

Dollar Makes the Good Life A Tourist Bargain in Europe

By ALESSANDRA STANDEY

ROME, Oct. 30 — Like other European capitals, Rome is enjoying a record year for foreign tourism, with 24 percent more American visitors this year than last. Some may be religious pilgrims coming for the Jubilee, a Holy Year of the Roman Catholic Church. But most are not here to do penance.

"Our Beluga caviar consumption has tripled, our oyster consumption has almost doubled, and our champagne consumption has quintupled this year," Nicola Rex, a manager of the five-star Hassler Hotel on top of the Spanish Steps, said. "We ask ourselves, have all our clients become Arab sheiks?" Mr. Rex discovered that actually, 90 percent of the requests came from American guests.

About 12.4 million Americans are expected to visit Europe this year, according to forecasts by the Brussels-based European Travel Commission, a 6 percent increase over 1999, and the eighth consecutive year of record traffic to Europe.

American tourists are taking barge trips through Burgundy, hiking in the glaciers of Iceland, horseback riding across Andalusia, and scooping up Hermès wallets and Baccarat crystal on the Faubourg-St.-Honoré or Loro Piana cashmere scarves on the Via Borgognona in Rome. Some of the more wealthy

tourists are picking up more lasting souvenirs — buying pied-à-terre apartments in Paris and medieval farmhouses in Umbria or holding Renaissance theme weddings in Tuscany.

The strong United States economy is driving the vast holiday migration to Europe, helped by the dollar's exchange rate against the euro, the unified European currency that 11 countries joined in 1999, and which

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cently fell to a record low of 82.81 cents to the dollar. At the end of trading today, the euro had bounced back to 84.14 cents, but since its introduction at the beginning of 1999, it has lost more than one-quarter of its value against the dollar.

The dollar's rise against the euro has shrunk the costs of shopping, accommodations and dining for traveling Americans. A modest dinner for three of pizza and salad at Tosca, a restaurant in central Rome, that cost about \$40 last week would have come closer to \$52 just a year before.

The urge to do Europe this year is so strong that the seasons have blurred. "All the early indications from airlines, hotels and tour operators suggest that the off-season is booming," said Einar Gustavsson, the United States chairman of the European Travel Commission, who is based in New York. Mr. Gustavsson, who is also the New York representative of the national tourism board of Iceland, a country where tourism is up 20 percent this year over last, noted that today's American tourist has new expectations. "We are competing not so much for people's money as their time. Americans have money, but they don't have a lot of time, so they want quality. Culture. And the way you spell culture in America is Rembrandts, opera, food and, of course, the shopping."

On Saturdays, customer service at the Louis Vuitton store on the Champs-Élysées in Paris begins on the sidewalk. The lines of shoppers, mostly Japanese and American, are

long, wide and sometimes testy. Vuitton dispatches greeters who try to impose order by jotting down names, first-come, first-serve, on little leather notebooks. On Saturdays, shoppers eager to take advantage of the dollar-franc rate can wait for an hour. Or more.

"It was absolutely terrible," Victor Sands, an orthodontist from Beverly Hills, Calif., recalled with a shudder. "We had a list, and by the time we got to a salesgirl, nothing we wanted was left in stock." Cyrille Merienne, deputy store manager of the Vuitton shop on the Champs-Élysées, acknowledged that clients sometimes had to wait to be served. "We try to accommodate the crowds, but our sales people have to spend quality time with each client," he said. "We are not a supermarket. And we never will be."

Dr. Sands tried to recover from the ordeal inside the plush, softly lit interiors of Hermès, where he and his friend Fred Kumetz, a lawyer from Beverly Hills, loitered in wait for their wives, who were wedged deep into the scarf counter, jostled by dozens of other tourists eager to buy silk and cashmere items that cost almost half what they would in New York.

The two couples had planned long ago to visit Europe this year, but the strength of the dollar rerouted their itinerary. "If the franc hadn't been so cheap, we wouldn't have been shopping so much," Mr. Sands explained wearily. "We might actually have seen a museum."

This loosening of American purse strings is prompted by the longest period of growth in the United States in a century, as well as the giddy

sense that even the grand life on the Continent has never been quite so affordable. "I have been coming to Paris regularly for 10 years, and this is the first time the dollar was really on my side," said Alan Helene, 44, a real estate developer from New York.

Mr. Helene, who treated himself and his wife to a week at the Plaza Athénée, had just bought a watch at Bulgari that cost him 35 percent less than it was priced on Madison Avenue. "There is nothing better than the feeling you are getting away with

Less than three bucks for a pint of Guinness, and you don't have to tip.

something," he chortled.

Britain, France, Italy and Germany remain the favorite destinations for American tourists. But the British pound, which is not linked to the euro, is stronger against the dollar and the growth rate for tourism there is lower, with only a 2 percent increase expected this year over last. Ireland, which is part of the euro, is anticipating a 6 percent increase in visitors.

Spain is expecting a 20 percent increase in American tourists this year. Waiting to enter the Prado Museum in Madrid, David Hogenkamp, a television executive from Buffalo, said the strong dollar was a definite factor in deciding to visit Spain, where the peseta is at 198 to the dollar, near the lowest it has been since the 1950's. "We are planning to buy some clothes, maybe some leather goods and jewelry," said his companion, Maryanne Skiva, a C.P.A. from Buffalo. "I'm even going to do some Christmas shopping."

They marveled at the low prices. "I've noticed that everything in general, food, hotels, etc. is generally cheaper than in the States. We're renting a car for 10 days to visit Barcelona and the southern coast and it only costs \$167," Mr. Hogenkamp said.

Europe is attracting all kinds of American tourists. "The increase is all across the board — it is not isolated to high-end tourism," Tom Souza, vice president of the European division of Far & Wide, a Miami-based consortium of 17 travel companies, said. "It's not just the strong dollar, there is strong consumer confi-

dence."

Not all American tourists, moreover, are booking five-star hotels and eating in gourmet restaurants. Brett Wallace, 30, traveling with his friend, Jeff Gust, 34, both from Wisconsin, flew out of O'Hare, and were on a male-bonding trip, which included window shopping along Dublin's fashionable Temple Bar area.

"We found a hot deal on Frommers.com," Mr. Wallace explained. He seemed most interested in finding good deals in pubs. A pint of Guinness in a Dublin pub costs \$2.33, whereas a pint in London goes for \$3.71. "We are paying £2.30 for a pint of Guinness," he said triumphantly. "That's less than three bucks a pint. And, you don't have to tip."

Mr. Wallace splurged on a pair of black leather shoes for 60 Irish pounds.

Others are buying medieval stone farmhouses. "A year ago, the dollar was worth about 1,800 lira, and now it is about 2,300, so, of course, Americans find it much more tempting to buy a dream house in Italy," according to Claudio Santi, a real estate agent at Tudor Immobilier, who helped arrange the sale.

Marie-Hélène Lundgreen, who works in the Belles Demeures department of Daniel Feau Conseil Immobilier, a Paris real estate firm, explained that not only was she getting many more American clients, but that the profile of the average American client had become younger and wealthier in the last few years. "It used to be older couples getting ready to retire; now I have new-economy clients — the 28-year-old trader who has a loft in TriBeCa and wants a two bedroom pied-à-terre in Paris and can spend more than \$1 million to buy the perfect place."

Perfection, in Paris, means a prestigious location, views of Notre Dame or the Eiffel Tower, large bathrooms, and exquisite furnishings. "For Americans, Paris is a dream, but that dream is very specific," Mrs. Lundgreen said. She noted that she recently sold a 200-square-meter duplex penthouse apartment in St.-Germain-des-Près for \$2.5 million to an American who made up her mind in one weekend.

Europe has always drawn honeymooners. Over the last few years, a growing number of Americans have held weddings overseas, exchanging vows and holding candle-lit receptions along the canals of Venice or in medieval castles in Tuscany.

Christopher and Carey Worthy, 29, were married on Oct. 14 in a richly brocaded reception room in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and

Such Bargains

Americans traveling in Europe are finding the strong dollar has given them more purchasing power, particularly for luxury goods. While still not cheap, here are some relative bargains at current exchange rates.

APARTMENT

PARIS
3 bedroom, 3 baths.
2,500 sq. ft. in a top
neighborhood

\$2.96 million or
\$1,189 a sq. ft.

NEW YORK
2 bedroom, 3 baths,
2,600 sq. ft. on
Upper East Side

\$3.39 million or
\$1,302 a sq. ft.

CAPPUCCINO

ROME Tre Scalini in
Piazza Navona
\$2.18

NEW YORK
Starbucks on
Eighth Ave.,
between
43rd and
44th Streets
\$3.25

*Excluding tariff from
bringing item back
into the United States.

Sources: Corcoran Group
for real estate prices in
New York; everything else
from retailers



MEN'S GOLD WATCH

By Bulgari
ROME \$4,200*
NEW YORK \$5,600



DINNER

Prix fixe at Alain
Ducasse featuring
white truffles

PARIS \$190
NEW YORK \$250

HANDBAG

Monogrammed
accessory
pouch by
Louis
Vuitton

PARIS \$104*
NEW YORK \$140



OPERA TICKET

MILAN
La Scala, best seats
\$130



NEW YORK
Metropolitan Opera,
best seats \$250



HOTEL SUITE

ROME
Hassler Hotel \$344*
NEW YORK
St. Regis \$590

MUSEUM ADMISSION

PARIS Louvre
Before 3 p.m. \$5.91
After 3 p.m. \$3.86

NEW YORK
Metropolitan Museum
of Art (suggested)
Adults \$10
Students/seniors \$5

th wore white — he donned his
aval reserve dress uniform, she
ore a Renaissance wedding gown.
The exchange rate kept falling in
ir favor — we couldn't believe how
expensive it turned out to be," Mr.
'orthy said.

Sandra Santoro, a Florence-based
edding planner, said, "This year we
ave witnessed an absolute boom in
merican weddings." Her company,
etting Married in Italy by Atlantis,
ranged more than 70 this year.
Its become fashionable, and the
merican economy makes it afford-
able," she explained.

Depending on size and extrava-
ance, her firm's weddings cost any-
here from 3 million lire, or \$1,301,
150 million. She cautioned that
alian bureaucracy sometimes
unctured some of the more roman-
c American fantasies. "I have cli-
ts who want to get married bare-
ot on the beach or in a gondola in
enice, and I have to explain that; by
iv, they have to do it in a town hall,"
e said.

American consumer confidence

appears to have rubbed off on Euro-
peans, who are continuing to visit
the United States, even though the strong
dollar makes everything from air-
line tickets to fast-food outlets more
expensive. The Tourism Industries
Office of the Department of Com-
merce has noted that 5.8 percent
more Europeans are visiting the
United States than last year.

"I am one of those stupid French-
men who spend all their summer
holidays in Florida," François Dela-
haye, general manager of the Plaza
Athénée in Paris explained. "I get
poorer every time my children visit
Orlando."