

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE IMMORTAL EUROPEAN SQUARE

TRAVEL DIARIES

A town square holds the essence of a European city. Punita Malhotra, during her travels to various cities of Europe, finds out that the multi-functional square is a true symbol of unity



The overriding impression I carry home after travelling to a European city is timeless. And the best example of this infinitude lies in the enigmatic town square. These public spaces have existed across the continent for centuries, magically connecting the past with the present. European squares have been hotspots for dialogue and discussion, meetings and greetings, for shared experiences and forming bonds. So, the next time you visit a European square, don't forget to count its six sides.

Of the heart and soul

Dominating the map of any city in Europe is the Old Town. And inevitably, its nerve centre is the town square. Original character, traditional architecture, historic cafés, local specialties, the explosion of arts-crafts and culture overload—all in all, it's a fully pedestrian zone. It can be seen as a time capsule of sorts. Just follow the throngs and you'll get there.

Designed for drama

Narrow, winding cobbled streets lead you in through one of the many entry arches. Cross the threshold, and boom...you find yourself in a sunny, airy, wide-open courtyard, walled in with medieval buildings. Be ready for a surprise at the contrasts of spaces as you enter the mammoth-sized Praça do Comércio, Lisbon, or the arty Piazza Della Signoria, Florence.

Star attraction

There's bound to be one distinctive feature that stands out in every town square. Mostly, it's a cathedral or a town hall or both. The Rathaus Glockenspiel at Marienplatz, Munich, or the mega Papal Palace, Avignon, are but a few examples. These are vestiges of the Medieval Age when coronations, religious, political, social, commercial gatherings, even executions, were held there.

Age-old legacy

Centuries-old squares continue to shine on as sites earmarked for annual carnivals, celebrations, performances, protests and revolutions. Age-old traditions and rituals have survived, even thrived, through these very public spaces. Think the Christmas market at Altmarkt, Dresden, the flower carpet show at Grote Markt, Brussels, or the art market at Piazza Navona, Rome.

Social hotspots then and now

These town squares have traditionally been social hotspots—these are the places to commuise, converse and collaborate. Canopied cafes overflow with people, children play, street bands perform, local cuisine thrives. Witness a wedding shoot in Republic Square, Florence, ride a horse carriage at Grote Markt, Antwerp, or just indulge in a coffee at St Mark's Square, Venice. Take a seat. Feel at home.



**SQUARE,
YOU SAID?**

Lucca's Piazza dell'Anfiteatro is oval and St Peter's Square, Vatican is semi-circular. It could be rectangular, hexagonal or even completely irregular...but is still a square! Modest or grandiose, hidden or legendary, in Europe, you would have to think twice before concluding that a square is a square.

Back to square one

The square has been referred to by many other names down the centuries. Take a look:

- Agora in Greece
- Piazza in Italy
- Markt in Netherlands
- Place in France
- Praça in Portugal
- Platz in Germany
- Náměstí in Czech
- Rynek in Poland
- trg in Croatia

