

**DEAR
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Time for luxury?

Now that the dollar has strengthened and there is a worldwide glut of empty hotel rooms, what kind of deals are being offered by the very best, most expensive, most exclusive hotels in Germany, Austria and Switzerland?

These past few years of dollar weakness have sent me and most North American travelers toward more affordable, often less luxurious, hotels. Like everybody else I'm trying to get the best value for my money, but there's another reason for the shift; we're detecting far less interest among our readers in five-star accommodations. But now that a stronger dollar has lowered prices for North Americans, and a lack of demand has hotels everywhere slashing prices, is it time to start thinking about the occasional five-star splurge? Before we try to answer that question, let's define terms. There are five-star hotels, and there are five-star hotels. For example, though European hotels such as **Marriott** (and I'm a Marriott fan) and **Intercontinental** are rated five-star, they are not "grand" hotels. Hotel classification is usually done by a country's hotel association or tourist authority. The star rating is determined by the level of services offered—a five-star may have to have 24-hour room service, doormen, elaborate spas, fitness facilities, and a variety of other amenities. More stars does not necessarily signify quality, and the classification is not subjective. In other words no matter how much the assigner of stars likes a hotel, if there's no 24-hour room service, a five-star rating isn't in the cards. There are three-star hotels in the countries we cover whose staff services and spacious, luxurious guestrooms are better than at many five-stars, such hotels just don't offer

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GEMÜTLICHKEIT

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

Konstanz

Featuring a prime lakefront location plus Rhine riverbanks, this not-so-big southwestern German city's layout includes three Swiss border crossings.

From Black Forest and Schwäbische Alb highlands in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, southwestern Germany's topography slants down to the Swiss border, where it dips into a sizeable body of water: Lake Constance, or the Bodensee on German maps, but in local parlance often called the Swabian Sea. Balmy midyear weather and aquatic recreational opportunities attract vacationers. Many of them flock to the town of Konstanz, compact and small enough for easy getting-around.

City contours are shaped by Bodensee shores and the Rhine River, which flows beneath two north-side

bridges while passing a pair of rock-solid gateways: the **Pulverturm** (1320) and **Rheintorturm** (circa-1400), remainders of medieval fortifications. Crossing the Rheinbrücke bridge gets you to the upscale **Petershausen** district's Seestrasse, lined with early 20th-century *Jugendstil* Art Nouveau villas. One has housed a *Spielbank* casino (Seestrasse 21, www.spielbank-konstanz.de) since 1951.

South beyond the bridge, delve into Konstanz's **Niederburg** quarter—the *Altstadt* (Old Town) core, defined by a tight tangle of narrow alleyways and auto-free pedestrian corridors that connect cubbyhole shops, cafés, food stands and *Kneipe* taverns, interspersed by arcaded

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Prague Beer Halls

Many consider Czech beer the best in the world. The Czechs think so, too: they're the biggest consumers of it on the planet, drinking an average of 161 liters (42.5 gallons) per person annually—about 30% more than their beer-loving German neighbors.

Bohemia in today's Czech Republic has long been one of Europe's most important beer-brewing regions. In the 19th century, the Czechs were among the leaders in modernizing the technology of commercial beer production, as well as the mass production of inexpensive clear-glass mugs that showcased the pale, golden-colored beers of Plzen (home of the world-renowned Plzen-sky Prazdroj, or Pilsner Urquell,

beer) and Ceské Budejovice (where the original Budweiser or Budvar, beer is brewed).

By 1900 there were 1,300 breweries in the Czech lands of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In the Czech Republic today, 48 breweries continue to produce more than 300 varieties of excellent beer for which the country is famous.

And the best place to drink those beers is on their home turf, fresh from the barrel.

The Czechs prefer to drink their beer on tap in local taverns, not from bottles or cans. ("Cans are for sauerkraut," they say.) Another

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Exchange rates as of 4/29/09
1 euro = \$1.33 1 CZK = \$.0498
1 Swiss franc = \$0.88
1 gallon diesel, Germany = \$5.05

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

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the same range of facilities.

The five-stars I'm talking about are the truly "grand" hotels; the "old-world" temples of aristocracy and old money; of soaring public rooms, great art, masses of fresh flowers, formal gardens, unflappable staffs with decades of experience, and of thin, elderly women carrying small dogs. In the 23 years of publishing this newsletter we've been fortunate to lay our heads on the pillows of most of the best hotels in our three countries—among them Baden-Baden's **Brenner's Park**, Zürich's **Dolder Grand**, the **Sacher** in Vienna, the **Bayerischerhof** in Munich, **Le Montreux Palace**, Interlaken's **Victoria Jungfrau**, and **Le Beau Rivage Palace** in Lausanne. Until a few years ago, three or four nights each trip at a "grand" was a usual part of our itinerary. Then two things happened: you told us you don't stay in five-star hotels, and prices at top-level hotels skyrocketed. Though I've done no definitive research on this, my sense is the "grands" are much more expensive in relation to ordinary hotels than they used to be. For example, in 1998 one could book a double room at Munich's **Bayerischer Hof** for \$190. The fine little **Hotel Exquisit**, a four-star, was \$121. Today, you can get a double room at the Exquisit for about \$193 but the Bayerischer Hof has jumped to \$588 (though I did see

a last-minute "deal" for \$504). In 1998 there was a 57-percent premium to stay at the Bayerischer Hof versus the Exquisit. Today it's three times as much. In 1993, Interlaken's Victoria-Jungfrau had double rooms for just over \$200. If you try to book it on Orbitz now, the quote is a tidy \$744, though I found a price at the VJ's website for CHF 400, or about \$352, not bad for a "grand."

So: are there any deals among these super hotels? Depends on how you define "deal." While the previously mentioned chains like Marriott are selling inventory in large chunks to discounters such as Priceline.com and Hotwire.com, a look at Biddingfortravel.com, a website that keeps up with the prices of successful bids on Priceline, yields virtually no mention of the "grands." (One exception: Salzburg's storied **Goldener Hirsch** recently accepted a bid for a room at \$170 per night.

In the belief that doing so will destroy rate structure credibility, management at Europe's top-tier hotels would rather eat worms than cut prices. (They may be right. Take business class air fares: who pays \$10,000 these days when one can almost always find a ticket for \$4,000? And "discount" phobia is not limited to the best hotels. I am told that during hard times in the '90s, some family hotels in Switzerland failed without ever having cut a single franc off room rates.)

Another reason rates aren't being pared to the bone at top-end hotels is that while the past year may have lightened portfolios among the clientele of Europe's "grands," the damage hasn't been lifestyle altering. Just because Herr Schmidt's net worth went from €30 to €20 million doesn't mean he's checking in to a Best Western instead of the Brenner's Park. Luxurylink.com seems to support that theory. This is a website used by luxury properties to market excess inventory. Out of 76 properties "approved" by Luxurylink throughout Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, only four were on offer at press time, and one was a six-night ballooning package at three good-but-not-grand Swiss hotels for just under \$10,000 per person.

There is yet another element at work in keeping rates up at the "grands;" one I doubt hoteliers are willing to discuss, but which un-

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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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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

KONSTANZ*Continued from page 1*

courtyards and signposted public buildings dating from the Middle Ages. Another sturdy gateway, Husenstrasse's 13th-century **Schnetztor**, "guards" inner-city goings-on. The **Zoffinger Dominican Convent**, now a girls' school, was founded in 1257 (Brückengasse 15). Strolling south from there brings you to the Klein Venedig border crossing, where German Konstanz blends seamlessly into Swiss-suburban Kreuzlingen.

Town Hall and Cathedral

The **Altes Rathaus** (am Fischmarkt) grabs attention as an eminent Renaissance landmark, its walls, niches and courtyard splashed with a colorful mix of heraldic motifs. Just as prominent, is the steepled **Münster Cathedral** (Münsterplatz)—gradually transformed from austere Romanesque to soaring Gothic during its many years—featuring a vaulted nave Mauritius rotunda, side chapels, wood-carved choir stalls and a 16th-century organ loft. A stairway spirals up to an observatory platform (€2 fee), plenty high-enough for terrific urban panoramas, with snow-capped Swiss alpine peaks on the southern horizon. (Its remarkable closeness to neutral Swiss territory kept Konstanz totally free from Allied aerial bombardment throughout World War II, with blackouts never enforced).

Jan Hus and the Great Schism

Learn a lot by touring the richly appointed **Rosgarten Museum** (Rosgarten Strasse 3-5), established in 1870. In this former butchers' guild hall, exhibits span a broad spectrum: local and regional history (recalling the city's prehistoric Paleolithic origins and ancient Roman settlement), archaeology, art and handicrafts, folklore and lake commerce, plus detailed accounts of the epochal **Council of Constance** (1414-18), instigated by hot-headed Bohemian reformer Jan Hus. Hammered out as the Great Schism, council members voided Catholicism's controversial dual Vatican-Avignon papacies. After being

Konstanz Basics**Population:** 81,006**Elevation:** 447 meters (1,467 ft)

Visitor Information: Tourist-Information Konstanz GmbH, Bahnhofplatz 13, 78462 Konstanz, tel: +49/7531/133/030, fax: 7531/133/060, info@ti.konstanz.de, www.konstanz.de.

German National Tourist Office, 122 East 42nd Street, New York NY 10168-0072, tel: 212-661-7200, fax: 212-661-7174, web: www.cometogermany.com.

- Third-century Roman colonial garrison
- Designated a Catholic bishopric, 585
- Chartered as a Swabian Free Imperial City, 1192
- Annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1548
- Incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Baden, 1896
- Universität Konstanz established, 1966

Driving Distances:

Stuttgart	122 km	76 miles
Munich	186 km	116 miles
Lindau	39 km	24 miles
Frankfurt	275 km	170 miles
Köln	397 km	247 miles
Freiburg	106 km	66 miles
Basel	119 km	74 miles
Schaffhausen	41 km	25 miles
Zürich	58 km	36 miles
Innsbruck	172 km	107 miles

Southbound from Stuttgart, take the A-81 *Autobahn* past *Schwarzwald* Black Forest highlands to the Singen exit, followed by a short motorway jaunt into Konstanz.

Departing from Zürich, connect onto Switzerland's N-7 motorway; head north.

Rail: Check www.rail.ch for Federal Swiss Railroad service from Zürich airport's train station or downtown's main station. The trip to Konstanz's clock-towered, mid-19th-century *Hauptbahnhof* (tracks for Swiss as well as German trains; a block from lakefront boat docks) takes

about 45 minutes. Departing from Frankfurt Rhein-Main airport's AirRail facility German Rail's (www.bahn.de) ICE (InterCityExpress) trains make the high-speed trip south to Konstanz in a bit less than four hours.

Air: Zürich ZRH and Stuttgart STR are the closest international gateway airports.

Guided Sightseeing: Take your pick of 11 special-interest, two-hour walking tours starting at the Münsterplatz. Cost per adult: €6.50; details at the tourist information office.

Best Buy: The Bodensee Erlebniskarte entitles users to free cruises on the lake's *Weisse Flotte* excursion boats, plus complimentary admittance to selected German, Swiss and Austrian museums in the area. Three-day, one-week, two-week cards, from €39.

Events: International Bodensee Music Festival, Konstanz, Mainau, Friedrichshafen, and Lindau are the site of classical, liturgical and pop performances, late April-early May

Konstanzer Wine Festival, best reds and whites from German and Swiss vineyards, citywide locales, July 22-25, '09

Seenachtfest, Konstanz-Kreuzlingen lakefront entertainment, magic acts, food and fireworks; second Saturday each August (8/8 in '09)

Rock am See, high-decibel rock, techno, hip-hop on lakeside stages, August 30th, '09

Konstanzer Oktoberfest, *Altstadt* market squares, Sept. 19-Oct. 5, '08

Christmas Markets, primarily along inner-city Marktstätte and surrounding the lakefront Konzilgebäude landmark, Nov. 23-Dec. 23, '08

Fasnacht, German/Swiss pre-Lenten Carnival merriment and Rose Monday parade, January 4-February 25 (Ash Wednesday)

convicted of heresy by Church officialdom, Hus was burned at the stake on a Konstanz square, three years before the gathering's conclusion.

Reach **Stadtgarten** greenery—overlooking the Bodensee—by way of bustling Marksträtte, Münzgasse or super-picturesque Zollernstrasse. While resting your feet, look up at the tall limestone memorial dedicated to Konstanz-born (1838) airship pioneer Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin. In the park's adjacent, hip-roofed **Konzilgebäude**, built as a 1388 granary and supported ever since by log pilings pounded into the lake bed, audiences applaud orchestral performances by the **Southwest German Philharmonic** (am Fischmarkt 2, www.philharmonie-konstanz.de).

People of all ages line up to enter the **Sea-Life Centre**, a futuristic aquarium with numerous interactive features, primarily focused on the lake district's creatures and ecosystem—in addition to exhibits and hands-on experiences in the lake-front complex's **Bodensee Natural History Museum** (Hafenstrasse 9, www.sealife.de).

Key Websites for the Traveler

- 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 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 gemut2009.
- 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 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 electronics for travelers — cell phones, computers, etc.

Konstanz Hotels

Steigenberger Insel-Hotel

Best on the Bodensee for location (on its own well-manicured island, attached to a private boat dock) and posh creature comforts. Remarkably transformed from a 13th-century step-gabled, white blue-trimmed Dominican monastery, its still-intact inner Romanesque cloister is now surrounded by public areas. Floral-patterned upholstery, bed coverings and draperies beautify the 100 guest rooms (plus two suites) in three categories: balconied lake view, terraced garden view, west-facing city view. At mealtime, choose the colonnaded, wood-paneled, tapestry-hung **Seerestaurant** or—for regional specialties—the decidedly less-formal **Dominikanerstube**.

Daily Rates: Singles from €141, doubles from €240.

Contact: Steigenberger Insel-Hotel, Auf der Insel, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/1250

(866-991-1299 in U.S.), fax 7531/26402, reservation@sgres.com, www.konstanz.steigenberger.de.

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 11/20

Hotel Barbarossa

Proprietors Bärbel and Jürgen Wiedemann make guests feel at home in the old townhouse (foundation from 1419) they've turned into a handsomely appointed three-star, 50-room hostelry facing a market square for center-of-the-action convenience. Dinners are in the wainscotted Green Salon, its warm ambience accentuated by massive timber beams and stained-glass windows. Guests socialize in a Mediterranean-influenced wine and tapas bar called Baudalino.

Daily Rates: Singles €50-70, doubles €90-120.

Contact: Hotel Barbarossa, Obermarkt 8-12, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/128 990, fax 7531/128/9700, wiedemann@barbarossa.com, www.barbarossa-hotel.com.

Rating: QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 13/20

Hotel Hirschen

A red facade makes this 33-room **Garni B&B** a visual standout. The

four-story edifice overlooks an *Altstadt* square sporting umbrella-shaded café tables clustered around a statue-topped fountain. Smaller upper-floor rooms are squeezed into roofline dormers with recessed window nooks for Euro-coziness. Bicyclists have racks for parking their two-wheelers; an attached garage accommodates incoming guests' automobiles. Among Hirschen's amenities are sauna, solarium and ample-enough exercise equipment. Children up to 10 years of age sleep in their parents' room cost-free.

Daily Rates: Singles €70-80, doubles €96-120.

Contact: Hotel Hirschen, Bodanplatz 9, 78464 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/128 260, fax 7531/128/2650, info@hirschen.de, www.hirschen-konstanz.de.

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 14/20

Graf Zeppelin

Dating from 1845 and covered sidewalk-to-roof with vivid frescoes, the inner city's original Deutsches Haus Hotel switched management and nomenclature to become the airship pioneer's namesake in 1956. Heritage-sensitive renovation was undertaken three years ago. Forty of 49 guest rooms are nonsmoking. Guests have free wireless Internet access for on-the-road computing, plus €8 daily parking if arriving by car. Arched alcoves, carved-oak woodwork, rustic furniture, ceiling-hung lamps and rounded window frames make the restaurant a *gemütlich* local hangout.

Daily Rates: Singles from €70, doubles from €90

Contact: Hotel Graf Zeppelin, St. Stephansplatz 15, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/237 80, fax 7531/172 26, baskim@t-online.de, www.hotel-graf-zeppelin.de.

Rating: QUALITY 13/20, VALUE 15/20

Bilger Eck

Prefer the open space of a north-side Rhine embankment's shrubbery, bike lanes and jogging paths? If so, this 23-room, family-run street-corner hotel—noticeable because of its sky-blue stucco facade—will appeal to you. Direct adjacency to a pedestrian bridge ensures walkable closeness to

in-town Konstanz. High-ceilinged bedrooms are generously proportioned, tall-windowed and modernized. Augmented by a beer garden beneath overhanging chestnut trees, the restaurant exudes homey cheerfulness, embellished with green *Fachwerk* cross-timbers and colorfully painted ceiling beams.

Daily Rates: Singles €55-80, doubles €98-120

Contact: Bilger Eck, Reichenau-Strasse 2, 78467 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/5993, fax 7531/5933 29, info@bilgereck.de, www.bilgereck.de.

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 14/20

Konstanz Restaurants

Hafenhalle

Opened in 1995 and perfectly positioned for wide-angle harbor views, this family-friendly place comprises a window-walled dining room, double-level deck and a zesty, brassy beer garden that includes a kids' playground. Menus list fresh-from-the-Bodensee *Felsen* pike-perch fillets, and meat eaters can opt for such alternatives as *Wildbret* venison and *Bratwurst* sausages. Or else: a platter full of genuine Swiss *Rösti* potato pancakes. Full-course dinners range €9-16. Dixieland combos keep things jumping on weekend afternoons.

Contact: Hafenhalle, Hafenstrasse 10, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/21126, fax 7531/21127, www.hafenhalle.com

Rating: QUALITY 12/20, VALUE 15/20

Hörnle

Standing on a grassy point of land where the Bodensee and Rhine converge, the locale treats onlookers to splendid water-and-cityscape vistas. Dine in this informal restaurant-café's glass pavilion or, if preferred, on the plant-filled deck. The kitchen crew focuses its talents on *Badisch-Schwäbisch* cookery (€8.50-15) which is your cue to sample *Maultaschen* ravioli-type pasta or plump *Spätzle* dumplings. Among other offerings are *Schnitzels*, Berlin-inspired *Currywurst*—even burgers and hot dogs. For dessert, stick your fork into a thick slice of *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte*, a.k.a. Black Forest cherry cake.

Contact: Restaurant-Café Hörnle, Eichhornstrasse 100, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/367 893, www.hoernle-konstanz.de

Rating: QUALITY 14/20, VALUE 15/20

Hohenegg

A third "H" in the lakefront food chain. This one consists of an elegant 160-seat, blue-carpeted, wide-windowed, modular-ceilinged dining room and a 200-seat terrace with a fancily sculpted fountain as its centerpiece. Lunch and dinner selections are highlighted—no surprise—by two kinds of absolutely fresh whitefish (*Felsen* and *Zanderfilet*, €14.90-15.80). In case you're not in the mood for either of those, splurge by ordering Hohenegg's excellently prepared lamb cutlet (€16.80).

Contact: Restaurant Hohenegg, Hoheneggstrasse 45, 78464 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/335 30, fax 7531/807 311, www.restaurant-hohenegg.de

Rating: QUALITY 15/20, VALUE 13/20

Storikenescht

You'll want to hug owner/chef Danielle Laboux for running this invitingly petite touch of Alsace in inner-city Konstanz. Reach her cross-timbered bistro by taking a few right-angle steps from the Schnetztor gateway on the *Altstadt* district's southerly fringe. Countrified Alsatian cabinetry, basketry, flower pots, antiques and kitschy knickknacks adorn Danielle's cheerful dining room.

Supreme among "Stork's Nest" Alsatian specialties are *Schupfnudeln* potato dumplings (€9.40), *Riebekuchen* potato pancakes (€11.20), *Choucroute aux Poissons* sauerkraut mixed with fish fillets and boiled potatoes (€16 and worth it!), *Schweinehälde* pork stew cooked with mushrooms and mini-dumplings (€14.50) and nine variations of fluffy *Flammkuchen crêpes* (€6.80-9.50). As for side dishes, try resisting the duck's-liver paté (€12.90), the *Quiche Lorraine* (€6.80) and—for anyone's memorable grand finale—a cup of creamy-dreamy *Crème Brûlée* (€5.70).

Contact: Storikenescht, Döbele Strasse 3, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/919

047, fax 7531/818 785, www.storikde

Rating: QUALITY 16/20, VALUE 17/20

Konstanzer Bürgerstuben

If catching a German-Swiss train or city bus is on your agenda and you aren't in rush-rush mode, here's a stopover place that's right beside the railroad station and not at all far from yacht-harbor docks. Balconied and red-canopied, the few-frills restaurant has flourished at this central spot for the past half-century. Indoors, patrons can escape tobacco fumes by sitting in four designated nonsmoking sections. Typical daily offerings include *Wiener Schnitzel* (€13.50), rump steak (€14.90), especially good turkey steak (€11.20) and pike-perch fillet in white-wine sauce (€13.20). For dessert or some warm-weather snacking, relax in the separate café to decide upon 16 kinds of ice-cream sundaes (€2.70-4.90).

Contact: Konstanzer Bürgerstuben, Bahnhofplatz 7, 78462 Konstanz, tel. +49/7531/246 62, fax 7531/291 74, www.konstanzer-buergerstuben.de

Rating: QUALITY 11/20, VALUE 15/20

Wine-tasting & a brewpub

Two wineries do business in very old Niederburg premises. **Spitkellerei-Konstanz** (Brückengasse 16) keeps its stock in a timbered cellar existing since 1225. Haus der Mugge, built in 1422, became the **Wein Franz Fritz** (Niederburggasse 7) storefront exactly 500 years later. As for beer, Niederburg's **Brauhaus Joh. Albrecht** (Konradigasse 2) epitomizes an historically independent house brewery, complete with copper kettles, brick walls and baskets of pretzels.

Classic local Konditorei

In Gisela and Wieland Grutshnig's **Rosgarten Konditorei-Café** (Rosgartenstrasse 9, around a corner from the railroad station), the glass and chrome showcase will tempt you with its display trays filled with tortes, cakes, pastries and chocolate goodies. This is, furthermore, a thoroughly Germanic kind of place for generously big breakfasts (a dozen selections, €2.90-5.60) and no less than 20 diverse offerings for a light

or full luncheon (€5.50-12.50). Weather permitting, eat, chat and people-watch upstairs on the Rosgarten roof's *Dachterrasse*.

Island Day Trips: Mainau

Reaching this downright exotic "Flower Island" (tel. +49/7531/3030, www.mainau.de) entails a 50-minute cruise from Konstanz or go by commuter train, bus or bicycle. Admittance is €13.90 per adult, €28.90 for families. A 13th-century stomping ground of Knights of the Teutonic Order, now owned and "horticultured" by Swedish Count Lennart and Countess Bettina Bernadotte, Mainau dazzles visitors with sculpted floral arrangements spread amidst semi-tropical palm, lemon, lime, orange and banana trees. During midyear seasons, diverse botanical species beautify the landscape—among them hyacinth, narcissus, dahlias, rhododendrons, tulips galore and 20,000 roses. All of this plus the Bernadottes' Baroque *Schloss*, opened for art exhibitions, also café luncheons beneath the palms. Pricier meals are served in the castle's **Schwedenschenke** restaurant (tel. +49/7531/303 156). Other island delights: Germany's biggest *Schmetterlinghaus* butterfly conservatory and, for youngsters, Mainau-Kinderland playground and water park.

Reichenau

Half an hour west of Konstanz's waterfront via German and Swiss trains, ferryboat, bus or automobile, fertile vegetation and dozens of greenhouses hint at a market-garden economy. But its early history as an eighth-century haven for monks underlies the island's stature as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2000. In addition to folksy shops and cute eateries, each of Reichenau's three close-together villages features a cloistered Romanesque monastery church (tel. +49/7534/9207, www.reichenau.de). In Mittelzell: **Münster St. Maria und St. Markus** (816). Visit Oberzell's **Stiftkirche St.**

Georg (890) to admire Carolingian altar frescoes painted by monks that depict the eight miracles of Jesus Christ. Eleventh-century **Stiftkirche St. Peter und Paul**, Romanesque with gaudy Baroque add-ons, looms over Niederzell.

A Vineyard Village: Meersburg

Situated directly eastward across the Überlingersee from north-side Konstanz's Allmendorf ferryboat docks, this almost impossibly picturesque, timeless little place (pop. 5,543) perches on vineyard terraces. Steep-climbing Steigstrasse stairways connect the *Oberstadt* (upper) and *Unterstadt* (lower) parts of town (tel. +49/7532/440 400 for visitor info). Cramped passageways fanning beyond the Marktplatz and its 16th-century *Rathaus* are jam-packed wall-to-wall with *Fachwerk* half-timbered houses, shops, tiny wine-bar cafés and Mom-Pop food markets. Allow ample time for poking around, staying absolutely long enough to visit Meersburg's two side-by-side hilltop castles. The **Altes Schloss** (628) contains a museum displaying medieval weaponry and armor (€5.50 admission, tel. +49/7532/800 00). For utter contrast, the bishop's 18th-century **Neues Schloss** is flamboyantly Baroque—the odd-but-interesting locale of Germany's Dornier aircraft and aerospace museum (€4 admittance, tel. +49/7532/43110). 

PRAGUE BEER TAVERNS Continued from page 1

Czech saying emphasizes the importance of the taverns: "The brewmaster brews the beer, the innkeeper makes it great."

Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, has long been known for its beer taverns, some of which date from the Middle Ages. They've always been the haunts of workers and students, as well as those writers, artists, and revolutionaries who preferred the classless camaraderie of the humble taverns to the social and intellectual pretensions of the

city's more elegant coffeehouses. Until the second half of the 20th century, beer taverns were also traditionally a male domain.

Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, some of the beer taverns in Prague were known as places where tourists (and spies) from the West could rendezvous with people from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who were allowed to travel to Czechoslovakia but could not go to Western Europe or the United States. Of course those taverns also attracted agents of Czechoslovakia's secret police, who spied on "suspects" from East and West meeting over mugs of beer in the smoke-filled rooms. Back then, some of Prague's public taverns seemed like settings for a John le Carré novel.

After 1989, some of the other old beer taverns cleaned up their grungy interiors and added better facilities, others went completely glitzy-modern, and a few went out of business, bought up by rich companies from the West that wanted to use the property for more profitable purposes. In the same period, however, a few old, defunct brewery taverns were brought back to life, and new microbrew pubs opened, too.

Regardless of recent changes, Czechs—as in the past—still go to their taverns to meet friends, swap stories, and discuss the state of the world (or at least local politics) over several glasses of fresh beer.

They also go there to eat. Many of Prague's classic beer taverns offer traditional Czech dishes like grandmother used to make—good food, at reasonable prices, served with excellent beer in an atmosphere that welcomes young and old, rich and poor, male and female, local and tourist. What more could you want?

A metropolis of 1.2 million people, Prague has hundreds of beer taverns, from well known hangouts (large and small) in the central part of the city to little neighborhood pubs patronized only by locals. For current reviews and ratings of more than 60 Prague beer taverns, see www.praguepubs.co.uk.

U Fleku

Prague's oldest, best known, and most touristy tavern is At Flek's Place, which dates to 1499 when both a brewery and a pub were established at that site. Today, U Fleku's famous strong dark beer is still brewed on the premises, attracting hordes of beer-lovers from around the globe.

The building's rather plain exterior is distinguished only by the large gilded ironwork clock, the tavern's symbol, on the front. Inside you'll find several "Old World" rooms with dark wood paneling, vaulted ceilings, stained-glass windows, and beams painted with barley and hops motifs. Part of the building surrounds two open-air courtyards used as beer gardens in warm weather.

The food is decent and moderately priced. The multilingual menu lists several traditional Czech main dishes at CZK189: roast duck with sauerkraut and dumplings, beef with sour cream sauce and bread dumplings, goulash with bacon dumplings, smoked pork with sauerkraut and dumplings. The house specialty, "Flek's Treat," consists of a big plate of roast duck, roast pork, red and white cabbage, bread dumplings, and potato dumplings (CZK329).

U Fleku seats a total of 1,200 people in its various dining areas, and is often packed at peak hours. In tourist season, go mid-morning or mid-afternoon to find a seat. The tavern also features live music, an "Old Prague cabaret" in the evenings (CZK100), and a brewery museum for serious students of the suds.

Contact: U Fleku, Kremencová 11, Prague 1, tel. +420/224/934 019 20, fax +420/224/934 805, ufleku@ufleku.cz, www.ufleku.cz. Open 9am to 11pm

U Medvídku

At the Little Bears is a smaller (350-seat) historic tavern, recently renovated. Records show that beer has been served on this site since 1466, and in centuries past a brewery was also located on the premises, as well as a popular cabaret. Today's tavern re-

tains the vaulted ceilings of the original structure in several rooms and features an open-air beer garden, too.

The wood-paneled restaurant has an extensive, multilingual menu of Central European dishes, including a game menu (in autumn) of venison, wild sheep, wild duck, and pheasant accompanied by red cabbage, potatoes, and dumplings (CZK185-260). Many of the hot and cold appetizers (CZK48-129) are portioned large enough to make a light meal in themselves: try the *Medvedí tlapy*, the tavern's own version of "devil's toast" with a piquant meat mixture on top (CZK48), or four slices of fried rye bread with house-made beer-cheese spread (CZK58). Classic Czech dishes are priced at CZK115-290, and the *Certovo kolo* ("devil's wheel"), a plate-size potato pancake topped with a spicy mixture of meat and vegetables (135 CZK) is highly recommended.

The tavern serves Budvar (original Budweiser) on tap, as well as semi-dark Oldgott and very strong X-Beer from the new microbrewery upstairs, the smallest brewery in Prague, established in 2005. There's also a cabaret section, a small museum, and a shop selling several kinds of beer and beer paraphernalia.

Contact: U Medvídku, Na Perstyně 7, Prague 1, tel. +420/224/211 916, fax +420/224/220 930, info@umedvidku.cz, www.umedvidku.cz. Open 11:30am to 11pm)

Dvou Kocek

Even in the Communist era At the Two Cats was known for good, traditional, beer-tavern food, served with mugs of fresh, foamy Pilsner Urquell, in a centuries-old building in central Prague. Although the cigarette-smoke-stained walls have now been repainted and the entire place spruced up, U Dvou Kocek retains its character as a small (180-seat) beer tavern where locals and tourists mingle over plates of goulash with two kinds of dumplings (CZK98), smoked pork neck with spinach and potato dumplings (CZK98), and rabbit with cream sauce, cranberries, and bread

dumplings (CZK199). The large menu (with English translation) includes reasonably priced soups, cheese platters, hot starters (try the "Devilish Spicy Toast," CZK49), and now even pasta and vegetarian dishes, as well as desserts such as "Homemade Cinnamon Pancakes with Blueberry Cream and Blueberries" (CZK75). As in some Czech restaurants, the menu also notes, "An extra charge of CZK25 per person is added to meals for cover and service."


Contact: U Dvou Kocek, Uhelný trh, 10, Prague 1, tel. +420/221/014 354, fax +420/224/212 665, www.udvoukocek.cz. Open daily 11am to 11pm

U Rudolfina

Near the Rudolfinum concert hall, many think U Rudolfina has the best Pilsner Urquell in Prague. They also consider it to be a "real" Czech beer tavern, which hasn't made any concession to the rampant tourism that has overtaken central Prague during the past two decades. Most of the people drinking here are Czechs.

Beyond the nondescript exterior, just inside the front door, you'll find a small, simple, wood-paneled room with a small bar. Downstairs is a larger area, just as plain in decor, and as smoky and noisy as the little room upstairs. Way in the back is a separate dining room set aside for nonsmokers.

In addition to the excellent beer, U Rudolfina serves some of the best beer-tavern food in town. Start by ordering a basket of topinky, slices of dark rye bread fried on both sides, sprinkled with salt, and accompanied by whole cloves of garlic to rub on the bread. If this classic Czech finger food is too strong for your tastes, go for the "beer cheese," a mound of soft cheese with mustard and chopped onions on the side, which you mash together with your fork and spread on fresh bread. The main dishes emphasize meat—beef, pork, sausages, chicken—and are very well prepared, large portioned, and reasonably priced (CZK95-199).

Although there is supposedly an English menu available, your waiter probably doesn't speak English, so it's best to go to U Rudolfina with a Czech friend who can translate. Reservations are recommended because this is such a popular place—and well worth visiting for an authentic, no frills, Prague beer tavern experience. (U Rudolfina, Krizovnická 10, Prague 1, tel. +420/222/328 758. Open 11am to 11pm) 

DEAR SUBSCRIBER

Continued from page 2

doubtedly trumps all others. While it would seem to make sense to sell those 20 empty rooms for \$150 per night on Priceline rather than get zero income from them (after all, that's \$3,000 per night and \$21,000 per week), to do so opens the door to a completely different clientele, one with the potential to drastically change a hotel's carefully orchestrated ambience. The reasoning probably goes something like this: one or two wide-eyed, Volkswagen Golf-driving, Timex-wearing guests can create an amusing diversity, but a hotel full of them changes everything.

In my search for good deals at "grand" hotels, the best I found was at Berlin's elegant **Schlosshotel im Grunewald**, sumptuously refurbished a few years ago under the guidance of Karl Lagerfeld. At the hotel's website I scored a last-minute, two-night stay for €175 per night. The Schlosshotel is in the posh suburb of Grunewald, about 20-minutes by public transport from the *Mitte*. The more central **Hotel de Rome** has doubles for €235.

The great Brenner's Park in Baden-Baden, where the Obamas relaxed for a day during the recent NATO Summit, has two-night bed and breakfast packages in a double room for €1,040 or about \$1,360. The best rate I saw on the hotel's website was €320 (\$416), no breakfast.

Interlaken's Grand Hotel Victoria Jungfrau, a place of many fond memories (watching the sunlight fade on the Jungfrau from the elegant **La Terrassa Restaurant**) used to have a

"special offers" calendar on its website that identified nights on which discounts were available. Click the date and book; great for the flexible vacationer. Seven years ago *Gemütlichkeit* reported the site listed 18 nights in a single month in which a double room could be had for CHF 260, about \$154 at the time. The best deal now there now is found under "Special Offers & Events/Internet Special," and is for a double room at CHF 400 or about \$352, not bad for a hotel of this caliber and a far cry from the \$744 Orbitz price.

Though it's not a "grand" hotel, Luxurylink.com offers five nights for two people (plus kids under 12 stay free), including breakfast and dinner, at the five-star, family-owned **Hotel Grüner Baum** in Bad Gastein for a "buy it now" price of \$1,600. The minimum bid price is \$1,092 but I suspect a bid of \$1,100 will win the day. The food was a disappointment on our last visit (off-season), but the accommodations were fine and the national park setting is spectacular. Though there are some negative posts on Tripadvisor, this would be a great bargain for a couple traveling with two children under 12.

Once thought to be Germany's finest hotel, Hamburg's **Vier Jahreszeiten** has gone from family-owned, old-world service of the very highest quality, to a string a corporate managers, the latest being Fairmont, a Canadian firm which seems to specialize in historic "grand" hotels. I haven't been there for several years but those who have report a wide variance in room quality. At the Fairmont website I found a price of €192, about \$250. I guess whether that's a good deal depends on whether you get one of the musty closets some complain about or one of the bright, luxurious chambers that gets raves. The **Jahreszeiten Grill** has to be one of the most beautiful dining rooms in Europe.

Le Montreux Palace, another Fairmont, offers doubles for CHF 469 but if you stay four nights you get a fifth free, which works out to about \$330 per night.

A better deal at a better hotel is

CHF 348 (about \$306) at Lausanne's Le Beau Rivage Palace overlooking Lac Léman.

Vienna's Hotel Sacher will put you up for four nights for the price of three at €888 or about \$290 per night. The Sacher's regular double room rates start at €385. Of course you can rent the Madama Butterfly suite for two nights for €4,380, about \$5,700.

Three hundred dollars a night in the best hotels in our three countries may be a better deal than we realize. In Paris, the **George V** wants €770, the **Cipriani** in Venice charges €609. On the other hand, London's old-line **Claridge's** has a spring special for about \$328 per night.

While shopping the websites of these transcendent purveyors of bed and board, be prepared for a few annoying features. Words such as "rates" and "prices" are not generally used. "Arrangements" is popular but terms such as "deals," "specials," and "discounts" are simply not done, old boy. To get a price you're going to have to find the site's booking engine—try "availability"—and punch in some dates. Then there's the excruciatingly bothersome music, which can only be extinguished by locating some link in four-point type well-hidden on the page.

Though we enjoy occasional stays at the best hotels, you really don't need a newsletter to tell you about the Sachers and Brenner's Parks of Europe—except when they don't measure up. No, the trick is to find exceptional hotels at good prices, and over the last 23 years we've gotten far greater satisfaction in spotting places like the **Art Nouveau** in Berlin, the **Hirschen** in Langnau Switzerland, and the **Petrisberg** in Trier, than we have in reporting on hotel rooms that cost more per night than the average family's monthly grocery bill. Small town Nebraska/Oregon upbringing dictates that I'll always be more comfortable with a late night cold beer from the Art Nouveau's honor bar than with a Grand Marnier in the leather and dark wood of the Beau Rivage Palace's **English Bar**. —RHB 