

DEAR
SUBSCRIBER

The Planning Phase

These are trip planning days. Time to grapple with such issues as whether to travel by rail or car, where to book hotels to get the best rates, just which cities and regions to put on the itinerary, and that confusing business of trip insurance, do you need it and, if so, how much do you need.

Based on emails and phone calls to this office, there is a lack of awareness of available tools to facilitate these decisions.

A huge percentage of questions posed to us involve auto and train travel. Mrs. Smith, for example, wants to know whether she and her husband should travel in Germany by car or by rail. We can't answer that without knowing about the Smith's personal preferences, proposed itinerary, and their trip budget. In the course of 30 minutes or so, our trip planning people, for a fee, can gather the information and help Mrs. Smith come to a conclusion. But, given the right tools, she can easily do it herself. What she needs to know, in the context of her itinerary, are travel times, routes, train schedules, and costs.

She can email our car rental service (carrental@gemut.com) for a quote but a good rule of thumb is to figure about \$30 per day for a four-door rental car in Germany, plus fuel and parking. Rail pass prices are available at www.gemut.com.

That part is easy. But let's say Mrs. Smith wants to know the driving time vs. train travel time from Munich to Füssen, and the price of individual rail trips. Before the Internet, that information wasn't so easy to find. Now it's a snap.

Two Essential Websites

Michelin's travel website, www.viamichelin.com, and the Deutsche Bahn's www.bahn.de (be sure to click 'Internat. Guests' for the English

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

Charming Steyr

Off the beaten path, a historic little city intrigues travelers with its own special attractions and an Old World look and feel.

Austria's "Big Three"—Vienna-Salzburg-Innsbruck—get maximum attention among first-time and repeat visitors to the country. But just a hundred miles from Vienna, and even less from

Salzburg, the little city of Steyr (population 40,000) needs neither *Sachertorte* nor the *Sound of Music* to hold its own. An intriguing history, well-preserved architecture, and thriving industry set the scene.

After flowing through the hilly Traunviertel region of Upper Austria (Oberösterreich), the Steyr and Enns Rivers converge to form a sharp triangle of land where picturesque, walkable Steyr has stood for 1,000-plus

years. Rows of arcaded Renaissance, baroque, and rococo townhouses, crammed wall-to-wall, set the harmonious scene. For visual accentuation, massive **Schloss Lamberg**, dramatically floodlighted after nightfall, commands the heights of an adjacent promontory. The castle's foundations date from the 10th century, when Franconian-Bavarian Babenberger margraves ruled what ultimately became this northerly segment of imperial Austria-Hungary.

Trading rights were granted by Duke Albrecht I in 1287, boosting waterborne commerce (the Enns empties into the Danube 30 km / 18 mi north of town). Resulting prosperity goes a long way toward ex-

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Racing at Hockenheim

(The highlight of a high-calorie, high-octane tour of the Black Forest was a pit stop at Hockenheim last July 30 for a bit of world-class Sunday driving. Many thanks to Vertu and Ferrari for Ms. Itoi's unforgettable backstage visit.)

For 362 days of the year, the township of Hockenheim, pop. 20,000, is mostly nondescript farms and scraps of pine forest, just off the A6 between Heidelberg and Karlsruhe. It's only 60 miles from Frankfurt, but way off the tourist map—generally not worth even a pit stop. However, for a sweltering summer weekend, the population balloons over 100,000 as Hockenheim becomes the epicenter of the most glamorous motor sport on earth. And in this exclusive, *Gemütlichkeit* reports on the 2006 Formula 1

German Grand Prix directly from the paddocks of Team Ferrari itself, the second hottest seats in the house after world F1 driving champion Michael Schumacher's.

Actually, there really aren't any seats in the paddocks except for the pit crew. In the pits, where most races are won or lost, there is simply no room for error, and less for visitors. Gino Rosato, who might have been an NFL linebacker if he weren't so busy being point man for Ferrari's CEO, found us an out-of-the-way corner where we were somewhat less likely to be trampled to death by swarms of helmeted spacemen in red-orange jumpsuits.

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Exchange rates as of 2/26/2007

1 euro = \$1.32

1 Swiss franc = \$0.82

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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version) are indispensable to this process. Mrs. Smith will quickly discover there is hourly train service, that the one-way cost, if she's thinking point-to-point tickets instead of a rail pass, is €20.8, and that the trip takes just over two hours. If she wants, she can book tickets at the site which also has complete timetables for all the railroads of Europe. Want to know about a train trip from Bucharest to Paris? Provided you know to use the word Bucuresti and not Bucharest, the timetable feature of this German Rail website will tell you it can be done in about 35 hours with one change of trains. But you won't find the price here. Fares for most international trips are not computed at any of the national rail websites. More on that in a minute.

At Viamichelin.com Mrs. Smith learns the driving time from Munich to Füssen is one hour and 40 minutes and the distance is 133km (83 miles). She'll also get a zoom-in, zoom-out map and a suggested routing with links to Michelin-recommended hotels at the destination.

These two websites should be bookmarked in every Europe traveler's browser. Register free at Viamichelin and all your route plans and maps will be saved, no need to reconstruct them. Mrs. Smith will also find the same listings of hotels and restaurants contained in the *Michelin Red Guide* series as well as the recommended sights, including descriptions and maps, from

the Michelin Green Travel Guide series. Suppose she wants to know what to see in and around Füssen? At Viamichelin.com she clicks Tourism/Michelin Travel Guide, then selects Germany and types 'Füssen' in the city field. That brings up a list of 29 sights Michelin deems worthwhile plus a map of the region spotted with the same 29 sights. Clicking on sight number eight she is presented with a paragraph of information about the two-star Wieskirche, its address, phone, fax, times open to the public, and a link to its website. This is probably the single most useful website for the European traveler.

Another part of the planning process that stumps many rail travelers is determining whether it's cheaper to buy a pass or individual city-to-city tickets. In order to make that call you must first know the cost of both. The prices for the myriad of rail passes is easy to find; just go to www.gemut.com and click "Buy a European Rail Pass." Getting the price of individual tickets is harder. Though the websites of Europe's national railroads provide ticket prices for travel within their own countries, it's a different story when the trip involves crossing borders. For example, the Swiss railroad's website (www.rail.ch) has schedules but no prices for a Zürich-Munich trip. For trips involving more than one country your best bet is a U.S.-based online seller of point-to-point tickets such as www.gemut.com or www.raileurope.com. For long trips that involve train changes you might

have to get creative. You won't find a price anywhere that I know of for the Bucharest-Paris trip. However, if you break your search into segments — Bucharest-Vienna, Vienna-Munich, Munich-Paris—you'll get an idea of the cost. With this information you can determine whether you need a multi-country rail pass or just individual tickets. Unfortunately, some point-to-point journeys simply can't be booked here in the U.S.

Of course there are many other websites with reliable, useful info. The U.K.-based www.seat61.com, for example. The work of one man, Mark Smith, a former British railroad employee, Seat61.com will answer just about any question you can dream up on European rail travel.

Finally, I still keep close at hand Michelin Red and Green Guides, a MaxiAtlas for Germany, 1:200,000 scale maps for Austria and Switzerland, and a Langenscheidt English-Deutsch dictionary. I use 'em every day.—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

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User Name: yrts Password: 8338

Vol. 21, No. 2
March 2007
GEMÜTLICHKEIT
The Travel Letter for Germany, Austria, Switzerland & the New Europe

Publishers: Robert H. & Elizabeth S. Bestor
Executive Editor: Nikki Goth Itoi
Contributors: Tom Bross
Lydia Itoi
Consulting Editor: Thomas P. Bestor
Online Services: Kurt Steffans
Subscriber Travel Services: Andy Bestor, Laura Riedel

Gemütlichkeit (ISSN 10431756) is published 10 times each year by UpCountry Publishing, 288 Ridge Road, Ashland OR 97520. TOLL FREE: 1-800/521-6722 or 541/488-8462, fax: 541/488-8468, e-mail travel@gemut.com. Web site: www.gemut.com. Subscriptions are \$67 per year for 10 issues. While every effort is made to provide correct information, the publishers can make no guarantees regarding accuracy.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO:
Gemütlichkeit, 288 Ridge Road., Ashland OR 97520

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

STEYR*Continued from page 1*

plaining rich details noticeable on structures surrounding the elliptical **Stadtplatz**. Tallest amidst the ensemble: the slender white belfry of Steyr's mid-18th-century **Rathaus**, a can't-miss landmark featuring a ro-coco-encrusted façade and ornamental balustrades.

For late-Gothic contrast, cross the cobblestone-paved *Platz* for close-up looks at the pointy-gabled, impeccable preserved **Bummerlhaus**, a burgher's residence long ago, then an inn, now a VKB bank. Of 15th-century Gothic vintage, too: Pfarrgasse's **Parish Church** (illuminated by a brilliant pair of stained-glass windows revering the Virgin Mary) and, on Kirchengasse, the **Dunklhof** house with its truly Old World courtyard. Two rock-solid gateways—**Schnallentor** (1613) and **Neutor** (1573)—“guard” inner-city perimeters. Looming above riverfront embankments, twin clock towers surmount 1647's **Michaelerkirche**, its curved pediment adorned with an allegorical fresco assuring believers that Archangel Michael vanquished devilish Lucifer. Inside, altarpiece artistry repeats the Archangel theme.

Steyr's compact cityscape, developed over the centuries on three fairly steep terraces, is interconnected by 119 bridges and catwalks, so roaming around always reveals different perspectives and hidden-away nooks and crannies.

Making Music and Forging Iron

A commemorative marker on the Stadtplatz's **Paumgartner** housefront informs us that Franz Schubert stayed here on three separate occasions (1819, 1823, 1825). The murmuring and splashing of Steyr's two rivers doubtlessly inspired his *Trout Quintet*, as well as the A-major piano sonata. Six decades later, composer Anton Bruckner enjoyed a sojourn in the Parish Church's rectory, a peaceful-enough time for him to play the organ and complete his monumental A-major *Sixth Symphony*.

Steyr Basics**Population:** 39,495**Elevation:** 310 meters (1,017 feet)**Protected Historic Buildings:** 450**Visitor Information:** Tourismusverband Steyr, Stadtplatz 27, A-4402 Steyr, tel. +43/07252/53229, fax 53229-15, info@tourism-steyr.at, www.tourism-steyr.at**Driving Distances:**

Vienna	164km/102 miles
Linz	40km/25 miles
Salzburg	132km/72 miles
Innsbruck	320km/199 miles
Munich	275km/169 miles
Prague	299km/184 miles
Zürich	590km/366 miles
Frankfurt	579km/360 miles
Berlin	758km/472 miles

Rail: Hourly service from Vienna, trip time is 2:11. From Salzburg there are about a dozen trains daily. Trip times vary from 2:02 to 2:45. Nearly all trains from both directions change at St. Valentin.

Nearest Airport Flughafen Linz-Hörsching (a.k.a. Blue Danube Airport, code LNZ)

Guided Sightseeing: Two-hour walk through the *Altstadt* includes Schloss Lamberger's *Bibliothek* (one of Austria's largest private libraries; rare prints, 11,000 books). Saturdays, April through October (€6 per adult).

Major Events in 2007:

May 4-20, International Schubert Festival (since 2002)

June 22-August 24, Friday Trumpet Concerts, Schloss Lamberger courtyard

June 23-24 Steyr Stadtfest

July 26-August 18, Steyr Music Festival

Les Misérables (open-air Schlossgraben)

Gluck's operatic *Orpheus und Eurydice*

(Alten Theater)

November 23-December 17, Christkindlmarkt along Promenadenallee

Excursion: A drive south to Austria's forested **Kalkalpen National Park**, its 3,000-meter/9,000-foot mountains embedded with iron-ore deposits and a prime destination for hikers, bicyclists and cross-country skiers, takes about half an hour.

Considering those tuneful grace notes and the picture-perfect urban panoramics, Steyr's longtime industrial prominence might come as a surprise. Ironworks, in fact, were established as early as the 14th century. That led to muskets, pistols, and carbines being turned out by the thousands for Europe's military battalions. Entrepreneur Josef Wendl made firearms assembly a leading economic enterprise during the mid-19th century, with Mannlicher emerging as one of Europe's most-recog-

nized brands.

Meanwhile, the continent's first-ever electric streetlights (hydropowered by the two rushing rivers) were switched on in 1884.

Tractors, trucks, and (as of 1926) zippy Puch mopeds have been locally produced. In east-side Münchenholz, a plant (open for tours) manufactures engines for BMW automobiles. The city's industrial activity came at the price of World War II air raids, the heaviest coming on February 23, 1944. Two Stadtplatz buildings, hit by stray bombs, were destroyed, afterwards replaced by ambitiously blended-in 1950s structures. Streetfront plaques on each of them tell the story.

Toward the war's end in May 1945, the bridge spanning the Enns became the meeting point of the Soviet Red army's 5th guards parachute unit and the 751st tank battalion of the Americans' 71st infantry division. Two months of joint Russian/U.S. occupation followed.

Austria's Christmas Village

An epileptic local bandmaster's miraculous recovery led to construction of 1725's *echt-Barock*, richly gilded *Christkindl Pilgrimage Church*, 3 km/1.86 mi southwest of the *Immenstadt*. Gaze high upward toward the dome fresco, a vision of the Assumption painted by Johann Carl von Reslfeld. Visitors come from far beyond for seasonal viewings of the parsonage's enormous Pöttmesser nativity scene (778 figures!) and a Biblical diorama populated by 300 linden-carved creatures, made mechanically moveable by Karl Klaunder's intricate system of bicycle chains, gears, and shafts. Deluged by mail during each year's Advent season, the village's tiny post office nevertheless manages to Christkindl-postmark more than two million cards and letters.

Right in town, a former hospital now houses Austria's first **Christmas museum**, displaying Elfriede Kreuzberger's collection of 14,000 Yuletide decorations dating from as early as 1830, plus doll houses and

200 puppets. As expected, a huge *Tannenbaum* fir tree stands at mid-point on the Stadtplatz, a setting (strung with thousands of lights) for caroling and trumpet concerts. Narrow, north-branching Enge Gasse ranks as Steyr's swankiest pedestrian lane, favored by shoppers for leather goods, fashion attire, and handicrafts.

Steyr Hotels

Landhotel Mader

Separated by an arcaded courtyard, two circa-1694 Renaissance buildings originating as side-by-side inns now function appealingly as four-star lodgings in the very heart of Steyr. Floral-print draperies and crisp white curtains brighten each of 56 individually furnished guest-rooms; doubles are especially large. Warm-weather outdoor dining in the courtyard's Schanigarten is a delight. Indoor spaces include a stone-vaulted wine cellar, also the rustic Altwirt Stube and elegant Schubertstüberl.

Daily Rates: Singles €72-86, doubles €114-140

Contact: Landhotel Mader, A-4400 Steyr, Stadtplatz 36, tel. +43/7252/53358, fax 53358-6, mader@mader.at, www.mader.at

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 15/20

Stadthotel Styria

Another on-the-Stadtplatz, four-star choice occupies a 400-year-old heritage building. Inside are such niceties as a cedar timber-beam ceiling above the colonnaded breakfast parlor, embellished with a fresco depicting Steyr's medieval fortifications. Spacious, floral-carpeted guestrooms (39 overall, plus suites) are adorned with antique framed graphics. Daylight shines through deep-set window arches that muffle sounds from outside. A stairway leads down to convivial Café Styria in the hotel's arcade. A Turkish steam bath and Finnish sauna are onsite, too.

Daily Rates: Singles €81.75, doubles €121.5

Contact: Stadthotel Styria, A-4400, Steyr, Stadtplatz 40-42, tel. +43/

7252/51551, fax 51551-51, info@styriahotel.at, www.styriahotel.at

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 14/20

Romantikhotel Minichmayr

Run by Ingo and Isabella Vier-
tler with personal attentive-
ness for each guest, this 40-
room charmer (built in 1534 and sub-
tly modernized) gets an A+ for its
location—at the confluence of Steyr's
two rivers, resulting in terrific views
from the window-walled Panorama
restaurant (Gault Millau and Chaîne
de Rotisseurs membership). For so-
cializing: the lantern-lit Flösserstube,
beneath a painted 100-year-old
wooden ceiling. In each white-tiled
bathroom, slippers and terrycloth
robes await guests' arrival. Sleeping
quarters are Biedermeier-furnished
and accessorized. For unwinding,
Minichmayr's Wellness-Oasis pro-
vides sauna, steam bath, aromathera-
py, solarium, massage, whirlpool,
and fitness/cross-training gear.

Postwar tidbit: Russian officers made Minichmayr their headquarters during the occupation, while their American counterparts settled into Schloss Lamberg.

Daily Rates: Singles €73-82, doubles €115-128

Contact: Romantikhotel Minich-
mayr, A-4400 Steyr, Haratzmüller-
strasse 1-3, tel. +43/7252/53410, fax
48202, office@hotel-minichmayer.at,
web www.hotel-minichmayer.at

Rating: QUALITY 17/20, VALUE 16/20

Landhotel Eckhard

Staying in Steyr's verdant out-
skirts is doable if you're traveling by
car. Johannes and Ursula Eckhard's
country hotel in St. Ulrich, 4 km/2.5
mi south of town, adjoins a reservoir
and nestles in hiking terrain that
slopes up to the Damberg mini-
mountain, topped by the Damberg-
warte lookout point. Blond furnish-
ings and paneling prevail in the 33
guestrooms; a fireplace warms the
restaurant, which alternates with
seasonal dining on the sun terrace;
spa and fitness facilities are complete.

Daily Rates: Singles €62-72, doubles €94-114

Contact: Landhotel Eckhard, A-4451

St. Ulrich/Steyr, Eisenstrasse 94, tel.
+43/7252/52326, fax 48528,
eckhard@eisenstrasse.at,
www.hotel-eckhard.at

Rating: QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 14/20

Gasthof Pöchhacker

On a hillside above the Steyr
River, just a bit northwest of the city
center, this modest little two-story
place deserves attention for its
gemütlich hominess and economical
prices, which include breakfast. Bath-
rooms are surprisingly huge; beech-
wood bedroom furniture is quality-
made; each room (25 total, with
smoking/nonsmoking choices) fea-
tures TV and radio. No-frills means
no-elevator, but a riverview *Gastgar-
ten* shaded by chestnut trees compen-
sates as an enjoyable amenity.

Daily Rates: Singles €36-38, doubles €60-112

Contact: Gasthof Pöchhacker, A-
4400 Steyr, Sierninger Strasse 122,
tel. +43/7252/731/730, fax 7313,
gasthof.poechhacker@aon.at,
www.gasthof-poechhacker.at

Rating: QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 14/20

Steyr Restaurants

Schwechaterhof

Next to west-side Steyr's Stadt-
farrkirche at Brucknerplatz, a former
brewery-turned-*Gasthof* (in 1835) now
functions cheerfully as Wolfgang
Pötzl's old-fashioned restaurant. This
popular family hangout comprises
three dining rooms. Best of the trio:
the woodsy Bürgerstube, unashamedly
kitschy, complete with an an-
tique porcelain-tile stove and chain-
hung light fixtures. An ample beer
garden, complete with the inevitable
leafiness of chestnut trees and pour-
ing Feldschlossen Hopfenperle beer
vom Fass (on tap), turns buzzy and
oom-pah-tuneful in balmy weather.

Main courses feature regional
Schmankerl specialties. Your chance
to taste-test sliced morsels of turkey
doused in beer sauce, accompanied
by homemade, truly Austrian *Knödel*
potato dumplings (€10.80). If not
that, choose the braised beef cutlet
with baked potatoes and onions
(€10.80, too), or a mixed *Feuerspitz*
grill blending pork, beef and turkey

(€11). Or opt for a choice of fish (pike-perch, trout, €12.50).

Contact: Schwechaterhof, Leopold-Werndl-Strasse 1, tel. +43/7252/53067, fax 477054, office@schwechaterhof.at, www.schwechaterhof.at

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 16/20

Rahofer Café Restaurant

Make your way through one of innermost Steyr's courtyards to reach a Viennese-type *Kaffeehaus* sharing attractively decorated space with a chic eatery devoted primarily to Italian/Mediterranean cuisine. Opened in 1980, stone-floored and candlelit for rusticity, the intimate restaurant section (accommodating 25-30 customers) has earned a coveted Gault-Millau *toque* for culinary excellence and a connoisseur-caliber wine list. Main courses range €12.50-23. Among those: carpaccio with risotto and mushroom salad (€13), selected portions of garlic-buttered scampi (€10.50-12.50) and noodles/mushrooms (€12.50).

Contact: Café Restaurant Rahofer, Stadtplatz 9, 4400 Steyr, tel: +43/7252/54606, fax 54606, cafe-rahofer@liwest.at, www.restaurant-rahofer.at

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 15/20

knapp am eCK

It's on a Steyr River island, reached by a network of pathways and footbridges, that Josef Wernl developed his 19th-century armaments factories—long since transformed into an architecturally modernistic complex housing the city's influential technical school. So expect a predominantly young crowd at Josi, Otto and Jürgen Klement's small, chatty *Wirsthaus*. Two traditional *oberösterreichischer* on the menu are recommended: *Rogl-Strohsau* roast-pork file (€13.50) and a hefty bowl of *Beuscherl* soup cooked with veal and lamb (€4.80).

Contact: knapp am eCK, Wehrgrabengasse 15, 4400 Steyr, tel. +43/7252/76269, fax 749/904, wirsthaus@knappameck.at, www.knappameck.at

Rating: QUALITY 10/20, VALUE 12/20

Schlossrestaurant Lamberg

A good reason to ramble through the *Schlosspark*, high above the cityscape's rivers, rooftops, steeples and towers is to linger over a midday meal in the castle's aristocratic restaurant—memorable because this high-ceiling Baroque dining hall was originally the rulers' horse stables. Some tables, in fact, are set inside the former stalls, each with their fanciful wrought-iron enclosures.

Among much-requested entrées are *Bratl in der Rein*, marinated pork loin pot roast served with cabbage and bread dumplings (€12.20) and *Knödlgemischt*, dumplings with sauerkraut (€7.80). Overall, meat dishes range €7.80-15.80, unless you'd prefer file of trout (€10.50).

Contact: Schlossrestaurant Lamberg, Berggasse 2, 4400 Steyr, tel. +43/7252/48675, fax 486/7513, schloss@ooenet.at

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 14/20

Christkindlwirt Baumgartner

In the charming Christmas village, right next to the post office, the Baumgartner's balconied restaurant, here since 1972, opens onto sweeping views of the broad Weisser Heide meadows and Steyr River valley. Full-course lunches and dinners range €9.50-10.60 (except for top-of-the-list roast duck with dumplings and cabbage, €11); vegetarian meals range €5.90-8.90. For dessert, try not resisting the house specialty: *Cremeschnitten* layer cake (€2.20).

Contact: Christkindlwirt, Christkindlweg 6, 4400 Steyr, tel. +43/7252/52184, fax 52346, christkindlwirt@aon.at, www.christkindlwirt.at

Rating: QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 15/20

Coffee Break on the Platz

Six Konditorei-Bakery-Cafés are essential to the city center's pleasant ambiance: **Fröhlich** (Stadtplatz 28), **Hohlrieder** (Stadtplatz 17), **Luxor** (Stadtplatz 6), **Postmann** (Stadtplatz 13), **Schmidt** (Stadtplatz 1), **Segafredo-Espresso** (Stadtplatz 39). ☒

HOCKENHEIM

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Outside, fans filled the grandstands as uniformed racetrack babes pranced around the starting grid. There were a few spots of baby blue Finnish flags supporting MacLaren driver Kimi Raikkonen and teal blue Renault colors for defending champion Fernando Alonso, but for the most part, the Hockenheimring is a roiling sea of Ferrari red. Celebrities and VIPs get a closer look at the cars, and I spotted a TV crew interviewing Nikki Lauda. The former three-time world champion still bears the battle scars from his terrible 1976 accident at Nürburgring, Germany's other fabled circuit. That incident helped lead to the F1 German Grand Prix's return to Hockenheim.

Hockenheim's long racing pedigree goes back to the 1930s, when Mercedes-Benz turned a motorcycle track and backwoods roads into a test circuit. Within a few years, the original triangular raceway became a long oval that blazed a famously high-speed loop through the Black Forest

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.travelessentials.com Guidebooks, maps, travel accessories, luggage, all at 10 percent off for subscribers. Use discount code gemut2006.
- www.webflyer.com Informative frequent-flyer forums make this a must for air travelers.
- 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 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.
- www.historicgermany.com Website for an alliance of historic German cities.
- www.thetravelinsider.info Info on electronic devices used by travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

before sweeping back into town. War, new highway construction, safety issues, and the demands of modern spectator sports have brought several modifications, and the latest Herman Tilke-designed incarnation was opened in 2002. This new track design reflects F1's current preoccupation with slowing the cars down—if they were any faster, they'd take flight. Traditionalists mourned the passing of the days when men were men and thought nothing about hurtling through silent forests in attempts to warp the space-time continuum. (Two drivers have lost their lives on the old track in the process.) Today's shorter, 4.574km/2.842 mile Hockenheimring may no longer have those atmospheric tree-lined straightaways or turns through the village graveyard, but it still lets cars get over 200 mind-rattling miles per hour and has capacity for 120,000 rabid Schumacher fans.

It feels like twice that number have shown up for the weekend, and the roads into town are completely jammed. Many don't have tickets, but they stay for the party anyway. Hockenheim's cornfields have temporarily sprouted Winnebagos, souvenir stands, and impromptu beer gardens in the shadow of a vast encampment of racing team trucks and trailers. "Schumi's" popularity and performance have turned Hockenheim into Germany's biggest tailgate for the past 10 years. As it turns out, 2006 could be the last Schumacher homecoming. In July, F1's regulating body announced that from now on the German Grand Prix would alternate between Nürburgring and Hockenheim, and the 2007 race will take place at Nürburgring. Later Schumacher himself, seven-time world champion and the most successful F1 driver in history, would announce that he's retiring after the season.

As extraordinary as Schumacher is, even he doesn't win on his own. A regulation 2.4 liter V8 engine that can pump out 800 bhp at almost 20,000 rpm isn't the only well-oiled machine you need to win in Formula One. You need about 60 of them, each designed to last for only a few hours, plus a crack crew of design engineers and

fanatical roadies who could probably assemble a fighter jet from scratch in 30 seconds blindfolded. Formula One is also the world's most expensive and technologically demanding sport. To organize and finance all of this, you need a formidable organization that could teach NASA a thing or two about high-tech logistics. They may hail from Marinello, but Team Ferrari is a modern-day Roman invading army, sweeping everything out of its path with its technical and organizational muscle.

In the moments before the big race, the pits look like intense chaos, but it's carefully choreographed chaos. One knot of mechanics swarms over the cars, waiting to the last minute to whip off the puffy covers from the Bridgestone tires. Someone holds an umbrella over Schumacher as he pulls on his helmet, receiving

The car merely seemed to vanish into another clap of thunder — tires changed, tank filled.

final words of encouragement from Ferrari CEO Jean Todt. Just before the starting flag, the engines are roaring over the crowd, but the pits are finally quiet, almost relaxed. Everybody settles into their seats because everything is as ready as it can ever get.

Then the light changes. All at once, the surrounding Black Forest is practically uprooted by the searing howl of 22 apocalyptic riders launching off the starting grid. In the trenches, you don't watch the race—the crew watches a live video feed—you FEEL it. You feel the air and your inadequately protected eardrums shattering under the pressure of a solid wall of sound. You feel the ground shaking and your nose burning from fumes and incinerating rubber. You feel the tension in the room as every team member strains at the monitors, willing their man to get to the corner first. I for one felt a rabbit's instinct to dive into the nearest safe burrow when hawks are screaming overhead.

I won't go into the details of the race since I'm not a sportswriter and it took me a while to pry my eyes back open. But when the dust finally settled from the starting rush, the two Ferraris were pulling easily ahead. On the first lap, Ralf Schumacher, Michael's brother, ran into David Coulthard, and the two BMW Saubers ran into each other. Raikkonen, who started in pole position just ahead of Schumacher and Massa's red Ferraris, had to drop back because MacLaren had accidentally put too little gas in his tank, forcing an extra pit stop. We saw him blaze down the pit lane three times, and when his crew struggled a few extra moments with a wingnut, the Ferrari team politely looked away. Defending world champion and 2006 leader Fernando Alonso limped along on his blistered Michelins as the Ferraris continued to sweep around the circuit, leaving behind 67 laps of scorched earth.

If the race looked easy, it was thanks to perfect engineering, planning, and execution. I never saw any outward signal, but somehow the crew knew when to get up in a body and take their places in the pit. One of the Ferraris would come screeching to a halt, there would be a wild frenzy of activity for some six or seven seconds, and then everyone would be back in their chairs again, some even catnapping between stops. The car merely seemed to vanish into another clap of thunder—tires changed, tank filled. In slow motion, the frenzy would look like grease monkey ballet. This has to be the best mechanic shop on earth, the absolute last word in the technology of speed. It's also the cleanest—I sat on a tool chest and came away after two hours with not a smudge on my white slacks. I only wish I could bring my car here for service.

The pit crew's battle-hardened composure exploded when Schumacher crossed the finish line first, followed by his teammate Massa and then by Raikkonen, Jenson Button, and Alonso. We found ourselves swept up in a tidal wave of red-shirted euphoria as the crew rushed for the podium to be showered with champagne. The crowd nearly

crushed me against the rail as Schumacher climbed out of his triumphal car only a few feet away. Grown men, including the giant Gino and our friend Ralf, were jumping up and down and climbing the walls like children. Clearly, the fact that Schumi had won so many victories didn't make his 89th any less special. July 30, 2006 would go down as a perfect day at the races for Ferrari and Germany's favorite son.

Hockenheim Hotels

If you decide to go to Hockenheim, book your room as early as possible. Nearby hotels, none of which offer much in the way of atmosphere or amenities, may be almost entirely booked by the racing teams. The Holiday Inn Walldorf, for example, seemed to have been taken over by Ferrari. A small crowd had staked out the parking lot in hopes of catching a glimpse of their hero, and you could only enter if you were a guest of the hotel or a guest of Ferrari. Of course, hotels often take Grand Prix to mean especially high rates to apply just for that weekend. To find lower rates, you may be better off staying farther afield and spending more time driving in. You can always camp in the cornfields to cut down on traffic time.

Hotel Mondial

Frankly, the only reason for travelers to stay here is its convenience to Hockenheim or other events. It is reasonably clean, modern, functional, and reasonably friendly as a small business hotel, but in the middle of a characterless suburb. We stayed here only because all rooms were taken in Heidelberg. Common areas, while not warm or particularly inviting, are well maintained and only slightly worn. We were offered a welcome drink at the bar, which is part of the narrow front lobby. Since there is no night clerk, guests must take keys with them if they go out at night. Bike rental and shuttle service to the business park are also available.

Room 303 was on the street side of a light-filled gray corridor. However, the combination of no air conditioning, no shade, and black cotton cur-

tains created an unbearable oven on what had to be the hottest weekend of the summer. I would recommend getting a room overlooking the back yard. There is a rooftop sauna with a terrace, but the sauna in our room was more than sufficient.

Clean and otherwise comfortable, the stark black-and-white, vaguely Art-Deco-ish décor was quite masculine. There was a double twin bed, and two small black leather chairs. The bathroom, equipped with a tub, shower, sink, and hairdryer, was also done in contemporary black tile with fluorescent tube lighting and mirrors. A mini bar, built-in clock radio and wall desk, TV, dial-up internet, and ironing board rounded out the equipment.

The breakfast buffet, which was included in our rate, was served in the dining room, done with basic white walls, blue carpet, and black and gray upholstered chairs. The nicest part of the hotel was its small homey back yard, with a child's swing set and a few toys under the trees. Apparently, the hotel sometimes arranges backyard barbecues there. Had it not been for the exceptional Grand Prix prices, the hotel would have been a reasonable value.

Contact: Hotel Mondial, Schwetzingenstrasse 123, 69168 Weisloch, tel. +49 /622/2 57 60, fax +49 /622/2 57 63 33, info@mondial-wiesloch.de, www.mondial-wiesloch.de

Daily Rates: Standard singles from €90-120, standard double from €110-140. Weekend rates are generally about 20 percent lower, unless it is racing weekend, in which case it is €177.

Rating: QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 13/20

Hockenheim Restaurants

Since we ate mainly frankfurters and ice cream at the racetrack, we had little opportunity to explore the gastronomic offerings of Wiesloch or Hockenheim itself. However, we did go to the following restaurants within easy driving distance—if you're Michael Schumacher in a Ferrari.

Frankfurter Haus

I love it when a local friend takes me to a place where slightly batty

locals enthusiastically serve local food to local folk. The night before the race, our Frankfurter friend Ralf and his lovely wife met us in this popular beer garden in the suburb of Neu-Isenberg for a crock of Possmann *apfelwein* (apple wine, €3.25 for a pint) and traditional Frankfurter dishes. Parking is plentiful, but only if you are a regular with a nice car. The somewhat eccentric owner spends all her time directing parking lot traffic, and it takes some time for Ralf to position his Porsche to her satisfaction alongside the fleet of BMWs and Audis. Our rental Megane doesn't make the cut and is waved out to the street.

Once out of the lot, all chi-chi pretension drops away, and everyone sits at wooden tables under big square umbrellas drinking beer and eating big portions of honestly cooked food. Ralf insisted we spike the somewhat weak, sticky *Apfelwein* with sparkling water, a dubious improvement. Their favorite dish was the classic boiled beef (*Tafelspitz*, €14.80) served with boiled potatoes, sliced carrots and celery root moistened with a ladleful of the hot cooking liquid. Bowls of sauerkraut and Frankfurt green sauce, which tastes somewhat like a green Tartar sauce made of chopped herbs and hard boiled egg, were served on the side. The best dish was the *Spanferkelbraten*, thick baby pork chops with a thick, super-crunchy crackling, served with sliced stuffing and rich, natural meat juices. (€13.90). They also listed hard-to-find dishes like roast goose and beers were €2.50-3.50. Desserts (average €5) included an excellent *Rote Gruze* or red berry pudding with vanilla cream and a very curious savory dessert called "Handkäse mit 'Musik'" ("hand cheese with 'music'"). This consisted of a soft, fresh square of cheese covered with chopped raw onion and caraway seeds and served with a tiny side salad. Go figure.

No culinary fireworks, but good-quality, old-fashioned food at a reasonable price in a historic inn and beer garden with a convivial atmosphere. Near a large park. This is a good stop for people driving down to Hockenheim from Frankfurt.

HOCKENHEIM*Continued from page 7*

Contact: Frankfurter Haus, Darmstädter Landstr. 741, 63263 Neu-Isenberg (just south of Frankfurt), tel. +49/610/231 466, fax 232 6899

info@frankfurter-haus.de

www.frankfurter-haus.de


Rating: QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 14/20

Palmbräu Haus

Snarled traffic inspired an unscheduled pit stop in Eppingen on the way back to Stuttgart. We found a pleasant enough haven at Palmbräu Haus, a nice and moderately priced eatery with garden tables in summer. It's located in a peach stucco and limestone building across from one of the several half-timbered houses in downtown Eppingen. The restaurant is rather charming, filled with curios and photos. The food is unreconstructed regional cooking—another workmanlike meal of just slightly lower quality than Frankfurter Haus. We chose just one course each. The best was the pork chops (€16.80) in a fresh chanterelle cream sauce, although I suspect the "house" *Spätzle* of being ready-made and the sauce made with a commercial base. There was also *Zweibelrostbraten vom Rumpsteak*, a thin, slightly overcooked but still tender escallop of beef smothered with braised onion and meat juices and yet more *Spätzle* (€15.80). Appetizers and soups ranged from €3.80-9.80, while main courses were €12-20.

We felt the food was a bit overpriced for what it was, although it was quite decent quality. We left satisfied if a little underwhelmed. Still, the traffic jam was all cleared up by the time we left.

Contact: Palmbräu Haus, Rappenauser Strasse 5, 75031 Eppingen, tel. +49/726/28 422, Artur Weber family

Rating: QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 11/20 

Readers' Forum**First Time in Hamburg**

Recently, we visited two related couples in Hamburg, whom we first met in Tuscany. In fact, we've stayed with them at same inn, at same time,

in three different years—what a small world. Turns out, they live in two of Hamburg's premier locations. One couple has a house on the Elbe, and the other a penthouse overlooking the downtown. We enjoyed a day-and-a-half-long tour that few would ever see without being with locals. This trip was our first time in Hamburg, and we found it an extremely impressive city. With more upscale shopping than Berlin, it's easy to believe that Hamburg is the most affluent city in Europe. We stayed in the suburbs at **Landhaus Flottbek**—very nice at about \$190 per night.

BILL BOHNHOFF
VIA E-MAIL

Munich Hotels

My wife and I just spent a few days in Munich during Oktoberfest and stayed at the **Hotel Asam**. We've stayed there several times before and have always enjoyed our stays. On a previous trip, we tried the **Hotel Acanthus** and feel that for two couples, the Asam is a better value if you can take advantage of the suites. The Asam is in a wonderful location and the Saupers have always provided us with wonderful service. While its increased nightly rate at the Euro conversion makes it less of a value when compared to your last review, we still consider it our home in Munich. Thanks for turning us on to it in one of your Munich reviews several years ago.

Also, I'd like to pass on a hearty recommendation for the **Hotel Neu-Meran** in Bad Reichenhall. Upon our departure from Munich, we had no specific plans other than to spend a few days in southern Bavaria. Apparently, Münchners all had the same idea because we had a hard time finding accommodations. After several phone calls, we struck gold with the Neu-Meran—quiet and beautiful location, fantastic staff, and a very *gemütlich* apartment-style room complete with ceramic *Kachelofen*. The Neu-Meran was listed in your hotel reviews database but without any quality or value ratings. If you trust our reviews, I'd give high marks for both. Stamp it Editor's Choice!

Once again, your hotel database has proven invaluable to our travels. Consider us subscriber's for life.

BRIAN HILL
BURKE, VIRGINIA

(Ed. Note: Thanks for the kind words. We've long sung the Neu-Meran's praises. Visit www.gemut.com/content/view/248/192/ or see the May 2001 issue online.)

Long Stay in the Swabian Alb

We recently spent 15 days in the Swabian Alb—primarily for genealogical research. We stayed in one hotel the entire time and made day trips to my various ancestral villages. While we have been in this area several times before, we have never done it in this manner. My paternal family (my maiden name is Appenzeller) settled here in the 1200s from St. Gallen.

We stayed in the **Hotel Krone** (email: s.erat@t-online.de) a small family-owned (since 1888) hotel in upper Haigerloch. Staying in one place for 15 nights could have been deadly – luckily, it wasn't.

We had a large double room (all rooms have been recently renovated) for €69 a night including a full breakfast. The owner of the hotel is the cook. He is known in the area for his cooking - mostly Swabian recipes. We took half-pension because we knew we would be out most of the day and wanted to just come back and not have to decide on our dinner. He does not speak much English but his wife does. The half-pension cost €15 for three and sometimes four courses. We settled our bill the night before we left as departure was very early in the morning. After paying, we said we would stay and have a drink. The owner would not let us - insisting it was on them. I asked if there would be somewhere to get some coffee in the morning. She said don't worry. At 5 a.m. when I opened our door, I found a tray loaded with coffee, rolls, butter, jam, sausage, cheese, yogurt, two hard boiled eggs and two apples! If one is doing the Alb, this is an excellent central location.

JOAN GOEDEN
VIA E-MAIL 