

Once UPON A TIME

SIX UNDER-THE-RADAR EUROPEAN
CASTLES FROM CENTURIES PAST
GIVE AN OVER-THE-TOP MUSEUM
EXPERIENCE TODAY.

by PAUL RUBIO

Photo: Luis Montenegro/Getty Images

Alcázar of Segovia

Under the reign of the Carolingian dynasty in the ninth century, Europe's united Frankish empire began to dissolve, leading to the feudal division of land among nobility and lords. Entering the latter half of the Middle Ages, these new landowners constructed the world's first castles—fortified noble residences and centers of administration, cast in a bold aesthetic intended to demonstrate power.

By the 12th century, elements like towers, gatehouses, and moats were added for enhanced defense, and castles began to take the iconic, more ornate shape we associate them with today. The development of gunpowder-based weaponry in Europe in the 15th century ultimately branded castles a thing of the past, as the thick stone walls and traditional defense structures were no longer effective as fortification.

As forts replaced castles for military purposes, Europe was transitioning from the medieval period to its Renaissance era, a time when the elite were leaving sheltered ground for life in manors and new cities. In effect, castles grew more ornamental and less functional; many were converted into private homes, prisons, or military academies, and some were even abandoned.

Nowadays, private and public funds have helped restore thousands of Europe's medieval and Renaissance castles to their original glory, preserving the exterior grandeur and internal artifacts as modern-day museums. Here, six such castles that never made it into our history books but make us want to go back in time.



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Alcázar of Segovia

SEGOVIA, SPAIN

King Alfonso VIII constructed this stone castle in the 12th century in central Spain on the foundations of an ancient Roman fort, strategically positioned high atop a rocky promontory above the Eresma River. The cliff's geography dictated the castle's distinctive shape—like that of a ship's bow. The monarchs of Castile and León expanded the castle through the centuries, most notably King John II, who constructed the soaring Torre de Juan II, which granted a bird's-eye view of the land below. By the early 15th century, the polished Alcázar of Segovia—layered in towers, turrets, and spires and surrounded by a profound moat—embodied the archetypal castle of modern movies and storybooks. While Germany's Neuschwanstein Castle garners most of the credit, it's often contested that the Alcázar of Segovia in fact served as the inspiration for Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty Castle.

The Alcázar of Segovia is open to the public year-round. Private tours in English (\$45; must be pre-booked by phone or Web) and private hire of the castle after-hours (rates vary based on time, season, and amount of time requested; must be pre-booked by phone) are also offered. alcazardesegovia.com ▶





Corvin Castle

HUNEDOARA, ROMANIA

Castelul Corvinilor, or Corvin Castle, is everything you'd expect from a 14th-century Gothic fortress in the heart of Transylvania: foreboding, eerie, mystical, and inspiring. The transformation of the early Renaissance fortress into a castle began in 1446 when the Hungarian parliament appointed John Hunyadi (loan of Hunedoara in Romanian) regent-governor of the kingdom. Hunyadi executed his plans with utmost fortification in mind, which included a double, nearly impregnable wall; a massive drawbridge; and a perimeter lined with rectangular and circular towers used for heavy artillery and prisoners. Behind its battlements and at its core were the castle's sprawling courtyard and regal, rectangular halls for social activities.

Expect your imagination to run wild as you walk through the marble-clad Diet Hall, where receptions and ceremonies took place; Knights' Hall, which was used for lavish feasts; the dungeon and torture chamber, which reveal a darker side of the human spirit and European history; and the "bear pit," where legend has it that actual bears would consume prisoners.

Corvin Castle is open year-round to the public. Specific rooms and halls are available for private hire for cultural events (\$365/hr), weddings (\$200/hr), and artistic or documentary footage (\$725/hr), all with advanced notice. castelulcorvinilor.ro



Trakai Island Castle

TRAKAI, LITHUANIA

Constructed on its own island in Lake Galvė in southern Lithuania in the 14th century, Trakai Island Castle was erected as a sister fortress to a principal castle on the mainland by the Grand Duke of Trakai, Kęstutis. By the late 14th century, under Kęstutis' famed son, Vytautas the Great, the castle assumed its spired, red Gothic stature and expanded with a six-story donjon or innermost keep, a kind of castle-within-a-castle surrounded by its own moat, which added an extra layer of protection from raids. Allied with King Jogaila of Poland, Vytautas led the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to victory against the German-Prussian Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald in 1410. Following what was one of the largest battles of the Middle Ages, power shifted in Eastern Europe in favor of Lithuania, and Trakai Island Castle lost its relevance as a military stronghold. Thereafter, Vytautas the Great transformed the castle into his fabulous primary residence, commissioning frescoes for its walls, and enhancing its decorative aspect until he died in the castle in 1430.

Trakai Island Castle is open year-round to the public, except on Mondays between October and April. Private use of the castle is determined on a by-request basis. The castle hosts an annual "Night at the Museum" in May (next date: May 20, 2016), when medieval meets modern with folks dressed in period costumes, mock battles between knights, fire dancers, and live music. trakaimuziejus.lt ▶



Photos: (Opposite top) Rieger Bertrand/Hemis/Corbis; (opposite bottom) Walter Bibikow/JAI/Corbis. This page: (top) Fotomem/Stock; (bottom) Richard Bradley/Alamy Stock.



Predjama Castle

PREDJAMA, SLOVENIA

Etched into the mouth of a cliffside cave overlooking the River Lokva in southwestern Slovenia, this four-story castle is heavily steeped in the folklore and legends of its 15th-century lord, knight Erazem Lueger, who was more like Robin Hood than fellow aristocracy. Even during the Austrian-Hungarian War, when rival Austrian forces surrounded him at Predjama, Erazem was able to pursue his mission as a heroic outlaw by sneaking out via a secret passageway up and through the surrounding cave into neighboring towns. By way of its cave design, the castle proved impenetrable to his opponents ... until they were tipped off on its one unfortified nook, the toilet. Alas, that's where Erazem met his demise. After the siege, the medieval castle was rebuilt in 1570 in the less austere Renaissance style visible today and transformed into a royal residence for several centuries.

Access to Predjama Castle is year-round, but from May to September visitors get the added bonus of exploring sections of the 8-plus-mile cave system below. Even better is the Erazem's Passage adventure tour (\$45; must be booked three days in advance) where a guide leads you through the knight's secret cave path (warning: not for the faint-hearted or claustrophobic). postojnska-jama.eu ▸



Photos: Izlok Medja

Caerlaverock Castle

DUMFRIES, SCOTLAND

Near the frontier between England and Scotland, this 13th-century Scottish castle was the site of numerous battles between the two kingdoms, besieged and captured by the English on multiple occasions between 13th and 17th century. During this time, the castle was inhabited by the Scottish Maxwell lords, who successfully reclaimed it each time ... until ultimate defeat in 1640. While detailed accounts of these combats have been retrieved (including Edward I of England

leading his army to victory here in 1300) as well as the Maxwells' personal chronicles at Caerlaverock (which read like a soap opera filled with feuds and murders), the castle's triangular shape remains a mystery. In fact, the trilateral architecture—inclusive of a moat, twin-towered gatehouse, curtain walls, and battlements—is the only one in Britain. Caerlaverock Castle is open year-round to the public. historic-scotland.gov.uk



Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte

MAINCY, FRANCE

This 17th-century château outside of Paris bears striking resemblance to the more famous Château de Versailles, and for good reason. In 1658, Nicolas Fouquet, the superintendent of finance to Louis XIV, cherry-picked three luminaries to intertwine architecture, interior design, and landscape design to build his regal domed-roof estate and sprawling gardens, in which no expense was spared. The epic result inspired King Louis XIV to employ this same trio—Louis Le Vau, Charles Le Brun, and André Le Nôtre—to design Versailles (ironically, after firing Fouquet for his expenditures and throwing him in jail). Though it was Versailles that became an iconic symbol of France, lesser-known Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte rivals its contemporary as the foremost example of 17th-century French architecture and landscape design. Unlike the archetypal medieval and Renaissance chateaux found in regions like Périgord or Languedoc, don't expect Vaux-le-Vicomte to have a moat or battlements. Despite the “castle” name, Vaux-le-Vicomte is in fact an unfortified palace, built long after the period of true castles. The French word

for castle, *chateau*, was carried through the ages to have a broader meaning that incorporated palaces and mansions of later centuries. In this vain, many French chateaux do not fit the classic mold of their European peers. Run today as France's largest private historic property, Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte is open to the public from spring to early fall and again during select days of the festive season (private guided tours \$275; daily April-October 2016, mid-December 2016 to early January 2017). Certain rooms of the estate can be rented for private use (from \$4,400). On Saturdays from May to October (in 2016, May 7-October 1), the estate hosts a weekly “Candlelit Evening” \$20) when the palace is illuminated by 2,000 candles from 7 p.m. until midnight. Patrons have the option of dining next to the twinkling gardens at the estate's Les Charmilles restaurant, opened exclusively on these evenings (set menu from \$65; must be booked in advance), or in a private salon (from \$4,400). Additionally, Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte hosts concerts and guided costume tours throughout the year. vaux-le-vicomte.com ♦

Photos: (Opposite) Elena Rostunova/Shutterstock. This page: Hemis/Alamy Stock