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 Europe, is that of the town square. And the best example of this is to be found in the enchanting town square. These public spaces have existed across the continent for centuries, steadily connecting the past with the present. European squares have always been hotspots for dialogue and discussion, meetings and greetings, for shared experiences and lingering bonds. So, the next time you visit a European square, don’t forget to count in six sides.

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 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 cobblestone streets lead you through one of the many entry arches. Cross the threshold, and boom…you find yourself in a sunny, airy wide-open market square. It’s a sight that needs no introduction. Square for a surprise at the centre of space as you enter the monumentally Prague, Lisbon, or the arty Piazza Della Signoria, Florence.

Star attraction

There is bound to be one distinctive feature that stands out in every town square. Usually, it’s a cathedral or a town hall or both. The Cathedrals of Monreale, Amalfi, or the mighty Papal Palace, Avignon, are but a few examples. These are vestiges of the Medieval Age when coronations, religious, political, civic, commercial gatherings, even executions, were held there.

Age-old legacy

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

Social hotspots then and now

These town squares have traditionally been social hotspots—there are the places to connect, converse, and collaborate. Cupola cafes overlook with people children play street bands perform, local musicians 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.

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
- Namesti in Czech
- Rynek in Poland
- Trg in Croatia