

- Hofburg Fire Update
- Reader's Forum
- Budapest Excursions
- Low Prices in Tegernsee

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

Dear Subscriber

THE DOLLAR MOVES UP

Desitate to mention it for fear it will turn and go the other way, but while we've been merry-making over the Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's holidays, watching interminable, televised football games, and electing and inaugurating a new president, our lil' old greenback has been quietly rising against European currencies. I say quietly because, to my knowledge, the dollar's steady climb from being worth DM 1.39 marks to DM 1.64 — a tidy little jump of 18% — has taken place without comment from the media in this country. That, of course, is in sharp contrast to what happened late last summer when every bump in the buck's tumble was gleefully accompanied by alarmist press reports of how the slide was taking Europe beyond the financial reach of North American travelers.

To get overly excited now about the current rebound would be just as irresponsible as what happened last September when the press went into their "sky is falling" act. The dollar up-tick does, however, come at a good time because now is when some European travel providers set their prices. Here's a look at what a stronger dollar could mean to the traveler to Europe in 1993:

Car Rental

Car rental firms are just now coming out with their 1993 rates armed with the knowledge that each \$100 they collect translates to 164

deutschemarks instead of 139, as was the case last September. The stronger dollar could thus mean smaller than anticipated increases in 1993 rates.

On the other hand, after last year's dollar dip we can expect fewer European rental companies to guarantee their rates in dollars. When a German car rental firm establishes and guarantees a weekly rate of, say, \$200 for a certain car, basing that rate on the dollar being worth 1.6 German marks, it expects to wind up

with 320 marks. But when the dollar falls after the rates are set, and becomes worth only 1.4 marks, the company's take is only 280 marks. Last year some companies — seeing each succeeding rental yield fewer and fewer marks, francs, etc. — changed in mid-stream. In the early fall, **DER Tours** tacked a 9% surcharge onto its dollar rates (then rescinded it when the dollar rallied later in the year) and **Connex** issued new, higher rates in the late summer.

Continued on page 2...

VACATION RENTALS IN GERMANY, AUSTRIA & SWITZERLAND

Renting a house or apartment for two or three weeks is a different, less expensive style of European vacation.

After a few trips that involve touring from major city to major city, tourist attraction to tourist attraction and hotel to hotel, many European travelers are becoming attracted to a less peripatetic holiday; one in which an apartment, condominium or private home is rented for a week or more and used as a base or headquarters for daytrips. Not only is travel in this style more relaxing, it's cheaper. The rental price is lower than in a similarly furnished

hotel and there is always a kitchen which, if used, saves on restaurant expenses.

We are getting an increasing number of letters like the following one from Alvin Grancell of Mesa, Arizona:

"Do you have any information on small apartments or houses in Bavaria, Austria or Switzerland especially priced for active senior citizens. We like to eat out only two or three times a week. We like

Continued on page 6...

BUDAPEST REVISITED

Our hardy Eastern Europe experts, the redoubtable Claudia Fischer and Roger Holliday, finish their report on the world's two favorite formerly Iron Curtain destinations, Prague and Budapest, with a look this month at the Hungarian capitol.

European cities with histories reaching back to Roman times and beyond tend to be situated on rivers, not for esthetic purposes but because waterways afford many practical benefits: transportation routes for trade, travel and commerce; protection from evil forces and good strategic positioning in general.

Budapest is no exception. Since the first century A.D. when Roman legions occupied the area, civilization has flourished in this city on the Danube.

The 1,770-mile long river that traverses Europe from the Black Forest to the Black Sea, was a natural place for many early city builders to set up shop. Cities as diverse as Ulm, Regensburg, Passau, Vienna and

Continued on page 3...

DEAR SUBSCRIBER
Continued from page 1

Steinke Autos in Europe took a different tack. It stuck by its prices as long as the dollar stayed at DM 1.6 or higher. Below that, adjustments were made.

Of course it's a windfall for these companies when, if they have guaranteed dollar rates, the dollar rises against European currencies.

We think it is likely that this year you'll pay about the same as in 1992 for a rental car in Europe. However, when you get a price quote in dollars, — especially for reserve-now, pay-later deals — be sure to find out just how firm that price really is.

Rail Passes

These fares were set months ago and if past experience is a guideline they'll not change. The basic, 15-day, first-class, Eurailpass for 1993 is \$460 per person, up \$30 from 1992. More geographically limited passes such as the German Rail Pass, the Swiss Pass and the Austrian Rabbit card are much better values unless you've got one of those silly, exhausting Paris-Rome-Vienna-Zürich-Budapest-Stockholm-in-two-weeks kind of itineraries in mind.

(While we're on this subject, let us hypothesize that European rail companies have a virtual monopoly and price accordingly, reacting only to ridership and the cost of operation. A look back at the March 1989 issue of *Gemütlichkeit* reveals a 1989 15-day Eurailpass cost \$320 per person; nearly a 44% increase in four years. In 1989, a *Gemütlichkeit* subscriber could rent a VW Golf from Steinke Autos in Europe for two weeks for \$328 including tax. Today Steinke is accepting reservations for the 1993 VW Golf at a guaranteed two-week rate of \$352 [provided the dollar stays at DM 1.6 or above], including tax. That's less than

an 8% increase over four years. The same car from Connex or DER Tours is about the same price.)

Food and Lodging

Your dollar buys more. Last spring we got excited over a terrific country hotel in Kandersteg, Switzerland. In September the **Waldhotel Doldenhorn's** best double room was 250 SFr. or about \$200. As this is written, that same room is \$169. A small double room at the **Hotel Domus** in the heart of the Berlin (where according to the Associated Press "good" hotel rooms "start" at \$250) now rents for \$110 vs. \$129. A hearty meal at a simple gasthof for 25 DM is now \$15 instead of \$18. A mineral water in a Swiss restaurant is now \$2.16 vs. \$2.72. That's enough arithmetic, you get the idea.

In addition, the larger chains such as Steigenberger, Kempinski and Leading Hotels, who sometimes offer guaranteed dollar rates through toll-free 800 numbers in this country, are now more able to cut dollar prices knowing they'll wind up with more marks, francs, shillings, etc.

Air Fares

It's hard to imagine transatlantic fares going any lower than they have in the past couple of years. A stronger dollar, however, makes it easier for foreign carriers like **Swissair** and **Lufthansa** to compete in the U. S. The question now is what will happen this summer?

There are few deals around right now for travel after the March 31. If you're planning a June trip, as an example, the best roundtrip fares currently offered by the major carriers are \$736 from New York, \$854 from Chicago and \$982 from the West Coast. It's a stand-off. The airlines are waiting for heavy summer bookings in the hope of avoiding heavy discounting while vacation travelers await the next fare war. Put your money on the customers. In a few weeks the airlines will blink and the sale will be on. In the meantime, Southern

Californians, should know that DER Tours is selling roundtrip space on weekly **Air New Zealand** 747-400 non-stops from L. A. to Frankfurt for from \$549 to \$919. A super-saver, Tuesday departure in early June is \$699 and in July, \$799. Two members of our staff flew Air New Zealand to Frankfurt last summer and give it a thumbs-up. **Condor**, incidentally, will not serve the West Coast this summer.

• • •

Hofburg Fire

Here is an update from the **Austrian Tourist Office** on the consequences of the November fire in Vienna's Hofburg (Imperial Palace):

- The Schatzkammer (Imperial Treasury) is closed and, if repairs proceed on schedule, will re-open in March.
- The Grand Hall of the Austrian National Library is closed "until further notice" due to "waterlogged ceilings."
- The morning workout of the Spanish Riding School is not currently open to the public though that could change as early as mid-February.
- The various Hofburg museums — with the exception of the Schatzkammer — will be open as usual.

Speaking of Tourist Offices

Unlike the French Tourist Offices in this country, which dispense travel advice on a dialing-for-dollars basis — 900 phone number, you pay by the minute — their Swiss, German and Austrian counterparts still give free advice over the phone and will send you reams of valuable brochures and booklets at no charge. The young people who staff these outposts are some of the best and brightest their countries have to offer. Take advantage of their expertise now because they may be a dying breed. Eastern European countries may be opening tourist offices in this country but the rest of Europe is closing them. ☒

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Rating Key - Hotel

- I** Basic accommodations or a hotel that underachieves. Suitable only for stays of one or two nights.
- II** Good hotel, typical of its class. Suitable for a longer stay.
- III** A cut above other hotels in its price category.
- IV** Excellent accommodations.
- V** A great hotel, world-class, could be a memorable experience.

Restaurants

- ❖ Acceptable meals, but *only* if the price is right.
- ❖❖ Good food but not good value, overpriced.
- ◆ Serves good, plain food, typical of the region.
- ☆ A cut above other restaurants in its price category.
- ☆☆ Outstanding food and service.
- ☆☆☆ A great restaurant in every respect

Special Designations

- G** By virtue of location, decor, special charm, warmth of management, or combination thereof, an especially pleasant establishment.
- \$** Offers significant value.
- ⊖ Stay away.

BUDAPEST

Continued from page 1

Belgrade are all situated on the banks of the Danube.

But Budapest's intimate relationship with the river is different from all the others. It is said the Danube runs *by* Vienna but that the Danube *is* Budapest.

No wonder then that post-WWII hoteliers moved heaven and earth to secure riverside real estate and build their properties to maximize a classic view: the Chain Bridge connecting the green hills of Buda — with its castle and Matthias Church — with level Pest, whose skyline is dominated by the massive Parliament Building and Basilica.

Hotels

For two decades after the war, Budapest's hotel situation remained in a dismal state, all the major hotels had been destroyed in the siege of 1945 and not rebuilt. For years, all that remained of them were depressing, burned-out shells. When an energetic program of tourist development began in the 60s, international hotel chains were quick to seize prime spots along the river where the once-grand hotels still languished, dark and deserted.

The first modern hostelry on the Pest side of the river was the 340-room **Duna Inter-Continental**, its construction in 1969 started a process that changed tourism in Budapest. It introduced the concept of a large hotel featuring the international style of service that

travelers from the West had come to expect.

The **Forum Hotel Budapest**, constructed next door a few years later, made even more innovative use of its site. Each of its 408 rooms is set at an angle to insure a view of

through an atrium area filled with fountains and lush, green plants.

Across the river on the Buda side of town, the controversial **Hilton-Budapest** sits atop Castle Hill, in the middle of some of the city's most historic buildings. The outcry that arose when plans for its construction were unveiled one can only imagine, given that the hotel was built into and on the ruins of a 13th century Dominican church and a 16th century Jesuit college. Even though we might have been among the loudest protesters, the final result is successful.

The hotel's striking bronze-tinted exterior panels reflect the image of the picturesque and ornately carved Fisherman's Bastion, one of the city's most visited monuments. Care was taken during construction to maintain the site's historical integrity. The street side facade incorporates the remains of the Jesuit school while other elements of the structure fuse with the Gothic remains of the church, creating in one part of the building a charming area where operas, concerts and ballets are performed during the summer.

Actually these well-known, riverside Budapest hotels are more alike than different. Each is rated at four or five stars and staffed by well-trained,

multi-lingual personnel. All were built 15-20 years ago. Guest rooms are nicely furnished with mini-bar, color-TV, phone, hair dryer, lots of fresh towels, 24-hour room service and, nearly always, a superb view. As is the case with most hotels, the cheaper rooms tend to be small. All the usual facilities are available and

Continued on page 4...

BUDAPEST: THE DATA

Budapest Hilton, Hess Andras ter 1-3, H-1014 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 175-10-00, fax (36-1) 156-02-85. Singles 290-370 DM (\$177-\$226), doubles 360-460 DM (\$220-\$281). Breakfast buffet 25 DM (\$15) extra. Maximum rates are for rooms with river view. Major cards. Rating: **III-IV**

Atrium Hyatt Budapest, Roosevelt ter 2, H-1051 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 266-1234, fax (36-1) 266-9101. Singles 340-380 DM (\$207-\$232), doubles 420-460 DM (\$256-\$281). Major cards. Rating: **III-IV**

Forum Hotel Budapest, Apaczai Cserejanos Utca 12-14, H-1368 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 117-8088, fax (36-1) 117-9808. Singles 329-360 DM (\$201-\$220), doubles 380-420 DM (\$232-\$256). Major cards. Rating: **III-IV**

Duna Intercontinental, Apaczai Cserejanos Utca 4, H-1364 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 117-5122, fax (36-1) 118-4973. Singles \$195, doubles \$240. Major cards. Rating: **III**

Pannonia Hotel Nemzeti, Jozef krt 4, H-1088 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 133-9160, fax (36-1) 11-49-019, Singles \$85, doubles \$105. Major cards. Rating: **II**

Hotel Gellert, Gellert ter 1, H-1111 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 185-2200, fax (36-1) 166-6631. Singles 6900-10,400 fts (\$115-\$173), doubles 14,000-17,300 fts (\$233-\$288). Prices include use of thermal baths and pools. Rating: **II**

Grand Hotel Corvinus Kempinski, Erzsebet ter 7-8, H-1052 Budapest, telephone (36-1) 138-2334 or 118-3476, fax (36-1) 117-8609. Singles 310-390 DM (\$189-\$238), doubles 390-470 DM (\$238-\$287). Breakfast buffet 25 DM (\$15) extra. Major cards. Rating: **IV**

Kispipa Vendeglo, Akacfa u. 38, telephone 142-2587. No credit cards. Rating: ☆☆☆ \$

Café-restaurant Hungaria (The New York Café), Theresia krt 9-11, telephone 122-3849. Rating: Recommended for drinks and snacks only.

Café Gerbeaud, Vorosmarty ter 7, telephone 118-1311. Rating: ☆ \$

the river.

The 356-room **Atrium Hyatt Hotel**, located just behind the Forum on Roosevelt ter, though not directly on the river, is cleverly designed and its views are equally good. In typical Hyatt fashion, the ten floors are connected by three dramatic glass elevators that rise

BUDAPEST

Continued from page 3

typically include a fitness center, sauna, cocktail bar, a variety of restaurants with menus for every taste, garage parking, meeting rooms, a uniformed doorman and, of course, souvenir shops.

While not members of the warm and cozy category, each offers excellent accommodations in a convenient location.

A new player, the **Grand Hotel Corvinus**, opened with appropriate pomp and circumstance on September 11. Unfortunately, by the time the Kempinski group arrived to construct this impressive hotel all prime river spots had been taken. They built instead on a large city block between pretty Elizabeth Square and Deak Ferenc ut, a few steps off the main shopping streets and only three blocks from the river — a less dramatic setting but one with easy access to the major tourist areas.

The Corvinus is big with 367 rooms on nine stories. Everything about it is state-of-the-art from high tech elevators to wide, sunlit hallways. Each room has a phone in its bathroom. Television sets, hidden in stylish armoires, not only provide normal programming but interactive services as well. Guests can tune in stereo radio, read phone messages, check their bill everyday for accuracy, order room service and even control the heating and air conditioning — all by remote control.

Rooms themselves are large with high-quality, neoclassic furnishings creating a formal atmosphere that, while perfect for entertaining, is somewhat less conducive to relaxing in bare feet and a bathrobe.

A hundred years ago all great hotels had large, opulent public spaces. In recent decades, however, lobby areas have been declared wasted space and consequently grown smaller and smaller. Not at

the Corvinus. The design goal was to achieve an ambiance of such grand style that the hotel would be a natural setting for all manner of important events. The enormous, curved lobby is an expanse of polished marble floors, Corinthian-like columns and high ceilings. Ballrooms and conference spaces are just as impressive and throughout the hotel, dramatic pieces of original artwork convey a sense of quality and elegance.

The Kempinski management is so convinced their hotel is in a class by itself they are suggesting the city institute a new six-star category.

Less expensive hotels are, of course, available throughout the city. One we especially recommend is the **Hotel Nemzeti** (Hungarian for National). Although located an easy 15-minute walk from the city center, there is a subway stop just outside the front door. Rooms here are less elegantly furnished and there is no room service or fitness center, but each one of Nemzeti's recently remodeled guestrooms is comfortable, clean and comes with the basic amenities — telephone, color-TV and mini-bar.

The Nemzeti's restaurant serves a good breakfast buffet. Meals at other times, while not inspired, are hearty and abundant. The *deriguer*, two-man gypsy band is either welcome or slightly irritating, depending on your mood. There's also a cozy bar just off the attractive Baroque-style lobby.

A slightly funky overnight alternative is the famous **Hotel Gellert**. Built in 1918 on the site of medieval thermal baths, it, too, was damaged extensively during the war but was restored during the 1950's. Though there's a pervasive feeling of drab, old-fashioned Socialism about the place, the art nouveau architecture is stunning. There are 322 rooms, all with radio and phone. The larger rooms and the suites also have color-TV, air conditioning and a mini-bar.

Even if you don't stay in the hotel, be sure to at least take a peek at the Gellert Baths around the side.

The magnificent foyer of majolica tiles and mahogany is an elegant sight in itself. Entrance to the baths costs just a few forints but the stern women guarding the door won't let non-payers in even for a quick look. The baths and pools themselves are gorgeous, with lots of things like marble lions spewing water. In addition to ordinary swimming, soaking and tanning, something called underwater massage is among the treatments offered. Guests at the hotel can use these facilities for free.

Budapest is, in fact, is sometimes called the 'World's Largest Spa.' Eons ago, a fault line formed right where the hills of Buda and the Great Plain of Hungary met, creating a six mile stretch of thermal springs. Every day fifteen million gallons of water flow from 123 springs. Upwards of ten million people visit the baths annually — 70% of them for medicinal purposes for ailments ranging from arthritis to dermatitis.

Finding Food

Hungary is not known for sophisticated cuisine. Sturdy soups and stews usually involving onions, paprika, garlic and sour cream are the norm. But there are many excellent places to eat in Budapest, offering both good food and good service, something of a rarity in other Eastern European countries.

The **Kispipa Vendeglo** at Akacfa u. 38, continues to be a favorite. Excellent meals are served at reasonable prices in a friendly bistro atmosphere. A typical meal of, for example, venison filet or paprika veal stew, including pre-dinner cocktails, appetizers, wine and dessert, costs less than \$30 for two persons. The clientele is a nice mix of local and foreign diners.

Café Hungaria (also known as the New York) at Theresia krt 9-11 has a stunning interior that is all carved wood, velvet, gilt, ornate

mirrors and strolling gypsy musicians. Unfortunately, the food is terrible. There is rumor, however, of an impending sale, so perhaps a change in ownership will bring some improvement. In the meantime, it's still worth stopping by for a cup of coffee or a glass of wine just to have a look at the Rococo grandeur.

In addition, the restaurants of the major hotels are recommended and serve complete meals of several courses for a surprisingly low cost of 950-1740 fts (\$16-\$29) per person.

One culinary skill in which the chefs of Budapest excel is baking mouthwatering pastries and cakes. The most famous spot to sample these delights is **Gerbeaud Cukrászda**, Vorosmarty ter 7, serving a steady stream of customers since 1858. In warm weather it's possible to sit outdoors but it's a shame not to go inside and enjoy the cherry-wood paneling, vaulted Louis XIV ceilings, crystal chandeliers, wall sconces and marble topped tables.

As many as 150 different items, both sweet and savory, arrive freshly prepared from the kitchen each day, fortunately not all at the same time. The shop's display cases are replenished with new temptations throughout the day so it's impossible to know just what will be available at a given moment. It doesn't matter, though, everything looks and is wonderful. A cup of excellent coffee and a slice of divine pastry cost under \$3.00 a person.

A word of caution — despite reports of a wait staff of eighty, service can be slow in the extreme. Go when you have plenty of time

and can relax.

Ambling Through Budapest

Walk out of Gerbeaud, through the square, past the statue of romantic poet Mihaly Vorosmarty, and you're strolling down the Vaci, the Budapest version of Rodeo Drive. A variety of big-ticket shops from the West line this busy and colorful pedestrian shopping area as do street musicians and table-top vendors. On past visits the street

with the changes and a combination of an old map with a new guidebook, or vice versa, can lead to serious confusion.

The market used to be located between Kalvin ter and the Szabad-sag Bridge (which, for the time being at least, remain the same) on a thoroughfare formerly called Tolbuhin korut but now known as Vamhaz korut. Sorting that out was just the beginning of our difficulties, though, because the massive, old building was closed indefinitely for reconstruction. Only clever detective work eventually led us to the market's temporary quarters along the river.

Our effort was rewarded. The market stalls, indoors and out, were loaded with autumn bounty: baskets of apples and pears, bins full of potatoes, carrots, beets, yams, onions and cabbage; long swags of garlic and bright red, orange and yellow dried peppers; pine cone and lichen wreaths, hand embroidered baby clothes, folk art Christmas decorations, honey straight from the farm and home-made pickles and jams. Smartly dressed women shopped alongside babushka-ed peasant

women and swarthy men in work clothes.

Tucked away in some of the stalls were little packets of saffron, one of the rarest, most expensive spices in the world. Saffron, which is the stigma of the crocus flower, adds distinctive color and flavor to such dishes as paella, risotto and bouillabaisse and is expensive because of the laborious hand work involved in harvesting it. For a single pound, 250,000 of the tiny golden threads are needed.

In our local grocery store an infinitesimal amount of saffron

Continued on page 8...

GETTING TO BUDAPEST

Airport Arrival

Travelers arriving in Budapest at the two airports, Ferihegy I and II, can now take advantage of a new service into the city. The LRI Airport Bus Service provides transportation to anywhere in Budapest for 500 fts (\$8.33) per person, half to one quarter of current cab fares. The service uses six-seater vans and guarantees a wait of no more than 10 minutes. Return trips to the airports can be arranged by calling 157-6283.

Auto Crossings

For those traveling by car, the usual crossing point is at Hegyeshalom about 70 kilometers (45 miles) south-east of Vienna. Recently, new crossings have opened at Janossomorja-Andau on the east side of the Neusiedlersee in Burgenland, and at Fertod-Pamhagen at the south end of the same lake. The latter would be more convenient for travelers returning to Austria from the southwest of Hungary.

By Hydrofoil

From March through September hydrofoils make the 4-1/2 hour trip between Vienna and Budapest at least once a day, depending on the season, for approximately \$80 per person.

was crowded with Romanian Gypsies, aggressively selling 'hand' embroidered linens and fur pieces. Thankfully they were not so much in evidence this time.

A slightly different shopping experience is to be had at the Vasacsarnok, the city's central market...if you can find it.

Still a problem in all former East Bloc countries is the renaming of streets and squares that used to be called after the likes of Marx and Lenin. Unfortunately printed materials don't always keep up

VACATION RENTALS

Continued from page 1

music, art, exploring old towns and rural areas."

"We will be there from August 1 to September 1, coming from Great Britain to Northern Germany, maybe wandering for a week or two toward the Rhine Valley visiting friends near Frankfurt, then to the high cool area."

Our advice to the Grancells, is to first determine the specific regions — or better yet, cities and towns — where they wish to headquarter, then write or phone the German (or Swiss, or Austrian) Tourist Office in Los Angeles and request the addresses, telephone and fax numbers of the tourist offices for their areas of interest. Once that information is in hand, they can then contact these local tourist offices and ask for a listing of vacation rentals.

Perhaps we can learn from the recent experience of the Karl Beckers of Gulf Shores, Alabama, who for two months stayed in a variety of apartments, the cost of which was about 67 DM (\$41) per night including final cleaning, utilities, garage, TV, water, etc. The Beckers, who traveled in the off-season, went to Germany with nothing pre-arranged.

"When we decided on a town in which to stay we went to the local tourist information office and asked for brochures on available accommodations (*Ferienwohnungen*). Then we simply picked out a place. There was nothing scientific about it," said Mr. Becker.

As an example, Mr. Becker mailed us a rather hefty brochure published by the Bad Kohlgrub tourist office which contained

listings of all local accommodations from the simplest room in a private home to the best hotels. The booklet is typical of that published by many local tourist offices and, in addition to the listings, contained 50 pages of color photographs of hotels, condos, apartments and guest houses.

"Out of the 191 addresses with 398 *Ferienwohnungen* / apartments in



Bad Kohlgrub we picked **Haus Ambos** simply because it was the first listing with a picture. And the lady at the tourist office made the telephone call for us," said Mr. Becker.

The photo of Haus Ambos shows a typical, frescoed Bavarian house with flower bedecked balconies and green shutters. The Beckers stayed for one week and paid 385 DM (\$235) for a three-room apartment with private bath, color TV and balcony.

According to Mr. Becker, the difference between a *Ferienwohnung*

and a *Ferien-Apartment* is that the latter usually has a combined sleeping / living area plus cooking facilities and bath, whereas a *Ferienwohnung* is a full-fledged apartment with separate living room, bedroom, full kitchen, bath, etc., usually with its own entrance. Sometimes it is a separate cottage or bungalow.

"As far as we are concerned, *Ferienwohnungen* are the only way to go, with perhaps a few guesthouses in between for one-night stands. It does not make much sense to spend a fortune on a hotel room and live out of a suitcase when for the same price you can have a complete apartment and live like a king. And not least, be able to fix yourself a hot cup of coffee in the morning, or a home-cooked breakfast."

"These accommodations are spotless, beautifully decorated, and provide more comfort than any Holiday Inn or Best Western hotel ever offered me. And last but not least you get warm, personal service that no hotel chain can give you. All this at half the cost," concludes Mr. Becker.

Here is a list of the *Ferienwohnungen* rented by the Beckers on their recent trip with average cost per day of the lodgings based on an exchange rate of \$1 = DM 1.64.

CITY	LODGING	AVG COST
Polle	Ferienheim Weserterrasse	\$37
Lahnstein	Ferienpark Rhein-Lahn	\$51
Langenburg	Ferierendorf Roseneck	\$41
Möhringen	Ferienwohnung E. Waibe	\$32
Bad Kohlgrub	Haus Ambos	\$34
Amelinghausen	Forstgut Rehrhof	\$55
Quickborn	Ferienwohnung Edith Sendel	\$43

Based on lodging costs for two persons of about \$41 per day, rental of a small car at about \$160 per week, roundtrip airfare of about \$500 per person, an off-season, two-week vacation for two can be done for less than \$2,000, not including meals and gasoline. Our thanks to Mr. Becker for his lengthy and detailed report. ☑

READERS' FORUM

Traveler's Checks

Elsewhere in this issue, under the heading "Vacation Rentals" we have reprinted certain portions of an informative letter from subscriber Karl Becker of Gulf Shores, Alabama. Mr. Becker's experience with vacation rentals was most instructive but he also offered a couple of other comments worth passing on.

- The new American Express traveler's checks that can be used by either of two persons are sometimes difficult to cash. At a Hamburg bank Mr. Becker was unable to convince the teller that only one of the signatures was required to cash the checks. He had to bring his wife to the bank and both had to sign. Not what American Express had in mind.

- Off-season tourists should be aware that some attractions may not be in full operation after the summer crowd is gone. He was there in November and says Linderhof (Ludwig II's jewel of a castle in the forest near Oberammergau) had closed the grotto, turned off the waterfall and already crated several statues for winter storage. He found similar conditions at Sanssouci (Potsdam) and at Hohenzollern Castle the shuttle bus up the mountain was not operating. He points out, however, (and we agree) that such irritants are minor and more than offset by the off-seasons' lower prices and lack of holiday crowds.

Car Rental Insurance

William Quinby of Greenwich, Connecticut, relates that his rented Fiat Panda was burglarized in Nice on October 10, 1991. His Visa card

covered the \$1,020 break-in damage but, without proof that the car could have been rented during the repair period, wouldn't cover the loss-of-use charge of \$222 assessed by ANSA, the rental agency. ANSA wouldn't furnish such proof, saying that they make a "standard" daily charge that is negotiated and agreed to by "all" insurance companies. Mr. Quinby says it was "Catch-22" for a long time but he kept badgering Visa and their insurance carrier (IAC of Westminster, Colorado) and finally was paid for the loss-of-use claim on October 31, 1992.

"Persistent pursuit of these matters seems to be necessary to get satisfaction," he said. "The procedures and documentation required for filing a damage claim in the first place are onerous and seem calculated to discourage the filing process, but we happily report this case history of ultimate success."

Elderhostel/Hotel Evaluations

Mr. Quinby also commented on the two months he and his wife spent last fall in Austria:

"From 30 September to October 18 we participated in an Elderhostel program that studied Austrian culture and history, combining hotel stays in Vienna and Salzburg with a cruise on the Danube from Vienna, upstream to Passau, downstream to Budapest and back to Bratislava and Vienna. The Elderhostel program with 52 participants was a bit too structured and slow-moving for us but we learned a lot from University and Hochschule lecturers and some excellent guides. Accommodations and travel comfort on the DDSG SS Theodor Körner were excellent as was the service; meals were forgettable, probably as a result of negotiation by Elderhostel to keep costs down. Most "Elderhostellers" lack the experience, confidence or physical ability to cover the same ground on their own."

"Although we stayed many nights in Alpen huts and in hotels booked by Elderhostel, we found some delightful accommodations that we recommend to *Gemütlichkeit* readers. All had good food, amenities and reasonable prices:"

- **Altdeutsches Hotel**, Feldkirch (Vorarlberg)
- **Hotel Alpina**, Pettneu (Tirol)
- **Schwarzer Adler**, Kitzbühel (Tirol)
- **Hotel Gasthof Adler**, St. Gallenkirch (Vorarlberg)
- **Seehotel Feldhütter**, Prien am Chiemsee (Bavaria)
- **Hotel Senator**, Munich (Bavaria)
- **Goldener Löwe**, Kufstein (Tirol)
- **Alpengasthof Eng**, Eng (Tirol in Karwendel Naturpark)


Three we would avoid next time are the **Löwen Hotel** in Schruns (Vorarlberg), **Hotel Regina** in Vienna and **Hotel Schaffenrath** in Salzburg."

Plug for Prague

And finally, Dr. Fredric K. Kratina dropped us this upbeat note on Prague:

"Count me in as a recent delighted visitor to Bohemia and its magnificent capitol, Prague. I had the privilege of spending better than two weeks charmed by the buildings, castles and that delightful anachronism, the Charles Bridge. Another week was spent traveling about in the bus, again confining ourselves to Bohemia, its castles and peoples."

"In a rented vehicle I drove to Saxony and back visiting Dresden, a bitter disappointment, terribly polluted, rushed, angry, and fierce. Yet I couldn't wait to get back to a land that certainly takes its Communist experiment several degrees lighter."

"You can easily see which reality and lasting impression I got bitten by." 

BUDAPEST

Continued from page 4

costs over \$10, which works out to \$201.78 an ounce. At Budapest's central market cellophane packages of approximately 1/2 cup (lifetime supply in most kitchens) cost only 100 fts (\$3.33). Small, inexpensive, weighing almost nothing and universally appreciated, this is the perfect gift for the cook on your list.

Next time we'll buy much more, we could probably finance our whole trip with saffron futures!

Excursions

For a day out of Budapest, a visit to the **Danube Bend** is a highly recommended excursion by rail, bus, boat or car.

Just north of Budapest the river almost makes a U-turn as it changes from an easterly to a southerly direction, forcing its way through the mountains and creating some very dramatic scenery.

We took the one-hour and 20-minute train ride through the countryside to see the small town of Estergom, today's religious capital of Hungary where in 1,000 A.D. St. Stephen was crowned king.

Only remnants of the original 10th-century cathedral remain but the Basilica that replaced it still stands. Inside is a belltower to climb and a crypt to investigate that includes the tomb of Cardinal Mindszenty,

who along with hundreds of priests was unjustly imprisoned by the Communist regime.

Much more interesting, however, was the little **Varmuzeum** next door. It is Hungary's oldest palace, destroyed by the Turks during one of their numerous invasions of the region and hidden from view until rediscovered during a construction project during the 1930's.

The self-guided tour of this charming little museum leads through the castle's ancient rooms now filled with artifacts unearthed on the site. None of the descriptions are in English but it doesn't really matter; the items are so well displayed that little explanation is necessary. The tour ends on the rooftop with a beautiful view of the Danube far below and the rusted bridge to Czechoslovakia on the other side, destroyed during the war and never rebuilt.

On another day we made a 40-minute journey to **Szentendre**, a town of seven churches, fourteen art galleries and museums and a large number of pretty Baroque houses painted in bright yellow, cool green and rich russet.

Unfortunately, tourism has already made ugly in-roads and the streets even off-season are lined with cheap souvenir shops. There are worthwhile things to see in **Szentendre** for those with time to spend — as well as some good restaurants — but we don't recommend it for a quick trip.

EUROPE TRAVEL BRIEFING

Free Hotel Guide

One of the better free books available is *Schweizer Ferienhotels* (Swiss Hotels for Holidays). It lists 200 hotels in small towns and villages and contains all the necessary basic information — prices, phone and fax numbers, facilities, etc. The printing is high quality and there is one or more color photos of each hotel. The brief descriptive text on each hotel is in German but the symbols used to indicate hotel facilities and features are explained in English. The **Swiss National Tourist Office** in Los Angeles has a limited number of copies remaining so act promptly.

Another SNTTO publication you may want to ask for is their 1993 *Season for Seniors*. This booklet covers options for older travelers to Switzerland.

Both these publications are available at no charge by contacting the SNTTO at 222 No. Sepulveda, #1570, El Segundo CA 90245, telephone 310-335-5962

Stuttgart Flower Show

Flower lovers from professional botanists to weekend gardeners should include Stuttgart on their summer travel itinerary. The world's largest horticulture show, **IGA Stuttgart-Expo 93**, 250 acres of dramatic gardens, parks, special floral displays and the ultimate in landscaping, runs from April 23 through October 17.

A Week on the Mosel

From May through October, Neumagen-Dhron, a quiet village along the Mosel, offers inexpensive packages entitled **Eight Days In and Around the Mosel Valley** for from 390 DM to 510 DM (\$238 to \$311) per person including seven nights accommodations, dinners and breakfasts. Among the varied excursions are tours to the ancient Roman town of Trier, Luxembourg, Idar-Oberstein and the Eifel region. Contact: Tourist-Information, D-5507 Neumagen-Dhron, telephone 06507/6555.

Tegernsee Deals

Until April 3, the Bavarian, lakeside resort of Tegernsee offers vacation apartments with facilities for as many as six persons for from 40 DM (\$24) per day. Guest houses, pensions and bed and breakfast accommodations are available for as little as 20 DM (\$12) per day. A minimum seven day stay is required. Contact: Fremdenverkehrsgemeinschaft, Postfach 1451, D-8189 Tegernsee, telephone 08022-180149. ☒

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