

TRAVEL

How to Live Your Own Chapter in European Storybook Destinations

These places feature prominently in classic books, fairy tales and films



To immerse yourself in legendary tales, visit the actual European destinations featured in classic novels, fairy tales and films. Traverse Toledo, Spain, to follow in the footsteps of Don Quixote.

COURTESY TRAFALGAR TRAVEL

By Bill Fink, AARP

ADVERTISEMENT

By Bill Fink, AARP

Published October 02, 2025

For me, traveling to Europe is like entering a storybook, given all its [medieval castles](#), scenic mountain meadows and historic villages. To fully immerse yourself in these legendary stories, you can visit the actual destinations featured in [classic novels](#), fairy tales and films.

“To be able to feel a sense of history or occasion when you’re standing in the location or setting of your most treasured stories is an experience many others cannot replicate,” says

Mikael Mendes, travel director for Trafalgar Tours. Going to these storybook destinations, says Mendes, is “like the first time you see a loved one again, or when you meet an idol. ... And to be able to do that with others feels momentous.”

“Whether exploring Salzburg, forever tied to *The Sound of Music*, or discovering other story-rich destinations across Europe, these places spark the imagination,” says Scott Abbott, managing director at Wilderness Travel.

The average age for Trafalgar tours is 62, with nearly half its guests between 51 and 70. Similarly, G Adventures’ Classic tours “attract the 50-plus crowd,” according to communications manager Kimberly Greiner. And 80 percent of Wilderness Travel guests are over 50, averaging 67 years of age on the Salzburg tours.

From the spooky settings of Grimms’ Fairy Tales in Germany and Dracula’s castle in Romania to the carefree childhood joy of the locales of Pippi Longstocking in Sweden and Heidi in Switzerland, here are 10 storybook destinations, some of which I’ve experienced, that may bring back treasured memories and add deeper meaning to your European trip.



“Don Quixote” fans will enjoy walking tours in the old town of Toledo. Here, the Toledo Cathedral appears in the background. Courtesy Trafalgar Travel

‘Don Quixote’: Castile-La Mancha, Spain

Miguel de Cervantes’ 1605 novel about delusional knight Don Quixote’s quests in Spain is a national classic. Reading the book while traveling south of Madrid, [seeing windmills spinning](#) in countryside fields and horses and cattle grazing at traditional haciendas, brought the tales to life for me and injected the story into the landscapes.

“My personal favorites involve tracing the fictional route of Miguel Cervantes’ famous protagonist, Don Quixote, through the city of Toledo and the modern Spanish region of Castile-La Mancha,” says Trafalgar’s Mendes. “We can discover small green plaques with ‘Ruta de Don Quijote’ all throughout the locations Cervantes wrote for Quixote’s now-famous adventures.”

Don Quixote fans will enjoy walking tours in the old town of Toledo as well as souvenir shops packed with book-related merchandise. I enjoyed strolling Toledo’s cobblestone streets on a quiet early morning amid centuries-old stone buildings, imagining I was back in Cervantes’ time.



Bran Castle is a towering Gothic fortress in Romania. Courtesy G Adventures

‘Dracula’: Bran Castle, Transylvania, Romania

Bram Stoker’s 1897 horror novel launched the vampire-story genre with its creepy tale set in Transylvania, Romania. Nowadays, visitors flock like swarms of bats to Romania’s Bran Castle, the towering 14th-century Gothic fortress linked to the infamous Vlad Dracula, “the Impaler,” who is said to have inspired the story.

Bran Castle tours can be crowded, so consider expanding beyond the prime storybook spot. For example, a tour with G Adventures in Romania “is not just Bran Castle, it’s Brasov, with its historic center that goes back to the Middle Ages,” says Yves Marceau, G Adventures’ vice president of product. “It’s also Peles Castle; while not as old as Bran, its architecture very much invokes that feeling of being in a fairy tale.”



For a taste of Grimms' Fairy Tales, travel to Bavaria, Germany, to see the Neuschwanstein Castle. Courtesy Trafalgar Travel

‘Grimms’ Fairy Tales’: Bavaria, Germany

From “Snow White” to “Hansel and Gretel,” Grimms’ Fairy Tales have been entertaining kids and adults since the early 19th century. For the past 50 years, readers have been able to tour dozens of story sites along the 372 miles of Germany’s Fairy Tale Trail. I’ve walked trails in a thick Bavarian forest, and the gnarled tree branches seemed ready to reach out and grab me; it felt like I was pages deep into one of Grimm’s scary tales.

The Fairy Tale Trail covers about 70 towns and cities, including Bad Wildungen (“Snow White”), the tower in Trendelburg (“Rapunzel”) and Hameln (“The Pied Piper”). Eighty different tour operators guide visitors there; you can also download self-guided itineraries from Germany’s tourism website.

“The German Fairy Tale Route represents a romantic image of Germany, with local culture and traditions, castles, half-timbered towns and beautiful natural landscapes,” says Liv Boeing of the German National Tourist Board. “Typical visitors include families or grandparents traveling with their grandchildren.”



Walk in Hans Christian Andersen's footsteps during a visit to Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark. Getty Images

Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales: Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen, Denmark

Hans Christian Andersen visited Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens upon its 1843 opening and was so inspired by the Chinese pavilion that he used it as a model for the emperor's palace in his story "The Nightingale," which was published in 1844.

The park has embraced Andersen's stories since then and created many themed attractions, such as The Flying Trunk, a ride through scenes from 32 of his fairy tales.

I'm not much into rides but thoroughly enjoyed strolling through Tivoli, admiring the park's twinkling lights on trees and classic pavilions, imagining myself back in Andersen's day, and thinking up a few fanciful tales myself after sampling beer and wine from the park's many stalls. Perhaps you will find your own creative inspiration, as Walt Disney did after his park visits in the early 1950s, prior to designing Disneyland.



The Swiss Alps are the backdrop for the classic children's tale "Heidi." Courtesy Switzerland Tourism

‘Heidi’: Heididorf, Switzerland

Johanna Spyri's classic children's book is set in the Swiss Alps of the 1880s. On my hikes through the surrounding area, I've marveled at the wood-framed village housing and bell cows plodding along trails beneath snowcapped peaks — scenes straight out of *Heidi*. If you're looking for an even fuller immersion, visit Heididorf ("Heidi's Village"), about 60 miles from Zurich.

Another way to experience Heidi's landscapes is by going on an Alps hiking trip. Join an adventure company such as MT Sobek, where a "trek through the Swiss Alps isn't just about the hiking; it's about slipping into the rhythm of Alpine life," says Anne Wood, senior program director at MT Sobek. "For many travelers, especially those over 50 who love being outdoors, it's a chance to feel carefree again, like Heidi in the mountains."



The gargoyle statues of Paris' Notre-Dame Cathedral served as inspiration for "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame." Ludovic Marin/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

‘The Hunchback of Notre-Dame’: Paris

Victor Hugo’s famous story was inspired by the macabre gargoyle statues that hang from nearly every nook of the exterior of Paris’ Notre-Dame Cathedral. I’ve walked by Notre-Dame on a dark, foggy night and could have sworn that some of those creepy creations above me were moving around.

Now refurbished after 2019’s devastating fires, Notre-Dame welcomes visitors inside the cathedral (for free!). It also offers volunteer-led guided tours of the exterior that explain the significance of its architecture and statuary.

To learn more about Hugo, you can join Hunchback-themed walking tours of Paris. Visitors are taken to Hugo’s home as well as Notre-Dame and hear stories of Hugo’s life and medieval Paris.



Head to Astrid Lindgren's World, an amusement park in Stockholm that features characters from Lindgren's books. Courtesy Visit Sweden

‘Pippi Longstocking’: Stockholm

“Pippi Longstocking isn’t just a beloved literary character or childhood icon,” says Visit Sweden’s Josefin Haraldsson. Pippi is a “cultural symbol of modern Swedish values, wrapped in red braids and mismatched socks.”

Fans of Astrid Lindgren’s tales of the spunky little girl can book tours of Lindgren’s Stockholm apartment, where the books were written; it now serves as a museum. Younger kids will enjoy Stockholm’s Junibacken, a Lindgren story-themed center with play areas, a theater and a train ride. The center also houses Sweden’s largest children’s bookstore.

If you’re on a Swedish road trip with kids, drive to Astrid Lindgren’s World, in the southeast town of Vimmerby, Lindgren’s birthplace. This amusement park features all the characters from Lindgren’s books. Outside Vimmerby you can visit the studio sets of Filmbyn Småland, where *Pippi Longstocking* and other children’s films were made.



During a trip to Nottingham, England, you may see a performer strike a pose as Robin Hood Courtesy Ade Andrews

Robin Hood: Nottingham, England

Experience the setting of the traditional tales of Robin Hood and his Merry Men in the historic city of Nottingham and nearby Sherwood Forest. You can join tours led by characters dressed in period costumes and even attend a Robin Hood festival, complete with swordplay, jousting and archery.

Tour Nottingham Castle, which, legend has it, was the villainous Sheriff of Nottingham's stronghold. Then sip a pint at Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem, which claims to be England's oldest pub, established in 1189 for knights traveling to the Crusades.

"Nottingham, in my book, is the unsung hero of England. No other city has such a fascinating story," says local guide Ade Andrews, who, through his company Ezekial Bone, gives area tours in character as Robin Hood. Andrews says such tours "give the background to the legends, and through that, a greater understanding of England is revealed."

You can hike the trails of Sherwood Forest by yourself or on a tour, passing locals walking their dogs and even seeing what's purported to be the Major Oak from the stories, a 1,000-year-old tree that seems perfect for a hideout.



Shakespeare lovers will love Juliet's House and Museum in Verona, Italy. Here, a view of Ponte Pietra across the Adige River. Courtesy Trafalgar Travel

‘Romeo & Juliet’: Verona, Italy

Shakespeare's play about the doomed young lovers is set in the homes and streets of Verona, Italy. Nowadays, visitors can tour Juliet's House and Museum, purportedly where the actual Giulietta Capuleti lived in the 13th century.

Visitors can book tickets to Juliet's House, which includes the balcony of “what light through yonder window breaks” fame. The bronze statue of Juliet in the courtyard is said to bestow good luck in love to those who touch it.

Juliet's House is often crowded, so plan your trip early or late in the day, or visit in the offseason. I've enjoyed early-morning Verona walks on quiet streets, imagining Shakespearean dramas taking place behind the brass-studded wooden doors of centuries-old villas.

Juliet's tomb, an empty sarcophagus in a crypt inside Verona's deconsecrated 13th-century church of San Francesco al Corso, is where Juliet was buried, according to legend. Visit the former church, now part of a museum, to soak in the spooky scene, and study the church frescoes and Shakespeare-related artwork in the complex.



You may be inclined to sing tunes from “The Sound of Music” while in Salzburg, Austria. Courtesy Trafalgar Travel

‘The Sound of Music’: Salzburg, Austria

Fans of Rodgers and [Hammerstein](#)’s Broadway musical and the Julie Andrews film will delight in a visit to the story’s locales in Salzburg, Austria. I truly felt like I was in the film as I toured Salzburg’s cobblestone streets, lined with brightly colored buildings, and walked the grounds of the grand palaces. My hike into nearby Alpine meadows was so inspiring, I nearly burst into song myself.

Many, many *Sound of Music* tours are offered in the Salzburg area, with visits by foot, bicycle, bus, car, van and even horse-drawn carriage. Expect a lot of singing, particularly in large group tours and bus rides. I found the ongoing tourist chorus amusing at first, but after a couple days the songs were most definitely not “a few of my favorite things,” as the lyrics go.

Tour highlights include the Hellbrunn Palace, where much of the film was shot, including its gazebo for the “Sixteen Going on Seventeen” scene. The *Sound of Music* hiking trail leads to the meadow where the cast sang “Do-Re-Mi,” a beautifully scenic spot on a sunny day.

A Sound of Music Museum will open in spring 2026. Located at Hellbrunn Palace, the museum will feature memorabilia from the theater and film productions, as well as historical relics from the real von Trapp family.

Bill Fink is an award-winning travel writer covering global adventures for BBC, Lonely Planet, Thrillist and many other outlets. Follow him @finktravels.