

Top gastronomic experiences

Gather seafood on wild Irish shores, follow a German brewery trail and learn to cook guided by an Italian countess, with Europe's bucket-list epicurean breaks

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TAKE A CHAMPAGNE MASTERCLASS IN FRANCE

In Épernay the streets are built on champagne – quite literally. Some 70 miles of cellars, filled with 200 million bottles, hide under this self-proclaimed capital of bubbly. On the town's outskirts lies France's official champagne school, where future masters learn their craft. A full course here takes two years, but members of the public can get a crash course on one of the day workshops (£50; sanger.fr). Under expert guidance, study how champagne is made, discover the secrets of terroir and different grape varieties, and learn how to use sight, smell and taste while sampling 10 different cuvées. Back in town, explore Avenue du Champagne, a boulevard of Neoclassical villas built by the big producing families, and dine at restaurants such as La Cave à Champagne (la-cave-a-champagne.com), where typically champenois dishes, including snails and veal in mustard sauce, can be paired with flights of the region's finest vintages.

● **ARRIVE** It takes 4½ hours to travel from London to Épernay by train, changing in Paris (from £105; voyages-sncf.com).

● **STAY** La Villa Eugène once belonged to the Merciers, the family behind one of the world's most renowned champagne brands, and still retains its opulent décor, including a wood-panelled bar and Art Nouveau iron staircase (from £190; villa-eugene.com).

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COOK LIKE A SICILIAN IN ITALY

Blending Mediterranean and North African food, Sicilian is among the most distinctive of Italy's regional cuisines, and the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School offers total immersion in the island's culinary culture. Hosted in a 19th-century stone farmhouse, part of the aristocratic family's wine estate, the Food and Culture itineraries include classes on how to cook ingredients harvested from the kitchen garden, plus visits to local producers (Friday–Monday; from £1,020pp, including accommodation, lessons, meals and excursions; annatascalanza.com). Depending on the season, guests might visit pizzerias, ricotta cheesemakers and more, but all can expect fantastic meals featuring flavoursome local produce.

● **ARRIVE** The school is a 1½-hour drive from either Palermo or Catania airports. Fly with BA or easyJet (from £100; easyjet.com).



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HAM IT UP IN MADRID

Acorn-fed Ibérico pigs make Spanish ham the best in the world, and a leg from one of these premium porkers becomes a legitimate souvenir option after completing A Taste of Spain's Ibérico ham carving course (from £130pp for a 1½ hour workshop plus lunch and ham to take home; atasteofspain.com). Under the tutelage of an English-speaking master carver at ham shop Góndiaz, knife-wielding novices learn about the product while whittling off their own slices. Then it's next door to Restaurante La Mi Venta for tapas dishes including Ibérico cooked over charcoal. Extend your culinary journey with visits to Madrid's food markets – San Miguel and San Antón have good charcuterie stalls – and to the Museo del Jamón, with its array of ceiling-hung hams (museodeljamon.es). End with reservations at one of the city's speciality ham restaurants. Cinco Jotas and Joselito's are both run by leading Spanish producers (cincojotasmadrid.es, joselito.com).

● **ARRIVE** Airlines such as Air Europa, BA, easyJet and Iberia fly to Madrid from the UK (from £115; easyjet.com).

● **STAY** Las Letras Gran Vía Hotel features original mosaics and a sunny roof terrace (from £155; hoteldelaslettras.com).

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EAT THE ULTIMATE NORDIC FOOD IN SWEDEN

It lies 400 miles north of Stockholm, in forested wilds where only three people live per square mile, yet Fäviken has become one of Scandinavia's most prized restaurants. In a candle-lit barn, chef Magnus Nilsson serves a 32-course tasting menu that represents the apogee of New Nordic cuisine. Foraging, fishing, hunting and preserving, he transforms ingredients from the surrounding land and lakes into works of beauty: dishes such as spruce ice cream and scallops served atop a smoking bed of juniper (£260 per person; faviken.com). You can also sleep here in rooms named after animals and made cosy with fur throws (£220, including breakfast).

● **ARRIVE** Östersund airport is a 50-mile drive from Fäviken. EasyJet flies to Östersund once a week (from £75; easyjet.com) and SAS has daily flights via Stockholm (from £180; flysas.com). →



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DISCOVER THE SECRET OF THE PERFECT VIENNESE PASTRY

Melding culinary traditions from Europe's four corners, the Austro-Hungarian Empire arguably has its most enduring legacy in the Viennese pastry. To experience the best of the capital's cornucopia, request one of Vienna Food Tours' dessert crawls (£85; viennafood.tours). This four-hour ramble along cobbled lanes and grand imperial avenues is punctuated with stops

in gilded coffeehouses for treats such as buttery apricot dumplings, apple strudel made to a centuries-old recipe, and Sachertorte, a chocolate cake so renowned it had a legal war waged over it. While in Vienna, also learn to make your own Austrian classics with leading chef and food writer Bianca Gusenbauer (£105; biancaisst.com). From baking grandmother's strudel to creating Kaiserschmarrn ('Emperor's Mess'), she offers a variety of dessert-focused classes to please the sweet-toothed. All begin with a tasting tour in a little-touristed neighbourhood before retiring to her cosy home kitchen.

● **ARRIVE** Austrian Airlines, BA and easyJet fly from various UK airports to Vienna (from £90; easyjet.com).

● **STAY** In the historic centre, Hotel Beethoven is Neoclassical on the outside but inside the rooms are contemporary, with bright prints on the walls and each floor designed after a different Viennese theme (from £165; hotel-beethoven.at).

8 TAKE A CHAUFFEURED WHISKY TOUR IN SPEYSIDE, SCOTLAND

Though Scotland offers peerless terrain both for road trips and whisky tours, the two make unhappy bedfellows – unless you enlist Speyside Whisky Tours as your designated driver. The company chauffeurs guests around the world's foremost whisky region, taking in pioneering and little-known distilleries, as well as those run by established brands like Glenfiddich (exclusive driver-guide from £150pp per day, not including entrance to the distilleries, lunch or drinks; speysidewhisky.com). Hosted by well-informed local guides, these bespoke tours can also include visits to a cooperage, where whisky barrels are made, plus stops at pubs and stores, all the while as the classically Scottish scenery of lochs and castles shifts past your window.

● **ARRIVE** Inverness is an hour's drive from Speyside; fly there with BA, easyJet and Flybe (from £76; easyjet.com), or catch the sleeper from London (from £80; sleeper.scot).

● **STAY** The village of Aberlour is well-placed for distilleries – occupying a grand house, the Dowans Hotel offers smart rooms with tartan touches (from £105; dowanshotel.com).

7 CATCH AND COOK ON THE CONNEMARA COAST

The splintered coastline of Ireland's Connemara is home to some of the world's best seafood. It's all the tastier if you've caught it yourself. Ballynahinch Castle Hotel allows guests to do just that, sending them with an experienced local skipper into the clear waters of Roundstone Bay to pluck lobsters fresh from their pots (£65). Return to eat your catch, transformed under the deft hands of the hotel chef. The next day continue gathering the fruits of the Atlantic

on one of the Ecology Centre's walks. With Connemara's dark hills brooding behind, comb the shore for seaweed, sea urchins and crabs, as your guide points out ancient shellfish middens – evidence that foraging has been a way of life here for millennia (£30; theecologycentre.ie).

● **ARRIVE** Connemara is a two-hour drive from Knock and Shannon Airports. Airlines including Aer Lingus, BA and Ryanair fly from UK cities (from £65; aerlingus.com).

● **STAY** Ballynahinch Castle is a mansion turned hotel at the foot of Connemara's Twelve Bens, with roaring fires, leather chairs and four-poster beds (£160; ballynahinch-castle.com).

9 FOLLOW THE BEER TRAIL IN GERMANY

Its medieval and Baroque buildings bisected by rivers and canals, Bamberg is one of Germany's most attractive towns. Though easy to enjoy sober, it possesses an unusually high number of breweries – no fewer than nine cook up the smokey-flavoured local specialty Rauchbier. Get orientated with the BierSchmecker tour (£19pp; bamberg.info), which includes a booklet listing all local beer producers, five vouchers to spend on their produce and a shoulder bag to carry around your loot. Spend the next day walking off any excessive consumption by tackling all or part of the 13 Breweries Trail (same website), a 20-mile hiking route that takes in the rolling hills of the surrounding Franconian countryside – said to be the Tuscany of Germany – and, of course, plenty more beer.

● **ARRIVE** The nearest airport is 45 miles away in Nuremberg, served by direct flights from London Stansted and Manchester (from £65; ryanair.com).

● **STAY** Grand 18th-century Hotel Residenzschloss sits on the River Regnitz (from £80; welcome-hotels.com).

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