

**DEAR
SUBSCRIBER**

Searching for the "Old Country"

A recent phone conversation with a longtime subscriber and veteran of many European trips — not just to Germany, Austria & Switzerland — reminded me of a fundamental reason why I return to Europe again and again and again. He mentioned that he was considering a visit to Burgenland and from there planned forays into Hungary because, as he said, the region offered one of Europe's few remaining "Old World" travel experiences. Immensely popular destinations such as Provence and Tuscany, he feels, are not only expensive but, worse, overrun with American tourists, which has contributed to a loss of "Old World" charm.

With one offhand remark, that savvy Mississippian opened my eyes to a bedrock motivation for my own European travels — I, too, seek the "Old World" experience. (Here, of course, I should provide some sort of definition of the term "Old World" but can't because it means something different to me than to you. In any case, I know it when I see it.)

My sense of Europe began to take shape while growing up in a little town outside Omaha. There was a war on (I was seven when it ended) and much of it was fought in what the oldest members of my family referred to as the "Old Country." While my father was away and my mother worked days for the government in Omaha, I stayed with my grandmother, whose par-

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

WERFEN

This little-known Austrian hamlet just south of Salzburg has a fine castle, is gateway to the world's most extensive ice caves and home to possibly the country's best restaurant.

Something of an undiscovered secret, this village lies 30 miles south of Salzburg, along the road and rail route to Zell am See and Badgastein.

Rail travellers barely have time to register that there's a sublimely situated castle glowering on a hillock above a cluster of traditional houses, before the train whisks them away down the valley. Even car drivers, who would find it much easier to break their trip for a couple of hours to stroll down the main street and grab a few snapshots, will only scratch the surface of what the village has to offer. To see the best of Werfen, you need to schedule an overnight stop or two.

By Mark
Honan

There's the 16th-century castle itself, **Hohenwerfen**, a twenty minute hike uphill from the main street, Markt. Its crenellated walls and concave spires soar above a swathe of verdant conifers. Regular tours take visitors through the dingy dungeons, displays of arcane torture equipment and weaponry, the chapel, and the wooden belfry. If you can't follow the German commentary, an audio handset will tell you all you need to know in English. Afterwards, you can move at your own pace through the castle's museum collections, which include temporary displays and a permanent falconry exhibit.

The latter should whet your ap-

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Austrian Country Hotels

There is something special about top-of-the-line country hotels in Austria. To first or second time travelers to our regions they may seem virtually the same as their counterparts in Germany and Switzerland. There are, however, enough subtle differences to give a unique twist to the Austrian hotel experience; more country, more off-the-beaten-track, and more "Old World" — all the while maintaining a high standard of luxury.

Take the "Old World" business. In Germany and Switzerland there are a few hotels where one finds the staff turned out each day in traditional dress, whereas in the Austrian countryside it's standard operating procedure. In fact, when it comes to setting a mood, country hotels there seem bent on recreating the time of

the beloved Emperor Franz Joseph in the mid-19th century, the last great days of the Hapsburgs. Lehar and Strauss are heard on hotel sound systems and décor is reminiscent of the great royal hunting lodges. The obvious goal, and this is not criticism, is to reproduce in style and atmosphere, that headier, perhaps more gracious, era.

It starts with the properties themselves. Four and five-star Austrian country hotels set the standard for rustic elegance: gorgeous, elaborately carved wooden ceilings and paneling, frescoes on stucco surfaces, are all *de rigueur* in public rooms; great stone fireplaces blaze throughout the day and evening; and here and there are cozy, nooks with vaulted ceilings. Dining rooms can be grand, high-ceilinged places

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DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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ents had emigrated from southern Bohemia. One neighborhood of our little city was called "Bohunk town" where names such as Ptak and Svoboda were stenciled on the mailboxes. Grandma had an ancient (probably only in her late '60s) wispy-haired, cleaning woman we all called 'Missy Hollis.' She had about three teeth in her head and frightened some of my friends. Missy Hollis was from the "Old Country," about which, in my grandmother's house, there was much discussion. I had to eat all my food because of the starving children in the "Old Country." People from my family and from our town had gone to the "Old Country" to fight the war. At the local movie house, where I was a frequent patron (I was allowed to watch the cartoon and the cowboy movie that preceded the main feature), I saw the "Old Country" in newsreels but it seemed to be mostly smoky, ruined buildings and piles of rubble.

It actually took a couple of post-war decades of movies shot on location in Europe before my newsreel images were replaced by green hills, sidewalk cafes, sleek trains and cozy hotels. All this resulted in a curiosity about the Europe that existed before World War II and, even later, before the mass arrival of American tourists. What, for example, was Berlin like in the 20s, Vienna in the great days of Empire, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

during the '36 Winter Olympics? Fragments and flickering glimpses of those times remain, and catching a fleeting whiff of them is always a satisfying part of every trip.

As you can see, I'm most interested in the recent past. Perhaps my idea of "Old World" — let's just call it OW for the moment — is best understood by example. Vienna is the most OW city in our three countries; Geneva is the least. On my "OW quotient" scale of 0-10, Vienna is a 9, Geneva a 2. Of some influence is the volume of tourists; it's hard to find "Old World" among all those busses. Rothenburg ob der Tauber gets a 5, but Bamberg is a 7. Graz is a 7, Lucerne a 4.

Among our three countries: Austria is the most OW, followed by Germany and Switzerland. Of course, eastern countries, like the Czech Republic would score even higher. It would be hard not to give 10s to places such as Prague and Cesky Krumlov.

For some reason, perhaps it's the relentless tide of tourists, in an overall sense Salzburg isn't very OW. However, some of its sights are, notably St. Peter's Cemetery and the Cathedral.

But perhaps I should say what *is*, rather than what isn't, OW — at least in my opinion. We've already mentioned Burgenland which I consider a throwback and as OW as any region in our three countries. This is *very subjective* but the wine villages, the lower prices, the proximity to Hunga-

ry, and a look and feel I simply can't put into words, somehow fit my personal idea of "Old World." So, too, does Graz and the wine country south of it along the Slovenian border.

Vienna, of course, reeks of OW. Have dinner at the **Restaurant Beograd** (Schikanedergasse 7), walk the streets of neighborhoods outside the Ring and eat at a dingy *Beisel* few tourists ever pass by, much less dine at. The neighborhood where one finds the **Hotel Altstadt** (Kirchengasse 41) is a good one to prowl.

In Germany, for some reason, I get more of an OW feel in southern Bavaria than in the Black Forest. The Romantik Road holds no romance for me, though Rothenburg, Dinkelsbühl, Nördlingen, and Donauwörth are all worthwhile towns with OW patches.

Though Berlin was virtually blown to dust, it is a town in which I

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Using Gemütlichkeit

- 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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User Name: **drow** Password: **9753**

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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.

WERFEN*Continued from page 1*

petite for the falconry show which takes place twice a day in a grassy open-air enclosure within the castle walls. A series of successively larger and larger birds of prey are put through their paces, soaring high into the air or swooping low over the heads of the startled audience. The spectacle is made all the more exciting and dramatic by the stupendous backdrop of the 8,000-foot-high mountain ranges on either side. I won't forget in a hurry the final pass made by the eagle owl, the largest European owl. Its huge orange eyes bored into mine as it dived within inches of my scalp, its beating wings close enough to send air currents shivering down the raised hairs on the back of my neck.

The fortress is open from late March until early November, daily except for Mondays in April; closing times range from 4:30pm in spring/fall up to 6pm in July and August. Admission costs €9 for adults.

Even better is **Eisriesenwelt**, the giant ice caves set high in the Tennengebirge mountain range and an adventure in itself to reach. First, there's a car or minibus trip up an impossibly steep, winding road that claws its way up the mountainside for some four miles. After that, the increasingly precipitous gradient makes road transport impossible. So the next stage is a 15-minute walk up a switchback footpath, before a cable car will whisk you over the stark grey cliffs above the tree line. Then there's a further 15-minute walk to the cave entrance.

It's a long trip, but your perseverance will be highly rewarded. Indeed, you will already have received some of your payback from the magnificent views down to Werfen and across the valley.

The caves are well named. 'Giant' is no exaggeration, for these are the largest accessible ice caves in the world – some 26 miles of passages that open onto huge caverns and elaborate ice sculptures. You'll see shapes that conjure up frozen waterfalls, monstrous prehistoric beasts,

Werfen Basics

Tourist Information: 24 Mark, tel. +43/06468/ 5388, fax 7562, email:

info@werfen.at, web: www.werfen.at

Driving Distances to:

Frankfurt	358 miles	577 km
Munich	110 miles	178 km
Salzburg	29 miles	40 km

Auto: Arriving from the north: via the A-10 Tauern Autobahn, take the Pass Lueg or Werfen exit.

Arriving from the south: take the Pfarrwerfen/Werfen exit off the Autobahn

Rail: Werfen regional railway, Pfarrwerfen and Tenneck stops; Bischofshofen station for IC/EC trains (5 km away)

Air: Nearest airport is Salzburg, 50km.

Werfen Package:

- Three nights' room and breakfast
- Admission to Hohenwerfen Fortress incl. falconry exhibition and castle tour
- Visit to Austrian Museum of Falconry
- Special exhibit "Figur und Landschaft"
- Visit to Ice Caves incl. ride on the cable lift, guided tour and shuttle bus.
- **Special exhibits** at the Künburggewölbe
- "Seven Mills" in Pfarrwerfen
- Salzburg State Skiing Museum in Werfenweng
- Hiking map and info folder

Per person prices, depending on category of accommodations, range from €105 to €165 (\$115-180). Must be booked with tourist office. See contact info above.

and gigantic oriental veils. Your imagination will be prompted in a certain direction when the guide informs you of the names of the structures: ice chapel, ice organ, ice palace, and so on. (Strangely, there's no ice cream!) Yet despite the impression of the presence of a designing hand, all the shapes are entirely naturally formed. To light up the offerings, the guide sets off powerful magnesium flares. The intense but short-lived explosion of illumination greatly adds to the sense of drama and occasion, though it does make impossible detailed appreciation of the structures.

Some words of warning if you plan to visit. Though the sun may be blazing outside, it's usually cold and damp inside, so wear warm clothes and make sure your shoes have a decent grip on their soles. Also, you have to negotiate long stairways inside, and this can be exhausting at an altitude of 5,380 feet. I saw at least

two elderly couples, already tired by the long walk to the mouth of the cave, give up and turn back within the first few minutes of the tour.

A visit, including travel time, takes about four hours roundtrip. If you need to take the minibus, it departs from the car park at the train station (€8/\$9 roundtrip). The caves are open from 1st May until 26th October, and tours are daily between 9:30am and 3.30pm (until 4:30pm in July and August). The combined entrance fee for the caves and the cable car is €16 (\$18) for adults or €8 (\$9) for children. For more information, see the Web site:

(www.eisriesenwelt.at). The extremely fit and extremely determined can hike up to the Eisriesenwelt from Werfen in about four hours. But for most people, especially those who have excess Strudels to burn off, I'd recommend instead taking one of the many alternative, less strenuous, but equally rewarding hikes that radiate across the valley from in and around Werfen (the tourist office can supply maps).

Back down in the village, there are also a couple of churches worth peeking inside. The best is the **Parish Church** in honor of apostle James the Elder, near the tourist office. Built in the mid-17th century, it features a classic Baroque high altar and two early Baroque side altars.

In addition to its own attractions, Werfen is a suitable base from which to visit a number of other sights, not least the myriad top-line draws of Salzburg. Hallein, over halfway towards Salzburg and easy to visit via a 20-minute train ride, is a well-preserved market town with a long history. The biggest attraction here is the salt mines above the town, situated in Bad Dürrenberg. You can reach them via cable car, a bus ride, or even a stiff 40-minute hike up narrow footpaths.

For centuries, salt was crucial to the development and prosperity of the Salzburg region. The mine at Bad Dürrenberg began yielding up its so-called 'white gold' as early as 600 BC. However, in 1989 the mines' owners realized that conducting tours of the caverns was even more lucrative than

extracting sodium chloride (aka salt). If you take the tour you'll don miners overalls, take a mini train trip, get ferried across a subterranean lake, and view films about the salt extracting process. Best of all, for those who prefer their erudition mixed with a smattering of fairground adrenaline, are the long slides down dark chutes into lower caverns. Riding on your behind on polished wooden banisters, you'll feel a tug of nervousness as you launch yourself into the semi-darkness, though you do reach the bottom before your increasing momentum gets too frightening. The mines are open daily all year, from 11am to 3pm during winter and 9am to 5pm the rest of the year. Admission for adults costs €15.50 (\$17). See the Web site: (www.salzbergwerke.com).

If your thirst for salt-related matters is not sated by the salt mine, the town reveals more of its secrets at the **Keltenmuseum** (Celtic Museum), at Pfliegerplatz 5, open daily from April to October. At the end of June, Hallein village takes on a carnival air, thanks to the open-air theatre, music and processions that constitute its Stadtfestwoche festival.

Midway between Hallein and Salzburg, the Untersberg mountain is well worth ascending. It's easy to get to the top via cable car, and the eleva-

Key Websites for the Traveler

- www.gemut.com Gateway site for travelers to Germanic Europe, including car rental, rail passes, hotel bookings, traveler feedback, travel tips and past issues (free access to back issues for subscribers; see log-on info on page 2).
- www.viamichelin.com The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants plus great interactive trip planning tools.
- www.travelgearnow.com Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10% off for subscribers.
- www.mapblast.com Map and automobile trip planning. Locates routes and distances.
- bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en German rail. Train schedules throughout Europe, not just Germany.
- www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm Swiss and European rail schedules.
- www.ski-europe.com Top web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts.
- www.myswitzerland.com Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority.
- www.germany-tourism.de Germany's national tourist authority.
- www.austria.info/us Austria's national tourist authority.
- <http://www.hhog.de> Website for an alliance of historic German cities.

tion of 6,080 feet affords an excellent panorama of the taller Alpine giants in Tyrol and Salzburg province.

Lodging

In addition to the choices mentioned below, Werfen offers rooms in simple guesthouses or even in private homes. The tourist office (tel. +43/06468/5388, www.werfen.at) can outline the options.

Hotel-Restaurant Obauer

Formerly known as Gasthof Lebzelter, this stylish place is run by two brothers. Karl Obauer does front of the house duties, while Rudolf reigns supreme in the kitchen. As you'd expect from four-stars, all fixtures and fittings are of high quality. The 10 rooms are variable in proportion and in decor. Their modern and elegant ambience belies the old fashioned, somewhat nondescript exterior of this gabled building. Within the rooms, touches of elegance are manifested in the most surprising places, such as in decorative light fittings hand-crafted by Karl Obauer senior. Rooms have shower or bath, toilet, cable TV and usually a balcony. I enjoyed having a radio in the bathroom, so that I could wallow in the bath to some musical accompaniment.

Daily Rates: Singles €70-128 (\$76-140, doubles €128-195 (\$140-\$213); add €55 (\$60) per person for four-course dinner.

Contact: Hotel-Restaurant Obauer Markt 46, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/6468/5212, fax 521212, email: obauer.karl.rudolf@sbg.at, web: www.obauer.com

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 13/20

Hotel-Garni Erzherzog-Eugen

Run by the sister of the Obauer brothers, and just a few doors from their place, you'll find this attractive B&B, a cheaper yet similarly stylish option. Approaching the comfort and elegance of its sibling, Erzherzog-Eugen has 11 modern rooms graced by subtle lighting, warm colors, and striking design flourishes. The rooms also have the usual four-star trappings of bathroom, TV, mini bar, safe and direct-dial telephone. Additionally, most rooms have a balcony pro-

viding views of the surrounding mountain ranges. The house was built in 1961, though with its traditional chalet design, flower boxes and dark brown window shutters, it slots comfortably alongside the much older buildings on the street. An enjoyable feature is the rear garden, equipped with a sundeck and sun-loungers.

Daily Rates: Singles €48-88 (\$52-96), doubles €88 (\$96)

Contact: Hotel-Garni Erzherzog-Eugen, Markt 38, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/6468/5210, fax 75523, email: obauer-krieger@sbg.at, web: www.gaestehaus-obauer.at

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 15/20

Landgasthof Reitsamerhof

This three-star hotel boasts several famous former guests, including Clint Eastwood and Richard Burton – they even hosted Margaret Thatcher's security men when she stayed in the region (though not the former British Prime Minister herself). It's a large, three-story chalet run by the hospitable Gschwandtner family, and has been so for three generations since 1935. Rooms vary in facilities and size – if you get one of the better, more expensive rooms you'll have private shower, toilet, satellite TV and balcony. Multi-bed rooms are available for people with families – in all, 50 beds are on offer. Rooms have standard Austrian-style fixtures and fittings, and are perfectly adequate if somewhat uninspired. If possible, go for one of the rooms facing the back of the building or in the rear annex, as those facing the front can be noisy from traffic on the main road. Another reason for locating yourself round the back is the proximity to the relaxing guest garden, with its terrace overlooking lush lawns and shady trees. The hotel offers plenty of parking places, including a garage for bicyclists and motorcyclists – they get a few of those dropping in, as the Tauern cycle path runs past the building. Though it's two kilometers south of the center, you don't have to drive or hike into town to get your meals, as they have a satisfying restaurant serving up home cooked Austrian food on the premises.

Daily Rates: With shared shower/

WC: singles €26 (\$28), doubles €42 (\$46). With private shower/WC: singles €35 (\$38), doubles €58 (\$63).

Contact: Landgasthof Reitsamerhof Salzach Bundestr. 22, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/6468/5379, fax 5379-4, email reitsamerhof@newsclub.at, web: www.reitsamerhof.at

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 14/20

Restaurant zur Stiege (mit Zim)

Though mostly lauded as a restaurant, this place offers a handful of reasonably comfortable rooms. From the outside, the 16th century, chalet-style building makes an immediate impression. Colorful window boxes vie for the attention, alongside the front facade's relief designs and elaborate central mural. The front door is reached via a few steps up a double-approach stairway which has inspired the name of the restaurant. Within this setting, the four rooms on offer are a slight let down. They're simple and uncluttered, with white walls and dark-wood furniture – the standard sort of two-star rooms you'll see all over Austria. They would almost be austere, but for the colorful curtains and the occasional painting (depicting mountain scenes and the like) breaking up the bare walls. On the plus side, the beds are comfortable, the rooms are a reasonable size (though all the four rooms have different dimensions), and all are equipped with cable TV, *en suite* toilet and WC. Two rooms face the quiet main street, and two overlook the rear garden.

Daily Rates: Singles €36 (\$49), doubles €58 (\$63)

Contact: Restaurant zur Stiege, Markt 10, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/06468/5256-0, fax 5256-4, email:

restaurant.zur.stiege@aon.at, web: www.restaurant-zur-stiege.at

Rating: QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 13/20

Food

Though Werfen is little more than a one-street village, it has two excellent restaurants. For simpler fare, it's easy to explore the main street, Markt, and dive in to somewhere that takes your fancy – there's a pizzeria and a couple of typical Gasthöfe.

Hotel-Restaurant Obauer

The real jewel here – and, some

would say, in the whole of Austria – is this restaurant, serving up creative gastronomic transformations of standard Austrian dishes. Meals can be taken either in the shaded garden or in one of several connected interior spaces. Wherever you eat, you'll get attention to detail, top service (I lost count of the number of times I was asked if I was enjoying my meal), and best of all, fabulous food.

The brothers have travelled widely, and have absorbed ideas and cooking methods from all over the world, but particularly from Asia. They take their food very seriously, but are open to a bit of humor too: the brothers' comically elongated chef's hats have inspired the logo for the restaurant.

Main courses cost €24-36 (\$28-39), or you can opt for a multi-course menu (choice of several, for around €32-55/\$35-60), as I did. The brothers have a knack for combining unusual elements but making it work. Trout, for example, is not often presented as a strudel, but here it is. Served with a mushroom puree, it's both light and flavorful. Stuffed duck is an array of taste experiences, with sweet, sour and savory ingredients complementing rather than battling. Desserts, like most of the other dishes, are a work of art on the plate. It seems a shame to tuck into them and spoil the symmetry, but I didn't spot anybody hanging back from doing so.

My one small criticism is that they can overelaborate. The following morning, still replete from my rich and varied feast the night before, I requested a breakfast of scrambled eggs. I expected and wanted a simple dish to cleanse my palate, but what I got was another surfeit of strong flavors, my eggs arriving mixed with an overpowering accompaniment of chives, other pungent herbs and assorted greenery. I felt that was a bit much for breakfast. I suppose, though, that when you have so many good culinary ideas bubbling over in your minds and saucepans, it's difficult to reign in your creativity. Even for scrambled eggs.

Contact: Hotel-Restaurant Obauer Markt 46, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/

6468/5212, fax 521212, email: obauer.karl.rudolf@sbg.at, web: www.obauer.com

Rating: QUALITY 18/20, VALUE 14/20

Restaurant Zur Stiege

This restaurant turns out prime Austrian and regional fare. The recipient of favorable reviews in the Austrian press, as well as a 16 out of 20 Gault Millau rating, you can expect to be served up nouvelle cuisine built upon traditional Austrian culinary values. The restaurant decor beneath the dark-wood ceiling includes a pleasing combination of green upholstery and salmon-colored curtains and tablecloths. At the center of the eating area is a drinks board groaning with an intoxicating array of spirits, including two dozen types of Schnapps. In the summer, you also have the option of eating in the pleasant garden.

Herbert Ranstl has been in charge in the kitchen since 1998. Set menus are in the €26-49 (\$28-53) range, while à la carte main courses come in around the €11-23 (\$12-25) mark. Cheaper options include standard fare such as scallop of pork or breast of chicken, while the higher prices include choice cuts such as rabbit fillet or saddle of lamb. Among the seafood choices was an adventurous presentation of pike-perch (€22/\$24). Served on a bed of potatoes and shallots, the fillet of pike-perch came with an exquisite crust combining eggplant and courgettes. Dessert was equally distinctive and equally good: white cheese souffle with brandy sorbet and a pineapple-raspberry ragout (€8/\$9). The wine list includes some 150 varieties, strongly favoring Austrian and European growers and priced from €26 to €80 (\$28-\$87) per bottle. Or, instead, an extensive exploration of the Schnapps table might just prove too tempting.

Contact: Restaurant zur Stiege, Markt 10, Werfen, A-5450, tel. +43/06468/5256-0, fax 5256-4, email:

restaurant.zur.stiege@aon.at, web: www.restaurant-zur-stiege.at

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 13/20


Gästehaus Unterholzerbräu

If you spend the day in Hallein, you can find a number of inexpensive

restaurants at which to linger over lunch or dinner. Located in the town centre on the western edge of the pedestrian zone, Gästehaus Unterholzerbräu is a place to visit for a smattering of local color and a plateful of reliable Austrian food. With its pale walls, dark wood furnishings and predominantly local clientele, this is a typical no-frills Gasthof. The menu is not at all daring, offering the usual standbys of *Schnitzel*, grills, fish and *Knödels*, but the portions are well cooked and substantial. Main courses are in the range €6-15 (\$7-\$16).

In the evenings, the restaurant takes on more of a bar atmosphere, with locals chatting, playing cards or sipping draught beer.

Contact: Oberhofgasse 4, 8010 Hallein, tel: +43/06245/81203, open 9am-midnight Tuesday-Saturday, 9am-2:30pm Sunday; closed Mondays

Rating: QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 14/20 

AUSTRIAN COUNTRY HOTELS

Continued from page 1

or intimate, elegant hideaways. During your stay it's likely that each night at dinner you'll be shown to a roomy, comfortably padded, wooden booth marked with a discreet "reserved for" sign with your name on it.

The benevolent, *gemütlich* feel extends to the typically oversized guest rooms where separate sitting and sleeping areas are the norm, as are balconies and spacious bathrooms equipped with terrycloth robes and thick towels.

These hotels are not for the overnight auto traveler, but for those who can stop for a few days to enjoy a different kind of hotel experience. Not only are guests provided with comfortable sleeping accommodations, but are fed two or even three meals a day — often accompanied by live music — and entertained with outings and special activities. Elaborate spa, pool, wellness and beauty facilities, bicycles to loan, guided hikes and excursions, and even professionally supervised childcare and activities for kids, are all part of daily life at a top-flight Austrian country

hotel.

Though the tariff at such rustic palaces will deter some, to pass them by is to miss a bargain, especially in the off-season. Take the rambling, five-star **Hotel Tümmelerhof** in Seefeld, whose kitchen gets two Toques from *Gault Millau*. Next spring, two persons can stay there six nights for less than \$1300, or about \$217 per night, including breakfast and dinner. At least one evening will feature a special buffet with live music. Let's compare that with a week at similar Swiss and German hotels. The website of the **Grand Hotel Regina** in Grindelwald advertises a seven-night package for around \$3200 or \$457 per night. A four-night package at the **Hotel Bareiss**, in Baiersbronn in Germany's Black Forest figures out to about \$446 per night. Even an off-season superior double room with breakfast and dinner, in what *Gemütlichkeit* considers the top country inn in Austria, the **Grüner Baum**, is a comparatively thrifty \$260 per night.

Here are a half-dozen of our Austrian favorites listed in reverse order of our ranking:

Hotel St. Peter, Seefeld

In this mountain resort village 20 minutes northwest of Innsbruck the traveler can select from a long list of hotels. This one is a four-star that provided us with a pleasant night's sleep and a good meal a couple of years ago. Number 107 had a separate sitting area with couch, coffee table and television, a gleaming bathroom with thick towels and terrycloth robes, and a balcony with a mountain view.

Getting There: Seefeld is about 20 km north of Innsbruck on Red Road 177. From Munich it's about a two-hour drive via Garmisch-Partenkirchen. It is also accessible by train from Innsbruck (about 35 minutes) and Garmisch-Partenkirchen (about 45 minutes).

Contact: Hotel St. Peter, Mösererstrasse 53, Seefeld, A-6100, tel. +43 5212 455 0, fax 45 55 45, email: info@mountains.at, Web: www.seefeld.org/en/index.htm
Cost: See box page 7

Gartenhotel Tümmelerhof, Seefeld

The Tümmelerhof is a 10-minute walk or five-minute ride on one of the hotel's bikes from the center of the village. Its location on four wooded acres combines country charm with easy access to Seefeld's busy pedestrian-only shopping areas.

Each Wednesday, half-board guests are treated to an outdoor barbecue (weather permitting). Tables and umbrellas are set on the terrace and lawn, the staff dresses in traditional Tyrolean costume and a great ice carving is centerpiece for a massive layout of food. Uniformed chefs barbecue and serve an assortment of delicious meats including various wursts, chops, steaks and fowl. Members of the Zorn family graciously greet guests and serve them from the buffet, all the while urging extra helpings onto plates already top heavy with food. Throw in live music from a venerable string trio and, of course, magnificent views of the mountains, and you have a most agreeable package. Friday nights feature a five-course degustation menu.

The hotel's 65 rooms are large, well furnished and designed for long stays. Nearly all have spacious entry closets with plenty of shelves, places to hang clothing and to store gear.

Getting There: See Hotel St. Peter.
Contact: Gartenhotel Tümmelerhof, Münchnerstrasse 215, Seefeld, tel. +43/ 5212/25 710, fax 25 71 104, email: hotel@tuemmlerhof.at, web: www.tuemmlerhof.at
Cost: See box page 7

Hotel Jagdhof, Neustift

The Stubaital, a few kilometers south of Innsbruck, is a narrow valley running at a southwestern angle off the main highway to Italy. Neustift is one of the larger villages along the valley road which deadends at the Stubai Glacier, where there is year-round skiing.

A Burgstall apartment — ours was Number 211 — turned out to be three rooms: one with a queen-size bed, another with a single bed, and, between the two, a sitting room with huge L-shaped sofa, coffee table and TV. The large bathroom consisted of

shower, tub and double sinks in one space, and the toilet in a separate room. The per person off-season rate is €123 (\$134); in high season the price rises to €130 (\$142). Included are breakfast and a multi-course dinner with live zither music in the candlelit dining room where a small ceramic plaque inscribed with a gold "Bestor" designated our table.

The Jagdhof has all the five-star refinements: indoor and outdoor pools, beauty farm, fitness facilities, childcare, etc.

Getting There: From Innsbruck, take Red Road 182 south which parallels Autobahn A22 toward the Brenner Pass. (The Autobahn is faster but you pay a toll.) Angle southwest into the Stubai Valley at Schönberg. The nearest rail station to Neustift is in Fulpmes, about six km (4 miles).

Contact: Hotel Jagdhof, Neustift 733, Neustift im Stubaital, A-6167, tel. +43 5226 2666, fax 26 66 503, email: mail@hotel-jagdhof.at, web: www.hotel-jagdhof.at

Cost: See box page 7

Hotel der Bär, Ellmau

The Bär's several buildings sprawl over the hillside above the town, a position that takes advantage of a fine view of the Kaisergebirge range. Five-star amenities include two swimming pools, a beauty center, free bicycle use, a long list of guest activities, supervised play for kids, tennis and six golf courses in the vicinity.

In the spacious bar, the hotel's most appealing room, a wall of curving windows takes advantage of the view. The furniture is comfortable with couches and overstuffed chairs arranged around coffee tables — a particularly pleasant after-dinner room.

Though guest rooms are not quite on a par with the rest of the hotels in this group, the Bär's restaurant may be the best of all. Even as single night guests we were escorted to a large window table softly illuminated by a single, low-hanging, shaded lamp. Set before us were starched linens, gleaming stemware and delicate, fresh blossoms floating in a giant wine glass. Somewhere, a piano rip-

pled familiar show tunes. Dinner began with a few tiny baked shrimp followed by a morel mushroom soup sprinkled with tiny croutons. Next came a dish with Asian overtones; *Fischstrudel auf Wildreisrisotto*, flaky white fish in phyllo crust over a mixture of white and wild rice. Then, after a bit of sorbet, came the featured course, three small pork medallions, first grilled then coated with a sauce of Gorgonzola cheese and quickly broiled to form a light crust. The rather dramatic dessert was wings of white chocolate mousse, *Tiramisueis* and fresh berries served on a black plate. One of the finest half-board dinner we've ever been served.

Getting There: Ellmau is about 113 km (71 miles) southeast of Munich.

Austrian Country Hotels Bed & Halfboard - 2 persons

Hotel St. Peter	\$150
Hotel der Bär	\$190
Hotel Tümmelerhof	\$207
Hotel Grüner Baum	\$264
Hotel Jagdhof	\$277
Gasthof Post	\$366

Prices are approximate low season per day for two persons, standard double, based on a seven-night stay and include breakfast and dinner.

From the Wörgl exit on A12 Autobahn, proceed east about 20 km (13 miles) on Red Road 312 just south of Kufstein. The nearest rail station is in St. Johann im Tirol, about 12 km (8 miles).

Contact: Hotel der Bär, Ellmau, A-6352. tel. +43/5358 2395, fax 239 556, email: info@hotelbaer.com, web: www.hotelbaer.com

Cost: See box page 7

Gasthof Post, Lech

The very best hotel in one of Austria's most popular ski destinations is the ultra-traditional Post. Though it's weathered shingle façade on the village's main street is quite plain, beyond the arched front doors is a Fabergé egg of carved-wood rusticity and Austrian country elegance. Everywhere Oriental rugs and highly

polished antiques catch the eye. Dirndls and Loden coats are the uniform of the day and not just for the staff.

Hovering above the stunning main salon — the Hubertushalle — is an octagonal skylight cut into the center of the wood paneled ceiling. With the room's fireplace crackling away, there is no better place in Lech to take tea on a winter afternoon.

Guest rooms are more of the same; traditional, atmospheric and five-star.

There is an indoor pool, a lovely garden for summer relaxing, various dining venues and even a small boutique.

The Mercedes Benzes and BMWs parked out front tell the story of the Post's clientele: well-fixed Europeans, mostly Swiss, Germans and Austrians.

This is the most expensive of the hotels mentioned here, especially in winter during ski season. Rates are considerably lower in summer.

Getting There: Best reached by car, Lech in the Arlberg is west of Landeck and just a few kilometers north of the A12, the main east-west highway through Austria. The nearest international rail station is 17 km (11 miles) in Langen im Arlberg and from there bus and taxi transfers are available.

Contact: Gasthof Post, Dorf 11, Lech am Arlberg, A-6764, tel. +43 5583 22 060, fax: 22 06 23, email:

info@postlech.com, web:

www.postlech.com

Cost: See box page 7

Hotel Grüner Baum, Badgastein

All things considered, the Grüner Baum, which occupies its own little valley, the Kötschachtal, near the old resort town of Badgastein, is the finest country hotel ever reviewed by *Gemütlichkeit*. First built by the Archduke Johann as a hunting lodge, it is spectacular in every way. Back-dropped by heavily forested hills and snow-covered peaks, the setting is picture-postcard; a cluster of Alpine chalets in a rolling green meadow with a mountain stream winding

among them. The facilities are five-star with beauty farm, indoor and outdoor pools, multiple restaurants and tennis courts. Interiors are glorious examples of Alpine decor, a kaleidoscope of rugged wood beams, white vaulted ceilings supported by marble-footed columns, carved wood paneling, cozy fireplaces and priceless antiques and rugs.

The hotel's considerable physical charms are matched by the owners' exceptional warmth and the efficient, friendly service dispensed by the traditionally-dressed English-speaking staff. Over the decades Grüner Baum has hosted the likes of Yehudi Menuhin, filmmaker Billy Wilder, Arturo Toscanini and the Emperor Franz Joseph and the Empress Elizabeth.

When this hotel is compared, as it should be, against the best in Europe, it emerges as an outstanding value.

Getting There: Badgastein is almost straight south of Salzburg and about an hour's drive — 94 km. There is frequent rail service from Salzburg with trip times ranging from one-and-a-half to two hours.

Contact: Grüner Baum, Kötschachtal 25, Badgastein, A-5640, tel. +43 6434 25 160, fax 25 16 25, email: info@grunerbaum.com, web: www.grunerbaum.com/index_en.html

Cost: See box page 7

Readers' Forum

Beware Credit Card Fees

I may be the only one who did not know this, but using one's credit card may not be the cheapest way to purchase when abroad. I recently reviewed my Citibank platinum business card rules and found that VISA and Mastercard both charge 1% and Citibank then charges an additional 2%. That's 3% total assuming Citibank does not compound their charge. I am sure the conversion rate itself is a reasonable one, but these are fairly stiff charges. I do not know the best way to convert currency, but this is more expensive than I realized.

SHELTON G. HOPKINS
DALLAS, TEXAS

(Ed. Note: Considering the advantages of frequent flyer miles and conve-

nience, the banks have probably correctly calculated that you're still financially ahead to use a credit card rather than buying traveler's checks and getting a less favorable exchange rate. Some credit cards do not assess these transaction charges but they do not award frequent flyer points either.

In most cases, we think the best way to obtain foreign currency in Europe is to use an ATM debit card [NOT a credit card]. ATMs are everywhere. You get the best conversion rate and pay a small — zero to about \$3 — transaction fee while avoiding the considerable expense and hassle of cashing traveler's checks — think of all those Saturdays, Sundays and holidays when the banks aren't open. Be sure to check with your bank to see what they'll charge you to use your ATM card out of the country.)

Recalls Haunsparg

Your recent mention of **Schloss Haunsparg** near Salzburg reminded us of our stay there in the summer of 1984. It was our first trip to Europe and knowing that we would be attending the Salzburg Festival, our travel agent booked reservations for us at the Schloss. Since my wife and I are professional musicians, Frau Gernerth told us of about past guests including the great conductor Bruno Walter and the young American conductor Andrew Litton. It made for a memorable first-time visit to Salzburg. That Christmas, the Gernerths were kind enough to send us a Christmas card.

DEBBIE AND NELSON TANDOC
SAN JOSE CA

Great Dining Halls

The feature on dining halls in the August issue was of great interest to me because I have had the good fortune to dine at three of the listed establishments, two of which left me with special memories.

Last year I was in Munich during Fasching. On the Sunday prior to Lent we went to the **Augustiner** for lunch and encountered a party in progress that would rival any in New Orleans, I'm sure. The food, beer and music created a festive atmosphere that kept hundreds of people having fun for hours. I don't know what was going on at the **Hofbräuhaus** that afternoon but nothing could top this

"great dining hall" experience.

Several years ago my wife and I went to the Christkindlmarkt in Nürnberg. On opening day of the market (the Friday after Thanksgiving) six of us went for lunch at **Bratwursthäusle** and were prepared for a long wait when we saw the line for tables. As we were considering our options the owner came over, told us to follow him, escorted us past the waiting line and took us to a corner table. After the rush quieted down he returned and sat with us and chatted like he had nothing better to do.

So, yes, I agree that they deserve "special dining hall" status and are true *gemütlichkeit* experiences. Special thanks for this feature article.

GARY R. KLEINHANS

VIA EMAIL 


DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 2

find much OW. I saw the battered Reichstag in a 40s newsreel; then up-close-and-personal in 1980, deserted and surrounded by weeds; and now, of course, in its reborn, glass-domed glory. Very OW.

On the other hand, OW is not easy to find in Munich. It's in the **Augustiner Gäststatten** but not the rowdy **Hofbräuhaus**. Actually, I find more OW in Hamburg than Munich; the fish market, the great port, and some of the old-time restaurants and bars like the **Commercial Room** (Englische Planke 10), the **Ratswein Keller** (Grosse Johannisstr. 2) and the hole-in-the-wall **Alt Hamburger Bierstube** (Gerhofstr. 40).

Some of Germany's best OW is in the regions of the former East Germany in towns like Quedlinburg and Weimar. In this area, however, "Old World" is best found by hitting the backroads where you'll come upon villages that have changed very little in the last 50 to 100 years.

My guess is that everyone has some very specific expectations regarding what they hope to get out of their European travels. You've heard one of mine; what about yours? Drop a note or email me at bob@gemut.com. — RHB 

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