



PATRICIA SZILAGYI

111  
EXTREME  
PLACES IN  
EUROPE  
THAT  YOU  
SHOULDN'T  
MISS

emons:

# 1 Fonderia Marinelli

*The oldest bell casting workshop*

The sound of church bells is ubiquitous in Agnone. The village in the Italian region of Molise has only 5,200 residents, but no less than 16 churches. This should come as no surprise, as it is also home to the oldest bell casting workshop in Europe. Surrounded by mountain peaks and wild nature, it feels as though time has stood still in Agnone. Fonderia Marinelli's bells are still produced in precisely the same way as they were hundreds of years ago.

The Marinelli bell casting workshop has been around since 1339. The craft has been passed down from generation to generation: from the manufacture of the clay mould, to the 'recipe' for the perfect bronze mixture of copper and tin. All of the steps in the process are carried out by hand to this day. The Marinellis believe that only in this way does a bell obtain not only its unique sound, but also its soul. Their bells have borne the Pope's seal since 1924.

Every bell is unique, every form is specially fabricated. It takes at least three months, from the first drawings to the decisive last step, the casting – and that is very much like a religious ritual. There is often a priest present, who says prayers and blesses the bell. The bronze is heated to more than 1,100 °C, and flows into the mould like glowing lava. Whether the result is good can only be assessed a few days later when the metal has cooled. After the clay casing is peeled off and it has been polished, the 'Maestro Campanale' checks the sound of every bell. Only then is the instrument sent out into the world.

From the leaning tower of Pisa, to the UNO in New York and the Vatican, bells from Agnone can be heard in countless places around the world. And because the Marinellis hand down not only their knowledge but also their love of the craft from one generation to the next, there are sure to be a whole lot more to come – each and every one manufactured according to ancient tradition.



**Address** Via Felice D'Onofrio 14, 86081 Agnone, Italy | **Getting there** Agnone is around 220 kilometres from Rome. You can take the train to Isernia, and from there the bus to Agnone. | **Tip** In the Fonderia Marinelli museum you can see the largest collection of bronze bells in the world. The oldest bell exhibited is around 1,000 years old. Guided tours daily ([www.campanemarinelli.com](http://www.campanemarinelli.com)).

## 2 Alnwick Poison Garden

*The most dangerous garden*

England is the kingdom of gardeners. The passion of the British for anything that blossoms is unrivalled. A paradise of green meadows and colourful flowers also welcomes visitors to the garden of Alnwick Castle. The castle, located in the far north of England, has belonged to the family of the Duke of Northumberland for 700 years. The path through the castle garden leads between fragrant rose bushes and cherry trees blossoming in delicate pinks, until you suddenly find yourself in front of a wrought-iron gate with two skulls. This is the entrance to the most dangerous part of the property: Alnwick Poison Garden.

‘These plants can kill’ is written in large letters on the gate, and you are only allowed to enter in the company of a guide. The rules of conduct for visitors are strict: plants must not be touched or smelled. These precautions are absolutely justified – the most poisonous plants in the world are all gathered here. These include intoxicating plants such as cannabis or the opium poppy, but also seductively beautiful specimens such as angel trumpets or wolfsbane, which seem to disguise their toxic nature with their vibrant-coloured flowers.

The spectrum of potential effects ranges from slightly numbing to absolutely deadly. Hemlock, for example, was historically served as a drug to perform executions! The Greek philosopher Socrates famously chose a cup of hemlock to bring about his death. Wolfsbane, meanwhile, was used to contaminate the wells of the enemy, and castor beans, the oil of which is often found in medicines or in cosmetic products, contains one of the strongest natural poisons in existence.

Nevertheless, you shouldn’t be worried about visiting Alnwick Poison Garden. Thanks to the knowledgeable guides, you should leave the Poison Garden not only fit and healthy, but educated in a wealth of floral poisons.



**Address** Denwick Lane, Alnwick NE66 1YU, England | **Getting there** Alnwick is nearer to Edinburgh than London – from the Scottish capital take the train to Alnmouth, then the bus to Alnwick (Playhouse). | **Hours** Daily 10am–6pm (shortened hours in the winter months) | **Tip** Alnwick Castle itself is also worth a visit: the historic walls served as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the Harry Potter films.



### 3\_\_Alto Douro

*The oldest wine-growing region*

The Douro cuts deep into the landscape of north-east Portugal. Here, near the border with Spain, the river meanders through innumerable shale hills. Lush vineyards rise up to either side of the river's banks. The radiant white walls of the wine estates, the so-called *quintas*, flash through the green vines every now and then.

Wine has been grown in Alto Douro, the 'high Douro', for more than 2,000 years. The Romans recognised the ideal conditions of the dry-hot climate and planted vines here. Many centuries later, in 1756, the borders of the region were officially defined for the first time. With this, the Alto Douro became the first legally protected wine-growing region in the world. It even became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001.

The region remains one of the most important wine regions in Europe to this day. Vintners cultivate grapes here on around 25,000 hectares of land. History and tradition are particularly important to them. The grapes are still picked by hand, as the slopes are too steep for machines, and the mash is still trampled by foot at most of the vineyards, just as it always has been.

This is also how one of the most famous wines in the world is made: port. The Alto Douro region is the cradle of this sophisticated drink, and the sweet fortified wine can only be pressed out of the grapes that grow here. After the pressing, the grape must is mixed with high-proof brandy. This stops the fermentation, and provides for port's characteristic taste as well as a high alcohol content of around 20 per cent by volume. The famous beverage obtains its final aroma near the city that also gave it its name: Porto. It matures for at least two years in one of the many wineries around the harbour city. Only then is it exported to a myriad of countries, taking the taste of the oldest wine-growing region in Europe out into the whole world.

**Getting there** From Porto you can reach the region of Alto Douro by car, train or boat. Particularly recommended is the 'Linha do Douro'. The train journey leads from Porto to Pocinho along the Douro, and is one of the prettiest train routes in Europe. | **Tip** Many of the traditional *quintas* along the Douro provide tours that include wine tasting.



The QR code takes you to the corresponding video in the series, *Europe to the Maxx*. Look for more QR codes placed on the photos in 19 other chapters.



## 4 Trollveggen

*The highest rock face*

Åndalsnes, around 400 kilometres north-west of Oslo, is the climbing capital of Norway. With around 2,200 inhabitants, the town is located in the middle of the Romsdal Alps. While it is actually more of a village, in summer it can get quite busy, as this is when hikers and climbers from all over the world visit Åndalsnes. They are attracted by the easy access to fjords, mountain streams and imposing rock formations right on their doorstep.

The best-known of these is only a few kilometres away: it is called Trollveggen – in English ‘Troll Wall’. The distinctive rock face is part of the Trolltindene massif, which provides a spectacular backdrop to Åndalsnes. The Troll Wall towers around 1,700 metres above the valley, with a series of characteristic jagged rocks on the summit. According to legend, they are petrified trolls – a deep-rooted part of local mythology.

It is not the height alone that makes the Troll Wall stand out, however: what fascinates most climbers is the steep face, which soars up vertically for around one kilometre. In parts, the rock face even has an overhang of up to 50 metres – an extreme challenge even for professional climbers. For a long time the Troll Wall was therefore considered unassailable. Nevertheless, the most courageous climbers tried, and a competition began regarding who would be the first to complete the climb. This was finally achieved in 1965, when two expeditions conquered the vertical rock face at the same time. They took 14 days to struggle to the summit via two different routes.

Today, there are a dozen or so climbing routes, but none of them are suitable for amateurs. However, there is still a lot to experience for those who do not want to explore the rock wall with such intimacy. The area offers numerous hiking routes for all levels of fitness and ability, often with spectacular views of the famous Troll Wall.





**Address** 6300 Åndalsnes, Norway | **Getting there** By train or bus from Oslo to Åndalsnes, where numerous operators offer tours to the Troll Wall | **Tip** Take a trip along the nearby Trollstigen road, which winds through the Trolltindene massif in 11 hairpin bends, and offers impressive views.

## 5—Andorra la Vella

*The highest capital*

Very few people would use the word ‘pretty’ to describe the capital of Andorra. Shopping streets and shopping malls dominate the image of this city, which is home to 23,000 people. Andorra is not part of the EU, and is seen as a tax haven. As a result, many tourists visit for the sole purpose of engaging in some cheap retail therapy. While Andorra la Vella has attuned itself to shoppers’ needs, this means that day trippers often miss out on the city’s most important sights, related to its exposed location: the fabulous mountain landscape of the surrounding area.

Andorra la Vella is located in a high valley in the eastern Pyrenees, at an altitude of more than 1,000 metres. Just beyond the edges of the city, the mountains rise up and nature takes over. It is a paradise for fans of the outdoors and extreme sports. Mountain bike tours, canyoning trips and climbing tours – availability of such a diversity of activities around a capital is very rare. There are 65 peaks over 2,000 metres to discover in the most condensed of spaces, as the small principality is one of Europe’s mini states. It’s possible to drive from the border with France in the north-east to the Spanish border in the south in less than one hour – despite the fact that it’s not possible to drive particularly fast due to the winding mountain roads.

In summer, alongside adventure holidaymakers, lots of hikers and anglers are drawn to the Pyrenees, while in winter it’s the skiers who visit. They all experience the purest of nature very near to the city. Indeed, 90 per cent of Andorra is undeveloped. The sharp peaks and narrow valleys seem to resist civilisation. Only here and there does the occasional village church tower rise in the landscape. Andorra is like an island in the middle of Europe, with a capital whose location is its biggest trump card: the unique proximity to nature and the mountains.

**Address** Andorra la Vella, AD 500, Andorra | **Getting there** Andorra doesn't have its own airport, but you can fly to Barcelona or Toulouse, then travel by bus or rental car. | **Tip** When you visit Andorra you should try *Nectum*, a pine cone syrup, that's said to have magical powers.



## 55 — Unstad

*The most northerly surfers' paradise*

When Thor Frantzen and Hans Egil Krane undertook the first attempts to ride the waves in Unstad at the start of the 1960s, they had neither surfboard nor thick neoprene suits. They had both worked previously as skippers on cargo ships, which had taken them to Australia. They marvelled at the surfers on the famous Bondi Beach, and returned to their homeland of Norway completely impassioned. There were waves there too, after all! As a result they built themselves their own boards out of polystyrene sourced from old fish boxes. Then they wrapped themselves up in thick woollen jumpers and waterproof raincoats to protect against the cold, and plunged into the icy North Sea.

Today, surfers are no longer a rare sight in the tiny town on the Norwegian Lofoten island of Vestvågøy – although these days they wear much more familiar kit. Here, more than 150 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, a real surfers' Mecca has developed. The best conditions prevail in the small bay off Unstad, surrounded by high rock faces. The waves here are usually not huge, but on many days they are perfectly formed for surfing.

Now word has spread, and an increasing number of surfers from all over the world visit Unstad in order to test their limits. Surfing here certainly isn't a sport for the faint-hearted. Even in summer the sea remains dreadfully cold, and in winter the water temperatures are in single digits. Snow can fall even in spring or autumn. It's not rare to surf here with a view of white mountains and a snow-covered beach. With a bit of luck surfers can even see the northern lights while gliding over the waves.

In the meantime, there's not only a surf shop in Unstad, but also a surf camp, where even beginners venture into the icy tides. There is at least one thing you don't have to worry about here: unlike Australia and Hawaii, there are no dangerous sharks in Norway.

**Address** Unstadveien, 8360 Unstad, Lofoten, Norway | **Getting there** By air via Oslo to Leknes on Vestvågøy, then around 20 kilometres by rental car | **Tip** The best time for beginners is May to September; in winter the swell is higher, and only suitable for experienced surfers.



## 56 — British Library

*The library with the most items*

The British Library was once described in parliament as ‘one of the ugliest buildings in the world’. The new building near London’s St Pancras Station was not exactly showered with love when it opened in 1997. Many remembered the famous domed reading room in the British Museum, where most of the library’s books were previously housed, with melancholy. Karl Marx had written parts of *Capital* there, and famous writers such as Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw and Virginia Woolf were regular guests.

But the museum was beginning to bulge at the seams. In 1973, the British Museum Library and some other institutions were brought together as the new National Library. Not only books and magazines, but also audio recordings, maps, databases, paintings, stamps and patents are part of the collection. There are more than 170 million items in total, with around 8,000 new ones added every day. In order to create room for the immense deluge of media, the building in St Pancras, which is now the library’s main site, was built.

True treasures of the history of humankind are stored behind the walls of the modern building. The oldest objects in the collection come from the period around 1,600 years before Christ. Among the most precious are two original Magna Cartas and two Gutenberg Bibles. The British Library also calls the oldest completely preserved book in Europe its own: a transcript of the Gospel of John from the early 8th century. The catalogue includes works from almost every period, country and language. Many are extremely valuable, like the copies of the first complete works of Shakespeare or the diaries of Leonardo da Vinci.

The inventory of the British Library is absolutely unique. And even the unpopular new build has redeemed itself in the meantime. In 2015, a preservation order was put on it – as one of the youngest buildings ever.

# BRITISH LIBRARY BRITISH



**Address** 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, England | **Getting there** Underground to King's Cross St Pancras, Euston or Euston Square | **Hours** Mon–Thu 9.30am–8pm, Fri 9.30am–6pm, Sat 9.30am–5pm, Sun 11am–5pm; information on opening times of individual reading rooms at: [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk) | **Tip** The British Library also makes part of its holdings available online. Access around four million works via the website.

## 57 — London Eye

*The tallest Ferris wheel*

The London Eye is the perfect refuge in the middle of the British capital. On the streets of the metropolis, with its population of nine million, endless streams of pedestrians push past each other, with everyone seemingly in a hurry. But you can leave all the noise, cars and people behind – or more specifically below you – sealed off from the hustle and bustle in one of the big wheel's 32 gondolas.

The 135-metre wheel turns slowly, right on the banks of the Thames, opposite the majestic Big Ben and Westminster Palace. Created on the occasion of the new millennium, the design of the wheel represents a distinct contrast to the Victorian architecture that characterises so much of the centre of the British capital. 1,700 tonnes of steel were used in its construction, which from a distance looks like an oversized bicycle wheel. The gondolas are attached to the outside to ensure that nothing obscures the passengers' view as they look out from the fully-glazed capsules. There is room for a total of up to 800 visitors at a time to travel in the London Eye's elliptical gondolas.

The big wheel turns so slowly that you hardly notice that you're moving away from the ground. At first you see only the glittering water of the Thames, then you are suddenly at eye level with some of the most important sights of the city. Westminster Abbey and Big Ben seem close enough to touch, then a little further on is Buckingham Palace. Looking towards the north east, the Tower of London and St Paul's Cathedral come into view. In good weather it's possible to see for up to 40 kilometres – and if you're lucky, perhaps even make out Windsor Castle.

The city sightseeing tour from a bird's-eye view takes around half an hour. Then the time out from the turmoil of London ends, and out of the glass capsule you step, back into the crowds and hubbub of the British capital.





**Address** Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7PB, England | **Getting there** Underground to Waterloo, Embankment, Charing Cross or Westminster | **Hours** Mon–Fri 11am–6pm, Sat & Sun 10am–8.30pm | **Tip** The architects of the London Eye have also designed a modern viewing tower for Brighton in the south of England. A glazed viewing pulpit travels to a height of up to 138 metres, from which you can enjoy views of the beach, town and surrounding area.

## 58 Malbork Castle

*The largest brick castle*

It looks like a knight's castle from a book of traditional fairy tales: Malbork Castle, in the Polish town of the same name. Thick walls with battlements and defence towers surround the complex, with impressive castle buildings and church walls looming up behind them. You almost expect a knight on horseback with a shield and lance to gallop cross the bridge over the Nogat river in front of the magnificent structure.

Malbork Castle, around 60 kilometres south-east of Danzig, is an impressive legacy of the Middle Ages, and represents a piece of German-Polish history. It was German Teutonic Knights who built the castle. During the period of the crusades the knights of the order had helped in the missionary work of the Christian Church. They had ridden through Eastern Europe to the Holy Land, and established branches in many places. Malbork was created from 1270 as an important base. In 1309 the Grandmaster of the German Order relocated his seat here, which increased the importance of the castle even more. The fortress was upgraded to a castle – composed of many millions of red bricks, giving the castle its characteristic appearance to this day, and making it the largest brick building in Europe.

Malbork Castle, or Marienburg as it was at the time, was in the hands of the German Order until 1457. Then the fortress fell to Poland. The following centuries were eventful, and characterised by many battles. The complex suffered its heaviest blow during World War II, when large parts of the fortress were destroyed. It is thanks to the comprehensive Polish reconstruction that took place in the 1960s and 1970s that the castle can now be viewed again in its original appearance, as the famous site was immaculately restored. It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997 – and is one of the country's most significant historical sights.



**Address** Starościńska 1, 82–200 Malbork, Poland | **Getting there** From Danzig reach Malbork by regional train in around half an hour; from the railway station walk for around 15 minutes | **Hours** Daily May–Sept 9am–8pm, Oct–Apr 10am–4pm | **Tip** Every year in July the siege of Malbork Castle by the Polish-Lithuanian army in 1410 is re-enacted as a grand open-air spectacle. A medieval market and archery tournament accompany the event.

## 60\_\_ Staatliche Porzellan- Manufaktur Meissen

*The oldest porcelain factory*

You certainly need a steady hand to be a porcelain painter. Particularly if you want to decorate a piece with the most successful of all patterns: the onion pattern. In delicate strokes of blue on a white background, to this day it continues to be painted by hand in Meissen. After all, the small Saxon city is not only the birthplace of the famous motif, but of European porcelain.

In 1710, Augustus II the Strong, Elector of Saxony, announced the establishment of a porcelain factory. The production site in the Albrechtsburg in Meissen became the first of its kind in Europe. Until then, the material was only known as coming from China, where porcelain had already been used for many centuries. It wasn't until the start of the 18th century, however, that the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger was able to decipher the secret of its production. His recipe for the mixture of white kaolin, feldspar and quartz formed the foundation for the international success of the factory.

Around 700,000 model forms have been made in the course of the company's more than 300-year history. Some are still used for production today. Every piece is still formed, fired and glazed by hand in a painstaking process. The paints for the elaborate porcelain painting are manufactured in the in-house laboratory according to old formulations, such as the cobalt blue used for the renowned onion pattern.

Very few people know that the onions weren't originally onions at all. In fact, this pattern had also been copied from China. The motifs depicted there were peaches, pomegranates and citrons – exotic fruit unfamiliar to the Saxon painters. As a result, their stylised depictions looked more like onions. In retrospect, this probably represents one of the most successful misinterpretations in history.



**Address** Talstraße 9, 01662 Meissen, Germany | **Getting there** From Dresden you reach Meissen via the S-train line 1 in half an hour. From Meissen-Triebischtal walk around 500 metres. | **Hours** Daily 9am–5pm | **Tip** During the guided tours you can watch how the porcelain is painted in the show workshops. Now and then creative workshops are also on offer, where visitors can learn the basics of the craft.

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**Patricia Szilagy** is a freelance journalist and author living in Berlin. For more than 10 years, she has been working as an editor for the magazine 'Euromaxx' in the Deutsche Welle programme. There, she works intensively with the diverse cultures and lifestyles in Europe. Travelling is her great passion – she sets out as often as possible to discover Europe and the world – not always chasing records, but constantly looking for new places and inspiration.