

DEAR  
SUBSCRIBER

### Car Rental: Don't Sign Blind

A new Avis Europe rental car contract underscores my contention that reading the fine print is more important when renting a car than perhaps in any other travel transaction. I'll get to the new Avis contract in a minute, but first some background:

The European rental process starts with finding a price you like, then the fun begins: what is included in that price and what is not? There can be charges for extra drivers, road taxes, international drop charges, mandatory winterization, and other fees.

The big one, of course, is collision (CDW) and theft insurance. About 99 percent of *Gemütlichkeit* auto rental customers wisely rely on a credit card for such coverage. The insurance sold by the rental companies is expensive, ranging from about \$10 to \$25 per day. It also carries a deductible from as low as about \$500 to around \$3,000.

In other words, if you opt for the extra insurance and return the car with a simple fender scratch, you'll not only pay for the insurance but also the cost to repair the scratch, say, \$500 — maybe even more if the deductible is higher. Not a good deal. Your credit card, assuming it offers collision and theft insurance, simply will reimburse you for the damage. You pay nothing.

Sounds simple, but there's a small hook. For your credit card to cover the damage — and for you not to be charged for the optional insurance — you must decline the rental company's offer of insurance. And insurance isn't an extra that's not

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# GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

## KANDERSTEG

*Meet Roland Reimann: A new Gemütlichkeit contributor, who shares an insider's view of an often overlooked Bernese resort.*

It is hard to find a place in Switzerland that is as well endowed with natural alpine beauty and rich traditions as Kandersteg. And that is saying a lot, since it is up against some very serious competition. Yet what puts this town head and shoulders above Swiss mountain resorts, such as Grindelwald and Zermatt, is that it has managed to benefit from tourism without having sold its soul. You won't be the only tourist here, but neither will you have to fight your way through the crowds.

Kandersteg is the last village in the Bernese Alps for travelers journeying south through the Lötschberg train tunnel on their way to the resorts of the Rhône Valley or even

further south to Milan, Venice, and Rome. Yet, regardless of how many times I have traveled this line, I always feel the urge to disembark in Kandersteg to stroll through its laid-back village center, rediscover the wild side valley of Gasterntal, take the quaint chairlift to the emerald alpine lake of Oeschinensee, or throw on my backpack and cross from north to south the way Mark Twain once did: on foot over the **Gemmi Pass**.

It does not matter whether you arrive by train or car, the only thing you need to get around during your stay — whether two days or a couple of weeks — is your hiking boots.

*Continued on page 3...*

### Hidden Treasures...

## Hotel Lundenbergsand

Most visitors to Germany never get north of Frankfurt, and even fewer venture above Hamburg to Schleswig-Holstein, a thick neck of mostly flat ground that divides the Baltic from the North Sea. It is a breezy land of thatched roofed houses, clean air, and big skies; a different sort of landscape, a different sort of architecture. Motoring south late one afternoon from Denmark on federal road #5, about an hour or so north of the port city of **Husum**, it came time to find a place to stay.

From Michelin's excellent *500 Charming Hotels and Inns*, we selected a couple of prospects that fit our requirements: quiet, country, restaurant, and about €100 for a double room. Though calls via our tri-band GSM mobile phone drew a "fully

booked" response from the **Holländische Stube** in Friedrichstadt, we hit paydirt at the **Hotel Lundenbergsand** in Simonsberg. A double room for one night would be €95.

This is sparsely populated country, and after leaving the main road, the route to the hotel turned into a series of almost deserted narrow dike roads. Fortunately, there are discrete signs to the hotel. Set in a copse of trees, the snow-white Lundenbergsand backs up to the 30-foot high dike that protects it from the sea. Dormer windows peek from a massive, steeply-pitched thatched roof.

Other than its cozy quarters, the interior décor is a bit of a change

*Continued on page 6...*

### Exchange rates as of 09/26/05

**1 euro = \$1.20**

**1 Swiss franc = \$0.77**

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER**

*Continued from page 1*

charged unless you ask for it, such as a child's seat or an additional driver; you must indicate on the rental contract that you *don't* want it.

Here's where the wicket gets a bit sticky. Rental car employees the world over are compensated, at least in part, on their sales of optional insurance. Jet-lagged, bleary-eyed travelers arrive at car rental counters throughout Europe every day with the full intention of declining the offered insurance. And yet every day a small percentage of them initial in the *Ja* or *Oui* box instead of the *Nein* or *No* box and end up being charged what sometimes comes to hundreds of dollars for insurance they don't need or want.

The story we hear all too often goes something like this: "The rental agent clearly understood we didn't want the insurance, and we simply initialed where he/she told us to." Tired from a long flight, too many renters blindly sign and initial where they are told. Much later, when the bad news comes in the form of a credit card bill and the charge is disputed, the rental contract gets its first close examination and there, for all the world to see, are the renter's initials in the *Ja* box, indicating "yes, I want the insurance."

Such charges are usually contested through the renter's credit card company, but since only the paperwork

remains, the credit card folks almost always decide in favor of the rental car company. There are too many of these to be mere "misunderstandings," based on a difference in languages.

By no means am I suggesting that European rental companies are out to cheat North American travelers. What I do believe, however, is that with the incentive of a fat insurance commission at stake, the rare less-than-honest agent will take advantage of a tired, perhaps not so sophisticated, traveler. Frequently, for example, renters are told that they *must* purchase the extra insurance. Except in Italy and Ireland, that simply isn't true.

All this gets us back to the new contract you'll be signing in Europe if you rent from Avis. Initialing *Ja* and *Nein* boxes is now a thing of the past. Now you will simply affix your signature at the end of the contract. It will be up to each renter to determine if it includes unwanted charges, such as expensive, unneeded insurance. More than ever, the onus is on the renter.

Perhaps the new contract will be a plus for renters, as Avis says it is abandoning industry jargon and using actual words, such as 'insurance' instead of CDW, SCDW, TP, and PAI. In addition, contracts are currently offered in several languages, including English. In the sample I saw, the insurance charges were enumerated and spelled out in straightforward English.

Of course, you'll also be agree-

ing to the following clause: If the charges under this rental contract are paid by credit card, the cardholder's signature shall be regarded as authorization to debit the total amount to his/her account with the credit card company. This authorization shall also be valid for subsequent debits due to rental rate corrections, damage events including any corresponding towing fees and traffic offenses.

Here are four cautions to consider for your next car rental:

- By all means rely on your credit card for CDW (collision) and theft insurance.
- Don't let anyone tell you that you have to buy CDW and theft insurance (except in Italy and Ireland).
- Insist on a contract in a language you speak and read.
- Read the contract yourself. Don't take the agent's word for what's in it. —RHB

**Using Gemütlichkeit**

- 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".

**Logging on to Our Website**

Back issues in text format from January 1993, except for the most recent 12, are available free to subscribers only at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) (click on "Members"). To access the issues, enter the user name and password published in this space each month. The new codes are:

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**Publishers:** Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor  
**Executive Editor:** Nikki Goth Itoi  
**Senior Writer:** Jim Johnson  
**Contributor:** Mark Honan  
**Consulting Editor:** Thomas P. Bestor  
**Online Services:** Kurt Steffans  
**Subscriber Travel Services:** Andy Bestor, Laura Riedel

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**POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO:**  
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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.

**KANDERSTEG***Continued from page 1*

The village is more than manageable on foot, and there are regularly scheduled buses linking the center and hotels with the resort's cable car and chairlift stations located on its edges.

Hiking is Kandersteg's *raison d'être*, and is as good as it gets in the Alps, with a variety of walks from demanding full-day mountain scrambles to smell-the-flower strolls. The best part: you can get to most trail heads at little expense compared with what you would have to spend on the often overpriced rides on the cable cars, funiculars, and cog railways in bigger resorts. (See page 8 for a hiker's checklist.)

**Nordic Walking**

Nordic Walking, essentially cross-country skiing without the skis, has become the latest rage in Switzerland, and Kandersteg was one of the first to catch onto the trend, becoming a center for the fitness activity.

There are eight specially-marked Nordic Walking trails in Kandersteg, and poles can be rented at all the sport shops in the village, as well as some hotels. A one-day introductory course (which I found was all that was necessary) costs CHF 79 and includes poles and lunch at the **Hotel Victoria-Ritter** (CHF 64 without lunch; see lodging details below).

There are 25 Nordic Walking instructors in the resort, and many speak English. It is their job to show how best to use the poles to support your stride, promising a total-body workout while also relieving joints of the strain associated with jogging. Once I tried it, I understood immediately why it has become so popular among the 50-plus crowd.

My instructor was Casi Platzter, the affable owner and manager of the Victoria-Ritter and the driving force behind Nordic Walking in the resort. Herr Platzter was the first to understand that a resort popular with cross-country skiers in winter had untapped potential in summer.

**Kandersteg Basics****Population:** 1,200**Elevation:** 1,200m (3,280 ft.)**Tourist Information:**Kandersteg Tourist Office: tel. +41 / 33 / 675 80 80, [info@kandersteg.ch](mailto:info@kandersteg.ch)Oeschinensee: tel. +41 / 33 / 675 11 18, fax +41 / 33 / 675 12 87, [esselbahn.oeschinen@bluewin.ch](mailto:esselbahn.oeschinen@bluewin.ch), [www.oeschinensee.ch](http://www.oeschinensee.ch)**Nearest Airport:** Zürich**Driving Distances:**

Zürich	2hrs 15mins
Geneva	2hrs 30mins
Milan	3hrs 15mins
Innsbruck	4hrs 50mins
Paris	7hrs 15mins
Frankfurt	4hrs 45mins

**Rail Travel:**

There is a train at 39 minutes past the hour, every hour, from Zürich airport, which takes 2.5 hours. Every other train is direct, otherwise change in Bern. From Kandersteg, there is an hourly, direct train at 49 minutes past the hour to Bern, stopping in Frutigen, Spiez, and Thun. Heading south through the Lötschberg tunnel, trains depart at 12 minutes past the hour. The journey to Brig takes 35 minutes. Change in Brig for the journey to Zermatt (2hrs 12min) or other resorts in the Rhone valley (Saas Fee, Leukerbad, etc).

**Best Bets:**

The Hotel Victoria-Ritter drops its prices by about CHF 20 a room from August 25 and gives a further reduction after September 15.

**Nordic Walking Routes:**

[www.kandersteg.ch/nordic-walking/images/plan.pdf](http://www.kandersteg.ch/nordic-walking/images/plan.pdf)

**Major Events:**

Shepherds' Festival: Takes place on the last Sunday in July at Lake Daubensee on the Gemmi Pass; a folkloric event with food, drink, music, and about a thousand sheep.

Pelzmartiga: Takes place on Christmas Day and New Year's Day; locals dress up in costume, some quite frightening, and roam through town scaring villagers and tourists alike.

**One-day Excursions**

With or without poles, a visit to the resort would not be complete without a hike through the Gastertal, a crossing on foot of the Gemmi Pass, and a lazy day walking and picnicking on the shores of Oeschinensee. Doing any of these walks requires only a moderate level of fitness, since each is accessible by cable car, chairlift, or bus.

**Gastertal:** The Swiss have left this deep-cut valley largely untamed. Its river runs wild, and high, thin waterfalls flow in glistening ribbons to the valley floor. A single-track dirt toll road leads to the valley from Kandersteg.

The best way to explore the Gastertal, while having time to stop for lunch or a drink, is to take the small bus from Kandersteg, which does this spectacular run (part of the approach road has been chiselled out of the side of a cliff) a few times a day, to the last stop and walk back (about 10km). The Gastertal bus costs CHF 12 one way, and it is advisable to reserve your seat in advance, tel. +41 / 33 / 671 11 72, or ask your hotel reception to make a reservation.

It was worth stopping to admire the **Geltenbach** waterfall on the way out of the valley. The Geltenbach does not flow over the cliff but springs from a hole in the granite face, fed by an underground lake. Waterfalls like these were once considered fountains of youth.

**Gemmi Pass:** There is a trail near the top of the Gastertal gorge which leads up to the Gemmi Pass, (one of Switzerland's oldest north-south trading routes), and first became popular with prominent tourists about 200 years ago. The trail through the forest and along a stream is rewarding, but steep, requiring about two hours to the top.

Most hikers choose the **Sunnbüel** cable car shortcut, which costs CHF 29 roundtrip (tel. +41 / 33 / 675 81 41, fax +41 / 33 / 675 81 42, [info@sunnbuel.ch](mailto:info@sunnbuel.ch), [www.sunnbuel.ch](http://www.sunnbuel.ch)). Since the cable car station is on the Kandersteg outskirts, it is worth paying the CHF 2 for the bus from the

village center to get there.

Leaving the cable car, you find yourself above 6,000 feet and at the top of the tree line. The only scars on the landscape are the electricity transmission lines strung across the pass.

The wide trail rises gently from the cable car station to the other end and takes 2.5 hours one way. This is ideal Nordic Walking terrain, though the likes of Mark Twain, Jules Verne and Picasso tackled the trail without the aid of carbon fiber poles. Twain immortalized his crossing in the European travelogue, "A Tramp Abroad."

After absorbing a little of the history and quenching your thirst on the **Hotel Schwabenbach's** generous outdoor patio (see Lodging, below), it is time to continue the journey to the end of the pass, a little more than an hour away. It is recommended if only for the breathtaking views straight down to the spa resort of **Leukerbad**.

If you want to soothe your aching muscles in Leukerbad's thermal springs, you can take the cable car, or descend by foot down the spectacular switchback mule trail hewn out of the vertical face. But this is a two-day option from Kandersteg. To do it in a day, you will need to get an early morning start in order to make all of the bus and train connections to be back in your hotel in time for dinner.

**Oeschinensee:** The mountain lake is an alpine crown jewel that leaves many tourists rubbing their eyes in disbelief. This is Switzerland in miniature: a turquoise lake sheltered by high granite cliffs and watched over by snowy peaks. Trails meander through a forest of firs on one side and lazy cows graze in a meadow on the other.

The Unesco World Heritage Site, Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn, is expected to be expanded in the next couple of years to include the Oeschinensee and surrounding area.

But Oeschinensee is less of a paradise on sunny summer weekends when hordes of Swiss families head up here to laze about and roast fat sausages over open fires. By avoiding the weekend, you will be able to enjoy the tranquil setting. Before head-

ing up here, be sure to stuff your backpack with wine and cheese, instead of water and energy bars.

It takes a little over an hour to walk up to the lake from Kandersteg, or you can pay CHF 12 for a one-way trip (CHF 17 roundtrip) on the old, but well-maintained two-person chairlift. The resort markets the ride on the unusual side-facing chairs as "nostalgic".

Rent rowboats at the rustic restaurant that sits near shore, and if you really feel the urge to move your feet, there is a three-hour loop above the lake with three-star views, according to the *Michelin Green Guide*.

You will also see lots of hikers on fine weather days following the paths up to the high-alpine huts of **Doldenhorn, Frunden, and Blüemlisalp**, which sit exposed on the rocks below the peaks of the same name.

### LODGING

#### Landgasthof Ruedihus

If you have done any of the foregoing walks, then you certainly deserve splurging at least once on a candlelight dinner at the 250-year-old Landgasthof Ruedihus. It is in my opinion the most lovingly restored country inn in the Swiss Alps, and it also rates top marks for authentic cuisine.

The Ruedihus won honorable mention in 2000 from the jury of the Swiss Historic Hotel and Restaurant of the Year, an award sanctioned by Icomos, the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

If you can manage not to bump your head on the low doorways or trip over the high thresholds, you may notice a few of the historic details that make the Ruedihus such an important historical monument.

A hexagram is painted on the main door, which owner René Maeder tells me was not a Jewish symbol but a sign telling passing travelers that they could sup here. Built for a high-ranking official in 1753, the house's original doors and windows were donated by other members of the village upper crust. You can still make out their faded names or coats of arms inscribed on the wooden and glass surfaces.

The rustic rooms in the Ruedihus start at CHF 100 including breakfast. Add on CHF 45 per person for half board. Staying the night here rounds off the experience of stepping back in time, with old wood-framed beds and closets. However, without a television and no hotel lounge for killing a few lazy hours or when the weather is disagreeable, one night is probably enough.

For more modern accommodations, consider Herr Maeder's four-star **Waldhotel Doldenhorn** across the road, a longtime *Gemütlichkeit* favorite (See the August 1999 issue at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com)). It has rooms of varying sizes and standards, starting at CHF 200. Guests staying at either hotel have free entrance to the Doldenhorn's spa.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF 100-150, doubles CHF 200-260

**Contact:** Family R. Maeder, tel. +41/33/675 81 81, fax +41/33/675 81 85, [doldenhorn@compuserve.com](mailto:doldenhorn@compuserve.com), [www.doldenhorn-ruedihus.ch](http://www.doldenhorn-ruedihus.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 12/20

#### Hotel Victoria-Ritter

My personal favorite in Kandersteg is the centrally located Hotel Victoria-Ritter, operated by Casi Platzer and family. While the grand Belle Époque hotel Victoria, built around the 18th century guesthouse Ritter, can be a little intimidating from the outside, Herr Maeder ensures that informality is the rule rather than the exception on the inside.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Rooms start at CHF 160 a night, but these cheaper rooms have not been renovated, and look it. It is worth upgrading to the CHF 250 rooms, which have been tastefully modernized. Ask for one at the back facing the mountains and not the street. They have nice balconies, even if their railings could use

#### Did You Know?

The name Kandersteg means bridge (steg) over the Kander river. Kandersteg is the last village in the Bernese Alps for travellers heading south by train or car through the north-south Lötschberg tunnel to the Rhone valley.

a fresh coat of paint. There are also some traditional rooms on the upper floor of the Ritter.

The hotel has its own swimming pool, an Internet corner, and Wi-Fi if you bring your own laptop. Besides being the favorite hotel of the Nordic Walking crowd, the Victoria-Ritter is also a Lowa sports test center, so you can try out the latest hiking shoes and boots here. Once a week in summer, Herr Platzer takes guests on a full-day — and often strenuous — mountain hike. Highly recommended, if you are up to it. You only have to cover any transportation costs incurred.

Guests with half-board (CHF 50 per person) take dinner in the fancy, high-ceilinged dining room of the Victoria (see Food, below).

**Daily Rates:** CHF 160–250

**Contact:** Family C. Platzer, tel. +41/33/675 80 00, fax +41/33/675 81 00, [info@hotel-victoria.ch](mailto:info@hotel-victoria.ch), [www.hotel-victoria.ch](http://www.hotel-victoria.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 15/20

### Ermitage

More affordable accommodation can be had at the Ermitage, a clean and bright family-run hotel and restaurant with decent-sized rooms next to the Oeschinensee chairlift, a 10- to 15-minute walk from the village center.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF 90-110, doubles CHF 150-190

**Contact:** Family K. and R. Bieri-Keller, tel. +41/33/675 80 20, fax +41/33/675 80 21, [ermkand@bluewin.ch](mailto:ermkand@bluewin.ch), [www.ermitage-kandersteg.ch](http://www.ermitage-kandersteg.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, Value 14/20

### Alpina

Cheaper yet is the Alpina on the main street, run by the friendly Hari brothers and their wives. Since double rooms are small with tiny bathrooms, it may be better to reserve a “family room” for only CHF 10 more per night to have more space and normal bathrooms. Once a week, the Haris take guests up to their hunting lodge above the village for a barbecue.

**Daily Rates:** Singles CHF 87-97, doubles CHF 144-164

**Contact:** Hermann and Peter Hari,

tel. +41/33/675 12 46, fax +41/33/675 12 33, [alpinakandersteg@bluewin.ch](mailto:alpinakandersteg@bluewin.ch), [www.alpina-online.com](http://www.alpina-online.com)

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

There are two small pensions in the picturesque hamlet of Selden (Gasterntal), each with its own small hydroelectric plant, since they have to generate their own power:

### Hotel Steinbock

It was a wet and unseasonably cold August day when I sought shelter at the Hotel Steinbock, and so I expected a few weary hikers to be huddled together for warmth, sipping hot chocolate or tea. But the couple who have owned and managed the place for the past 25 years, Christian and Ann Künzi, are obviously used to adapting to the moody alpine weather, and had a roaring fire going, which contributed to the convivial atmosphere.

I also wasn't prepared for the honesty of Ann—an English woman who came to Kandersteg because she loved climbing in the mountains and ended up making it her home. After I complimented her on her “homemade” apple pie, she was quick to reply that it was not homemade. “Our guests somehow expect that I rise at four o'clock each morning to milk the cows and make cheese, as well as apple pie,” she said. “We have enough to do around here to keep us busy.” Her answer was as straightforward as the restaurant's simple but cozy décor, where I felt I could order a coffee, take out my dog-eared novel and wait out the rain.

It was the grandfather of Ann's husband, Christian, who constructed the first restaurant on this site in 1920. Christian has the distinction — as the oldest resident in the Gasterntal — of being the guardian of the 300-year-old Gasterntal Bible, which the authorities of Bern awarded to the poor and isolated mountain people to show their gratitude for their help in improving the trading route over the Lötschen Pass, which begins in Selden. The bible is removed from its wooden box the first Sunday in August each year for an open-air sermon, which is the valley's main cultural event.

**Daily Rates:** Basic double rooms CHF 55, no toilet or shower in the

rooms; dormitory CHF 30 per person  
**Contact:** Ann and Christian Künzi, summer: tel. +41/33/675 11 62 (summer), +41/33/675 14 72 (winter), fax +41/33/675 11 62, [steinbock@gasterntal.ch](mailto:steinbock@gasterntal.ch), [www.gasterntal.ch](http://www.gasterntal.ch)  
**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 16/20

### Hotel Schwarenbach

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was an avid mountain hiker, was so impressed with the raw landscape at Gemmi Pass that he set a Sherlock Holmes scene here. Guy de Maupassant wrote a short suspense story which unfolds at the Hotel Schwarenbach. The historic inn is located halfway across the pass, and if owner and manager, Peter Stoller, is not too busy, you may just convince him to show you a few of the old, leather-bound guestbooks that hold the names of many illustrious guests who dined, rested, and drew inspiration here before continuing their journeys.

The Schwarenbach was also home to a legendary mountain climbing cat, Tomba. Immortalized on postcards, Tomba had a penchant for accompanying alpinists to the tops of surrounding peaks during his lifetime in the 1980s.

### Key Websites for the Traveler

- [www.gemut.com](http://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](http://www.viamichelin.com) The Michelin database of hotels and restaurants, plus great interactive trip planning tools
- [www.travelessentials.com](http://www.travelessentials.com) Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers
- [www.webflyer.com](http://www.webflyer.com) Informative frequent-flyer forums make this a must for air travelers
- [bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en](http://bahn.hafas.de/bin/query.exe/en) German rail website, with train schedules throughout Europe, as well as Germany
- [www.sbb.ch/index\\_e.htm](http://www.sbb.ch/index_e.htm) Swiss and European rail schedules
- [www.ski-europe.com](http://www.ski-europe.com) Top Web resource for skiers with much data on Alpine resorts
- [www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com) Website of Switzerland's national tourist authority
- [www.germany-tourism.de](http://www.germany-tourism.de) Germany's national tourist authority
- [www.austria.info/us](http://www.austria.info/us) Austria's national tourist authority
- [www.historicgermany.com](http://www.historicgermany.com) Website for an alliance of historic German cities
- [www.thetravelinsider.info](http://www.thetravelinsider.info) Info on electronic devices used by travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

**Daily Rates:** Basic double rooms CHF 57, no toilet or shower in the rooms, dormitory CHF 31 per person  
**Contact:** Family Peter Stoller, tel. +41/33/675 12 72 (summer), +41/33/675 17 75 (winter), fax +41/33/675 22 87; [info@schwarenbach.ch](mailto:info@schwarenbach.ch)  
[www.schwarenbach.ch](http://www.schwarenbach.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 15/20

## FOOD

### Marmotte Feinbäckerei und Tea Room

For a light lunch, or to stock up for a picnic, the Marmotte bakery and tea room has a good selection of breads, sweet and savory pastries, and sandwiches, and even makes its own chocolate pralines. Expensive? Yes, but at normal Swiss prices. They are not marked up for tourists.

**Contact:** Hauptstrasse 117, tel. +41/33/675 10 70, open weekdays 7:30am – 6:30pm, Sundays 8am-5pm

**Rating:** QUALITY 15/20, Value 12/20

### Hari Dairy

The Hari dairy in a broad chalet not far from the station, has a wide variety of Swiss cheeses, including a few produced on the premises. If you cannot tell *Emmental* (known as Swiss cheese in North America) from *Appenzell*, ask at the counter for the English printout describing what's available. The dairy even makes a full-fat, soft variety called Prince's Cheese, which was created in honor of Prince Charles' visit.

**Contact:** Bahnhofstrasse, tel. +41/33/675 12 59

**Rating:** QUALITY 17/20, VALUE 13/20

### Restaurant Rendezvous

Order a coffee at the Rendezvous restaurant beside the Oeschinensee chairlift station. Without asking and at no extra charge, it will be brought out along with a chocolate cup full of fresh whipped cream. This is the traditional way of serving coffee to guests invited for dinner, but you will be lucky to come across it elsewhere during your travels.

**Contact:** tel. +41/33/675 13 54, closed Tuesday

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 13/20

### Landgasthof Ruedihus

Creaky wooden floors add to the dining experience at the Landgasthof Ruedihus, but bring a sweater on cool evenings; the uneven window frames may be priceless antiques, but they let in a draft. Fittingly, Herr Maeder puts the culinary accent on traditional Swiss cuisine and beverages.

We chose the three-course meal for CHF 50 per person, which started with tangy *Hobelkäse*, thinly shaved slices of alp cheese, and tender smoked trout filet from Blausee (recreational lake below Kandersteg), served with horseradish and whipped cream. A potato terrine followed, along with a crisp leaf lettuce salad. For the main course, my wife opted for the braised beef marinated in vinegar (*Suuremoecke*), and I went for the *Mischtchrazeli* (manure scratcher). Farm humor aside, it was a generous helping of corn-fed chicken with *Spätzli*, complemented by string beans and yellow carrots. Although we normally drink red wine with our meals, we selected a Heida, a distinctive white wine from Europe's highest vineyards in **Visperteninen**, a village located 4,500 feet above the Rhône valley.

Desserts did not disappoint, especially since we wanted a taste of how poor alpine folk once treated guests. Most consisted of three main ingredients: local fruit, schnapps made from the fruit, and lots of cream. The names said everything: "Auntie Lina's visitor pudding," "Grandmother's apple cream," and "Apricots in their own syrup."

**Contact:** Family R. Maeder, tel. +41/33/675 81 81, fax +41/33/675 81 85, [doldenhorn@compuserve.com](mailto:doldenhorn@compuserve.com), [www.doldenhorn-ruedihus.ch](http://www.doldenhorn-ruedihus.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY, 18/20, VALUE 15/20

### Restaurant Victoria-Ritter

The *a la carte* restaurant of the Hotel Victoria-Ritter is on the ground floor of the Ritter, continuing a tradition that goes back to the late 18th century when this was the village's most important staging post for travelers and traders journeying over the Gemmi Pass. Today, the restaurant offering is eclectic, moderately priced

and a refreshing change if you have been overdosing on cheese dishes and *Rösti* (fried potatoes).

For CHF 35-40 per person with wine, you can eat well here. We started by sharing a plate of "Kandersteg's delicacies," consisting of dried meat and village sausage, (*Hobelkäse*), smoked trout fillet, goat's cheese, mushrooms, and lamb's lettuce. For the main course, the chef honored my request and brought a small sampling of several dishes. I particularly enjoyed the vegetarian lasagne with a creamy spinach sauce (CHF 17.50) and the *Pizzokkel* (CHF 16.50). The latter is a traditional dish of dumplings from southeastern Switzerland that I am normally not fond of. Herr Platzer has the kitchen serve this version with leeks and dried tomatoes instead of bacon. Delicious! The same was true of the lamb stew curry.

**Contact:** Family C. Platzer, tel: +41/33/675 80 00, fax +41/33/675 81 00, [info@hotel-victoria.ch](mailto:info@hotel-victoria.ch), [www.hotel-victoria.ch](http://www.hotel-victoria.ch)

**Rating:** QUALITY, 17/20, VALUE 15/20

## HOTEL LUNDENBERGSAND

*Continued from page 1*

from the stereotypical small Germany hotel. The overall feeling, in fact, is somewhat nautical. The combination reception area/*Stube*/dining/breakfast room is done in a muted green and accented with green Delft tiles. On the walls are a ship's wheel, pictures of ships and thatched roof farmhouses, and raised inscriptions in what we presume is an ancient Frisian language. Oil lamps hang over each table.

Room Number 11, reached via a stairway off the public room, is compact and spare but comfortable enough for a stay of two or three nights. There is a white wooden bed, a table and two chairs, a small TV, furrowed sisal carpeting, striped wallpaper, a painted wood ceiling edged in white molding, pictures of boats and flowers, and a chest-high window. The latter affords a long, peaceful view of sky, hedges, waving grasses, and wheeling birds. The bathroom has adequate space and lighting and one of those after-the-fact, add-on corner shower enclosures.

Dinner in the *Stube* — there was also a more formal dining area — featured ample portions of good but not great food. Predictably, the menu includes a preponderance of seafood selections. Chunks of grilled and fried North Sea fish comprised the *Kapitansteller* (€15.9) and baked *Scholle* (€15.9) was fairly massive and halibut-like. Shared starters of grilled *Garnelen* (shrimp) and a salad cost €8.50 and €2.80. The price of a 0.4 liter glass of Königspilsener was €2.90. Without beverages, we paid €49.9 for dinner for two with dessert.

Plenty of daylight still remained at 9:30pm, so a walk on the dike seemed in order. Even though it is no more than 30 or 40 feet above the sea, one has a sense of altitude and vast space from atop this sturdy embankment. Sheep sprawl on the grass-covered berm as it slopes to the water. A man with a complicated-looking camera and tripod squints west, toward the pink horizon. A couple sit cross-legged on a blanket and sip red wine. Other than the sheep, the photographer, and the wine drinkers, we are alone. The tide flats of the **Wattenmeer National Park** stretch far into the distance and reflect the limitless sky.

This is an unconventional kind of beauty. To the east, 30-foot metal blades of giant power-generating windmills turn slowly in the breeze. Some might see them as interlopers, but oddly enough their almost regal presence seems to enhance the peaceful but rather melancholy scene. Just before dark, as we head back to the hotel, a hedgehog scrambles across the road in front of us. Through the night, we keep the window in our room open. Other than the wind rippling the long grasses, there is hardly a sound to be heard.

Perhaps the best word for this unusual part of Germany is solitude — the kind found on mountain-tops and lonely beaches. It's good not only for the blood pressure, but for the soul. So just once, why not forgo the kitsch of southern Bavaria or the Black Forest for the charm and quiet of western Schleswig-Holstein and the Lundenbergsand?

**Daily Rates:** Singles €45-55, doubles €80-95

### Prepaid Travel Cards: A Hefty Price for Security

American Express has introduced a prepaid travel card as a way of allowing travelers to access cash when traveling. The main advantage is that the card is not tied to any bank account and if lost, will be replaced within 24 hours. Users "load" the card with dollars or foreign currency and then, while traveling, use it to get cash at ATMs or banks or to purchase goods and services. Some users report a shortage in the number of places where the cards are accepted, and there are also fees involved:

- Activation fee: \$14.95
- Reload fee: \$5.00
- Foreign exchange fee: 3%
- ATM withdrawal fee: \$2.50
- Printed monthly statement: \$5
- Overdraft fee: \$15
- Refund fee: \$10

Let's say you want to take €2,000 to Europe on a prepaid travel card. Assuming an exchange rate of €1 equals \$1.20, here's what it's going to cost: to load your card with €2,000 you'll need \$2,400 (the maxi-

mum is \$2,750), plus the \$14.95 activation fee, plus the 3 percent (\$72) foreign exchange fee, plus \$2.50 for each ATM withdrawal.

If you make four ATM withdrawals during your trip, the cost to access your own money is \$96.95. The card has an expiration date, and if after that date, you haven't used all the funds loaded into it, Amex will charge you \$10 to issue a refund. In addition, certain types of purchases — gas at an automated pump, for example — are prohibited.

Our advice remains unchanged: to obtain cash overseas, get an ATM card from a bank or credit union that charges no fee for overseas withdrawals. That way, the charge to access the same €2,000 is zero instead of \$96.95. Even Wells Fargo and Bank America, which charge \$5 per overseas ATM transaction, are a better deal than this new Amex product. And even though most add a 3 percent charge for foreign transactions, for larger overseas purchases we still like credit cards. You can accumulate miles, and for a few weeks you get to use somebody else's money. ☒

**Contact:** Hotel Lundenbergsand, Lundenbergweg 3, D-25813, tel. +49/04841/83930, fax 839350, [info@hotel-lundenbergsand.de](mailto:info@hotel-lundenbergsand.de), [www.hotel-lundenbergsand.de](http://www.hotel-lundenbergsand.de)

**Rating:** QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 14/20 ☒

## Travel Notes

■ **Learn to speak German:** Michel Thomas language courses, offered by publisher **Champs-Elysees, Inc.**, are audio-based programs, meaning no books or homework. Learn both at home and on the go. Courses include beginner, advanced, and a language-builder course. For those who already speak German and would like to brush up or maintain fluency, *Schau ins Land* monthly audio magazines are packed with news and features on German, Austrian, and Swiss life and culture. Contact: [www.champs-elysees.com](http://www.champs-elysees.com).

■ **FIS Alpine Ski World Cup St. Moritz Engadin 2006:** SkiEurope reports that January 20-22, 2006, the spotlight of international competition skiing will take place at St. Moritz. In

addition to the Super-G and downhill events, women athletes will for the first time also compete in a combination event. All three disciplines promise exciting races and outstanding pictures. ☒

## Readers' Forum

### Thumbs Up for Fraundorfer

After our return from a trip with our sons (ages 18 and 14 — their first trip), I never wrote to *Gemütlichkeit* about our experiences there. The September 2005 issue just arrived, and I read the letter from the Hylans about their disappointment with **Gasthof Fraundorfer** in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

We had a wonderful stay at the Fraundorfer in March 2005. My wife and I stayed there many years ago and had fond memories of the people, the place, and the food. Our two rooms were clean, although a bit small by American standards. We found the staff to be friendly and extremely helpful. Our German is poor at best, and they were willing to let

## MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE: A CHECKLIST FOR HIKERS

By Richard Davidson  
President, SkiEurope

The body becomes older, the knees a bit weaker, and one day we realize that, even without snow, mountains are still a powerful magnet. Hiking is the way to discover this world, and autumn is the best season. The days are still warm, but a bit crisp, and visibility is the best.

Switzerland is a top destination for hiking at all levels of difficulty. It's not terribly important which resort you choose; just be sure to read these tips before you go:

**Travel:** Using the enviably efficient Swiss Travel System, it is possible to hike over mountains into the next valley, then to return home by public transport. Alternatively, your baggage can travel while you hike and be waiting for you at your destination.

**Clothing:** There is no substitute for high-quality hiking boots. In addition, choose rugged hiking socks and wear them with sock liners to wick away moisture and minimize friction. Beyond the feet, my usual attire is simple: shorts or cutoffs and a T-shirt (with extras in my pack).

**Backpack:** My light pack ingeniously folds into itself making a small pouch for my suitcase. Into the pack goes at least one change of T-shirt, a sweatshirt or sweater, a light wind- and waterproof jacket, sun and lip protection, a couple of liters of water, some granola bars, and, of course, Swiss chocolate. A secure zip pocket stores passport, rail pass, and local money.

**Maps:** Due to extensive trail signposting, it's almost impossible to get lost. Nevertheless, a large-scale trail map is helpful for overall orientation. These can be found at newsstands, such as those in train stations, or at local tourist offices, which often publish a hiking brochure with trail descriptions.

**Weather:** In the mountains, conditions can change rapidly. Within minutes, clouds streaming over the peaks can transform a brilliant, sunny day into a cold, murky whiteout. Become accustomed to watching cloud buildups closely and ask local people to interpret the conditions and the outlook.

**Trails and Markings:** A useful feature of all Swiss trail signs is that they show times, rather than distances, (for example: Tannalp 1.5 *Stunde*/hours). These times are reasonable for average hikers, but do not allow for rest or scenery stops. There are four types of trails:

- *Wanderweg* are gentle paths that are suitable for everyone and often follow the valley floor. They are posted with plain yellow signs and may be marked along the route with yellow diamonds, blocks, or arrows.

- *Bergweg* are mountain trails that require good hiking boots and weather protection. They are posted with white-red-white and are marked along the trail with bands in these same colors.


- Alpine Routes are difficult, high-altitude trails that absolutely require mountain climbing gear and should not be attempted without experienced guides or companions. These trails are

marked with white-blue-white.

- *Via Ferrata*: In recent years, there has been rising concern about environmental damage by mountain climbers. In response, *Kletterstiege*, which are known as "Via Ferrata", have been installed on some peaks. These facilities have permanent climbing footholds and safety cabling, which can even be used by people without advanced climbing experience. Nonetheless, you still need a harness and other gear, a qualified guide or companion, and confidence to climb without vertigo or fear.

**Up, Down, or Both?** Almost every Swiss resort has summer lift service making it possible to achieve the same altitudes with a lot less effort. Adapt the length of your hike by hopping onto cable cars or chairlifts at various points along the trail, or take a lift up, then hike along the upper level.

**Local Hazards:** At medium altitudes, it's hard to hike without sharing the space with herds of ringing brown Swiss cows. This means giving special attention to their "output" on the path. Herds are allocated grazing space separated by innocuous-looking strips of woven plastic on slender poles. Beware! These are electrified, and can give a nasty tingle if you mistakenly grab one for balance. Special care is also essential going through gates in these electric fences.

**Armchair Adventure:** Read more about Richard Davidson's hike at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com). His trip report covers the Four Lake High Alpine Trail, from Engelberg to Stockalp. Visit SkiEurope ([www.ski-europe.com](http://www.ski-europe.com)) for ski packages and winter travel information. 

us try our German, then helped in German and English. Breakfasts were great — I don't know when I've seen so many kinds of jam. The evening meal, described as "typical Bayerisch," was wonderful. The kids danced to the traditional songs. And when we left, Frau Fraundorfer gave us a gift to commemorate our stay. We would definitely return there, and would recommend it to friends and family.

People's needs and expectations

differ, but I hope your readers will give Gasthof Fraundorfer a try.

JIM BERNARD  
VIA E-MAIL

### Lufthansa Upgrades

Our recent trip to Germany, Poland, and Lithuania was wonderful. Our stay at the **Art Nouveau** in Berlin couldn't have been nicer. The Schlenzkas family was helpful and friendly, and we really liked the neighborhood. Our car rental arrangements (booked through *Gemütli-*

*chkeit*) were flawless, despite a change in dates at the last minute.

A word about the **Lufthansa** upgrades: It was aggravating to us as well because my husband was trying to use upgrade certificates. He did finally get his upgrade but didn't know until the last minute. **United** will tell you at the time of booking if it's available and guarantee the upgrade.

SUSAN CLARK  
VIA E-MAIL 