

- Prague's Dark Side
- Air Fares Drop
- Prague Hotel Find
- Basel's Der Teufelhof

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

November 23, 1995

Swiss Deals Afoot?

Basel, our lead story this month, is a fine second-tier European city. It isn't Paris, it isn't Vienna or Munich or Zürich. It doesn't dish up mammoth helpings of "old world" ambience like Salzburg or Rothenburg, or possess the small town charm of Bamberg or Freiburg im Breisgau. As a desirable tourist destination I put it just behind Graz and well ahead of Innsbruck. I like it.

While writing the Basel story I thought what a pleasant surprise it was and how I wished things were a little less expensive in Switzerland these days. I winced as my calculator spit out numbers in the \$200 and \$300 range when converting Swiss franc hotel prices to dollars.

But wish as I might, things are flat-out expensive in Switzerland. We're not talking "Japan expensive" (you've no doubt heard tales of \$200 cab rides to the Tokyo airport), just "Manhattan-when-you're-getting-ripped-off expensive." One very modest hotel reviewed this month, the **Steinschanze**, is recommended for students traveling on the cheap by the *Let's Go Budget Guide to Austria & Switzerland* and its double rooms *start at \$119!!* (Not a rip-off, just the result of an unfortunate currency exchange rate.)

So what are those of us who need an annual Swiss fix to do? For now, I suppose, the only course of action is to spend fewer days in the country, lower our sights insofar as hotels and restaurants are concerned, and do a better job of tracking down bargains.

But courage, help may be on the way. The *Paris Herald-Tribune*

Continued on page 2...

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

BASEL

We continue to plough new ground with our first report on Basel, Switzerland's second largest city. It turns out to be an easygoing city with more going for it than almost any town its size.

The real secret of Basel, we were told by a native shortly after our arrival, is that it is the most liberal, least "uptight" town in Switzerland. "Alternative life-styles" are accepted without so much as a single lifted eyebrow. Though the description sounded a little like San Francisco, it turned out not to be. We should have known. San Francisco, or "The City" as it prefers to call itself, is the undefeated, untied world champion of "alternative life-

By
Bob
Bestor

style." Unconventional in Basel is attending the symphony without a tie.

In fact, the two cities are not at all alike. Though only a quarter the size, Basel has more and better museums than San Francisco, a better zoo and twice as many symphony orchestras. Most San Franciscans fear riding their city's spooky, graffiti-ridden, catch-as-catch-can bus system. In Basel, 40% of the population regularly buys season passes on the *Träml*, which runs at six to 10-minute intervals during the day and every 15 minutes at night. Basel has three

railway stations; San Francisco none. In 1460, when the most important structure on what was to become San Francisco's Nob Hill was a teepee, Basel already had a university.

But enough of that. Since they have virtually nothing in common, Basel and San Francisco shouldn't be measured against each other.

The comparisons do, however, demonstrate the cultural richness and scope of this medium-sized town (population 200,000) on a bend in the Rhein where three countries — Switzerland, Germany and France — meet. (It is said that the employees of the Sandoz pharmaceutical company must go through French customs to get to the company tennis courts.) In addition to its two symphony orchestras, Basel has 13 theaters, 100 galleries and a beautifully preserved old town overlooked by an 800-year-old twin-spired Gothic cathedral.

There are 28 museums, the most important being the highly-regarded **Kunstmuseum** (Fine Arts Museum) with thousands of works by such heavyweights as Rembrandt, Delacroix, Manet, Monet, Renoir, Pissaro, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, Chagall, Dali, Miró, Ernst, Klee and others. The 27 other museums also have much to

Continued on page 3...

PRAGUE RE-VISITED

The Fischer-Holliday entry is back in Prague for the fourth time since 1990. They note major changes and discover a terrific hotel.

Prague, October, 1995 — In the early years of Prague's "coming out" we found ourselves there every autumn. First in 1990, then again in 1991 and 1992. Each time we were amazed at the dizzying changes that had taken place in our absence. But after those visits, three years somehow managed to slip by before our next return and so it was with pleasure...and curiosity...that we looked forward to going back again this year.

By
Claudia Fischer
& Roger Holliday

Is the city still changing?

Have things improved? Are they worse? Will we recognize anything? Is it true Prague is just like any other western European city now?

The answer to all the questions is yes...and no. Prague remains a city in transition — a necessary state of affairs for the foreseeable future.

The first move was from communism to uncertainty. Under the old regime life for ordinary people had been drab but predictable and, in a way, secure. Everyone had a job and for team players there was just enough money to buy

Continued on page 6...

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 1

recently reported that August 1995 was Switzerland's worst August for tourists since 1952. A *Gemütlichkeit* source says when all the numbers are in, tourism in Switzerland in 1995 may be off as much as 30%. And not only are Americans, Germans, French, Canadians and Italians scared off by the strong franc, the Swiss themselves are exchanging Alpine holidays for vacations in North America. If your standard of living is based on the Swiss franc, \$89 for an Embassy Suites hotel room is almost free.

Tourism is big business in Switzerland and there will be pressure to avoid a repeat of '95. Something will have to be done. What that "something" will be remains to be seen but it's likely to involve price cutting, discounts and special deals, a course of action independent Swiss hotel operators have been loathe to take. When asked about such things, most hoteliers talk vaguely in terms of free bottles of wine, 10% off for groups and modest discounts for stays of a week or more.

To be blunt about it, that's not enough. Many small hotels, like one we visited this spring outside Gstaad, are locked-in to regional pricing agreements and cannot unilaterally lower their rates no matter how many empty rooms they have. But chains like **Sofitel** are already looking at their skimpy advance reservations and offering rooms at \$118 and \$138. Sure, in Zürich I'd rather stay at the more *gemütlich* **Florhof** or, better yet, the *gemütlich* AND luxurious **Dolder Grand**. But at \$283 for a double at the Florhof, and more than \$400 for the Dolder, I'll settle for the Sofitel. Yes, it's big and impersonal, but it rates four stars and has many amenities.

So the discounts are going to have to be deep, particularly in the off-season. Fifty-percent off has a nice ring. How about two nights for the price of one? At the very least, three nights for the price of two. My guess is that's what will happen. We will see package arrangements that will entice visitors

to stay several days in a particular region or canton. Airlines will join with hotel operators, car rental companies, Swiss Rail and the various regional tourist offices to offer all-inclusive deals guaranteed in U.S. dollars.

But one cautionary note; just because you pay in advance in dollars doesn't mean it's a bargain. (**Wundercheck**, for example, a German hotel voucher package purchased in advance in the U.S., is not a good deal. One can obtain equal or better rates by booking direct with member hotels. Remember: never pay in advance unless you're getting a good deal.) This pre-pay-in-dollars psychology works on the timid, naive traveler who envisions himself far from home stuck with an astronomical hotel bill he can't contest because he doesn't speak the language. (In Switzerland — and in Germany and Austria — this is an unlikely scenario; hoteliers there are honest. The price they quote at check-in is what is billed at checkout. There are no hidden or surprise charges.)

Ultimately, the best deals will come from the hotels themselves and from the various tourist authorities. Add a tour operator's cost — travel agent's commission, marketing costs and his own markup — to the wholesale price of a hotel room and you come up with a number close to the rack rate, which is no bargain at all.

But don't give up on Switzerland. We'll evaluate the deals that come along in '96 and tell you about the good ones. In fact, here's an offer to the Swiss hotel industry from *Gemütlichkeit*. We will publicize to our readers the names of Swiss hotels who offer *Gemütlichkeit* subscribers a minimum 25% off rack rates for stays as short as one night.

Remember, too, that airfares and car rental rates are still very reasonably priced, so once we get some better hotel prices Switzerland will look a lot more attractive.

Fare War

Just as we are going to press this month, a fare war has broken out among the major airlines. This one promises to be bloody — just the way we consumers like them — but short. However, these

extremely low prices indicate a determination on the airlines part to fill every seat to Europe this winter. So, even if the fares listed below are not in effect for very long, it seems likely prices will remain low for the near term.

Here are some examples of midweek, winter fares in effect at the end of November. Most are for travel through March 15:

Roundtrip San Francisco-Frankfurt: **USAir** \$468; **United**, **Lufthansa**, **Delta** and **American** \$558

Roundtrip Chicago-Frankfurt: **Delta**, **United**, **USAir**, **Continental**, **USAir**, **TWA** \$394; **Lufthansa** \$434.

Roundtrip New York-Frankfurt: **Delta**, **United**, **TWA**, **USAir**, **Continental** \$368; **Lufthansa** and **American** \$398

Expert Trip Planning

Occasionally we get calls from people who want help planning a European vacation. Anyone in need of such services will do well to turn the chore over to Karen Pasold who specializes in "**Romantik Olde World Excursions.**" Ms. Pasold, who has been a *Gemütlichkeit* subscriber since we started, knows more rustic, charming, *gemütlich* hotels in Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary and France, than anybody I know. The last person I sent her way, for whom she planned a trip in celebration of a milestone anniversary, wrote to thank me for recommending her. The trip was apparently a big success.

Ms. Pasold, who is not a travel agent, charges \$250 and up for her services. I've talked with her enough, and seen enough of her trip itineraries, to confidently recommend her. Contact: Karen Pasold, 1 Glenmoor, Frisco TX 74034, phone 214-625-6050, fax 214-370-2700.

Internet Travel

The Internet address for **Switzerland Tourism's** new site on the World Wide Web is <http://www.switzerlandtourism.ch/>. — RHB

Vol. 9, No. 11
November, 1995

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

Editor & Publisher: Robert H. Bestor, Jr.
Associate Editors: Elizabeth Schiller, Bruce Woelfel
Contributing Editors: C. Fischer, R. Holliday
Design & Composition: Paul T. Merschorf
Consulting Editor: Thomas P. Bestor
Subscription Dept: Andy Bestor, K. Steffans

Gemütlichkeit (ISSN 10431756) is published monthly by UpCountry Publishing, 2892 Chronicle Avenue, Hayward, CA 94542. TOLL FREE: 1-800/521-6722 or 510/538-0628. FAX: 510/582-8296, E-MAIL rbestor@aol.com. Subscriptions are \$67 per year for 12 issues. While every effort is made to provide correct information in this publication, the publishers can make no guarantees regarding accuracy. Second-class postage paid in Hayward, CA.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO:

Gemütlichkeit, 2892 Chronicle Ave., Hayward, CA 94542

HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

Rating Category	Scale	Hotel Rating Criteria	
Unacceptable	0 - 3	People/Service	30%
Adequate	4 - 7	Location/Setting	15%
Average	8 - 11	Guestrooms	30%
Above Average	12 - 15	Public rooms	5%
Excellent	16 - 20	Facilities/Restaurant	20%

Special Designations

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

\$ Offers significant value.

Restaurant Criteria

Food	65%
Service	20%
Atmosphere	15%

BASEL

Continued from page 1

offer. See Luther's chalice at the **Barfüsserkirche**, ever-changing exhibitions of modern art at the **Kunsthalle**, Aubusson tapestries at the **Kirschgarten Museum**, Beethoven's Flute at the **Collection of Musical Instruments**, a four-seat bicycle in the **Fire Brigade Museum**, the "be-headed prisoner" in the **Anatomical Museum** or the collection of more than 30,000 posters at the **Film Museum**. You may want to purchase a three-day pass for 23 Sfr. (\$20) good for entry to most of the museums.

As someone who has no particular interest in or knowledge of animals, I was nonetheless captivated by the Basel Zoo. The 32-acre site is lush with vegetation which gives the visitor at least somewhat the illusion of seeing the animals in their natural state. There are nearly 6,000 different species from five continents.

A path winds among the various venues, there are picnic facilities and a special children's zoo. The gorilla house is equipped with tiered benches for those who wish to watch these fascinating primates for an extended period. The **Zoologischer Garten Basel** is a "must see."

Obviously, Basel's geographical position makes it easy for those who want to duck into France and Germany on day-trips. Freiburg, in the Black Forest, is just 72 kilometers (45 miles) to the north and up the west side of the Rhein, France's Alsace region is also close.

A highly recommended nearby excursion is to **Augusta Raurica** (August Roman Ruins), in the two villages of August and Kaiseraugst, about seven miles east of the town. Here you will see the remains of the oldest (15 B.C.) Roman settlement on the Rhein. Its theater, which held 8,000 spectators, is the largest Roman ruin in Switzerland.

Finally, **Fasnacht**, a three-day carnival/bacchanal is, we are told, one of the wildest blowouts in Europe. It begins with a 4 a.m. (not a misprint) parade on the first Monday after Ash Wednesday, February 26 in 1996. Hotel rooms, of course, are at a premium.

For unconventional, uninhibited behavior, Fasnacht in Basel may not match Halloween night in San Francisco, but if you get bored you still have all those museums.

BASEL INFO

Population: 200,000

Altitude: 273 meters - 896 feet

Distances to...

	Kilometers	Miles
Bern	100	62
Frankfurt	331	207
Geneva	259	162
Munich	399	249
Paris	553	346
Strasbourg	145	91
Venice	605	378
Vienna	830	519
Zürich	85	53

Tourist Information

Verkehrsbüro Basel
Schifflande 5
CH-4001 Basel
Phone: 061/261 5050
Fax: 061/261 5944

Tourist information stations are also at the SBB railway station and at the N2/A5 Autobahn reststop Basel/Weil north of the city.

Key Phone Numbers

Swiss Rail 061/157 3333 (1.40 Sfr./\$1.24 per minute)
German Rail 061/691 5511
French Rail 061/271 5033
Hotel Reservations 061/686 2630

Tram and Bus

Buses and trams travel throughout the day at 6, 7 1/2 and 10-minute intervals during the day and every 15 minutes at night. Individual trips start at 1.20 Sfr. (\$.106). Day tickets are 6.60 Sfr. (\$.85).

City Tour

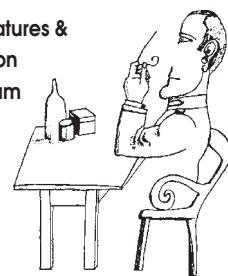
A 95-minute guided tour of the city departs Saturday and Sunday mornings from the front of the SBB train station and the Hotel Victoria. The cost is 18 Sfr. (\$16) per person.

An alternative to the group tour is five self-guided walks each beginning at the Marktplatz and marked by color-coded signs. A free tourist office brochure briefly describes the routes which vary in length from 30 to 90 minutes. Three of the five are wheelchair accessible. A good book to accompany the walks is *Basel fotogen* available for 22 Sfr. (\$18) at bookstores and the tourist office.

Discount Hotel Package

The Basel Tourist Board books weekend packages that offer decent value. Two nights hotel accommodations with breakfast, plus free use of public transport, free admission to the town's 28 museums, free city map and literature, a half-price city tour and reduced rates to several other attractions, goes for from 356 Sfr. (\$315) in a two-star hotel to 552 Sfr. (\$488) in five-star lodgings.

Caricatures &
Cartoon
Museum
Basel



Saul Steinberg
The Nose
1967

HOTELS

Hotel Drei Könige

The waters of the Rhein lap at the foundation of the "Three Kings," Basel's leading hotel and its only five-star property with "old world" ambience. It may, in fact, be the oldest luxury hotel in Europe, full of old tapestries, gilt-framed mirrors, sparkling chandeliers, *trompe-l'oeil* and *objet d'art*. It is the place to stay in Basel and priced accordingly.

Address: Hotel Drei Könige am Rhein, Blumenrain 8, CH-4001 Basel

Phone: 061/261 5252

Fax: 061/261 2153

Location: Central, *Altstadt*, left bank of Rhein

Rooms: 81

Proprietor: Jacques Pernet

Prices: Singles 255 to 355 Sfr. (\$226 - \$314), doubles 420 to 590 Sfr. (\$372 - \$522). Breakfast is an additional 29 Sfr. /\$26 per day.

Facilities: Terrace restaurant overlooking Rhein, air-conditioning, nonsmoking rooms

Credit Cards: All

Disabled: Not suitable

Closed: Never

Parking: Hotel garage 25 sfr. (\$18)

Rating: EXCELLENT 16/20 G

Swissôtel Le Plaza

Le Plaza is physically connected to the convention center, about a 15-minute walk from the "old town." Though virtually all alike, the renovated guestrooms, which open to exceptionally wide, well-lit corridors, are the best we saw in Basel. The hotel offers a weekend special at 245 Sfr. (\$217) per night for a double room with breakfast, a bottle of champagne, free parking, late checkout and is the best value in town. During the week, prices are much higher.

Continued on page 4...

BASEL

Continued from page 3

Even if you don't stay at Le Plaza, stop by for a drink beneath the life-size wooden horse that sits astride the lobby bar. Late in the evening it is not uncommon for well-oiled, visiting firemen to attempt to mount and ride it.

Address: Swissôtel Le Plaza, Messeplatz 25, CH-4021 Basel

Phone: 061/692 3333

Fax: 061/692 5633

Location: Right bank, at convention center, 15-20 minute walk from *Altstadt*

Rooms: 219

Proprietor: Joe Gehrler

Prices: Singles 233 to 336 Sfr. (\$206 - \$297), doubles 22 to 469 Sfr. (\$285-\$415)

Facilities: Restaurant, bar, indoor swimming pool, sauna, steam bath, solarium, nonsmoking rooms

Credit Cards: All

Disabled: Four specially equipped rooms

Closed: Never

Parking: Hotel garage

Rating: EXCELLENT 16/20

Hotel St. Gotthard

This particularly appealing hotel, across the street from the railway station, is convenient for train travelers. The old town is about a 15-minute walk. The neighborhood is busy and just a little tacky. The hotel though is a gem, easily the best value — except for the weekend rate offered by Le Plaza — in town. The bright and inviting reception and lobby area are decorated with oriental rugs and arresting pieces of African art.

Address: Hotel St. Gotthard, Centralbahnstrasse 13, CH-4002 Basel

Phone: 061/271 52 50

Fax: 061/271 52 14

Location: Near rail station, 15 minutes walk from *Altstadt*

Rooms: 63

Proprietor: Albert Geyer-Arel

Prices: Singles 165 to 220 Sfr. (\$146 - \$195), doubles 220 to 280 Sfr. (\$195-\$248)

Facilities: Nonsmoking rooms, no restaurant

Credit Cards: All

Disabled: Yes

Closed: Never

Parking: Hotel garage 20 sfr. (\$18)

Rating: ABOVE AVERAGE 15/20 G

Kunst-Hotel Teufelhof

The Teufelhof, in what was once a very large, turn-of-the-century middle-class house and stable located on the ancient circle of walls that once surrounded the city, is listed in Michelin as a restaurant *mit Zim* (with rooms). Though running a one-star Michelin restaurant (see story next page) is serious stuff, Der Teufelhof's owners have taken a more lighthearted approach to the hotel part of their business. The eight simple guestrooms with hardwood floors, white walls and simple furnishings are viewed as "empty canvases" and periodically eight different artists are commissioned to decorate them. The results are fascinating, but rather spare and hardly luxurious. The effect is in a range from *avant garde* to slightly bizarre. There are murals, mobiles, sculptures, paintings and high-tech lighting, but no couches or comfortable chairs. Each bathroom is equipped with a heated towel rack and hairdryer.

We liked Numbers seven and eight, cozy, garret-like top floor rooms with exposed beams, dormer windows and slanting ceilings. One drawback for all rooms is that there is no lift and one must negotiate at least two flights of steep stairs.

The Teufelhof is also known for the small — 120 seats — but busy theater located within the walls of its rambling structure.

The whole package, main dining room, *Weinstube*, theater and the eight guestrooms have been meticulously and imaginatively restored and the pieces of art carefully chosen. Note, for example, the clever pitchfork (Der Teufelhof means "the devil's house") wall sculptures incorporating images of famous people.

For the flexible traveler who appreciates new ideas, even if they are a little quirky, Der Teufelhof will be fun.

Address: Kunst-Hotel Teufelhof, Leonhardsgraben 47, CH-4051 Basel

Phone: 061/691 1010

Fax: 061/691 1004

Location: Central, *Altstadt*

Rooms: 8

Proprietor: Monica & Dominique Thommy-Kneschaurek

Prices: Singles 190 to 210 Sfr. (\$168 - \$186), doubles 245 to 280 Sfr. (\$217-\$248)

Facilities: Michelin one-star restaurant plus *Weinstube*, theater

Credit Cards: All

Disabled: Not suitable

Closed: Never

Rating: ABOVE AVERAGE 14/20

Hotel Mérian

On the other side of the river from the Drei Könige, just over the Mittlere Rheinbrücke, the first and for many centuries the only bridge over the Rhein between Lake Constance and the sea, is the four-star Hotel Mérian. Its guestrooms — many of them on the river side — are modern but perhaps a little sterile.

The hotel's fish restaurant is well-regarded and has an interesting nautical decor (if tables in the bar are put together jigsaw style they form a fish shape.)

The welcome and service from Bodo and Ursula Skrobucha is both warm and efficient. Ask one of them to show you the stained glass in the elegant downstairs meeting rooms of the historic "Three Honorable Companies" (ancient trade guilds).

Address: Hotel Mérian am Rhein, Rheingasse 2, CH-4058 Basel

Phone: 061/681 0000

Fax: 061/681 1101

Location: Central, just over bridge from the *Altstadt* on right bank of Rhein

Rooms: 60

Proprietor: Bodo & Ursula Skrobucha

Prices: Singles 150 to 200 Sfr. (\$133 - \$177), doubles 195 to 270 Sfr. (\$173-\$239)

Facilities: Restaurant, bar, nonsmoking rooms

Credit Cards: All

Disabled: Yes

Closed: Never

Parking: Hotel garage

Rating: ABOVE AVERAGE 13/20

Hotel Admiral

Across the Messeplatz from Le Plaza, the Admiral also derives much of its business from the town's convention activities and prices fluctuate accordingly.

Rooms are decent, but not special. On the roof is a heated outdoor swimming pool and sunbathing area.

Address: Hotel Admiral, Rosentalstrasse 5, CH-4021 Basel

Phone: 061/691 7777

Fax: 061/691 7789

Location: Right bank, near Convention Center, 10-15 minute walk from *Altstadt*

Rooms: 130

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Proprietor: Ernst Römer
Prices: Singles 140 to 195 Sfr. (\$124 - \$173), doubles 200 to 280 Sfr. (\$177-\$248)
Facilities: Restaurant, bar, rooftop swimming pool, nonsmoking rooms
Credit Cards: All
Disabled: Not suitable
Closed: Never
Parking: Hotel garage, 18 Sfr. (\$16)
Rating: AVERAGE 11/20

Hotel Steinenschanz

Accommodations are basic, but prices may be the lowest in town. Cable TV, including CNN. Ask for a room overlooking the garden.

Address: Hotel Steinenschanze, Steinen-graben 69, CH-4051 Basel
Phone: 061/272 5353
Fax: 061/272 4573
Location: On busy thoroughfare about a half-mile southwest of the Altstadt
Rooms: 47
Proprietor: Ruth Schwendener
Prices: Singles 100 to 135 Sfr. (\$88 - \$119), doubles 135 to 180 Sfr. (\$119-\$159)
Facilities: No restaurant
Credit Cards: All
Disabled: Not suitable
Closed: Never
Parking: Public garage
Rating: AVERAGE 8/20

Hotel Basilisk

Good location on a tree-lined street, and the corner terrace is no doubt a fine place for lunch or a drink on a nice day, but the tiny reception area and the guestrooms are a little shabby and the furniture has too many dings. The hotel is clean but simply not up to standard.

Address: Hotel Basilisk, Klingentalstrasse 1, CH-4005 Basel
Phone: 061/681 4666
Fax: 061/681 4145
Location: Right bank of Rhein, five minutes walk from Altstadt
Rooms: 53
Proprietor: Family Cavegn-Krucker
Prices: Singles 140 to 160 Sfr. (\$124 - \$142), doubles 210 to 240 Sfr. (\$186-\$212)
Facilities: Bistro-style restaurant with outdoor service
Credit Cards: All
Disabled: Yes
Closed: Never
Parking: Hotel garage, 15 Sfr. (\$13)
Rating: ADEQUATE 7/20

FOOD

Restaurant Der Teufelhof

The Michelin one-star kitchen at Der Teufelhof turns out some of the best and most imaginative food we've come across in the past couple of years. It is served in two venues; a coat-and-tie upstairs dining room and a brasserie-style *Weinstube* on the floor below. We chose the relaxed, less expensive *Weinstube*. There, you will feel comfortable in jeans, and, in fact, if you just want to have a beer or dessert that's o.k., too.

English is spoken by most servers and the welcome is very warm.

The wine list is extensive with many Swiss offerings and some of the greatest wines of France. But what we really liked is the inclusion of lesser-known but high-quality bottles, mostly French, at fairly reasonable prices. For example, we drank 4 dl (at 7.50 Sfr./\$6.60 per dl) of Côtes de Duras from Cahors, a region adjoining Bordeaux. Tasted blind it could be mistaken for a more expensive chateaux-bottled Bordeaux.

The *Weinstube's* decor — like Der Teufelhof's guestrooms and, for that matter like its fancier upstairs restaurant, where the meals are about twice as expensive — is simple: hardwood floors, plain wood tables, white walls and a small bar. The eclectic clientele seems to be the same mix of students and hip, well-heeled, business and professional types one finds everywhere in this sort of restaurant. We have been in many a trendy bistro, however, where the ambience was very *au courant* but the food wasn't. Not so with Der Teufelhof. It is what is on the plate and in the glass that lifts it above pretenders.

The very first course let us know we were in for an extraordinary dining experience. In the smooth elegance of *Betesuppe*, pureed beets swirled with cream, floated *Meerrettich Ravioli*, delicate little pasta pillows subtly flavored with horseradish, that gave the soup a welcome heartiness on a cold night.

Kalbsmedallions in Pfeffer-Rahmsauce were little rounds of veal that appeared to have been sauteed on one side, coated with batter on the other, then sauteed on the batter side and served with the peppery reduction sauce.

An Italian-inspired *Lammpiccata mit*

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Rosmarin-Thymianjus, like the veal, was one of those straight-from-the-skillet dishes that are a bistro hallmark. The rosemary and thyme sauce carried a hint of lemon and a scattering of capers. What came with these two dishes demonstrates the kitchen's attention to detail. No just throwing a few steamed veggies on the plate here. With the veal were sauteed celery and tomato and half a potato that had been boiled, sliced, sprinkled with Parmesan cheese and bread crumbs and then broiled. Served with the lamb were sauteed scallions and unstemmed baby carrots bathed in their own sauce.

The highlight dessert was a rhubarb soufflé with praline ice cream.

Dinner for two, including wine, beer and mineral water, was 157 Sfr. (\$139). Kunst-Hotel Teufelhof, Leonhardsgraben 47, CH-4051 Basel, phone 061/691 1010, fax 061/691 1004. Expensive.

Rating: EXCELLENT 17/20 G

Hotel Rôtisserie des Rois

The Hotel Drei Könige's Rôtisserie des Rois offers the sort of fine dining one expects in a five-star Swiss hotel in the German-speaking regions of the country; traditional dishes of high quality ingredients, beautifully prepared with great attention to detail.

For example, five perfectly grilled lamb chops were enhanced with a thyme flavored reduction sauce; a traditional appetizer of Lachs (lightly smoked salmon) came with sweet onions, capers, toast and a whipped sour cream and horseradish sauce; breast of duck with thin slices of sauteed apple was also a winner and a first course of the ubiquitous *Spargel* (large, white asparagus) was made more intriguing than usual by a touch of orange in the white sauce. A dessert of fresh fruit and rhubarb sorbet was straightforward and satisfying.

A meal on the riverside terrace is an especially pleasant experience.

Dinner for two was about 210 Sfr. (\$186).

Hotel Drei Könige am Rhein, Blumenrain 8, CH-4001 Basel, phone 061/261 5252, fax 061/261 2153. Very expensive.

Rating: EXCELLENT 16/20



PRAGUE

Continued from page 5

food from a meagerly stocked market stall.

Then, in 1989, the gates suddenly burst open and the outside world poured in: the curious, the entrepreneurial, the seeders and the bleeders. All dressed to the nines, driving shiny Western cars, oohing, aahing, tsk-tsking and making unreasonable requests for clean rooms, private bathrooms and decent food.

First to arrive on the scene were a flood of bright, eager, young Americans, Canadians and Brits; smart-alecky kids who knew it all and never hesitated to say so. They scoured the want ads, grabbed up all the new jobs in banking and advertising and computer technology, opened coffeehouses and laundromats, inaugurated English-language newspapers and settled in for a long stay.

Five years later the Czechs have their own MBAs, so good-bye clever young things (they're on their way to Vietnam, we understand).

But transition continues as the Czechs move toward a market economy. Restrictions on bringing Czech crowns in and out of the country are easing. Salaries and wages slowly rise to Western standards. Tiered pricing seems less logical every day. Trade deficits are bemoaned and tackled. Long neglected, state-owned properties are steadily being sold off to private enterprise, gutted, renovated and reopened. Tourist revenue grows steadily as visitors from every country, particularly neighboring Austria and Germany, rush in for a look at history in the making and to drink cheap beer.

As frequent but always short-term visitors, we surveyed the scene this year and saw plenty of differences; a bit more of this, somewhat less of that. But above all we saw crowds.

Prague, virtually hidden from sight for decades, has become a tourist mecca. The main sight-seeing / shopping route leading from Wenceslas Square or the Powder Tower, through the Old Town Square, down Karlova, across the Charles Bridge and up to Castle Hill, literally heaves with an endless stream of humanity.

Gratefully, the route is pedestrian-

only, but nevertheless there is construction, reconstruction and even destruction everywhere, impeding the ebb and flow of this swell of humanity. And it was October!

Signs of individual capitalism are everywhere although not as haphazard as in 1990 when anyone with an extra pair of shoes could set up shop on the Charles Bridge. Today the streets are lined with a myriad of shops that don't seem to sell anything but lead crystal or wooden toys, all of which look pretty much the same. (What giant factory in which far-flung destination is cranking out all this merchandise?)

HOTELS

It was not without nostalgia that we remembered our first hours in Prague in 1990.

We had arrived around noon by train and, against all advice, without hotel reservations. Trekking up and down Vaclavske nemesti (Wenceslas Square) from dingy hotel to dingy hotel, the answer was always the same; no room at the inn.

Finally the inadvertent hint of bribe landed us a room in the lovely **Hotel Drzuba**, notable for several unusual features. First, an elevator that could only be activated by a bellboy who could only be activated by a crisp one-dollar bill. And secondly, a less than attractive guestroom immortalized by an exterior door that fell out of its frame whenever we tried to lock it.

The next time we went back to Prague someone had had the good sense to put the Drzuba out of its misery and transformed it into a bank. And now even the bank is gone, in its place is a store devoted exclusively to the sale of Levis, beginning at \$80 a pair!

On our 1991 and 1992 visits we stayed in private apartments temporarily vacated by their Czech occupants. This U. S. operation, **Prague Suites**, was a lifesaver in those early days and its recent demise is a reflection of the fact that the hotel situation has improved dramatically, although during peak season, which now runs from May through October, it is still necessary to book centrally-located hotels well in advance.

Hotel Adria

This year our choice for lodging was this well-situated hotel on Wenceslas

Square, just a few doors from where the infamous Drzuba once stood. There are all sorts of colorful stories about the Adria's past glory but none of that really matter because the hotel has been completely renovated from its sparkling lobby to the 58 comfortable guest rooms. All thanks to a hefty dose of Austrian cash, we are led to understand.

The Adria was reviewed by *Gemütlichkeit* in its January '95 issue and we have only a couple of comments to add to that report.

Room 'keys' are of the latest credit card variety but, despite a demonstration model on the reception desk downstairs, the corridors are lined with people hunched over their door knobs, valiantly struggling to get inside. And motion sensitive hall lights, while no doubt environmentally sound, don't come on until you've already walked halfway to your room in semidarkness.

According to local cynics, these are typical examples of 'Czechology' at work.

Address: Hotel Adria, Vaclavske namesti 26, 110 00 Praha 1.

Phone: 011-42-2-24-23-13-93

Fax: 011-42-2-242-11025

Location: Central on Vaclavske namesti (Wenceslas Square).

Rooms: 51 double, 7 single, 5 apartments, 3 studios and one room for handicapped

Prices: Singles 4030 Kcs (\$155), doubles 4930 Kcs (\$189.61), studio 5950 Kcs (\$228.85), apartment 6910 Kcs (\$265.76), including buffet breakfast.

Facilities: Restaurant, bar, room service, laundry, elevator, air-conditioning

Credit cards: All

Disabled: One room designed for handicapped.

Parking: Nearby

Rating: ABOVE AVERAGE 15/20

Hotel Sidi

Halfway through our stay in Prague, friends arrived from London and showed us their hotel room in the tiny Hotel Sidi which is located on Kampa Island in the Vlatva River right at the base of the Charles Bridge, one of Prague's most picturesque landmarks. The wide, tree-filled square, Na Kampa, lined with outdoor cafes and local shops, is literally an oasis in the midst of an overwrought city.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

The hotel is really a bar/restaurant with rooms — technically three, but we only saw two in operation. Our friends had a lovely room on the top floor with little dormer windows that opened directly out over the bridge; the ultimate room with a view! At night they lay in bed, looking out the window and listening as the street musicians serenaded them to sleep.

It was love at first sight and we hurriedly made arrangements to take up residence.

Our room turned out to be a second floor, two-room suite whose wide windows looked down on the tranquil scene below and up to Prague Castle and the spires of St. Vitus' Cathedral. Not a bad view either, but we had to get out of bed to look at it!

There was one consolation; only a short time before we arrived, actor Tom Cruise, on Kampa Island filming an update of Mission Impossible, had stayed for several nights in our very room! (Not everyone can honestly say they have slept in Tom Cruise's bed...or vice versa.)

The Sidi's guestrooms have recently been fixed up with full plumbing facilities, mini-bar, TV and so on, plus some nice touches like chocolate wrapped in the official Sidi logo waiting on the pillow each night. There is, however, no elevator or air-conditioning.

A full breakfast cooked to order is included, with the added bonus of that fabulous view across the Vltava river to ease any early morning pain. The restaurant serves traditional Czech food in a pleasant atmosphere and the minuscule bar downstairs is a favorite with locals.

The owner, Mr. Pter Sadik Sidikman (thus the Hotel Sidi), and his able assistant, Michael Melichar, stop at nothing to please, adding much to the charm of the establishment.

Address: Hotel Sidi

Phone: 536 135

Fax: Same

Proprietor: Pter Sadik Sidikman

Location: Near Charles Bridge

Rooms: 2 doubles, 1 suite

Prices: Doubles/suites 3,500 kcs (\$134.61), including full breakfast

Facilities: Restaurant, bar

Credit cards: None

Disabled: Not suitable

Parking: Street

Rating: EXCELLENT 17/20 G \$

FOOD

Restaurant Kampa Park

Conveniently located in the same neighborhood as the Sidi is the upmarket Restaurant Kampa Park, the perfect place to go when you can't face another dumpling or sausage.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Kampa Park is owned by Swedes and has been open about a year. The riverside location, with panoramic views, is perfect. Inside, stucco walls arch over polished hardwood floors overlaid with traditional Swedish rugs. The atmosphere is high-tech bistro with an open kitchen, lots of bustle and potted cactus on the tables.

Our meal there began with a large appetizer of four quail eggs and a dozen chanterelle mushrooms arranged on a bed of bitter greens (125 Kc, \$4.80). Other appetizers include several preparations of oysters or shrimp (175-275 Kc, \$6.73-10.57), gravlax (185 Kc, \$7.11) and dried wafer-thin beef (155 Kc, \$5.96).

We continued with a hearty bowl of Czech Potato Soup (90 Kc, \$3.46), followed by filet of lamb in béchamel/wine sauce and fresh rosemary (355 Kc, \$13.65) and venison simmered in red wine with sauteed mushrooms (395 Kc, \$15.19). Both were served with green beans and delicious Scandinavian-style scalloped potatoes.

Fish entrees include salmon, sole, turbot, halibut and scallops ranging in price from 425-525Kc (\$16.34-\$20.19). Rabbit, chicken and beef tournedo are also on the menu.

There is a limited but respectable — and affordable — selection of French and German wines. A bottle of house red costs 165 Kc (\$6.35), a glass of same is only 35 Kc (\$1.35). Cocktails, always expensive in Europe, cost only 90 Kc (\$3.46) here.

Kampa Park is arguably the nicest restaurant we've ever patronized in Prague, as well as the most expensive. Kampa Park, Na Kampa 8b, Mala Strana, Prague 1, phone 534 856 534 800. Moderate. **Rating:** EXCELLENT 16/20

U Dvou Kocek

We're more likely to be found in a place like U Dvou Kocek (The Two Cats). U Dvou Kocek holds a warm place in our hearts because back in 1990, when meals

were as hard to come by as hotel rooms, we were welcomed here with something akin to open arms. In those days the culinary choices amounted to 'white stuff with dumplings' or 'brown stuff with dumplings' served with a side of stewed spinach but we were happy enough to get it and couldn't argue with a total bill of 100 kcs (\$3.84) for both the food and a fair amount of beer.

Subsequent visits to U Dvou Kocek over the years have been reassuring. There's now a full Czech menu, lots of good beer and an aging but enthusiastic accordionist working the crowd. Still, the atmosphere hasn't changed much from the basic working class bar that it's always been. A jolly evening there with friends now averages 225 kcs (\$8.65) a person for food and drink.

U Dvou Kocek, Uhelny trh.10, Prague 1. No credit cards. Inexpensive. **Rating:** AVERAGE 11/20

U Bonaparta

We returned also to U Bonaparta, another of those few that would feed us so long ago. On our last trip, U Bonaparta was closed for renovations, a seemingly unavoidable condition for all these long-neglected buildings, but everything seems in good order and all the Napoleon memorabilia is back on the walls.

This small tavern, about half way up the steep ascent to Prague Castle, is a good place to stop for a relaxing lunch and a clean toilet. U Bonaparta, Nerudova 19, Prague 1 No credit cards. Inexpensive. **Rating:** AVERAGE 10/20

Novomestsky Pivovar

A new discovery for us was Novomestsky Pivovar (The New Town Brewery), Prague's first modern brewpub, located just 350 meters from Wenceslas Square.

The layout alone is fascinating with ten separate dining/drinking rooms arranged in a labyrinth of steps and stairs and passageways meandering past all the trappings of beer production. To avoid other tourists, don't sit down at the first empty table; the local people, and there are lots of them here, all go further back.

The menu is very good, traditional Czech. Three of us one night ordered *gulas* (goulash), *smazeny syr* (fried cheese), *svickova* (beef in sour cream sauce), *hradolky* (french fries) and lots of the crisp house beer. The total bill was

Continued on page 8...

PRAGUE

Continued from page 7

500 Kcs (\$19.23).

Food, in fact, is generally very inexpensive in Prague. Restaurant ratings typically describe the cost of a three course meal with one drink as 4*—very expensive; 1,000 Kc.+ (\$38.46 +); 3*—expensive 500-1,000 kc (\$19.23-38.46); 2*—moderate 200-500 Kc (\$7.69-19.23) and 1*—under 200 (\$7.69).

A glass of good beer is even cheaper, costing just 15 kcs (57¢).

Novomestsky Pivovar, Vodickova 20, Prague 1. Inexpensive. **Rating:** ABOVE AVERAGE 14/20 \$

PRAGUE'S DARKER SIDE

Prague is a tale of two cities, two economies and at least two visions of the future.

It starts with them versus us. Locals versus tourists. A million souls who, for more than forty years, suffered awful privations under communism are now slowly emerging from their ordeal versus a gazillion curious tourists flocking to watch them do it...and capitalize on bargain basement prices.

Obviously this cultural and economic square-off has a high potential for conflict and bad feelings.

One tangible manifestation of this crisis has been the creation of a double standard in which locals are charged one set of prices for services, food, accommodations, transport or entertainment — and Prague visitors, another.

It's not a subject that worries the average tourist — he simply doesn't realize it's happening.

Government justification for the practice goes some-

thing like this: Czech consumers have less purchasing power than foreigners, therefore local citizens should pay lower prices.

The fact that such a strategy flies in the face of the very capitalist system that the country is trying to embrace doesn't seem to matter. Two-tiered pricing, argues the Czech government, will disappear of its own accord when economic parity is reached. The *Prague Tribune*, an English-language magazine, on the other hand, believes the practice is bound to continue well into the future.

How great is the inequity? Considerable, according to a survey conducted by the *Tribune*.

Look at just a few examples.

- Prague restaurants hang out signs announcing, *domaci zu polovic* or, "half price for locals".

- On phone-in orders the National Theater often charges foreigners several times the prices paid by Czechs; between \$2 and \$10 for locals; \$35 for outsiders.

- A car rental firm in the city charges foreigners \$43 a day for a Skoda Favorit while a Czech pays \$24 for the same car.

- A long-distance bus ride from Prague to Frankfurt can cost a foreigner \$66. A local pays only \$38.

The magazine survey goes on to cite many other examples of tiered pricing including tennis and riding clubs and hotels outside Prague.

Despite this transparent discrimination, it's easy to sympathize with the average Czech trying to earn a crust and support a family on \$250-\$300 a month in a city where a reasonable hotel room starts

at \$120, a little bauble in lead crystal can cost a week's salary and even a Big Mac is over \$2.

The wage inequity manifests itself in less benign ways, however.

It creates the kind of environment in which taxi drivers habitually plunder unsuspecting tourists via rigged meters or no meters.

First-time, highly-vulnerable visitors usually have no idea what a reasonable fare between point A and B should be and even if they ask before setting off and are fluent in Czech (a highly unlikely combination) they can still be ripped-off. It isn't called the 'taxi Mafia' for nothing.

Our recommendation, based on several frustrating taxi experiences, is to use Prague's public transportation wherever possible. It is clean, efficient and very, very cheap.

The **Czech Airlines** airport bus that departs to and from central Prague every half hour costs \$1.15 compared to \$19 for a taxi. A cab from Holesovice train station to Wenceslas Square will run in the neighborhood of \$13 — if you're lucky. A metro ticket is just 25 cents. You get the idea.

There are some private cab companies that have built an honest reputation according to those on the scene. Highly recommended is AAA Taxi which uses English-speaking operators. Their phone number in Prague is 34-24-10.

Another much discussed problem associated with the economic gulf is the proliferation of petty thievery and prostitution; even roving gangs who prey on the unwary. Although we heard plenty of scary stories about stolen bags and wallets during our recent visit the overall atmosphere seemed to us as safe as most large European cities.

Maybe our casual dress and defensive posture helped protect us.

Readers should take the usual sensible precautions while in Prague, or any other major city, for that matter. That means using money belts, traveler's checks and hotel safes, photocopying all personal and financial documents, and leaving anything of great value at home.

Still hanging around from the old days is a lack of basic courtesy among the very people who have the most to gain by being pleasant: shopkeepers, waiters, hotel receptionists and tourist office employees.

There have been improvements; words like surly, sulky, dour, morose and grumpy come less and less to mind but it is still common to be totally ignored in a store where you are the only patron, or to be greeted sullenly by a hotel desk clerk or restaurant waiter for no apparent reason.

In an effort to counter this 'attitude problem', several Czech customer service training agencies like 'Mirror-Mirror' and 'Positive' are hard at work trying to improve relations through politeness skills and drills in day long seminars featuring lots of role playing and hands-on exercises.

But don't expect instant miracles...or 'Have a Nice Day' or even a *Dobry Den*. (Czech for 'Good Day'). Not yet anyway. It takes a long time to undo a bad day that lasted forty years.

The foregoing is a caution regarding difficulties which occasionally can be encountered in this city that is undergoing profound changes. It should not discourage anyone from visiting a wonderful destination. 