

**DEAR
SUBSCRIBER**

Two weeks in Europe for less than \$2000, air included

This is getting serious. The euro, I mean. By the time your credit card nails you for its two or three percent foreign transaction charge, you can add about 50% to any euro price tag; a €20 plate of food is going to cost nearly \$30, and a €100 hotel room will be about \$150. That €1000 Louis Vuitton handbag in the store window? \$1500.

The dollar's recent vapors have caused some frequent Europe travelers to postpone or cancel trips scheduled for '08. Others are simply resigned to spending a few hundred dollars more for their beloved European sojourns. As usual, most of the mainstream travel media isn't helping. They simply can't resist those \$10 cup of coffee stories.

But as we discussed here in last month's issue, there are ways to cushion the euro's impact and, by altering your travel style, perhaps spend even less than you did a year ago. In the October/November *Dear Subscriber* column, however, I left out the most dollar-efficient way of visiting Europe. It is one longtime subscriber Charlotte Sprawls reminded me of in an email she recently posted online with Untours informative listserv (register at www.untours.com). Her solution consists of two elements: rent an apartment and travel with another couple. In the off-season, or even the shoulder season, traveling from the east coast, you should be able to vacation for two weeks in Europe for less than \$2200 per person (add about \$300 from the west coast). If another couple shares your accommodations and rental car, you can get

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

THE BEST OF BUDAPEST

A three-hour rail trip from Vienna leads to a different kind of cosmopolitan experience; leavened, of course, with generous measures of "jeepsee" music and Goulasch.

Time flies. The so-called Iron Curtain has now been on history's trash heap for nearly two decades. Eastern Europe's big, ex-socialist cities have steadily changed from somber, secretive places to lively, westernized destinations where urban resurgence and civic pride are apparent at every turn. That especially characterizes Budapest—which, however, retains ample amounts of its Old World atmosphere and charm.

Vienna and Budapest have a capital-city kinship that dates back to the Austro-Hungarian empire's half century of geopolitical clout prior to going *kaputt* in 1918. So the

impulse to link the two in your mid-European travel planning makes sense—all the more so because of their proximity to one another. Departing on frequent schedules from Vienna, eastbound trains cover 135 miles (217 km) of level terrain to reach Budapest in a bit less than three hours. That modest distance is roughly comparable to Portland-Seattle and considerably less than New York-Washington, D.C.

After journeying alongside the Danube while approaching metro Budapest, you're treated to river vistas meriting their UNESCO World Heritage emi-

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Salzkammergut Weekend

When Julie Andrews twirled and sang her way over those hills alive with the sound of music, it was the hills just east of Salzburg—a set of granite peaks rising dramatically from alpine lakes.

This area, stretching from Salzburg in the west past Gmunden in the east, encompasses nearly a dozen lakes and some of Austria's best recreational opportunities. You can hike easy ridges with spectacular views, get out on the water, go climbing and caving, or just stroll through the towns and shop. Even during high tourist season, the Salzkammergut moves at its own leisurely, sun-filled pace.

Although roads can be crowded during high season, a car will provide maximum flexibility for this itinerary. Regular and convenient buses also run from Salzburg, and there is train service into Bad Ischl. In addition, you may want to consider purchasing the **Salzkammergut Card** (€4.90 and available at any tourist office). It offers significant discounts on lake ferries and cable cars and most of the region's attractions.

Day One

Start your tour of the Salzkammergut by following Route 158

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Exchange rates as of 11/13/2007
1 euro = \$1.46
1 Swiss franc = \$0.89

December/January 2007-08

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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the cost under \$2000.

Here's how. If, at this time of year, you book a mid-April flight, Lufthansa will fly you nonstop from New York to Frankfurt and back for under \$600. Once on the ground you'll need transportation. If there are just two of you, a compact, four-door VW Golf will do nicely and cost about \$450 with taxes. A party of four will require a midsize VW Passat, or similar, for about \$490. Add another \$350 to fuel the car over 1000 miles/1609 km.

Apartments outside Germany and Austria's major cities start at about €200 per week. For example, the website for the Black Forest city of Freiburg (www.freiburg.de) lists page after page of holiday apartment rentals starting at €25 per night for two persons. You might, for example, choose Appartement Am Schloßberg (www.freiburgcity.com). The per couple price is about \$58 per night. Or, less than 10 minutes by car from Freiburg, in the charming Black Forest village of Kirchzarten, is a newly renovated and furnished two-bedroom ground floor apartment (www.vrbo.com/116304) in the duplex of Joan and Robin Stockitt. The place comes equipped with cable/satellite TV, CD player with music library, computer with high speed Internet

access, gas barbecue grill, washer and dryer, full kitchen including dishwasher, and castle and mountain views. Both bedrooms open to the landscaped garden. The total price per week for four persons is 792 dollars, not euros.

These are just two examples; there are thousands of clean, well equipped self-catering accommodations in our three countries. The question is how to find them and, from thousands of miles away, ensure quality, cleanliness and value.

The least expensive way of renting an apartment or house in Europe, is to deal directly with the owner. That way you avoid property manager and booking agent fees. There's a website (www.vrbo.com) that puts you in contact with vacation rental owners all over the world. Vrbo.com's property list for Germany, Austria and Switzerland, however, is a bit scant. For a much larger inventory of rentals, contact the tourist office of the town or region where you plan to headquarter. Most maintain an extensive property list with descriptions, photos, prices, and contact info. Of course, you can request the list via email, phone or fax (the *Michelin Red Guides* for Germany and Switzerland have tourist office contact information for thousands of towns) but you'll get more information quicker by visiting tourist office websites. Usually a simple "rothenburg tourist office" or "graz tourist office" Google search will

bring up what you're looking for. These days most of the properties on these tourist office sites have their own websites, often in English, where, via links, you can view photos, check prices, find a description of each property and its amenities, and then contact the owner.

The only problem with renter-to-owner contact at a distance is you're buying sight-unseen. As we learned a few years ago when we wore out shoe leather searching for an apartment in the Montreux-Lausanne area of Lake Geneva, carefully staged photos and glowing descriptions written by owners frequently don't reflect reality. If you travel in the off-season, I suggest waiting until you get to Europe to search for a property. Before leaving the U. S. you can use the Internet to compile a list of places you'd like to inspect. You might lose a day or two in the search but that's preferable to mak-

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Using Gemütlichkeit

- Hotel prices listed are for one night. Discounts are often available for longer stays.
- All hotel prices include breakfast unless otherwise noted.
- Local European telephone area codes carry the "0" required for in-country dialing. To phone establishments from outside the country, such as from the USA, do not dial the first "0".

Logging on to Our Website

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User Name: **jjgg** Password: **5602**

Vol. 21, No. 10
Dec/Jan 2007-08

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

Publishers: Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor
Executive Editor: Nikki Goth Itoi
Contributors: Tom Bross
Lydia Itoi

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. Web site: www.gemut.com. Subscriptions are \$67 per year for 10 issues. While every effort is made to provide correct information, the publishers can make no guarantees regarding accuracy.

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

HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

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

BUDAPEST*Continued from page 1*

nence. And here's an opportunity to comprehend this two-part city: hilly Buda, topped by the Castle District, looms above the Danube's west bank. On the other side, with the enormously neo-Gothic Hungarian Parliament as a focal point, flat Pest sprawls toward its cultural landmarks and buzzing commercial areas. Disembark at the eastern station (*Keleti pu*), a skylit 19th-century behemoth dominating Baross Square, smack-dab in the middle of cosmopolitan Pest.

Day One

Decide among plentiful hotel options. Upscale choices in Pest include **Le Meridien**, converted from a limestone police headquarters, and the more intimate **Atrium**, newly opened in 2007. For tempting river-view accommodations over in Buda, consider the four-star **Victoria** or charming 26-room **Burg**. After unpacking, plunge in to the urbane tempo and post-socialist spirit of Hungary's proudly resilient capital. If you're exploring Pest at midday, enjoy a lunch break indoors or on the terrace at **Premier**, serving international cuisine along with Budapest-brewed Dreher beer.

The restaurant is located along **Andrássy Avenue**, one of Europe's truly great boulevards, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, lined with splendidly restored mansions and public buildings. Especially prominent among them: the 1884 **State Opera House**, matching its counterparts in Vienna, Dresden, and Paris for grandiose architecture and lavish interiors (Bertalan Székely's murals on the foyer's vaulted ceiling, for instance; also gorgeous Károly Lotz frescoes above the main hall). Wrought-iron balustrades seen on this Parisian-influenced thoroughfare frame stairways leading down to continental Europe's first subway line, inaugurated in 1896 to coincide

with Hungary's national millennium celebrations.

The avenue leads toward the **Millennium Monument** fronting marble-paved **Heroes' Square**, an open space adorned with statue-bedecked colonnades. Immediately beyond, **City Park** encompasses tree-shaded walkways, ponds, botanical gardens, Budapest's zoo, and the famous **Széchenyi Spa Baths**, Europe's biggest such complex, fed by thermal springs that were discovered 131 years ago. Backtracking to the square, make at least a quick tour inside the **Museum of Fine Arts** before it closes at 5pm (Tuesday-Sunday). Its world-class collections include paintings by Raphael (*The Esterházy Madonna*), Rembrandt, a Dürer self-portrait, Tiepolo, El Greco, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Pieter Brueghel the Elder's 1566 masterpiece: *St. John the Baptist's Sermon*.

For tonight's meal, choose **Belcanto**, virtually next door to the opera house. Pastel walls enclose this two-level dining salon, where singing waiters entertain. Fish and vegetarian courses are on the menu, augmented by an extensive wine list, but here's your chance to savor Hungarian veal stew with *strapatchka* dumplings.

Day Two

Make the most of a full day in Pest. There's still much to see—not the least of which are memorials to the Russian Red Army's deadly siege during the closing months of World War II and the 18-day Hungarian Revolution a decade later. No need, though, to rush your hotel breakfast, because guided English-language tours through the magnificent **Hungarian Parliament Building** at Kosuth Square don't commence until 10am. St. Stephen's crown and other coronation regalia glimmer in glass display cases. Nearby, **St. Stephen's Basilica**—an ecclesiastical treasure house of jewel-encrusted reliquaries, mosaics, paintings, carvings, and Alajos

Stróbl sculptures—is surmounted by a 315-foot (96-meter) dome housing an observatory for 360-degree vistas over Budapest.

In a museum-going mood? Pest has dozens. Their themes range from ethnography and agriculture to geology, postal service, photography, railroading, contemporary art, and national history. The **Béla Bartók Memorial House** was the 20th-century composer's residence. The **Museum of Applied Arts** is an Art Nouveau stunner, inside and out. Conceived by architect Ödön Lechner, aqua and gold Zsolnay ceramics cover the dome and roof in dazzling patterns. Compelling, too, is the squeezed-together Jewish Quarter, with Holocaust remembrances added to the rose-windowed, Byzantine-Moorish **Great Synagogue**, consecrated in 1849.

Ponder two lunchtime recommendations: The circa-1897 **Central Market Hall** (more multicolored Zsolnay rooftop zigzags), jam-packed with stalls purveying fruit, vegetables, paprika, meats, and cheeses. Bread, sausages, sugar-sprinkled *palacsinta* pancakes, and drinks are sold in the upstairs fast-food corner. Or, similar vintage but classier ambience: **Gerbeaud**, the quintessential Old World pastry shop/coffee house/tea room/luncheon haven, a can't-miss presence beside a square graced with a sculpted stone fountain.

Shopping, people-watching, café-sitting. Accomplish all three on a sensationally popular pedestrian corridor two blocks in from the riverfront—namely **Váci Utca**, hemmed in by neoclassical, Bauhaus, and daringly postmodern buildings.

Make this a memorable evening by boarding a boat anchored near the iconic **Chain Bridge**, dramatically illuminated, as are imposing buildings along both sides of the Danube. Settle into **Spoon**, the mid-ship restaurant, then linger over after-dinner

drinks in the lounge, with its backdrop of city lights.

Day Three

After riding the **funicular railway** up a steep 48-degree slope, you're on the Buda heights, locale of the **Royal Palace**. Spread amidst courtyards, gardens and ornamental gateways, attractions inside this supreme landmark include the **Hungarian National Gallery**, **Budapest History Museum**, and the **National Széchényi Library** (2,500,000 books).

Huddled beneath the ramparts, rows of Gothic and Baroque house-fronts overhang narrow streets illuminated by gas lights. Sure enough, many of them are loaded with folkloric souvenir cubbyholes—your cue to do some luncheon unwinding at a neighborly café. Aim for a sidewalk table at tiny **Walzer**, a few steps from **Holy Trinity Square**, where the spire of neo-Gothic **Mátyás Church** stands lean and tall. Then ramble upward toward the four conical towers of the 1895 **Fishermen's Bastion**, a curved pavilion providing high-angle views of Pest, the Danube and its bridges.

While you're in Buda, angle onto a southerly route from the Castle District. Destination: **Statue Park**, hilltop dumping ground for 41 gigantic Communist-era monuments, ripped from their citywide perches after Russia's bureaucrats and troops left town in 1991. Say hello to larger-than-life Marx and Engels, plus Lenin, Dimitrov, and other comrades. For evening farewells, soulful guitar strumming in the 15th-century palm court—within sight of Mátyás Church—complements your dinner at five-star **Alabárdos**, a restaurant featuring the cuisine of Transylvania.

Before you go: Catch the mood of Budapest before, during after WWII, by renting *Gloomy Sunday*, a fine German film that blends romance, intrigue, nasty Nazis and a restaurant so enticing you'll want to immediately book a table.

Budapest Hotels

(Prices are in HUF-Hungarian Forints: US\$1 = HUF 173)

Le Meridien, Erzsébet tér. 9-10, tel. +36/429/5500, fax 5555, www.lemeridien.com, info@lemeridien.hu; doubles from HUF 69,398

Atrium, Cszona 14, tel. +36/299/0777, fax 6090, www.atriumhotel.budapest.com, info@atriumhotel.com; doubles from HUF 29,568

Victoria, Bem Rakpart 11, tel. +36/457/8080, fax 8088, www.victoria.hu, victoria@victoria.hu; doubles HUF 23,661-30,448

Burg, Szentháromság tér 7-8, tel. +36/212/0269, fax 3970, www.burghotelbudapest.com, hotelburg@mail.datanet.hu; doubles from HUF 24,388, singles HUF 21,052

Budapest Restaurants & Cafés

Premier, Andrásy út. 101, tel. +36/342/1768; Mon.-Sat. 10am-11pm; entrées HUF 3,000

Bel Canto, Dalszínház út. 8, tel. +36/269/2786; daily noon-3 p.m. and 5pm-2am; entrées HUF 3,000

Spoon, V. Vigadó tér. 3, tel. +36/411/0933; daily noon-midnight; entrées HUF 2,790-3,200

Central Market Hall, Fövám tér.1-3; Mon. to 5pm, Tues.-Fri. to 6 p.m., Sat. to 2pm; lunches HUF 1,566-1,914

Gerbeaud, Vörösmarty tér. 7-8, tel. +36/429/9000; daily noon-11pm; lunches average HUF 1,800-2,000

Walzer, Táncsics Mihály út. 12, tel. +36/321/3622; daily 10am-6pm.; pastry and beverage HUF 1,044-1,392

Alabárdos, Országház út. 2, tel. +36/356/0851, Mon.-Sat. 7-11pm; entrées HUF 3,000

SALZKAMMERGUT

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out of Salzburg to the Fuschlsee and the town of the same name. Right after you pass the modern headquarters of Red Bull Austria (the renowned energy drink makers that sponsor all sorts of things, including Salzburg's soccer team), turn left on Dorfstrasse and drive by the beach. The **Hotel Seerose** will be on your left. You can't beat it for location and although some of the rooms may feel slightly sterile, it offers a good combination of comfort and convenience. For the more budget-minded, try **Haus Fieg** at Ellmaustrasse 2. You can choose between quiet rooms toward the back of the house or those with a view of the Fuschlsee. A high-end option is the **Schloss Fuschl** at the other end of the lake. Located in a castle on its own peninsula, it offers a fairy tale experience complete with carriage rides and rooms in the tower—and is priced accordingly.

Once you've settled in, get out your walking shoes and head off on the path that goes around the lake (you can find it in front of Hotel Seerose). The entire loop can be done in a few hours at a walking pace. But, whether you are walking, running, or even riding a bike rented from one of the many shops in town, bring a bathing suit and stop by any of the beaches. One favorite is the **Wesenauer** beach, on the south side. It is a peaceful retreat from the sometimes crowded public beach. And the nearby restaurant **Holzknichtstube** will serve lunch or a snack. But save your appetite for dinner tonight at the **Gasthof Seerose**.

Try to reserve a table facing the lake and plan to be seated about thirty minutes before sunset. Prepare to linger as the sun goes down across the water. If you're lucky, one of the lake's dusk anglers will drift by in a

rowboat casting the perfect silhouette. By the time you have finished the *Wienerschnitzel* (€10, it is particularly good here) and are on to your coffee, the sky will have turned a lovely blue and the mountains will have faded to black. Bring a sweater though, because here on the water, the air can turn chilly even on a summer night and you'd hate to have to leave because you weren't prepared for the cooler air.

If by chance, the Hotel Seerose is fully booked, try **Steakhouse Fuschl** at Ellmaustrasse 2 (Route 158). Ask Maria for a table in the garden and try the mixed grill for two (€16 per person). You won't be disappointed. Steakhouse Fuschl is also an excellent choice for families with young kids—both the menu and the backyard playground are sure to bring smiles.

Day Two

After breakfast, get on the road quickly, for there's a great hike ahead of you. But before you leave, stop at the **Nah & Frisch** (9 Dorfstrasse) just up the road from the hotel to grab the makings for a picnic lunch. Although there is plenty of food available halfway up the hike, a picnic at the top of the **Bleckwand** is clearly a better option. Pulling out of Fuschl, continue on Route 158 towards Sankt Gilgen. Bypass the town and continue on Route 158 toward Bad Ischl. Just after you pass the town of Geschwendt, you will see Gasthof Wiesenhof on the left; turn right at the sign that says Bleckwandstrasse. This is a toll road, so have your €3 ready to drop into the slot at the gate. Climb this steep and winding road to the parking lot on the left just past the Jausenstation on the right.

The first section of this hike meanders slowly up through a forest before gaining the ridge where the **Bleckwandhütte** sits (walking time to the hut is 30 to 45 minutes and then another half an hour to the top). It is one of a

series of Alpine huts serving basic meals and drinks. If the porch tables are open, stop for cake and coffee, or maybe even a cup of *goulaschsuppe*. Once fortified, follow the path that leads up from the hut towards the summit. Although moderately steep in some sections, the hike is short with a tremendous payoff. The top is wonderfully rounded, with a large grassy plain, but be careful, the cliffs here are real cliffs. The view is stunning: five lakes and the towns of Bad Ischl, Sankt Gilgen, Sankt Wolfgang, and Strobl – all surrounded by granite peaks and green valleys. There is a picnic table and bench near the cross that marks the highest point, so don't forget the backpack full of food you bought back in Fuschl.

When you are ready, stand with your back to the cross and take the path that leads south down the backside of the Bleckwand (away from the lake). As the trail drops down through the forests, you will begin to catch views of high pastures dotted with cows and sheep. Follow the path down to the mountain dairy farm and take a moment to drink in the view (and a bit of fresh milk if you can get it) before returning to your car via the road (about a 15-minute walk).

After returning to the main road (Route 158), turn right and pass through Bad Ischl on your way to Hallstatt (on Routes 145 & 166) for tonight's stay. Hallstatt is the stunning postcard village featured on almost all literature about Austria. In addition to 7,000 years of history and inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list, Hallstatt offers plenty of activities, depending on the season you visit. First, leave your bags at the **See-hotel Grüner Baum** in the Marktplatz. Although there are plenty of accommodations in this heavily-touristed town, the Grüner Baum may be the best value.

If there is still light in the town

(the steep walls surrounding this tiny village clinging to the side of the Hallstättersee mean the town is shaded by mid-afternoon at the latest), go explore a bit of the town by walking all the way through on the main street to the **St. Michaels Chapel** with its famous charnel house. The church's cemetery has been in use since 1600 and is so small that after being buried for 10 or 20 years, remains are transferred to this above-ground building. Some of the skulls are marked with the date and/or the cause of death.

After that sobering interlude, double back through the town. Check out the two main squares and stop at **Gasthof Zauner** (also a hotel candidate) to make a dinner reservation. Request the porch table overlooking the square.

Next, chase the light out onto the water by renting an electric or paddle boat from the marina at the north side of town. Roughly €10 for a half-hour ride allows you to see the town from a totally

Key Websites for the Traveler

- www.gemut.com Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, traveler feedback, travel tips, and past issues (free access to back issues for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- www.viamichelin.com The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants, plus great interactive trip planning tools
- www.travelessentials.com Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers. Use discount code gemut2006.
- 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.

different perspective.

Round out your afternoon with a little shopping. **Hallstatt Keramik** is the place to buy ceramic bowls, egg cups, vases, and dishes – all with the distinctive spiral pattern of Hallstatt pottery. For additional local gifts, try the **Salzkontor Hallstatt** shop, where special Hallstatt salt and gems are sold. If you are in the market for outdoor gear, try **Dachstein Sport** for functional clothing, great trekking socks, and outdoor equipment. In addition, the basement showcases the Roman ruins upon which the store is built.

When your table is ready at Zauner, head over and start with a glass of *Grüner Veltliner* before ordering up the *Hallstatter Forelle* (if you are squeamish, have them remove the head first). The trout is sweeter than the local *Reinanke*. And no meal at Zauner is complete without their monstrous version of the *Salzburgerknockerl*, a traditional baked pastry loaded with butter and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Day Three

Rise early this morning to get the most out of the morning sun. Often, the cold water of the Hallstattersee causes a smoky mist to drift about in the morning light. If you are lucky, you'll catch one of the locals poling their long wooden boats silently through the morning fog. As the day warms, find the path (The Salzburg Weg) that leads up from the Marktplatz towards the summit of the hill behind Hallstatt. It's a steep 45-minute climb up switchbacks, but the path is wide and gravelly, and the forests are cool, so it is a pleasant walk. After visiting the salt mines, take a table near the railing at the **Rudolfturm restaurant** and enjoy lunch with the valley and lake literally laid out at your feet, and the Dachstein range rising above you. This is the perfect place to lay out the map and plan the next trip.

Salzkammergut Hotels

Hotel Seerose, Dorfstrasse 20, Fuschl Am See, tel. +43/6226/8793, www.hotel-seerose.at; €64-82 per person per night

Haus Fieg, Ellmaustrasse 2, Fuschl Am See, tel. +43/6226/8231, www.steakhouse-fuschl.at; €21-30 per person per night

Hotel Schloss Fuschl, Schlossstrasse 19, Hof Bei Salzburg, tel. +43/6229/22531, http://austria.starwoodhotels.com/schlossfuschl.0.html?&no_cache=1&L=en; €215-575 per person per night

Hotel Gasthof Zauner-Zee-wirt, Marktplatz 51, Hallstatt, tel. +43/6226/8793, www.zauner.hallstatt.net; €40-52 per person per night

Seehotel Grüner Baum, Marktplatz 104, Hallstatt, tel. +43/6226/8793, www.gruenerbaum.cc; €50-65 per person per night

Salzkammergut Restaurants


Hotel Seerose, Dorfstrasse 20, Fuschl Am See, tel. +43/6226/8793, www.hotel-seerose.at; daily from 11am; main dishes from €6

Steakhouse Fuschl, Ellmaustrasse 2, Fuschl Am See, tel. +43/6226/8231, www.steakhouse-fuschl.at; Mon.-Fri. from 5pm and weekends from 11am; main dishes from €8

Gasthof Zauner-Zee-wirt, Marktplatz 51, Hallstatt, tel. +43/6226/8793, www.zauner.hallstatt.net; daily from 11am.; average fish dish €13

Rudolfturm, tel. +43/6132/2002490; daily from 9am.

Tourist Info

Salzkammergut Tourism Marketing, Salinenplatz 1, A-4820 Bad Ischl, tel. +43/06132/21306 or 26909, fax 2690914, info@salzkammergut.at, www.salzkammergut.at 

Rental Car Issue:


Do I Need Winter Tires?

If you plan to rent a car in Europe between now and about April 1, *Gemütlichkeit* suggests giving thought to the issue of winter tires. German law now requires them when driving on snow, though rental car companies are not routinely equipped with them—and, at most times, in most locales, snow is not be an issue. The penalty if you are caught driving in snow without winter tires is €40. Worse, however, you may be financially liable if you don't have them and are involved in an accident on snow. And, since you would be breaking the law, driving without winter tires might also void your insurance coverage.

The problem is winter tires are expensive, especially in Germany. They are not standard equipment and must be booked in advance. Most rental companies charge about \$20 per day to a maximum of from \$135 to \$240. So a compact car for a week in Germany will be \$228 plus \$140 for winter tires, a total of around \$368.

Normally, Germany is the least expensive country in which to rent; but perhaps not in winter. In Austria, winter tires are mandatory at certain times of the year and all rental companies include them with the basic price of the rental car. That makes the \$323 weekly price of a compact car with snow tires in Austria cheaper than in Germany — unless, of course, you don't want winter tires in Germany. Switzerland, also requires winter tires through March 31 and the cost is \$6.50 per day. The price of a compact car for a week in Switzerland is \$277, plus \$46 for winter tires for a total of \$323.

In France, snow tires are not required, and at most rental stations only available on expensive, four wheel drive vehicles. The cost is about \$38 per day.

Snow chains? Rental car companies are phasing them out, though they are sold at most service stations. 

Readers' Forum

Bring Your Tent

While packing for a trip with my 10-year-old daughter, I decided to include a two- to three-person dome tent and two light sleeping bags. It was the best decision ever. We had the best nights' sleep and fun experiences camping in Austria along the Altsee in someone's backyard for €8; Czech Republic in the middle of nowhere for €12; outside Melk below a castle along the Danube for €14; and at the lake campground near Neuschwanstein Castle for €22. All were clean, quiet (unlike our Hostel experiences), convenient, and fun. For budget travelers, I highly recommend camping (at least as a backup) and then splurging once in awhile on more expensive hotels.

DANIEL SRNA
VIA EMAIL

Burned by DCC

Your mention of Dynamic Currency Conversion in a recent *Gemütlichkeit* really struck a nerve. A little over a month ago my husband and I spent a night at a Holiday Inn near the Frankfurt Airport. When we checked out of the hotel I looked briefly at our receipt but did not really check it carefully until we got home. I discovered that we had been billed in USD, not Euros. A few days later I sent an email to Holiday Inn and detailed my complaint. I specifically mentioned that we were never asked our preference for which currency should be used; I also mentioned that because they made the currency conversion (at a rate favorable to them) we were unfairly overcharged. Although their website states they will answer emails within 8-10 days, we have heard nothing from them. You are so right to warn travelers about this as I fear this practice is becoming more widespread. The dollar is weak enough as it is — no need to diminish it even more.


CHARLOTTE OLSTEAD
REDWOOD CITY CA

IN EUROPE, PAY IN LOCAL CURRENCY, NOT DOLLARS

Tempting as it may sound, don't pay any bills in Europe that are presented in dollars. Insist on local currency. Under the guise of offering a convenience for travelers, this practice—called Dynamic Currency Conversion (DCC)—was created to establish a revenue stream for the companies that peddle DCC and for their merchant customers: the restaurants, hotels, car rental agencies, and stores that do business with tourists.

DCC adds about three percent to your final cost; this for the infinitesimal convenience of knowing immediately, and to the penny, what you just paid in U.S. dollars for that dinner, rental car or three-night hotel stay. Let's say your hotel bill is €500 and you put it on your Visa card. If you pay in euros the currency gets converted to dollars using the interbank rate—the rate banks use among themselves. In this case, let's assume that rate is 1.45. You wind up paying $1.45 \times €500$ or \$725. Add Visa and your own bank's three percent foreign transaction charge and the final total in U.S. dollars is \$747 (a few cards, such as Capital One do not


assess foreign transaction fees). But suppose you are charmed by the hotel manager's pleasant manner when he says you can pay the bill in dollars if you choose. He fails to mention there is a fee for this "service." The currency transaction from euros to dollars is now done at an exchange rate chosen by the "technology provider"—a company called Planet Payment, is one example—that offers this immediate conversion service to the merchant's bank. Instead of an exchange rate of 1.45 it's 1.494. With your credit card's three-percent foreign transaction charge, and the higher exchange rate imposed by Planet Payment, you wind up forking over \$769. Your hotel and Planet Payment split the extra \$22 you paid for an electronic sleight of hand that is of absolutely no value.

Reports to us from returning travelers confirm that if you offer a USA credit card for payment, many merchants routinely present the credit card signature form in U.S. currency. The customer is not given a choice. It this happens, simply insist on paying in local currency. 

News/Deals

■ **SEA to FRA on LH:** Good news for the Pacific Northwest. On March 30, **Lufthansa** begins nonstop service from Seattle to Frankfurt. Flight LH 491 will depart daily from Seattle at 2:30pm and arrive in Frankfurt at 9:25am local time the next day. Connections are available from there on Lufthansa to some 135 other European cities. The return flight, LH 490, leaves Frankfurt at 10:05am, and arrives in Seattle at 11:20am local time the same day. The new route will feature a 221-seat Airbus A330-300, with eight first class, 48 business class and 165 economy class seats. Lufthansa also begins new Calgary-Frankfurt service on March 30. For a price quote call 800-521-6722x2 or visit www.gemut.com and click on "Buy air tickets to Europe."

■ **Vienna Air/Hotel Deal:** Except for travel during the holiday season, December 13 through January 4, **Austrian Airlines** is offering an air and hotel package from New York, Chicago and Washington DC, starting at \$809. The deal includes non-stop roundtrips to Vienna from its U.S. gateway cities plus three nights in a three-star hotel. Extra nights are \$61 per person double occupancy and \$99 single. Hotels in the package are the Hotel Capri, Hotel Savoy Garni, and the Hotel Alantis. Contact Austrian Airlines Vacation Center at 800-790-4682 or go to www.austrianair-vacations.com.

■ **Medical Insurance Abroad.** Ed Perkins' online column on this topic should be read by every Europe traveler on Medicare. Go to www.smartertravel.com then do a search for "Ed Perkins columns." 

DEAR SUBSCRIBER*Continued from page 5*

ing a nonrefundable financial commitment and then discovering upon arrival that you've paid for a dump.

In high season, however, you may have to book months in advance. In that case, unless you have friends or relatives who can recommend places they've rented, the best option is a trustworthy rental agent. We recommend **Drawbridge to Europe** (www.drawbridgetoeurope.com), a small firm here in Ashland, Oregon, with high standards that has carefully vetted the properties it represents. That's, of course, if you're headed for Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. To rent in France put yourself in the capable hands of **At Home in France** (www.athomeinfrance.com).

Beyond friends, relatives, and trusted vacation rental companies, you can try online forums such as Fodor's and Frommer's—though based on the erroneous car rental information I see passed around on these forums, I would take any such info with a grain or two of salt. On the other hand, the website, www.slowtrav.com has fairly detailed, authentic-sounding user reviews of hundreds of European rental properties.

Perhaps the main reason to rent a house, flat or apartment is to cook some or all of your own meals. A few months ago I ventured into a couple of Berlin grocery stores specifically to compare food prices with those in the U.S. I was surprised to find staples such as bread, milk, cheese, eggs, vegetables and fruit, similar to what we pay here. Good beer and wine (emphasis on the good) is less expensive than in the U.S. Household items, however, such as liquid soap, toilet paper, and cleaning products are significantly higher. Thus if you cook all your meals you won't spend much more money in Europe on food than if you stayed home. But eating every meal in your apart-

ment is probably not practical, so for our purposes let's figure one restaurant meal every day; say, \$30 per day per person. We'll add another \$20 per day for incidentals such as entrance fees and parking (remember, sometimes you have to pay to park in the U.S.).

14-Day Apartment Vacation Germany

	2 pers	4 pers
Air	\$600	\$600
Car/fuel	\$350	\$213
Accommodations	\$406	\$396
Restaurants	\$420	\$420
Incidentals	\$350	\$350
Per person total	\$2126	\$1979

Your own costs will be higher if you: travel in the high season, drive more than 1000 miles, spend more than \$30 per day in restaurants, and stay in accommodations that cost more than about 20 euros per person per night.

The per person cost difference between one and two couples isn't great in this instance, but it should be pointed out that the foursome renting in Kirzharten have larger, better equipped accommodations.

If one compares the above scenario with 14 nights in three-star hotels, and 14 days of restaurant meals, the difference is somewhere around \$1,000 per person. The key number, of course, is how much more it's going to cost you per day to be in Europe versus staying home.

Our two-person scenario costs about \$152 per person, while four people traveling together each spend about \$141. (But what does it cost you per day if you stay at home?) It is interesting to compare these prices with the cost of an escorted bus tour. A 12-night Globus tour that includes Vienna and Salzburg starts at \$256 per night and you'll have to buy about half your own meals.

As a wise person on the Untours listserv points out, no one on their deathbed ever wished they spent more time at the office, or were thankful they stayed home from Europe because it was too expensive. After all, what are credit cards for? —RHB

We Recommend

This listing of good value, mid-priced hotels in popular destination cities is intended for fast reference. Additional hotels and links to hotel websites is in the **Hotel Review** sections at www.gemut.com. Hotels are arranged in price order, higher to lower.

Berlin

Hotel Art Nouveau, Leibnizstr. 59, tel. +49/030/327 7440, fax 327 744 40, info@hotelartnouveau.de, www.hotelartnouveau.de
Hotel Domus, Uhlandstrasse 49, Germany D-10719, tel. +49/030/882041, fax 882 0410, info@hotel-domus-berlin.de

Bern

Hotel Bristol, Schuplatzgasse 10, CH-3011, tel. +41/31/311 0101, fax 311 9479, email reception@bristolbern.ch
Hotel Kreuz, Zeughausgasse 41, CH-3000, tel. +41/031/329 9595, fax 329 95 96, hotelkreuz@swissonline.ch

Lucerne

Hotel Wilden Mann, Bahnhofstrasse 30, CH-6000 Luzern, tel. +41/041/2101666, fax 2101629, mail@wilden-mann.ch
Hotel Cascada, Bundesplatz 18, CH-6003 Lucerne, tel. +41/041/226 80 88, fax 226 80 00, info@cascada.ch

Munich

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

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

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

Rothenburg ob der Tauber

Reichs-Küchenmeister, Kirchplatz 8, Rothenburg o.d. Tauber, Germany D-91541, tel. +49/09861/97 00, fax 97 04 09, hotel@reichskuechenmeister.com
Hotel Hornburg, Hornburgweg 28, D-91541, tel. +049/09861/8480, fax 5570, hotelhornburg@t-online.de, www.hotelhornburg.de

Salzburg & Environs

Schloss Haunsperg, A-5411 Oberalm bei Hallein, Hammerstrasse 32, tel. +43/06245/80662, fax 85680, info@schlosshaunsperg.com
Hotel Struber, Nonntaler Hauptstrasse 35, Austria A-5020 tel. +43/0662/843 728, fax 843 728 8, struber@sbg.at
Hotel Jedermann, Rupertgasse 25, Austria A-5020, tel. +43/0662/873241-0, fax 873241-9, jedermann@salzburginfo.or.at

Vienna

Hotel Römischer Kaiser, Annagasse 16, A-1010, tel +43/01/512 77 51 0, fax 512 77 51 13, info@rkhotebestwestern.com
Allstadt Vienna, Kirchengasse 41, tel. +43/01/526 3399-0, fax 523 4901, hotel@allstadt.at, web: www.allstadt.at
Pension Aviano, Marco-D'Aviano-Gasse 1, tel. +43/01/512 8330, fax 512 8330 6, aviano@pertschy.com

Zürich

Hotel Florhof, Florhofgasse 4, Switzerland CH-8001, tel. 41/01/261 4470, fax 261 4611, info@florhof.ch
Hotel Arlette, Stampfenbachstrasse 26, Switzerland CH-8001, tel. +41/01/25 20 032, fax 25 20 932, hotel.arlette@bluwin.ch

Frankfurt Airport

Steinberger Esprix Hotel Frankfurt Airport, CargoCity Süd, D-60549, tel. +49/069/69 70 99, fax 69 70 94 44, frankfurt@esprix-hotels.de

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

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

Munich Airport

Daniel's Hotel, Hauptstrasse 11, Halbergmoos-Goldach, D-85399, tel. +49/0811/55120, fax 551213, info@hotel-daniels.de, www.hotel-daniels.de

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

Zürich Airport

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

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