

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

February 24, 2001

In Praise of Travel Agents

A few years ago I got into trouble with our travel agent subscribers by offering the opinion that some of their colleagues were more commission than client oriented.

Recommending one vendor because that supplier pays a higher commission than one whose product better suits the client — or worse yet, is cheaper — is about as ethically bankrupt as it gets. It is, however, a common travel industry practice. In his dissertation *Airlines and Travel Agents: An Uneasy Partnership*, air transport consultant, Ron Kuhlmann, points to a 1995 travel industry survey which showed 60% of agencies have “override” agreements with suppliers — meaning they get a higher commission when they book that supplier — and that 66% of such agreements “affected bookings.” “Overrides,” according to the U.S. Inspector General, “transform the role of travel agencies from a neutral seller of airline tickets to a direct distribution agent for a particular airline.”

Another industry problem has been a large number of inept agents. The proliferation of poorly-trained, part-timers in the travel business solely for discounts or to make a commission on their relatives’ trips,

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This Month in Gemütlichkeit

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

BURGENLAND

Once a part of Hungary, Austria’s Burgenland province is a throwback to the time when European travel was inexpensive and there weren’t many American tourists.

Tourism data show a clear pattern: most American visitors to Germany, Austria and Switzerland start out in Munich, Frankfurt or Zürich. From there they head for places like the Black Forest, Southern Bavaria, the Rhine, Salzburg, Vienna, Interlaken and Lucerne. Berlin’s popularity is skyrocketing. A fair percentage branch out to destinations like the Lake Geneva region, the Tirol, Austria’s lake district, and even northern and eastern Germany.

Germany’s Bavarian Forest, southeastern Switzerland, Ticino, and Austria’s Arlberg get a few U.S. customers but almost nobody goes to Burgenland, the Austrian wine

province about an hour south of Vienna. That fact alone should recommend it to *Gemütlichkeit* subscribers seeking off-the-beaten-track destinations.

But there’s more to Burgenland than an absence of American tourists. For one thing, until 1918 it was part of Hungary, a lineage that gives it a different look and feel than the rest of Austria. There are no mountains and few forests. This is wine country and vineyards sweep down virtually every hillside. Everyone seems to be in the business and houses have huge, carved, arched doors leading to inner courtyards where many of the

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Franconian Bargain

If bombastic college basketball TV commentator, Dick Vitale, were a travel writer he would likely exclaim “Altenstein is an awesome bargain baby! With a capital ‘B’!”

Located about 20 minutes west of Coburg and its impressive **Veste**, this tiny town’s rural setting is enhanced by an enormous panoramic view, an interesting ruined castle and a small hotel that is a super bargain. **Gasthof-Pension Hofmann**, just below **Burg Altenstein**, overlooks rolling green pastures and a pine forest.

The Castle

Said to date from 1225, Burg Altenstein’s crumbling towers are now part of the landscape, its arches and walls blend seamlessly into the

hillside. We visited its remains in the evening, just before sunset, snapping photos as the light from the setting sun cast long shadows on the emerald earth. We used the ruins as a jungle-gym for grown-ups, climbing everywhere to give it a complete exploration. To be allowed to touch and wander as we pleased was a treat. Old castles don’t exist in California and if they did visitors would probably have to view them from a distant observation platform through one of those quarter-per-look telescopes.

The Hotel

Our simple room at the Hofmann had a small couch, a table with chairs, a modern little bathroom with toilet and shower, and a

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has made it tough on the truly top-notch, knowledgeable professionals.

However, since the airline industry pulled the commission rug out from under the travel agency business a few years ago, thousands of marginal agents have departed the field, leaving a higher percentage of travel pros who understand that, in the long run, when the client is happy, commissions follow.

Many travelers are unaware of just what travel agents are up against these days. Small, local shops are an endangered species, doomed by airline commission policies and the Internet. According to Kuhlmann, a 1999 Merrill Lynch study revealed the following costs for America West to issue a ticket: traditional travel agency \$23, Internet agency \$20, own telephone reservations \$13, own website \$6. Any doubt about where all this is heading?

For an air ticket to Europe, airlines pay a commission of 5%. So you buy a couple of tickets at \$1,500 and your agent gets \$75 per ticket or a total of \$150; not bad, you think, for maybe half an hour's work. Ah, but there are a couple of caveats; the maximum commission is \$50 (business class, first class, doesn't matter), and the agent undoubtedly has to split the commission with the owner of the agency.

The picture is really bleak during

off-peak travel times. Let's say you want a couple of those winter airfare specials at \$400 each. The agency's commission in this case is \$40, of which the agent gets maybe \$20. Of course, someone has to do the paperwork, print the tickets, and ship them out, probably the agent. If your booking requires a couple of phone calls and a little back and forth, both the agency and the agent have lost money.

Perhaps, you reason, they'll make it up booking your hotel rooms. That's possible, provided you book big hotels that are in the CRS (computer reservation service) such as Sheraton or Steigenberger, but very doubtful if you ask an agent to book small, family-run properties in Europe. Many of the latter don't pay commissions at all or simply say they will and then don't. The agent doesn't have the time to run down that past due \$8 commission from a one-night \$100 hotel booking in the German countryside; he or she is too busy trying to find somebody a low airfare.

Car rental commissions range from 10% to 20% of the basic rental rate (they get nothing on drop charges, taxes, extra drivers, etc.) while rail tickets and passes pay from 8% to 12% (nothing for reservations which take as much of the agent's time as issuing passes). Remember, your agent, unless you're dealing with the owner, only gets a portion of these commissions.

If you find a travel agent that can lucidly explain the advantages of the various European rail passes, knows something about how car rentals work in Europe, can recommend good, small hotels, and generally knows something about European travel, you have a valuable resource. Don't expect that person to help plan your European vacation and make all the bookings for \$50 to \$100 in commissions. Hotel reservations alone can take a couple of hours. The back and forth fax and email process is a time eater.

About 15% of our subscribers are in the travel business. They use *Gemütlichkeit* to make recommendations to their clients traveling to the Germanic countries. Most have experience traveling in Europe and some have taken the time and expense to become specially certified by the various European tourist

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Notes for Readers

- Foreign currency prices are converted to U.S. dollars at the exchange rate in effect at the time of publication.
- Hotel prices listed are for one night. Discounts are often available for longer stays.
- All hotel prices include breakfast unless otherwise noted.
- Local European telephone area codes carry the "0" required for in-country dialing. To phone establishments from outside the country, such as from the USA, do not dial the first "0".

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Publishers: Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor
Editor: Robert H. Bestor
Contributors: C. Fischer, R. Holliday,
Nikki Goth Itoi, Doug Linton
Paul T. Merschdorf
Web Master: Thomas P. Bestor
Consulting Editor: Thomas P. Bestor
Subscription Dept: Andy Bestor, K. Steffans

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HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

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

Special Designation

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

BURGENLAND

Continued from page 1

winemaking activities take place. A third of all Austrian wine comes from Burgenland.

After the vineyards, the countryside's dominant feature is the reed-ringed Neusiedler See, a seven-foot deep, 124-square-mile body of water that sometimes mysteriously disappears. The last time was for four years starting in 1865.

The region's peaceful, bucolic demeanor belies its bumpy history. Both the Turks and the Romans came here with less than honorable intentions, and from 1945 to 1955 it was occupied by the Russians.

The province's most interesting town is Rust (pronounced "roost"), though the *Michelin Green Guide* for Austria gives nearby Mörbisch two stars and Rust, about 41 miles south of Vienna, none. No matter where you choose to headquarter, both villages should be explored. Gaze upward to the rooftop storks' nests and stop for a snack and a made-on-the-premises glass of fresh white wine at one of the ubiquitous *Heurigen* (wine taverns). Both towns are on the lake.

Unfortunately, neither Rust nor Mörbisch is served by rail. The nearest train station is in Eisenstadt, the provincial capital and Burgenland's most important city. It is also where composer Joseph Haydn lived for 30 years. Mementos of the beloved musician can be seen in the **Haydn Room of Schloss Esterhazy** — once home of the renowned Hungarian family — and in a museum in the house where he lived.

This is an interesting, inexpensive destination with more than enough to hold your attention. Do we dare compare northern Burgenland to Europe's two most prized country destinations, Provence and Tuscany? All have an agrarian charm that appeals to stressed-out American tourists dreaming of a culture opposite their own: miles of vineyards interspersed with old wine villages, distinctive regional

Rust Basics

Population: 1700

Altitude: 118 meters / 387 feet

Driving Distances:

City	KM/Miles
Budapest	223 / 138
Graz	184 / 114
Munich	497 / 308
Salzburg	357 / 221
Vienna	66 / 41

Tourist Information:

Rust Tourist office, Michaela Prückler, Rathausplatz 1, A-7071 Rust, tel. +43/02685/502, fax 50210, email: info@rust.or.at

Burgenland Tourism, Schloss Esterhazy, A-7000 Eisenstadt, tel. +43/02682/63384-15, fax 63384-20

Activities:

- If you visit Rust in winter, your activities are likely to be limited to indoor pursuits — museums, galleries — or, depending on your pain threshold, chilly walks through the villages and vineyards.

In summer, however, the lake is warm and inviting. Paddle boats, row boats and various sailing craft can be rented.

- The huge expanse of reeds that rings the lake is home to a great variety of wildlife. Bird-watchers come from all over to see storks, egrets, geese, ducks and dozens of other varieties.

- The area's relatively flat landscape is conducive to cycling and walking, especially among the vineyards. The tourist office has publications which suggest routes for both activities.

- For any excursion, on foot, on a bicycle or by car, be sure to stop at a tourist office and get the free *Burgenland Strassenkarte* (scale 1:200,000). It uses a color system to mark walking and cycling routes as well as wine roads.

- Explorations by car, of course, are good in most any weather. See page 5.

Among the areas main attractions:

Esterhazy Palace – Eisenstadt
Haydn Church – Eisenstadt
Haydn Museum – Eisenstadt
Roman Quarry – St. Margarethen
Fisherman's Church – Rust
Basilica – Frauenkirchen
Franz Liszt Museum – Raiding

cuisine, and characteristic architecture. All three conjure images of days in the sun filled with visits to tiny wineries where bountiful meals of local provender prepared by the vintner's wife are eaten under shade trees, accompanied, of course, by quantities of simple but delicious wine. But Provence and Tuscany, are expensive and overrun with English speaking tourists. By contrast, the visitor to Burgenland, through all those long, sunny days, may not encounter a single American; and his stay — meals, accommodations, libations — will cost about half what it would in the other two.

Burgenland is what rural European travel was 30 years ago; inexpensive and authentic.

Accommodations

Though we found no extraordinary hotels in Rust, here are three worthy of your patronage.

Seehotel Rust

The sprawling, turreted, red tile-roofed Seehotel, located directly on the lake just a short walk from the village center, is Rust's leading hotel. Guestrooms are standard commercial grade with necessary amenities. Many have lake views.

As a four-star, it offers a long list of services and such facilities as indoor swimming pool, sauna, steam room, indoor and outdoor tennis, bicycle and boat rentals, and free parking.

In addition to the rates below, the hotel offers a number of attractive packages. A two-night weekend deal including breakfast and dinner is 2960 AS (\$195) for two persons. Guests over 60 who stay seven or more nights pay 820 AS (\$54) per person, including breakfast and dinner.

Daily Rates: All rates include breakfast and dinner. Singles 1120 to 1190 AS (\$74-\$78), doubles 1840 to 2500 AS (\$121-\$164). For bed and breakfast only, deduct 80 AS (\$5.25) per person from the half board rates.

Contact: Seehotel Rust, Am Seekanal 2-4, A-7071 Rust Burgenland, tel.

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BURGENLAND

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+43 2685 381, fax 381 419, email: seehotel.rust@austria-trend.at. Proprietor: Wolfgang Hanreich
Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 19/20

Gasthof Rusterhof

The town's best restaurant offers four modern, spacious apartments for rent. These light and airy accommodations have hardwood floors, white walls and ceilings, light wood furnishings plus the charm and coziness of sloping ceilings and dormer windows.

The Rusterhof is located in Rust's oldest building (1535), on the main square next to the **Fisherman's Church**.

Daily Rates: Singles 900 to 1350 AS (\$59-\$89), doubles 1200 to 1800 AS (\$79-\$118). No credit cards.

Contact: Gasthof Rusterhof, Rathausplatz 18, A-7071 Rust, Burgenland, tel. +43/02685/6416, fax 6416 11. Proprietor: Michael Mooslechner

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 19/20

Hotel Am Rathausplatz

Across the wide open town square from the Rusterhof, the unpretentious Hotel Rathausplatz offers surprisingly comfortable rooms at very attractive rates.

All guestrooms underwent complete refurbishment in 1999 and are equipped with direct dial phone, cable TV, and minibar. Excellent value.

Daily Rates: Singles 500 to 600 AS (\$33-\$39), doubles 940 to 1100 AS (\$62-\$72)

Contact: Hotel Am Rathausplatz, Rathausplatz 7, A-7071 Rust, Burgenland, Tel. +43/02685/6202, fax 6772, email: am_rathausplatz@rms.at. Proprietor: Freya Hübner

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 19/20

An Apartment Rental

Rust and Burgenland abound with reasonably priced vacation rental facilities. One such is operated by Annemarie Poglitsch, a two-bedroom apartment, with pleasant inner courtyard near the lake and

village center.

The per day price for this apartment ranges from 550 to 700 AS (\$36-\$46), the basis for an inexpensive family vacation.

Contact: Annemarie Poglitsch, Dr. Alfred Ratz-Gasse 8, 7071 Rust Burgenland, tel. +43/02685/6845

Sustenance

Rusterhof

This splendid little restaurant and inn (see hotel reviews), at the upper end of the main square, served us one of the best meals in recent memory. Frankly, based on an earlier visit to Rust, we hadn't expected to eat this well.

Stopping on a cold afternoon for a hot drink, we became intrigued by the Rusterhof's cozy charm — wooden ceilings, red tile floors, white-washed walls, dried flowers, rustic wood furnishings — and decided to request an 8 pm dinner reservation. It was winter and the woman attending us had to check first to see if the restaurant would be serving dinner that night. She returned in a minute or so to tell us it was all right but, since there was only one other reservation, and that was at 7pm, could we come then? We could.

Arriving at the appointed time, we were seated in the same small bar/bistro room. The white-clothed table was lit by a candle and set with tall, delicate wine glasses. We later learned there is a more formal dining room but it was not open that night. In summer, most meals are served outside on a small patio, enclosed by trees and potted plants.

Our wait person first delivered a basket of warm breads with butter, some soft, herbed cheese, cherry tomato halves, and very small hard-boiled eggs with a bit of red caviar.

Next, we divided a fine appetizer of moist smoked salmon (125 AS/\$8.22) that came with bits of fried potato, more small egg halves, and a yogurt-based sauce.

By this time, we knew we were in good hands and the main dishes kept the level of excellence. Succulent

Tafelspitz (boiled beef), with julienned carrots and zucchini served with *Apfelkrem* (horseradish in applesauce), was a steal at 215 AS (\$14). Equally good was *Zander von Neusiedlersee auf roten und gelben paprikarahm mit Blatt Spinach* (pike-perch from the lake with wild rice, spinach and two sauces) for 235 AS (\$15.50).

A pair of extraordinary desserts capped this wonderful meal: *Schokoladenmousse hell und dunkel auf Erdbeermark und Fruchten* for 105 AS (\$7) was a huge cone of chocolate lying on its side and stuffed with mousse and raspberry sauce; and in a surprisingly light and not too-sweet *Orangencreme mit Grand Marnier* (85 AS/\$5.60), the orange mouse was decorated with orange slices and Grand Marnier-soaked strips of the rind.

To appreciate the local varietal wines one has to suspend preconceived notions of taste and simply take them as they are; very different but nonetheless good accompaniment to the food. After we made that adjustment we were better able to enjoy glasses of a Rust Cabernet (Friedrich Seiler Cabernet Sauvignon, 1996) and a 1996 Herman Hammer Chardonnay. Wines by the glass were in the \$3.50-\$5.00 range.

We discovered an exception to this rule, a dessert wine suggested by our server. It was Kracher, Grand Cuvee, Trockenbeerenauslese #1 1995; spectacular stuff that instantly reminded us of the great Sauternes of Bordeaux, but grown and produced in the village of Illmitz, just across the lake. A glass cost 100 AS (\$6.60), about half what one would pay for a comparable wine in the U.S. We decided we had to have some and so set out the next day to track down its origins (see page 5). It wasn't easy but we finally found the property where the wine is made.

The door was answered by a man with a napkin tucked into his shirt. We had obviously interrupted his lunch. He spoke no English and shouted back into the house for assistance. A middle-aged woman

soon appeared at the door with a bit of a puzzled look. After hearing our story, she explained that though their wine was not usually sold on the premises she could arrange to find a few bottles for us. She went on to say that there was a store in the next town that sells her family's wine but that it was closed that day.

But with amazing good humor, she led us to a building at the rear of the property where we paid about \$24 each for a few half bottles from the 1996 vintage — the '95 vintage of the previous night was sold out.

(A few weeks after returning to the U.S. we came across a mention of Illmitz in an upscale magazine. The story noted that the wines of Kracher, once virtually unknown, are now prized by oenophiles throughout the world.)

Dinner for two without the beverages was a little over \$50. This is an excellent restaurant with much charm.

Contact: Gasthof Rusterhof, Rathausplatz 18 A-7071 Rust, Burgenland, tel. +43/02685/6416, fax 6416 11. Proprietor: Michael Mooslechner

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 17/20

Restaurant am Rathaus Platz

A more pedestrian option on the main square is Restaurant am Rathaus Platz where the townspeople gather to socialize over a drink, an ice cream or a simple meal.

Here, you can get a decent *Schnitzel* (95 AS/\$6.25) or perhaps venison stew (135 AS/\$9) with a mixed salad (26 AS/\$1.75) of chopped lettuce, cabbage with caraway seeds, vinegary potato slices, and garlic marinated green beans. A large draught beer is 34 AS (\$2.20) but a glass of house Riesling is the best deal of all at 12 AS (80 cents). A shot of Barack,

the Hungarian *Schnapps*, costs 24 AS (\$1.60).

Contact: Hotel Am Rathausplatz, Rathausplatz 7, A-7071 Rust, Burgenland, Tel. +43/02685/6202, fax 6772, Proprietor: Freya Hübner

Rating: QUALITY 9/20, VALUE 13/20

Wine Country Drive

This is an all-day auto tour around the Neusiedlersee. Those who plan ahead can arrange with their rental car company (at the time

swimming center with a twisty water slide.

Turn around and drive toward the church. At the end of the road go left, then right and out the arches. Then, just past the fire station, take a left into Kellerplatz and see the odd, bunker-style wine cellars. Those with green boughs over the door are open for tasting and selling wine. Return to the main road and leave the town, observing the chapels and statues along the way.

Breitenbrunn: Note the Watch

Tower at the entrance to the old town. Follow the *Bahnhof* signs and you will see more wine cellars and some attractive new houses, perhaps a sign of the region's growing importance as a wine producer.

Winden: Turn into the town on Hauptstrasse and continue left to the church. Note the huge black marble headstones. Return to the main road.

Jois: Not very attractive. At the roundabout go right toward the town of Neusiedl.

Neusiedl: A principal lakeside town with lots of shopping along the narrow main street.

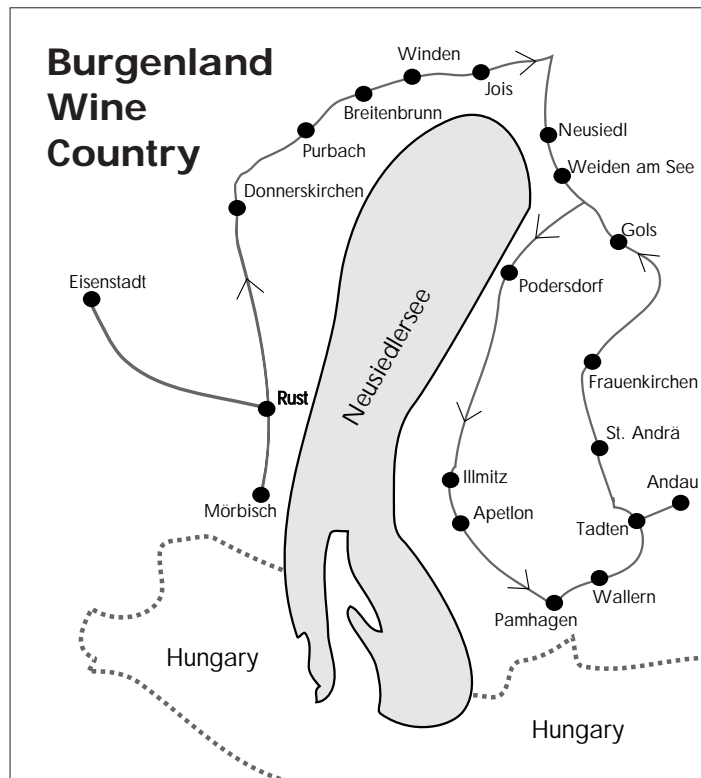
Weiden: We passed.

Podersdorf: Check the cemetery wall on the left. At the main junction turn right toward the lake. Note the dozens of private vacation accommodations along this road. At the end, you can park and walk to the beach and a dock that juts out into the lake.

Go back the way you came and proceed to Illmitz. On the way, if the weather is clear, you will see the towns on the lake's western shore and the mountains beyond.

Illmitz: An important wine town. Houses declare their success on signs

Continued on page 6...



of reservation in the U.S.) for permission to drive in Hungary and thereby drive entirely around the lake. We did not and thus had to backtrack.

Leaving Rust, head north toward Donnerskirchen, charting a course on your 1:200,000 scale map that includes these towns:

Purbach: First turn right and go through the arches — **Turken Tur** — into the town. Head down the main street, turn left at the end and see thatched roof buildings. Go right again, crossing the railroad tracks to the lake. In summer you can rent a boat. On the left, before the lake, is a

BURGENLAND DRIVE

Continued from page 5

reading "World Champion 19 --". The Kracher family's winery (see Rusterhof story, pg 4) is on the road to Apetlon. You need an appointment to visit but the wine is sold by a shop in the next town. We paid 360 AS or about \$24 per half-bottle.

Apetlon: To find the Kracher wine shop, follow the *Ortsmitte* signs and swing left. The address is 55 Wasserzeile. Leave town and follow the "Güterweg Pamhagen" signs. Soon you will come to an Austrian guard station where the Hungarian border touches the road.

Pamhagen: Turn right after the church to go to the border, then take a left at Hauptstrasse and a right at Raiffeisenstrasse. About one kilometer outside town is a narrow bridge, that crosses the border. Just before it is a turnaround and tower with armed guards. After you do the turnaround, follow Raiffeisenstrasse to Wallern.

Wallern: Not a prosperous town.

Vila Vita: Along the road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, is the huge Vila Vita (Storchengasse 1, A-7152 Pamhagen, tel +43/02175/21800, fax 218 0444, web: vilavitahotels.com) used mainly for large conferences, no doubt by Vienna-based businesses. Some buildings have thatched roofs, there are stables and an elaborate tennis center. Guest and public rooms are certainly up-market, but with its over-the-top decor and furnishings the place has an odd feel. Doubles are in the \$110 to \$135 range.

Wallern: In Wallern follow signs to Todten and Andau. Along the road note the many greenhouses.

Todten: Turn right to Andau

Andau: Famous for helping Hungarians escape the Russians in 1956. A short drive takes you to the escape point on the frontier. Turn at the information sign, just after the cemetery. Soon you will come to a "Y" in the road. In the gore of the "Y" is a small monument. At this point an Austrian soldier may ap-

pear from the bushes. When we visited, the guards' headquarters was a tent in the trees behind the monument.


Here you commence the nine kilometer drive to the border bridge, where the escapes took place. Both sides of this arrow-straight road are lined with trees and dotted with crude, eerie sculptures. At the end, is another soldier and a place to park. Unfortunately, a fence blocks access to the bridge. Climb the tower to see over the border to Hungary.

Return to Andau and go into town. There is a church with unusual architecture. Head again to Todten and St. Andrä. Go through the town and follow signs to Wien and Neusiedl/See.

Frauenkirchen: Here is the **Basilica** and the unusual **Calvary** monument with its Stations of the Cross. Continue toward Wien and Neusiedl.

Mönchhof: The only sign of industry we saw in the area. Looks like an American city.

Göls: Here we passed police officers standing at the side of the road clocking traffic with a radar gun.

One could easily spend a full day in the Podersdorf - Andau area. It is part of the national park and there are many small towns to explore. 

Readers' Forum

Hotel Near Frankfurt Airport

The **Hotel Birkenhof**, recommended as a good last night location for the Frankfurt airport, now has a website and email. The website is "www.hotelbirkenhof.de" and the email address is "info@hotelbirkenhof.de". The website is only in German, but is very informative. We plan to use the Birkenhof for our return in July. The cost of a double is now 180-200 DM (\$83-\$93).

JIM LEATHERS
VIA EMAIL

Bavarian Recommendations

We had very positive travel experiences in Grainau, Germany, a

town located at the foot of the Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain.

This is a very traveler-friendly town, located within easy driving, walking or bus travel distance of the famous Zugspitze, on the German/Austrian border; also, the very beautiful lake Eibsee ... with pleasant walking paths. Many amenities in the town, including a world class swimming pool/sauna complex. Very friendly people.

The town is also only four kilometers from Garmisch-Partenkirchen ... and the **Gasthof Fraundorfer** which we visited for a happy dinner evening ... complete with all the German *gemütlichkeit* you could want!

A wonderful hotel to check out: **Gastehaus Bergland** (Alpspitzstrasse 14, Grainau. tel. +49/08821/9889 0, fax 9889 99, email info@hotelbergland.de). Great modern, comfortable accommodations, reasonable prices, great *Frühstück*, friendly people. For Grainau info contact: grainau.zugspitzdorf@gap.beynet.de.

DAVID BORCK
ARLINGTON HEIGHTS IL

More On Michelin Website

Thanks for publishing a very interesting and informative newsletter on German speaking countries. It's the first thing I open when it arrives in the mail.

I read your info on Michelin having a free trip planner available on their website, and I wanted to make your readers aware that the *Michelin Red Guide* is also available for downloading. There's a demo version available on the site and the descriptions are the same as in the book version.

Michelin also offers an English/German dictionary from Collins. Both programs sell for \$34.99 each.

KYLE PARKER
VIA EMAIL

Bavarian Churches

A very good friend of mine, Christoph Schneider is the office manager for the **Wieskirche**, and he has developed an excellent website for the church. It is in both English

and German versions and is updated on a regular basis. The site is www.wieskirche.de.

Wieskirche is located about 25 kilometers from Oberammergau on the main road to Neuschwanstein, one of Ludwig's castles.

Rottenbuch is another beautiful church in the same rococo style as Wieskirche, although it is very plain on the outside and the inside in no way reflects the outer structure as it is part of an old monastery that has not functioned as such since 1803.

We passed it by many time over the years, as most tourists do, until Christoph took us there the first time. To get to Rottenbuch, which is about 15 kilometers from Oberammergau, instead of turning left toward Wieskirche immediately after crossing the Echelsbach Bridge, go straight ahead about three kilometers and drive into the monastery grounds. You will be very glad that you did when you go inside.

ROBERT WEISNER
GREENSBURG, PA

Hotel Near Salzburg

On our last trip to Europe, we stayed at a very charming hotel at Fuschlsee in Austria, not far from Salzburg. It was the **Hotel Seewinkel** (Brunn 86, A-5330 Fuschl am See, Salzburg, tel. +43/06226/8344, fax 834418, email: hotel@seewinkel.com) at the end of the road, but with rooms with balcony overlooking the lake.

FRANK HERZBERG
VIA EMAIL

"New Europe" Coverage?

I just got the most recent issue of *Gemütlichkeit*. The cover mentions "the New Europe." But there are almost never any articles or reviews about any place other than Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Being a poor historian that loves craftsmanship and beauty, I hope soon to visit some of the former lands of the Habsburg Empire, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland. I am sure there are many fine experiences, and the cost presumably would be less

than Rome, Paris, or London.


But I dearly would love to have guidance to restaurants and hotels. Last September, we went to Austria and, following your advice, stayed at the **Gasthaus Schorn** (St. Leonhardstrasse 1, A-5083 St. Leonhard-Grödig, tel. +43/06246/72334, fax 72334-40, email: gasthof.schorn@aon.at) in Grödig. The service was the opposite of American hotels. No hypocritical smiles, and the word "gruff" applies. But ask for something and one got it. Having eaten at numerous Michelin two and three-star restaurants, I am competent to say the food was excellent for the price.

Well, Salzburg was the low point of the trip. Compared to other Austrian towns and villages, it is a fraudulent tourist trap. But it was tolerable thanks to the Schorn. I can image how I would have felt if I had been staying at a noisy inefficient, large hotel for \$150 or \$200 a night.

You see what I mean. I dearly would like to know about the equivalent of the Schorn in the "New Europe." I am sure there must be at least some Polish innkeepers that take their job as seriously as the family at the Schorn. I desperately need guidance as to who they are.

It may be that your readers only send in letters about experiences in Germany. If that is so, how about the owner spending his next two dozen trips to Europe in any Central European country except Germany, Switzerland, and Austria!?

JAN ROGOZINSKI
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA.

(Ed. Note: The "New Europe" was inserted in our headline after the fall of communism. Mainly it was to signify that we would cover the territory of the former East Germany with an occasional story about the Czech Republic and Hungary. Since that time there have been stories on Prague, Budapest, Slovenia, Southern Bohemia, and, just a few months ago, one on Bratislava. We will continue to carry items on these countries but the amount of coverage probably will never equal that given to Germany, Austria or Switzerland.) 

Inside Travel

■ New Plans for "Hitler House"

The Austrian town of Branau, birthplace of Adolf Hitler, has plans to transform the place where he was born into a "house of responsibility," that will remind visitors of past atrocities in order to prevent future ones. Ironically, the crumbling, three-story building is currently a handicraft workshop for mentally and physically disabled Austrians, people Hitler wanted to exterminate.

Branau is about 35 miles north of Salzburg.

■ Free Food, Wine Info on Ticino

The Swiss canton of Ticino has a new brochure about the region's wines, cheeses, and liqueurs, plus a list of wineries that can be visited (English-speaking ones are noted) and a list of the best restaurants in the region. The brochure's back page contains phone, fax and email for all the canton's main and local tourist offices. Contact: Ticino Turismo, Casella Postale 1441 Via Lugano 12, CH-6501 Bellinzona, Switzerland. Request "Ticino Gastronomia."

■ Baking Museums

The Swiss town of Echallens, directly north of Lausanne, is home to **La Maison du Ble et du Pain** (The Wheat and Bread House), a museum

Key Websites for the Traveler to Germany, Austria & Switzerland

- www.gemut.com Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, traveler feedback, free travel advice and past issues (free access to back for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- www.michelin-travel.com The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants plus great interactive trip planning tools.
- www.mapblast.com Map and automobile trip planning. Locates routes and distances.
- bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en German rail. Train schedules throughout Europe, not just Germany.
- www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm Swiss and European rail schedules.
- www.switzerlandtourism.com Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority.
- www.germany-tourism.de Germany's national tourist authority.
- www.anto.com Austria's national tourist authority. 

INSIDE TRAVEL

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devoted to the story of wheat and bread from pre-history to the present. There are audiovisual presentations about wheat farming and exhibits of ancient millstones. An on-site working bakery allows visitor participation and a cafe serves the bakery's products. The museum is open from 9am to 6pm daily, except Monday, from March 1 to December 15. Contact: La Maison du Ble et du Pain, Place de l'Hotel de Ville, CH-TK Echallens, Switzerland. Tel. +41/04121/881 5071.

In the Valaisian ski resort of Saas Fee, the **Imseng Bakery** has an exhibit of bread molds and other bakery tools in a 1920's bakery environment. Open every day from 7am to 7pm, admission is free. Contact: Baeckermuseum Saas-Fee, CH-3906 Saas Fee, Switzerland, tel. +41/04127/958 1258, fax 958 1255

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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offices. This sort of agent is very different from one who knows only what's in the Sabre or Apollo computer reservation services. This is an agent who has knowledge. An agent who, for example, can tell you which European airports have trains running from the airport to the downtown, or who won't let you charge a 16-day rental car contract to a credit card that only provides collision and theft coverage on contracts of 15 days or fewer. This is also an agent who will save you money.

Many of you no doubt do your own trip planning and research, turning to an agent only when it's time to actually purchase needed travel products, such as air and rail tickets. Those who want their travel agent to be more than a ticket seller are going to have to pay over and above the commission structure. Many agencies already charge a service fee on airline tickets and agents with specialized knowledge now ask for consulting fees. The days of good, free advice as an

implicit part of the travel agent-client relationship are over.—RHB

ALTENSTEIN

Continued from page 1

balcony with spectacular view. A huge bargain at \$42 per night. A week's stay for *two persons*, including breakfasts and dinners, is only 666 DM (\$308)

The hotel's restaurant is another good reason to visit this small Franconian town. That night there was just one other couple in the pleasant dining room. The owner himself greeted us and first offered a choice of soups. We picked cream of tomato and potato leek and he disappeared into the kitchen, returning 15 minutes later with hot bowls of what was obviously freshly made soup.

Earlier in the day, our host had touted us on his steaks. We took the hint. They came with a crisp mixed salad and roasted potatoes. Delectable, as advertised.

After the meal we complimented the proprietor/chef and inquired about the origins of the beef. He pointed to a man at the bar who raises 'em, feeds 'em, slaughters 'em and delivers 'em. What we ate probably had a name. Cool.

Daily Rates: Singles 55 DM (\$25), doubles 80 to 90 DM (\$37 to \$42). Seven-night special with breakfast and dinner 666 DM (\$308) for two persons.

Contact: Gasthof-Pension Hofmann, Altenstein, 96126 Maroldswiesach, tel. +49/09535 391, fax 1441, web: www.gasthof-hofmann.de. Proprietor: Family Trejgis.

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 19/20

Birds of Prey

Next day, halfway between Altenstein and Coburg, we found the town of Tambach and its castle, **Schloss Tambach**. The castle itself is not extraordinary, but the falconry show on the castle grounds is worth a detour, especially for those who, as we do, have some interest in birds. When hiking in Northern California, if we happen to spot a falcon, hawk or eagle, we take time to observe. At

the Bayerischer Jagdfalkenhof we were able to view, "up close and personal," some of the world's largest, most lethal raptors.

The audience for this demonstration, 80 to 100 persons, assembles on bleacher-type seats. The show is narrated in German and begins with the flight of a single falcon. A trainer, positioned in a field in front of the bleachers, signals the bird which appears from behind the audience and lands on his protected hand. Another handler then takes his place on the top row of bleachers. The bird is then signaled by the second trainer and comes swooping overhead to him. The trainers then send the bird back and forth so that each section of bleachers gets a close-up view.

The demonstration continues with bald eagles, other falcons and an assortment of condors. The sight of a condor coming directly at you with its landing gear down is exhilarating to say the least. The oohs and aahs continue as the show crescendos like a 4th of July fireworks display, with diving falcons, soaring eagles and the big condors all sharing airspace.

The show runs daily at 11am and 3pm between March and October. The price of admission (about \$5.50 for adults and about \$2.50 for kids) includes entrance to Schloss Tambach and its hunting museum, plus admission to the wild animal park.

There is much to be said for Europe's big, historic cities, but the German countryside offers a unique kind of comfort and hospitality. Perhaps it's the slower pace that feels more like a vacation. Though Altenstein is not much different from thousands of similar German country towns, it does have advantages: a charming castle ruins, close proximity to a pair of fascinating cities — Coburg and Bamberg, and the friendliness and food at the Gasthof-Pension Hofmann.

www.gemut.com

The website for travelers to
Germanic Europe