

Digging wondrous caves of Europe



Rick Steves

Europe is rich in history, but its splendid castles, antique churches and age-old ruins tell only part of the story. To dig even deeper in time — much deeper — visit a cave. Some of my favorites, in France and Slovenia, showcase 17-foot-long bulls drawn by our ancient forebears and 100-foot-high stalagmites sculpted by nature.

The world's most famous cave paintings are at Lascaux, in southwest France. From 18,000 to 10,000 B.C., long before Stonehenge, the pyramids, metalworking and farming — back when mammoths and saber-toothed cats still roamed the earth — prehistoric people painted deep inside these limestone caverns. These aren't crude doodles with a charcoal-tipped stick. They're sophisticated, costly and time-consuming engineering projects.

Discovered in 1940, the caves were closed to visitors in 1963 due to the deterioration of the artwork. But a "copy cave," the impressive Lascaux II, was opened two decades later to the delight of tourists. Here, visitors can see 90% of the reindeer, horses and bulls of Lascaux, painstakingly reproduced by top artists using the same dyes, tools and techniques their predecessors did 15,000 years ago. Guides call the Lascaux Caves the "Sistine Chapel of the prehistoric world." I thought, "Promotional hyperbole." But then I climbed into Lascaux II and almost immediately forgot it's a copy. I was swept away by its grandeur. The paintings are astonishing, and the experience is mystifying.

Lascaux II was so popular, it sparked the



The sheer magnitude of Slovenia's Škocjan Caves is hard to capture with the many grottoes and mighty river. **DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI**

creation of Lascaux III and IV. While III is an exhibit designed to travel abroad, IV opened in 2017 as another razzle-dazzle replica of the original, reproducing almost 100% of its drawings and equipped with more modern technology.

To see actual, original prehistoric art, head to the nearby Grotte de Font-de-Gaume. Even if you're not a connoisseur of Cro-Magnon culture, you'll dig this cave — the last one in France with prehistoric multicolored (polychrome) paintings still open to the public.

Font-de-Gaume contains 15,000-year-old paintings of 230 animals, including many red-and-black bison painted in elegant motion. When two animals face each other, one is black, and the other is red. Your guide, with a laser pointer and great reverence, will

trace the faded outline of the bison and explain how, 15 millennia ago, cave dwellers used local minerals and the rock's natural contours to give the paintings dimension. But getting in is tricky — only 78 visitors are allowed in per day, and tickets must be reserved online months in advance.

In Slovenia, the ancient story found below ground relates to geology, not human culture. About an hour south of Ljubljana, the country's Karst region is honeycombed with a vast network of caves and underground rivers. Spelunkers agree that this region has some of the most remarkable caves on the planet, including my favorite, the Škocjan Caves.

At Škocjan, visitors begin by seeing a multitude of formations in a series of large caverns. Guides tell the story as, drip by drip,

stalactites grow from spaghetti-thin strands to mighty sequoia-like stone pillars. The experience builds and builds as you go into ever-more impressive grottoes, and you think you've seen the best. But then you get to the truly colossal final cavern — the "Murmuring Water Cave" — with a mighty river crashing through the mist. A thousand evil "Wizard of Oz" monkeys could comfortably fly in formation through here. Crossing a breathtaking footbridge 150 feet above the torrent gives you faith in Slovenian engineering. Finally, the cave widens, sunlight pours in, and you emerge — like lost creatures seeking daylight — into a lush canyon.

The nearby Postojna Caves are Slovenia's single most popular tourist attraction. Postojna lacks Škocjan's spectacular,

massive-cavern finale, but the formations at Postojna are slightly more abundant, varied, and colorful, with stalagmites and stalactites as tall as 100 feet.

While some fairly strenuous hiking is required to see Škocjan, visiting Postojna is an easy, lightly guided roll-and-stroll through an amazing underground cavern. A little open-air train first slings you deep into the mountain, whizzing past wonderful formations. Then you'll walk uphill into the "Big Mountain," where you're surrounded by a sea of fairy chimneys, before a bridge over a canyon takes you into "Spaghetti Hall," named for the long, skinny stalactites that seem to be dripping from the ceiling. After passing some huge, white, melting-ice-cream formations, you'll wind up in the impressively vast cavern called the "Concert

Hall." Here, an aquarium houses the strange, pale-pink, salamander-like "human fish," a cave-dwelling creature that is celebrated as a sort of national mascot in Slovenia.

After exploring some of the world's best caves, mull over what you've seen — and return to more modern history — with a glass of wine from vineyards near these caves. Raise a glass to red-and-black bison, colossal caverns and human fish that hide beneath Europe's modern surface.

Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. This column revisits some of Rick's favorite places over the past two decades. Visit his website at ricksteves.com, email him at rick@ricksteves.com or follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Bishop trades LA for quiet Colorado

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
Tribune Content Agency

Singer-songwriter Stephen Bishop ("On and On," "Save It for a Rainy Day," "It Might Be You") had a sold-out tour planned when the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench in his plans.

"Sadly, we were never able to reschedule the dates," said Bishop, now 73. "(But lockdown did give) me time to really reflect on my career. In the end, it was the (50 years of touring) that got to me. The \$20 airport sandwiches that were terrible, endless hotel rooms, hauling heavy luggage and guitars and constantly being away from home. I've realized I'm more of a homebody and that spending only a few months at home each year wasn't the life I wanted."

This interview with Bishop has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What was it like when you moved to Colorado?
A: After living in Los Angeles for 47 years, it was a tough transition. It would be for anyone after calling a place home for so long. But I came to realize that LA was no longer the right place to raise a child. Most of my friends had either moved away or passed on, and the new neighbors in the Hollywood Hills were constantly throwing parties. (There was) construction noise all around. I would step outside and never find a moment of real peace. Also, LA traffic is horrible. In Colorado, it's different. I have space, land and quiet.



Singer-songwriter Stephen Bishop, known for his hit "On and On," said Sweden is on his travel bucket list. **LIZ KAMLET**

At the end of the day, home isn't just a place, it's where your life and the people you love are.

Q: What was your first really big show?

A: When I opened for Linda Ronstadt. That was really my first time performing for thousands of people. She had 27,000 people in attendance. I had to get over my stage fright pretty quick, but it was an exhilarating experience. Linda was and still is great.

Q: Of all the places you've performed, which one was your bucket-list venue?

A: Madison Square Garden. I played there in the late '70s. And the Roxy (Theatre in LA), along with the San Diego Sports Arena (now the Pechanga Arena). Being from San Diego, that was nice.

Q: What is your best or worst vacation memory?

A: When I was 15, I went to Puertecitos, Mexico, with a few of my friends from my band, The Weeds. It's about six hours away from San Diego, where I grew up. I got severely sunburned. I never forgot that and I always wear sunscreen whenever I go out now.

Q: What untapped destination should people know about?

A: I'm not telling you, because then everyone will go there. (Laughs) Just kidding. Woodloch Pines Resort. My wife used to go

there growing up and it's tucked away in Hawley, Pennsylvania, and is truly top notch.

Q: What trip you took as a child that stands out?

A: When I was 5, my mom took me on a bus from San Diego to Key West, Florida, to see my relatives. Looking back now, with a child of my own, I have no idea how my mom kept me sane with one comic book for almost five days. We did not fly. It was not fun. It was hot and exhausting. So was the ride back.

Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?

A: Never let the promoter book your travel. They do not know you or your preferences. I remember my last trip to the Philippines on the way back was awful. The promoter booked me for an eight-hour layover at one in the morning, separating me from my entire team, forgetting to book their travel. I had to sleep on the floor of the terminal. It was a truly awful experience. I went from (receiving a) standing ovation to the cold concrete floor of a random country.

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: I've always wanted to go to Sweden. The people seem really nice and (it has) a rich historic culture.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Insurance company denies claim after family trip nixed

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

I bought travel insurance from Tin Leg for a scheduled REI tour to Utah. When a family tragedy struck and my husband's father passed away, I canceled our entire trip and all related reservations. I acted quickly to inform both REI and Tin Leg.

Despite my prompt cancellation, Tin Leg denied my claim. Their explanation was that I reused my airline ticket for a different trip, so my cancellation was deemed invalid.

I feel that this interpretation is unfair. I followed the policy by canceling the trip that I could not take due to unforeseen circumstances. I have maintained a complete paper trail of every email, phone call and correspondence with both REI and Tin Leg.

I need to know if my cancellation should have triggered a full reimbursement for the canceled REI trip. Did my actions not meet the intended spirit of the policy? I also wonder if there was anything more I could have done to secure my refund.

— Amy Sparks, Minneapolis

A: I'm sorry to hear about your father-in-law. At a time like this, you would expect your travel insurance company to be compassionate and to quickly honor your claim. After all, it's why you bought travel insurance.

I was curious as to why Tin Leg denied your refund. In an email to you, the company explained its reasons.

"Unfortunately, as your trip was rescheduled rather than canceled in its entirety," a representative told you, "the REI portion is not eligible for reimbursement. The Trip Cancellation benefit under your policy requires the entire trip to be canceled to qualify for coverage, not just a portion of it."

In other words, because you accepted a credit for your flight instead of canceling it, Tin Leg

denied your entire claim.

I thought a carefully worded appeal might have allowed the insurance company to see that this interpretation of the policy, while technically correct, was wrong. But it also rejected your appeal.

I list the names, numbers and email addresses of the customer service executives at Tin Leg on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. A brief, polite email to one of them might have fixed this.

But travel insurance is complicated. The decision about whether to honor your claim actually needed to be made by Tin Leg's underwriter, Starr Indemnity Insurance Company. I contacted Starr on your behalf to see if maybe something had been overlooked with your claim. Separately, you reached out to the Minnesota

Department of Commerce, which regulates travel insurance in your state, and you filed a complaint.

Tin Leg's underwriter then reversed its position and honored your claim. If there's one takeaway from your case, it's this: Make sure you follow all the instructions carefully when you have to cancel a trip and file a claim. Specifically, be sure that you cancel all prepaid, nonrefundable portions of your trip that are covered by travel insurance. Otherwise, your travel insurance company could deny your entire claim.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.