

# Europe's great universities offer treasures



**Rick Steves**

When touring any city, it's fun to drop in on the local university. And in Europe, universities can be essential sightseeing, as some are home to great architectural, artistic, and cultural treasures.

One of Europe's top university sights is the Book of Kells, tucked away in the library of the venerable Trinity College in Dublin. This famous illuminated manuscript is a 1,200-year-old version of the four gospels, elaborately inked and meticulously illustrated by faithful monks, who went to great lengths in creating the 680-page book.

To make the vellum pages, they laboriously scraped and dried the skin of an estimated 185 calves. To get the most vivid pigments, they used powders from crushed bugs and precious stones. They wrote in Latin calligraphy and adorned the pages with big, flowery letters, detailed illustrations, and animals crouching between sentences or intertwined with letters — a jungle of intricate designs, inhabited by tiny creatures both real and fanciful.

A visit is memorable — but crowded. (Buy timed-entry tickets in advance.)

More than any country in Europe, Great Britain is synonymous with prestigious universities. While several are worth touring, from a sightseeing point of view, I enjoy Cambridge, near London. Two of Cambridge's highlights are the King's College Chapel and Wren Library.

The 500-year-old chapel is England's best surviving example of late Gothic architecture, a style emphasizing perpendicular lines. It boasts the largest



The ceiling of King João's Library at Portugal's University of Coimbra is an example of a Baroque illusion technique. **DOMINIC ARIZONIA BONUCELLI**

single span of vaulted roof anywhere — 2,000 tons of glorious fan vaulting — and the most complete collection of original 16th-century Renaissance stained glass in existence. Scenes from the New Testament decorate the lower panes, while corresponding stories from the Old Testament are in the upper windows. Adorning the altar is the Adoration of the Magi, one of many versions painted by the famous Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens.

The Wren Library (at Trinity College Cambridge) features the light and airy design of Sir Christopher Wren — the architect who designed St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Unlike other libraries at Cambridge, this one is on an upper floor, allowing it to be flooded with light.

Its display cases contain a rotating collection of items, such as early editions of

Shakespeare's plays, handwritten works by John Milton, Sir Isaac Newton's notebook and prism, and A.A. Milne's original Winnie the Pooh.

Another treasured library is the elegant King João's Library (Biblioteca Joanina), at the University of Coimbra in Portugal. Showcased in this 300-year-old temple of thought are 40,000 books in impressive Baroque splendor. The interior is all wood, including reading tables inlaid with exotic South American woods and bookshelves built with clever hide-away staircases. Even the "marble" triumphal arches that divide the library into rooms are, actually, painted wood. The painted ceiling, meanwhile, demonstrates the illusions of Baroque's trompe l'oeil.

Since the library's books all date from before 1755, a major job here is pres-

ervation, and the zealous doorkeeper opens the big front door sparingly to keep out humidity. The library is accessible only during appointed times, and visitors have just 10 minutes to view it before being ushered out.

At night, resident bats come out to devour book-eating insects, providing a chemical-free way of protecting the collection.

In Salamanca, home to Spain's oldest university (established around 1218), the highlight is the grand façade of the school's entrance. Its intricate stonework is a great example of Spain's Plateresque style, represented by delicate, detail-packed, filigree-like carvings.

The façade has three sections. The bottom celebrates the "Catholic Monarchs," Ferdinand and Isabel, who granted money for the building. The

immodest middle section celebrates their grandson, Charles V, who commissioned this facade and decorated it with the complex coat of arms of the mighty Habsburg Empire. The top shows the pope flanked by Hercules and Venus — a statement of intellectual independence from medieval Church control. Buried amidst the ornamentation is a tiny frog on a skull that students look to for good luck.

Founded around the same time as University of Salamanca, Italy's University of Padua is one of Europe's first, greatest, and most progressive schools. Independent of Catholic constraints, this haven for free thought ushered in intellectuals from all over the continent, including Copernicus, who studied here, and Galileo, who taught here.

Students lead tours of

the university, highlighted by a peek at Europe's first great anatomy theater (from 1595). Because of the Church's strict ban on autopsies, the university operated on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis. More than 300 students would pack this theater to watch professors dissect human cadavers — mostly bodies of criminals from another town.

From ancient autopsy rooms to glimmering Gothic chapels, and medieval manuscripts to dark Baroque libraries, Europe's universities can provide an intimate setting to experience some of history's most impressive artifacts.

*Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.*

## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### South America beckons musician

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

In 1989, Shintaro Sakamoto was the frontman, vocalist and guitarist for the fledgling psychedelic rock band Yura Yura Teikoku. For their first real gig, they performed at a Tokyo venue called La.mama. "It was a daytime audition and if we passed, we'd be able to perform in the evening slot," Sakamoto told me from Tokyo. "I was 21 or 22 at the time. I had sung too much during the rehearsal the day before and ended up ruining my voice, so on the day of the show I could hardly sing at all. Needless to say, the performance was bad. And we, of course, failed the audition."

After the group's disbandment in 2010, the composer-producer formed his own label, Zelone Records, and released four solo albums. "Yoo-hoo," out now, is his fifth.

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

**Q: What would you like readers to know about "Yoo-hoo"?**

**A:** I produced the album with Soichiro Nakamura, who I have worked with many times, mixing and mastering. The album features my live band of AYA on bass, Yuta Saganuma on drums and percussion and Tetsu Nishiuchi on flute.

**Q: Does the music you hear in a particular city or country inspire your own work?**

**A:** The idea for the song "Tournament of Macho Men" came to me while I was traveling from Bangkok



Musician Shintaro Sakamoto said that traveling around France in his 20s affected him deeply. **ZELONE RECORDS**

to Chiang Mai in Thailand. It's not that I was directly influenced by Thai music, but I remember images popping into my mind as I walked around the cities. I shaped those ideas into a song after returning to Japan.

**Q: Did you write any of the songs on "Yoo-hoo," or any of your other albums, while you were on the road?**

**A:** I don't think I've ever written songs while on tour. I compose music when I'm alone at home. As for lyrics, I sometimes think about them while traveling, sitting in a car or plane, but I always finish them when I'm back home by myself.

**Q: Do you write your songs knowing that most international fans don't understand Japanese?**

**A:** Although I write lyrics in Japanese, I'm very particular about the sound and rhythm of the language, so I believe people can enjoy the songs even if they don't understand the meaning of the words. My music is influenced by all the different kinds of music I've listened to over the years.

**Q: Have you visited places for work that were so nice that you traveled back there later for a personal trip?**

**A:** I first visited Taiwan 20 years ago and liked it so much that I returned there privately soon after. It reminded me of Japan when I was a child. Even

though it was my first time there, it felt strangely nostalgic.

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

**A:** When I was 15, I traveled from Nagano to a friend's house in Fukuoka. It was my first time riding a sleeper train alone, so the experience left a strong impression, with a mix of nervousness and excitement. It was a lot of fun.

**Q: What is your best and/or worst vacation memory?**

**A:** When I was young, I wasn't interested in traveling abroad, and I first went overseas around the age of 29. I traveled by bus through the south of France and ended up in Paris, and that trip was incredibly enjoyable. I feel like it changed my perspective on life. I have two worst memories from traveling. On both occasions, a friend I was traveling with was taken away by ambulance due to injury or illness. Fortunately, nothing serious happened.

**Q: What is a bucket-list venue that you have yet to perform in?**

**A:** I'm not sure about the venue, but since I've never been to South America, I'd love to go.

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

**A:** Brazil, Portugal.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Car rental cancellation turns into \$52 annoyance over fee

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

I recently booked a Hertz rental car through Expedia for pickup at Fargo Airport. The reservation clearly stated that I could cancel at any time before pickup without a penalty. Three days before my rental, I canceled the reservation through Expedia and received an email confirming my cancellation without a cancellation fee.

Imagine my surprise when, a week later, Hertz charged me a \$52 no-show fee. I contacted Expedia, and a representative told me that my reservation did not include a cancellation fee. But then the responses got confusing. One Expedia agent claimed that there was a cancellation fee in my reservation (which I know isn't true). Another told me to deal with Hertz directly, and yet another said that Hertz had agreed to refund me, but the refund never arrived. At one point, Expedia even issued a refund to my credit card, only to reverse it and say that it was a mistake.

I've followed all the advice from your columns, including appealing to the executive contacts who are listed on your site. The only replies I got were generic and didn't answer my specific questions. I asked Expedia to provide written proof that my cancellation was sent to Hertz before the pickup time so that I could appeal to Hertz directly, but they never provided it.

I even visited the Hertz counter at Fargo Airport, but the manager never got back to me. The staff there said that it looked like Expedia didn't send the cancellation in time. How can I get my \$52 back?

— **Todd Brueshoff, Chicago**

**A:** Let's get one thing straight: When you book a rental car through an online travel agency like Expedia, it's the online travel agency's job to make sure that your cancellation goes through and that you're not penalized for following the rules. Expedia should have promptly processed your cancellation, confirmed it with Hertz, and provided you with written proof that the cancellation was received by Hertz before your scheduled pickup time.

If your reservation terms allow for a free cancellation, and you cancel within the allowed window, you should not pay a no-show fee. If Expedia failed to transmit your cancellation to Hertz in time, this is on Expedia — not you.

I reviewed your correspondence with Hertz and Expedia, and it looks like you did this by the book. You canceled in advance,

kept all the documentation, and escalated your case through the proper channels, even appealing to executive contacts. I publish the names, numbers and email addresses for the higher-ups at Expedia and Hertz on my consumer advocacy site, [elliott.org](http://elliott.org).

You maintained a detailed paper trail, which is exactly what I recommend. If this happens to anyone else, I'd add: Always double-check that you receive a cancellation confirmation email, and if possible, contact the rental agency directly to confirm receipt — especially if you're close to the cancellation deadline.

You did everything right, and you even went the extra mile by visiting the Hertz counter at Fargo Airport. The staff there suspected that Expedia didn't send the cancellation in time, which explains why Hertz saw

you as a no-show. Expedia, meanwhile, bounced you between departments, issued and then reversed a refund, and failed to provide the documentation that you needed to resolve the issue with Hertz.

It turns out there was more to this story. After Expedia issued a credit and then withdrew it, you filed a credit card dispute, which you lost. Once your bank sides with a merchant, you only have two realistic options: an outside advocate or a trip to small claims court. You chose me, and I contacted Expedia on your behalf. Expedia issued a full refund of your \$52 no-show fee.

*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](http://elliott.org/help) or [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*