

Germany Vacation Diary 2008 – Part 1

Thursday, April 17 – San Diego, Dallas

Our flight out of San Diego (American Airlines 160) has been delayed due to a mechanical problem. This turns out to be fortuitous, in that AA has no other option but to re-route us through Dallas and then direct to Frankfurt. For the past few weeks, I have been told by AA that no seats were available on this route. Looks like they were saving them for us after all!

We sleep little during the 8 hour and 40 minute flight from Dallas to Frankfurt, maybe two hours at most. Each passenger on our Boeing 777 has their own LCD screen with lots of in-flight movies to choose from.

Friday, April 18 – Frankfurt, Baden-Baden

We arrive in Frankfurt around 7am, about the time we would have arrived in London if we had flown our original schedule. We experience a very happy moment when we pass through passport control and see our two suitcases on the convey belt! Although we had been assured that our bags would make the change along with us, it's never a foregone conclusion that they will arrive on time.

After passing through customs, we begin our search for the train connecting the airport to Frankfurt's main rail station. A friendly German and his wife stop to offer assistance as we evaluate a map of the airport. We make our way down two flights of stairs to the train tracks. I carry our two large suitcases and Karen manages the two rolling daypacks. At this hour, there are no ticket agents on duty, and the [vending machine instructions](#) are in German. We learned from our last trip that it is easy to select the wrong ticket and overpay. We ask a passing airport employee, an American, to assist us. He presses a button to select "single passenger", then Einfahrt (one-way) to Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof. The machine then requests 3.20 €. The train arrives shortly and board for the 15-minute ride to the main station.

When we arrive, our new friend gives us directions to the information counter in the main station, and wishes us well with a sincere "Enjoy!" We quickly locate the [Deutsches Bahn](#) information area, where an English-speaking agent re-issues our tickets to Baden-Baden. We ask him when the next train to Baden-Baden leaves, and he says "in three minutes from platform 9". Once again, we find ourselves rushing to catch a train early in our trip! The train is quite long, with the 2nd class cars on the far end. To ensure we are not left behind, we jump onto a 1st class car and make our way to the Café car.

Our Intercity Express (ICE) train flies along the rails at a blistering 120 mph. The ride is smooth and quiet. We are practically alone in the Café car, so decide to stay awhile. I order coffee and pastries for us, and we relax for the first time as the rising sun begins to warm the countryside. We soon arrive in Mannheim, where a white-haired gentleman sits down next to us with a tall beer at 9am. He detects our American accent, and tells us that it is common for German towns to have sister towns in the USA. He once stayed with a family in a sister town in Wisconsin some years ago, and has fond memories of his time there.

When we deboard at Karlsruhe, he directs us to an elevator. We take the elevator down to a tunnel that connects all platforms. We walk through the tunnel until we find our platform number, and then take the elevator back up. The train to Baden-Baden arrives momentarily. As a regional train, it has roomy areas for transporting bicycles and plenty of overhead storage. It is even outfitted with LCD TV screens. A German version of MTV is playing on the tube.

We arrive in Baden-Baden's small train station after about 15 minutes. We navigate the tunnel to the main platform and share the elevator with a friendly German woman in her seventies. She had been on the first elevator with us, and then became confused in trying to locate the second one. We can't understand many of her words, but there are smiles all around. I've found that people who don't speak the same language can nevertheless comprehend each other, if for no other reason than we seem to share an understanding of human behavior in given situations. Especially human foibles.

We walk around to the front of the station, and quickly locate a waiting taxi. A friendly cabbie who hails from Kosovo takes us to the [Hotel am Markt](#) for 16.20 €, which I round up to 20.00 €. Along the way we talk about Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February, and that the USA was among the first to recognize the new nation. He says that while President Bush may be greeted by protests elsewhere in Europe, he would be enthusiastically welcomed in Albania and the large population of Albanians in Kosovo.

At the front desk, we are greeted by Frau Bogler Schindler, a petite woman in her fifties with a lilting voice and an easy laugh. It is only 11:00am and the apartment is still being cleaned. She tells us to leave our luggage in the dining room and come back around 2:00pm. How to kill three hours in Baden-Baden? In the spa, of course. She sells us two discounted spa passes to [Friedrichsbad](#) for 54.00 €, which includes a rub-down. But first, lunch.



Karen at the base of the ancient stairway leading to downtown Baden-Baden

We walk down the long stairway into town. Along the way we tip the two town minstrels playing their violins in front of an open instrument case. We shamelessly enter the local McDonalds for a quick meal of a McRib sandwich, fries, and beer. Soon the place is invaded by schoolchildren on their lunch break. We wander down the main cobble-stoned street past small shops and around the

corner to Friedrichsbad. After a sauna, a rub-down, and a steam, I meet Karen in the pool area. There are fewer than a dozen people here, so we have the place mostly to ourselves. After soaking for a couple of hours, the long flight and train trek have become a distant memory.

We return to Hotel am Markt around 2:30, where we are greeted by Frau Jung, Frau Bogler Schindler's dark-haired sister. Carrying the smaller luggage, we ascend three steep flights of stairs to the apartment. It is roomy and comfortable, with a separate living room and bedroom. The low beams in the bedroom and the sloping ceiling give us pause for caution. There is also a large kitchen and decent refrigerator. There is a bathtub with a hand-held water dispenser, but no shower. Overall, a great value for 83.00 €. After hauling our remaining luggage up the stairs, we're in need of a break.

After a 20-minute power-nap and a shot of Jack Daniels, we feel revived. We walk back into town for a short tour, remembering stores, shops, and restaurants from our first visit in 2006. We decide on lunch at the Lowenbrau Biergarten, feasting on large portions of pork and Schnitzel under a cloudless sky. There is a light breeze and the air is warm, about 65 degrees – in short, perfect! Everybody is out sunning themselves, drinking coffee or beer and people-watching. After the months of planning it feels great to finally be here!

We stop at a local shop and purchase beer, wine, bread, and some salami, cheese and chips for snacks. The clerks speak English, which is helpful although I enjoy the opportunity to order from the deli in German. I've studied the German words for numbers, and am pleased when I comprehend the total: 19.00 € and change.

In the early evening, I visit [CaracallaTherme](#) while Karen watches the German version of American Idol. We finally crash about 10:30pm.



Our penthouse apartment in Hotel am Markt is comfy and spacious with a full kitchen

Saturday, April 19 – Baden-Baden

We wake up about 4am, our body clocks totally out of kilter. We snack on cheese, then go back to sleep. We finally wake up about 10:45am, having slept through the hotel breakfast period. It rained during the night, and the air is considerably cooler today, with an overcast sky and drizzle.

Nevertheless, it is a Saturday and lots of weekend sightseers pack the streets. We wander around looking for a place to eat brunch. Karen spots a Turkish diner down a side street that serves large portions of pizza and Greek gyro-like sandwiches. We opt for the pizza, with mineral water and beer. Next, we cross the main street to visit the [Tourist Information Center](#) near the [Kurhaus](#) (casino). After collecting brochures and maps, we venture toward the casino. There is a long red carpet leading up to the entrance. As we approach the large entry doors, we hear orchestral music coming from inside. When we inquire at the information desk, we're told that a free philharmonic concert is offered at 4pm. This is the one we saw in Rick Steves' video about Baden-Baden.

Back outside, we hear music and arrive at the main street in time to catch the local parade. It's an eclectic mix, and while it's hard to tell exactly what the theme is, it appears to be a fundraiser judging by the number of kids involved. There are rows of children marching in red, white and blue medieval costumes and playing instruments. They are followed by parents in street clothes, walking hand-in-hand with their kids. An oversized basinet containing two middle-aged men dressed as babies rolls by. They are squalling and carrying on, and really getting into the part. Bringing up the rear are Roman centurions pulling a chariot carrying their commander.



A springtime parade features locals in all manner of costumes, including city fathers in a basinet.

We take a few pictures over the Oos River that winds its way from one end of Baden-Baden to the other, and helps to define the town's charming character. We then wander down the Lichtentaler Allee, a walking path that leads through a lush public park. Created in the mid nineteenth century, the park extends for several kilometers alongside the banks of the Oos River to the forests beyond Baden-Baden. It is exceptionally well maintained because of its location in a famous spa town. The famous Gonneranlage rose garden was added in 1952.

Over the centuries, the area has been a meeting-place for European nobility, artists and diplomats. The original avenue of oak-trees, established by Moritz von Lassolaye in 1655, was converted into an English garden covering 40 hectares of land by casino leaseholder Jacques Bénazet in 1850. Now around 300 different kinds of trees and shrubs from all over the world can be found here: oaks, beech trees, tulip- and mammoth-trees, magnolias, rhododendrons, silver-maples and many more.

We circle back through town, passing by the old church and fountain. We window-shop the stores in front of the Kurhaus, marveling at the beautiful silver jewelry and ornaments and the stratospheric prices of ordinary shoes. Inside the Kurhaus, we queue for the concert and are allowed entry into the large auditorium at 3:55pm. For an hour, we listen to a wonderful classical "Landspartie" program comprised of music from well-known composers over the past 500 years.

After the concert, we walk back into town, looking for a shortcut back to our hotel. We find the red carpet that we'd seen at the Kurhaus extending from the main street, all the way up a side street. We follow it to the [Heliopark BadHotel Zum Hirsch](#), a spa-hotel run by a hotel chain from Moscow. It is very elegant and pricey, and we realize that the red carpet connects the hotel with the Heliopark convention being held at the Kurhaus.



View of the Oos River along the Lichtentaler Allee

It's time to shop for provisions. Back at the Hotel am Markt, we ask Frau Jung for directions to a supermarket. She directs us to the Wagoner Department Store, describing the entire 3rd floor as a grocery superstore. We wander up the cobblestone street north of our hotel to where it forks uphill and downhill. We find a sign pointing to the store through a doorway in a residential building, but are disbelieving. Finally, we return to the door and find that it does in fact lead us through an apartment building, and then through a covered Medieval-looking wooden walkway, and finally to a parking lot on the roof of the Wagoner Department Store building. We take the large elevator to the 3rd floor, and step out into a vast realm of food and beverages.

We select salami and several types of cheeses from the deli section, along with bread, crackers, and chips. We also stock up on inexpensive bottled water, both carbonated and plain. We also find the bottled beer and wine to be less expensive than in downtown Baden-Baden. Not to be overlooked are the dark German chocolate candy bars on sale!

After returning to the hotel with our stash, Karen is ready to relax. I make another visit to Caracalla where the sauna and steam rooms work out any remaining kinks from the past our travel ordeal. I return to the hotel around 9:20, and we head into town to dine at one of our favorite restaurants, Roma. The lasagna is as plentiful and good as we remember it. Karen enjoys a glass of Chianti. Feeling adventurous, I order Radler, a Black Forest specialty beer. Too late, I realize Radler is not quite what I expected – it's a mixture of beer and apple juice. Great for a picnic, but not for pasta. Nonetheless, it's not bad, just...different. The trees in the Lowenbrau Biergarten across the street are adorned with small white lights that make them sparkle and dance. We top off our fine meal with Tiramisu, a favorite Italian dessert.



The Friedrichsbad Spa

Sunday, April 20 – Baden-Baden

Although we toss and turn a lot during the night, we wake up at a normal time this morning (i.e., before 10:45am) to take advantage of a wonderful breakfast buffet of meats, cheeses, soft-boiled eggs and pastries, along with O.J. and Cappuccino. We finally went to bed at midnight, woke at 3am, dozed until 5am, and then finally fell back to sleep and awoke at 7:45am.

We spend a fantastic morning together at [Friedrichsbad](#) (10:00am – 1:30pm). On Sundays, couples can be able to do the entire spa experience together from start to finish. All body types are on display. We return to the hotel feeling very refreshed and relaxed.

Karen mistakenly plugs her curling iron into the 240v adapter plug instead of the voltage converter. This explains why its tip suddenly becomes extremely hot and begins to droop.

When we ask Frau Jung about Internet access, she mentions that our hotel has a computer available to guests in the Reading Room on the 2nd floor. We find access to be intermittent, although we're able to connect briefly to our RoadRunner accounts and check email.



View of Baden-Baden from Hotel am Markt

The weather has turned warm and sunny again, after a foggy start to the day. Not feeling hungry yet, we head toward the Lichtentaler Allee. The brochure we picked up at the TI points out that spring begins earlier in Baden-Baden than elsewhere in Germany. The throngs of tourists in the streets and packing the cafés are testimony to that. As we pass through town, we find our roving violinists hard at work. We tip them again, as we did the first day. Further on, we encounter three American Indians in full regalia, playing haunting ballads on flutes and selling CDs.

As we begin our stroll down the Lichtentaler Allee, Karen's intuition proves correct – this is not a good day for bike riding, due to the crowds. Couples young and old and families meander blissfully

past the bubbling Oos River. Trees are in full bloom. We come to a park fenced in by an ornate hedge. Strangely, its leaves are brown and withered. Karen takes a shot of me wearing my SportsPlex League Champion T-Shirt in front of the fountain.

After walking a kilometer or so, we rest on a park bench. The path stretches on to the horizon and beyond to the forest. It's nice just to sit for awhile and watch the world go by. On the walk back, we pass ornate houses and hotels. We also observe strange parking customs: cars are parked in both directions on the same side of the street! Having worked up an appetite, we stop at the Lowenbrau Biergarten for another plate of sausages, sauerkraut, beer and wine.



The trees along the Lichtentaler Allee are in full bloom

After a visit to Caracalla, we visit the hotel Rathausglockel restaurant, highly regarded by Rick Steves. There is only one other couple there, friendly white-haired seniors. Although everything on the menu looks good, Karen orders the special meat loaf, and I have the Schnitzel (under the menu listing, in English, it says "You will like it!") I had the same meal here back in October 2006, and it was memorable. The owner, Michael, is friendly and charming as before, and speaks perfect English. His cook comes out to chat for awhile about his occasional visits to Florida to visit friends and relatives.

Karen is served far more meat loaf than she can eat and asks for take out boxes. She is told politely that that it is not customary in Germany and even considered rude in some parts. Presumably, they are all staunch members of the Clean Plate Club here. That said, Michael brings her a rinsed-out strawberry ice cream carton which works just fine. The leftovers make up the better part of our next two dinners in the apartment.

Monday, April 21 – Baden-Baden

I wake up at 6am, my usual time, after a full night's sleep. Jet lag is officially history, but Karen didn't sleep as well, partly due to my snoring. The day begins under a slate gray sky and ends with a drizzling rain, but the temperature is tolerable; it feels like the low sixties. After another great breakfast (Karen resourcefully hoards some butter patties for cooking) we head into town to catch the mini-train city tour at the Kurhaus. There is some commotion near the bus stop in front of the Kurhaus shops, as a film crew prepares for a shoot.

We board the train for our 40-minute tour, and discover we are the only passengers. The "train" is actually four miniature railroad cars pulled by a "locomotive", all riding on tires. The driver kindly asks us if we would like to hear the tour in English, and we thank him (gee, what gave us away? Maybe the ball caps...)

The driver takes us along the Lichtentaler Allee, then back into town to Leopoldstrasse, where a dump truck blocks the road and snarls traffic for a few minutes. We continue on to the outskirts of town, and then up a winding residential street into the "Beverly Hills" district of the well-to-do. The train stops at the MerkurBahn entrance, where the driver dutifully announces the stop, as he has all others. Back in town, we veer north past the fifth largest concert hall in Europe. We return to the hotel, grab our spa kit bags, and head off to Caracalla in time for the 20-minute aqua aerobics class in the large indoor pool. After 3 hours, we return to the hotel for a homemade lunch of cheese, liverwurst, salami, and Ciabatta bread. After lunch, we visit the Wagoner Department Store to find Karen a new curling iron and more water, beer, wine, and veggies.



The friendly staff of the Rathausglockel Hotel offer one of the finest meals in Baden-Baden

Around 5pm I head off to Caracalla. There are no crowds until about 7:15, and then the place is inundated. Sitting by the foot bath, I meet a couple from New Jersey named Tim and Kim who also happen to be staying at Hotel am Markt. They have come to Baden-Baden to visit the au pair girls who they once employed and are now grown with children of their own. The girls have become like family, and I soon learn that Tim and Kim are empty-nesters who share our love of traveling.

This evening, Karen prepares a fine meal of leftover Lasagna, pizza, zucchini and mushrooms. The veggies taste especially good, grilled in garlic oil.



The Caracalla Spa is a 5-minute walk from the Hotel am Markt

Tuesday, April 22 – Baden-Baden

I slept soundly again. The Flonase and nasal strips seem to improve sleep quality. I introduce Tim and Kim to Karen at breakfast. We eat separately, but then join them at their table for a brief chat that turns into a half-hour conversation. Small world that it is, they live in the next town over from Chatham, N.J. where our friends Shelby and Carolyn live. They know where the Verizon HQ building is where Carolyn works, and ask if we know about the [Great Swamp](#). It was the result of a community project some years ago, privately funded by millionaire residents, to create a wildlife refuge to stymie the development of a proposed airport. It worked; the airport was never built. They visited Strasbourg last week and shared pictures of this picturesque French town less than an hour drive from Baden-Baden. They also told us about the [Palace at Rastatt](#) with its fine collection of porcelain, and of a medieval town nearby that has endured the tests of time.

We leave for Caracalla about 10am and spend another relaxing morning after the morning water aerobics class. I run into Kim and Tim upstairs in the sauna area. They mention a free dance at the Kurhaus this evening, and that they ran into neighbors of theirs at Hotel am Markt who happened to

sit at the table we vacated. I told them my favorite small world story about running into my Spanish teacher in a small town in northern Spain one summer. Karen heads back to the hotel about 1:15, and I extend my stay until 2:00. After a delicious lunch of salami, wurst, cheeses and sesame crackers, we head off to the Frieda Burda Museum of Contemporary Art. A one-man show of works by [Gerhard Richter](#), a still-living German artist, is the featured attraction. He has a way of painting photo-realistic images of landscapes, still-life objects (including a burning candle) and people as if seen through a mist. At the other extreme are large scale abstract works. We expect to stay a couple of hours, but there are only three floors and we see the whole thing in about 45 minutes. We stop in the café for cappuccinos and a peach tort.

After another late afternoon session at Caracalla, Karen fixes another fine meal of leftover Schnitzel, potatoes, sliced grilled dumplings (they're better this way), zucchini and mushrooms. Afterwards we feel like crashing, then we remember the dance at the Kurhaus. As we teeter on the brink of indecision, we start to goad each other into action with good-natured name calling ("light-weight" and "wuss" can be printed here, other words cannot). So, we venture out into the cool, drizzly night toward the Kurhaus, where we find a large gathering outside the restaurant. Some people are huddled inside a bright yellow, inflated beer tent, while others brave the evening chill in the open. There is a mixture of formal and casual attire. As we attempt to enter the restaurant area, we are told by the doorman that this is a private function, "closed" to us. He speaks no English, but his meaning is clear.

We regroup and head inside toward the casino lobby, where we find signs directing us to free entertainment in the bar. This sounds like the event that Kim and Tim were talking about. There are only a handful of patrons at the bar, and no sign of Kim and Tim. Karen says we've come this far, I might as well buy her a drink. I find it hard to argue with that logic. The band is knocking back tunes from the '60s through the '80s. We ask the bartender where they are from, and he says "Croatia". Then he hands us a pad and pen and suggests we make a list of requests. When the lead singer performs a dead-on rendition of Barry White's "Can't Get Enough of Your Love Babe", we burst into loud applause. As we finish our song list – including The Doobie Brothers, The Eagles, and other greats – Kim and Tim suddenly appear. They have perfect timing, as the band tells us they will play our requests on the condition that we all dance.

Tim and Kim are very good dancers. Tim invites a group of single Asian girls to dance, and becomes the life of the party. A tall African man dances with Kim, but soon it's obvious he's drunk. Tim cuts in and rescues Kim. The keyboard player could be a stunt double for Andre Agassi. The band plays "Long Train Running" by the Doobies and "Hotel California" by The Eagles. We scream and yell and clap our approval after each song. Suddenly it's 2am, and time to leave. The manager gives us a thumbs up, and Andre comes up to say goodbye. I give him a friendly man-hug and we bid him farewell.

Wednesday, April 23 – Baden-Baden

Had breakfast with Tim and Kim Sommer again this morning. As we munched on cereal, yogurt, meats and cheeses, we talked about our plans for the day. The Sommers are returning home tomorrow, and want to visit the old [Hohenbaden](#) castle ruins on a hillside overlooking Baden-Baden. The castle was built in 1102 and has been in ruins since the 15th century, but it is still favored by locals for wedding receptions and large parties.

After visiting Caracalla in the morning, I make plans to pick up our rental car. I decide to pick it up at 4:00, an hour early. I call ahead and the friendly agent says "Mr. Granger? Yes, we are expecting you." I stop by Wagoner to buy more bottled water, and then head for the bank to withdraw another 500 €. Although bus #21 runs along Maximilianstrasse, it's still a nice day so I decide to walk the 1.5 miles to the Avis office. About half way to my destination I feel the first sprinkles, but press on. I stop a couple of passersby to confirm I am going in the right direction, and arrive just before 4:00. The office is in the suburbs, about a 3-minute drive from downtown.

The agent I spoke with on the phone shows me to our rental car, a black [Kia Rondo](#) 4-door SUV. Since I was expecting a Volkswagen coupe, I am pleasantly surprised. As rain begins to fall steadily, the agent gives me a quick lesson on how to work the GPS Navigation System. It comes with a manual, and seems easy enough to program. As it starts to pour, she bids me bon voyage and retreats to the Avis office.

The car's large windshield offers great visibility, and it will be fun to drive a stick shift again for awhile. I make a left turn into traffic, and proceed toward Baden-Baden. Within 30 seconds I've made my first wrong turn. Or rather, instead of taking a side road that heads into town, I enter the tunnel that funnels traffic from one end of town to the other. When I emerge into sunlight a few minutes later, I recognize the intersection at the west end of Baden-Baden, near the Opera House. I turn on to Leopoldstrasse, and follow the winding road up through the hills north of town, and within minutes I am picking my way carefully along the cobble-stoned streets off of Sophienstrasse and heading up the hill to Hotel am Markt.

Flush with victory, I meet Karen in our room and we prepare for an evening visit to Caracalla for their special Sea of Lights event. We meet Tim and Kim just before 6:00, as the Caracalla employees begin setting lanterns around the outdoor pool and channeling new-age music through the speakers. It's a nice evening, still almost 3 hours until dark. Tim heads upstairs, while Karen, Kim and I swim in the outdoor pool with the artificial river. After awhile I do a stint in the saunas, and suggest to Kim and Tim that we go out to dinner. I recommend a sure thing, the Lowenbrau Biergarten, and they agree.



Sharing brats and schnitzel with Tim and Kim Sommer at the Lowenbrau Biergarten