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Preface

I have produced this eBook as an easy to use and comprehend step-by-step guide for someone who wishes to get the facts quickly so they can begin their pursuit of playing or coaching baseball in Europe. Use the table of contents to navigate the book to find the answers to your questions.

To someone looking to take their career to Europe, there is a lot to consider as there are so many differences when compared to U.S. ball, and so many varieties in levels of baseball that you cannot summarize it in a sentence or two. Also, there are a number of similarities across Europe so I will cover these first to avoid repeating myself as I take you through each country and league. However before we get to that, I need to separate countries into tiers for ease of clarification.

You cannot base level of play in domestic leagues off of the [world baseball rankings](#) as many countries have more U.S. dual passport players than others and some leagues import professionals for their domestic seasons a lot more than others. Therefore I am separating countries which offer paid opportunities into four tiers (with their 2017 world ranking), because that is the most accurate in showing the level. Countries are ranked within their tier as well based on the estimated strength of their domestic leagues

Tier 1

Italy	#15
Netherlands	# 9











Tier 2

Czech Republic	#18
Germany	#21
Spain	#25
France	#23
Netherlands D2	

Tier 3

Belgium	#28
Austria	#24
Switzerland	#43
Sweden	#31

Baseball World Rankings

MEN'S		POINTS	
9	 NED	▼ 2002	▼
15	 ITA	▼ 1059	▼
17	 ISR	▲ 817	▼
18	 CZE	▼ 787	▼
21	 GER	▼ 337	▼
23	 FRA	▲ 283	▼
24	 AUT	▲ 281	▼
25	 ESP	▼ 274	▼
27	 RUS	● 204	▼
28	 BEL	▲ 171	▼

Tier 4

Euro Interleague	(Croatia #30, Hungary #62, Slovakia #32, Slovenia #48, Serbia #44)
Great Britain	#34
Poland	#34
France D2	
German D2	
Czech D2	
Austrian D2	

Travel/Baseball Opportunities

There are also opportunities that are more for the player or coach who is willing to take on some of the expense from his own pocket. This is more of a baseball adventure than it is professional baseball. Imports to these leagues are offered a place to stay for free if they pay their flight. Sometimes arrangements can be made for the player to earn a little cash to support their living expenses. Not included on this list are the opportunities that lie within leagues of countries for those willing to pay their flight. The following countries have offered these types of opportunities to date (listed by world ranking). All would fall in the tier 4 ranking.

Bulgaria	#42
Ireland	#54
Norway	#59
Finland	#63
Denmark	#75
Scotland	NR



European baseball commonalities

In this section I will group and compare the aforementioned countries in areas where they are similar.

1. Schedule
2. Professionalism
3. Amount of importing and importing limits
4. Importing trends by position

5. Background of imports
6. Expectations/duties of imports
7. Compensation & Contract
8. Level of play
9. Visas
10. Lifestyle

#1 Schedule

Leagues in Europe for the most part play double headers on the weekends due to the fact that the players, other than the imports, are not paid and therefore work during the week. The top leagues in Italy and the Netherlands are professional and therefore their game schedule is much more similar to that of a professional club in the U.S..

Practice schedules average 2-3 times a week in the evenings for typically two hours in length. Imports can expect 1-2 days off a week and a lot of downtime during the day while they wait for practices.

Often leagues have a break in the season during the EU championships which allows for imports to take time off for a while to travel.

2 Professionalism

Most European clubs operate within a non-professional league. The majority attempt to conduct themselves in a professional manner as much as possible given their human and financial resources. Most clubs take their baseball seriously and try to present a professional image.

There are some exceptions. If you are an experienced professional player and only want to deal with the most professional teams Europe has to offer, aside from the big two, you are best to look within the top clubs in Tier 2 countries. Within any given league, the further down the ranking you go, the less professional it usually becomes. Eventually you end up in second divisions of countries and you are dealing with

clubs in their development infancy. However, even these clubs for the most part act professionally and try to model what the top EU clubs have done.

Occasionally you will find a low level club that has secured some sponsors or has raised the funds to improve their facilities and are striving to become more professional and advance through the ranks.

Keep in mind that the majority of baseball in Europe does not operate within professional leagues and therefore you need to be a little more understanding and patient when things are not run as professionally as you may be used to. When communicating with a club, keep in mind that the guy on the other end is probably married with kids, holding down a full time job and volunteering in his spare time to find a good import on a very limited budget. If he brings in a dud, he has wasted Euros that the club cannot afford to waste. It could be the reason the decision process may be dragging on a little. This just reinforces why you should provide as much info up front as possible to help the process move along a little quicker.

3 Amount of Importing and Importing Limits

Opportunities for imports can vary from country-to-country. Germany is the most active in importing players and coaches as clubs from the first division through the third division actively import. Austria is second on this list with importing happening through the first and second division with the odd third division club getting involved.

All and all, the various levels in Europe allow for opportunities for many professional baseball players with a variety of backgrounds ranging from a recent grad from an average NCAA D3 college to former MLB players. More specific detail on the opportunities available in each country will be tackled in the country-by-country breakdown later on in the eBook.

Most European leagues have similar rules with regards to importing. The Dutch Major League (Hoofdklasse Honkbal) and the Italian Baseball League are the exception as they are professional leagues and have different rules and regulations. I will outline the specifications on those leagues during the country-by-country breakdown to follow. Other than those two leagues, typically leagues allow 2 to 3 imports on the field at a time. Professional players with EU passports are in extreme demand as they do not count as an import.



IBC member Ian Vazquez with the Mannheim Tornados, German Bundesliga 2015

However in most leagues there must be a minimum of five countrymen occupying a position on the field at a time to prevent a team from loading upon imports. In addition, there is a regulation that a countryman must pitch in one of the two games played on a weekend, usually the first game. For example in Austria, an Austrian pitcher must pitch the first game of a double header and in the playoffs they must pitch games 1, 3 and 5 of a five game series.

With all that being said, it does not mean that every club of every league imports to the maximum. Some clubs will take pride in producing home grown talent and therefore import less, or some clubs simply cannot afford or do not have the ability to house 3 imports. These details will be broken down when we touch upon each league in this ebook.

#4 Importing trends by position

Pitchers are in the highest demand as the success of all clubs across Europe heavily rely on bringing in a quality import pitcher. Most clubs also expect the import to go the distance every game (9 innings) or at least deep into the game as pitching depth is lacking in all European leagues except the big two. In 2014 and 2015, 46% of IBC members signed overseas were pitchers.

Player-coaches are also quite popular as most clubs in Europe are still in need of bringing in imports who can work with the youth and also play on the men's team. Often they will bring in a player who also coaches the top men's team that he plays on. The more coaching experience the better. Typically they look for guys that are a bit older and have some international experience but that is not set in stone. So if you have any coaching experience, make sure to highlight that in your profile.

Utility players are seen as the next most popular in demand. The utility guy that can pitch is the most popular, especially if they can catch or play short. Remember, you can be a starting pitcher in college and still fulfill expectations at shortstop in some of the lower European leagues. However, I would not label yourself a utility guy unless you have played position in the past and have some success swinging the bat in college, in a men's league, or overseas.



Chris Michals' ability to hit and pitch at a high level has helped two European clubs win their national championships

Shortstop is the next position that clubs will often fill with an import. The skill level of European baseball players has risen dramatically over the years, however, when compared to a quality middle infielder import there is a noticeable difference (with the odd exception). Clubs will often sacrifice filling the shortstop position with imports that play other positions naturally, if that import brings a big bat with them and/or pitching ability. If shortstop is your main position, to stand out from the competition, it helps if you can eat up a couple of innings on the mound or can catch a little, depending on the league.

Catchers are in as high demand as shortstops and would be in even more demand if there were no regulations holding them back from catching import pitchers. Therefore catchers are expected to play a second position, usually pitcher, short or third. The position is typically one of the least developed positions and a weak spot for many clubs.



Trevor Rooper has coached in 4 different counties and has led the Stockholm Monarchs to 3 consecutive titles.

Experienced coaches are in demand as well, but most clubs cannot afford them. Therefore usually only the clubs with a larger budget will bring in someone who is strictly a coach. Typically clubs who need a coach for their men's team seek player-coaches. Experienced college coaches or pro coaches should look at the German and Czech League's first as those are the leagues a step behind Italy and the Netherlands that can perhaps afford a coach to help their club reach a new level. It is quite difficult to get on as a coach in Italy or the Netherlands but not impossible. You would need to have coached a number of years of college ball or at the pro level to be considered.

Outfielders are the least in demand, therefore it helps if they have numbers that separate them from others, have the ability to play other positions or have coaching experience.

In summary, the more positions you can play at a high level the better, and the more coaching experience you have is a plus. If all else fails, offer to pay your flight.

#5 Backgrounds of imports

Tier 1 & 2 Countries

The Big Two and the top clubs from the other Tier 2 countries seek former AA or higher, top independent pro veterans, or players who have had success in European leagues. If you have not played affiliated baseball or had success in the top independent leagues, your best bet is to get on with Tier 2 clubs towards the bottom of the standings. The other option would be to obtain an EU passport if you have European heritage and qualify, this will bring you a lot of attention because then you a) don't count as an import and b) helps avoid visa issues and c) allows you to legally work.



Chris Mezger - German Bundesliga North Best Pitcher 2015

The rest of the Tier 2 clubs seek starting pitchers who consistently throw 88+ mph, have control, can go deep into games, and have minimally found success within a solid college program or top independent club. Clubs of these leagues are more experienced in importing, are familiar with all levels of baseball in the U.S.A. and know how to analyze stats. They will want you to be a proven successful starting pitcher with good strikeout to walk and innings per start ratios.

Position players looking to play in the Tier 1 or 2 leagues of Europe should minimally have very solid college stats from a good conference. Teams will first try to land a good former minor leaguer or independent player with a good chunk of their budget, then fill out their roster with a

solid recent college grad with a proven track record. Most popular are three or four hole type hitters. These clubs are less concerned about your ability to also pitch, coach or play a second position. However, if you are one of these freaks who can also deal it on the mound, then by all means mention it.

Tier 3 Countries

These clubs seek pitchers who minimally throw 85+ consistently, with control and can go 8-9 innings each start. Most clubs first shoot for the moon and try to acquire a pitcher who is better suited for an Tier 2 club. Early in the signing season (Oct-Jan), these clubs will not look at a pitcher with good numbers from an average college program. They want successful starting pitchers from colleges with good reputations in strong conferences or former affiliated/frontier guys. Usually they look for players who have been successful overseas first. These players are easier to benchmark based on stats from leagues/clubs they are familiar with. They are also seeking import pitchers with either coaching experience or who can swing the bat. So if you find that there is a lot of competition within your position on the website, make sure to promote the other things you bring to the table.



Lucas Hagberg (University of San Diego) with the Therwil Flyers of Switzerland in 2015

Position players who are imported to Tier 3 clubs will have to have had success in college or at the pro level and bring a big bat. They drool over two-way players. So if you can crush the ball and deal on the mound, you will get a lot of attention here and within Tier 2 leagues. Even if you can throw low to mid 80's with accuracy for a few innings, you will be in high demand if you bring a big bat with it. If your stats are sub-par, you will HAVE to bring something else to the table such as an ability to catch, pitch, coach or even pay your flight. Imports who are great with coaching youth are as sought after as two-way guys. This will also make you stand out from the rest. Again, these clubs will first try to land imports

more suited for higher European leagues so if you feel you fit in that category, maybe it is best you wait for a better offer from a better league.

The knowledge of college programs and conferences within the U.S. may be lacking by those evaluating you. Sometimes it is the case that they will have horse blinders on and only look at NCAA I guys, unaware that there are plenty of good NCAA II and III colleges and conferences better than some NCAA I. Therefore it is important to emphasize you are from a top school if you are. Especially if you hit under .300, you may want to point out that you faced better pitching in your conference compared to others. Providing this detail with references to back it up are small details that will help you land on a club within these leagues.

Tier 4 Countries



NCAA I grad Alex Lee first played overseas in division 3 Austria. He has now gone on to play in the Czech Republic and Australia.

Second division and third division clubs across Europe that import still shoot for the stars despite playing at a very low level. These clubs are often a good place for players that have been overlooked due to average numbers, played at small schools or have had injuries which have disrupted an otherwise promising career. This can be humbling to someone who was on track for a promising professional career prior to the injury. However it is a way to get your foot in the door and to prove you still have it. If you fit the profile described above, it is a huge plus if you have coaching experience or are a

proven two-way player. With that being said, there have been some quality imports wear the jersey of second division clubs in Europe and have therefore raised the benchmark on the standard of player these teams seek.

#6 Expectations/Duties of Imports

The main expectations of imports in Tier 1 and 2 leagues are to produce results, especially among the top clubs. Among the clubs lower in the standings, there are usually additional expectations of helping out with the youth program in various capacities ranging from a few camps and clinics to being a full time coach.



Joe Wittig post game photo with some of his youth players. Fürth, Germany 2015

In Tier 3 and 4 countries the emphasis is a little more towards bringing in players who in addition to putting up some numbers, can either coach youth or sometimes even the men's team they play on. A lot of coaching experience is not necessarily required. However their expectations are that you can come in and conduct efficient practices, be organized, and be a leader. Many find this challenging because it often involves communicating with young children who do not speak English or very little English. It can also involve going to schools to introduce the game of baseball, as well as running summer camps.

The further down the ladder in terms of level of play, the more emphasis that is placed on bringing in an import that can really help the club develop fundamentally. This is especially the case with the second and third division leagues.

#7 Compensation & Contract

Compensation of imports is relatively the same across Europe but there is some categorization that can be made. The rule of thumb is this: the higher level of baseball you have reached and had success in, the more money you can make. This is obviously a no-brainer but it should be stated that the same goes in Europe. However, the spread between the income earned is not significant. The highest paid players in Europe are usually making at most \$2,000 a month with the odd exception of someone making up to \$2,500. In order to earn this much, you need to either have had AA+ affiliated success, have an EU passport, or have proven European success at a high level.

This of course includes a return flight, accommodations, phone and transportation with a few other perks such as a gym pass, free food at the clubhouse, etc. The only leagues where you can find clubs that pay this much are the Netherlands and Italy and possibly the bigger budget clubs in Germany. It should be noted that if you are in negotiations with a club that is described above,



Owen Ozanich is a French born American pitcher who plays for the top french club the Rouen Huskies, the French National team and Team Europe.

it does not necessarily mean you are looking at such an offer. Often these clubs will bring in a 3rd or 4th import who is more affordable after spending the large portion of their budget on a couple of big names. This is when the door is often opened up to non-drafted players who have had some professional success or those straight out of college with a good track record.

For the most part, however, import players to Europe can expect to earn between \$400 and \$800 a month in addition to the flights and accommodations. Accommodations can range from room and board, to your own apartment usually shared with a second and even a third import. Clubs that fall in this range will often add a 2nd or 3rd import with whatever is remaining in their budget. This could be as little as accommodations, and opportunity to earn some extra cash for players that are willing to pay their own flight cost.

Leagues that often fall into this category are the first and second divisions in Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Sweden, and Spain. A few clubs in Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland have been known to offer similar packages.

If your grandparents or parents were born in Europe, you may qualify for dual citizenship within the EU and at that point become very valuable to clubs across Europe.. Clubs love to import EU passport professionals since they a) can work and b) do not count as an import. EU passport holding imports often can earn more than \$1000-\$2000 a month, especially if they bring a lot of skill and experience to the table.

#8 Level of play

There is a consistent trend across European leagues of a wide range of talent from top to bottom. The top clubs in Germany, Czech Republic, France, and Spain can compete with the top clubs in Italy and the Netherlands in any one game. However when it comes to depth in the lineup or bullpen these clubs simply just can't compete with the top clubs in the Big Two over a multiple game series, except for perhaps the Regensburg Legionäre featured below. *



No visitor to a Regensburg Legionäre game would ever believe they play in an amateur league, the German Bundesliga 1.

On the other end of the spectrum, the bottom clubs in these leagues are far from that level and are in a completely separate class within the same league. A good comparison would be a German club at the bottom of the standings will compete quite evenly with the top club from a Tier 3 country.

For a direct comparison from league to league, you can view the results of the top clubs competing against one another at the European Cup and European Cup qualifiers by going to the website of the [Confederation of European baseball](#).

**see more photos of the German Bundesliga [here](#)*

Within many clubs you will find men in their 30's playing alongside 17-19 year olds. The top clubs in Germany, Czech Republic, France, and Spain will not have such discrepancies, but within their respective leagues the lower ranked teams will often have a wide range of ages receiving regular playing time. With most other leagues in Europe you can expect to see this. This is a result of the lack of popularity of the sport in Europe and therefore there are often gaps within generations of baseball players as baseball loses out to soccer and other sports.

To get a better idea of where you might fit, I have broken it down into level of play categories compared to US baseball. I have only included leagues that I know have clubs that offer paid professional packages that include flight, accommodations and salary. This comparison is made based on my observations combined with feedback from imports that have played in these leagues. Also, within leagues there is sometimes a drastic difference in level of play from top to bottom. Therefore I will provide a comparison range for each league.

Facilities are rated ranging from very good to very poor with very good being a small pro ballpark in the U.S., to very poor being a below average high school ballpark.

League Ranking

#1 Italian Baseball League - Professional

High: Rookie ball to A ball

Low: Average NCAA I



#2 Hoofdklasse (Dutch Major League) - Professional

High: Rookie ball to A ball

Low: Average College



#3 Spanish Division de Honor

High: Above Average College

Low: Below Average College



#4 German Bundesliga 1

High: Above Average College

Low: Below Average College

#5 Czech Extraliga

High: Above Average College

Low: Below Average College



#6 French Elite League

High: Above Average College

Low: Low College



#7 Belgian Baseball League

High: Average College

Low: Very low College



#8 Swiss Baseball League (NLA)

High: Below Average College

Low: Very low college



#9 Austrian Baseball League

High: Below Average College

Low: Very low college



#10 Swedish Elite League

High: Below Average College

Low: Very low college



#11 Euro Interleague (Eastern EU)

High: Below Average College

Low: Very low college



#12 Second division leagues in Austria, Germany, Czech, France, Belgium, Sweden

High: Very low college

Low: High school level

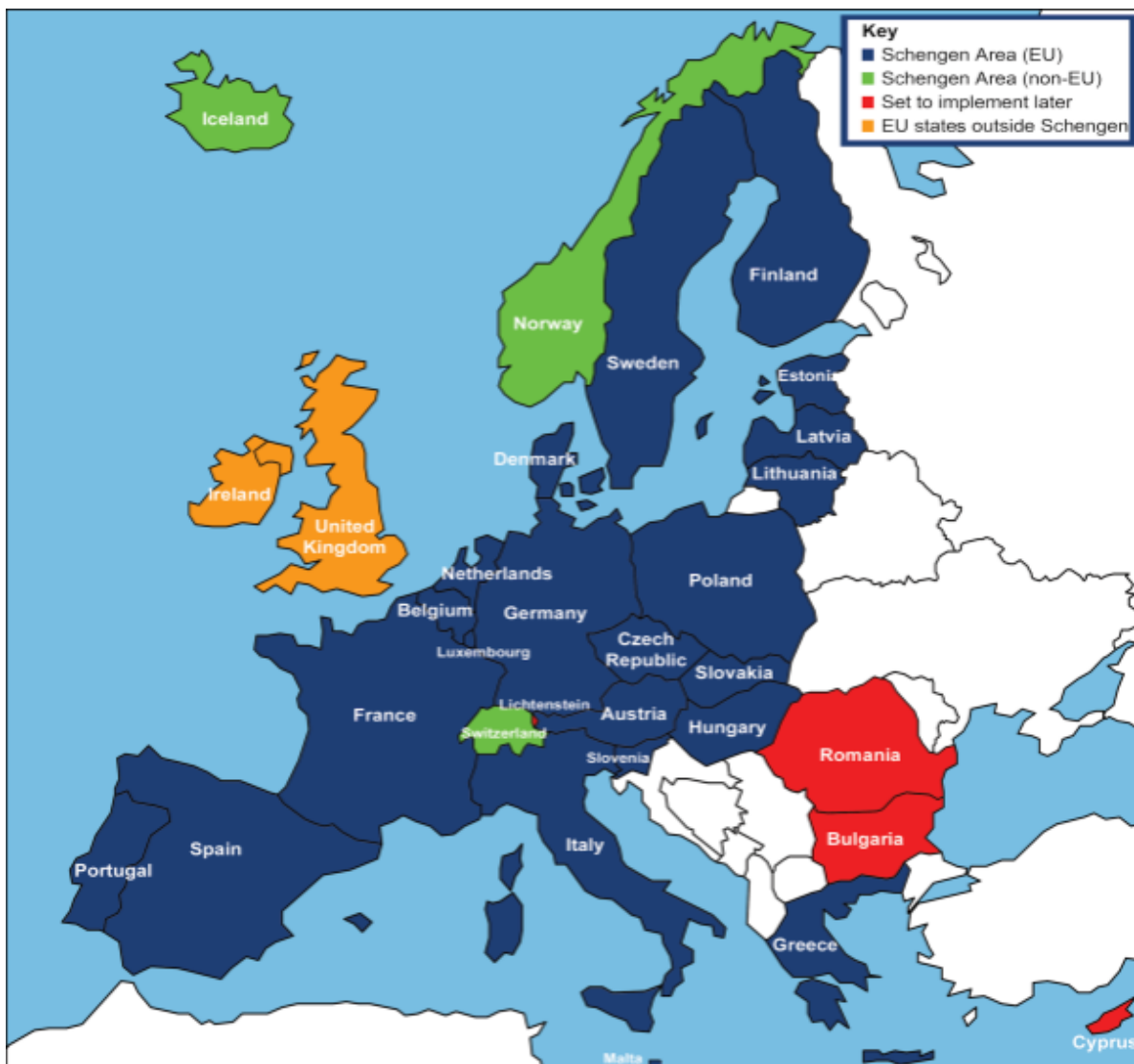
#13 Third divisions of Germany, France, Austria

High: Very low college
Low: High school level

9 The Visa Conundrum

A topic that comes up time and time again is the situation with visa requirements with regards to the importing of foreign baseball players to Europe. If you're a citizen of the U.S., Australia, or Canada, you may stay visa-free (under a tourist visa) a total of 90 days over a 180 day period within the entire Schengen region which includes 26 European countries (see figure below). Once day 181 hits, the count resets itself.

For example, if someone were to fly into the Schengen Zone and spend three months travelling within and then exit the Schengen Zone, they could not re-enter for three months, the end of the 180 day period.



Of the European nations that import players, all but the U.K., Bulgaria and Croatia are in the Schengen zone. These countries allow you to stay 6 months visa free, however clubs in these three countries rarely import.

This presents a problem when most clubs need imports to come for 5-6 months, usually from mid-March through mid-September. Many clubs have simply had imports stay past the three month deadline illegally and upon leaving, imports have had no problems with immigration officials other than in the Netherlands where they have really tightened up with their immigration policy (or at least started enforcing it).

Therefore the Netherlands only import players with EU passports or Canadians, Aussies and New Zealanders as they both qualify for work visas under a working-holiday agreement between the countries. In fact, [Canadians](#), [Aussies](#) and [New Zealanders](#) have this agreement with most countries in the Schengen zone and therefore have an advantage over American players as they present less headaches to clubs when dealing with visas.

Although many imports have been staying past the 90 days across Europe for years without any problems, my recommendation would be to address the visa issue with the club and see if there is any way to do it legally so you can enjoy your stay and not have that in the back of your mind.



There is plenty of info in [this article](#) on this issue and is a must read if you plan on playing baseball in Europe. It will take you through all the different ways around this problem, country-by-country, including student visas, work visas, and which countries offer visa extensions. It also dives into how to deal with staying past the 90 days if that is a situation you find yourself in and which relaxed countries you should fly out of.

If the visa issue is a major concern, there is another option involving clubs in the U.K. who are out of the Schengen Zone. Clubs there cannot afford flights or salary, but can offer a place to stay and opportunities to earn some money coaching. Therefore my idea would be to arrange to begin the season with a club in the Schengen Zone and within the first two months leave the Schengen Zone to the U.K (or Croatia) for 2 months to

coach or even play, and then return at the end of the season for the playoffs. While you are out of the Schengen Zone, the 90 day period is paused and therefore you can bank the remaining days until you re-enter. Since many leagues do have a long 3-4 week break in the season for the EU championships, a trip to the UK for a couple a months could be made without missing too many games. Another option would be if you and a baseball buddy worked out an import exchange with a club in the U.K. and a club in the Netherlands for example. One guy would spend the first 3 months in the U.K. and the other in the Netherlands and then switch half way through. This is just a thought but something you could propose to a club. Let me know if you do either of these and they go for it I want to hear about it!!

#10 Lifestyle

Before we jump into the country-by-country baseball breakdown, I want to fill you in on some of the lifestyle similarities across Europe. The European lifestyle is much more laid back. There is an emphasis on family and social time as most countries have numerous holidays and much more paid vacation time built into their annual work schedule. Google “most paid vacation time by country”. It will make you real upset when you know that the rest of the world does not work 50 out of 52 weeks in the year. I moved to Austria in 2004 from Canada and went from two weeks holidays a year to five. Also, the Austrians have 13 statutory holidays compared to six in Canada. They will also often take an extra day if the holiday falls on a Tuesday or Thursday. This results in a lot less stress across Europe and a lot more time for celebration and tradition. Check out [Fest 300](#) for a guide to the best festivals in Europe by category.



There are 28 countries in the European union with 28 different cultures speaking 23 different languages all compact into a size a little less than half the size of the U.S.. This provides for a great opportunity to experience many different cultures in a short period of time, especially when considering the ease of access to all of these countries using the trans [European railways](#) and cheap flights ([Ryan Air](#) & [Easy Jet](#)). For example, Austria is bordered by 8 countries, all accessible from my location within a maximum 6 hour train ride. Given the fact that most European baseball leagues only play on weekends, (often all in one day), you have a lot of time on your hands to explore Europe. Most leagues also have a long break at some point while they pause for the European Championships.

I can't discuss lifestyle without touching on cuisine and beer. [The European cuisine is unreal](#). You will be exposed to some of the best food you have ever tasted and to top it off, the best beer in the world comes from Europe. German speaking countries are said to have the best food and some of the best beer in the world. In my opinion the Czech's hands down have the



best beer although not the best food. Make sure to check out the [world beer awards](#) before travelling to Europe so you know what to drink when you are there.

The last lifestyle point I want to mention is safety. Safety is often a concern for new travelers to Europe and understandably could have an impact on your lifestyle if you were unable to go about your way without fear of harm. With recent terrorism in France and the imminent threat of more of the same, this is a legitimate concern. Vision of Humanity puts out an annual global peace ranking which provides a ranking of the most peaceful countries in the world and will open your eyes to whether living in Europe is a danger or not, especially when compared to the U.S.. There is also a Global Terrorism Index which measures the impact of terrorism on any given country. The website is a great tool when evaluating your safety when considering playing baseball in any given country around the globe.