

Germany-Austria Vacation Diary 2006

Saturday, September 23rd

We fly all night from San Diego to Dallas to Zurich. Sixteen and a half hours later, we arrive in foggy Zurich at 8am local time. Our pilot announces that we are “right on time” in a distinct Texas drawl that accentuates the realization we are half a world away from home. Our bodies are telling us it’s really 1:00am, and we should be horizontal rather than vertical, as we move like zombies to retrieve our carry-on baggage and deplane.

We take the shuttle train to the main concourse, where we take a long and much needed rest room break. When I emerge, Karen is obviously worried that I had fallen in or wandered off. With a few euros in our pockets, we head off with no real direction in mind and soon make our way to a café. We order strong coffee and a bottle of water; both taste great after the long flight.

We have slept very little on the long stretch between Dallas and Zurich. We find comfortable seats in the lounge area with a view of foggy [Zurich Airport](#). Reading novels and working crossword puzzles makes the time go faster, but our three and a half hour layover in Zurich still feels like a full day by the time our Swiss Air flight to Munich takes off at 12:15 pm. As we consume our energy bars, we realize it’s been quite some time since we last ate. Flying low over Bavaria in our small Avro RJ-100 Avroliner jet, we observe forested valleys dotted with small clusters of buildings with red rooftops. As we approach Munich Airport, the autobahn appears sparsely populated. At the airport, we breeze through passport control and customs, and stop at the information booth for some friendly travel advice. We change money at the Reisebuero Bank (the rate is not good). We head across an open air plaza past a biergarten en route to the [DB Deutsche Bahn](#) ticket desk.

In line at the ticket desk there is mass confusion. A group of rowdy Englishers - some wearing black bushy wigs and others cross-dressed in white wedding gowns - whoop and holler at each other before moving on. After a short wait, I purchase two one-way Bayern tickets to Schliersee. I learn that the correct pronunciation is not SCHLYER-SEE but SCHLEER-SEE. The Bayern tickets are the Bavarian version of the regional [Lander Tickets](#). They are the cheapest way to get around on the expensive German rail system. We learn that there are two types of local trains: the “S-Bahn” trains travel overground, while the “U-Bahn” trains travel underground. In downtown Munich, this distinction is blurred, as S-Bahn trains also travel to underground stations. We take the S8 train to Donnersbergerbrücke and change to the BOB (Bayerische Oberland Bahn) train. Along the way, German girls dressed in traditional Bavarian dirndls board the train, headed for the Oktoberfest festival grounds near the main train station (Hauptbahnhof). By the time we arrive in Schliersee, our total transfer time is three and a half hours (1:00 pm to 4:30 pm).

At the station, we look in vain for an open information desk to ask directions to the AlpenClub, our timeshare exchange. Wondering what to do next, I step into a pub and ask the tall, elderly proprietor for directions in German. We step outside, then giving me a stern look, he proceeds to give me directions in German. I understand little beyond the hand signals he is giving me, which direct us up one block and to the left. With our luggage in tow, we head north about 100 yards along Schliersee’s main thoroughfare until we come to a gas station. The teenager at the mini-mart counter speaks English, and directs us to a nearby street where we find AlpenClub nestled below a hillside meadow. We check in and settle into our wonderful little apartment. It feels great to finally shower and change into fresh clothes. As Karen happily continues to build our new nest, I head for the bar and order “ein gross bier” from the jolly bartender. Afterwards, I inquire at the desk about our friends Craig and Amy and find they have not yet checked in. I decide to take the 10-minute walk back to the train station on a hunch that they may arrive on the 7:30 pm train, but no luck. Karen and I arrive for dinner and are seated in the busy dining room. We enjoy a delicious Italian

meal where diners can choose from a variety of pastas and select a special sauce (we love the chili sauce). After building our own concoction of pastas in a bowl, we hand it to the chef who then cooks it in a wok and adds the sauce. After washing down our repast with Chianti, we stagger back to our room for a long slumber.



The AlpenClub at Schliersee. Pool and solarium are at lower left, stairs to dining area on the right.

Sunday, September 24th

Schliersee

I wake up at 4:30 am, my biological clock totally out of whack. Karen is up by 5:00. We have coffee, continue unpacking, then collapse in the sack again to catch a little more shuteye. We reawaken before 10:30, just in time for the last breakfast call. We meet a group of American retirees at a nearby table, who talk about how much fun they have living in an RV park in Arizona, when they're not traveling in the RV or venturing abroad.

It's a beautiful, warm sunny day, with the temperature in the mid-seventies. We couldn't ask for more perfect weather to begin our Bavarian adventure. Our plan is to relax all day in or near the spa, and we see no need to make any changes. Around lunch time, Craig and Amy end all speculation as to their whereabouts when they appear on the stairway leading down from the pool. We hail them from our lounge chairs in the grassy sunbathing area near the indoor pool, and then there are hugs all around. We find out that they arrived late the night before and are staying in the hotel section of the AlpenClub.

We spend the rest of the day relaxing in the pool and Jacuzzi, then later the sauna and steam bath. We enjoy a gourmet buffet dinner and make plans to venture into Munich on Monday and visit the Deutsches Museum and Oktoberfest.

Monday, September 25th

Schliersee

The weather this morning is a carbon copy of yesterday. We meet Craig and Amy for breakfast early (07:00 is early while on vacation). The buffet line features soft boiled eggs (2.5 minute and 4 minute eggs – you gotta love the precision), scrambled eggs, sausages that taste better than anything we can get at home, salami, cheeses, melons, strawberries, bananas, muesli and corn flake cereals, a variety of pastries, rolls, and bread, fresh orange juice, sparkling mineral water, and a vitamin-packed mixed fruit juice.

After breakfast, Amy and I take a taxi into town to exchange money at the Sparkasse Bank. The town of Schliersee is situated at the north end of a lake of the same name. It is surrounded by small mountains - foothills to the alps – and cows are visible on the steep alpine meadows below the ridgeline. At the bank, the teller speaks excellent English. After punching numbers into the computer, he gives us the exchange rate: 1.33, compared to 1.20 a year ago. The dollar's recent slide notwithstanding, the unfavorable rate seems unusually lopsided. As a consolation, the bank charges a mere 3€ service fee to change \$1,000 cash into 746€. Karen and I decided to go cash-only on this trip. As we learned in Italy last year, banks love to change travelers cheques. In the age of ATMs, we discovered that they now command a steep service fee. Returning to our waiting cab, Amy and I split the 20€ fare. Back at the AlpenClub, we meet Karen and Craig in the lobby.



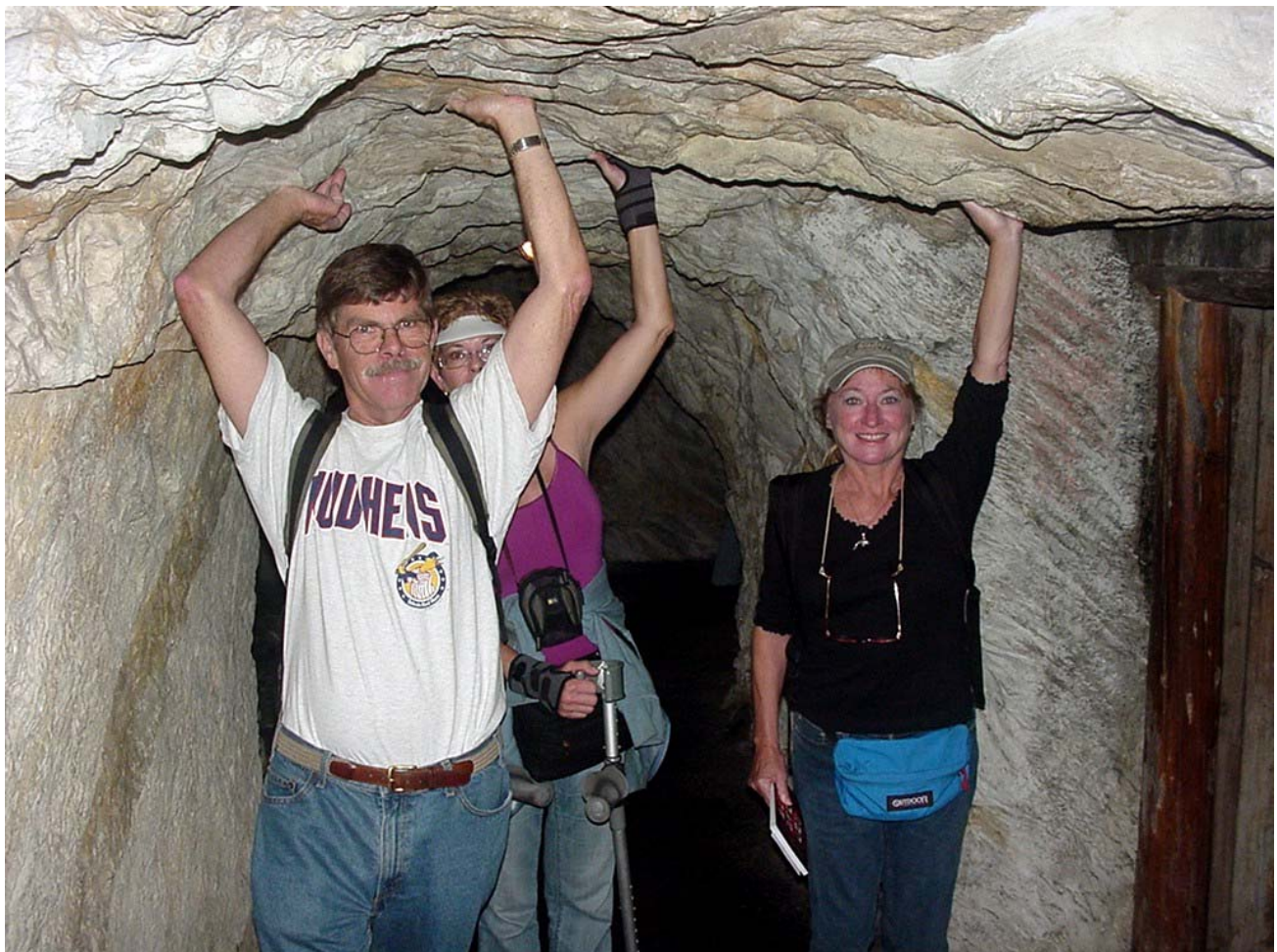
German hotels and homes are typically adorned with brightly colored flower boxes.

Wearing daypacks and armed with our cameras, we leave the AlpenClub for the 10-minute walk to the train station. The street leading to the main road is lined with picture-perfect Bavarian style homes. Second story balconies feature planter boxes filled with bright, colorful flowers. The landscaping is immaculate. We pass a shop and the girls are all agog over the pretty Bavarian-style dresses in the window. Karen says they are called “dirndls”, to which I reply, “I’ll show you a DURNDUL”. We have to stop for a minute to allow Craig to recover from a fit of laughing.

The train station is at the end of the rail line. A small crowd is gathered around the automated ticket vending machines. Two old women are arguing with each other about how to work the machine, and eventually give up. As we scroll through the menu, we see different prices for similar fares. As we are about to make a selection, the woman in line behind us takes charge and says “No, that is too much.” She steers us to the cheapest fare for a one-day rail pass on the BOB. A paltry 19€ covers travel for up to five people between 9:00am and 3:00am each day. We can ride the train back and forth to Munich, and use the U-Bahn, S-Bahn, and tram cars - all on the same ticket.

The 50-minute ride from Schliersee to Munich Hauptbahnhof is pleasant and scenic. The picture windows provide a panoramic view of forests and pastureland, and we stop at the occasional town to offload passengers. As we pass by a cornfield, we see a genuine piece of environmental art: a giant, white-washed, papier-mâché figure sitting on the edge of a bed frame in a contemplative pose. At the Hauptbahnhof, we make our way down the stairs and through the underground shopping mall toward the S-Bahn.

The S-Bahn trains run regularly at 5 to 10 minute intervals. We take the S-Bahn to the Deutsches Museum stop, and climb the stairs to daylight. According to the map, the station is only two blocks



Craig, Amy, and Karen - lost in the mines of the Deutsches Museum

from the museum, situated on an island in the middle of the Arno River. We notice painted lines forming a lane on the sidewalk. About the time we realize their purpose, a bicyclist speeds by at a formidable speed inches from where we are walking, dinging us with a warning bell as he passes. A pedestrian explains that the lanes are for cyclists only and should be avoided by those on foot. As a mode of transportation, bicycles are far more common in Europe than in American cities. The sidewalk bike lanes are an obvious nod to this fact, and seem a sensible alternative considering the dangers of cycling in downtown traffic. Now, if only they would invent head mounted rearview mirrors for unwary pedestrians, everyone would be a winner.

We enter the [Deutsches Museum](#), Germany's answer to the cavernous Smithsonian in Washington D.C., around noon. The museum's many exhibits trace the evolution of science and technology, everything from astronomy to zymurgy. Near the entrance is the Mine exhibit. We descend a spiral stairwell with a view into an artificial mine shaft. Lifelike mannequins dressed in miner's gear are hard at work with picks and shovels. Some are dressed in soldier uniforms, which seems odd. We come to a room filled with scale models and working exhibits. Press a button and the model of a giant pit mining excavation machine swings into action. Old film reels showing the actual machine at work are shown on a TV monitor above. As we go deeper into the exhibit, we begin to wonder if we are ever going to get out. We climb up and down stairs, and become concerned about the wear and tear on Amy, who is stoically navigating the pathways on crutches. Finally, we escape our subterranean prison and emerge into a large room filled with even more exhibits. This seems a perfect time for a lunch break.

We take lunch at a deli in the courtyard outside the museum. The salami and cheese sandwiches, chips, and 24 oz. steins of hearty German beer taste great. Fortified, we re-enter the museum and catch the 2:00 demonstration of the power of high voltage electricity. As a 5-foot bolt of lightning leaps from one sphere to another, it makes a loud bang. Moving on to the maritime exhibit, we observe the conning tower of the first German U1 submarine ever built rising up through the floor. We descend to the floor below to see the rest of boat, which is sliced down the middle to display all of its compartments. Although the boat was battery powered, we are surprised to learn that submarine technology was so advanced in 1906.

We spend another couple of hours touring as much of the museum as our legs can stand. We find an actual V1 flying bomb from WWII in the Aeronautics section, a model of Spain's Altamira cave (famous for its well-preserved prehistoric wall art), and the forerunner of modern computers, the Univac (a million-dollar room filled with thousands of vacuum tubes and miles of wiring). The last section we visit before the museum closes, and Karen's favorite, is the Textiles section. On display are the earliest weaving devices, up to the automated textile machines of today. We are among the last visitors to leave the museum.

Although tired from a short night's sleep, we press on. [Oktoberfest](#) awaits.

Thanks to directions from a museum employee, we catch Bus 131 in front of the museum in the direction of Hans-Fisherstrasse. The buses in Munich are as modern and clean as the trains. As an attractive girl wearing traditional Bavarian dress (yes, a dirndl) gets on, we are assured that we are heading in the right direction. We exit the bus and cross to the street, where we are greeted with an amazing sight. Theresienwiese fairgrounds (known as the "Wies'n," south of the train station) is a mini-city of enormous beer tents, high-octane thrill rides, and mobs of fun-loving people strolling arm in arm in a carnival atmosphere.

We arrive at the entrance to find no entry gate. Dozens of revelers are lounging on the grass beneath a giant statue to the left of the entrance. Directly ahead is the Lowenbrau beer tent, one of many flagships of Munich breweries on the festival grounds. As we enter the tent, we pass through a picnic area. Once inside, we pause to take in the scene. The tent is the length of a football field. A band is playing on an elevated circular stage in the middle of the room. The Oom-pah style bands of old have yielded to more modern music, and we recognize an old Eagles tune. Upwards of 6,000



The Lowenbrau tent is one of many, each packed with up to 6,000 revelers. Now THAT's a party!

happy people cram into the picnic style benches. We circumnavigate the tent using the walkway that surrounds the seating area, doing our best to avoid getting run over by the scurrying beer maids. Not one seat is vacant. I stop a pretty girl in costume, asking her in German if she speaks English. Invariably, Germans will say "a little" and then proceed to converse like a native. In fact, most took English as a second language in grammar school and are quite fluent. I ask her how to go about getting a seat, to which she replies that we should just try to make friends with someone sitting at a table. We learn later that most seats are reserved by guests who book packages through Munich's hotels.

Undeterred, we leave the Lowenbrau tent city in search of four seats. The broad avenue is packed with festival goers. On either side are kiosks selling tourist trinkets, fast food booths, and carnival barkers. The flood of people extends into the distance as far as the eye can see. We arrive at an intersection with another broad avenue, and again the mass of humanity seems to stretch to infinity. We enter the Paulaner beer tent to find it as crowded as Lowenbrau's. The outside seating area is much larger, and we spot a half-filled table. After securing our seats, a beer maid is quick to take our order. On the limited menu, roast chicken sounds good. The beer decision is easy; it comes in only one size (a liter) and the beer of choice is helles, the German word for a golden, full-bodied pilsner. Dunkles is the darker beer. In any case, it's hard to go wrong.

We each get a whole chicken, which seems like a lot until we realize how famished we are. It is easy to strike up a conversation and make merry with those at our table. We find ourselves in the company of Germans, French, Americans, Australians, and pilgrims from around the world. Craig meets a woman from the Midwest who is attracted by his "Mud Hens Football" t-shirt, and a bond is

instantly formed. Our beer maids pause just long enough to pose for a picture. Two liters of beer later, we head back into the tent in search of commemorative “I Survived Oktoberfest” t-shirts.

It's now well after dark. Feeling tired but in great spirits, we head back toward Hans-Fisherstrasse. We catch a cab and gladly pay the fare back to the train station, which is alive with festival goers. After a 20 minute wait, the arrival of our BOB train back to Schliersee is a welcome sight. We finally pull in to the station about 10pm, and then take a cab back to the AlpenClub. As we fall into bed, it feels like we've been gone for more than a day.

Tuesday, September 26th Schliersee

We awaken at 7:30 from a deep sleep, still feeling tired but better than yesterday. The weather is cool and drizzly, with overcast skies. Craig and Amy decide to hang out at the resort today, tired from yesterday's exertions. Karen and I arrive at the Schliersee station and purchase tickets for the 9:35 BOB to the Munich Hauptbahnhof. While waiting on the platform for the train to arrive, we are approached by a man on a bicycle dressed in biking attire. He introduces himself as Andy, and asks who we are in such a way that his forthrightness could easily be mistaken as a demand by someone in authority. He is friendly in an odd sort of way, and seems intensely curious about us. When we say we are Americans, he acts amused. He turns to a group of Germans and pointedly asks each one if they are American. Playing along, they laugh and say, “No, einen Deutscher”.

When the train arrives, we bid aufweidersehen to Andy. At the Hauptbahnhof, we catch the S-Bahn to the city center and Marienplatz, just in time to catch a rate Glockenspiel performance. Afterwards, we walk through a light drizzle down Theatrinstrasse and soon arrive at the Residenz.



The 700-year-old Residenz Palace in Munich features an ornate grotto made entirely of seashells.

Built by the Wittelsbachs in the 1300's, the Residenz Palace has been converted into a museum housing paintings, statuary, priceless jewels, and royal furnishings. Though much of the palace was destroyed near the end of WWII, it has been rebuilt to its former splendor. Many of the large ceiling paintings were lost, but many smaller ones survived. We pick up audio phones, included in the 9€ ticket price, and begin our tour in a long, mirrored hallway filled with dozens of Wittelsbach family portraits chronicling their 700-year dynasty. The length of the Wittelsbach reign during this time is exceeded only by the Hapsburgs of Austria.

Three hours later, we search the guidebook for suggestions on where to eat. The breweries sound good, but at this point Karen's feet are tired. We decide on the market district near Marienplatz, known as the Viktualien Markt, and take the underground for the short ride there. The rain begins to fall as we arrive in the market center. We stop at a one-stop deli, ordering schnitzel, pork, sauerkraut and potatoes, chased with fine Lowenbrau beer. Picnic tables situated under dense chestnut trees and umbrellas keep us dry.

As the rain begins to fall harder, we gravitate toward a well-lit stall featuring a large selection of cheeses, bread and wine. We decide to stock up on picnic supplies. As we tour the market, we notice that many of the stalls feature fresh produce, meats, fish, and trinkets. Although it's only late afternoon, thoughts of relaxing in the AlpenClub spa win out over sightseeing in the cold rain. We pass by several delicatessens side by side on one long block. To top off our picnic supplies, we stop at one which seems to be favored by locals and buy 200 grams (almost half a pound) of salami.

We arrive back at the AlpenClub before nightfall, and in time to hear a presentation from the general manager of the resort. The sauna and steam room are extremely relaxing, and we enjoy another fine Bavarian style dinner with Craig and Amy before turning in.



Nothing like "ein gros helles bier" to cap off another fine day of adventure.

Wednesday, September 27th

Schliersee

We awake feeling “normal” for the first time on this trip. After a leisurely breakfast of deli meats, cheeses, croissants, scrambled eggs and bacon, yogurt, cereal, banana, coffee, juice, and mineral water, we depart for the train station. Andy, the bicyclist who we met yesterday, greets us and asks each of our names. Funny guy; we are unaccustomed to such forthright friendliness.

For some reason, the train is much more crowded than yesterday...maybe all beers are half-price today at Oktoberfest? Somehow, we manage to find seats. As we approach Munich, more passengers get on than off and now it's standing room only. I offer my seat to a frail, elderly woman, who is genuinely grateful; she takes my hand in both of hers and thanks me as if I were a grandson.

At the Hauptbahnhof, we descend the stairs toward the orderly chaos where passengers are rushing to board the U- and S-Bahn trains. En route, we decide to make a pit stop. Unlike the dingy restrooms common to many train stations, the pay toilets here are state-of-the-art and the service is first-class. While the fee seems a bit on the high side (1.10€ for a private restroom, 0.60€ for a public urinal), the cleanliness and amenities are worth it. Europeans have a more casual approach to many things, and the urinals arranged in full view of those entering the facility are no exception.

We take the S-2 train to Dachau, only a 20-minute ride from the Hauptbahnhof. In the town of Dachau, we catch the #726 bus in front of the train station, using our 19€ regional ticket. It's a short 10-minute ride to the concentration camp. We pick up audio guides, and find them easy to use thanks to the succinct instructions from the vendor.



The memorial to the fallen prisoners at Dachau Concentration Camp