga Cathedral | Braga, Portugal

The Catedral de Santa Maria de Braga – also called Braga Cathedral, Sé Cathedral and the Cathedral of Braga – is Portugal's oldest cathedral and Braga's most opulent building. Work on the cathedral began in the 11th century by Braga's bishop, Dom Pedro. Subsequent bishops added their own flair to the cathedral over the next several centuries.

The exterior of Braga Cathedral reflects Portuguese Romanesque architecture with two soaring towers but has additions from the 15th to 18th centuries, including a portico (or galilee) and a coat of arms chiseled from stone. But the real show-stopper is inside – the two organs, dating from the 18th century, are flamboyantly embellished with carved and gilded panels. Marceliano de Araújo's decoration is so remarkable that the woodwork is considered among the most incredible in Europe.

A bit off the beaten path, Braga is 40 miles from Portugal's second largest city of Porto. You can reach Braga from Porto by train or taxi. Traveling by train is cheap but takes longer. If you have travel buddies to share the expense, a taxi is affordable. For more information about Braga Cathedral, visit www.se-braga.pt/catedral.php.



Sedlec Ossuary



Sagrada Família

Sagrada Família | Barcelona, Spain

While Sagrada Família is no secret, the magnitude of this unusual and extravagant cathedral makes it a must-see. No trip to Barcelona would be complete without a visit to Antoni Gaudí's magnum opus, a cathedral so elaborate that work continues today – more than 130 years after construction began.

Every design, angle, symbol and style choice for this unique place of worship is deliberate for conveying meaning and emotion. The four façades of the cathedral each bear a different story from the Bible. When complete, the cathedral will boast 14 towers. The bright white walls and towering windows, which are still being transitioned to stained glass, create an open, welcoming ambiance despite the cavernous interior. The columns are designed as trees, creating a canopy over awestruck visitors.

Because of its popularity, admission lines are extremely long during tourist season. Plan your visit during the late fall and winter months or buy advance tickets online for priority entrance. To reach the cathedral, take the subway to the Sagrada Família station; many bus lines also stop nearby. To help plan your trip, go to www.sagradafamilia.cat.

These are but a few of the intriguing churches of Europe. Want more? On your next vacation, ask your hotel concierge or a tour guide about the area's lesser-known cathedrals and chapels; make note of churches mentioned historically while visiting museums or other monuments; and explore for yourself by peering into the next church you come across, even if it isn't on the itinerary. Perhaps you'll discover another of Europe's best-kept secrets. ■

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