

DEAR  
SUBSCRIBER

### Car Rental vs. Rail

Over the past 20 years, the writers, editors and readers of this publication have engaged in a sometimes heated discussion over which is the better way to travel in Europe, by train or by car.

Perhaps because of *Gemütlichkeit's* affiliated car rental business, we got some impassioned letters of protest when, back in the late '80s and early '90s, I came down on the side of car travel. Though I could hardly claim objectivity, my stance was mainly a reaction to the conventional media wisdom — spear-headed in large measure by Rick Steves (Rail Europe's number one seller of rail passes) — that, like the sun rises in the east, rail is the best and *cheapest* way to see Europe. "Best" is subjective, but cheapest is not, and most of my efforts were directed toward showing that in many instances traveling by car was less expensive than going by train.

I was surprised at the strong reaction from rail travel devotees. My conflict of interest was (and is) a valid point, though I have long recognized the rail-car choice frequently has nothing to do with money but comes down to personal preference. One man, as I recall, said he would rather undergo a root canal than drive in a large European city. That's a fair point and tells me this is an issue that will never be resolved; for some travelers, rail is better, for others it's car.

For several reasons, my personal views on this issue have altered somewhat over the past dozen years.

- For openers, I've ridden a lot

*Continued on page 2...*

This Issue

p1 Thun & Spiez  
p1 Country Explorations  
p7 Germany's ICE Trains  
p5 Useful Websites

# GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

## SWISS LAKE TOWNS

*Travelers are just beginning to discover the charming lakeside towns of Thun and Spiez, and find them a less expensive and less touristy alternative to nearby Interlaken.*

Ten years ago, travelers considered Thun worthy of a short stop if they happened to be passing by on the way to somewhere else. Today, the town caught halfway between the capital of Bern and the tourist center of Interlaken has been thoroughly revived. Fashionable boutiques and trendy restaurants and cafes have opened in the compact center, breathing new life into old buildings. There is a lively buzz about town and a healthy mix of young and old along the pedestrian streets and alleys.

Both Thun, and its smaller neighbor, Spiez, make an excellent base for getting a taste of everything Switzerland has to offer: rolling hills, dairy

farms, tall mountains, clear blue lakes, and old-world charm combined with celebrated contemporary architecture.

Thun bills itself as the gateway to the Bernese Alps, but the vibrant lakeside town is equally the portal to the rolling Emmental countryside. In addition, it is just a short drive or train ride from the Swiss capital, Bern, with its medieval alleys and cultural attractions. Of course, the magnificent Jungfrau region is also just minutes away.

### Thun on Foot

To get a feel for Thun, take a 45-minute walk through the old town and by the river. Starting at the railway station, go left along the main

*Continued on page 3...*

## On the Backroads of Germany

One doesn't have to stray very far from Germany's most frequently-traveled tourist routes in order to get off the beaten track, where the villages are sleepy and the roads nearly deserted.

Near the top of virtually every auto tourist's hit list is the **Romantik Road** from Würzburg to Füssen. The principal stops along its way, such as Rothenburg, Dinkelsbühl, and Nördlingen, have an undeniable appeal, but in high season are often jammed with visitors. And the road itself can be bumper-to-bumper with tour buses. But for those equipped with the right maps, the pleasures of placid country hamlets, and inexpensive but charming country hotels, are literally minutes away from the tourist hubbub.

For example, Volkach near Würzburg, and Niederstetten near Rothenburg, are interesting small towns, each worthy of a half a day's exploration, and blessed with pleasant, affordable accommodations with good dining options. The journey by car from one to the other, via a series of historic towns and a maze of backroads, could take as little as 75 minutes or a full day, your choice.

### Volkach

This town of some 9,000 inhabitants and almost continuous wine festivals, is on a bend in the Main River, 28 kilometers east-northeast of Würzburg. It celebrates its 1100<sup>th</sup> birthday this year with the usual

*Continued on page 6...*

**Exchange rates as of 02/28/06**

**1 euro = \$1.19**

**1 Swiss franc = \$0.76**

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER**

*Continued from page 1*

of trains during that period. With age, I find I approach the prospect of a hard day's drive from, say, Hamburg to Frankfurt, with little enthusiasm. Soon after it went into service in 1991, I began to rely more and more on Germany's great ICE service for longer trips, and a Hamburg-Frankfurt run became a pleasure, not a chore. Then about 10 years ago I started to realize that, for travel in Switzerland, I could do without a car entirely and instead rely on the magnificent Swiss Transport System, anchored, of course, by its 1800-station rail network.

- The relationship between the cost of rail passes and rental cars changed — dramatically. In 1998, a five-day, second class German Twin Pass cost \$282 for two persons and the base price for a rental car in the compact category (4 doors, air) for one week in Germany was \$106, including value added tax. Today, that same five-day German rail pass for two persons costs \$338, a 20% increase. The price for the compact car, however, is now \$208, a 96% increase. In addition, gas in Germany in 1998 was about \$3.50 per gallon. Today it's around \$5.50.

- In the last few years, Rail Europe has introduced a wide variety of rail passes that cater to the traveler who is no longer interested in the Copenhagen-Paris-Munich-Vienna-Rome-in-14-days style of travel, and wants to explore a much smaller geo-

graphic area. Now available are many two, three, four and five-country passes that offer a flexibility and cost-effectiveness that didn't exist just a few years ago. Example: in 1998 the traveler who wanted to see just Germany and Austria by rail had to either purchase the 17-country Eurail pass or buy a Germany pass *and* an Austria pass. Now, in 2006, a new Germany-Austria pass is available.

From a cost standpoint, the rail-rental car choice is a closer call than ever. There are few absolutes and personal preference plays a much greater role. Eight years ago, the choice for two people traveling in Germany was a no-brainer: a compact car for two weeks cost \$212 plus \$100 for fuel, total \$312. The second-class rail pass was \$282 but provided only five days travel during the two-weeks, whereas the car was at the renter's beck and call 24/7 for 14 days. Today, however, that same car and fuel are about \$550 (\$390 for the car, \$160 for the fuel) vs. a five-day rail cost of \$338. Five days won't be enough travel days in a two-week period, so a more realistic number might be eight days for \$452. The picture gets murky for those who want to travel first-class, as the eight-day Twin pass is \$600.

For those who plan to visit three countries, the equation is different and, assuming it's picked up in Germany, the rental car option looks much more favorable. With added fuel to cover more ground, the car is now about \$600 for two weeks. But

the three-country Eurail Select Saver pass for two persons is \$650 for only five days of train rides, \$720 for six days, and \$856 for two. If four persons are traveling together, the rental is the clear choice— at least from the standpoint of cost.

(Not taken into account in the foregoing are parking fees for car travel or taxis and other public transport for rail travel.)

Your own car-rail choice should be made only after careful consideration of all the factors: countries to be visited, where the rental car will be picked up and dropped off, size of the traveling party, type of car needed, number of travel days required, first or second-class rail, and, of course, personal preference. For those who can afford it, a combination of rail and car often works best; rail for the long trips and a car (or cars) for exploring the countryside.

So where do I stand now on the

*Continued on page 8...*

**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](http://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: **nuun** Password: **3976**

Vol. 20, No. 3  
April 2006

**GEMÜTLICHKEIT**

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

**Publishers:** Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor  
**Executive Editor:** Nikki Goth Itoi  
**Senior Writer:** Jim Johnson  
**Contributors:** Tom Bross, Roland Reimann  
**Consulting Editor:** Thomas P. Bestor  
**Online Services:** Kurt Steffans  
**Subscriber Travel Services:** Andy Bestor, Laura Riedel

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](mailto:travel@gemut.com). Web site: [www.gemut.com](http://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.

## THUN & SPIEZ

Continued from page 1

road as it curves to the right and into the town center. Continue past the traffic circle over the bridge. Turn left just after the bridge onto **Bälliz**, Thun's main shopping mile, which is only of mild interest except for the colorful Wednesday and Saturday markets. Resist, for the moment, the urge to cross the pedestrian bridge on the right just past the Altes Waisenhaus restaurant. Instead, continue another 200 meters and look for an alley on the right between the Expert Moser and Dies + Das shops to a narrow bridge across the Aare. It leads to the **Rathausplatz**, a tranquil square with newly renovated buildings, including the **Rathaus**, that date to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

To the right of the hotel and restaurant Zunfthaus zu Metzger (see review below), a path ascends to the town **Castle**. The reward for the climb is a view across the red rooftops.

Peek inside the castle courtyard, the scene of a gruesome 14<sup>th</sup>-century crime. Above, in the impressive four-turreted castle keep, are the upper turret windows from which Count Hartmann von Kyburg was thrown to his death by his brother Eberhardt. The pair had squabbled over money, but even with his sibling out of the way, Eberhardt could not afford the castle upkeep and was forced to sell.

The entrance fee of CHF7 seems a high price to view a mediocre permanent exhibition of local crafts, toys, old timepieces, and musical instruments. The stately **Knight's Hall** offers a better impression of the castle's former importance. Original ceiling beams are treated with ox blood. If you have paid the entrance fee, head up to the turrets. The spot where Hartmann was thrown to his death offers stunning views of the Bernese Alps.

Leaving the castle courtyard, walk straight ahead in the direction of the old church. A flight of steps leads back down to the town. After exiting the covered part of the passage, turn right to explore the historic and unusually designed, split-level **Obere Hauptgasse**. Small shops line both the

## Thun/Spiez Basics

**Population:** Thun 41,000, Spiez 7,650

**Elevation:** 588 meters (1,830)

**Tourist Information:** Thun and Spiez Tourist Office: tel. +41/33/225 90 00, fax: +41/33/655 90 09, [thun@thunersee.ch](mailto:thun@thunersee.ch), [spiez@thunersee.ch](mailto:spiez@thunersee.ch), [www.thunersee.ch](http://www.thunersee.ch)

### Driving Distances from Thun:

Zürich	151 km	94 miles
Geneva	190 km	118 miles
Milan	325 km	202 miles
Innsbruck	397 km	248 miles
Paris	629 km	391 miles
Frankfurt	449 km	279 miles

**Rail Travel:** Trains depart from Zürich airport at :13 (direct) and :39 (change in Bern) minutes past the hour, every hour. The trip takes about 1hr 45 min; 10 minutes longer to Spiez. From Geneva airport, there are trains at :01 and :36 minutes past the hour. The trip takes about 2.5 hours (change in Bern). Direct trains from Thun and Spiez depart for Bern every half hour (travel time 20 minutes from Thun, 35 minutes from Spiez) and to Interlaken (35 minutes from Thun, 20 minutes from Spiez) and its mountain railways.

**Boat Tours:** Boats depart hourly in summer (Jun. 4–Sep. 10) from the landing opposite Thun's railway station or beneath the castle in Spiez. There is also frequent service in spring and fall. In the summer, the magnificent paddle steamer, *Blümlisalp*, departs Thun or Spiez once a day and once in the early evening.

**Best Bets:** June is a good time to see the region, since high season hotel prices in Spiez don't start until July 1, but boats and all mountain railways are already operating on a regular schedule. In Thun, the Hotel Krone offers CHF10 reductions per guest per night for Internet bookings ([www.krone-thun.ch](http://www.krone-thun.ch)).

**Events:** Seenachtsfest (mid-summer night's festival): Thun and Spiez take turns putting on this lively event on the last Saturday in July. It includes market stands, live music, and a spectacular fireworks display over the lake. It is Thun's turn in 2006

International Barrel Organ Festival, mid-July, Thun: For two days, around 200 barrel organ players take over the old town

The wine harvest is celebrated in Spiez with a late September parade and open-air market.

lower and upper street levels.

A broad, covered passage ends in the open square of **Mühleplatz**. On warm days, this is the liveliest part of town. Cafes and restaurants line the river, hip young adults sip lattes, and mothers with small children feed bread to the ducks and swans.

Turn left on Aarequai and contin-

ue along the river, past the small cafes or continue in the same direction by crossing over the covered sluice bridge and then getting back onto Aarequai via the road bridge on Freienhofgasse. Stay on Aarequai toward the lake and soon you will find the town's most splendid 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings. Many have been lovingly restored in recent years, including a monumental rectangular structure with a flat roof, the **Thunhof**. Built in 1875 as a grand hotel, it now houses the local town offices, as well as the city's art museum and a small café with outdoor tables overlooking the river. Inside, note the beautifully restored atrium.

Retrace your steps to the town center.

### Serene Spiez

Even at the height of summer, Spiez is laid back. Still, many travelers who intended only to spend the night have remained much longer and return year after year. The appeal has everything to do with what locals claim is "the most beautiful bay in Europe." Even if you don't agree, the town certainly has the right ingredients: a medieval castle, vineyards climbing the slopes, sleek sailboats crowding the harbor, and the ever-present backdrop of snowy peaks.

The town's few hotels all have rooms and restaurants overlooking the bay and are within walking distance of the train station at the top of the town. After an exhausting day in the mountains, visitors appreciate a relaxing dinner on a restaurant terrace with a view of the yacht harbor.

In Spiez, everything of importance is within walking distance, and the main hotels and restaurants are connected by well-maintained footpaths along the lakeshore and around the harbor. The town does not lack for amenities, though an attractive shopping area is notably missing.

Leave enough time to climb through the vineyards and the forest above the castle to enjoy the picturesque setting. Above the vineyards are benches, where in summer one can watch the comings and goings of the passenger vessels and the lazy progress of sailboats.

A popular trail is the **Strandweg** (beach path) that hugs the lakeshore and connects Spiez with neighboring **Faulensee** to the southeast. The walk takes about 30-40 minutes in each direction, starting from the harbor. Passing through a stand of trees that covers the slope, the trail eventually comes to a fish farm and ends—rather appropriately—at a series of seafood restaurants in Faulensee.

After a hot spell in summer, the temperature of glacier-fed Lake Thun can climb to a fresh but not frigid 68-70 degrees Fahrenheit. Take a dip from the steps of the small wooden shelter located about 200 yards after entering the forest along the Strandweg. You can change into swimming gear and store your clothing in one of the shelter's compartments. Be careful not to swim much beyond the floating platform, since the passenger boats, especially the old steamer, come quite close to shore.

Wallenrain is also popular for a swim. This grassy area is reached by taking the narrow lane leading down from the back of the castle to the lake. A more crowded option is the outdoor Olympic-length swimming pool, also located in the harbor. Entry costs CHF6. The complex includes a large lawn for sunbathing.

The 12<sup>th</sup>-century **Spiez Castle** dominates the harbor and is the town's most interesting cultural site. A tour through the various wings is a walk through the ages, from the primitive 13<sup>th</sup> century tower to the ostentatious Renaissance suites. There are knights' armor and halberds to admire, plus the castle's original 17<sup>th</sup> century kitchen, tiled ovens for heating, and an unusual wine dispenser (CHF7).

### Lodging

#### Hotel Krone

The four-star Hotel Krone enjoys a prime location on Thun's lovely main square and has just finished refurbishing its 27 rooms. They have no special ambience but are clean, bright and comfortable and offer all the essentials, including wireless Internet. Half the rooms have wall-to-wall carpeting, the other half lami-

nate flooring. For CHF30 more a night, you can sleep in the "tower room;" a mini-suite with the bed in the old tower overlooking the square.

Breakfast is served in the French restaurant. Saturdays here are perfect for a long-lazy breakfast watching the locals set up their colorful market stalls in the square. Management gives a CHF10 discount per person per night for online bookings.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF170, doubles CHF265

**Contact:** Hotel Krone, Rathausplatz 2, CH-3600, Thun, tel. +41/33/227 88 88, fax 227 88 90, [info@krone-thun.ch](mailto:info@krone-thun.ch), [www.krone-thun.ch](http://www.krone-thun.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 10/20

#### Hotel Emmental

This beautiful, old hotel on the corner of a busy intersection at the edge of the town center has simple but large rooms with character. Most are furnished with sofas and café-style tables and chairs. The sound of the traffic dies down after 9pm but picks up again about 6am. Breakfast is included in the price (self-service from a small buffet). The hotel restaurant has been converted into a roadhouse-style eatery, with fare (nachos, potato skins, garlic bread) more typical of the United States than Europe.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF80, doubles CHF160

**Contact:** Hotel Emmental, Bernstrasse 2, CH-3600, Thun, tel. +41/33/222/01 20, [welcome@essenundtrinken.ch](mailto:welcome@essenundtrinken.ch), [www.essenundtrinken.ch](http://www.essenundtrinken.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 12/20

#### Zunfthaus zu Metzger

This grand old building, guarded by a golden lion wielding an axe, dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. What was originally the official meeting place of the town's butchers is now a medium-priced restaurant and inexpensive hotel.

Location is often everything and the Zunfthaus's is excellent, at the foot of the castle on the Rathausplatz near the Krone. The hotel has 10 Spartan but spacious nonsmoking rooms that not lost their historic charm despite having recently been renovated. Unfortunately, none have TVs or *en suite* bathroom facilities,

other than a sink. Modern shared bathrooms are located in the corridors.

One of the best options is the corner room with arched windows overlooking the square. The hotel does not offer breakfast, but guests can pay CHF16 per person for the buffet at the Hotel Krone. There are also a couple of nearby tea rooms and bakeries that can provide a light meal to start the day.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF50, doubles CHF100 (breakfast not included)

**Contact:** Zunfthaus zu Metzger, Untere Hauptgasse 2, Rathausplatz, CH-3602, Thun, tel. +41/33/222 21 41, fax 222 21 82, [info@zumetzger.ch](mailto:info@zumetzger.ch), [www.zumetzger.ch](http://www.zumetzger.ch). Prop: Renate Fankhauser -Martin Moser,

**Rating:** QUALITY 10/20, VALUE 15/20

#### Bellevue

The Bellevue is the better choice of the two Spiez hotels on Seestrasse, both of which view the harbor. Walter Maurer's grandparents converted the old building to a hotel in 1944 and he is now the third generation to run it, together with his wife, Veronika, and their two small children. The south-facing rooms have splendid views of the lake with either small balconies or access to a large sundeck. All rooms, which will soon be in need of a refurbishing, have bathrooms with toilet with shower.

For breakfast, the Maurer's put the accent on fresh fruit and a variety of muesli, as well as fresh bread and croissants. Another plus: The Spiez harbor is only a 5- to 10-minute walk from here along quiet alleys, and the train station is an equal distance away at the top of the town.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF72-80, doubles CHF124-140

**Contact:** Hotel Bellevue, Seestrasse 36, CH-3700, Spiez, tel. +41/33/654/84 64, fax 84 48, [hotel@bellevue-spiez.ch](mailto:hotel@bellevue-spiez.ch), [www.bellevue-spiez.ch](http://www.bellevue-spiez.ch).

Prop: Family Maurer

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 14/20

#### Seegarten Marina

A more expensive yet still good value option is the three-star Seegarten Marina, located in the yacht harbor. If you prefer to be right next to

the lake and listen to the gentle clanking of sailboat masts during the night, then this is the right place. Rooms are comfortable, with balconies and full bathrooms. The restaurant terrace below is busy on warm summer evenings, so the constant chatter and clinking of wine glasses could spoil your sleep if you like to turn in early.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF100–120, doubles CHF160–210

**Contact:** Seegarten Marina, Schachenstrasse 3, CH-3700, Spiez, tel. +41/33/655/67 67, fax 67 65, [reception@seegarten-marina.ch](mailto:reception@seegarten-marina.ch), [www.seegarten-marina.ch/](http://www.seegarten-marina.ch/)

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 12/20

### Food

#### Dampfschiff

This immaculately restored restaurant is closely linked with the beginnings of tourism on Lake Thun. In the 1830s, the 200-year-old house was converted by the brothers Knechtenhoferin into an inn to take advantage of its location at the landing where they had launched the lake's first passenger steamboats. Old prints of the lake's fleet decorate the walls. They have been collected by the building's owner and architect, Rolf Lemberg, a German with a passion for the grand old vessels. He is responsible for restoring the restaurant as well as the Lötschberg paddle steamer which plies neighboring Lake Brienz, and Blümlisalp, a Lake Thun steamer.

The restaurant's historic ambience, with its small rooms and low ceilings, has not been lost. Take time to admire the lovely old prints on the walls, and make sure to book a table in the restaurant's conservatory.

A meal might begin with a Gorgonzola mousse accompanied by pear slices soaked in red wine (CHF16). For the main course, perhaps a tender veal steak with porcini mushrooms, an herb risotto, and crispy, fresh vegetables (CHF46). The filet of beef baked in an herb mescalpone comes with vegetables and mashed potatoes laced with black olives—an unusual but tasty combination (CHF44).

Chef Michael Schürch purchases ingredients and produce from local suppliers and in summer uses fresh, wild herbs gathered from fields in the nearby countryside. He makes a "blue potato" soup when the spud is in season, buying from a local farmer who has re-cultivated heirloom varieties.

He also creates irresistible desserts (CHF11–14): chestnut mousse, an ice-cold schnapps parfait served with marinated raisins, and in season, a parfait with fresh elderberries. Two-course lunches range from CHF18–22, without drinks.

**Contact:** Dampfschiff, Hofstettenstrasse 20, Thun, tel. +41/33/221 49 49, [kontakt@dampfschiff-thun.ch](mailto:kontakt@dampfschiff-thun.ch), [www.dampfschiff-thun.ch](http://www.dampfschiff-thun.ch), Prop: Family Schürch

**Rating:** QUALITY 18/20, VALUE 14/20

#### Zunftthaus zu Metzger

In the heart of the old town, the restaurant of the Zunftthaus zu Metzger boasts a lovely outdoor terrace at the foot of the castle and an informal Swiss dining room. The latter is stylish without being overstated, and the indirect lighting highlights its historical features. Italian chef Gilberto Rabozzi took over the kitchen a few years ago, and, together with managers Renate Fankhauser and Martin Moser, has put the accent on fresh, organic cuisine at affordable prices. The restaurant has won the World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Goût Mieux seal of approval for being an environmentally responsible operation. About half of the dishes on the menu are made using only organic ingredients.

By relying on his Italian training and experiences in India, Señor Rabozzi uses local and exotic ingredients to create dishes that probably can best be described as Swiss-fusion. A creamy spinach pasta sauce is made with local Gruyère cheese, instead of Parmigiano. A salad of Mâche (lamb's lettuce) features a tangy, housemade dressing and a slice of fresh, whole-wheat bread. Another stellar opener is warm goat's cheese laced with peppercorns and smothered in olive oil. Sun-dried

tomatoes on the side add just the right note of sweetness (CHF11).

Señor Rabozzi also does wonders with the classic Swiss dish, *Kalbsgeschmetzeltes nach Zürcher Art* (tender, sautéed veal strips served in a cream sauce, CHF29.50). Accompanying *Rösti* (traditional fried potatoes) is perfectly crisp. Vegetarians choices include Indian dahl with coconut vegetables and rice (CHF24), or a plate of pasta with fresh goat's cheese and eggplant (CHF22). Two-course lunches are in the CHF14–19 range.

**Contact:** Zunftthaus zu Metzger, Untere Hauptgasse 2, Thun, tel. +41/33/222 21 41, fax 222 21 82, [info@zumetzger.ch](mailto:info@zumetzger.ch), [www.zumetzger.ch](http://www.zumetzger.ch) Prop: Family Moser

**Rating:** QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 15/20

#### Bellevue

Like most Swiss lakes, Lake Thun has a small number of professional fishermen who sell their catch to local restaurants, including the Bellevue, which is a member of a Swiss association of restaurants that specialize in fresh, local fish.

Whitefish is the lake's most com-

#### Key Websites for the Traveler

- [www.gemut.com](http://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](http://www.viamichelin.com) The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants, plus great interactive trip planning tools
- [www.travelgearnow.com](http://www.travelgearnow.com) Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers
- [www.webflyer.com](http://www.webflyer.com) Informative frequent-flyer forums make this a must for air travelers
- [bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en](http://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](http://www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm) Swiss and European rail schedules
- [www.ski-europe.com](http://www.ski-europe.com) Top Web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts
- [www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com) Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority
- [www.germany-tourism.de](http://www.germany-tourism.de) Germany's national tourist authority
- [www.austria.info/us](http://www.austria.info/us) Austria's national tourist authority
- [www.historicgermany.com](http://www.historicgermany.com) Website for an alliance of historic German cities
- [www.thetravelinsider.info](http://www.thetravelinsider.info) Info on electronic devices used by travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

mon variety, and Walter Maurer's interpretation of fried whitefish filet "Berner Art" (CHF31.50) is a Swiss-style sweet and sour. The generous serving is topped with sautéed apple slices, diced peppers, spring onions, and served on a bed of golden *Rösti*. A walleye filet (CHF33.50), dredged in sesame seeds and a coconut-lemon sauce, arrives with a topping of baby carrots slices. On the side are *Capuns*, a traditional dish from southeastern Switzerland, made of air-dried beef, sausage, and ham, and cooked in a *Spätzli* dough and wrapped in a chard leaf. The combination of the earthy capuns and the flaky fish makes for a pleasant surprise, and is indicative of how varied Swiss cuisine can be. A Spiez white wine, such as Riesling X Sylvaner, matches well with the restaurant's fish dishes.

For dessert, the Bellevue makes its own parfaits and apple pie, and its ice cream comes from an organic farm in the mountain community of Lenk.

The restaurant has two rooms: a brightly refurbished *Stube* (smoking permitted) at the front where one can dine or simply order a drink, and a larger, non-smoking space on the lakeside. Ask for a table with a harbor view.

**Contact:** Hotel Bellevue, Seestr. 36, Spiez, tel. +41/33/654 8464, fax 654 8448, [hotel@bellevue-spiez.ch](mailto:hotel@bellevue-spiez.ch), [www.bellevue-spiez.ch](http://www.bellevue-spiez.ch). Prop: Family Maurer

**Rating:** QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 14/20

### Seegarten Marina

Due to its location and large number of patio tables, this is Spiez's most popular restaurant on warm, summer days and evenings. The menu consists of standard Swiss fare plus pizzas. Unfortunately, service and quality are hit and miss.

**Contact:** Seegarten Marina, Schachenstrasse 3, Spiez, tel. +41/33/655 6767, [reception@seegarten-marina.ch](mailto:reception@seegarten-marina.ch), [www.seegarten-marina.ch/](http://www.seegarten-marina.ch/)


**Rating:** QUALITY 9/20, VALUE 10/20

### Schloss Pintli

A little bit closer to the boat landing than the Seegarten Marina, this small restaurant is a favored by members of the local yacht club. The patio

is a little more intimate than the Seegarten, and the food of a generally good standard.

**Contact:** Seestrasse 63, Spiez, tel. +41/33/654 66 24

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 12/20 

## BACKROADS OF GERMANY

*Continued from page 1*

markets, music, and merriment. Special events are planned for June 17-18.

We checked in to its **Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten** on a warm Sunday afternoon last July after phoning earlier in the day to reserve a room. The hotel dates from 1605, and our room, Number 105, a comfortably-sized double featured high ceilings, wood floors, antique furnishings, and windows opening directly onto the town's main street, Hauptstrasse. But other than a couple of straight-backed chairs and the bed, there was no place to sit; a drawback had we planned to stay more than one night. The price, with a good buffet breakfast, was €93 for two persons.

After a 40-minute exploration of the town, we found two chairs in the shade in front of the Hotel Behringer on the town's main square and ordered glasses of the local white wine (€2.6 each).

Volkach is unspoiled by commerce — no McDonald's or KFCs — and retains much of its ancient character, with narrow lanes, numerous half-timbered houses and handsome baroque buildings.

Though we didn't see it, the 15<sup>th</sup> century **Maria im Weingarten** pilgrimage church on a hill outside town contains the **Madonna im Rosenkranz**, carved by Tilman Riemenschneider (his most famous work is a 1504 altarpiece in Rothenburg's St. James Church).

The late afternoon and early evening were passed reading our books in the Vier Jahreszeiten's quiet, tree-shaded garden, where a beer costs €1.9.

The hotel has no restaurant but sent us a few steps down the street to **Weinstube Torbäck**, where, in a small outdoor courtyard, the food was well-prepared, plentiful and

inexpensive. Main courses ranged from a massive platter of buttery, rich pappardelle — similar to fettucine, but wider — for €8.5, to four tender, juicy pork medallions in a cognac cream sauce. With a liberal covering of sautéed mushrooms, a mixed salad of fresh lettuce and sliced vegetables, and *Röstinchen*, small fried potato patties in the Swiss style, the price was €11.8. A quarter liter of red wine, *Spätburgunder*, cost €6.8 and one-third liter of *pils* was €1.8. We ended the evening with ice cream, chocolate sauce and whipped cream (€2.8), and *Pfirsichlikör*, a peach-flavored, liqueur, for €1.6. The final bill for beer, wine, salads, main courses, the shared dessert, and the liqueur, was a value-winning €38.

**Daily Rates:** Singles €52-100, doubles €75-120

**Contact:** Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten, Hauptstrasse 31, D-97332, Volkach, tel. +49/09381/8484-0, fax 8484-44, [vierjahreszeiten-volkach@t-online.de](mailto:vierjahreszeiten-volkach@t-online.de), [www.vierjahreszeiten-volkach.de](http://www.vierjahreszeiten-volkach.de). Christina Fuchsberger.

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 15/20

**Contact:** Weinstube Torbäck, Hauptstrasse 35, tel. +49/09381/716 171

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 15/20

## The Drive

The 1:150,000 scale *ADAC Maxi-Atlas for Germany* reveals a confusing array of route choices for the approximately 80-kilometer, meandering drive from Volkach to Niederstetten, located about 25 kilometers straight west of Rothenburg. One can, of course, zip down the Autobahn from Würzburg to Rothenburg and be in Niederstetten in just over an hour; but a better idea is to strike out over backroads and take a full day getting there.

You might, for example, go south to medieval **Kitzingen**, a center for the Franconian wine trade, then to **Markbreit** with its 16<sup>th</sup> century town hall and Black Tower, and from there straight west to **Ochsenfurt**, where the town's 14<sup>th</sup> century church displays a statue by Riemenschneider.

From Ochsenfurt, work your way south through peaceful, rolling farm country, using the atlas to choose

*Continued on page 8...*

## Germany's Fastest Trains: 200 MPH on the InterCity Express

By Ernest H. Robl

Germans like to travel fast—on and off the *Autobahn*. Whether it's a wide open highway or an InterCity Express (ICE) train, speed and style have long defined their approach to getting around. Now in its third generation, the 15-year old ICE carries passengers between major German cities at speeds up to 330 kilometers per hour (205 mph). Travelers appreciate the efficiency, comfortable ride and lack of security checks. And, when one factors in trips to and from the airport, traveling by ICE can often be faster than flying because the trains deliver passengers to the heart of the city.

The impression of most first-time ICE travelers is that the ride doesn't feel different from a conventional train—in fact, it's often so smooth you don't realize you're moving at 150-plus miles per hour. Objects near the tracks flash by, but the speed is less noticeable when focusing on distant scenery. You'll know you're cruising, however, when you pass traffic on a nearby *Autobahn*.

Even if you don't need to go from point A to point B, an ICE train is worthwhile if only for the ride. Plus, this year, the first generation of ICE trains will undergo a major overhaul that includes refurbishing the interiors.

### Notable Routes

While ICE trains now reach most major German cities, two routes are of special interest:

- **Würzburg-Hannover:** The original Würzburg-Hannover corridor, part of the Munich-Hamburg route, still offers one of the longest ICE trips within Germany; especially for those who go all the way from Munich to Hamburg. Along the way, you will see how well the original design and engineering have held up.

- **Frankfurt-Cologne:** This relatively short run was the first ICE route in which the engineering allowed trains to reach speeds of 330 km/h (205 mph). It opened in 2002 after more than a decade of planning and construction, has the steepest grades of any high-speed line in the world, ranging up to 4 percent. (On

railroads, anything over 1.5 percent is considered steep, and even mountain lines in Austria and Switzerland seldom exceed 3 percent gradients.)

Since it was built through a densely populated area, the line had to follow an existing *Autobahn* to avoid displacing large numbers of people; thus the scenery doesn't equal that of older Rhine routes. Conventional trains, offering more scenic vistas, still run along the Rhine. A good strategy is to take the scenic route in one direction and an ICE in the opposite direction. (Note: The new, super-fast ICE3 trains, the only ones permitted on this line, now range far beyond Cologne, should you wish to continue on.)

### Buying Tickets

Germany classifies its intercity lines in three categories: heritage lines, served by conventional trains (and carrying ICE trains in and out of urban areas); upgraded lines (*Ausbaustrecken*) carrying conventional and high-speed trains at speeds up to 200 km/h (160 mph); and purpose-built new high-speed lines (*Neubaustrecken*). Dedicated high-speed lines carry only ICE trains.

Individual trip tickets for ICE trains require a supplement to the normal fare. However, rail passes are equally valid on ICE trains as on all other trains—without having to pay the ICE supplement. Considering that a one-way fare on an ICE can cost in excess of €100, both Eurail and Germany-specific passes — such as the German Twin Pass (four day unlimited travel at \$150 per person second class, and \$200 per person first-class) — are a great bargain. Discounts are available to frequent travelers, but even at normal prices, ICE trains are popular with business travelers, as they can work on the train rather than having to concentrate on driving.

Unlike the French TGV high-speed trains, the DB does not require a seat reservation for ICE trains. You can, of course, reserve a seat in Germany for about 3 euros, a good idea at peak travel times. Tip: When making a reservation in Germany you might ask to be seated at the front of the train, immediately behind the train operator. The view down the track at 160-plus mph is a bit of thrill.

### 15 Years of High Speed Rail

Germany joined the high-speed rail bandwagon slightly behind France and Japan, but had the benefit of their experience in the design of both rolling stock and lines. Many who traveled on both the first generation ICE and the original French TGV high-speed trains found the ICE more comfortable and more appealing.

As the ICE concept started before German reunification, the first high-speed routes were all in the former West Germany. The initial line, opened in segments, was a racetrack between Munich in the South and Hamburg in the north, with Frankfurt am Main served via upgraded spur lines.

The first ICE trains consisted (and still do) of 14 intermediate cars, including a dining car, bracketed by an engine on either end. These 'consists' stay together and are only separated for major maintenance work.

While this concept worked fine on the heavily traveled north-south route, it did not fit less frequented routes or ICE trains that would run part of their trips on a dedicated high-speed line but then branch off at slower speeds to reach other cities. That led to the second generation, mostly identical to the first but consisting of only one engine and seven cars, the last of which had a control cab, so that the train could operate in either direction, with the engine pulling or pushing.

Two trains can be coupled together and run as a set controlled by a single engineer over part of their route, then split to go in different directions.

The third generation ICE3 is an entirely new design, laid out for higher speeds and able to operate into other countries (you can, for example, ride an ICE3 to Interlaken and Zürich) with different voltage and signal systems. Like the ICE2, they have one engine and seven cars per set and can be run as double sets.

An intermediate version using tilt technology for increased speeds on winding older routes was less successful and sidelined after a short period of operation. The DB is trying to sell this equipment to another country, but, so far, has found no takers.

*Continued on page 8...*

**BACKROADS OF GERMANY***Continued from page 6*

roads marked on the map in yellow. These are guaranteed to be *way* off the beaten track. One recommended portion is the approximately 10 km, scenic stretch (green-edged on the map) from Bernsfelden straight south to Weikersheim, a beautiful little town where the main square, adjacent castle and lovely grounds are definitely worth a stop. From **Weikersheim** it's about 10 more kilometers to Niederstetten and the Hotel Krone.

**Niederstetten**

With a population of 5,000, this somnolent village is about half the size of Volkach. Its main virtue is peace and quiet, though there are attractive half-timbered buildings, here and there a medieval turret, and a castle-like structure above the town to climb to. It's fine for an overnight stop but would also work as a base for exploring the region's wealth of interesting towns such as Rothenburg, Bad Mergentheim, Tauberbischofsheim, Wertheim, Weikersheim and Crelingen. One rental, for example, take a vacation rental for a week. Unit #2 of **Ferienwohnung Siedler** (<http://www.niederstetten.de/touris/touris.html>), comes with kitchen, bedroom, tiled bath, living room, balcony, and regional decor at the amazing price of €25 per night.

We stayed in the new wing of the **Hotel Krone**, where the clean, comfortable rooms are of a modern style more reminiscent of business conferences than German country charm. Nonetheless it was quiet, well maintained and offered all needed amenities. The €82 double room price must be considered a bargain, though we did have to walk up 37 steps to the non-smoking floor.

There is a feeling, impossible to adequately describe, that perhaps you've also experienced: it's nine o'clock on a summer night, deep in the German countryside. You've settled into a cozy corner of your hotel's rustic restaurant. The pace is relaxed, the customers mostly locals, and the service friendly and attentive, with lots of smiles. The beer comes at just

the right temperature and the delicious, simply-prepared, time-honored dishes are made with the freshest ingredients. You look over at the *Stammtisch* (table for regulars), where there's a card game in progress alongside a debate on farming techniques. About then it hits you: this is the real Germany. You're not standing with 1,000 other Americans on the Marienplatz in Munich, waiting for the Glockenspiel to do its thing, or overhearing a loud conversation in American English across the aisle on the train, this is the real deal.

It's a feeling that might overtake you at the Krone's restaurant, which, incidentally, Michelin awards a red "Karte" designation (good food at moderate prices), a rating we enthusiastically second.

Though the dishes have familiar names, the Krone's rendition of them is a cut or two above. A juicy *Zwiebelrostbraten* (steak and crispy onions), with wonderful roasted potatoes, is just €14.8. Four thick lamb chops (€18.9) are baked to rosy perfection and accompanied by a hefty ramekin of butter-laden potatoes gratin under a crunchy crust of cheese. Without beverages — half a liter of local red wine from Weikersheim is €9.8 and draft beer costs €2.1 — dinner for two was €45, including salad and dessert.


Avoid, if you can, the English menu, it doesn't list all the dishes available.

Though the hotels and restaurants of this all too brief two-day country sojourn were inexpensive — €280 for two nights' lodging, four meals (two breakfasts, two dinners) — the food and accommodations were well above bargain quality. All are recommended.

**Daily Rates:** Singles €49-59, doubles €77-82

**Contact:** Hotel Gasthof Krone, Markplatz 3, D-97996, Niederstetten, tel. +49/07932/8990, fax 89960, [info@hotelgasthofkrone.de](mailto:info@hotelgasthofkrone.de), [www.hotelgasthofkrone.de](http://www.hotelgasthofkrone.de). Family Marquardt.


**Rating:** QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 16/20

**Restaurant:** QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 17/20 

**GERMANY'S ICE TRAINS***Continued from page 7***On the Horizon**

The new interiors of the refurbished original ICE trains are getting mixed reviews. However, with millions of travelers, these trains were very much due for a rebuild.

When the first ICE trains went into service in June 1991, video screens on the backs of first class seats were an innovative feature. Now, these are being taken out in favor of electrical outlets at all seats for portable computers and personal entertainment devices.

After extensive testing and political negotiations, ICE3 trains may soon continue from Germany in to France. But, even within Germany, the ICE fleet and the number of routes continues to grow, showing that the move to high-speed rail a good decision, and visitors would do well to take advantage of the latest innovations in train travel. 

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER***Continued from page 2*

rail-car controversy? Well, you can be assured the next time I climb aboard a flight to Europe I'll be carrying a car rental voucher *and* a rail pass.

Actually, I've become a great fan of rail travel. I'm one of those people who thinks about going to Switzerland just to ride the trains. One of my fantasies would duplicate that system here in Oregon. I dream of boarding a train in Ashland and arriving two hours later in Portland, 275 miles away. Unfortunately, not in my lifetime.

I'm not ready, though, to turn my back on the automobile. Last summer, after three days of hauling luggage, computers, phones, cameras, and chargers, on and off jam-packed second-class-only, un-airconditioned regional trains in the north of Germany, our air-conditioned VW Golf picked up in Lübeck felt awfully good. We slid some familiar CDs into sound system, cranked up the air, and eased our way south over quiet back roads, stopping along the way at country hotels. The mainstream media seems to think the romance of European travel is the exclusive province of trains. Not always. — RHB 