

Walled cities in Europe

In Europe there are a lot of cities and towns where ancient walls, fortifications and towers or parts of them are still visible. Only in Germany there are about 200. In Italy there about 160, in France 100, in the Netherlands 90, in the UK around 60. In Poland and in Spain almost 50, in Ireland 20.

There is something special about a walled city: a connection with the past which remains

only in a few of the towns and cities of the modern-day world. From pre-Roman times until the Renaissance, city walls were often a vital barrier for townsfolk against attack from invaders. There are walled cities all over the world but some of the finest and most intact are to be found in Europe. Some are well known; others are small, off the tourist track, and pretty well unknown except to locals.



The walls of Carcassonne (France)



The walls of Rieti (Italy)

■ Carcassonne (France)

With its 3 kilometres of defensive ramparts, the old city of Carcassonne is one of the largest surviving medieval walled cities in Europe. As a natural defensive spot beside the River Aude, the site has been occupied and fortified since Roman times. It was a Roman fortress, before being conceded in the 5th century to the Visigoth King Theodoric II. The Walled City of Carcassonne was enlarged and fortified in Medieval times, and served as a defensive city until the 17th century. The adjacent part of the town, located at the foot of the walled city, was founded across the river around 1250, and called then the Lower Town. Carcassonne Cité is a hilltop town ringed by two concentric walls, hosting 52 defensive towers. It is the largest walled city in Europe and still contains a Medieval-style village (although oriented now towards tourists). There is even an inner castle, the Comtal Chateau, with its own fortified walls and moat.

■ Avila (Spain)

Generally regarded – along with Carcassonne in France, as one of the finest walled cities in Europe – Avila is the largest city to have conserved its mediaeval town walls completely intact. And unlike Carcassonne, at

Avila the walls encircle the heart of the modern city, not just the vestiges of a city of the past. The walls of Avila are 2,500 metres in length, and have 87 towers.

■ Rothenburg (Germany)

Rothenburg is named after its location on a plateau overlooking the Tauber River. Rothenburg ob der Tauber means “Red fortress above the Tauber” in German. During the Middle Ages, Rothenburg was a Free Imperial City and the second largest city in Germany with a population of 6,000 residents. Reduced to poverty during the 30 Years War, Rothenburg was no longer a significant city and growth stalled, thus preserving its 17th-century state. Today Rothenburg is known world-wide as being Germany’s best preserved medieval walled town.



1. Read the text and answer the questions.

1. What was the function of the city walls in the Middle Ages?
2. How long are the defensive ramparts of Carcassonne?
3. What was Carcassonne during the Roman times?
4. What happened to Carcassonne in the 5th century?
5. What is the Lower Town?
6. What does Carcassonne Cité contain?
7. What’s the difference between Carcassonne and Avila?
8. What are the characteristics of the walls of Avila?
9. What is Rothenburg named after?
10. Why was Rothenburg an important city during the Middle Ages?