

**DEAR  
SUBSCRIBER**

### **Deals, Deals, Deals**

The year 2009 already seems destined to be remembered for many things; a new president, bailouts, deficits, unemployment, foreclosures, and failing banks and businesses. We may also look back on '09 as the best year to visit Europe since the euro became Western Europe's currency in 2002. In fact, the travel opportunities may be even better than that. Almost everything is on sale and the year is just underway.

- As this is written on the last day of February, the major airlines have slashed fares to Europe. I just saw a \$472 fare from San Francisco to Frankfurt for travel in the month of May on **Northwest**. It wasn't long ago that fuel surcharges on some transatlantic flights were above \$400. June fares are still over \$1,000 but in another month those numbers may come down.

- **Lufthansa** is offering attractive business-class discounts for summer travel starting at \$2,036, not including taxes and fees.

- Paying cash for frequent flyer miles is usually not a good idea. However, through March 31, **Delta's Sky Miles** program will sell two miles for the price of one. At \$.0275 per mile (plus 7.5 percent excise tax) you can, for example, purchase 10,000 miles but get 20,000 for \$296. The miles can be used on Delta or its partners, which include **Air France** and **Singapore Airlines**. Enrollment in the program is free.

- Our favorite Berlin hotel, the **Art Nouveau**, is offering *Gemütlichkeit* readers 20-percent off its published Internet rates on three-night stays, provided one is a Sunday and booking is done before the end of March. The deal includes free beverages from the hotel's honor bar, free WiFi, and free telephone calls

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# GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

## Getting Around Europe

*One of the major decisions facing nearly every visitor to Europe is how to get from place to place. The main story in this issue is devoted to helping readers make that choice.*

**W**e've stopped trying to determine which is the better way to travel within Europe, by car or rail. Advocates for both seem unshakable in their loyalty and we've decided to simply present the how-to aspects of each and let our readers decide which works best for them. For those who don't mind spending a few extra dollars, a combination of the two is frequently best.

Lately, a third option for traveling quickly and inexpensively between distant European cities has emerged; the slew of small, intra-European discount airlines such as **Ryan**, **Easyjet**, **Air Berlin** and **Germanwings**.

Buses? Except for Switzerland's great Postal Buses, which are really just an adjunct—though a crucial one—to a magnificent public transportation system that also includes rail, lake steamers, and mountain cable cars and funiculars, there really isn't enough frequency and coverage to make buses a realistic option for North American travelers.

### **Auto Rental**

A rental car remains the most flexible, liberating way to see Europe. Except in Switzerland, where there are a handful of car-free villages, the automobile offers access to the tiniest hamlet. Keep in mind, the European continent has many more

*Continued on page 3...*

## Cruising the Danube

**W**hen Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic Expeditions asked me to lecture on one of their 12-day Danube river tours two years ago, it was my first opportunity to be aboard a vacation river cruiser.

Sure, I'd been on the water before—on small ferries crossing Norwegian fiords, on hydrofoils in Russia, on several European river boats for day-trips, and on rust-bucket ships transporting cars, trucks, people, chickens, and goats between ports in the Mediterranean, but I had never been interested in a long holiday cruise on a boat with a bunch of other tourists.

I have changed my tune, however. Now I know why so many of my friends sign up for cruises all over the

world, from adventure travel to Antarctica to leisurely luxury trips on European waterways.

Our tour began in Budapest, where we stayed for three nights at **Le Meridien**, a beautiful five-star hotel conveniently located in the central part of the city. Guided tours to a variety of interesting sights in Budapest—the Neo-Gothic Parliament Building, the State Opera House, the Great Market Hall—were included in the tour price, along with a private concert of Hungarian folk music and dancing.

In the evenings we could choose to attend operas, ballets, or concerts, at our own expense. There was also plen-

*Continued on page 7...*

**Exchange rates as of 3/2/09**  
**1 euro = \$1.25**  
**1 Swiss franc = \$0.84**  
**1 gallon diesel, Germany = \$4.92**

**DEAR SUBSCRIBER**

*Continued from page 1*

throughout Germany. The Art Nouveau's 10-percent anytime offer to *Gemütlichkeit* readers remains in effect. Go to [www.hotelartnouveau.de](http://www.hotelartnouveau.de).

- Cruise companies are desperate to fill cabins. David Rowell of [TheTravelInsider.info](http://TheTravelInsider.info), a longtime friend of *Gemütlichkeit*, invites readers to join him on perhaps the most interesting Germany riverboat itinerary I've seen; it starts in Trier, then zigzags to Bernkastel, Zell, Cochem, Koblenz, Mainz, Heidelberg, Miltenberg, Wertheim, Würzburg, Bamberg, and Nürnberg. There are more details in our News/Deals column on page eight, but the very low price, starting at \$1499 per person, reflects the times. An added incentive: book his cruise and David will buy you a full year of *Gemütlichkeit*.

- For the first time in my memory, the prices for some of Eurail's most popular passes, the 21-country Global passes, and the three, four, and five-country Select passes, were lowered for the new year instead of raised. Through March 31, you can book **Eurostar** between London and Paris and London and Brussels for \$81 (go to [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) and click "Rail passes & Tickets" under "Plan Your Trip" in the right-hand column).

- Hotels throughout the world are cutting prices. The above-mentioned Mr. Rowell recently booked a

room at Las Vegas's **Sahara** for \$22. The deals aren't quite that good in Europe, but almost. The [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) online booking engine (affiliated with Booking.com) is full of entries that look like this: "Rate for three nights, Double Room, ~~€807~~ €477." In this case, the hotel is the five-star **Sofitel Munich Bayerpost**. Less upscale hotels are discounting as well; the three-star **Hotel Galleria** shows a three-night double room price reduced from €405 to €165. A good strategy with this booking engine is to find a hotel with a good price but which has an average reviewer score of 8.0 or more. For example, **Star Inn Hotel München's** price is only discounted from €228 to €198 (about \$84 per night) but gets an overall rating of 8.2. In late 2007, I stopped by Munich's **Hotel Adria**, our headquarters during many visits in the late '80s and early '90s. I am pleased to report that it has been restored to its former charm. It is in a lovely neighborhood, an easy walk to the center, gets a 7.8 rating from former guests, and is priced about \$100 per night.

- If you're a little adventurous, at [Hotwire.com](http://Hotwire.com) you could, at press time, book a five-star hotel (exactly which one isn't known until a nonrefundable booking is made) for \$146. A 3.5 star, which Hotwire says includes Hilton, Crowne Plaza, and Millennium, was \$65.

[Biddingfortravel.com](http://Biddingfortravel.com) continues to report successful [Priceline.com](http://Priceline.com)

hotel bids at four and five-star hotels in major European cities as low as \$43. Here are a few: **Marriott Berlin**, \$80; **Intercontinental Frankfurt**, \$77; **Munich Marriott**, \$55; **Hamburg Maritim**, \$65; **Renaissance Düsseldorf**, \$60; **Mövenpick Stuttgart Airport**, \$85; **Mövenpick Prague**, \$43; **Renaissance Salzburg**, \$60; **Marriott Prague**, \$55; **Sofitel Budapest**, \$76; **Marriott City Centre**, Vienna, \$105; and **Central Zürich Marriott**, \$96. Remember these are rates obtained only by bidding at [Priceline.com](http://Priceline.com). Bids are made by rating category — five-star, four-star, three-star, etc.— and by geographic area. You might not get the above hotels but if you bid in the four and five-star categories it's hard to go wrong. Before bidding, check [Biddingfortravel.com](http://Biddingfortravel.com).

Given the deals on airfares, car rentals, rail travel, and especially hotels, *plus* a euro currently at about 1.25 dollars, the outlook for affordable European travel is indeed rosy.—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 PDF format from January 1993, except for the most recent 10, 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:

User Name: **rent** Password: **9293**

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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   |

**GETTING AROUND***Continued from page 1*

miles of paved roads than passenger rail lines.

Our best advice when renting a car in Europe is to keep it as simple.

- Ordinary economy, compact, and midsize cars with manual transmission are the most plentiful, least expensive vehicles, and are suitable for the vast majority of travelers.

- Except where the purchase of collision and theft insurance is required, such as in Italy, and in some cases Ireland, rely on a credit card for the insurance. It's free and zero deductible.

- For additional savings in countries such as Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland, where airport and rail station fees range from 16 to 20 percent of the total rental cost, try to commence the rental at a city location (there is no fee for returning a rental car to an airport or rail station).

- To avoid international one-way charges of from about \$75 to \$3000, return the car to a city in the same country in which it was rented.

- Rely on one driver. Adding a second driver to most rental contracts costs from \$6 to \$25 per day.

- All things equal, it's better to commence the rental in a major city; rental stations in smaller towns don't have the selection of vehicles (especially automatics) nor are they used to dealing with English-speaking customers. They may, for example, assume you're like their European customers and plan to purchase optional insurance. As you'll see in a few paragraphs, this can lead to expensive misunderstandings.

**Small Adjustments Can Mean Big Savings:** Here's an example of how to spend a lot more on a car rental than is needed: Two couples, the Smiths and the Thompsons, are flying to Frankfurt and need a car for two weeks. They can drive a "stick" shift car but would rather not. They also feel they need a larger car, a "full-size," that they will pick up at the airport. They decide on a fullsize au-

tomatic with Europcar. It's likely the car will be a C-class Mercedes Benz. The cost is \$996.

Since the Smiths/Thompsons booked online, and there was no one to tell them otherwise, they don't realize that with some minor adjustments they could have had a car just as large—maybe larger—for about half the price. An intermediate VW Passat with manual transmission at an off-airport location would have cost them \$523. They paid a huge premium for an automatic, "fullsize" car, plus 20-percent for the convenience of picking up at the airport.

According to [Edmunds.com](http://Edmunds.com), the "fullsize" 2009 C-class Mercedes is 182 inches long and has a trunk capacity of 12.4 cubic feet. Edmunds categorizes it as a "midsize" car. The "intermediate" VW Passat, again according to Edmunds, is 188 inches in length and has trunk space of 14.2 cubic feet. "Fullsize" is misleading because European rental companies tend to put top-end brands like BMW, Audi and Mercedes in higher, more expensive categories. For example, many companies put the Audi A3 in the intermediate category, though it is clearly a compact car.

Automatics in Germany are typically priced at 50-percent more than manual transmission cars.

The two couples could also save \$50 to \$150 on both rentals if they would agree on a single driver.

Most travelers don't relish the idea of transferring by taxi to an off-airport rental location after a long transatlantic flight. But it might not be as bad as they imagine. Waits of 30 minutes to more than an hour to pick up cars at major European airports are common. Processing is usually faster at off-airport locations. Of course, the taxi fare somewhat offsets the savings on the airport fee, so you have to pick your spots, but the Smiths/Thompsons will save over \$100 on the manual transmission car, and \$166 on the automatic, by taking an eight-minute, three-mile taxi ride to a rental office in Kelsterbach. They can return the car to the airport when they are done with it.

**Extra Charges:** Be alert for a growing list of fees that are mandatory but often aren't part of the basic quoted price. In Germany it's mainly limited to a road/registration tax. In other countries, however, you'll find such things as environmental fees (France), mandatory winterization charges, credit card authorization fees (even though paying in cash is not an option), older driver charges (Ireland), cross-border fees and, in certain large cities, congestion fees.

**Older Drivers:** For the most part, there is no upper age limit to rent a car in Europe, the exceptions being Ireland, and some eastern and Scandinavian countries that impose an age limit on certain car categories.

**CDW/Theft Insurance:** This is the scary part of renting a car in Europe. We know of a couple who mistakenly signed for \$1,800 worth of CDW and theft insurance at an Avis location in a relatively small town in Germany. Had they refused the insurance, they would have been covered by their credit card. Claiming they were verbally assured the contract they signed did not include any additional charges, they appealed to Avis and to their credit card company, but to no avail. The only record of what transpired at the rental counter is a signed contract that clearly shows the renter's signature in the optional insurance box.

If you choose to rely on it, the insurance provided by your credit card is better than that offered by car rental companies. First, your credit card (if it provides coverage at all, and most do) will simply reimburse you for damage or for loss if the car is stolen. Most CDW/theft sold by rental companies has a deductible that ranges from a couple of hundred dollars to about \$3000. In addition, rental company insurance often won't cover the car's roof, undercarriage, interior, wheels, or windows.

Most gold and platinum credit cards, plus the regular green American Express card, and Diner's Club, offer free CDW and theft coverage if you use them to pay for the rental. Call your credit card company to find

out if your card offers coverage and the length-of-rental limits of that coverage. Mastercard typically restricts coverage to contracts of 15 days or less. Visa, Amex and Diner's cover up to 31 days.

Most credit card insurance is secondary to any other coverage you may have. (It is very unlikely your U.S. car insurance will cover you for rentals in Europe.) Thus if you buy insurance from the rental company you will likely invalidate your credit card's coverage, though Diner's Club offers primary coverage, and so does American Express's Premium Car Rental Protection. More later on this.

Generally speaking, credit card coverage is not available on cars rented in Italy, Ireland, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand. In those countries you must purchase CDW and theft insurance. Exotic and expensive cars may also be excluded from coverage.

To be reimbursed by your credit card's insurance you will have to provide damage documents and notify the credit card company of the loss within a specified period of time.

#### 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, 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. Use discount code gemut2009.
- [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com) Best maps on the web. Driving & walking. Zoom in-out. Great detail city & country. Satellite & terrain views.
- [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 electronics for travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

Prior to your U.S. departure, contact your credit card company to find out if your card provides free rental car collision and theft insurance coverage in Europe.

For from \$15 to \$25 per rental, Amex card holders can purchase Premium Car Rental Protection, a policy that offers primary, zero deductible collision and theft coverage up to \$75,000 on all rentals. The policy also includes personal property, medical expenses, plus accidental death and dismemberment. This coverage is recommended in these circumstances:

- You plan to rent a car for an extended period of time up to 42 days.
- You plan to rent a vehicle not covered by normal credit card insurance, such as a nine-passenger van or luxury car worth more than \$50,000
- You want your credit card insurance to be "primary" rather than "secondary."

If you still have your heart set on buying CDW/theft insurance, make sure you get it prior to the trip. You'll pay less than at the car rental counter. Most companies sell a "super CDW" coverage that reduces the deductible.

#### CDW/Theft in Italy

In Italy, there is no choice, you must purchase CDW and theft insurance. The question is, will any credit card reimburse you for the amount of the deductible? I have read that Visa and American Express cover deductible in Italy. However, based on information published on the Amex website, and later confirmed by telephone, it seems clear: Amex cards do not provide any insurance coverage on cars rented in Italy, period. (Cars rented in other countries and *driven* in Italy are covered, however).

Visa may be a different story. Curiously, Visa does not list Italy among its non-covered countries. But here's the tricky bit; the Visa website says its coverage becomes secondary (read invalid) if the cardholder has other insurance, which of course is the case in Italy where CDW/theft is required. A Visa supervisor, however, told us that, since CDW/theft is mandatory in Italy, Visa will cover

whatever the auto rental company's insurance does not, namely the deductible. At press time, that supervisor had promised to confirm this in writing, as the Visa website does not address the issue. So, for now, we are of the opinion that cars rented in Italy, and paid for with a Visa card that covers CDW/theft, are covered to the amount of the deductible. However, all Visa's requirements that apply to CDW/theft insurance coverage must be met. Check with Visa.

#### Booking Via Overseas Brokers

When renting a car through a European company—mostly U.K.-based brokers like Argus or Nova—or directly from an overseas supplier such as Europcar, insurance is almost always included, but with a high deductible. However, this included insurance, which "protects" the renter from damage and theft, as mentioned earlier, often does not cover damage to certain parts.

A bigger problem is that once you make a booking that includes CDW/theft (except in the Italy instance noted above), most credit card insurance is invalidated. You are thus on the hook for a deductible that is typically €1000 to €3000. To get that deductible down to zero will require the purchase of extra insurance at the time of rental, and typically add another \$15 to \$40 per day to the cost of the rental. You're better off getting a quote that makes CDW/theft optional. That way you can rely on your credit card for the coverage.

There are other factors to keep in mind when booking with a company headquartered on foreign soil.

- You will probably book and pay in euros in Europe. Most credit cards charge a two to three-percent foreign transaction charge.

- If the quote is in euros, and does not require prepayment, you really don't know the final price in dollars until it appears on your credit card statement. Last year, if you booked a €500 rental in early February, the dollar price was about \$725. But by the time you paid for it in mid-July

the cost was \$795. That's why we recommend bookings guaranteed in U.S. dollars with no penalty to cancel. That way, if the price goes down you can cancel and rebook. If it goes up, you're locked in to the lower price.

- Many overseas brokers charge cancellation fees.

### Navigation

In most cases, GPS is free only on more expensive cars, though you may luck into an intermediate or even a compact car that has built-in navigation. As an add-on, GPS ranges in price from about \$4.50 to \$20 per day, depending on the rental company and country. If you order a GPS option with your rental car it will very likely be a hand-held Garmin or TomTom portable unit. It almost surely will not provide coverage outside the country where the rental commences.

For frequent travelers who want a basic GPS with Europe maps, we suggest Garmin's Nuvi 270. New ones are available on eBay for about \$200. Used units from reliable eBay sellers are on sale for about \$120.

### Choosing a Car Category

There are no Ford Victorias or Lincoln Town Cars in European rental fleets. That level of passenger room and trunk space doesn't exist. Larger top-end S-class Mercedes, 7-Series BMWs, and Audi A8s can be rented, but they start at about \$1200 per week, require two credit cards at pickup, can't be driven into Italy or any eastern country, and may be excluded from insurance coverage by your credit card.

**Subcompact:** Typical cars: Opel Corsa, VW Polo, Fiat Punto. Okay for two persons not interested in burning up the Autobahn. Trunk space is small and often there is no air-conditioning.

**Compact:** Typical cars: Opel Astra, VW Golf, Ford Focus, Peugeot 307. Comfortable at 80 to 90mph. Good trunk - figure one big suitcase and two small ones, or two large ones, plus room for a garment bag and/or a soft duffel or two. Both two-door and four-door models, occasionally comes with a sunroof. Fine for three adults who go easy on luggage.

Air-conditioned.

**Intermediate:** Typical cars: Opel Vectra, Fiat Croma, VW Passat, Renault Laguna, Peugeot 408. Our recommended category for two couples. O.K. on the Autobahn but underpowered with four people and luggage. Beware of companies that put cars like the Audi A3 and the BMW 118 in this category. These are compact cars and not suitable for four people.

**Standard:** Typical cars: Audi A4, BMW 3 series, Mercedes B-Class. The cars may be a tad more upscale than the intermediate category, but they are no larger, just more expensive.

**Fullsize:** Typical cars: Mercedes C-class, Opel Signum, Peugeot 607. Fullsize is a misnomer. Most of the cars in this category are no larger, in some cases smaller, than the intermediate VW Passat. If you want a nicer car, by all means rent a fullsize; but if you're only moving up for extra passenger and luggage space, forget it, you're wasting money.

**Station Wagon:** Sometimes referred to in Europe as a Kombi. Come in three sizes - compact (VW Golf, Opel Astra), midsize (Vectra, VW Passat) and fullsize (Volvo V70). You pay more for a wagon than for the same model sedan. Can hold more gear but it is often exposed. For four people we like the midsize sedan over the compact wagon; more passenger comfort and almost as much luggage room. In a pinch, the midsize and fullsize wagons can carry five people but someone has to ride in the rear center seat.

No European sedans or wagons we know of have a front bench seat, so carrying six passengers is not an option in these vehicles.

**Vans:** Mostly seven and nine-passenger vehicles with three rows of seating, similar to US minivans. The nine-passenger assumes three persons per seat—three in front, three in the center seat and three in back. Seven-passenger vans have front buckets, a shorter center bench seat or two buckets, and a rear bench. Minivans are fine for four or five people, but beyond that, luggage space is a problem. For six or seven passengers we

recommend two cars, one midsize, one compact, cheaper rental cost and more room.

Do not plan to rely on a credit card for CDW and theft insurance when renting a nine-passenger van. Some credit card companies exclude it from their insurance coverage. Vans become scarce every summer. Book early. It may be cheaper to rent two midsize sedans.

**Luxury Cars:** Power and engineering make them somewhat safer than the run-of-the-mill Opels, VWs, Skodas, and Fords, but at a hefty price. Expect to pay more than \$500 per week in Germany for an E-class Mercedes, 5-series BMW, or Audi A6. Weekly prices exceed \$1200 for S-Class Mercedes, 7-series BMW, or Audi A8. Check your credit card to see if its CDW/theft coverage applies to these vehicles.

### Rail Travel

A couple of decades ago, it was standard operating procedure for North Americans traveling in Europe by rail to buy the standard 15 to 90-day Eurail pass that allowed them to ride the rails throughout western Europe. They wanted to see as much as they could in a relatively short time; from Copenhagen to Paris to Vienna to Rome, they spent entire days—and nights—on trains. That changed in the late '80s and early '90s, when travelers began to want to explore smaller chunks of Europe, but in greater depth. It's a trend that has picked up even more steam in just the past few years, a reality reflected in the rail products now available for purchase in North America. There are three, four, and five-country passes, and one can also now buy a pass for most country pairs including Germany-Austria, Germany-Switzerland, Austria-Switzerland, Germany-France, Switzerland-Italy, Austria-Italy, and many others. Of course, single country passes are sold for nearly every European nation. Eastern Europe has come into the Eurail system and rail visits are now possible to such countries as Croatia and Romania. An important piece of the Eurail puzzle was put into place with

the Czech Republic's recent addition to the Eurail system. Previously, the train traveler who wanted, for example, to visit Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic, a logical geographic threesome, had to buy a separate pass for the Czech Republic. Now it can be done on one pass, the **Eurail Select Pass** or the **Eurail Select Saver**. There are also Austria-Czech and Germany-Czech passes.

A few passes have dropped in price. Last year at this time, the three-country Eurail Select Saver pass was \$400 per person. Right now it's \$376. The 15-day **Global Saver Pass** is at \$593 per person, down from \$630 a year ago. The popular second-class **German Twin Pass**, however, is now \$195 per person vs. \$181 a year ago.

Don't expect much price cutting from the European rail system going forward. Higher fuel prices and Europeans' commitment to a green lifestyle is filling the continent's trains. You'll want to reserve seats on popular long-distance routes between major cities. Switzerland, of course, being the exception. Reservations in that country are needed only on the special scenic trains such as the **Glacier Express**.

**Point-to-Point Rail Tickets:** Not many North Americans know that it is possible to book and pay for city-to-city rail tickets at the websites of several national European railroads, including Germany and Switzerland. In most cases you can print the tickets on your own printer. Although rail passes issued in the USA continue to be the best deal for most, those who require only one, or perhaps two, point-to-point tickets, the cheapest place to buy them is probably at the website of the railroad of the country where travel will commence. The German rail system, for example, offers long-distance fares as low at €39, based on advance purchase plus restrictions on refunds and changes. (Be wary, however, of the French Rail website which works hard to direct English-speaking users to the Rail Europe website where point-to-point tickets are often priced higher.)

You can also purchase point-to-

point tickets at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) (in the right-hand column, under the heading "Plan Your Trip," click "Rail Passes & Tickets"). Our site is now affiliated with Rail Europe and we make a few dollars on each ticket or pass booked via our website.

**Rail Passes vs. Tickets:** The question of whether it's cheaper to buy a rail pass or individual tickets can be a difficult one, especially when it involves international travel, as it's sometimes hard to determine how much point-to-point tickets cost. First, try checking the website of the railroad for the country in which the trip will originate. If it's Germany, go to [www.bahn.de](http://www.bahn.de), select your language from the header menu, and enter departure and arrival cities. If it's Frankfurt to Zürich, Paris, or Vienna, the site will probably give you a price. But if the destination is Warsaw, or Dubrovnik, or even Rome, you'll get timetables but maybe no fare quote. At that point you can try the above-mentioned rail link at [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com).

If, when comparing the cost of international point-to-point tickets with a rail pass, you're unable to pin down the cost of the individual tickets, consider that the per person cost of the three-country, first-class Eurail Select Saver pass is \$75 per day. As this is written, Rail Europe is quoting one-way, second-class Frankfurt to Rome tickets, from \$156 to \$271.

**First or Second-Class?:** This very question, recently posted at an online travel forum, elicited this answer from a frequent traveler who commented on Swiss trains:

*Returning to our apartment from long days, we encountered crowded second-class cars and often had to stand in vestibules. On hot days there was better air conditioning, less crowding, and more comfortable seating in first-class. Swiss schools have "days out" for students. While many classes have "Reserviet" (reserved) cars, some do not and behavior varies—dramatically, depending on the teacher and parents. Before we upgraded to first-class, we had some unpleasant trips, including children climbing in the overhead luggage racks, and using them*

*as jungle gyms.*

Second-class travel is fine throughout most of western Europe, unless one encounters the foregoing circumstances. We recall a stifling, unairconditioned second-class car between Rostock and Lübeck one July day. Backpackers and their gear occupied almost every cubic foot of space, including the aisles and the overhead luggage racks. To contemplate making one's way the length of the car to use the toilet was to contemplate an attempt on Everest.

Fewer fellow travelers and more room make for better comfort and more relaxed traveling in first-class compartments. Nonetheless, second-class seating aboard Germany's fast ICE trains is better than anything I've seen on Amtrak. The price difference is not as dramatic as on airplanes; first-class is roughly 50-percent more than second-class. Sometimes there is no choice; many Eurail passes are only available in first-class.

**Seat Reservations:** Given that Europeans are increasingly getting off their highways and onto the rails, seat reservations are a bit more advisable than they used to be.

- In Germany and Austria, reservations are usually not necessary, even on ICE trains. The exception is on Fridays and Sundays, when trains can fill up. Of course, some routes require reservations. You can find out which ones at [www.bahn.de](http://www.bahn.de). Reservations in Switzerland are not needed at all, except on a few specialty trains.

- All seats in dining cars are open to anyone and you can nurse a beverage for an entire trip.

- A maximum 70 percent of seats on German trains are eligible for pre-booking. That means the other 30 percent are on a first-come, first-served basis. If you are traveling from the train's point of origin, just go early and grab one of the unassigned seats. If a Berlin-to-Frankfurt train originates at Berlin's Ostbahnhof before stopping at the new Hauptbahnhof, where the majority of passengers will board, simply get on at the originating station, Berlin's Ostbahnhof.

• Reserved seats on trains are noted by a small card on the luggage rack above the seat. You'll see empty seats marked in this fashion. Check the card to see if you can occupy it. If, for example, you're on a Berlin-Frankfurt train and the reservation card says "Leipzig-Frankfurt," then you are free to sit in that seat between Berlin and Leipzig. If the card says "Berlin-Frankfurt" and the seat is still not occupied 15 minutes after the train has left the Berlin station, then the reservation is no longer valid and anyone can sit there.

If you purchase point-to-point tickets via Gemut.com/Rail Europe, a seat reservation, if required, will be included. If you have a rail pass, we suggest waiting until you get to Europe to make seat reservations. It's three-euros and no shipping cost instead of \$11 per leg of the journey plus shipping starting at \$18.

#### Discount European Airlines

There are now dozens of small airlines operating intra-Europe flights. Their fares are often amazingly low. You've no doubt heard stories of €10 fares from London to Frankfurt. Though they are true, such prices come with restrictions and some inconveniences. **Germanwings.com** currently advertises a Cologne/Bonn-Milan fare of €29 and a Cologne/Bonn-Prague fare of €39. Fly to Rome from Cologne for €99. To check a bag costs another €5, but that's if you book and pay online; at the airport it's €10 for each bag. To reserve a seat is another €5. I was able to book a one-way, Cologne/Bonn to Milan flight, check one bag and reserve seat 12C from an online chart for €39.99 (about \$51). Intra-Europe air may be a better solution than a one-way car rental for those who want to fly into Frankfurt or Amsterdam and return home from Rome or Milan. Currently it costs over \$600 just for the one-way international fee, plus the cost of the rental itself, to get a rental car in Amsterdam and drop it in Rome. Another option is to rent a car for a few days in the north, then fly to Italy and rent a second car. Though you'll miss the scenery along the way, you'll save time

and the high drop fee. Be careful about luggage. Most discounters apply heavy penalties for heavy bags. You may also find yourself in some off-the-beaten-track airports. Frankfurt's **Hahn Airport**, for example, which serves many discount airlines, is nearly 90 minutes by car from the city of Frankfurt.

Don't call your travel agent to book intra-Europe discount flights, most of these airlines must be booked online. A good starting point to get a sense of which airlines service which cities, go to [www.euroflights.info](http://www.euroflights.info). Or use [www.flycheapo.com](http://www.flycheapo.com)'s route index to determine the airlines that serve your destinations. ☒

#### DANUBE CRUISE

*Continued from page 1*

ty of time for exploring Budapest individually. Very knowledgeable English-speaking representatives from a local tourist agency were available daily at the hotel to provide information and assist with making personal arrangements such as restaurant reservations and private guided tours to specific places of interest.

On the fourth day in Hungary we boarded a bus for the drive southward across the Great Plain to the **Tanyacsárda**, a country inn in Lajosmizse. Although the restaurant is set up to handle large numbers of people (especially in the summer), the meal they served was very good country-style fare, accompanied by local wines and live music from an enthusiastic Gypsy band. After lunch we walked outdoors to a set of wooden bleachers overlooking an open-air arena to watch the Hungarian version of a rodeo, with impressive trick-riding, wagon races, and displays of unique Hungarian gray long-horn cattle.

Late that afternoon we returned to Budapest to board the River Cloud, our ship for the next leg of the journey. Built in 1996, the River Cloud is the most elegant ship on the Danube, the only one constructed in 1930s style, with burled-wood paneling, plenty of polished brass, and classic teak decks where passengers can lounge on wooden deck chairs, practice on the putting green, or sip cocktails while watching the scenery glide by.

"It's like traveling on the Orient Express," said Harry Ripson who's been captain of the River Cloud since its first voyage.

The ship carries a maximum of 90 passengers, with 35 well-trained crew members running the hotel, restaurant, bar, and sailing operations. All the cabins have outside-facing windows or portholes and feature rosewood furniture, tile-and-marble bathrooms with golden fixtures, televisions, minibars, and fresh flowers.

In the elegantly decorated restaurant, attentive waiters served multi-course meals that rivaled the best restaurants of Europe. Using fresh, local ingredients, the chefs prepared dishes showcasing the regional specialties of the countries our cruise passed through. Each course was beautifully plated, and no dish was served twice on the entire cruise. It's not often one gets a chance to eat pasta that has been swirled in a huge hollowed-out wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano until it is completely coated with melted cheese and ready for a garnish of shaved white truffles.

I have to admit I was really impressed. Service in the restaurant (and throughout the ship) was friendly, unpretentious, and impeccable. And all the excellent European wines served at meals were included in the price of the tour (not so on many cruises).

The comfortable Art Deco-style bar-and-lounge area was the social gathering place on the ship, as well as the venue for musical performances and educational lectures on the history, cultures, and cuisines of the Danube lands. Shore excursions (also included in the tour price) offered multiple options—bicycle tours, museum visits, hikes to castle ruins overlooking the river—led by the ship's staff and highly qualified local guides.

Our itinerary took us from Budapest to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia; Vienna, Austria, for two days of sightseeing, operas, and concerts; along Austria's winding Wachau Valley, with visits to a wine village and the massive **Benedictine Abbey of Melk**; and finally on to the historic cities of Passau and Regensburg in Germany.



"There are two completely different views of the Danube," said Captain Ripson. "One from the land, the other from the water. And the only thing that connects them is a gangplank."

He was right. I've driven the Danube along this same route—and it's a revelation to realize that the views from the water are indeed different from what is experienced on land.

After the cruise ended in Regensburg, an optional, three-day tour to Prague, with lunch at a Czech castle along the way, was offered. The Prague hotel accommodations and guided city tours were of the same high quality as in Budapest. Some passengers even chose to stay longer in Prague, because the city has so many attractions. And for passengers wanting to travel in the opposite direction—down the Danube—Lindblad also offers tours starting in Prague, then cruising from Regensburg to Budapest, with an optional three-day stay in Budapest at the end.

I asked my fellow passengers, most of whom were veteran cruisers, why they chose to travel by water instead of on land.

- **Convenience** topped the list. They liked having a really good tour planned by a company they could trust. They didn't have to research the destinations and plan the itinerary themselves, nor make the hotel reservations, engage local guides, or arrange for transportation. All the work was done by the tour company.

- **Unpacking only twice**, at the hotel at the start of the trip and then on the ship, was another factor. They were able to settle into their cabins on the ship and visit cities in five countries without having to find a hotel at each destination and pack/unpack many times.

- **Letting someone else "do the driving"** was important to those with physical disabilities (from diminished night vision to recent knee surgery) and those who don't like to drive in Europe.

- **Optional organized activities** and plenty of free time for personal pursuits were another attraction. Our ship had a spa with a massage therapist and well-

ness instructor who also conducted yoga classes, led bicycle tours, and organized hikes at various scenic spots along the river. Other staff members provided photographic instruction or led discussions with smaller groups who wanted to learn more about the history, politics, art, music, and ecology of the places we were visiting.

- **Fixed price**, in a period of fluctuating exchange rates. It is usually possible to book a tour at a guaranteed dollar price many months in advance and, even if the dollar loses value in relation to European currencies, the price is honored. Better yet, if the exchange rate goes the other direction, and the dollar becomes stronger and prices come down, some tour companies will allow rebooking at the new, lower price.

- **Inclusive price**, without extra charges for drinks at meals or for excursions on shore, was also a factor that many passengers cited in choosing the Lindblad cruise.

Many companies offer cruises on the Danube, from high-end luxury tours like Lindblad's to less expensive tours on modern-style ships that are more like floating motels (with plastic deck chairs, Astroturf, and more passengers on board). Before booking a cruise, ask friends for recommendations based on their experiences. It is also possible to view customer reviews and ship ratings in the *Berlitz Complete 2009 Guide to Cruising & Cruise Ships*.

Be sure to find out if the cruise is "all inclusive" or if there are "fine print" fees, such as beverages at meals, shore excursions, museum entry fees, bicycle rentals, etc. Even some of the most expensive tours charge for these "extras," so know before you go. Some tours offer educational lectures on board the ship, although these vary widely from one tour company to another. (Tours with Lindblad/National Geographic Expeditions are always accompanied by historians and other experts who lecture on a variety of subjects related to the tour route.)

For more information about specific Danube River cruises go to [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) and click "River Cruise Finder" in the right-hand column under "Plan Your Trip."

See Lindblad Expeditions' offerings is at [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com).

[Editor's note: Sharon Hudgins has worked as National Geographic's Historian on three Danube River cruises offered by Lindblad Expeditions.]

## News/Deals

■ **Cruise through Germany and get a free Gemütlichkeit subscription:** David Rowell, the man behind the popular [TheTravelInsider.info](http://TheTravelInsider.info), will lead his loyal followers on a June 29-July 6 cruise through Germany, Trier to Nürnberg, with stops at Bernkastel, Zell, Cochem, Koblenz, Mainz, Heidelberg, Miltenberg, Wertheim, Würzburg, and Bamberg. David's deal is \$800 to \$900 off the brochure price for **Amawaterways' Heartland Cruise**. In addition, he's throwing in a one-year *Gemütlichkeit* subscription, or a one-year renewal for current subscribers. *Gemütlichkeit* has heard high praise from readers who have sailed with David on past cruises. Per person prices start as low as \$1499 for the 75-cabin *Amalrya*, a brand new vessel whose maiden voyage is later this month. All accommodations are 170 sq. ft. outside cabins (suites are larger but sold out) equipped with toilet and shower, flat-screen satellite TV, and an Internet-connected computer. The price includes all meals plus complimentary beer and wine. A three-night, pre-cruise Paris package, with transportation to Trier, and a two-night Prague extension, are available for additional fees. Get complete information at [www.thetravelinsider.info/travel/europeheartland09.htm](http://www.thetravelinsider.info/travel/europeheartland09.htm), or email David at [david@thetravelinsider.info](mailto:david@thetravelinsider.info).

■ **Walking Tours:** Deborah Lewis of **Bredeson Outdoor Adventures** will lead a walking tour entitled "Hiking Austria and Bavaria: From Tyrolean Mountain Huts to a King's Fairy Tale Castles" June 28-July 5. The land cost of \$2700 per person, double occupancy, includes four and five-star hotels (one a Relais & Châteaux property) and most meals. Email [info@gemut.com](mailto:info@gemut.com) for full details. ☒