



Cultural Considerations

Adventures in Dining:

Dining out in a new locale is one of the fundamental experiences of an international trip, but visiting a restaurant in Europe is different than in the U.S., of course. Key points to know:

- Upon entering a restaurant, the process is pretty familiar up to the time you get your meal.
- Once your meal has been brought to your table, waitstaff will leave you alone. (This is particularly true in Paris – the experience in London is more similar to the U.S.) Americans often see this as “inattentive,” but it’s not -- it’s simply the model in much of Europe, where the expectation is that diners will be left in peace. So, don’t hesitate to get the waitstaff’s attention by raising a hand, or with a polite “Excuse me?” -- or, in Paris, “Pardon?”
- Waitstaff are paid a living wage, so tips in Europe are a smaller affair, akin to “rounding up” the bill. It’s as much art as science, so Americans used to the predictable calculation of 15-20% for tips can find it frustrating. If it helps, think of 10-15% as a fair tipping range in London, and 5-10% in Paris.
- If paying your bill in cash, it is generally preferable to hand your waitstaff your payment before leaving. However, you can leave a cash tip at the table.

Wait, I have to pay for that??

- Water. If you order water to drink at a bar or restaurant, it almost always arrives as bottled water, which must be purchased. If you request tap water (sometimes referred to as “table water”), it may not be provided, or if it is, you may still be charged even for that.
- Restroom use. In certain cases, you may have to pay a small fee (from 20 cents to as much as 1-2 euros/pounds) to use restrooms in public places, particularly train stations and bars. The fee helps to fund on-site restroom cleaning staff, so in exchange for the minor aggravation of paying to use the restroom, the facilities are generally well maintained.
 - This usually does NOT apply in a formal restaurant, where paying customers can use the restroom for free, but fast-food establishments may charge for restroom use.
- Street performances. Well, no, not exactly -- street performances are not ticketed events, and you are welcome to enjoy a song being performed on a subway train, a dance group performing in a public square, etc. However, the unwritten convention is that if you take a photo or video, it is common courtesy to give something; it doesn’t have to be much -- a coin or two is sufficient.

Customer Service:

The American construct that “the customer is always right” does not apply in the European customer service model. While most employees you’ll encounter at restaurants, shops, and elsewhere will be perfectly polite, it may not be the effusive friendliness to which you may be accustomed, and an employee may well say no to a customer request (e.g., a substitution in a dish at a restaurant).