

DEAR
SUBSCRIBER

January 27, 1999

Why G.A.S.?

Some years ago, just prior to one of our annual trips to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, before there was a *Gemütlichkeit*, a young woman at a cocktail party inquired about our destination.

When I said Germany she got a puzzled look on her face and asked a simple question — why?. She seemed curious in the same way that one might wonder why someone would go swimming in Lake Michigan on New Year's Day. Through body language and a careful choice of words, she intimidated no one in their right mind would pick Germany or Austria for a European vacation. Switzerland might be OK., but the Swiss were pretty cold fish and boring besides. France and Italy were the places she and her friends planned to visit.

Seeing the conversation was a lost cause, I quickly retired.

Over the years I have had enough similar exchanges and tepid "Oh, how nice" comments concerning our choices of European destinations to now fully understand that Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are not, at least for many people, fashionable.

Friends' get misty-eyed over Italy and destination droppers slip place names like Provence and Tuscany into the conversation. The likes of Bavaria, Graubünden, and the Tirol are "simply not done, my dear."

For its annual travel issue, *German Life* magazine has asked us to do a short piece on behalf of the German-speaking countries.

So for the last few weeks I've been doing a sort of "how do I love thee; let me count the ways" exercise: reasons to choose these three countries as travel destinations.

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

HEIDELBERG

Romantic Heidelberg, beautifully situated in the Neckar Valley, is one of Germany's premier tourist stops. Our Holliday-Fischer duo report on their recent visit.

Ever since the first tourists descended on it at the rear end of the 18th century, Heidelberg has forever been the recipient of ecstatic reviews. Celebrated down the centuries in every kind of art form... from high-flying prose and operatic aria to romantic poetry and

By Claudia Fischer & Roger Holliday

paint...this quintessential university town on the banks of the Neckar has become a veritable poster child for German tourism — as well as magnet to some 3 million visitors a year. (Rivalled only in popularity by Neuschwanstein and Rothenburg).

Hardly surprising considering its central location, just 55 miles south of Frankfurt; easy accessibility by road, rail and river; spirited nightlife,

helped along by a large and lively student population; and above all, its sublime presence.

From a travel industry perspective then, Heidelberg must surely represent the "dream package", made even dreamier by the kind of high profile proponents who have been flocking to it. Everyone from Elizabeth Stuart (daughter of James 1) and Sigmund Romberg — who set his *Student Prince* here — to Mark Twain, Victor Hugo, Count Bismark, Goethe, and even the British artist Turner, who painted Heidelberg to a fare-thee-well. And then became its adopted son.

Why then must we begin our report on this classic beauty with a cautionary note? A visitor's heads-

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Europe Travel Digest

■ **Swissair** has notified *Gemütlichkeit* that it will continue to provide subscribers with price reductions on its flights from the U.S. to European destinations for another year.

The reductions remain as they have since the program's inception in 1991: \$600 per ticket off first class fares, \$400 off business class, \$150 off coach tickets which cost more than \$1,000, and \$50 off coach tickets less than \$1,000. If fares dip below \$600, as they sometimes do during the winter, the discount is \$25 per ticket.

To book, phone Swissair reservations at 800-221-4750. Once reservations have been made, phone another Swissair number, 800-238-0399, for ticketing at the appropriate reduced price. You must *book and purchase tickets directly with Swissair.*

Prior to issuing tickets, Swissair will verify subscriber status with the *Gemütlichkeit* office. Family and friends traveling with a subscriber for at least one leg of the transatlantic roundtrip are also eligible for the lower fares.

■ **LTU International Airways**, the German airline, has announced special fares for spring, summer and fall travel from the United States to Germany. The prices are valid for travel between May and October

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Gemütlichkeit Has Moved

Our new address is:

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First Things First

A good place to start such a list is with breakfast. The German, Austrian, Swiss (let's just collectively call them G.A.S., for now) buffet is a marvelous collection of the very freshest dairy products, rolls and bread, sliced meats, jams and jellies (often house-made), various juices, often fresh fruit, usually a variety of cereals — including a pre-mixed concoction of müsli and yogurt to which I am partial — and coffee or tea. These are just the basics; at more expensive hotels the spread can be a lot more elaborate and include such things as omelettes, fancy baked goods, and so on.

The G.A.S. breakfast included in the price of the hotel room is the most bountiful we have experienced in Europe; much superior, for example, to the French continental breakfast of coffee and a croissant (admittedly an excellent coffee and croissant) or the Italian morning repast which sometimes is just coffee.

Transportation

Road or rail, no European transport system can match G.A.S. Let's start with Switzerland's rail system, hands down the best on the continent — maybe the world; 1800 stations in a country the size of Maine, all scheduled to mesh beautifully with the country's huge complex of light rail, boat, and bus networks. Of course, there is rail service to both Geneva and Zürich airports. At the

end of a trip earlier this month, we needed to get from Brig, near the Italian border, to the Zürich Airport in the north to catch an afternoon plane to San Francisco. It was snowing heavily and we had to get over, around or under the rugged Bernese Oberland. After an 8:30am breakfast at our Brig hotel, we walked five minutes to the station, through the snow, to catch a 9:57am InterCity. Even without reservations we had no trouble finding a pair of facing window seats which we never left until just after 1pm when, right on time, we rolled into the Zürich Airport. There were almost three hours to kill before our flight.

Germany's 160mph ICE trains are another high-tech wonder and Austria's rail system is also first-rate.

For all the jokes about it, and the average U.S. tourist's wariness of it, Germany's Autobahn system is another marvel. But perhaps the best thing about G.A.S. roads is that even the smallest, most obscure country lane is meticulously maintained. They get the highest marks from this veteran California pothole dodger.

And where are the least expensive car rentals in Europe? Germany, of course, where at this writing you can reserve a BMW 316i for \$120 a week or midsize Opel Vectra for about \$100, not including tax.

Music

Sorry, Italy, France, Scandinavia, Benelux, Balkans, Iberian Peninsula, but we've got most of the big hitters. Sure, we love guys like Grieg and

Sibelius (Scandinavia); Debussy, Ravel and Faure (France), Vivaldi, Puccini and Verdi (Italy), and Russia, of course, is understandably proud of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Prokofiev, but the heart of the G.A.S. batting order is Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. Plus, with the likes of Frank Schubert, Gus Mahler and the Strauss boys, Joe and Dick (no relation), we have an extremely deep bench. A fella like Franz Lehar is just a pinch-hitter for our side. We've got a few decent orchestras, too, like about 15 really top-flight ones in towns like Vienna, Berlin, Salzburg, Zürich, Munich, and even Bamberg and Bern.

Food

Well, maybe there you have us. The food in Italy and France is awfully good. In fact, if I had to choose just one cuisine for the rest of my life it would be Italian. Pasta every day would be no problem. Even so, I consider the Germanic elements of GAS food (there's a phrase to whet the appetite) to be underrated. Use of the freshest ingredients is the norm and dishes most of us don't find in the U.S. are commonplace; wild boar and venison, for example. The tender calves liver that melts in your mouth in a GAS restaurant is entirely different than what one finds at most U.S. restaurants (provided it's even on the menu) or grocery meat counters. Intensely-flavored wild mushrooms are used by even the most unpretentious restaurants. Simple, tried and true comfort dishes some "foodies" disdain, such as Swiss *Rösti*, Austrian

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HOTEL RESTAURANT RATING KEY

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

Special  Designation

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

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up, so to speak.

It's simply because Heidelberg has sadly become a victim of its own intense popularity and, unlike its more cautious down-river rival Tübingen (see *Gemütlichkeit*, Nov. '97), hasn't always taken the right steps to deflect the numbing effects of mass tourism.

The net-net of this careless indulgence is painfully obvious, particularly in the summer months, when the bulk of the tourists, both foreign and domestic, arrive for a look-see.

With the 30,000 students out of town for the holidays, the vacuum is instantly filled by regiments of roaming rubber neckers disgorged from dozens of big belching diesel coaches, lined up in parking lots on the edge of the Old Town.

The sheer number and force of these incomers literally floods the center city, clogging alley and street, bar and restaurant, stall and store, as the endless lines of *Touristen* trail behind their broily-toting guides: trolling for "I love Heidelberg" T-shirts and hats in the market square; spilling millions of frames of Kodak and Fuji in all the pretty places; and sopping up countless pints of frothy Adler beer in the outdoor cafes and student bars before heading, noisily and unsteadily, back to the busses for the next down river.

These coarse summer invasions have hardly gone unnoticed by travel writers, guidebooks and discriminating travelers, as Heidelberg is increasingly singled out as overcrowded, overrated, passe, pushy and borderline kitsch.

Even Rick Steves, of PBS and *Mona Winks* fame, has dropped Heidelberg from his top 20 Deutschland must-sees. "O Heidelberg, Du Feine," how far have you fallen!

The antidote to all this, of course, is to stay well clear in the peak season—July and August. Alternatively, you could take to the untramed *Gassen* (lanes) and wait for the daily invasion to subside before

Heidelberg Info

Population: 135,000

Altitude: 114 meters/374 feet

Tourist Information:

Pavillon am Hauptbahnhof, D-69115 Heidelberg, tel. +49/06221/21341, fax 167318, website: www.heidelberg.de/cvb/

Available in English for a small charge:

Heidelberg Map (with excellent self-guided walking tour) and *Heidelberg Tips*


Distance from:

Berlin	627 Km/392 miles
Stuttgart	122 Km/76 miles
Darmstadt	59 Km/37 miles
Karlsruhe	59 Km/37 miles
Mannheim	20 Km/13 miles

Train Times to other Cities:

Frankfurt	2 hrs (change Mannheim)
Munich	3 hrs
Cologne	3 hrs (change Mannheim)
Zürich	4 hrs (change Mannheim)
Hamburg	4.5 hrs
Berlin	6.5 hrs (change Mannheim)
Vienna	7 hrs (change Würzburg)
Paris	8 hrs (change Cologne)
London	11 hrs (change Brussels & Cologne)
Budapest	11 hrs (change Würz)

Guided Walking Tours 10 DM/\$6: In German/English, daily 2pm April through October. In English, Thursday to Sundays, 10am April through October. All depart from University Square/Lion's Fountain.

Neckar River Boat Trips: April through October, lasting between 1.5 to 3 hours, cost 6 to 16.50 DM (\$4-\$10). Multiple departures daily. Rhein-Neckar-Fahrgastsschiffahrt, tel. 06221/20181. Personenschiffahrt Hornung, tel. 06221/480064. 

doing any serious sight-seeing. Or, better still, hike the surrounding hills and inhale the city's indisputable bounties from above.

In fact, in our view, a visit to Heidelberg best begins not at ground zero at all, but rather in the clean air of the Königstuhl (King's Throne) above the castle or on the cross-river Philosopher's Way, with all those classic Old Town views that are burned into our collective memory banks from countless calendars and documentaries: a meandering Neckar *mit* gaily painted, slow-chug barges passing under a 17th century and portcullised *Alte Brücke*; a medieval huddle of spires and slate and sand

stone buildings set around a market square; everything supplanted by Heidelberg's crowning jewel — the classic ruined castle — all reds and pinks and purples in a canopy of forest green.

With this picture firmly in place, it's time to come down to earth for a closer, ground-level inspection.

As all the main attractions are within easy walking distance, Heidelberg is quite easily "done", sight-seeing-wise, in a couple of leisurely days. But for the true atmosphere to soak in (and to do proper justice to all the student razzmatazz!), we recommend a longer stay, perhaps using Heidelberg as a base from which to explore the fertile Neckar Valley, the "castle road" to Rothenburg or the historic towns of Ladenburg, Bad Wimpfen and Schwetzingen.

Tops on every Heidelberg agenda, is of course, the famous Schloss. This three-star Michelin ruin (while not exactly at ground level) is still easily accessed either by road or funicular from the *Kornmarkt*, and bears witness to a colorful and turbulent history.

First mentioned in dispatches in 1225, it was altered, expanded and besieged on several occasions, before being reduced to its current wreck in 1693 during the Wars of Conquest.

In case you're not familiar with this particular bloody skirmish...or were absent from school on the day it was discussed...have no fear, for Heidelberg's history is a long and complicated one with explanations best left to erudite guides and guidebooks. Suffice to say that both the castle and the city got in the way of some dispute over a Royal title...and were rapidly reduced to rubble.

The castle, however, is still worth a visit. If not for the sensational views out across the city and river to the hills beyond, then for a look at the world's largest wine cask; 48,000 gallons in capacity, this *Grosses Fass*, constructed in 1751, was once guarded, according to legend, by a vertically-challenged court jester named Perkeo, who is said to have had a

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monumental capacity for the juice! Now the cask doubles as a dance floor!

The castle presents its prettiest face at night from river level, when searchlights play on its crenelated ramparts and towers. Even more dramatic displays take place on the first Saturday of each summer month when blood-red spotlights recall the castle's fiery destruction...and fireworks provide the colorful crown of glories past.

Following the sacking, Heidelberg was rebuilt Baroque style on its original foundations, so the bulk of what one sees today is essentially 300 years-old, give or take the odd exception. (It should be noted too, that Heidelberg came through WWII safely, and is one of the very few cities of its size to have survived intact. The only remaining war legacy is the 20,000 GIs stationed at nearby Patrick Henry Village, adding a distinctly Yankee flavor to an already cosmopolitan population.)

The university, for which Heidelberg is best known...and around which so many of its romantic traditions radiate...is Germany's oldest, founded in 1386.

But don't expect to find said scholars on any kind of US-style campus, for most of the U's lecture halls, institutes, seminar buildings and clinics are spread out, hidden almost, throughout the Old Town.

But it's Heidelberg's evocative and immensely attractive *Altstadt* that remains the touristic focal point.

Pedestrianized in 1978, it is a veritable cornucopia of colorful markets and cobbled streets, Gothic-style churches and monumental fountains. Along the Hauptstrasse, upmarket shops and antique stores vie with souvenir schlock. Coffee houses and open air restaurants fizz with activity and blend in seamlessly with lavishly decorated mansions, stately museums and quiet courtyards.

On one corner, two students

fiddle baroque. On another, a Wurlitzer blasts oompa. On yet another, religious icons are peddled. And so it goes.

As an important center of learning (it boasts seven Nobel Prize winners), Heidelberg lacks little in the way of cultural activities — music, art, theater.

In the Palatinate Museum one can study the jawbone of the prehistoric "Heidelberg Man" who roamed the Neckar Valley in 500,000 BC. Or wonder at the wood carving skills of the ubiquitous Tilman Riemenschneider whose "Altarpiece of the Twelve Apostles" is on display.

If pharmaceuticals are more your thing, there's a museum dedicated to pestles and phials and apothecary equipment. And on a lighter note, there's always the Students' Gaol, where the more rowdy pupils were incarcerated, leaving on the sooty walls centuries of graffiti and coats of arms to memorialize their various escapades.

Ultimately, then, Heidelberg is about student life. About romance. The great traditions, the fraternities that still exist. The beanies, the sashes, the bizarre rituals called *Mensur*, or fencing matches, that continue today, albeit under cover. Where a scar on a cheek was, and is, considered a lifelong "badge of courage". A bond. Mark Twain wrote about it all in *A Tramp Abroad*.

The famous student taverns are filled with all this dueling memorabilia. With sabers and helmets. Goggles and medical devices. Faded tintypes of ancient and fraternal warriors who strutted Heidelberg's cobbled streets by day and its beer joints by night...competitively quaffing liter upon liter of frothy beer...before heading noisily and unsteadily home.

The circle, you might say, has been closed!

Hotels

It would be a shame to visit a city with a past as rich as Heidelberg's and not stay in one of its truly historic hotels. To be sure there's a full range of bed-in-a-box style places to

be had at lower cost and not a few in the higher priced range. But many of these are not only sterile and uninteresting, but a long, boring walk away from the old town.

Hotel zum Ritter St. Georg

Located right on the Hauptstrasse, looking out over the Fischmarkt, this late Renaissance establishment is so remarkable that it has become one of Heidelberg's must-see sights. The venerable Green Michelin for Germany calls it a "magnificent bourgeois mansion."

Hotel zum Ritter St. Georg, which translates roughly as The Knight's House, is named for the carving of St. George in knightly armor which features prominently in the ornate five-story facade. Built in 1592 by a French Huguenot, this was the only patrician house to survive the devastation of 1693.

As a hotel, the zum Ritter has had its ups and downs, succumbing at times to a temptation to exploit its premier location with indifferent service and lackluster rooms. Happily, those problems seem to be long past. We were warmly greeted by the staff on our recent visit.

The hotel was completely renovated in 1996 and while some of the guestrooms are quite small, all are attractive and comfortable and the restaurant is considered one of the best in town. The elegant dining room, where main dishes are in the 22 to 35 DM (\$16-\$21) range, is all mirrors and brass and dark wood wainscoting under a dramatic rounded sepia ceiling.

A broad wooden staircase in the lobby leads up to a warren of corridors that open unexpectedly onto courtyards and sitting alcoves. Don't be surprised to come upon a full suit of armor tucked into one corner or another.

The flagship room, Number 101, is decorated in a soothing combination of yellow and blue and has a cozy sitting nook with tall windows that overlook the Fischmarkt below. The bath is large and fully tiled. There's a power shower, heated towel bars, and a full range of quality amenities. In high season this room is

a pricey 365 DM (\$216). In all there are 40-rooms all with minibars, hairdryers and cable TV.

Daily Rates: Singles 165-245 DM (\$98-\$145), doubles 265-365 DM (\$157-\$216), Junior Suite 390-420 DM (\$231-\$249).

Contact: Romantik-Hotel zum Ritter St. Georg, Hauptstrasse 178, tel. +49/062 21/135-0, fax 135-2 30, www.ritter-heidelberg.de/

Rating: Quality 14/20, Value 10/20

Hotel Hirschgasse

Even older is the Hirschgasse across the river from the castle/old town and up a steep but short hill that leads beyond to the aforementioned Philosopher's Way.

The ancient inn was first mentioned in the recorded history of Heidelberg in the year 1472, part of a romantic encounter between poet Johann von Soest and the innkeeper's daughter.

Throughout the ages there has been no shortage of association with the rich and/or famous. The city's first dueling fraternity was founded on these very premises. Bismarck was apparently a regular visitor and not above carving his name into the wooden tabletop along with everyone else's — beer is still served nightly in the *Mensurstube* (duelers' tavern) on that same table, now over 200 years old.

Other visiting luminaries have included Mark Twain who wrote appreciatively about the inn and its action in *A Tramp Abroad...* and two fierce sounding Russians, Wooden Lip and Black Peter.

Enter through a courtyard into a low arched doorway and the tiny brick floored lobby. A length of paisley fabric artfully draped over the wrought iron stair railing let's you know right away that this is no ordinary establishment. Nothing is left to chance...every aspect, from the decor to the cordiality of the staff, is polished and buffed to perfection.

The Kraft family first bought the hotel in 1972. Now second generation Ernst and his English wife Allison — with the help of three year old Emma — run the daily operation

while technically retired *Grossmutter* tweaks the pillows into perfection in the background.

In 1988 the guest rooms were all remodeled into twenty suites each of which was given a theme-Peking, Blueberry, Patio. The actual decorating was done by the Laura Ashley group and is extremely attractive with coordinated fabrics, furnishings, wallpapers and color schemes.

The suites come in three sizes. Junior Suites are the smallest and most basic but still qualify as outstanding by any standard. Senior Suites, equipped with Jacuzzis and four-poster beds, are in the middle category. And at the very top reign the Salon Suites with balconies, leather chairs, replica telephones and TVs that rise magically from the floor. In the wrong hands all that prettiness could be a bit oppressive but the Krafts are so nice and so enthusiastic and so dedicated to their home and their work that a successful stay is virtually guaranteed.

The formal dining room, **Le Gourmet**, has parquet floors, a wattle-and-daub ceiling, a ceramic tile stove and a mere seven tables. Main dishes start at 40 DM (\$24).

Less expensive meals are served in the rustic **Mensurstube** where swords hang from the ceiling and you can all but reach out and touch Bismarck et al. The traditional menu choices cost 22 to 30 DM (\$12-\$18).

Daily Rates: Jr. Suites 295-350 DM (\$175-\$208), Sr. Suites 350-450 DM (\$208-\$266), Salon Suites 450-650 DM (\$266-\$385). Breakfast 25 DM (\$15) per person.

Contact: Hotel Hirschgasse, Hirschgasse 3, Heidelberg, tel. +49/06221/4540, fax 454-111, www.hirschgasse.de. Proprietor: Ernst Kraft.

Rating: Quality 17/20, Value 12/20

Hotel Hollander Hof

This hotel isn't the oldest in town — it only dates from the debacle of 1693 — but what is lacking in age is more than compensated for by location. The windows behind the pink-and-white baroque facade look directly out onto a square beneath the *Alte Brücke*, Heidelberg's second

most photographed landmark. And, of course, the River Neckar.

The 40 rooms are simply but comfortably furnished and have all the necessities including TV, safe, hairdryer, mini-bar, phone and radio. The best are those with the river/bridge view. Some are designated for nonsmokers, six are equipped for handicapped travelers.

Daily Rates: Singles 160-195 DM (\$95-\$115), doubles 195-290 DM (\$115-\$172)

Contact: Hotel Hollander Hof, Neckarstaden 66, Heidelberg, tel. +49/06221/6050-0, fax 6050-60

Rating: Quality 11/20, Value 11/20

Here are some Heidelberg hotel options previously reviewed in Gemütlichkeit.

Gasthof Hackteufel

A small, informal and homey hotel and restaurant near the *Alte Brücke*.

Each guestroom is different and individually furnished. The best is Number 12, an attractive attic room with sloping beamed ceiling and castle view.

The hotel's rustic little restaurant has long been a *Gemütlichkeit* favorite.

Daily Rates: Singles 120-160 DM (\$71-\$93), doubles 200-250 DM (\$118-\$148)

Contact: Hackteufel, Steingasse 7, D-6900 Heidelberg, tel. +49/06221/27162, fax 165379. Proprietor: Heinrich Scholl

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 9/20

Perkeo Hotel & Restaurant

Small, modern lodgings midway the length of Hauptstrasse with an attractive restaurant and outdoor terrace. Try Number 18 which opens to a quiet courtyard.

Daily Prices: Singles 120-180 DM (\$71-\$107), doubles 160-200 DM (\$95-\$118)

Contact: Perkeo Hotel-Restaurant, Hauptstrasse 75, D-6900 Heidelberg, tel. 06221/14130, fax 141337. Proprietor; Klaus Müller

Rating: QUALITY 10/20, VALUE 8/20

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Other hotel notes: If you don't mind a Western-style hotel with modern, well-maintained facilities but without a lot of charm, the **Holiday Inn Crown Plaza**, located west of the *Altstadt*, near the Gaisberg Tunnel, was, at press time, offering a price of \$135 per night via their U.S. toll free number 800-465-4329. Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Kurfürstenanlage 1, D-69115, phone 06221/9170, fax 06221/21007.

- Heidelberg's only five-star hotel is the 135-room **Der Europäische Hof - Hotel Europa**, on the west edge of the *Altstadt*, about three blocks from Hauptstrasse. For an atmospheric evening, book a table in the hotel's **Kurfürsten-Stube-Grill**. This is a clubby, old-world marvel of glossy carved wood ceilings, inlaid paneling and copper serving hoods. A "grand" hotel and restaurant with prices to match. Der Europäische Hof-Hotel Europa, Friedrich-Ebert-Anlage 1, D-69117 Heidelberg, phone 06221/5150, fax 06221/515555.

- For less expensive accommodations try: **Hotel Garni Am Kornmarkt**, Kornmarkt 7, D-69117 Heidelberg, tel. +49/06221/24325, singles 75 to 120 DM (\$44-\$71), doubles 130 to 175 DM (\$77-\$104); or farther out, but with more services...

Ambiente Hotel garni, In der Neckarhelle 33-35, D-69118 Heidelberg-Ziegelhausen, tel. +49/06221/8992, fax 89920, singles 110 DM (\$69), doubles 160 DM (\$95)

Restaurants

Wirthaus zum Spreisel

In a flash of wisdom, the powers that be at the **Hollander Hof** closed their rather mediocre restaurant and rented out the space to the very accomplished folks who now operate it as Wirthaus zum Spreisel, perhaps our favorite place to eat in Heidelberg.

In warm weather, tables spill out into the square that runs in front of the Hollander Hof to the *Alte Brücke*.

The food is based on traditional German favorites but with welcome

modern twists. There are also foreign dishes with German twists. Wurstsalat *Lyons d'Or* is a thinly sliced, fine-textured sausage that's slightly piquant. Served with a big portion of outstanding *Bratkartoffel*, hardboiled egg and fresh tomatoes, the cost is 24 DM (\$14). *Französischer Toast* (definitely NOT French toast) is a warmed baguette presented with Hungarian sausage and Camembert cheese, also 24 DM (\$14). *Kalbsteak* with more of those delicious *Bratkartoffel* and a salad of corn, kidney beans and greens runs 28 DM (\$17).

Wirthaus zum Spreisel,
Neckarstaden 66, tel. 23543

Rating: Quality 14/20, Value 15/20

Zum Roten Ochsen

As in any destination so heavily patronized by tourists, Heidelberg has plenty of either awful or unremarkable eating places, including every conceivable fast food opportunity from McDonald's to Pizza Hut, and even a disturbing number of American sports bars and Tex-Mex eateries.

The surprise in Heidelberg is that there is also very good food to be had even at venues that are well-known to tourists. In particular, the famous student bars where beer drinking and singing and you-don't-want-to-know-what has been going on for centuries.

To begin with, nobody has been foolish enough to 'decorate' — or redecorate. The carved up table tops, yellowing photographs and student paraphernalia have been there for a very long time and aren't likely to go anywhere soon.

As a group these student bars are called *Historischer Studentenlokal* and they're all about 300-years-old.

The Zum Roten Ochsen has been in the Spengel family for six generations, since 1839, in fact. As a bar, though, it goes back to 1703. Everyone who comes to Heidelberg eventually seems to end up here, including the likes of Bismark and Mark Twain (neither of whom seemed to miss much), John Foster Dulles, Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne. Powder horns, antlers, pewter and ceramic steins, old photographs and

faded mirrors, cover the walls, even the ubiquitous name carving moves from the tables up the walls and onto the ceiling.

At 7pm the crowd is aged 35+, mostly male and generally local. An hour later a piano player arrives and the noise level gradually rises with the increase in time and number of beers consumed. What happens in the wee hours you'll have to discover for yourself.

The wait staff are sensible-looking, mature women who add a homey feel to the place — and presumably know exactly how to deal with errant behavior from rowdy young men.

The food is hearty and surprisingly good. Perhaps after a few generations of practice that's to be expected. Two big pieces of *Schwein Schnitzel*, served with *Pommes Frites* and *Salat* are 20 DM (\$12). A pound of *Spargel* (fresh asparagus) with hollandaise sauce and *Neue Kartoffeln* is 27 DM (\$16), a plate of three different kinds of ham (*Schinken Plat*) added another 10 DM (\$6)

A final note: the toilets are amazingly clean and notably absent graffiti.

Zum Roten Ochsen, Hauptstrasse 217, Heidelberg, tel. 20977. No cards.

Rating: Quality 14/20, Value 11/20

Schnookeloch

Slightly less chaotic and a notch or two up on the culinary scale is Schnookeloch, Heidelberg's oldest student tavern. The usual carved table tops, dark wood paneling and faded photos line the walls in the manner you've come to expect. There's also, however, a pretty courtyard where shade and cool breezes are most welcome on a hot day.

Each day there's a *Studententeller* or daily special for 12 DM. (\$7) On our visit, *Bergstrasser Kartoffelsuppe* (potato soup), full of all kinds of root vegetables and cabbage that had been partially pureed to thicken and sprinkled with fresh parsley was followed by *Gebackenes Schollenfilet mit Sauce Remoulade*, (crisp fried plaice) and *Kartoffelsalat*. Both were

delicious and served with thick slices of pumpernickel bread.

Schnookeloch also has 11 guestrooms, the best of which is Number 14, a pleasant double with windows on two sides and a large balcony furnished with table and chairs. It rents for from 220 to 260 DM (\$130-\$154), depending on the season. Number 22 is considerably smaller, with twin beds and two windows looking out on the narrow street, and goes for from 170 DM (\$101).

Schnookeloch, Haspelgasse 8, Heidelberg, tel. 14460.

Rest. Rating: Quality 13/20, Value 15/20

Hotel Rating: Quality 11/20, Value 8/20

EUROPE TRAVEL DIGEST

Continued from page 1


1999 and tickets must be purchased by March 5, 1999.

Roundtrip fares from Florida to Germany start at \$448 for travel in October. For departures between May 1 and June 15 and in September, the roundtrip airfare is \$548 and \$748 for departures between June 16 and August 31. LTU offers scheduled nonstop flights from Miami, Orlando and Ft. Myers to Düsseldorf. Connections at these prices are also available to Frankfurt, Hanover, Berlin and Munich. The fares are also available from several other Florida cities to Düsseldorf, Hanover and Frankfurt, via Miami and Orlando.

From Los Angeles, round trip travel in October is \$498 and \$598 for departures between May 10 and June 15 and in September. For peak season departures the roundtrip airfare is \$848. LTU's nonstop flights between Los Angeles and Düsseldorf begin on May 10 and offer connections to Hanover, Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich. The fares are also available, via Los Angeles, from San Francisco, San Diego, Oakland, Sacramento, Fresno, Monterey, Las Vegas and Phoenix to Düsseldorf and Hanover.

As of January 1, 1999, LTU flights between the U.S. and Germany are nonsmoking.

Contact any travel agency or call LTU at 800-888-0200. Information is also available at www.LTU.com.

■ For a close-up look at the Alps in winter try the Rhaetian Railway's **Winter Panorama Express**. The service runs through March 11, 1999, every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday both directions on the Landquart - Davos - St. Moritz route. Passengers sit in the same panorama cars used by the legendary Glacier Express. Holders of the Swiss Pass, Europass and Eurail passes can travel at no extra cost. Reservations are mandatory, cost Sfr. 6 (\$4), and can be made at any railway station in Switzerland. 

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 2

Schnitzel, and *Eisbein* (pork shank) in Germany, may not be the latest "California Cuisine" but are, in the hands of the right chef, delicious. And, of course, if you want to eat Italian, just head for the Swiss canton of Ticino. For Michelin-starred French cookery try the Swiss canton of Vaud.

Beer & Wine

I find beer superb in both Austria and Germany and merely "very good" in Switzerland, which is a wine-drinking country.

When it comes to wine, G.A.S. doesn't get the credit it deserves. The everyday bottles of all three countries measure up to any country in the world, including France and Italy. When it comes to the pricier stuff, Germany, at least, is a world-class player. No white wine anywhere is quite like the luscious nectar produced on the banks of Germany's Mosel, Saar and Rhine rivers. And, though not in the class yet of great vineyards of Bordeaux or Burgundy, red wines from Baden-Württemberg have improved dramatically in the last 20 years.

As for Austria, I refer you to page 8, column 3.

Overall, Switzerland, may be the best wine-maker of the three countries, but since there isn't enough to export, few know or care. I have had extraordinary white wines from the

vineyards of the Vaud along Lake Geneva, and delicious, complex reds from the Rhône Valley in the Valais.


Variety

Taken as a region, G.A.S. offers mountains, lakes, islands, a variety of seacoasts, four languages, several cuisines, and climates that range from almost subarctic in the north of Germany to nearly subtropical in Switzerland's Ticino canton.

People

This is where the wicket gets a little sticky — at least for those who have never visited G.A.S. In contrast to the post-WWII attitude regarding the Japanese, the media has cast German speakers as virtual cartoon characters. Think about it, when was the last time you heard or saw an advertisement in which a Germanic character was not a caricature? Ads and movies almost always portray people with German accents as uptight, inflexible martinets; fat, fun-loving, beer-swilling bumpkins, or elegant but terrifyingly evil Gestapo interrogators. Are there Germans like that? Of course, but imagine the outcry in this country if a TV ad caricatured the Japanese.

If you've spent some time in the Germanic countries you know such portrayals are inaccurate. It is always a mistake to characterize an entire people. In little country towns throughout G.A.S. visitors are almost always met with warmth and friendliness — just as they are in small-town America. In big cities, encounters can be more brusque — just as in New York or Los Angeles. But we should remember that hospitality in the Germanic countries is part of the culture. It is ingrained in the families who run the thousands of small hotels and restaurants all across Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Remember, *gemütlichkeit* is both a German word that doesn't translate to other languages and a concept that is unique to the Germanic countries.

Probably I'm not wholly objective in these matters; and the fact that you are reading this newsletter says you, too, are a G.A.S. fan. In the end, it comes down to what gets your heart into high gear. — RHB 

What's in the Papers About Germany, Austria, Switzerland?

From Our Clipping Service

Vienna Coffeehouses

The Washington Post's **James Yenckel**, who always writes clearly and interestingly about Germany, Austria and Switzerland, points out the differences between a *Konditorei* and a coffeehouse in Vienna, though both sell many of the same goods. Coffeehouses or Cafés tend to be older, with a more traditional style, and the waiters often wear tuxedos. *Konditoreien* are usually newer, the decor is modern and one is more likely to be served by a woman.

He also discovered a couple of dos and don'ts regarding these establishments: Don't even attempt to carry your topcoat or raincoat to your table in the better places; you will almost certainly be ordered to the cloakroom. If tables are at a premium, don't expect someone to help you find one. Mr. Yenckel said he and his wife did what the Viennese do; they split up and "patrolled the room like Christmas shoppers looking for the last parking spot in the mall." (This procedure apparently is not universal; at **Café Griesteidl** the Yenckels failed to note seating was handled by a maitre d', and when they headed for a table on their own were shooed back to the waiting area by a waitress who also delivered a loud lecture in German.)

At **Café Gerstner** he discovered, after being ignored for several minutes by waitresses, that one must first place an order at the display counter. A clerk there puts the selections on a plate and hands the customer a slip of paper to give to a waitress who then retrieves and serves the goodies.

At **Café Tirolerhof** Mr. Yenckel experienced another coffeehouse tradition; a table once occupied belongs to a customer as long as he or she wants it. There he watched as one patron dozed off over her

coffee. Even though newcomers were milling about trying to find an empty table, she was not disturbed. The waiters didn't give her second glance.

The 200-year-old **Café Demel** is Vienna's most famous, most crowded and most expensive coffeehouse. Chocolat anything there, he says, is superb.

Some basics: small cup of black coffee is *der kleine Mocca*; *Die Melange* is coffee with milk, and *der Turkische* is strong black coffee.

Zermatt Cheaper Than Vail?

Cathy Carroll in the *Seacaucus*, New Jersey, *Travel Weekly* reports on Switzerland ski vacation packages which are less expensive than skiing in Colorado.

Deals from the East Coast, including air fare, seven nights' first-class hotel accommodations, transfers, two meals daily and a six-day ski pass, were compared.

Grindelwald was \$1624 compared with \$2,213 for Deer Valley; Zermatt was \$1,692 vs. \$2,411 for Vail and St. Moritz was \$1,767 vs. \$2,473 for Aspen/Snowmass.

The Switzerland packages were taken from **Swissair's** 1998/99 Vacation Brochure.

Hundertwasser Scores Again

Caroline Scutt, in the same publication, writes about the resort of Rogner-Bad Blumau (opened in May 1997) in southeastern Austria which is billed as the "world's largest habitable work for art." The artist, of course, is Friedensreich Hundertwasser, whose quirky but somehow satisfying design of a Vienna apartment house turned it into a tourist attraction.

The Trams of Vienna

Newsday's **Ian Hamilton-Fazey** likes Vienna's trams. With 35 lines and 991 stops in a city of 1.5 million people, he says, it is rare to wait for one for more than three minutes. Ridership has increased 36% in a 10-year period vs. 15% for automobile ownership.

He suggests Trams 1 and 2, which circle the Ring in opposite directions, as a way of not having to walk so far between major sights within the Ring. He notes that the N tram goes to the Hundertwasser municipal housing complex, and the D tram goes past the Karl-Marx-Hof workers' flats in the suburb of Heilingstadt, shelled by government troops in Vienna's own war between fascism and the left.

Those who stay on the D line for another five minutes to its terminus, will find themselves in Nussdorf where Beethoven finished his Ninth Symphony. But most important about Nussdorf, says Hamilton-Fazey, are the town's many Heurigen, taverns attached to vineyards where the simple food always tastes good and fresh white wine goes down all too easily.

Austrian Wine Wins the World

In the *Los Angeles Times*, **Stuart Pigott** tells of a little-known Austrian white wine region that has been confounding expert wine-tasters. At a blind tasting to determine the world's finest dry white wine, the 1993 Zieregg Sauvignon Blanc from Manfred Tement in Styria was an almost unanimous choice over all comers, even the odds-on favorite, 1995 Montrachet "Grand Cru" from prestigious Domaine de la Romanée Conti in France.

The wine comes from vineyards near the Slovenian-Austrian border south of Graz. According to Mr. Pigott, the Tement wines and others from this region are now on the lists of some of America's hottest restaurants.

He rhapsodizes over the Polz brothers' 1997 Sauvignon Blanc: "Grass, sweet red pepper and black currant aromas leap out of the glass and lavish flavors pour over the palate. Yet it remains absolutely clean with a spicy aftertaste that comes back at you like a whiplash."

The Polz vineyards are located near the town of Ratsch. 