

DEAR
SUBSCRIBER

January 24, 1997

Europe a bargain?

Europe will be less expensive this year. Cheaper, in fact, than it has been for a few years. The dollar has edged past 1.64 deutschemarks and 1.44 Swiss francs. Two years ago, in the spring, it was more like 1.40 DM and 1.10 Sfr. That's about a 17% increase against the mark (the Austrian schilling is tied to the mark and so rises and falls at the same rate) and about a 31% increase vs. the franc. Coupled with very low car rental rates (in many cases cheaper in Germany than in the U.S.) and the continuing good value in transatlantic air fares, Europe is starting to look like a bargain again.

In 1995, the best double room at Munich's **Hotel Domus** was 300 DM or \$214. Right now, the price is still 300 DM, but at an exchange rate of 1.64 it costs \$183, a drop of \$31. In the spring of 1995, the best room at the **Hotel L'Ermitage**, in Vufflens (Switz.) near Morges, was 380 Sfr. or \$345. Today, the price is 400 Sfr. which, at the current exchange rate, translates to \$278, or \$67 lower than in '95.

With a strengthening dollar you might be wise to alter your buying strategy. Beware these days of advance purchase deals — hotel vouchers, for example — whose prices are guaranteed in dollars. Set months ago, such prices were based on foreign currencies that were stronger than now. In fact, prices for all U.S. dollar-guaranteed products for travel in Germany, Austria and Switzerland should be coming down over the next 60 to 90 days.

It's time to get out the suitcases.

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria, Switzerland & the New Europe

BAD HOFGASTEIN

Tucked away in a pretty Alpine valley is Bad Hofgastein, a vigorous little spa town that shares famous healing waters with its more well-known neighbor, Badgastein.

Now, in the drab depths of an interminable winter, our daydreams are increasingly of warm days in a green, peaceful Alpine valley, perhaps sheltering a spic and span little town with simple, homey restaurants and hotels. Such an out-of-the-way dream village would be perfect for a week of country walks, good books and outdoor cafe lounging. It should also not be too expensive or attract too many American tourists. And, in case of a rainy day or plain old boredom,

it needs to be within an hour's train ride of an interesting larger city.

One town that fits our daydream is Bad Hofgastein, located just an hour south of Salzburg in the Gasteiner valley.

Its better-known neighbor, of course, is Badgastein, the spa town that saw its best days around the turn-of-the century when it attracted royalty from all over Europe.

Spread out on the valley floor, Bad Hofgastein cannot match Badgastein's

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Swissair price reductions extended through '97; upgrade program added

Gemütlichkeit is pleased to announce that Swissair has extended through 1997 its reduced fare program for Gemütlichkeit subscribers and their traveling companions and has also added a special upgrade-to-business-class feature. As in past years, the price reductions will range from \$600 off on the normal first class fare to a \$50 reduction on the lowest sale fares.

For example, as this is written on January 23, Swissair is offering a special roundtrip fare of \$392 to Zürich/Geneva/Basel from New York/Newark and Boston. Fares from other cities are proportionately priced. Or course, Gemütlichkeit subscribers and their traveling companions can deduct \$50 off each ticket purchased at these low fares.

To book a flight at the reduced prices, telephone the main Swissair reservation number, 800-221-4750, and ask the reservationist to access "G-star, reference QL2JLQ." Once reservations have been made, ticketing

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Why you never check luggage on a train

And now for something really stupid.

I refer to our decision to check two pieces of luggage on our December rail trip from St. Gallen, Switzerland, to Prague. Though we have ridden European trains from time to

**By
Bob
Bestor**

time over the past 25 years, we are not rail "buffs" and could hardly be considered expert or even particularly knowledgeable. In our naiveté, we assumed checked luggage on a train is the same as on a airplane. How wrong we were.

Departure

We rose that morning in Appenzell at 7 a.m. It had snowed all night and our rental car was buried in it. This was the day we would, in Euro-speak, "transit Prague." We had to shower, dress, breakfast, pack, check out of the hotel, dig the car out, negotiate the snow-covered 20 kilometers from Appenzell to St. Gallen, find the Avis car rental office, get a taxi to the railway station and board our train, the Albert Einstein Eurocity Express, by 10:41. The road was open, but as every mountain driver knows, in these conditions a jackknifed trailer-

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DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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German wine tasting guide

If we wine-loving travelers to Germany were football players, it would be time for the traditional celebratory bucket of iced Gatorade to be dumped on the head of one Carol Sullivan.

Carol, you see, is the Executive Director of the **German Wine Information Bureau** in New York and was a catalyst in the publication of one of the most useful, most needed new travel tools we've seen in years.

Those of you who, when driving the wine regions of Germany, wonder which wine-makers welcome unannounced visitors, will never again board an airplane to Germany without, *Vintners to Visit*, a series of three pocket-size guidebooks produced by the German Wine Information Bureau.

The booklets, which are free, contain information on several hundred German wineries regarding tour and tasting hours, languages spoken, group visit capabilities, availability of on-premise restaurants and wine pubs, even overnight accommodations.

The properties are listed alphabetically — with addresses, phone and fax numbers — according to wine region and village. Each is shown on a detailed road map with directions for the harder-to-find locations.

Other useful information includes frequently-used English/German travel and wine term translations, sight-seeing tips, tourist office addresses and points of interest.

Grouped by wine region according to location, the series covers the Ahr, Baden Württemberg, Franken, Hessische Bergstrasse, Mittelrhein, Mosel, Nahe, Pfalz, Ruwer, Rheingau, Rheinhessen, Saale-Unstrut, Saar, Sachsen and Taubertal regions.

Now, when you're driving through vine-

yards, you have only to consult *Vintners to Visit* to determine where, within a few minutes, you can taste wine, have lunch and perhaps even stay overnight.

Contact German Wine Information Bureau, 79 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10016, tel. 212-213-7028, fax 212-213-7042. email: sullassocl@aol.com.

New Year's Eve 1999 in Vienna

Several subscribers have inquired about hotel and concert reservations in Vienna around the dates December 31, 1999, and January 1, 2000. Most hotels are not yet taking reservations and so far the Vienna and Austrian tourist offices have no information for publication. Prices in Vienna — in any year an extremely popular New Year's destination — will no doubt be considerably higher than normal and my guess is hotel reservations will be offered to regular customers first. You can also expect tickets to the "Walter Cronkite" New Year's Day concert at the Musikverein to be virtually unavailable at face value. The going price for scalped tickets in normal years is about \$1,500. Other traditional performances, such as *Die Fledermaus* at both the Staatsoper and the Volksoper are also likely to be very hot tickets.

Peter Katz, director of the Austrian Tourist Office in Los Angeles, has promised to keep us informed.

Other stuff

- Those planning to use an ATM debit card in Europe should be aware that European ATM machines accept only PIN numbers with four digits.

- Subscriber Dave Blankenship reports stumbling on an incredible hotel bargain in Lucerne. Not having a reservation, he first went to the tourist office who told him of a special rate of 125 Sfr. (\$89) at the four-star **Hotel Montana** (*Gemütlichkeit* "Editor's Choice," September 1995). The Montana's rack rates — which many Swiss hotels never discount — for double rooms

range from 232 to 380 Sfr. (\$165 to \$270).

Such bargains, usually very short term and seldom advertised, are often available only through the local tourist office. You won't find out unless you ask. Next month we will publish a list of about 80 Internet sites for local Swiss tourist offices. If you can't get on the Internet, the addresses and phone numbers are available from Switzerland Tourism offices in the U.S.

Mr. Blankenship also gives high marks to the **Schloss-Hotel Grünwald** (tel. 089/641 9300, fax 089/6419 3036) in the Munich suburb of Grünwald, about 13 kilometers south of the city center. He felt warmly received and particularly recommends the food.

- Looking for a knowledgeable travel agent? **Switzerland Tourism** offers a course of home study and on-site seminars to North American travel agents. Those who successfully complete the training course are certified by Switzerland Tourism. One of 135 persons certified as a "preferred agent" in 1996 was *Gemütlichkeit* subscriber, **Gail Armer**. She also is a Vienna specialist and can be reached at 800-232-0211

Mea culpas

Anneliese Yiengst, of Merrimack NH, says an October, 1996, Readers' Forum letter erred in using the word *Wohlfahrt* instead of *Wallfahrt*. The former means 'welfare' and later means 'pilgrimage.'

Longtime reader Martin Ems of San Francisco says he cringed when he read 'Der' instead of *Die Fledermaus* and 'Die' instead of *Der Zigeunerbaron*. So did we.

Several of you have pointed out that Verbier is in Switzerland, not Austria as shown in our list of 20 favorite hotels in the December, 1996 issue.

Also, more than once in that December issue we made that most embarrassing grammatical blunder of misusing 'its' and 'it's.' Life goes on. — RHB



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The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria, Switzerland & the New Europe

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HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

Rating Scale	Scale	Hotel Rating Criteria	
Excellent	16 - 20	People/Service	30%
Above Average	12 - 15	Location/Setting	15%
Average	8 - 11	Guestrooms	30%
Adequate	4 - 7	Public rooms	5%
Unacceptable	0 - 3	Facilities/Restaurant	20%
Value Rating	Scale	Restaurant Criteria	
Outstanding Value	17 - 20	Food	65%
Very Good Value	12 - 16	Service	20%
Average Value	9 - 11	Atmosphere	15%
Below Average Value	5 - 8		
A Rip-Off	0 - 4		

Special Designation

By virtue of location, decor, charm, warmth of management, or combination thereof, an especially pleasant establishment.

BAD HOFGASTEIN

Continued from page 1

unique hillside location or its Victorian splendor, but BH is brighter, more contemporary and far livelier.

There is also just the tiniest feeling of isolation. Bad Hofgastein is not an Autobahn exit and few visitors are just "passing through." The town is near the end of the valley and the only way out is back the way you came or to put your car on a train through the Tauern tunnel.

Except for walking, our reverie envisions a pretty sedentary existence. The active traveler, however, will find plenty to do. There are many miles of flat trails, just outside of town is one of Austria's few golf courses and, of course, lifts to ski slopes are within walking distance of most hotels. In summer, the energetic visitor can ride, play tennis or squash, bicycle or swim. And three times a day the town's orchestra performs free concerts — outdoors if the weather is good.

Besides downhill and cross country skiing, winter activities include ice skating, curling and sleigh rides. And don't forget the "Bad" in Bad Hofgastein; the town has access to the same thermal baths, radon caves and mineral water that are available to the swells of Badgastein.

Walking, however, remains our exercise of choice when traveling. One morning last April, we walked to Bad Hofgastein from the Hotel **Grüner Baum** — about 9 km (5.6 miles) — explored the town, ate lunch and returned to the hotel by bus in the mid-afternoon. Obviously, one could do it in reverse, though much of the route would be an easy uphill.

This is a good destination for families. The resort offers special programs for children, there are special ski schools for kids and the town swimming pool has a water-slide.

Though only a city of 6,000 inhabitants, Bad Hofgastein has dozens of hotels in all price categories and more than 400 apartments or houses available for rent.

Here are three we liked.

Apparthotel Aurora

The centrally-located Aurora is our pick of the three accommodations options reviewed that are in Bad Hofgastein proper. Reserve either of the two top floor units. They are

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Bad Hofgastein

Altitude: 850 meters, 2,789 feet

Population: 6,845

Bad Hofgastein Tourist Office

Tauernplatz 1

A-5630 Bad Hofgastein

Tel. 43-6432/7110-0

Fax: 43-6432/7110-31

9 am - 12 noon; 2 pm - 5 pm

Location: Bad Hofgastein is 100 km (63 miles) virtually straight south of Salzburg. By car, take the A10 Tauern Autobahn and get off at Bischofshofen; then Red Road #311 south to #167 and south again. Approaching from the south, take the railway car ferry at Mallnitz.

Map: Die GeneralKarte #4 - Austria

Distance to:

City	KM	Miles
Berlin	839	524
Frankfurt	650	406
Innsbruck	191	119
Milan	611	382
Munich	235	147
Paris	1127	704
Salzburg	100	63
Vienna	412	258
Zürich	468	293

Bad Hofgastein seasons:

High season (HS) / summer July 1 - September 7

Low season (LS) / summer September 8 - October 28

High season (HS) / winter December 22 - March 2

Low season (LS) / winter March 3 - April 20

modern, well furnished, sparkling clean, airy and full of the fresh smell of the blonde wood that is the basis of their decor. The slanting ceiling of the smaller unit, for two persons, is broken by a large skylight. There is a small, well-equipped, spotless kitchen, a quiet bedroom and a cozy, comfortable sitting room. At 95 AS per day (\$90) it's a bargain. Even better value is the larger apartment with two bedrooms and a balcony with a good view.

Daily Rates: 560 to 720 AS (\$49-\$63) for two persons; 810 to 1060 AS (\$70-\$92) for three persons; 970 to 1240 AS (\$84-\$108) for four persons and 1360 to 1600 AS (\$118-\$139) for six persons. Breakfast and daily room cleaning available for an additional charge.

Contact: Apparthotel Aurora, Am Kirchenplatz 8, Bad Hofgastein, Austria, A-5630, tel. 06432/6210-0, fax 06432/6210-62

Rating: QUALITY 15/20 VALUE 17/20

Hotel Austria


Even more in the center of things, and a great bargain for those who want to stay only a couple of days, is the charming little Hotel Austria. Be sure, however to reserve room Number 1. This clean, spacious room has the usual side-by-side twin beds, two comfortable chairs, a small balcony, cable TV, telephone, radio and toilet and shower. The wash basin is in the sleeping room. The price is 280 AS (\$24).

EDITOR'S CHOICE

The welcome here is warm and the restaurant serves good food, sometimes on a terrace on the *Platz*. A light lunch of salad, *Speckknödlesuppe* and beer set us back 164 AS (\$14).

Daily Rates: 280 AS (\$24) per person.

Contact: Hotel-Café Austria, Bad Hofgastein, Austria, A-5630, tel. 06432/6223

Rating: QUALITY 10/20 VALUE 16/20 

Hotel Norica

You won't go wrong either at the four-star, five-story Hotel Norica, also in the town center. Rooms are large and modern, most with balconies and the hotel offers such amenities as a thermal indoor pool, sauna and steam bath.

Ask for room Number 305.

Daily Rates: Singles 740 to 950 AS (\$64-\$83), Doubles 1280 to 1680 AS (\$111-\$146). Prices include breakfast and dinner.

Contact: Hotel Norica, Kaiser-Franz-Platz 3, Bad Hofgastein, Austria, A-5630, tel. 06432/8391-0, fax 06432/8391-500

Rating: QUALITY 13/20 VALUE 15/20

Hotel Grüner Baum

Of course the best hotel in the region — and, in fact, the best country hotel we've seen — is the Grüner Baum, in its own little valley, the Kötschachtal, about nine

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BAD HOFGASTEIN

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kilometers from Bad Hofgastein. First built by the Archduke Johann as a hunting lodge, this hotel is spectacular in every way: backdropped by heavily forested hills and snow-covered peaks, its setting is picture-postcard, a cluster of Alpine chalets in a rolling green meadow with a mountain stream winding among them; the facilities are five-star with beauty farm, indoor and outdoor pools, multiple restaurants and tennis courts; and the interiors are glorious examples of Alpine decor, a rustic/elegant kaleidoscope of rugged wood beams, white vaulted ceilings supported by marble-footed columns, carved wood paneling, cozy fireplaces and priceless antiques and rugs.

The Grüner Baum's considerable physical charms are matched by the owners' exceptionally warm welcome and the efficient, friendly service dispensed by the family and their traditionally-dressed English-speaking staff. In the nearly 90 years the Grüner Baum has been in the Blumschein-Linsinger family, it has hosted the likes of Yehudi Menuhin, filmmaker Billy Wilder, Arturo Toscanini and the Emperor Franz Joseph and the Empress Elizabeth.

Most of the spacious, wood-accented guest rooms have separate sitting areas and private balconies. Ours, Number 93, overlooked the little river and offered a wonderful view up the valley. Depending on the season, it rents for from 2200 to 3400 AS (\$191 to \$296).


The hotel offers a half-board arrangement (350 AS/\$30 per person) but we opted to dine a la carte. Most main courses are in the 300 AS (\$26) range. Without beverages, our dinners were about \$80 for two persons. The first night's meal was highlighted by a surprisingly excellent bouillabaisse that would have done Marseille or Boston proud. Almost as good was an herbed pasta tossed with fresh dill, garlic, onion, butter and mussels that were a little too sandy. Soups, salads and desserts, all about \$6 to \$7, were very good. Main course meat dishes, however, did not measure up to the rest of the menu, partic-

ularly the seafood. Service was excellent and knowledgeable. There is an extensive wine list that seems reasonably priced. We paid 680 AS (\$59) for an outstanding Bordeaux, Leoville Las Cases, 1980.

When a hotel such as the Grüner Baum is compared, as it should be, against the best in Europe, it emerges as an outstanding value.

Daily Rates: Singles 1150 to 1950 AS (\$100-\$170), doubles 2100 to 3700 AS (\$183-\$322).

Contact: Grüner Baum, Kötschachtal, Badgastein, A-5640, tel. 06434/25 160, fax 06434/25 16 125

Rating: QUALITY 19/20 VALUE 19/20 

LUGGAGE

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truck can turn a 20-minute drive into a three-hour traffic jam.

Stephan Heeb, whose family has owned and operated Appenzell's excellent **Hotel Säntis** for several generations, had a suggestion. Five kilometers along the road to St. Gallen, in Sammelplatz, is a garage which some rental car firms use as a drop station. Across the road from the garage is a train stop. We could leave the car at the garage, jump on the little regional commuter train and roll right into the St. Gallen station. A call to Avis got a "no problem." It worked beautifully. We were there with 40 minutes to spare.

Here I must remind you that we do not travel light. Computer, video camera, still camera, film, hand-held audio tape recorder, tape cassettes, power converters, guidebooks and maps all seem to be necessary in the collection of data for *Gemütlichkeit*. And, by the end of any trip, we will have accumulated anywhere from 10 to 25 pounds of literature collected from various tourist offices, hotels and restaurants. In addition, I have never resolved the shoe dilemma. I need walking shoes, running shoes and, for the fancier hotels and restaurants, dress shoes. Once in a while, I even throw in hiking boots which have the twin disadvantages of being bulky and heavy. Like Stewart Granger and Deborah Kerr in *King Solomon's Mines*, we need native bear-

ers. Thus our ill-fated decision to check the two biggest, heaviest bags. We simply didn't want to haul them to our rail car and up into the overhead racks. There was also a concern that our compartment could be full and there might not be enough space for all our paraphernalia.

We stood in the same line as rail/air travelers checking bags for Swissair flights out of Zürich that day. The Swiss Rail luggage checker asked to see our passports and rail tickets. After looking them over, she asked us to complete some paperwork (here I should have heard the warning sirens) and pay 40 Sfr. (\$28) (more sirens).

Assuming again this was essentially the same transaction as checking luggage on an airline, I was surprised at the charge. But it had taken a good five minutes for the paperwork while others behind me in line waited and I would have felt a fool backing out at the last minute. So I paid the lady and kissed our luggage good-by. Little did I know I wouldn't see it for four days.

Prague Rail Station

A little over nine hours later we were at the Prague rail station trying to figure out how to get our luggage back. Except for the many signs which said "hotel" or "change," there seemed to be none in English, or even symbols, indicating baggage claim. But after a few minutes' searching we finally spied a baggage symbol which directed us down several levels to a place where luggage and freight are dealt with. A man at the window smoked and chatted with two women. He paid us no attention at all.

After a few minutes a small, middle-aged woman in a full-length working smock, no doubt noticing the puzzled looks on our faces, approached and examined our luggage receipt. She shook her head sadly and said something in Czech. Realizing we weren't comprehending, she tried a single German word, *Morgen*. It suddenly dawned on us that she was saying we wouldn't be retrieving our bags until morning. She then motioned us to follow her up one level where she pointed to an hours-of-operation sign on a door. Whatever was behind it, it wouldn't open until

7 a.m. the next morning. We concluded our bags were somewhere in that locked office.

I was so preoccupied with the fact that we would have to go on to the hotel without them that I didn't express proper appreciation to this woman who had gone out of her way to help us. We were also, at that point, just realizing that all our clothing and one other very important item, the container of pills Liz takes three times a day was in one of those bags. Never in a million years would we have put them in airline checked luggage but on the train we didn't give it a thought. We simply assumed the bags would be in another car of the train.

Before resigning ourselves to the fact that we would have to leave the rail station without our bags, we bounced around for awhile trying to find someone, anyone, who could shed light on our situation.

Lonely Planet's *Prague* guidebook says the rail station is not a place to be at night and we concur. Even in the daytime, it is heavily populated by a community of non-travelers that consists of mendicants, drunks, street urchins and a colorful but possibly dangerous cast of characters who are no doubt involved in all sorts of shady doings. Those who work behind windows dispensing rail tickets, food, accommodations, currency exchange and information speak little English — if at all — and are not an especially helpful or friendly lot. When asked if they speak English, most say yes, but if you ask more than the most routine travel-related question you're in trouble. Sometimes we were simply ignored.

In the hometown of Franz himself, we lived a Kafkaesque nightmare, lurching vainly from window to window. At the "official" information counter, the one with the international "i" over it, a man with rotting teeth, dressed in what seemed to be the grimy remains of a some sort of military uniform, was more interested in having a beer with friends in his booth than dispensing information. He claimed to speak English but when we queried him regarding baggage claim he just shrugged.

After a while our goal became to

simply find a fluent English speaker. Reasoning that among the many cubicles advertising accommodations we might find such a person, we began to approach windows signed "hotel." No luck. At one place the response was to simply not look at us or respond in any way. No doubt this is a carry over from communist days.

At a Czech Rail window we tried to reserve seats to Weimar on a future date. We had the necessary rail passes, we just wanted the reserved seats. After much figuring on a calculator and typing on a computer terminal keyboard, the agent pushed a scrap of paper toward us on which he had written the amount owed — 3,700 korunas (\$137). Since the reservation fee should be no more than about \$10, we decided to try another window. There the agent took one look at our Czech Rail passes and reserved two seats at no charge.

The driver took us directly to the hotel and charged the 963 Koruna (\$36) indicated on the meter. It turned out to be double the amount we paid a few days later for the same trip.

After about 30 minutes of futility we gave up and began to look for a taxi to the hotel. Signage in the station, at least for a non-Czech speaker, is inadequate, confusing and, in at least one case, incorrect. Exiting one door which had a "taxi" sign over it took us on to a forbiddingly dark ramp which contained only a few beat up cars and several sinister looking loiterers. No taxis. We had better luck on the other side of the station. There, at least, was a taxi rank, even if most of them had seen better days. Everything we have heard and read about Prague's taxis is that they overcharge tourists. Guidebooks advise getting a cab from the City Taxi company and making sure it has — and uses — a meter.

Ripped off

The first cab in line was a rickety job piloted by a scruffy but friendly enough fellow who, in retrospect, seemed far too eager for our business.

But there seemed no other option. I asked how much to the **Savoy Hotel** and, through a series of English and German words and a few gestures, we were told the price would be determined by his meter. The driver took us directly to the hotel and charged the 963 Kcs (\$36) indicated on the meter. It turned out to be double the amount we paid a few days later for the same trip. We should have phoned and asked the hotel to send a cab.

At the Savoy, our luck began to change. At check-in we were offered a glass of champagne, warmly welcomed and given a spacious, luxurious room with most of the five-star amenities.

We explained our problem to the front desk clerk who promised to track down the missing luggage first thing in the morning.

She was as good as her word. By 9 a.m. someone was already on the phone to the rail station. But the news was not good. Our bags were not there, they had not been on our train. Perhaps later in the day, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps... The woman in charge at the front desk said she would stay on top of the situation.

At that point I phoned Swiss Rail in St. Gallen and was told we might not see our bags for as long as a week! I learned that it is standard operating procedure that luggage checked from Switzerland to the Czech Republic (or any other foreign country) goes on a separate train (or trains), often via a separate route, and can take several days to arrive. The Swiss Rail person implied this is common knowledge. Well, we didn't know and most everyone I've asked since then didn't know. Swiss Rail is a fabulous transportation system, no doubt the world's best; I suggest, however, they have a responsibility to inform travelers with foreign destinations checking bags, that the checked items will not accompany them. Looking back over the check-in procedure, I wonder why, if such bags are treated as freight rather than checked luggage, the agent needed to see our rail tickets? (I also wonder — as you no doubt do — why in hell we

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LUGGAGE

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simply didn't save \$28 and haul our own bags? Good question.)

So now we had to deal with two problems: Liz's medication and the fact that our luggage might not arrive before we were scheduled to leave Prague.

As to the later, we could easily wear the clothes on our back for four days, but if we left Prague before our bags arrived, would we ever see them again? The hotel was willing to fetch them from the rail station and deliver them to Swissair who would fly them to the USA, but the hotel would not be allowed to retrieve them. We had to be there in person with passports. Fortunately, we never had to resolve this dilemma.

Clothes we could do without, but Liz's medication was another matter. And here the hotel was just terrific.

At one point that morning there were three hotel clerks on the phone at the same time, all dealing with our problem: one was calling pharmacies to see if they carried the needed medicine, another was on with the rail station and a third, in case we couldn't get the medicine directly from a pharmacy, was trying to find a doctor to write a prescription. (By the way, we were not known to the hotel as owners of a travel publication, just two not very bright American tourists.)

The Great Pill Hunt

As it turned out, local pharmacies had never heard of the medication and so the hotel made an appointment at the **Canadian Medical Centre**, a private English-speaking clinic. The bellman sent us off in a spanking clean, late model Audi cab with a polite, uniformed driver. Half an hour later we drove on to the grounds of the clinic, which is located in a large old house in a residential area several miles from the town center. They were ready for us and, after completing five minutes of paperwork, showed us to a comfortable waiting room. Shortly, a nurse came to get Liz. The young, friendly Czech doctor, who seemed eager to practice his English, gave her a brief examination

(blood pressure, pulse, stethoscope on the heart and lungs, etc.), then prescribed medication equivalent to what she was taking.

The cab, which had been waiting, then took us to a pharmacy where, after standing in line for 10 minutes, it dawned on me I might not have enough cash. Our driver knew of a nearby Citibank, but it turned out to be a corporate branch office with no ATMs. The Citibank receptionist, however, provided directions to the nearest ATM and, after yet another cab ride, we found the money machine.

The pharmacy was unlike any I've seen. It consisted of two small rooms divided by a wall into which was cut a window-counter, tended on one side by several white-coated women. The room behind them was stacked high with boxes and bottles of medicine. A line of 10 to 12 customers filled the tiny room on the window's other side. Prescriptions were submitted and the women in the white coats immediately handed over the necessary boxes and bottles. There was no counting of pills, measuring of liquid or individual containers of medicine with typed instructions. Boxes and bottles were dispensed as they come from the manufacturer. The line moved quickly.

Mission accomplished, the cab took us back to the hotel. The whole process took about two hours. The taxi fare was 980 Kcs.(\$36). The medicine turned out to be the same stuff Liz had been taking at home but under another label. It cost about \$30. The Canadian Medical Center charge was approximately \$35.

We explored Prague for three full days in the same clothes. Late in the afternoon before we were to leave, the front desk got a phone call announcing the arrival of our bags. The baggage claim office at the rail station closed at 5 p.m. but we could get them the next morning. What could be more convenient? (Read heavy sarcasm here.) We had to be at the train station anyway; why not pick up our bags before boarding the train to Weimar?

To be on the safe side we arrived at the station two hours before our train. Presentation of our receipt and passports at the baggage office creat-

ed a little flurry of activity. The Savoy had quite obviously gotten their attention. We were expected.

Then, like a climactic movie scene with the music swelling, a tiny woman in one of those colorless working smocks came toward us down a long dark hall. Ahead of her she proudly pushed a low, flat cart. On it were our two bags. She was smiling the only smile I ever saw in the Prague main rail station.

(More about Prague and the Hotel Savoy next month. The Canadian Medical Centre is at Veleslavínská 1/30, 162 02 Praha 6, tel. 316 5519, 316 6491 or, after hours, 0601 21 23 20.)

READERS' FORUM

This one we frame

Dear Mr. Bestor:

Thank you for your "Decade of *Gemütlichkeit*" issue and for nearly a decade of interesting reading and worthwhile suggestions which we have enjoyed.

Thank you for **Pension Heim** and **Gasthof Hirsch**, for **Albergo Gardenia**, for Yellow Roads, for suggesting the Engadine and for the many other useful ideas and recommendations which we have enjoyed thanks to your experience and research. We wish to give you personally particular thanks for the humorous way in which you write and for the feeling of real friendship which your style of writing engenders. We look forward to many more years of enjoyment of your fine newsletter.

Caroline and Lee Jordan, San Rafael CA

(Ed. Note: Wow! Thanks. And thanks, too, to all who wrote and phoned their congratulations. It was, and is, our pleasure.)

On the other hand...

I just received your December 22 issue of *Gemütlichkeit* and wish to refer to the information on hotels and restaurants on pages 8-10.

Putting the names of these facilities in an alphabetical order makes no sense — whatsoever! The lists should

have been done by countries and cities to be useful.

Hopefully, next time such data will be offered in a logical manner, which should not be too difficult in the age of the computer!

Dr. Egon Matijevic, Distinguished University Professor, Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY

Salzburg comments

Thanks for suggesting that instead of getting a car in Salzburg, and paying the high Austrian car rental rates, we take the train to Freilassing in Germany.

The pickup was smooth and we sure avoided a lot of extra cost by picking up and returning the car in Germany.

Freilassing was a 3 DM (\$1.90) and 9-minute train ride from Salzburg. The Avis car rental place is actually in a gas station about a 10-minute walk from the train station. And, the station is located on the main road back to Austria! The whole transaction from Salzburg Bahnhof and back to our hotel in Salzburg took about 60 minutes!

We also stayed at the **Struber Hotel**. It was everything *Gemütlichkeit* said it was. My aunt and uncle were with us and they expected the room to cost twice what it did. Barry Brown, Murray, KY

Bamberg recommendations

I just started receiving your newsletter last summer and saved the price of the subscription on two nights lodging in Bamberg. I have made a habit of staying in smaller hotels apart from the locus of conferences and found the **Hotel St. Nepomuk** to be an outstanding value with lovely owners and an outstanding restaurant. The view from the hotel on river Regnitz is also great and the location is superb.

I can recommend other restaurants in Bamberg: **Messerschmidt** (yes, related to the aircraft engineer), **Brüdermühle** and **Wilde Rose** are all outstanding with the prize going to the first, though Brüdermühle is close behind. The **Klosterbräu** brewery/restaurant, across the street from the St. Nepomuk, serves great beer and superb regional food.

Another very nice hotel with more spacious rooms than St. Nepomuk is the **Hotel Bamberger Hof**; it is more expensive but the location is not quite as nice as the St. Nepomuk (the disco on the first floor can be noisy if your room is close to it) yet very near the old town and city hall.

In your just received Dec. 22 edition I notice a reference to the **Tiefenau Hotel** in Zürich; this is a very nice establishment in which we have stayed several times. We have enjoyed it immensely with such a nice location.

I enjoy your publication and wish I could travel more to make greater use of it!

Patrick J. Perkins, M.D., Orinda CA 

EUROPE TRAVEL BRIEFS

Hotel deal for families

The **Sofitel** hotel chain offers a special for families traveling in Europe. On weekend nights, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, guests who pay for one room (at rack rate) receive a complimentary second room for up to two children under 18 years of age. The plan is also available daily during the periods February 12 to February 25; June 30 to August 31; and December 22, 1997 through January 4, 1998. Reservations: 1-800-763-4835.

Packages for musicals

Whether it's *Cats* in Hamburg, *Starlight Express* in Bochum or *Les Miserables* in Duisburg, or other musical events in Germany, **Stella Event Reisen** offers packages that include show tickets, hotel accommodations with breakfast, and sparkling wine at the theater. Booking hotline: 011 49/180-5356630, Stella Event Reisen GmbH, Haferweg 24, D-22769

InterCity Hotels' "Action 255"

Through March 31, Germany's **InterCity Hotel** chain offers a second class rail ticket from anywhere in Germany to any town with an InterCity Hotel, bed and breakfast, and free public transportation in that city, for from 255 DM (\$155) per person. There are 16 InterCity Hotels, all in large cities and near rail stations. Contact: InterCity Hotel GmbH,

Lyoner Strasse 40, D-60528 Frankfurt Main, tel. 069/6656 4687, fax 069/6656 4699.

LTU announces summer sked

The German airline, **LTU International Airways**, has announced its 1997 summer schedule. Nonstop service from San Francisco to Düsseldorf will resume May 14 and will operate weekly until October 15. A code-share agreement with **Air New Zealand** will continue through the summer and fall and applies to three weekly nonstops between Los Angeles and Frankfurt. Weekly nonstop service between Phoenix and Düsseldorf also continues as does service to Germany from New York's JFK Airport and the Florida cities of Fort Meyers, Orlando, Daytona Beach and Tampa.

At press time LTU had not yet released its summer promotional fares but they were expected to range from \$698 to \$798 roundtrip. Contact: 800-888-0200.

Fly vintage plane to Europe

This year **Swissair** celebrates 50 years of transatlantic service. In observance of that milestone, it is offering a special *Spirit of Swissair* anniversary travel package for the periods May 10-17 and June 12-19. Departures from New York's JFK Airport to Zürich will be aboard a specially prepared and fitted DC-4 propeller aircraft, the same airplane flown by Swissair over the Atlantic in 1947. The return flight from Geneva, however, will be aboard the much more up-to-date, MD-11 aircraft.

The program also includes surface transportation — including a ride on the Orient Express in Switzerland, — first class hotels and most meals. Book through your travel agent or **Swisspak** 800-688-7947.

Briefer briefs

American Airlines has stopped flying between New York and Zürich... **TWA** dropped its daily New York-Frankfurt flight for three months starting Jan. 14... In the summer of 1996, Swiss hotel stays fell 5.2% to their lowest level since 1959... Those who care to can now scuba dive through a hole in the ice in Theodul Glacier Lake near Zermatt. The three-dive ice-diving course costs \$366. Phone: 011 41/27 967 7050. 


SWISSAIR DEALS

Continued from page 1

will be handled by Swissair's Los Angeles office (310-335-5900.)

To obtain the price reductions, subscribers must book and purchase tickets directly with Swissair. Prior to issuing the reduced fare tickets, Swissair will verify subscriber status with the *Gemütlichkeit* office. Family and friends traveling at least one leg of the transatlantic roundtrip with a subscriber are also eligible for the lower fares.

The new upgrade program works as follows: purchase a full fare economy class ticket on Swissair and, with verification of *Gemütlichkeit* subscriber status, a voucher good for a confirmed business class seat will be issued. In addition, the *Gemütlichkeit* price reduction — in this case \$150 — will apply to the purchase of the full fare economy ticket. This program is limited to two tickets per subscriber and applies only to full fare economy tickets, not sale fares or lower priced advance purchase fares. Nonetheless, savings are substantial. Currently the roundtrip business class fare from the West Coast is roughly \$4500 and the saving from that is approximately 30% or about \$1350.

For more info call *Gemütlichkeit* at 800-521-6722 or Shirley at Swissair's Los Angeles office, 310-335-5900. 

Gemütlichkeit Tip:

When dialing Europe from the U.S. do not dial the first zero of the local area code in Europe.

1997 MARKS 150 YEARS OF SWISS TRAINS

In 1847, the first scheduled Swiss train, the Spanisch Brötli Bahn, steamed out of Zürich station to the spa town of Baden. This year Switzerland celebrates the 150th anniversary of that first trip and the country's amazing rail system. About the size of the state of Maine, Switzerland's rail system has 800-plus rail stations and its 10,500 miles of track, laid through 672 tunnels, up steep mountains and over 6,000 bridges, connects hundreds of towns from the biggest to the smallest.

Beginning in March and continuing for eight months, this anniversary, *Switzerland, 150 Years On Track*, will be observed all over the country.

A special exhibition train will visit 70 towns, 500 stations will stage their own festivities, and the **Swiss Transport Museum** in Lucerne will open a new exhibition hall and host an international railway congress. Among the important dates are:

Lausanne: June 14-15

One of the bigger celebrations, this one will feature a parade of 70 trains, tracing the development of the railway from the earliest (Spanisch Brötli Bahn) to the most recent (Cisalpino).

Jura: June 21-July 20

The town of Delemont will offer tours of the "Rotonde," the official home depot for steam trains. Visitors can take a circular day-trip through the cantons of Berne, Jura and Neuchâtel (a steam train to Glovelier, a narrow-gauge train to Saignelégier, an electric train to La Chaux-de-Fonds, a light-weight fast train to Biel).

Zürich: August 8-10

This is the official ceremony of the first scheduled train, Spanisch Brötli Bahn. The same train, now refurbished, will make the reverse journey, ending in Zürich Station where the newly restored main hall will be inaugurated. Passenger rides on the historic old train will follow.

Lucerne: August 22-October 25

The Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne will be a key site during the anniversary year. Activities here will begin with the inauguration of the museum's new railway hall. Original and replica trains from all over Europe will take passengers on nostalgic rides. During the period October 4 to 12, the focus will be on traditional railway models.

Visitors will be able to ride original trains that have been taken out of museums and put back on the rails:

June 5 to September 28

Cogwheel Steam Engine No. 7 will haul its original carriage — with seating for 60 — on runs from Rigi Staffel to the Rigi Kulm summit (9,500 feet), just as it did from 1871 to 1907 when it was forced into retirement by the advent of electric power. The starting point is Arth-Goldau, just 30 minutes from Lucerne and an hour from Zürich.

August 22 to October 8

Historic trains (including the Spanisch Brötli Bahn) will run between Wuerzenbach and Küssnacht am Rigi as part of the Lucerne celebrations. Rail buffs can buy a special ticket aboard trains departing from Lausanne, Geneva, Brig, Berne and Biel allowing them to ride, not in the carriages with the other passengers, but up front in the locomotive with the driver. Reservations (mandatory) should be made at the relevant train station.

June 21 to August 31

The spotlight shifts to Brienz in the Bernese Oberland. Its festival, *Steamin' Brienz '97*, will pay homage to the age of steam through displays of model steam boats and steam locomotives. Three full-size steam-powered vehicles — the lake paddle-wheel steamer Blumlisalp, the cogwheel train Brienz Rothorn and the Ballenberg steam train — will be available for visitor rides.

Special fares:

As part of the event, Swiss Rail is offering some special discounts:

- There will be no increase in the cost of Swiss rail passes in 1997.
- Buy a Swiss Pass (unlimited travel over a choice of four time periods) or a Swiss Flexipass (unlimited travel on three non-consecutive days within a 15-day period) between May 1 and October 31 and your companion travels for half price. Must be booked in the U.S.
- Buy a 1 month, 8- or 15-day Swiss Pass and receive an additional day free.
- The Family Card — free with the purchase of a Swiss Pass, Swiss Flexipass or a Swiss Card — allows children under 16 to travel free.

A 12-page brochure, *Switzerland, 150 Years On Track* has information on special rail packages starting at \$1,219 (per person/double occupancy for 5 overnights in tourist class hotels, breakfast, rail pass and roundtrip flight from New York/Newark to Zürich or Geneva included). Phone Switzerland Tourism for a free copy: New York 212-757-5944; Chicago 312-332-9900; Los Angeles: 310-640-8900; San Francisco: 415-362-2260. 