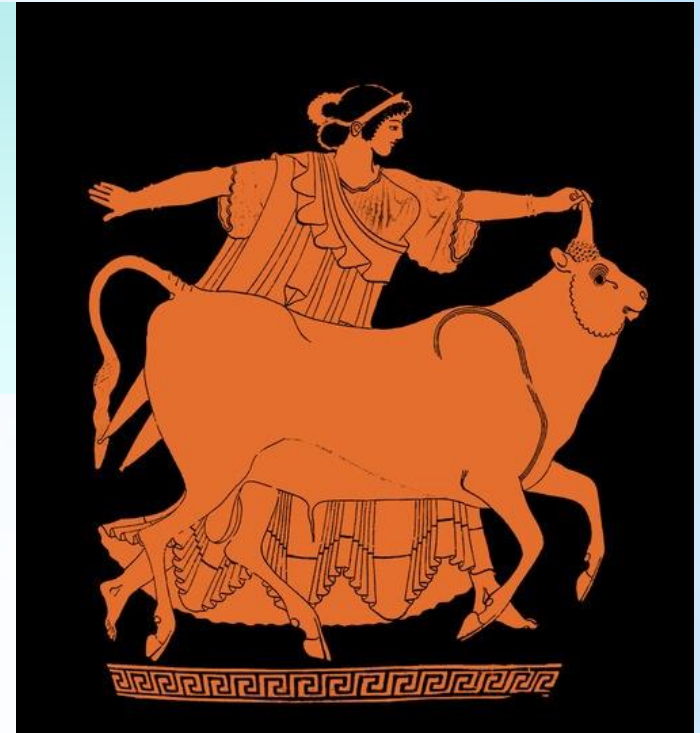




* An Introduction to Europe

Europe is named after a beautiful Greek princess called Europa. She was kidnapped by a shining white bull, which carried her into the sea.



The bull turned out to be the Greek God Zeus in disguise. He took her to the island of Crete, showered her with presents and made her queen.

Europe is made up of 46 different countries.

The **United Kingdom**, **France**, **Spain**, **Germany**, **Italy**, **Iceland** and **Norway** are all part of Europe.

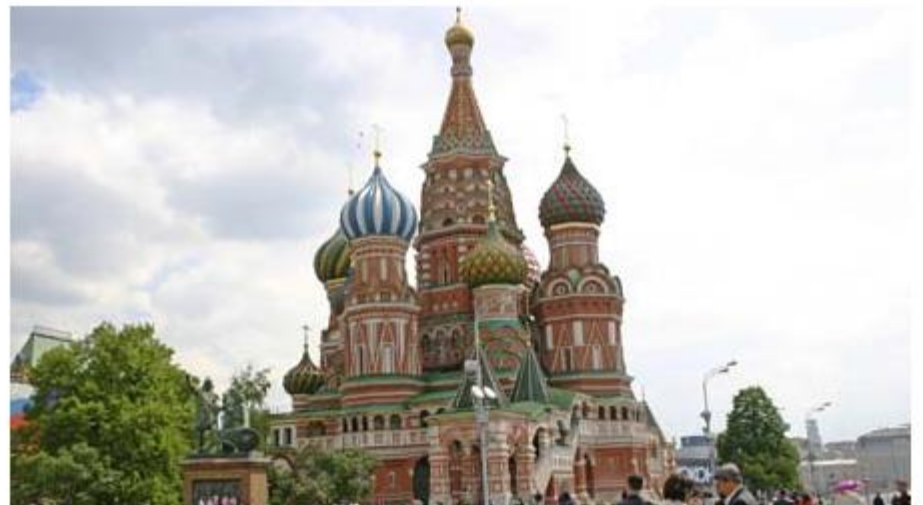
Europe is surrounded by water to the north, south and west. Can you see the **Mediterranean Sea**, **Atlantic Ocean** and **Arctic Ocean** on the map?

The eastern edge of Europe is joined to its neighbour **Asia**.

The biggest country within Europe is **Russia**. It is so big it also covers a large part of Asia too.

Europe is a continent. The world is made up of 7 continents: Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe and Oceania.

A continent is a large piece of land, normally made up of a group of countries.



St Basil's Cathedral, Russia

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The smallest country in Europe is the Vatican City, in Rome. The Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church lives here.



St Peter's Square, Vatican City

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The weather varies quite a lot within Europe. It gets colder the further north you travel, as you go further away from the Equator – that's the imaginary line which runs around the Earth, half way between the North and South Pole.

Countries like Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece have warmer weather than Sweden, Norway and Finland.



Beach in Portugal

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Watch out for polar bears, Norway

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See if you can spot some of these countries in the north and south of Europe on the map.





Facts about Europe

- **Population:** about 740 million. That's sounds a lot but there are five times that number of people living today in Asia!
- **Land Area:** 9,908,600 square kilometres (or 3,825,730 square miles) – it's about a third of the size of **Africa**.
- **Countries:** 46 countries (of which 27 are members of the European Union or EU).
- **Highest Peak:** **Mount Elbrus** in **Russia** stands at 5,643 metres above sea level.
- **Largest Lake:** Lake Ladoga in north western Russia has an area of 17,700 square kilometres (6,800 square miles).
- **Longest River:** The Volga River in Russia is 3,530 kilometres (2,193 miles) long.
- **Smallest Country (by land area and population):** Vatican City is a tiny country within the **Italian** city of **Rome**. The Pope, the leader of the worldwide Catholic Church, lives here along with its 800 other citizens.
- **Biggest Country (by land area):** the **Russian Federation** is the biggest country by land area, not just in Europe but across the whole world!
- **Languages:** there are more than 200 different languages spoken in Europe. The EU recognises 23 languages that are in common use amongst its member countries, where two of every three Europeans live.

Most of Europe was once covered by an ancient forest. Geographers call it the wildwood and it inspired stories like Little Red Riding Hood, Lord of the Rings and The Wind in the Willows. The trees made travelling difficult. The Roman general Julius Caesar once described Great Britain as 'one horrible forest'. These days woodland only covers about a quarter of the continent and not much of it is really wild, because people like to cut down certain kinds of trees and generally interfere. Areas like Scandinavia (that's Norway, Sweden and Denmark to you) and countries like Russia and Finland still have a lot of trees, some of which are grown to make paper and the furniture in your bedroom.

On the western boundary of Europe you'll find **Iceland**, which is also the most northerly country of this continent and geologically-speaking the youngest, as all of its **volcanoes**, geysers and hot springs demonstrate.



Icelandic geyser

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Iceland is just a baby in terms of the history of the world, at only 20 million years old. It was formed by a series of volcanic eruptions in the middle of the **Atlantic Ocean**. Of course more recently, who can forget the dramatic effects of the eruption of **Eyjafjallajökull** in 2010, when planes were grounded in northern and western Europe for days. You'd be forgiven for forgetting how to spell its name though!



Eyjafjallajökull erupts in 2010

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If it is **volcanoes** you are interested in why not travel south to **Italy** where **Mount Etna** and **Mount Vesuvius** are active, keeping local residents alert to rumbles underground.



Mount Etna

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For **mountains** that don't move (well not much, but that's **another story**) try the **Alps** in **France**, Austria or **Switzerland**. An alternative destination would be the **Grampians** in **Scotland**. You can ski in all these places in the winter and in summer admire the breath-taking views and glimpses of wildlife that emerge from underneath the ice and snow in this **mountain environment**.



Grampians, Scotland

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Europe is also home to dramatic coastlines, rolling hills and amazing forests. In the **deciduous** beech woodlands of England's Chilterns bluebells bloom in springtime as things warm up in this **cool temperate climate**.



Bluebells in the Chiltern Hills

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Further north the pine tree forests of the **taiga** ecosystem take over – why not visit Finland's Pyhä-Luosto National Park? Further south the Mediterranean climate bakes the soil in places like **Spain's** Parc Natural de Garraf resulting in a special combination of plants and animals found only in the **Mediterranean biome**.



Mediterranean scrubland

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People as well as nature shape a continent. Europe has been the central arena for two world wars which ruined the countries involved. The population of Europe lost money, sons and daughters and many cities were razed to the ground.

These terrible experiences of war inspired the formation of the European Union (or EU) almost sixty years ago, to forge important links between countries of this continent. Twenty eight countries are now EU members, trading goods and allowing people to move between places to work. Nineteen of those countries also share the same currency, the Euro.

The UK joined the EU in 1975 after a public vote across the country in favour of joining this European 'club'. But Britain did not choose the Euro as its currency and, in 2016, the people of the UK voted again, this time in favour of leaving the EU. The vote took people across Europe by surprise, including millions in the UK because almost as many British people voted to 'stay in' as voted 'out' – the result was very close! It will take years of talks between politicians to work out what Britain's exit (or 'Brexit') from the EU will look out.



Flag of the European Union

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There are many 'must-see's in Europe's historic cities. Rome's a good place to start, followed by Venice, Prague, Berlin and Moscow – and that's a whistle-stop tour!



Old Town Square, Prague

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Another amazing feat of engineering found in Europe is the Maeslantkering, a gigantic moving barrier built to reduce the risk of flooding in Rotterdam and surrounding areas close to the River Rhine, where it meets the **North Sea at the Hook of Holland.**

Flooding is a real concern for the people of the **Netherlands** where one quarter of its land area is below sea level. The Maeslantkering has two 210 metre steel gates that have been designed to hold back a stormy sea – they are so tall that if you stood one on end it would be as high as Paris's Eiffel Tower and they are twice as heavy.



Flood barrier, Netherlands

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However if you want to see the real thing then the French capital is the European destination for you. And you won't be alone there as **France** receives the largest number of holiday-makers each year of any country in the world!



Eiffel Tower, Paris

[View fullscreen](#)

It's not a straight forward matter drawing a line to show where Europe starts and Asia ends. The Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara mark the divide between these continents, but you'd also look to the Ural and Caucasus mountains if you want to paint a single stripe on a map.

