

DEAR
SUBSCRIBER

Disappearing Family Hotels

Among the many activities associated with planning a trip — including restaurants, shopping, sightseeing, and transportation — we've learned through reader surveys that choosing a hotel is your number one concern. You care about where you lay your head. It ranks high on my list, too. More than mere places to sleep, some hotels, even moderately-priced ones, can be destinations in themselves.

For example, I always look forward to the **Schloss Haunsperg** near Salzburg; the **Hotel Anker** in Markt-Heidenfeld, Germany; the **Waldhotel Doldenhorn** in Kandersteg, Switzerland; and the **Art Nouveau** in Berlin — four hotels with something very important in common: they are all family-owned and operated.

As a guest in any of them, you deal with people who have a compelling reason to make your stay pleasant — they hope you return. These four represent the kind of hotel we want to stay in when we are in Europe, not the impersonal hostleries of corporate giants such as Sheraton, Hilton, Holiday Inn, Intercontinental, Mercure, Sofitel, Dorint, and others.

It's true, one can find comfortable, often luxurious, rooms and fine service at some of these chains, but they don't provide the European experience I crave. The 10- to 25-room, family-operated inn with a restaurant serving dishes typical of the region is a hotel category that simply doesn't exist in the United States. And, sad to report, as the years go by, there are fewer of them in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

WINTER TRAVELS

"I've laid around and played around this 'ol town too long; summer's almost gone, yes, winter's comin' on." — from "Gotta Travel On," popular '50s song

For those who normally schedule trips during the warm months, Europe from late October through April may seem an entirely different place. The days are short and the sun is known to hide for weeks at a time. But the numbers of visitors are few, and this is the time of year when the Continent's rich culture comes to full flower. It's the season of symphony orchestras, opera houses, and museums; of *Glühwein* and wild boar; and perhaps most important — of lower travel costs.

This month, we bring you a round-up of winter travel, including suggested cities to visit, finding off-season airfares, and what to do while you're there. Read on for cultural highlights,

foods you can only try in winter, tips on where to stay, and some surefire transportation strategies.

Airfare Deals

Except for the two weeks around Christmas, off-season airfares get downright affordable. From the East Coast, you'll find roundtrip flights from \$500 to \$600, (about \$675 to \$850 from the West Coast). A careful shopper may do even better than that. **Air India**, for example, currently offers a nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Frankfurt for \$629, January departures. (If these fares seem a bit higher than last winter, it's because they are: fuel costs, taxes, and security fees have taken a substantial jump.)

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Three for the Snow

*Most of the information in this story comes from our colleagues at **SkiEurope**, a longtime winter tour operator specializing in arranging custom packages for groups and individuals. Gemütlichkeit is personally acquainted with the company's knowledgeable and caring management, and recommend their products and services without hesitation. Visit www.ski-europe.com, or phone 800-333-5533, for information about 60 resorts in six countries and online tools that help travelers find the best ski resorts to match their interests.*

The European skiing experience is as much about atmosphere as it is about downhill thrills. You don't have to crave a vertical drop — or even ski at all — to enjoy the winter mountain scene: ice bars playing popular tunes, a bowl of *Gulasch Suppe*, and a tall, cold beer. Read on

as we highlight a winter resort in each of our three countries.

Mayrhofen

An easy two and a half-hour drive from Munich or Salzburg, the Ziller Valley begins at the town of Jenbach (population 6,000), and runs south following the Ziller River between the Tux Alps and the Kitzbühel Alps. At the end of the valley sits Mayrhofen, a town of 3,000 residents that grew from its origins as a summer haven for Viennese city folk to an 8,900-bed skiing and hiking resort.

One of Austria's liveliest resorts, Mayrhofen has steadily upgraded its lifts in recent years. The latest addi-

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Exchange rates as of 08/30/05

1 euro = \$1.22

1 Swiss franc = \$0.79

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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Most of the families who preside over Europe's best small hotels seem to have made a lifelong commitment to the business; one that is often passed down through generations. Most of us can only guess at the demands of such an undertaking; work days that extend from early morning to late at night, maintaining a *gemütlich* demeanor with even the most difficult guests, finding and keeping good employees, and obtaining the financing to continually keep up and refurbish guest and public rooms.

We live in a small southern Oregon town, Ashland, whose main business is tourism and which has some 65 bed-and-breakfast hotels. The ownership turnover is constant. Local real estate agents joke that all 65 are always for sale. Running a B&B apparently is not the laid-back, small town idyll it might appear.

The usual story is this: fed up with traffic and the rat race, big city California couple quit high-paying jobs; sell million-dollar house; buy B&B in quaint, friendly, gorgeous, relaxed Ashland. Two to five years later, burnt out from seven-day work weeks, constant employee turnover, demanding guests, and fierce competition from 64 other B&B's as well as an ever-growing contingent of corporate hotels that offer less charming but better equipped rooms at lower rates, their 10-room hotel goes back on the market.

Owning and operating a small hotel anywhere is akin to a religious vocation — to succeed one must have a calling. We Europe-traveling North Americans are fortunate that inn-keeping is a tradition still alive in Europe, though not as robust a tradition as it was just a few years ago.

The list of family-run hotels, especially the better ones, is shrinking. The **Geiger** in Berchtesgaden comes immediately to mind. A more charming, old-world hotel you couldn't find. But rooms must be regularly renovated, new ones constructed, spas added, and websites built and maintained. All too often, without corporate financing, the numbers don't add up. The Geiger is gone.

For many years, we enjoyed **Hotel Schloss Neuhof**, outside Coburg. Gone. Last year, we stopped by the sweet little **Auberge de Chernex** in the hills above Montreux. Closed, apparently forever.

In Garmisch-Partenkirchen, **Clausing's Posthotel** and the **Posthotel Partenkirchen** are both looking the worse for wear these days. Even that glorious Austrian country hotel, **Grüner Baum** in Bad Gastein, is transmitting a few subtle but alarming signals: yes, there's a shiny new conference center, but the room we occupied last December doesn't seem to have been touched in at least 10 years, and the food was not very good.

In July, we spent a few nights at the **Hotel Stadt Hamburg** on the island of Sylt, in the Atlantic, just off the

coasts of Germany and Denmark. We'll save our Stadt Hamburg review for our Sylt article at a later date, but suffice to say it's a wonderful, traditional German luxury hotel: fresh flowers everywhere, every day; complete 'served' breakfast, as opposed to a buffet; a restaurant that aspires to Michelin recognition; a stylish little bistro; 72 beautifully-furnished and decorated guest and public rooms; and a plethora of uniformed employees.

Observing all this, I asked myself how long third-generation owner, Harald Hentzschel — he was actually born in the building — can hang in against the flood of corporate money being poured into other hotels on this island so popular with upscale Germans. We're rooting hard for Herr Hentzschel — and for the Schlenzkas (Art Nouveau), von Gernerths (Schloss Haunsperg), Mädgers (Doldenhorn) and Deppischs (Anker) of Europe. Long may they wave.

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Using Gemütlichkeit

- 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".

Logging on to Our Website

Back issues in text format from January 1993, except for the most recent 12, are available free to subscribers only at www.gemut.com (click on "Members"). To access the issues, enter the user name and password published in this space each month. The new codes are:

User Name: **sept** Password: **0826**

Vol. 19, No. 8
September 2005

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

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Gemütlichkeit (ISSN 10431756) is published 10 times each year by UpCountry Publishing, 288 Ridge Road, Ashland OR 97520. TOLL FREE: 1-800/521-6722 or 541/488-8462, fax: 541/488-8468, e-mail travel@gemut.com. Web site: www.gemut.com. Subscriptions are \$67 per year for 10 issues. While every effort is made to provide correct information, the publishers can make no guarantees regarding accuracy.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO:
 Gemütlichkeit, 288 Ridge Road., Ashland OR 97520

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.

WINTER TRAVELS

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Hotel Bargains

Once you've arrived, you'll find good prices at familiar hotels. Especially at country hotels that are not located near ski resorts, winter is off-season and a different, lower rate schedule will be in effect. For example, at the **Hotel Appenzell** in Appenzell, Switzerland, a double room that in summer costs CHF 210 will cost only CHF 186 November through March. The winter price for the best double room at the **Hotel Reulein** in Lindau on the Bodensee is €111, a 25 percent discount from the summer rate of €148. At the five-star **Grand Park Hotel** in Bad Hofgastein, Austria, a winter double is €115 vs. €132 in summer. Lower rates, however, almost never apply during the Christmas season.

Off-Season Deals on Apartments and Chalets

In winter, **Idyll, Ltd.**, creators of the "Untour," offer a few of their Swiss properties at extraordinarily low prices. They are **Chalet Berit**, **Elizabeth**, and **Studio Albert**. These apartments are all in Sachseln and owned by the Greutert family, whose wonderful hospitality we described in our March 2005 issue. Untour deals are for two weeks and include roundtrip air and a Swiss Rail Pass. Departures are every two weeks from November 2, 2005 to March 8, 2006, and prices range from \$1,220 to \$1,766 per person. Contact Untours at 888-868-6871 or visit its website at www.untours.com.

Some of the properties rented by **Drawbridge to Europe** are discounted during winter months, often by more than \$100 per week. Contact: Tel. 888-268-1148, Web: www.drawbridgetoeurope.com.

Getting Around by Car, Train, or Boat

Car rental and rail ticket/pass prices are virtually the same as in summer but trains will be less full, and you no longer have to worry about rail cars that aren't air-conditioned.

Traveling Europe in winter presents a somewhat different challenge

than in warm weather. Though the Germans, Swiss, and Austrians are masters at keeping their highways clear of ice and snow, road conditions can be a factor. You may, therefore, be more comfortable traveling by rail, especially over longer distances. In fact, rolling through a cold, snowy countryside while settled snugly in a warm rail car is an enjoyable way to pass a winter afternoon.

For the braver heart, nothing beats the flexibility of a rental car. A compact car such as a VW Golf, perfect for two persons, can be rented in Germany for \$228 per week including tax (tel. 800-521-6722, Web: www.gemut.com).

Winter travel, of course, has its drawbacks. A few roads and most mountain passes will close and few, if any, lake steamers will operate at this time of year. If you're traveling by rental car you may have to pay "winterization" charges for snow tires and chains whether you want or even need them.

Among the mountain passes you may find closed — though there are alternative tunnels for some — are the Albula, Susten, Furka, Klausen, Simplon, San Bernardino, Bernina, Grimsel, and St. Gotthard in Switzerland. In Austria, the Grossglockner Road is usually blocked by snow from early November to May, and for the Arlberg, your only option will be the tunnel.

There are few really high roads in Germany but some stretches of southern Bavaria's Deutsche Alpenstrasse are subject to sudden, heavy snowfalls as are the roads out of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, west and southwest to the Austrian towns of Reutte and Imst.

For the rail traveler we recommend:

- For travel in Germany only: **German Twin Pass** (\$135 per person, second-class, \$195 pp, first-class, for four days travel in one month; additional days \$18 and \$25.50)

- Switzerland only: **Swiss Saver Pass** (\$153 pp second-class, \$230 pp first-class, for four consecutive days unlimited travel; \$217 and \$323 for eight days)

- Austria only: **Austrian Railpass** (\$112 per person, second-class, \$164 pp, first-class, for three

days travel in one month; additional days \$16 and \$22)

- All three countries: **Eurail Select Pass** (\$316 pp, first-class only; five days travel within two months; pass also sold for six, eight or 10 days — \$348, \$414, \$480)

Except for the Austrian Railpass, these prices assume two persons traveling together at all times; rates are 17 to 30 percent higher if you are traveling alone.

Some of the most popular European river cruises take place during the winter. **Uniworld**, for example, operates a special eight-day, Vienna-to-Vienna New's Years cruise with stops in Bratislava and Budapest, as well as several 10-day Christmas Market cruises on the Danube, Rhine, and Mosel rivers. *Gemütlichkeit* subscribers get a 5 percent discount (call 800-521-6722, press option 3).

Performances Galore

Our three countries offer some of the world's finest performing arts organizations. There are a couple of dozen first-rate orchestras, perhaps as many opera houses, several world-class dance companies, and too many fine art museums to count. Berlin alone has three opera venues, 175 museums, and several top-flight classical music ensembles, including the great **Berlin Philharmonic**.

This season, **Deutsche Oper Berlin** (www.deutscheoperberlin.de) will feature premiers by Mozart (*Fragmente*) and Verdi (*Ernani*), among others. The world-renowned **Staatsoper Unter den Linden** (www.staatsoper-berlin.org/en/intro.htm) dates to the era of King Friedrich II. Upcoming premiers include *Die Lustige Witwe*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Tristan und Isolde*. Berlin's third opera house, **Komische Oper Berlin**, specializes in German-language productions of opera, operetta and musicals. (For more on Berlin, see Winter Destinations, below.)

Vienna is similarly endowed, with its great **Staatsoper**, **Volksooper**, and **Wiener Philharmoniker**, based in the city's Musikverein. (For more on Vienna, see Winter Destinations, below.)

Munich's **Bavarian State Opera** (*Bayerische Staatsoper*), performs in the

National Theatre on Max-Joseph-Platz and also in the Prinzregententheater and Cuvilliers Theatre. This season kicks off with a special tour though Japan, but the opera will return in October with seven premiers and a special **Mozart Festival** in February 2006, which will feature six Mozart productions. This is your last chance to catch Zubin Mehta as Music Director, as he retires after the season. Contact: www.bayerische.staatsoper.de.

There's cultural depth, too, in Salzburg, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Dresden, Leipzig, Zürich, Geneva, and others. Bamberg, for example, despite a population of only 70,000, is home to a world-renowned orchestra.

Winter Cuisine: Roots and Game

Fall and winter also mean a change of cuisine. Hardy root vegetables appear in salads and side dishes. Strong game dishes — venison, wild boar, goose — dot menus everywhere. Oysters from the Atlantic are at their best in November.

Dining, of course, is indoors and what were stuffy, airless rooms in summer are now charming, cozy sanctuaries from the cold. What better reward after a long, chilly walk, than a beer and bowl of thick soup at a rough wood table by a fire? Stronger "Bock" beers — originally brewed by monks to help get them through their Lenten fast — are typically available in the colder months.

On the third Thursday of November comes the first wine of the year. Pressed from grapes harvested in October, quickly fermented, and immediately bottled, Nouveau Beaujolais is shipped from France and restaurants all over Europe display the sign, *Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!* What only a few weeks before was grapes on the vine is now red wine in the bottle.

Holiday Cheer

Winter's first and most important major event is the holiday season, culminating, of course, in Christmas and New Year's Day (Sylvester). Beginning in late November, nearly every town square becomes that outdoor mall/carnival/open-air music venue/pub known as the Christmas Market. In addition to Christmas parapherna-

lia, the unending booths sell everything from sausage to shoes to *Schnaaps*. A few offer the handmade products of highly-skilled craftsmen and women, but much of the merchandise is mass-produced junk.

Still, it's great fun, especially the small town markets, with their kiddie rides and carousels, street music from Mozart to Dixieland, and ubiquitous *Glühwein* (hot, spicy, red wine) stands where it's mostly locals gathering in the cold to share conversation and a hot drink.

Though you must put this writer in the "Bah, Humbug-seen-one-Christmas-Market-you've-seen-'em-all" category, there are those North Americans who follow the Christmas Market circuit as though it were the PGA Tour; the 'majors' no doubt being Nürnberg, Vienna, Salzburg, and Munich. Trusted sources say, however, that the most authentic markets are in the former communist east; cities such as Krakow, Leipzig, and Prague, where crass, western-style commercialism is kept somewhat at bay.

Though we prefer the smaller town versions such as in Bonn or Weimar, in Vienna be sure to see the beautifully lighted and decorated market in front of the **Neue Rathaus**, but also take in lesser markets in squares and alleys all over the city; notably the one in **Spittelbergasse**. The vast main hall of Zürich's main rail station also has a Christmas market worth seeing.

Perhaps the most charming holiday destination is near Steyr, in Austria; the tiny pilgrimage hamlet of **Christkindl**, where you'll find a pretty little church and a very busy post office. It is here that Austrian children send their Christmas letters and all are answered by the Christkindl post office. You may wish to mail a card, as the stamps and postmark are somewhat prized. There is also a huge, wonderfully intricate, 'Rube Goldberg'-style, mechanical Nativity scene on display. Completed just before World War II, it is the work of a single local hobbyist who took some 40 years to build it — in his living room.

Winter Destinations

Cities, where it's easy to duck into a store or café, or jump aboard public transport, to escape the cold or bad weather, are preferable to the countryside for most winter travelers — unless, of course, you're headed to the hills for alpine fun (see "Three for the Snow," page 1.)

Vienna

If you want to see high-level productions of holiday staples, such as the *Nutcracker Ballet* and *Die Fledermaus*, this is your city. Forget the New Year's Day concert of the Vienna Philharmonic in the Musikverein, it may be Europe's toughest ticket.

From fall to early spring, there are performances virtually every night at the city's two leading opera houses, Staatsoper and Volksoper, as well as hundreds of less grand — and less expensive — musical events.

Berlin

"What Prague and London were in the 90's, Berlin has now become: a magnet for anyone who wants to live and work in a city that is humming with cultural energy and, by contrast with the rest of northern Europe, an insane bargain." — *New York Times*, March 13, 2005.

The Berlin Tourist Office estimates that each day and night in the city are some 1,500 events: concerts, art exhibits, plays, readings, and more. In addition to highbrow stuff, such as the Berlin Philharmonic, the **Deutsches Sinfonie**, numerous other classical music ensembles, and the three opera houses, are lesser-known, but no less entertaining, venues.

Last winter at the Komische Oper, a wonderful neo-Baroque building in the *Mitte* (old east), we saw a fine and funny production of *Die Lustige Witwe* (The Merry Widow). *Madama Butterfly* is there through January 15 at prices ranging from €8 to €31.

A surprising East Berlin carryover is the spectacular **Friedrichstadtpalast**, in which the costumes and staging (full-size, glass-enclosed swimming pools appearing and disappearing on stage) are reminiscent of Las Vegas. Emblem-

atic of Berlin's storied nightlife is the famed **Wintergarten** variety theater.

Dozens of extraordinary new buildings designed by the world's most sought-after architects, a contemporary art scene that critics say leads Europe, and Germany's best restaurant roster, are three more compelling reasons for a winter visit to this dynamic city.

Sylt, Germany

This summer playground of Germany's upper crust doesn't get much action in winter — a good reason to go there. Walk the beaches, the pathways through the dunes and face down exhilarating storms as they sweep in off the Atlantic. Great seafood. Time a February visit with the **Biikebrennen** bonfire festival and enjoy a traditional meal of *Grünkohl* (green cabbage).

Bern, Switzerland

The annual **Zibelemärit** (onion market) takes charge of this old-world Swiss town on the fourth Monday of November. Bern is great for strolling in bad weather, since ancient arcades protect six kilometers of old-town sidewalks.

Switzerland is the rail traveler's paradise and Bern, a railroad hub, may be its best day trip headquarters. Most hotels are an easy walk from the station and dozens of interesting destinations are within a two-hour ride. Buy a Swiss Pass and have fun.

Salzburg

This relatively small town (pop. 140,000) with big-time culture is said to take on a magical quality around Christmas. The Christmas Markets — there are three — are popular as are the many choral concerts in churches and concert halls.

Nürnberg

Home of the mother of all Christmas markets (November 28 to December 24), Nürnberg attracts more than two million visitors during the holidays. Go in the evening on a weekday. The tourist office proudly says no amusement park entertainment or "canned" Christmas music. A candlelight procession of thousands of school children takes place

at 6:15pm, December 11. More than 150 concerts and related events accompany this year's **Christkindlesmarkt**. The local tourist office has packages starting as low as €36. Contact: tourismus@nuernberg.de.

Köln (Cologne)

Carnival begins here at 11 minutes past 11am on the eleventh day of November, but the real craziness starts on the Thursday before the start of Lent. There are processions, costumes, balls, dancing and, above all, eating and drinking — until the wee hours. The big day is **Rose Monday** (Rosenmontag) with its huge parade.

Zürich

For two weeks in early November a massive wine tasting takes place aboard a dozen ships docked at Zürich's Bürkliplatz on the Zürichsee. At **Expovina**, visitors can choose from a selection of more than 4,000 wines from 24 countries. ☒

Travel Notes

■ **Call a Bike:** We're all accustomed to phones that can send e-mail and take pictures, but can a cell phone really conjure up a bike on demand? If you are in Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne, or Munich, keep an eye out for one of these high-tech bikes locked to a sign post on the corner.

Here's how it works: Registration is done over the phone by dialing 0700 0 5 22 55 22. After you've provided your credit card information, a €5 service deposit is charged to your credit card. (When you're finished with the bike, the €5 is deducted from your final rental fee.) Now, dial the number shown in the red circle on the top of the bike lock. The phone system will read you back a code. Enter it into the lock, and the bike is yours to ride.

After you've burned off the two bratwursts you had for lunch with a few laps around town, it's time to return the bike. Simply stop at the nearest major road crossing within the town's central area and lock the bike to a fixed object. Press the button on the display and you will see a return code. Dial Call A Bike and

tell them the code and the name of the street crossing. You'll be charged €0.07 per minute or €15 for 24 hours.

■ **SkiEurope** has announced what each year are some of the winter's best vacation packages. This year the company's **SuperSki Week** deals include deals to Innsbruck from \$669, Garmisch-Partenkirchen from \$779, and Chamonix from \$829. Prices include roundtrip airfare on major airlines, six nights hotel accommodation, buffet breakfast daily, transfers (except for Innsbruck), and local taxes and service charges in Europe. For more information, visit www.skieurope.com or phone 800-333-5533.

■ No list of unusual museums should fail to include the **Petrol Pump Museum** in Gänsbrunnen, Switzerland, near Solothurn. Its more than 250 items date to 1885 and include some of the very first gasoline service station pumps from the United States, Germany, and Switzerland. Also on display are some rare art-déco items, such as very old refrigerators, juke boxes and slot machines. Contact: www.tanksaeulenmuseum.ch ☒

Key Websites for the Traveler

- www.gemut.com Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, traveler feedback, travel tips, and past issues (free access to back issues for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- www.viamichelin.com The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants, plus great interactive trip planning tools
- www.travelessentials.com Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers
- www.webflyer.com Informative frequent-flyer forums make this a must for air travelers
- bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en German rail website, with train schedules throughout Europe, as well as Germany
- www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm Swiss and European rail schedules
- www.ski-europe.com Top Web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts
- www.myswitzerland.com Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority
- www.germany-tourism.de Germany's national tourist authority
- www.austria.info/us Austria's national tourist authority
- www.historicgermany.com Website for an alliance of historic German cities
- www.thetravelinsider.info Info on electronic devices used by travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

THREE FOR THE SNOW

Continued from page 1

tion is a six-seater called the Gerent, that will usher 3,000 skiers per hour to the mountaintop. Next on the list is the 25-year old Ahorn cable car.

There are two main mountains at Mayrhofen: the Penken and the Ahorn. The Penken is best suited to intermediates while the Ahorn is ideal for beginners.

Mayrhofen recently joined with the resorts of Hippach, Finkenberg, and Tux to form the Zillertal3000, an area that provides more than 146 kilometers (80 miles) of trails and is serviced by 46 lifts.

Shorter runs and long lift lines discourage some advanced skiers, but the conditions are reliable for Tyrolia. And nearby, the Hintertux glacier offers year-round winter recreation.

For a small village, Mayrhofen has an active après-ski scene. The **Ice Bar** at the base of the Penken Gondola is a popular destination for skiers at the end of the day. Bars and clubs offer music ranging from folk to disco.

A number of wintertime activities, however, don't require traipsing around in stiff boots attached to long, skinny planks. The tourist office can arrange a hot air balloon ride or a panoramic alpine flight, horseback riding, sleigh rides, ice skating, or tobogganing. In the rare case of inclement weather, indoor activities include swimming at the "adventure" pool (Waldbadstrasse); soaking in a hot tub, sauna, or Jacuzzi; playing squash, billiards, bowling, or chess; and of course, browsing the shops along Hauptstrasse.

The five-star **Elisabeth Hotel** (tel. +43 5285/6767, www.elisabethhotel.com) has 30 guestrooms with wood-paneled walls and ceilings, a balcony, mini-bar, satellite TV, and separate rooms for toilet and bath. The fitness center is a destination in itself, with a large indoor pool, sauna, solarium, steam room, body styling, massage, beauty salon, and Jacuzzi. Closed November 1 to December 16.

For Ziller Valley cuisine, **Wirtshaus zum Griena** (+43 5285 62778)

Skiing Stats

CHÂTEAUX D'OEX

Skiable Terrain: 62 km/39 mi
Highest Lift: 1,800 meters/ 5,905 feet
Vertical Drop: 802 meters/2,631 feet
Difficulty Level: beginner to intermediate
Multiresort Tickets: yes
Multiresort 6-day Lift Ticket: About \$250

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN

Skiable Terrain: 115 km/72 mi
Highest Lift: 2,830 meters/9,285 feet
Vertical Drop: 1,350 meters/4,429 feet
Difficulty Level: beginner to advanced
Multiresort Tickets: yes
Multiresort 6-day Lift Ticket: About \$175

MAYRHOFEN

Skiable Terrain: 146 km/80 mi
Highest Lift: 2,250 meters/7,500 feet
Vertical Drop: 1,650 meters/5,412
Difficulty Level: beginner to intermediate
Multiresort Tickets: yes
Multiresort 6-day Lift Ticket: About \$150

is the place to dine. Here, Anneliese Steinlechner serves local specialties in a 400 year-old farm house located near Mayrhofen's Ahorn gondola.

Châteaux d'Oex

Nestled on the south side of a valley among the Vaudois, French-speaking Alps, Château d'Oex is the picture of a quaint ski village. To the west is the medieval town of Gruyères, world famous for its cheese; to the east, the international glamour resort, Gstaad.

If cheese and the international jet set are not enough to evoke the real Switzerland, the cultural diversity between the French and German speaking sections of the country is.

Some simply enjoy the relaxed ski atmosphere at Château d'Oex. But most serious skiers opt for a regional pass that covers 69 lifts and accesses 248 kilometers (155 miles) of groomed slopes across eight different resorts, including Gstaad, Saanemöser, and Schönried, as well as the glacier above Les Diablerets, which is skiable year round.

Perhaps the most exciting time to visit this resort is toward the end of January, when Château-d'Oex is home to one of the world's largest

hot air balloon events. Only an hour and a half from Geneva, the resort is convenient for day trips to the lakeside **Castle of Chillon** (saluted by Lord Byron) and the cities of Montreux and Lausanne.

Inquire at the Château-d'Oex tourist office about visiting **La Maison de L'Etivaz**, a cheese-making cooperative. The cheese is made by individual farmers in the mountains in the summer, then brought to L'Etivaz to be stored and cured for up to three years. The tour is worthwhile.


For accommodations, **Hostellerie Bon Accueil** is a longtime favorite, in an 18th century chalet (Contact: www.lebonaccueil.ch/english/index.php).

Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Fresh, pure mountain air has made this one of the most popular health resorts in the Bavarian Alps. Unlike some of Europe's more glamorous resorts, it has a down-to-earth feel that is grounded in authentic culture. Locals often dress in traditional styles and many of the older buildings are decorated with beautiful frescoes that are often centuries old.

The imposing Zugspitze rises 2,966 meters (nearly 10,000 feet) from Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Skiers will find 115 kilometers (72 miles) of downhill runs, across all ability levels. With a multiresort pass, you can also use unconnected lift systems in the area. Three rail lines, several bus lines and excellent highways link Garmisch-Partenkirchen with southern Bavaria and Munich, the capital.

Five minutes on foot from the center of town in a quiet, residential neighborhood, the **Hotel Staudacherhof** is a wellness hotel and golf resort that rates Michelin "red." Contact: tel. +49/8821/92 90, www.staudacherhof.de.

About **Gasthof Fraundorfer**, on the Partenkirchen side of town, Germans like say, *Es gibt nur einen Gasthof Fraundorfer* — there is only one Fraundorfer. Good Bavarian food and soulful mountain music. A unique experience. Contact: tel. +49/8821/92 70, www.gasthof-fraundorfer.de. 

Readers' Forum

Summer Trip Report

The nicest hotel of our whole trip was the **Neu-Meran** in Bad Reichenhall. Our room was spacious, nicely appointed, with a beautiful bathroom. It was on a corner and had a 40-foot veranda. Since the hotel is on a hill, the view across the valley to the mountain on the other side was most beautiful. The wonderful ambience was also matched by the friendliness of the staff, excellent food, and superb wine. Our schedule only permitted us to stay one night, and we were very sad to leave the next day.

I will never stay at **Gasthof Fraundorfer** in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. It was the worst hotel of our whole trip. The staff was snippy and not helpful, and the management was more interested in operating the restaurant than the hotel.

BRUCE AND JUDY HYLAN
VIA E-MAIL

(Editor's Note: The Fraundorfer has long been recommended by Gemütlichkeit, especially the restaurant with its special Bavarian ambiance. Our last visit there was in December of 2004, and we found nothing amiss. Though we did not stay in the hotel, we had dinner there two nights. We would welcome comments from readers on recent Fraundorfer experiences.)

Lufthansa Upgrade Fails

We traveled to Europe in late May and hoped to use United frequent flyer miles to upgrade to business class on **Lufthansa**.

We purchased tickets seven months prior to travel. As you know, if you want to upgrade with miles you can't do so with the cheapest coach fares. So our tickets (San Francisco-Munich) were \$1,500 each.

At the time of booking the airline would not confirm an upgrade, but we (and our travel agent, I might add) were confident that it would not be a problem. *Wrong*. The travel agent checked with the airline on a regular basis regarding our status, and always with the same result: no upgrades available, but keep checking. And so we did, right up until flight time.

MICHELIN'S WEBSITE COVERS AUSTRIA

An important missing resource for the Germany, Austria, Switzerland traveler has been a *Michelin Red Guide* for Austria. There are guides for Germany and Switzerland, but none for Austria. Though there's still no printed guide, the outstanding Michelin website now contains hotel and restaurant listings for cities throughout Austria.

So, in effect, there really is a *Red Guide* for Austria, just no handy, shiny red book — with those marvelous front-of-the-book maps that highlight the best places — to throw in your suitcase.

To access the Austria data, go to www.viamichelin.com. Choose 'The Michelin Guides' from the yellow bar on top, and then select 'Hotels.' You'll be presented with a 'Location Search' window. Type in the city, choose 'Austria' from the dropdown menu, and click OK.

We tried the little town of Kremsmünster, whose **Hotel Schlair** we gave a thumbs-up to in our April issue. The search results place the Schlair at the top of the list. Michelin gives it one "roof peak" and describes

it as "a well-run hotel with a committed staff, centrally located in a 700-year-old guest house in the old town. Individually furnished rooms, from rustic to modern style."


it as "a well-run hotel with a committed staff, centrally located in a 700-year-old guest house in the old town. Individually furnished rooms, from rustic to modern style."

Listed beneath the Schlair are another 14 hotels in the region. There is also a zoom-in/zoom-out map with the Schlair and other nearby hotels marked on it.

Clicking on the Schlair brings up a page with such information as street address, e-mail address, rates, a brief description of the hotel, and other usual Michelin info.

Also on the Schlair page are links to nearby hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, and car parks. Click Restaurants for a list of eating establishments presented in order of their proximity to the Schlair. Also on that page is a map showing the restaurants' locations. Click on individual restaurants to get the Michelin low-down on each.

What was already a marvelous website for the Europe-bound traveler has become even more valuable with the addition of Austria.

Our thanks to longtime subscriber Ron Woellhof for alerting us to this important development. 

When we first presented our tickets at the airport, we were again put off and told to inquire about the upgrade at the gate just prior to departure.

To make a long story short, we were not upgraded. On the homeward flight it was nearly the same story at Munich airport; when we checked at the gate we were told that they could upgrade one of us, but not both. Generously, my husband let me take the upgrade and took his seat in row 54 — a very long walk from business class.

So, you do the math; my husband paid \$1,500 for a roundtrip coach seat purchased seven months in advance. My \$1,500 did get me a one-way upgrade, so guess I should live with that. But here's what rankles: why don't the airlines tell you up front whether or not you can have an upgrade? Instead, they take your money and string you

along. If we had known that there would be no upgrades from the outset, we certainly would have investigated other options.

This has been such a source of irritation and frustration for us that we will no longer fly with Lufthansa.

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST

(Editor's Note: It's difficult to know what this reader would have paid for a coach ticket purchased in November, 2004, for travel in May, 2005. Right now, however, you can buy a Lufthansa coach ticket for travel in late May, 2006, for \$1,006. This is on the airline's daily San Francisco-Munich nonstop. I think it's safe to say the price would have lower than that in November of '04.

Why airlines — and Lufthansa is not alone in this — choose to adhere to a policy that undoubtedly angers thousands of customers is one of the many

mysteries surrounding the airline business these days.

In a revealing demonstration of where in the pecking order it places the frequent flyer customers of a partner airline, Lufthansa quite obviously did not want to accommodate this customer until the very last minute, when it was certain the business class seat could not be sold — or given to a more favored customer.

Clearly, this policy provides short term advantages to Lufthansa; in this case they got extra revenue, and, with an upgrade to an otherwise unoccupied business class seat, were able to reduce their mileage debt. But in the longer term, they have a dissatisfied customer who in the future — all things being equal — will probably choose another airline.

Our advice? Tell your frequent flyer program how unhappy you are and don't spend additional money on a coach ticket unless you're certain of an upgrade.)

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 2

Trouble on a Train

I'm a pushover for warm and fuzzy travel stories. Here's one related to me by longtime subscribers, Phil and Lynn Roberts of Hayward, California. In it is a lesson or two. In the crowded luggage vestibule of a train about to depart Geneva for Venice, a man pulling a large piece of rolling luggage bumps heavily into Phil. There is a moment of confusion and chaos, and the man moves quickly on.

Half an hour later as the train speeds toward Italy, Phil discovers his wallet, which had been deep in a front pocket of his pants is gone, no doubt taken by the man with the rolling suitcase, or an accomplice in the vestibule. His pocket has been picked — in Switzerland, of all places.

As they begin to discuss just how to deal with having no credit cards and the equivalent of less than one hundred dollars in cash, help arrives in the form of a couple of fellow travelers. An Egyptian businessman and his wife, who have just put their son in a Geneva boarding school, immediately volunteer their GSM mobile phone, and for the next 45 minutes Phil is on the phone to the United

States, canceling his credit cards and trying to arrange for some quick cash.

It is Sunday, and Visa promises a new card delivered to their Venice hotel by Tuesday. American Express arranges for the equivalent of \$500 in cash at a Venice bank. Mastercard is sorry, but offers no assistance other than canceling the card — apparently getting a replacement card to a customer outside the United States is one of the “priceless” things Mastercard refers to in its TV ads.

As Lynn and Phil muse aloud about how they will survive in Venice for the next 24 hours with no credit cards and only 50 or so Swiss Francs, the Egyptian, in a moment that defies the stereotypical view of two cultures at odds, pulls out a U.S. \$100 bill and offers it to them. A loan? A gift? The Roberts aren't sure. It was just, “Here, I'd like to help.” Of course, they did not take the money, but what a wonderful gesture it was.

Upon their return from Europe, they received a transatlantic phone call from a Swiss man who had found the wallet and all its contents, except for the cash, on a Geneva street.

Later in their trip, the Roberts's arrived on a stormy afternoon in Interlaken, expecting to pick up the rental car they had reserved through the *Gemütlichkeit* Travel Service. Inexplicably, Interlaken's Avis office had closed an hour earlier than the scheduled 2pm time. A toll-free phone call to Auto Europe's 24-hour help line quickly solved the problem, however. Their car would be delivered next day to their hotel (Grand Hotel Giessbach, Brienz), and Auto Europe would pay for their \$50 taxi ride to the hotel.

Lessons to be learned?

- If you've booked a car through *Gemütlichkeit's* travel service, and something goes wrong, immediately phone the toll-free “Safety Net” help line. It's listed on the voucher.

- Keep valuables, such as credit cards, cash and passports in zipped pockets.

- Realize that help can come from unexpected sources. —RHB

We Recommend

This listing of good value, mid-priced hotels in popular destination cities is intended for fast reference. Additional hotels and links to hotel websites is in the **Archives & Hotel Database** sections at www.gemut.com. The required subscriber user name and password for access this month is on page 2 herein. Hotels below are arranged in price order, higher to lower.

Berlin

Hotel Art Nouveau, Leibnizstr. 59, tel. +49/030/327 7440, fax 327 7440, email: hotellartnouveau@snaufu.de

Hotel Domus, Uhländstrasse 49, Germany D-10719, tel. +49/030/882041, fax 882 0410, email: info@hotel-domus-berlin.de

Bern

Hotel Bristol, Schauplatzstrasse 10, CH-3011, tel. +41/31/311 0101, fax 311 9479, email: reception@bristolbern.ch

Hotel Kreuz, Zeughausgasse 41, CH-3000, tel. +41/031/329 9595, fax 329 95 96, email: hotelkrenz@swissonline.ch

Lausanne

Hostellerie du Débarcadère, 7 chemin du Cret, Saint Sulpice, CH-102, tel. +41/021/691 5747, fax 691 5079, email: debarcadere@swissonline.ch (not in town)

Hotel Agora, Av. du Rond-Point 9, CH-1006, tel. +41/021/617 1211, fax 616 2605, email: agora@fhoteis.ch

Lucerne

Hotel Wilden Mann, Bahnhofstrasse 30, CH-6000 Luzern, tel. +41/041/2101666, fax 2101629, email: mail@wilden-mann.ch

Hotel Cascada, Bundesplatz 18, CH-6003 Lucerne, tel. +41/041/226 80 88, fax 226 80 00, email: info@cascada.ch

Munich

Hotel Exquisit, Pettenkoferstr. 3, tel. +49/089/ 551 99 0, fax 551 99 499, email: info@hotel-exquisit.com

Hotel Acanthus, An Der Hauptfeuerwache 14, D- 80331 München, tel. +49/089 / 23 18 80, fax: 2 60 73 64, e-mail: acanthus@t-online.de

Hotel Kraft, Schillerstr. 49, tel. +49/089/594823-24, fax 550 3856, email: office@kraft-hotel.com

Rothenburg ob der Tauber

Reichs-Küchenmeister, Kirchplatz 8, Rothenburg o.d. Tauber, Germany D-91541, tel. +49/09861/97 00, fax 97 04 09, email: hotel@reichskuechenmeister.com

Salzburg & Environs

Schloss Haunsperg, A-5411 Oberalm bei Hallein, Hammerstrasse 32, tel. +43/06245/80662, fax 85680, email: info@schlosshaunsperg.com

Hotel Struber, Nonntaler Hauptstrasse 35, Austria A-5020 tel. +43/0662/843 728, fax 843 728 8, email: struber@sbg.at

Hotel Jedermann, Rupertgasse 25, Austria A-5020, tel. +43/0662/873241-0, fax 873241-9, email: jedermann@salzburginfo.or.at

Vienna

Hotel Römischer Kaiser, Annagasse 16, A-1010, tel. +43/01/512 77 51 0, fax 512 77 51 13, email: info@rkhotel.bestwestern

Allstadt Vienna, Kirchengasse 41, tel. +43/01/526 3399-0, fax 523 4901, email: hotel@allstadt.at, web: www.allstadt.at

Pension Aviano, Marco-D'Aviano-Gasse 1, tel. +43/01/512 8330, fax 512 8330 6, email: aviano@perlschty.com

Zürich

Hotel Florhof, Florhofgasse 4, Switzerland CH-8001, tel. 41/01/261 4470, fax 261 4611, email: info@florhof.ch

Hotel Arlette, Stampfenbachstrasse 26, Switzerland CH-8001, tel. +41/01/25 20 032, fax 25 20 932, email: hotel.arlette@bluwin.ch

Frankfurt Airport

Steigenberger Esprit Hotel Frankfurt Airport, CargoCity Süd, D-60549, tel. +49/069/69 70 99, fax 69 70 94 44, email: frankfurt@esprit-hotels.de

Hotel Birkenhof, von-Eiff-Str 37, Hanau-Steinheim, D-63456, tel. +49/06181/648 80, fax 64 88 39, email: info@HotelBirkenhof.de (25-minute drive from airport)

Hotel Dreieich, Frankfurter Str. 49, Langen, D-63225, tel. +49/06103/91 50, fax 52 030, email: hotel-dreieich@gmx.de

Munich Airport

Hotel Hoyacker Hof, Freisinger Landstrasse 9a, D-85748 Garching b. München, tel. +49/089/326 9900, fax 320 7243, email: info@hoyackerhof.de

Zürich Airport

Mövenpick Zürich Airport, Walter-Mittelholzerstrasse 8, CH-8152 Glattpfurg, tel. +41/01/808 88 88, fax 808 88 77, email: hotel@movenpick-zurich-airport.ch

Hotel Fly Away, Marktgasse 19, Zürich-Kloten, Switzerland CH-8302, tel. +41/01/804 4455, fax 804 44 50, email: reservation@hotel-flyaway.ch