

Western Europe

0 500 km
0 300 mi



- Danish
- Dutch
- French
- German
- Greek
- Italian
- Norwegian
- Portuguese
- Spanish
- Swedish
- Turkish

Note: Language areas are approximate only. For more details see the relevant introduction.



western europe – at a glance

One of the most rewarding things about travelling through Western Europe is the rich variety of cuisine, customs, architecture and history. The flipside of course is that you'll encounter a number of very different languages. Most languages spoken in Western Europe, including English, belong to what's known as the Indo-European language family, believed to have originally developed from one language spoken thousands of years ago. Luckily for English speakers, all but one use Roman script.

The Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) all developed from Vulgar Latin, which spread through Western Europe during the rule of the Roman Empire. The freedom with which English has borrowed Latin-based vocabulary means you'll quickly recognise many words from these languages. The Germanic languages – Dutch and German – are more closely related to English. The Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) form the northern branch of the Germanic languages tree, having developed from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings. Their big advantage is that, being so closely related, once you've got the hang of one language, the others should seem quite familiar. Greek, the language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, forms a single branch of the Indo-European language family and uses Greek script. Finally, Turkish is part of the Ural-Altaic language family, which includes languages spoken from the Balkan Peninsula to northeast Asia. Arabic script was replaced by Roman script for Turkish in the early 20th century.

did you know?

- The European Union (EU) was established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. It developed from the European Economic Community, founded by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Since the 2004 enlargement, it has 25 member states and 20 official languages.
- The EU flag is a circle of 12 gold stars on a blue background – the number 12 representing wholeness.
- The EU anthem is the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.
- Europe Day, 9 May, commemorates the 1950 declaration by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, which marks the creation of the European Union.
- The euro has been in circulation since E-Day, 1 January 2002. The euro's symbol (€) was inspired by the Greek letter epsilon (ε) – Greece being the cradle of European civilisation and ε being the first letter of the word 'Europe'.
- The Eurovision Song Contest, held each May, has been running since 1956. For the larger part of the competition's history, the performers were only allowed to sing in their country's national language, but that's no longer the case.

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