

DEAR
SUBSCRIBER

Clearing the Desk

It is Memorial Day weekend and we are heading into the busiest months of a year the European Travel Commission says will bring an all-time number of U.S. visitors to Europe. More than the record year of 2000, when 13.7 million of us crossed the Atlantic.

Since I seem unable to settle on a single topic for my monthly pronouncement in this space, you're going to get the bits and pieces; the fragments of emails, phone notes, press releases, Internet meanderings, and scraps of paper gathering dust on my desk.

We'll begin with a correction for last month's Berlin story. Reader Russell Wayne, of Westin CT, among others, reminds us that the restaurant on Schlüterstrasse is **Lutter & Wegner**, not, as we had it, Wegner & Lutter.

• **World Cup:** The tournament is in full swing and, of course, the predicted shortage of hotel rooms did not materialize. The world soccer organization, FIFA, booked 45,000 hotel rooms then "un-booked" 16,000 of them in May. They reserved 1,125 rooms in Berlin's **Hotel Estrel** but left the hotel high and dry for 60 percent of them. As of late May the Estrel was only 50 percent booked instead of the 68 percent it would be in a normal year. What happened is what always seems to happen for big events like the World Cup and the Olympics: Tourists who aren't interested in the event stay away. The German publication, *Der Spiegel*, says that many congresses and conventions that would normally have taken place have been rescheduled, cancelled, or gone elsewhere.

Remember, the matches are played in just 12 cities. Those who fear the big crowds and high prices should look to the wonderful towns

Continued on page 2...

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

THE SWABIAN ALB

History, nature and culture merge in Germany's southwest corner — a wilderness landscape with rolling hills, rugged mountains, and wildflower fields.

The Swabian Alb cuts a scenic swath across southwest Germany and runs about 135 miles (220 km) long. It sweeps from the rolling hills of the Neckar along its northern edge, crosses the surprisingly remote yet culturally rich setting of the Swabian Mountains, and ends

where a very young Danube carves into the mountains' southern ridge. It's narrowest to the west, where the two rivers almost touch near their sources in the Black Forest, and broadens to 40 miles (65 km) wide as it approaches Bavaria to the east.

Much of the region is a wilderness landscape with rolling hills, rugged low mountains (while *Alb* has the same etymological root as *Alps*, it has

no geographical connection), juniper forests, and expansive wildflower fields. The region also has the highest concentration of castles in Germany, thanks to the Hohenzollerns and other noble dynasties. Around every bend, it seems, castles and ruins crown craggy peaks.

Both landscapes and towns here feel natural and authentic. Indeed, much of the region was recognized in 2005 as a UNESCO Geopark, due to its "unique landscapes and geological, archaeological, and cultural-historical significance."

Paradise Found

For hikers, cyclists, cavers, and nature-lovers, the Swabian Alb is paradise. By car, it's a region ripe for

Continued on page 3...

Top-End Swiss Restaurants

For most, dinner in a Michelin three-star restaurant is a once-a-year, or once-in-a-lifetime, event. But even subscribers with no more than a mild interest in food, will be entertained by Lydia's Itoi's story of dining in Switzerland's two most famous — and expensive — restaurants. Ms. Itoi, formerly known as "The Hungry Traveler" columnist at the San Jose Mercury News, is currently a London-based food and travel writer. Her gourmet adventures have appeared in Time Magazine Europe and Newsweek Japan, but they started right here at Gemutlichkeit with a series on Schleswig-Holstein co-written with Nikki Goth Itoi.

The low-lying areas of the Vaud are pretty dead in February. Everyone is up in the mountains skiing, and all the picturesque lakeside towns lie quiet and shuttered.

When you don't know how to ski and the lake is freezing, the best thing to do is go

eat. The good thing about February is that the tables are cozy and reservations easy to come by.

The bad thing is that eating in Switzerland is not cheap. Eating in a Swiss restaurant with three Michelin stars is dizzyingly expensive. But you get what you pay for, right? It depends. On our recent visit to the two top-ranked tables of Switzerland, where dinner can cost \$200–300 per person, we were reminded once again that not all three-stars are created equal.

Restaurant de l' Hotel de Ville, Philippe Rochat

We found something near perfection in the former town hall of Crissier, where Philippe Rochat took over

Continued on page 6...

Exchange rates as of 05/31/2006
1 euro = \$1.28
1 Swiss franc = \$0.82

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 1

and cities where the World Cup *isn't*, such as Bamberg, Dresden, Lübeck, Freiburg, Trier, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Würzburg, Goslar, Weimar, Regensburg, Baden-Baden, Coburg, Münster, and so on. Wherever you are in Germany you'll be able to keep up with the tournament; all 64 matches are being shown on giant outdoor screens throughout the country.

• **Europe's Low Fare Airlines:**

Proponents of Europe's approximately 50 low-cost air carriers are touting them as more cost-effective and faster than rail travel. In many cases they are right; Paris to Rome on Ryanair costs about \$25 (that's right, \$25) and takes two hours vs. about \$140 and more than 12 hours by train. Setting aside for a moment, such hard to quantify factors as the charm of rail travel and the stresses of the airport experience, in this case going by air is the clear choice. When one considers the intangibles, however, I'm not so sure. First, the 12 hours vs. 2 hours is misleading. As Rail Europe maintains, there are few air trips less than 5 hours; especially when one considers the time getting to and from airports, the time spent waiting for departure, time waiting at baggage carousels, and time standing in line. Last year we took the train from Bern to Munich. It's five and a half hours with a change in Zürich. Rolling our bags behind us, we left the hotel less than 15 minutes before our scheduled departure. Most of the three block

walk was via a wide, attractive underground walkway lined with shops. Eight minutes after leaving the hotel we were in our reserved seats, gear stowed. We passed through no security checks, simply walked aboard the train and sat down. We weren't even asked to show rail passes until the train was underway. Except for the quick train change in Zürich, the next five-plus hours were spent reading, writing, snacking, dozing, and watching the scenery. We arrived in the center of Munich rested and ready, about a 10-minute walk from our hotel, the Kraft. I doubt there's direct air service between Bern and Munich, but if there were, the flight time would be about an hour. Add to that the required two hours one must be at the airport before flight time, and the 60 to 90 minutes it would take to get from flight arrival to downtown Munich, and the savings in time would be about an hour by air — and that's assuming *all goes as planned*. It would have to be a whole lot cheaper, and whole lot faster, to get me involved in airports and airplanes when I can get there by train in six hours or less.

• **Rental car horror stories:**

Renting a car in Europe is getting more complex every day. In Italy, there is no choice when it comes to collision and theft insurance. You must purchase it. But with one Italian company, Auto Europa (no connection to the highly reputable **Auto Europe**), the collision coverage applies only if another vehicle is involved. If you return to your parked

car to find a \$5,000 dent in the side panel, too bad, you're not covered. Wherever you rent, read the fine print carefully if you choose to buy the insurance; some parts of the car, such as undercarriage, roof, windshield, tires, wheels, side mirrors, are often excluded from coverage. In countries where it is possible — virtually all except Italy and Ireland — rely on a credit card for collision and theft coverage.

Be careful what you sign. In April, one woman thought she was declining collision and theft insurance with **Avis Germany** only to later be hit with a \$491 charge on her credit card — this on an 11-day, \$455 rental. Was this a misunderstanding at the rental counter or was she deliberately misled? Our rental department books several hundred cars each year with Avis and deals with only about half a dozen incidents in which unwanted insurance has been charged, so a company policy of cheating custom-

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 (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: **swab** Password: **9478**

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HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

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

Special Designation

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

BERLIN '06*Continued from page 1*

exploration, dotted with medieval towns, relaxed villages, and cultural highlights. Some of Germany's most scenic theme routes pass through the region including the Swabian Alb Road, Hohenzollern Route, Roman Road Neckar-Alb, and Upper Swabian Baroque Road. Train travelers will find a helpful network of rail connections with views that beg frequent disembarkation.

Tübingen on the Neckar and **Ulm** on the Danube are perhaps the region's best known cities. But the towns between the rivers form a necklace through the valleys and mountains with medieval treasures like the former imperial city of **Esslingen**, **Plochingen** with its historic market square and Neckar harbor, **Reutlingen** with mighty gates flanking the Altstadt, and the former trade and market town of **Kirchheim**.

This tour follows a rambling route through the region.

Starting in Tübingen

"Tübingen doesn't *have* a university. It *is* a university."

So the saying goes in this town of youth, students, romance, and idealism. Founded in 1477, it's one of Germany's oldest universities. This is a young and active city, with evidence everywhere of students and academia—from the teeming **Market Square** to the high concentration of museums and cultural events.

There's never been much industry in Tübingen, a fact that spared it from significant Allied bombing during World War II. Its Old Town is well-maintained in nearly original form with requisite half-timbered homes, narrow alleyways, and bustling squares.

Start your exploration at the Market Square, dominated by the 15th-century **Town Hall**, with its 16th-century **Astronomical Clock**. The statue of **Neptune's Fountain**, based on a fountain in Bologna, lends an Italian air.

Walk up the **Burgsteige** (Castle Way) to the **Castle Hohentübingen**. Most of the building isn't open to the

Swabian Alb Basics**Tourist Offices**

Baden-Württemberg Tourism-Marketing, PO Box 102951, 70025 Stuttgart, tel. +49/0711/23858/0, fax: 23858/98, info@tourismus-baden-wuerttemberg.de, www.tourismus-baden-wuerttemberg.de

Swabian Alb Tourism Association, Marktplatz 1, 72574 Bad Urach, tel. +49/07125/948106, fax 948108, info@schwaebischealb.de, www.schwaebischealb.de.

Tübingen Tourist Information, An der Meckarbruecke, 72072-Tübingen, tel. +49/07072/9236-0, fax 3507, mail@Tuebingen-info.de, www.Tuebingen-info.de

Ulm/Neu-Ulm Tourist Information, Münsterplatz 50, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/0731/161 2830, fax: 161 1646, unt@tourismus.ulm.de, www.ulm.de/tourismus.

Main Attractions

Burg Hohenzollern, D-72379 Burg Hohenzollern, tel. +49/(0)7471/2428, fax +49/07471/6812, verwaltung@burg-hohenzollern.com, www.burg-hohenzollern.com

Roman Open-Air Museum, 72379 Hechingen-Stein, tel. +49/07471/6400, fax 14805, info@villa-rustica.de, www.villa-rustica.de

Sigmaringen Castle, 72488 Sigmaringen, tel. +49/07571/729-0, 729 255, schloss@hohenzollern.com, www.hohenzollern.com

Transportation

There's excellent rail service through the Swabian Alb.

Nearby major airports are Stuttgart, Munich, and Zürich. Major train routes, including ICE, connect through Stuttgart and Ulm with excellent regional train service. The A8 motorway crosses the Swabian Alb between Stuttgart and Ulm, the A7 crosses the eastern region, and A81 crosses the western region.

public, but the renaissance architecture, built over the original medieval buildings—as well as the view to the town—are worth the short climb.

Take time to stroll along the **Plantanallee**, a centuries-old promenade with venerable sycamore trees. Walk past the old town moat, with blocks from the 13th century, and cross the Neckar at the **Eberhardsbrücke**, where you may see punters. (You can join them by booking through the tourist office: one hour for €52 for up to 12 people, €35 each additional hour.) Look across the river to the castle and the towers of the historic town center.

Guided walking tours (booked through the tourist office) include the student prison, less known but every bit as intriguing as its Heidelberg counter-

part. Woe to the student who smoked in public, missed curfew, womanized "too much," or failed a class.

Into the Alb

It's barely 20 minutes by car or train to **Hechingen**. In the distance, the turrets, towers, and ramparts of **Hohenzollern Castle** form a forbidding silhouette on a cone-shaped hilltop. Most of the existing structure was built in the latter half of the 19th century on top of two previous castles. The grounds and exteriors are impressive (as are the sweeping views), but the interiors—accessible only on guided tours—leave the most lasting impressions. The castle, designed as a royal residence, is a monument to Hohenzollern-Prussian pride and power, and the rooms are lavish to the extreme.

Whether arriving by taxi or car, visitors take a shuttle bus from the base parking lot to an upper lot (or hike 20 minutes), where an asphalt road passes walls and fortifications on its winding way to the top. Tours in English are by request only and recommended.

A short distance away, the **Roman Open-Air Museum** at Hechingen-Stein lets visitors walk among the foundations and tumbling walls of an ancient Roman estate. A 2nd-century villa has been rebuilt and furnished in original style, and with the adjacent museum, offers a look into life at a rural Roman settlement.

Onward to the Danube

The route from Hechingen to the Danube curves around hills and meadows and slices through the occasional limestone outcropping. Waterfalls pour over severe cliffs, and streams make their way across a fertile floodplain of meadows and farmland.

A good first stop and base camp on the Danube is **Sigmaringen**, where yet another Hohenzollern castle stands watch. **Sigmaringen Castle** looks more fortress than palace from the outside, where it dominates a cliff overlooking the river and town. With origins in the 11th century, the castle is a study in architectural styles from Romanesque to Jugendstil. Inside, it's a royal residence rich with paintings,

porcelain, furniture, tapestries, sculptures, and other signs of an earlier, opulent lifestyle. The armory is also worth a visit for its 3,000 exhibits of weaponry and armor.

At the foot of the castle, the medieval old town is well worth exploring. Purchase local Alb artwork at the **Ateliers im Alten Schlachthof**, a former slaughterhouse converted into studios and small shops (Georg Zimmerstr. 7, tel. +49/(0)72488/07571-3333). Another hill rises more than 650 feet (200 meters) above the old town and opposite the castle. Take time for the uphill climb, where a villa district shows architectural gems from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Spend time walking along the Danube, too, where the town has preserved the royal parks and created a river walk through greenspace. From a slight distance, the castle appears even more powerful and ominous atop the promontory and reveals its fortress roots.

Danube Retreat

From Sigmaringen, it's barely 20 minutes by train or car to **Beuron**, a timeless Danube village. Along the way, the Danube bears little resemblance to the mighty river that travels nearly 1,800 miles (2858 km) to the Black Sea. It's not the mighty river of Vienna or Budapest but a quieter, pastoral, unassuming river that makes its way through the countryside and between tall limestone walls. Streams merge to form small rivers, which rush from side valleys into the growing Danube. High karst pillars, worn from centuries of erosion, poke through forests.

Beuron is a popular destination for hikers, paddlers, and cyclists and has drawn pilgrims since medieval times. The focal point of the idyllic town is its **Benedictine monastery**, founded in the 11th century. Indeed, the whole town is a piece of paradise, an overwhelmingly natural setting that affords ample reflection to those within or outside the monastery walls.

While the monastery itself is closed to the public, its **pilgrimage church** is open. It's almost overwhelming in its majesty—not so

much ornate as powerful. From the outside, it's simple and plain. Inside, the rich and sumptuous stucco, paintings, gold leaf, and carvings—stellar examples of baroque celebration and rococo excess—were intended to astound visitors with a taste of heaven.

Ulm Inspires

Along the route downstream from Sigmaringen to **Ulm**, the final stop of the journey, the high cliffs give way to ridges and then to rolling, wooded hills and lush meadows. Occasional Karst spires look like nature's ruins. Towns, villages, and farms form distant smudges against the countryside.

Soon, a high tower looms in the distance. Surely, it was more impressive when no other high buildings filled the skyline, but it's still inspiring today. The **Minster** tower is Ulm's best-known landmark and the highest spire in the world. Construction started in 1377 and halted in 1543 as a torso without high towers. In the middle of the 19th century, construction started again, and a cornice flower at the top of the central tower gave it the final height of 161.53 meters (530 feet). Visitors can climb 768 steps for views that often extend 65 miles (about 100 km) to the Alps. Allow at least an hour to view the stunning structure that, as a Protestant church since the Reformation, lost many of its original ornate altars and statues. The relative simplicity makes the overall architecture all the more impressive.

In Ulm, the old and the new have married well. There's pride in today's style but also a full awareness and respect for the traditions and styles of the past.

Start at the **Stadthaus**—the Municipal Building—adjacent to the Minster, where the tourist office overflows with English-language materials and excellent advice. Don't miss downstairs exhibitions on excavations that have revealed traces from Roman times forward.

Stop for lunch or coffee at the **Stadthaus Café and Restaurant**. The window and walls curve so that nearly everyone can see the full length and height of the Minster—what some call “the most magnificent Gothic view in

Germany.” Or come back in the evening when Minster lighting makes the view even more stunning.

Using the great church as center-point, head north into a district of antique stores, galleries, bistros, and pubs. There was less damage here during the War, and the many medieval buildings are intact.

The **Fishermen's Quarter**, the city's most charming area, lies barely five minutes away by foot. A labyrinth of alleys and bridges cross the Blau River as it splits into channels past former mills and tanners' houses and makes its last rush to the Danube. Most of the buildings date from the 16th and 17th centuries and now house some of the city's best restaurants, cafés, and inns.

From the Fishermen's Quarter, pass through the ancient gate, walk between the town wall and the Danube, and look across to **New-Ulm** (connected by bridge, but the adventurous can take a small cable- and current-driven boat across). It's a separate city founded 200 years ago, and marks the border of Bavaria (Ulm, like the rest of the Swabian Alb, is in Baden-Württemberg).

Much of Ulm is still surrounded by medieval walls, most wide enough to walk on and some wide enough to hold rows of small houses in which soldiers once lived. From atop the walls, look down at what feels like a town within a town. At dusk, stand atop the walls, past the well-preserved houses and look out to the medieval town. As in much of the Swabian Alb, time has stood still.

Lodging

Hotel am Schloss

Just paces from Tübingen's castle and three minutes on foot from the Market Square, the Hotel am Schloss is quiet and peaceful. Rooms are spacious, clean, and comfortable with a somewhat plain décor. It's obvious from the smiles and laughter in the lobby that it's a family-owned hotel with a staff that loves its work. If you can handle stairs (there's no elevator), request a top-floor room; it's a beautiful view across the towers and chim-

neys of the Old Town to the Neckar Valley. Note that the road to the hotel may be a tad steep for guests with mobility challenges, but taxis can drive right up to the door.

Contact: Hotel am Schloss, Burgsteige 18, 72070 Tübingen, tel. +49/(0)71/92940, fax 793391, info@hotelamschloss.de, www.hotelamschloss.de. Hosts: Herbert and Christel Rösch.

Daily Rates: €51–85 single, €92–118 double

Rating: QUALITY 13/20 VALUE 13/20

Das Schmale Haus B & B

The 16th-century Schmale Haus—a narrow, classic half-timber house—rises five stories between a medieval street and the River Blau. There are just three guestrooms, which makes for a very cordial visit. Guests in the ground-floor room often gasp when they first enter: The view is to the river—which rushes below the oriel window—medieval buildings, and a pedestrian bridge, where passersby return the visitor's glances with looks of envy that say, "I wish I could be staying there." Modern walls, windows, fixtures, and furnishings integrate perfectly with the original 16th-century structure. Leave the windows open at night to fall asleep to the sound of rushing water. Wake up to a cooked-to-order breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, mushrooms, tomatoes and scallions, and melon tea. Another bonus feature: Einstein's great-grandson slept here.

EDITOR'S
CHOICE

Contact: Das Schmale Haus, Fischer-gasse 27, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/175494 0, fax 175494 88, mheide0107@aol.com

Daily Rates: Singles from €79, doubles from €99

Rating: QUALITY 17/20 VALUE 18/20

Das Schiefe Haus

Built in 1443, "The Leaning House" was renovated 10 years ago, but the new owners retained as much of the old structure as possible, with much of the original wooden flooring, plaster-and-straw walls, and beamed ceilings, and with rooms following their old plans. It's not for the faint of balance: The building (since propped up) has tilted dramatically over the centuries,

and floors slope as much as two feet from one wall to the next. Beds are propped to offset the leaning and have built-in water-levels to assure guests they're sleeping "horizontally." It's a fun stay in one of the city's most historic buildings.

Contact: Das Schiefe Haus, Schwörhausgasse 6, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/9673 0, fax 9673 33

Daily Rates: Singles from €108, doubles from €140

Rating: QUALITY 15/20 VALUE 15/20

Neuthor Hotel

Flush on the old city wall, the two-year-old Hotel Neuthor is a small, privately-owned, modern gem of a hotel that's a perfect symbol of Ulm's blending of old and new. Room 34 is a large double with windows on two sides—one overlooking the wall, the other opening to a small private terrace with a view to the hotel courtyard. Climb stairs to Room 41 in the former attic and you'll be rewarded with a stunning view to the Minster framed between the roofs of the Altstadt. Room 15 is designed for guests with mobility challenges and even has a connecting room for a travel companion.

Contact: Neuthor Hotel, Neuer Graben 17, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/9752 79 0, fax 9752 79 399, hotel-neuthor@comfor.de, www.hotel-neuthor.de

Daily Rates: Singles from €88, doubles from €112. Breakfast buffet (worth it!) €12

Rating: QUALITY 17/20 VALUE 17/20

Hotel-Restaurant Pelikan

The Pelikan was built in 1891 to house pilgrims to Beuron. Indeed, the Benedictine monastery still owns it. Today's guests will find plain but pleasant and comfortable rooms, renovated in recent years. From the rooms in the rear, the Danube is clearly visible. From the front, the view is to the monastery. Arnold and Bettina Schönwälder and their warm staff will make you feel welcome. The restaurant features regional fare like the Swabian platter with beef, pork, and turkey medallions served with bacon, *maultaschen*, and egg *spätzle*. The house specialty is pork roast prepared with young beer and fragrant herbs. For

lesser appetites, there are several cheese and meat platters. Leave room for fresh-from-the-oven desserts.

Contact: Hotel-Restaurant Pelikan, 88631 Beuron, Abteistr. 12, tel. +49/07466 406, fax 281, info@pelikan-beuron.de, www.pelikan-beuron.de.

Hosts: Arnold and Bettina Schönwälder and family

Daily Rates: Singles €42, doubles €74

Rating: QUALITY 10/20 VALUE 11/20

Food

Mauganeschtle

Mauganeschtle means "hidden place" in old Swabian dialect, but everyone who visits Tübingen seems to find it. The casual but classy restaurant is well-known for its traditional Swabian specialties, especially 28 varieties of *maultaschen*—literally "mouth pockets"—perhaps the most Swabian of delicacies. Resembling oversized ravioli, they're stuffed with tasty fillings like mushroom, pumpkin, salmon with cream and horseradish, and venison with nuts and wild berries, and then topped with cheese, sautéed onions, or a variety of other sauces. Most cost less than €10. Other Swabian dish-

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.travelgearnow.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.

es (around €15) include sour tripe with fried potatoes (an acquired taste), trout, cheese *spätzle*, and pan-fried beef and onions. In good weather, sit on the garden terrace in the shade of ancient trees, and look out onto the town and Swabian Mountains.

Contact: Mauganeschtle, Burgsteige 18, 72070 Tübingen, tel. +49/(0)71/92940, fax 793391, info@hotelamschloss.de, www.hotelamschloss.de

Rating: QUALITY 13/20 VALUE 15/20

Zunfthaus der Schiffsleute

Just 100 paces from the Danube, the Zunfthaus was built over the River Blau six centuries ago to serve the fishermen and boating trades. Old wooden oars, rudders

EDITOR'S
CHOICE

and paddles, and models of old boats recall the time when it was a nine-day float from Ulm to Vienna. Lances tip off an Ulm tradition of "jousting" between the local boats. Sit upstairs to look down on the Blau. Fish lovers have plenty to choose from, including creative treatments such as grilled tilapia served on ratatouille with vegetable couscous or rolled sea bass stuffed with smoked salmon and poached with green asparagus. Swabian specialties make up much of the rest of the menu. Try the "Cat's Cry," a hash with large chunks of beef and potatoes, pan-fried and stirred with eggs and parsley, and then served in a "shovel"—a large wooden spoon. Cheese, meat, and bread plates are lighter options. Many entrées top €16, but there are plenty of tasty choices under €10.

Contact: Zunfthaus der Schiffsleute, Fischergasse 31, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/64411, info@zunfthaus-ulm.de, www.zunfthaus-ulm.de

Rating: QUALITY 14/20 VALUE 16/20

Zur Lochmühle

The Lochmühle is a casual restaurant/pub in Ulm's oldest mill still standing—nearly 700 years old. The setting is relaxed, rustic, and authentic; service is friendly; and portions are huge. Walk into the half-timber building and choose a cozy corner or booth where white tablecloths drape over centuries-old tables. The Swabian specialties are best, like *Böffla Mott*: Thick,

moist, meaty slabs of Swabian sauerbraten served with bread dumplings the size of softballs. Other top choices: Sliced *maultaschen* stuffed with spinach and fried with eggs, and *Ulmer Laugenbrezelsuppe*—baked doughy pretzels in broth—that tastes much better than it sounds. Other German specialties are also plentiful, including lighter snack plates that are perfect with a beer on the terrace. Relax as the Blau River gurgles by. Main dishes range from €9–13.

Contact: Zur Lochmühle, Gerbergasse 6, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/67305, fax 619390, info@lochmuehle-ulm.de, www.lochmuehle-ulm.de. Host: Willi Schubert.

Rating: QUALITY 14/20 VALUE 14/20

Zum Bäumle

Zum Bäumle is a Weinstube/restaurant in a quiet district of shops and cafés north of the Minster. The setting feels much of its 500 years with hardwood floors, candlelight, cassette ceilings, and tile ovens. The inn has welcomed guests for generations, and today's visitors are likely to be local and German. Ask for a look in the guestbook, which has entries dating to the 1890s. It serves as a barometer of German sentiment from the enthusiastic nationalism of 1914 and 1915, to the sadness of 1917, to the lack of entries of 1918, with a similar progression in the 1930s and 1940s. If it's not too busy, Frau Nussbaumer may sit with you and translate. Expect cordial service and excellent treatments of traditional Swabian fare.

Contact: Zum Bäumle, Kohlgasse 6, 89073 Ulm, tel. +49/(0)731/62287, fax 6022604 Hosts: The Nussbaumer family

Rating: QUALITY 14/20 VALUE 15/20

SWISS RESTAURANTS

Continued from page 1

from the legendary Fredy Giradet, considered by many to have been the greatest chef of his time. That is a heavy torch to carry, but Rochat has done very well. He's maintained the restaurant at three Michelin stars since taking over in 1996, despite rumors of a falling out with Giradet. More importantly, he has proved to be his own man, and he's keeping

tiny, industrial Crissier on the map as a site of gastronomic pilgrimage with a highly personal, modern, and creative cuisine.

It's a pilgrimage that Josep Vilella, cookbook author and food critic for Barcelona's *Vanguardia* newspaper, has made over 100 times. When he heard we were going to visit Rochat, he insisted on driving eight hours to meet us for dinner. Josep claims he has never had the same dish twice in all of his meals at Rochat. You'd think that would limit our choices, but there is a very long debate before Josep and Rochat finally settle on our menu for the evening. The big dilemma was whether to have the rack of lamb or the truffled pig's foot. They decide to have both, so problem solved.

The oval, peaches-and-cream dining room manages to be both classical and contemporary at the same time, and so is the food. Beneath the hushed Swiss formality is a warm personal touch. The austerity of the dining room, hung with sober abstract art, is lightened by whimsical, Miro-like characters dancing across the Limoges china. In the entry is a memorial portrait of Rochat's late wife, a long-distance runner lost in a tragic ski accident. The chairs are sleek but comfortable, which is good when eating a 12-course menu with interesting dinner companions.

The first dish was a stunningly beautiful Granny Smith apple veloute (like a fancy Jell-O mold) decorated with an S-curve of precision-sliced raw apples and punctuated with glistening black mounds of Imperial oscietre caviar garnished with tiny herb flowers. It was framed in a translucent square of green apple sauce flecked with more green—a study of spring, only a pale hope in freezing February.

Next came a baton of silky duck foie gras paté pressed with a thick layer of dried cherries in a gel made from marc de Savoie (upscale schnapps). The accompanying violet and pistachio brioche and thimbleful of refreshing raw parsley root/citric zest salad were the kind of touches

that scream, "This is a three-star joint." The evening was shaping up nicely.

The next dish blew at least half of us away. A circle of feather-light cream of local Crissier cardoons was literally smothered under generous slices of the headiest black truffles we had ever had. There was a crisp little tartine toast on the side with yet more truffle. Josep and his wife ate this marvel calmly, since they are older and have had a lot more truffles than we have. The aroma was intoxicating, notable when so many modern truffles need more artificial enhancement than a Hollywood starlet. Instead of being a luxury garnish, the truffle was the mainstay of the dish—there was as much truffle as cardoon on the plate. We also liked the bold pairing of a luxury ingredient with a humble local vegetable.

The scallop with Normandy olive oil and Nîmes citron was a bit jolting. The scallop was perfectly cooked, sliced, and reassembled with a complex but almost invisible architecture of garnishes on a tiny silver peg. The acidity of the citrus sauce was bold to the point of being overpowering. We decided the flavors were too unbalanced to be fully successful, but it was an audacious move.

The tiny square of North Atlantic turbot (a nice fat one, rich with natural gelatin), swam in a little pool of coconut milk sauce, like a Swiss on a Thai holiday. The next dish—a single pink shrimp as big and succulent as a small lobster, delicately dressed with whole-grain mustard and root vegetable chutney in a light red curry infusion—sent Josep barreling into the kitchen to kiss the chef.

The lamb was a tender age, nearly white since it had not yet been weaned, making what generally passes as lamb look like mutton. It came with a barricade of giant macaroni with smoky, bright-red pimientos de piquillo from northern Spain.

How lucky we didn't pass up the pig's trotter, because this time we all jumped up en masse to kiss the chef. It was a round pillow of unctuousness, the meat boned and stuffed into the crispy skin with as much black truffle as can be stuffed inside. The

little scoops of root vegetable puree with rich demiglace sauce made for a millionaire's mashed potatoes with gravy. That dish was maybe the most delicious two bites I've had all year.

As a predessert, we had a parfait of blood orange sorbet perfumed with Napoleon mandarins, a frozen cyclone of citrus topped with a creamy citrus foam and a silvery spiral of pulled sugar. Then came a kebab of pineapple impaled on a whole Tahitian vanilla bean and roasted to a deep caramel. By the time we waded through coffee and petit fours and remembrances of great meals past, it was 1 am and we were the last to leave.

Our tasting menu was CHF 360 per person, which included a supplement for the three extra courses. The eight-course winter menu featuring turbot, crab, and duck cost CHF 280. The nine-course menu most similar to ours (without the turbot, scallop, and pig's trotter and the extra dessert) came to CHF 295. (These prices include service and taxes but not wine.) Three-star restaurants are not the place for budget travelers, but it is possible to watch the bottom line and eat well. One bargain is the lunch "menu rapide" Tuesday–Friday for CHF 165, which wouldn't include the most luxurious ingredients but would provide a taste of what Rochat is all about.

Contact: Restaurant de l' Hotel de Ville, Philippe Rochat, 1, Rue d'Yverdon, CH-1023 Crissier, tel. +41 (0) 21/634 05 05, fax 634 24 64, www.philippe-rochat.ch (Closed Sunday and Monday, two weeks at Christmas and three weeks in July–August.)

Rating: QUALITY 19/20, VALUE 17/20

Le Pont de Brent

Switzerland's other three-star, Le Pont de Brent, has the same elite Michelin rating, similar prices, similar luxurious surroundings, and impeccable service. Our dining experience, however, was completely different. For one thing, it is a more old-fashioned restaurant, both in décor and cuisine, compared to the more contemporary feel of Rochat. For another, there is the difference

between a chef who is content to rest on his ever-mustier laurels and one who is at the height of his powers. There is also the important difference, particularly marked in restaurants in Europe, between going to a restaurant with an insider's introduction and going as an anonymous American tourist.

However, since most Americans eat anonymously in Europe, we can only surmise that our lackluster experience is a good indication of what most *Gemütlichkeit* readers can expect. (Not that insiders fare much better, from what we hear.)

The restaurant is in a charming provincial house nestled in the hills above Lac Lemman and Montreux, on the road to Blonay. The richly paneled dining room is divided with strategically placed cabinets and floral arrangements into intimate sections that are rather cozy for such a formal setting. It's quite romantic, and it's easy to forget that there are other people in the room.

It gets less romantic when a tray of assorted canapés arrives, which immediately runs afoul of a pet peeve. There are two of us, but only one of certain types. Suddenly it's Darwinian competition for the best tidbits. There are two boring cheese straws, for example, but only one tiny round of gorgeous homemade rabbit sausage. At CHF 260 per person, you'd think they could splash out for an extra nibble of ham and cheese quiche or crab mousse.

The menu is pure French, not surprising since the chef is from Normandy. In more traditional places, it's a difficult decision whether to go a la carte or for the tasting menu, since hearty traditional dishes often don't lend themselves to miniature tasting menu proportions. Also, classically trained chefs trying too hard to be trendy with a multicourse, fussy menu don't play to their strengths. Appetizers ranged from CHF 50–85 a la carte, fish courses averaged around CHF 70, and meat courses about the same, with an emphasis on game and roasts for two that warn of a 50-minute wait. Cheese started at CHF 18, and desserts were CHF 26. There

DEAR SUBSCRIBER*Continued from page 2*

ers seems farfetched. That, however, doesn't rule out the occasional bad-apple, commission-hungry counter agent. Unfortunately, when the rental is finished, all that's left is the paperwork and the Avis policy, understandably, is "You signed, you pay."

- **Trip insurance:** Speaking of insurance, travel writing colleague Ed Perkins, founder of the now defunct *Consumer Reports Travel Newsletter*, writes a regular online travel column. His recent piece on travel insurance is as good an overview of the topic as I've seen. He covers trip interruption/cancellation, medical/emergency evacuation, personal property losses, how to calculate your exposure, and companies that sell travel insurance online. Read the full story at www.smartertravel.com. Click Senior Traveler and then look for Ed Perkins.

- **Smoking in Germany:** The German Hotel and Restaurant Association has agreed to create nonsmoking areas in its restaurants by March 2008. The country lags behind other western European countries in anti-smoking legislation.

- **Last night hotels:** Subscriber Pam Fetters recommends the **Airport Hotel Tanne** (Tannenstrasse 2, tel. +49/06107/9340, fax 5484, info@airporthotelanne.de, www.airporthotelanne.de) in Kelsterbach, very near the Frankfurt Airport. She reports that it was clean and convenient, the staff helpful, and the food excellent. Can't ask for more than that. Doubles are €78-110.

- **Bavarian vacation rentals:** Tom and Shirley Haug, subscribers since the '80s, sent us information on a consortium of vacation apartments in six attractive houses in Grainau near Garmisch-Partenkirchen. The three-star, four-star, and five-star accommodations are priced from €48 to €129 per day for two persons. The photos are gorgeous and the Haugs describe their own experience as "great." **Ferienwohnungen Bartlechner** (Oberer Dorfplatz 1a, tel. +49/08821/969941, fax 81390, ferienwohnungen@bartlechner.de, www.bartlechner.de). — RHB 

SWISS RESTAURANTS*Continued from page 7*

was a 7-course "Pont de Brent" menu featuring veal sweetbreads and pigeon for CHF 180, but in the end we opted for the CHF 260, 10-course "Menu Gourmand," which could also be called the "Menu Glutton." There was a shortened 8-course version, sans foie gras and scallops, offered for CHF 225.

First up was a clever (in French) rhyming dish of razor clam and crab. A tiny warm salad consisting of bits of razor clam, broccoli, cauliflower, peppers, and arugula were attractively arranged in a long, thin razor clam shell. There was also a small round of cauliflower-broccoli hash topped with a pink patty of spider crab. It was good, but the quality of the ingredients lacked a certain sparkle.

The foie gras pot-au-feu floated in a shallow pool of sparkling chicken broth with colorful bits of vegetables and a round of herbed pasta. Execution was a bit lazy—instead of being poached whole, which would keep most of the unctuous fat from leaking out, it was sliced then poached, which gives a slightly tougher result. The liver still retained a few fibers and unsightly veins. The bowl was too shallow to retain warmth, and after a few seconds, the food was stone cold.

Next, a tough, stringy, overcooked scallop with plump cockles and braised fennel lurked under an overly salty froth of saffron and shellfish stock, garnished with strips of lemon zest. It made the citron scallop at Rochat, the weakest link in the previous night's menu, look like a masterpiece.

The strongest dish of the evening was a timbale of frogs' legs and diced white root vegetables, wrapped in a chestnut pasta and garnished with black truffle and a creamy froth. The frogs' legs were a shade below totally tender, but the dish was savory and satisfying.

The rosemary-encrusted leg of milk-fed lamb was classically presented with much fancy-dining flourish: whole, in a paper sock, and with

garnishes of roasted potatoes and Brussels sprouts. Mme. Rabaey, the chef's wife, came over to supervise the carving herself. The quality of the lamb was outstanding, as was the sauce, but it was criminally tough and overcooked. They had managed to turn the world's tenderest meat into shoe leather. There were also splinters of bone treacherously embedded in the meat. By now we felt like storming into the kitchen to express our outrage.

The cheese cart was a depressing reinforcement of the stinginess we detected earlier from the tray of canapés. Some of the cheeses were in deplorable condition. We spotted the condiments for the spiced goat cheese with olive oil, but it was only a tease—they were out of fresh goat cheese that evening.

The apple crumble with caramel ice cream and apple sorbet was the kind of dessert we love, but the lemon soufflé was more like an excruciatingly sweet lemon meringue. By the time the tray of nicely made petit fours arrived, we were too full and too dispirited to care that there wasn't two of everything.

Pont de Brent was not our first disappointing three-star meal. It was yet another lesson in the dangers of trusting Michelin too much with your hard-earned cash. Michelin does not award three stars easily, but it is also very slow to demote three-stars that are no longer up to snuff. Presumably, Pont de Brent was outstanding, but now it is merely good. Another trusted source, Vedat Milor, founder of the dining blog *Gastroville.com*, once put Pont de Brent on par with Rochat, but he says recent meals there have been "dismal" (at least for the highest standards of gastronomic excellence). Let the buyer beware. Pont de Brent is cheaper than Rochat, but in the end it was a worse bargain.

Contact: Le Pont de Brent, 4, Route de Blonay, CH-1817 Brent/Montreux, tel. +41 (0)/964 52 30, fax 964 55 30, www.lepontdebrent.com. (Closed Sunday and Monday and two weeks at Christmas.)

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 8/20 