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## The Navigator: The risks of summer travel to Europe

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If you're looking for a little adventure this summer — a strike, a riot or maybe even a revolution — skip the Middle East and head to Europe.

Traditionally quiet and predictable Western Europe, a magnet for many American tourists, hasn't seen this much political and economic uncertainty in a while. As reports of economic bailouts, work stoppages, unrest in the streets and fluctuating currencies find their way back to the States, travelers wonder whether it's safe.

I do. I'm headed to Europe twice with my family: on a Mediterranean cruise in July and a tour of Italy in early September. While none of the experts I spoke with advised me to cancel, they did caution me to monitor the situation carefully.

"This is very different from years past," says Bruce McIndoe, president of [iJET Intelligent Risk Systems](#), a security consulting company. "The nexus of governing and financial issues will create a much more dynamic and tense environment throughout Europe over years past, where it has been much more localized." Indeed, Greece was the scene last week of violent clashes between police and protesters, as well as a disruptive nationwide strike.

American visitors are worried about two key issues: safety and money.

"The issue here is currency volatility," said F. John Mathis, a professor at [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#) in Glendale, Ariz. "When a country is going through a debt restructuring, as Greece is, the euro will depreciate, making it less expensive for U.S. tourists to visit Europe."

But that could change quickly once the situation stabilizes. Then the euro would probably strengthen against the dollar, making travel more expensive. The euro has risen against the dollar since the beginning of the year but has leveled off after the unrest in Greece began.

By the way, another European currency worth paying attention to is the Swiss franc. It's trading at an all-time high against the dollar because investors see it as an alternative to the euro, according to John Doyle, a senior currency strategist at [Tempus Consulting](#) in

Washington. But apart from Switzerland, which has never had a reputation as a bargain destination, it should be relatively smooth sailing for the dollar.

“While the U.S. dollar is subject to possible devaluation over the coming months, visitors should feel secure in the purchasing power of the greenback in Europe this summer and in the coming years,” Doyle told me.

What about security? Europe-watchers say that if you’re headed to Portugal, Ireland, Greece or Spain, pay special attention to safety. High unemployment and economic weakness make these countries potential hot spots this summer.

Michael Kelly, the president of [On Call International](#), a provider of medical evacuation services, says that visitors should check the State Department Web site for any warnings ([travel.state.gov](#)) just in case something flares up. “Be aware of new security guidelines, political and security warnings and major weather conditions, and stay connected with your smartphone by checking Twitter and news outlets for breaking news updates,” he says.

As always, the silver lining is the bargains that await contrarian travelers. James Stathis, who publishes the Web site [CelebrateGreece.com](#), says that news of riots in Athens has created opportunities for bargain hunters.

“This is a great time to visit because smart travelers know that crowds will be down,” he adds. “Prices are also down. The islands, villages and everywhere outside of Constitution Square in Athens are safe and fun to visit.”

What if violence erupts? William Burns, a retired New York police detective and a consultant for [Cassford Management](#), a hospitality advisory service, says that he’d play it safe and stay home. “Any country that is dominated by tensions should be completely avoided,” he says. “With the present political climate, an American tourist vacationing or conducting business in a country with ongoing protests and heightened tensions is a serious potential target.”

I spoke with several travelers who are planning to visit Europe this summer, and for the most part they seem unfazed. John Rybczyk and his wife, Barbara, who are on their way to Hungary in early July, aren’t worried about the exchange rate. Hungary, which doesn’t use the euro as its currency, is still a deal compared with other European countries. Plus, it’s politically stable. “I’m not concerned,” he told me.

But Jim Daniel, a salesman from Modesto, Calif., says that he’s staying stateside this summer. “There are far too many things to see and experience here,” he says. “Why should I ever spend all the time and money traveling to some other country where they don’t necessarily understand English and where they don’t particularly want me, only my money?”

He makes a valid point. Assuming that everyone goes to Europe is incredibly elitist of me. Most of the folks who read this column will drive to their summer vacation destinations right here in the United States. Fewer than one in 10 will fly. Thanks, Jim.

So will I cancel my trips? Not yet. But I'm keeping a watchful eye on Europe. The riskiest part of our itinerary is one night in Spain, which, according to security expert Philip Farina, could experience civil unrest this summer.

So I checked with a friend who visits Spain every summer about the potential for disturbances, and he said that I'm likelier to get run over by a bull than hurt in a riot.

I hope he's right.

Elliott is National Geographic Traveler magazine's reader advocate.

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