

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER**

June 25, 2000

**New Blood**

With this month's main story on Bratislava, we welcome a new *Gemütlichkeit* contributor, Douglas Linton. Mr. Linton, a graduate of the University of Texas, is a resident of Vienna and a travel writer with five years experience reporting on destinations in central Europe for a variety of travel publications. He is also author of *To the Coffee House: An Insider's Guide to Vienna's Cafés*. We'll be hearing from him frequently over the next several months.

**Tales from the Internet**

We may have to rethink that old saw "there's no such thing as a free lunch." Actually, there are many free things on the Internet. I don't think you'll find a free ham and cheese sandwich but you can track a portfolio of common stocks and mutual funds, get news tailored to your specific interests, send messages and documents around the world, and find the wholesale prices of new and used cars — all free, provided you're on the Net.

Recently we discovered another great freebie at [www.eKno.com](http://www.eKno.com). This Lonely Planet website, in addition to providing users with free email addresses, offers a "travel vault" for storing important information such as credit card numbers, passport numbers, airline ticket

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# GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

## BRATISLAVA

*Historic but overlooked Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, offers old-world charm at eastern bloc prices. It is only a 34-mile rail, auto or hydrofoil trip from Vienna.*

**E**ach summer, waves of tourists engulf the Central European capitals of Prague and Budapest, filling their hotels, restaurants and squares from full to overflowing. Given this great regional deluge, it is surprising that one neighboring capital is virtually empty. When it comes to tourists, Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, remains high and dry.

Why do many tourists ignore Bratislava? There are a number reasons. The city is much smaller than its neighbors and is certainly less majestic. It also lacks the romantic image of Prague or Budapest. For instance, when most people think of the 1968 Prague Spring, they forget

that Russian tanks also rolled through Bratislava, and that Alexander Dubcek—socialism's human face—was a Slovak. Bratislava (called Pressburg in German, and Pozhony in Hungarian) has also only recently become a capital, so it has not had the time to establish itself in the world's consciousness.

It has been a city for more than 11 centuries, but has only been the capital of a nation for a mere seven years — which is young even in American terms.

Until the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Bratislava was simply an important regional center, but not one to make international headlines.

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## Accommodations

*Reviews of recent hotel experiences by the Gemütlichkeit staff.*

Grandhotel Giessbach  
Brienz, Switzerland

Few country hotels in Switzerland are without at least some sort of mountain or lake view and an attractive setting. Surely among the best in this "view-setting" category is the Grandhotel Giessbach, perched in the forest about 200 feet above the Brienzensee and reached in only five minutes from Brienz via a narrow road that runs above the south shore of the lake.

Vistas from the hotel's terraces and guestrooms include snow-covered peaks, villages and towns (including Interlaken) on the opposite shore, and the lake itself, upon

whose great, green expanse chug the elegant lake steamers that carry passengers from town to town.

Then, looming above, are the thundering Giessbach Falls, a visual and audible presence almost everywhere in and around the hotel. One sees and hears them from the terraces, from the restaurant and from many guestrooms.

Add the wonderful, turreted Victorian building and the result is a romantic setting with few equals.

And here's the best part: from Sunday through Friday all summer long you can rent a double room with breakfast for under \$100. Doubles with lake or falls views are 240 Sfr. (\$148), but the same room facing the forest is 160 Sfr. (\$99).

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## DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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numbers, traveler's check numbers, PIN numbers, bank account info, key phone numbers and addresses, medical prescriptions, eyeglasses prescriptions, and so on. Lonely Planet claims eKno's four-level encryption provides 100% security.

Your data is available via the Internet from anywhere in the world, or you can retrieve it by dialing special Lonely Planet phone numbers from 51 countries, or have it sent to you via fax. (Download or print the list of local LP phone numbers from the website).

eKno also offers a low-cost international phone card as well as free voicemail service. You can access both voicemail and email messages on the web or via telephone, using the special phone numbers.

Like the email service, the travel vault is free; just register and store your information.

### Bad Site, Good Site

As those who prowl the Internet know, there are a number of sites where one can register to get regular travel information free via email. Among the dozen or so I receive are from: [www.lifeminders.com](http://www.lifeminders.com), [www.onetravel.com](http://www.onetravel.com) and [www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com). Being free, they are heavy on "special offers" and a little light on content (the exception is [www.smarterliving.com](http://www.smarterliving.com) which offers solid travel advice from some pros who know the business).

In the content category, one of them recently ran a story about getting the best deal on hotel rooms. It recommended the **Hotel Reservation Network** ([www.hotelreservationnetwork.com](http://www.hotelreservationnetwork.com)) which touts itself as the leading hotel discount on the web.

I immediately put the site to the test and asked to be shown all the Berlin hotels in its database. A grand total of six were found. I selected the **Berlin Crowne Plaza** and asked for the price of a double room for two nights. The answer came back quickly, \$170 per night.

I then headed my browser to [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) where I clicked on the **Hotelguide** icon. When the search option appeared I typed in the word "Berlin" and was shown a list of 276 hotels. In order to compare the two sites, I chose the same Berlin Crowne Plaza Hotel. Though the rack rate for a double room ranges from 340 to 450 DM (\$164-\$217) I was presented with a huge list of rate options, the lowest being \$120 for a nonsmoking "King Leisure" room, provided I was an AAA member. The corporate rate was \$124.

I tried another test. Three times this year we have stayed at the **Seattle Westin Hotel** in the center of downtown. Each time I booked via [priceline.com](http://priceline.com) and each time paid \$79 per night for a large double room. The best [hotelreservationnetwork.com](http://hotelreservationnetwork.com) could do was a weekend rate of \$209.95 per night. [Hotelguide.com](http://Hotelguide.com) came up with

\$191, not nearly as good at Priceline, but still almost \$20 a night better than Hotel Reservation Network.

Until a better one comes along, the place to book hotels online is [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com), click the hotel-guide icon.

### Europe's "Air Pass"

We get many inquiries about cheap flights within Europe. Unfortunately, the continent has no counterpart to **Southwest Airlines** and paying \$400 for a one-way flight of an hour's duration is common.

There is, however, **Europe by Air** ([www.europebyair.com](http://www.europebyair.com), tel. 888-387-2479); a company that has brought together about 15 small airlines and sells flights between 130 European cities for \$99 each — kind of a Eurailpass of the air. Sounds great when you compare that \$99 price, say, with the first class rail fare of over \$300 (second class \$200+) to go from Berlin to Zürich.

There's a slight catch, however. First, you must buy at least three legs at \$99 each, and the only way

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### Notes for Readers

- Foreign currency prices are converted to U.S. dollars at the exchange rate in effect at the time of publication.
- Hotel prices listed are for one night. Discounts are often available for longer stays.
- All hotel prices include breakfast unless otherwise noted.
- Local European telephone area codes carry the "0" required for in-country dialing. To phone establishments from outside the country, such as from the USA, do not dial the first "0".

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## GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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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.

## BRATISLAVA

Continued from page 1

The town, however, is certainly worth visiting for a day or two.

It has an attractive setting on a cluster of hills—the last spurs of the Little Carpathians—overlooking the Danube River, called *Dunja* in Slovak. The city also has an illustrious history. The short-lived, but influential, Great Moravian Empire (833-907) was centered here and was home to the missionaries Cyril and Methodius, who developed and spread the Cyrillic alphabet.

Much later, during the Turkish occupation of Hungary (1541-1686), Bratislava served as the capital of Hungary, which the Hapsburgs continued up until 1784.

Eleven kings and seven queens had their coronations in the city's **St. Martin's Cathedral** (that is why the spire has a golden crown on top). Empress Maria Theresa had a special love for the city. She was crowned here in 1740 and frequently held court in the castle, inviting Mozart and Haydn to play for her guests.

In 1805, a darker moment in Hapsburg history took place at the city's **Primate's Palace**, when Napoleon forced the Hapsburgs to sign the Treaty of Pressburg after routing them and the Russians at Austerlitz.

Of course, there is more than just history; there is also a present. Since the end of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Bratislava has spent much time and money rejuvenating the old town. Today, tiny one- and two-story Baroque palaces and homes glow with fresh paint and a new purpose, hosting either street cafes or interesting little shops. On the whole, this revival is not being done for tourists, but for Slovaks, to give them a capital they can be proud of. For a visitor, it is a wonderful experience to join in with the local people as they discover their new capital as if for the first time.

### Getting There

From Vienna, there are a number of ways to reach Bratislava. Possibly the most romantic is by the hydrofoil

## Bratislava Info

**Population:** 456,000

**Altitude:** 689 feet

**Distance From:**

Vienna	55 km/34 miles
Budapest	250 km/156 miles
Prague	320 km/200 miles

**Transportation:** Although old and overburdened, Bratislava's public transportation system is still an easy and convenient way to get around.

The most important lines for visitors are Bus #90 (which connects the international train station to the old town) and Tram #1 (which runs from the main train station to the old town). Tickets are 12 SK (27 cents) for a 30 minute journey. Day passes come in intervals of one (60 SK, \$1.40), two (110 SK, \$2.56), three (135 SK, \$3.14) and seven (200 SK, \$4.65) days.

Taxi drivers are certainly more trustworthy than their evil colleagues in Prague, but if you want to be on the safe side, agree upon a general price before getting in and make sure that the meter is running.

**Tourist Information:** Bratislava Information Service, Klobucnicka ulica 2, tel. +421/07/54434325. Located in the old town near Hlvane namestie, BIS acts as the city's tourist information office, selling maps, dispensing advice and arranging guided tours of the city (2 hours 1500 SK (\$35), 3 hours 2000 SK (\$47).

that plies the waters between the two cities (for information call **DDSG Blue Danube** at +43/01/588-800 in Austria, or +421/07/363-522 in Slovakia). Being a landlubber, I have to admit that I have never taken this route, though from all accounts it is a very scenic journey. The majority of visitors get there by train or car. Each offers its own pleasures.

Only a few years ago, the train ride to Bratislava still had a few features evocative of the Cold War, especially if you rode in one of the old Slovak passenger cars. My memories of these one-hour journeys are of the cheap vinyl seats, the drab plastic wood grain walls and the endless checking of documents by officials in ill-fitting green suits.

Today, however, the train is newer and faster, but, surprisingly, takes longer. This is because the mighty express whips along until it

reaches Bratislava's new international train terminal just across the river from the city in the suburb of Petržalka and, once there, sits for about half an hour while the engine is changed to a slower one that can ride on the Slovak rail system. Then, the train makes the final 10-minute journey to the main rail station. From there, you can catch tram #1, which will take you to Rybné Square (or *Rybne Namestie* in Slovak) in front of the **Hotel Danube**.

Impatient travelers who don't want to wait for the changing of the engines can get off at Petržalka rail station, go through passport controls (a brief formality for most Americans), and then catch one of the buses in front of the station. Bus #90 will take you across the river and drop you off beneath the New Bridge near Rybné Namestie in the old town.

This bus ride immediately reveals the best and worst of the city. The worst is the suburb of Petržalka, a flat expanse of decaying apartment buildings, each one looking like the other. All Eastern bloc cities have such buildings. An optimist might say that Bratislava is fortunate that the majority of its high-rises are located all in one place, rather than scattering their ugliness throughout the city.

Closer to the river, you will see the best, most dramatic view of the city; an amphitheater of green mountain spurs spread out across the Danube. On top of one, set right on the river, is Bratislava's castle, a boxy 13<sup>th</sup>-century fortress that some say looks like a table turned upside down. The high stone walls are the color of sand and each corner is crowned by a pointed red turret dating from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. In front, spanning the river, is the New Bridge (*Nový Most*), a gray space-age structure topped with an 80-meter observation tower that looks like an alien lander. One of the city's main roads runs across the bridge and unnecessarily splits the castle hill from the lovely old town below.

Anyone driving from Vienna to Bratislava gets a similar view, but

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## BRATISLAVA

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much sooner than expected. The city is located right on the Austrian border, and because the Austrian side is mostly farmland and small villages, the Slovakian capital seems to suddenly appear out of nowhere.

Currently, Vienna and Bratislava are not connected by a main Autobahn, so travelers can choose from a variety of pleasant routes. Going by way of the Austrian town of Hainburg is interesting because it takes you through this small baroque city with its commanding 16<sup>th</sup>-century defensive walls (which can be slow going at rush hour, as cars have to drive through the impressive tower gate one at a time).

The road via Gattendorf is another good choice, and in some ways the most surprising. The drive is along the relatively flat countryside until just outside of Gattendorf, where the road turns and then begins to rise slightly. Suddenly, far off where the road, framed by trees, meets the horizon, the little red-peaked corners of Bratislava castle pop up from out of nowhere, like some vision of the Holy Grail. Then, slowly, the rest of the city begins to reveal itself. It is a wonderful first impression.

### Crossing the Border

For Americans, the drive across the border is typically problem-free, taking anywhere from 5 to 45 minutes, depending on traffic. The best place to park your car is either in the garage of the Hotel Danube or in one of the lots on *Gorkeho ulica* (*ulica* means street in Slovak) behind the **Slovak National Theater**.

Once in the city, there are a number of cultural attractions such as museums, but they are really secondary to the pleasure of exploring the areas in and around the old town.

Start at Rybne Namestie. If you need strength before starting out, take an immediate break at the coffeehouse **Korso**, which is on the square next to the bridge. Then, cross under the bridge and walk up the

steep hill toward the castle. The road passes some lovely little houses before turning into stairs, and then finally reaches the wide green terraces surrounding **Bratislava Castle**. From here there are sweeping views over the spires of the old town, the wide Danube River and Petržalka's full panoply of apartment buildings. All three views are stunning in their own way.

Afterwards, walk back to the old town, crossing the road via the small stone pedestrian bridge next to **St. Martin's Cathedral**. Here you can walk along the last remaining stretch of the city's 13<sup>th</sup>-century wall. Unfortunately, what *doesn't* remain is the city's majestic 19<sup>th</sup>-century synagogue and its former Jewish quarter, both of which were torn down in the '60s to make way for the ugly road and bridge.

Behind the cathedral are the winding streets of the city's old town. Since the old quarter is not that big, the best thing to do is wander down any street that seems interesting. It is impossible to get lost and eventually you will wind up passing the most impressive parts. Be sure to walk up Venturska and Michalska ulica toward the small Baroque tower over **St. Michael's Gate**, which you can climb for a closer view of the old town. Venturska and Michalska were the old town's finest streets and home to most of the nobility. Today the area is lined with outdoor café tables and some of the city's better shops.

Probably the most attractive square is **Hlavane namestie**. It hosts a small crafts market throughout the summer, and larger ones during Easter and Christmas. At the top of the square is the lovely tile roof of the **Old Town Hall**.

Walk through the courtyard and out the other side to reach another attractive square, **Primacialne namestie**. The pink building is the **Primaatial Palace**, where the Treaty of Pressburg was signed. Next door is the **Bratislava Information Service** (see Tourist Information page 3) and then the recently reopened **Old City**

**Market**. Less dramatic and much smaller than the **Old Pest Market** in Budapest, Bratislava's Old City Market is still worth popping into to scan the few booths selling vegetables and handicrafts. There is also a good bakery, sandwich shop and stand-up creperie. A more extensive open-air market can be found at the corner of Zahradnicka and Mileticova, a 10-minute tram ride away (tram #12).

Back toward the river, and near to the start of our tour, is Hviezdoslavovo namestie. This is the home of the city's main music venues, the **Komorna Opera House**, **Slovak Philharmonic**, and the **Slovak National Theater**. If you only have time for one (and it is worth making time), visit the National Theater. The lovely interior is just as ornate as the exterior, and the program includes opera, ballet, and drama (for example a recent month featured *La Boheme*, *L'Elisir D'Amore*, *Rite of Spring*, *La Traviata*, *Swan Lake*, and *Sheherazade*, just to name a few performances). Tickets run from 600 to 1000 SK (\$14-\$23).

Of course, one of the best ways to pass the time in Bratislava is by eating out or visiting some of the city's craft shops. The best in the old town is **Twigi's** (Klariska ulica), which has an eclectic mix of colorful gifts and handmade items. There are also good shops at the bottom of Hlavne namestie. Another place is Obchodna ulica, the city's main shopping street just outside of the old town. This pedestrian boulevard boasts a number of craft stores, but the best is the complex of shops at Obchodna 64, called **Uluv**. There are two shops at the front; one specializes in textiles, the other sells traditional dolls and handmade pottery. The courtyard behind is lined with more craft shops, some staffed by artisans who show visitors how the various products are made. One makes pottery, another has handloom demonstrations, a third carves wooden toys, and the fourth, my favorite, makes an incredible range of things — from jewelry to kitchen implements— out of wire. Prices are

surprisingly low.

Now, on to the food...

### Sustenance

One of the great pleasures of Bratislava is the wonderful meals available for about half or even a third the price one pays in Vienna. Slovak cuisine is noticeably Central European, and so familiar dishes crop up, such as goulash, *Wiener Schnitzel* and *palachinky*.

Slovaks have wonderful soups. *Kapustnica* is a hearty cabbage soup with smoked pork and paprika. *Fazulova* has beans, vegetables, noodles, and more of the ubiquitous smoked pork. In my opinion, *drzkova polievka* is about the best thing you can do with tripe, besides throw it away. Normally, I do not like tripe, but I once had a bowl of this soup in a stand-up butcher's shop in Bratislava that was unforgettable (in a good way).

Main dishes feature pork, chicken, turkey, beef, and fish (usually carp and trout). From an American point of view, all but the beef are typically good to excellent, especially the pork. Slovaks like to bread and fry just about anything, which is o.k. by me. One typical meal is fried cheese (*vyprazany syr*) with French fries and tartar sauce. It might sound life-threatening, but when served piping hot, it is excellent. An even less healthy dish is a skewer of cheese, mushrooms and bacon, which is of course also breaded, fried and served hot — and is delicious.

Slovaks also like to fold various sautés within a potato pancake, or *palacka*. A friend of mine who lives in Slovakia will eat just about anything served in a *palacka*. The Czech version of this dish is usually served stuffed with sauerkraut and bacon.

The Slovak national dish is *bryndzove halusky*, which is Spätzle, or tiny boiled flour dumplings, served with sheep cheese and crispy bacon fat. (Slovak's cuisine is so meat-oriented that this dish usually can be found in the menu's vegetarian section.) Slovaks are extremely proud of this dish and are certain to ask whether

you have tried it and what you thought. The correct answer, of course, is "Delicious!"

Sweet tooths can be satisfied with a choice of apple strudel or crepes (*palacinky*) served either with marmalade or whipped cream and chocolate sauce.

The most traditional way of serving coffee (*kava*) in Slovakia is Turkish style. In other words, hot water is poured over a small cup containing a spoonful of grounds. Espresso and cappuccino go by the same names in Slovak. A *viedenska kava* is an espresso bearing a heavy load of whipped cream — much to the chagrin of the Viennese, who prefer steamed milk.

Slovakia imports some of the Czech Republic's best beers and produce some good ones of their own. Two of the best are **Zlatny Bazant** (Golden Pheasant) and **Stein** (despite the German name, it's made in Bratislava).

#### Prasna Basta

Some of the best food in the city. Appetizers include Armenian salad (shredded carrots with garlic, 44 Sk, \$1), smoked tongue with horseradish (65 SK, \$1.50) and smoked trout (85 SK, \$1.90). The onion soup (*prasnacibalacka*, 25 SK—56 cents!) is delicious.

A friend of mine insisted I mention the restaurant's chicken Dijon and the vaguely spicy chicken Jose as good picks, though I prefer the steak Montenegro (actually a pork chop fried in potato dough) and of course the fried cheese with tarter sauce. Eat either in the small round restaurant (its name means "Dusty Bastion") or in the lovely garden courtyard in back. The service is slow but friendly. The only drawback is that the beer here is served in bottles.

Prasna Basta, Zamocnicka 11, tel +421/07/54 43 49 57, open daily 11:00 am-11:00 pm

#### Modra gula

High atop a glass skyscraper, with lovely views of the castle and parliament, Modra gula is an atmo-

spheric choice for an outdoor evening dinner in the summertime. Beautiful sunsets free of charge. This upscale restaurant has an extensive menu that includes fish and wild game dishes. The salmon is particularly good. Sharp, formal service from waiters dressed in white shirts and black bow-ties.

Modra gula, Suche Myto 6, tel +421/07/58 50 40 07, open Mon-Fri 11am am-11:00 pm; Sat-Sun Noon-11pm

#### Uluv

Located in a courtyard filled with arts and crafts shops (see page 4), Uluv is part of a government project to promote local handicrafts. The cellar is all whitewash and unvarnished wood, while tables in the courtyard take advantage of the warm summer weather. The bean soup is quite good, but the cabbage soup only mediocre (for some reason only grimy bars and stand-up cafeterias can make this dish properly).

For a real Slovak treat, try the mixed dumpling plate (*haluskova mista*), which has dumplings dressed in an assortment of sauces, such as bacon, sour cream, cabbage and cheese for only 95 SK (\$2.20). The stuffed chicken is also good (120 SK, \$2.80). Zlatny Bazant on tap.

Uluv, Obchodna 64, tel +421/07/52 73 13 51, open daily except Sunday 11am-11pm

#### Klub F

This tiny cellar restaurant in the old town has a small menu, but a big heart. The vaulted brick ceilings are attractive and the menu features more vegetables and greens than most Slovak restaurants. The service is particularly friendly and efficient.

Klub F, Venturksa 18, tel +421/07/54 43 03 60, open Mon-Sat 10:30 am-9pm

#### Korso

My favorite coffeehouse in town, Korso has an attractive traditional interior and a large cobblestone plaza out front. Proper coffee and a filling breakfast make this a good start to the day. Later, pastries appear for a refreshing midday snack. Korso also

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

## BRATISLAVA

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offers a full menu, but I can only vouch for the cabbage soup, which is surprisingly good, considering that Korso is neither a grimy bar nor a stand up cafeteria.

Hviezdoslavovo namestie 11, tel +421/07/54434974, café 8am-mid-night daily

### Accommodations

The range of accommodations is not one of the high points of Bratislava. At present, the city does not really have any hotels that are worth remembering, and quite a few would best be forgotten. None are particularly Slovakian or "Bratislavan," but the following three hotels should ensure a pleasant stay.

#### Hotel Devin

The Devin looks out at the swift flowing Dunja (Danube) over a busy boulevard. The revitalized 1950s-era building contains the best large hotel in the city. The lobby and lounge look like an elegant boardroom (this is meant as a complement), with polished paneled walls, leather sofas, Persian rugs stretching across limestone floors, and crystal chandeliers dangling overhead.

Standard rooms are smallish, but nicely decorated with built-in wood furniture and bright colors. The tiny baths have cut-away tubs so doors can be opened. The best rooms are on the fifth floor and come with a large terrace at no extra charge. Triple-glazed windows keep the rooms quiet (there is a noisy street out front), and the higher you are the better the view.

Management and staff extremely personable.

**Daily Rates:** Single with shower 4100 SK (\$95), single with bath 4900 SK (\$114), single in double 5100 SK (\$119), double 5900 SK (\$137), suites 8600-10600 SK (\$200-\$246).

**Contact:** Hotel Devin, Riečna 4, tel +421/07/54 43 36 40, fax 54 43 06 82.

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20 VALUE 9/10

#### Hotel Perugia

Located on a narrow side street just off the old town square, this charming 14-room hotel offers modern facilities and an attentive family-owned atmosphere.

The first impression is delightful: flower boxes bursting with geraniums line the windows of the pretty pink facade, while in front cluster café tables shaded by wide red umbrellas.

The interior is simple, well maintained and contemporary, while the staff is positively friendly. The best rooms are on the first floor with terraces.

The name, by the way, comes from Bratislava's sister city in Umbria.

**Daily Rates:** Single with Shower only 4280 SK (\$100), single with terrace 4880 SK (\$113), doubles with terrace 5080 SK (\$118), suites 5660 SK (\$132). Weekend discount of 20%.

**Contact:** Hotel Perugia, Zelena ulica 5, tel. +421/07/54 43 18 18, fax 54 43 18 21.

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20 VALUE 10/20

#### Botel Gracia

Boat hotels are never high on my list of places to stay. Typically, they offer cramped, low-grade lodgings with a twist—the twist being that the boat leans to one side.

The Botel Gracia has many of the typical "botel" features — the low-grade rooms and the twist — but its quality of service, spacious rooms and central location just in front of the Devin help elevate it above the usual hotel-on-the-water. Moreover, the Gracia was recently renovated, so the paint is fresh, linens crisp, and the carpets are colorful and clean.

The hotel also has a bar on its large covered deck with nice views of the river and the space-age New Bridge. The best rooms do *not* face the highway.

**Daily Rates:** Single 1750 (\$40), double 2400 (\$56).

**Contact:** Botel Gracia, Razušovo nabrežie, tel +421/07/54 43 21 32, fax 54 43 21 31.

**Rating:** QUALITY 5/20 VALUE 10/20

## GRANDHOTEL GIESSBACH

Continued from page 1

Frankly, view is not that important. This is a Victorian building and the windows do not invite sitting and gazing and there are no balconies.

Under \$100 for a night at this stately old *grand dame* is one of the better bargains around. Built in 1870, the hotel sat unused for many years then reopened in 1987 after a massive and costly four-year restoration financed by a wealthy foundation called "Giessbach to the Swiss People." The high-ceilinged public rooms are adorned with donated antiques, statuary, fine art, gold and crystal chandeliers, and *trompe l'oeil*. In the style of all the great hotels built at this time, staircases and corridors are wide and graceful.

Décor and furnishings in the guest-chambers also reflect the period but are equipped with the modern appliances of a 21<sup>st</sup> century four-star hotel.

In the winter, the waterfall is a big chunk of ice, so the hotel is open only from late April to late October. Thus employee turnover is fairly high and for a kitchen that strives for excellence this is a particular problem. Our meals at the Giessbach reflected that difficulty. In fairness, it was very early in the season and the hotel had been open only a few days.

Service and table settings were quite formal, though the uniform of the day for diners was fairly relaxed; mostly open necked shirts for men and a few women in slacks.

When your meal begins with one of those tiny "gift of the house" courses, you can be assured you're in a restaurant that takes itself seriously — and that the menu will be priced accordingly.

While the food was acceptable it did not measure up to the prices; our four main dishes ranged from 36 Sfr. (\$22) for traditional *Geschnetzeltes mit Röstli* (chopped veal sauteed in a cream sauce with fried potatoes) to 43 Sfr. (\$27) for *Lammkoteletten* (lamb chops).

EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

Such dishes are found in the simplest Swiss country restaurants where they are better prepared at about half to two-thirds the price.

Service was friendly but a little ham-handed; the hostess who cleared our table scraped leftovers from one plate to another, a job best done in the scullery, not at the table.

Dinner for four without beverages was 231 Sfr. (\$143). A bottle of Valasian red wine cost 54 Sfr. (\$33).

Too bad the restaurant is not as good as the rest of the hotel

**Daily Rates:** Singles 140 to 170 Sfr. (\$86-\$105), doubles 160 to 340 Sfr. (\$99-\$210), suites 400 to 450 Sfr. (\$247-\$278)

**Contact:** Grandhotel Giessbach, Ch-3855 Brienz, tel. +41/033/952 2525, fax 952 2530, email grandhotel@giessbach.ch, web www.giessbach.ch

**Rating:** QUALITY 16/20 VALUE 16/20

### Things to Do

Grandhotel Giessbach is accessible to both auto and rail travelers (the hotel will pick you up at the Brienz rail station). The guest with a rail pass will find it convenient and enjoyable to start excursions from the hotel via lake steamer. The dock can be reached by funicular or by downhill trail in about 10 minutes.

Boats call at Giessbach several times each day and make stops at several villages and towns including Brienz, Iseltwald and Interlaken. At Interlaken passengers can change to boats that sail the Thunersee and service such towns as Thun and Spiez.

From the Brienz boat dock it is only a short walk to the rail station where, by rack-railway, you can take the approximately three-hour round trip to the **Brienzer Rothorn** at just under 8,000 feet.

Or you might, as we recently did, combine the two modes of transport; steamer and train. Take the boat to Brienz and Interlaken, stopping at each to explore, and at the end return by rail from Interlaken's east station. Those with more time can ride the

boat to Interlaken and then take the train to Bern, the capital city, returning in the late afternoon. The last boat from Interlaken to Giessbach departs at 4:30pm. Trains run from Interlaken to Brienz frequently but from there your choices are a long walk, a taxi or phone for the hotel's van.

Auto travelers will find they are 15-minutes from **Ballenberg Open-Air Museum** and easy day trips from Giessbach are also possible to Bern, Thun, Spiez, and even Grindelwald with its view of the Eiger. ☒

## Europe Travel Briefs

■ **"Heidi's Switzerland" is a new independent, unescorted rail/hotel package** that includes six days second-class rail travel (including airport transfers), five nights at three-star hotels in Bad Ragaz, Davos, St. Moritz, Lugano and Zürich. The first night is spent in Bad Ragaz, near Heidi's village of Maienfeld.

The package, which is \$470 per person, double occupancy, combines visiting the site of Heidi's story with travel in eastern and southern Switzerland.

Upgrades to first-class rail for \$33 and to four-star hotel accommodations for \$16. For a single room, add \$27 per night.

In addition, purchasers of "Heidi's Switzerland" will receive a 50% discount on the Swiss Travel System for excursions to mountaintops, on lake steamers, buses and trains. Book at 800-521-6722.

■ **Get \$200 off on a future flight.** **LTU International Airways** has announced an incentive offer to LTU First Comfort and First Comfort Sleeper passengers. Travelers flying to Germany from Miami or Ft. Myers are eligible for \$200 off a future LTU flight. LTU's First Comfort service to Germany from Florida is priced at under \$2000 roundtrip and includes leather seats with extendable footrests, five-course dinners, priority

check-in and baggage handling, and access to a VIP lounge prior to departure.

First Comfort Sleeper service from Miami and Ft. Myers is \$2556 and features an electronically adjustable seat, which converts to a bed.

Passengers traveling First Comfort between May 8 and November 15, 2000, will receive a \$200-off voucher for a future flight valid through December 31, 2001.

LTU has also announced connections and fares to Zürich from Anchorage, Ft. Myers, Miami, Orlando and Toronto via its Düsseldorf hub. The Düsseldorf-Zürich flights are operated by **Swissair** and **Crossair**. Check their website (www.ltu.com) for fares and schedules or phone at 800-888-0200.

■ **KD River Cruises of Europe has added "Exclusiv" service** to its two Elbe itineraries, both sailing between Prague and Magdeburg through October, 2000. This enhanced service includes a choice of menus, complimentary wine, beer and soda with meals, free bicycle use, a "gala" dinner, fresh fruit available all day and midnight snacks. Prices range from \$960 to \$1,340 per person for the five-night Prague-to-Magdeburg cruises and \$1,150 to \$1,610 for the six-night sailing in the opposite direction. Contact KD at 800-346-6525 from the eastern U.S. and at 800-858-8587 from the west, including Texas, Alaska and Hawaii. Website: www.rivercruises.com.

■ **The Deutsche Bahn has unveiled the fastest German train yet**, the 300 kilometers per hour (186 mph) ICE-3 (InterCity Express). The train went into service in late May on the Berlin-Hanover route. However, it can only achieve top speed on a specially designed stretch of rail between Frankfurt and Cologne which won't be ready until 2002.

The new ICE-3 has no separate locomotive. The drive mechanism is located in the undercarriage, near an axle of each car, which allows higher speed and faster acceleration. DB has ordered 50 of the new trains. ☒

## DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 1

you can fly from Berlin to Zürich is to go by way of Zagreb, Croatia, and stay overnight there.

I spent about half an hour on their website and found it difficult to find three legs that fit any itinerary I was interested in. I did, however, construct a London-Düsseldorf-Berlin-Munich itinerary, and when one considers the price of just a London to Frankfurt ticket on British Midlands is nearly \$400, Europe by Air's Flight Pass at \$297 seems a good deal.

If you're not interested in the \$297 Flight Pass, you can simply use Europe by Air's website to find (and book) flights within Europe. Clicking on "Discount Travel" I found a one-way Berlin-Munich fare on Aero-Lloyd of \$93. But most of the other one-way short-hop flights — Berlin to Vienna, Munich to Rome, etc. — were in the \$400 range.

Europe by Air is on the right track and is adding new airline partners all the time.

### Better Deal on Swissair

Europe by Air is o.k. for those not flying Swissair. But for readers who are, a much better program is Swissair's "Visit Europe Pass." When you order your transatlantic Swissair tickets, you can purchase three coupons for a total of \$299, each good for a flight within Europe on Swissair or its partners in the Qualifier Group which includes **Sabena, TAP Air Portugal, Turkish Airlines, AOM French Airlines, Crossair, Air Littoral, AirEurope, LOT Polish Airlines, PGA-Portugália Airlines** and **Volare Airlines**. The coupons are good for travel to dozens of cities including Munich, Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, etc.

I should also again point out that *Gemütlichkeit* subscribers (plus family and friends accompanying them) who fly to Europe via Swissair qualify for reduced fares of from \$25 to \$600 — depending on the price and class of ticket purchased. To book tickets at these special reduced rates phone 800-238-0399.—RHB ☒

# READERS' FORUM

## Whither the General Walker?

I am wondering if you or any *Gemütlichkeit* staff or readers has any information on the former **General Walker Hotel** (on the Obersalzberg outside Berchtesgaden).

The US Military returned the property to the Germans back in 1996 or 1997. When I visited in October of 1997 the hotel was closed and starting to get somewhat overgrown.

As a property that is steeped in history, it could be a spectacular alpine hotel with the right renovation and hotel operator. I was wondering if anyone has taken over the hotel, renovated and is operating it or if it still sits idle. Any idea?

TAD KEGELMEYER  
VIA EMAIL

(Ed. Note: The people who might know publish the R&R Space-A Report, a travel publication for retired military. Phone them at 703-237-0203 or visit their website at [www.militaryliving.com](http://www.militaryliving.com))

## Poor Rail Design

I have been employed in the railroad industry since 1978 and therefore have a special affinity for train travel. I agree with your analysis of the relative advantages of train vs. car in Europe.

I, too, do not understand why first the Americans (Metroliners), and now the Europeans, have chosen to emulate the airlines in the interior design of their most modern trains, including those infernal "rifle slot" windows you mentioned last month in the "Dear Subscriber" column. Don't they understand that at least some of us ride the train in order to SEE the scenery?

We have experienced the ICE in Germany, the Pendolino in Italy, and the Italian/Swiss Cisalpino, all with little bitty windows. We now take first-class seats on the regular express trains in preference. It's less hectic, cheaper, and you can see more. I think the railway staff keep

the big windows cleaner, too.

LARRY DEYOUNG  
FLEMINGTON, NJ

## Hospitality in Trier

We just returned from another wonderful trip to Germany, and would once again like to define the word "gemütlichkeit."

Our trip began at the Frankfurt airport with our pickup of our rental vehicle through your agency. We were upgraded to a "classic Mercedes," with no request from ourselves and sent happily on our way to Trier.

Our visit to this lovely Mosel city always includes the **Hotel Petrisberg** (Sickingenstrasse 11-13, D-54296 Trier, tel. +49/0651/4640, fax 46450) and the family Pantenberg. As usual, we were not disappointed. Herr Pantenberg had arranged a visit from the first violinist and a retired pianist from the Trier Philharmonic Orchestra. These two gentlemen enthusiastically played, sang and humorously entertained us and a group of Herr Pantenberg's friends and family for over three hours. The wine flowed — all supplied by our hosts — as well as snacks, etc.

When I tried to offer compensation for this wonderful evening, it was refused, with the comment "Oh no Herr McGowan, but you are our guests." What better start to our tour could we have found? As usual this wonderful hotel and family, showed us why the term "gemütlichkeit" has such full meaning.

A word in closing, the **Hotel Europa** in Mainz, a city hotel, leaves much to be desired, another reason to stay outside the city environs on departure night. However, the little town of Oberwesel on the Rhine, is a little jewel, and a stay at the **Castle auf Schönburg** (D-55430, tel. +49/06744/93930, fax 1613) is something not to be missed if at all possible.

Again, thanks for leading us to the Hotel Petrisberg, five stays later it only improves.

COLIN MCGOWAN  
VIA EMAIL ☒