

patio. We return to the restaurant, where our waitress guides us through the menu in broken English (oddly, the word “sausage” is not familiar). The meal is fabulous, the pork steaks are thick, and our waitress provides wonderful, attentive service. We tell her she is spoiling us, and she seems to understand; with a smile, she ladles more au gratin potatoes onto our plates.



Gasthaus Zum Lowen in Staufen

After dinner, things have started to quiet down as workers begin to dismantle the booths and equipment. We are lucky to have experienced at least a little of a four-day medieval festival, which are common during Oktoberfest. We return to our car to find it unmolested, and drive back to the hotel. We navigate the narrow streets behind and to the side, eventually parking behind the hotel in a space across the street. The hotel has quickly run out of its allotted spots, but the manager assures us that it's okay to park in the private space across the alley. To open the hotel door, we simply place the key near the lock, which activates an electronic switch.

In bed early, we watch a variety program featuring parade bands and musical groups from countries around the world. There are bagpipes from Scotland, river dancing girls from Ireland, military bands from Britain and elsewhere, and of course German bands. I read a little but fall asleep soon, glad for the karate-chop pillow and a firm bed.

Monday, October 2nd

Baden-Baden

I'm up early before the chickens. It's still dark outside, even though it's not quite 7am. I decide to catch up the diary with a cup of coffee. When I arrive downstairs at the restaurant, it's still dark and a lone waitress is busy setting up the breakfast buffet. I ask what time they open and she says “7”, noticing that it's now 7:10am. I comment that everyone must have worked hard because of the

festival, and she smiles, turns on a light and offers coffee. It's quiet and peaceful as I begin to write. Soon other guests begin to arrive, and the breakfast buffet begins to take shape. After an hour or so, I return to the room to fetch Karen. We enjoy another bountiful breakfast of bread, cheese, salami, soft-boiled eggs, juice, and mineral water. The better buffets serve mineral water, although it doesn't seem to be a requirement. Germans seem to drink less water (but more beer) than we do.

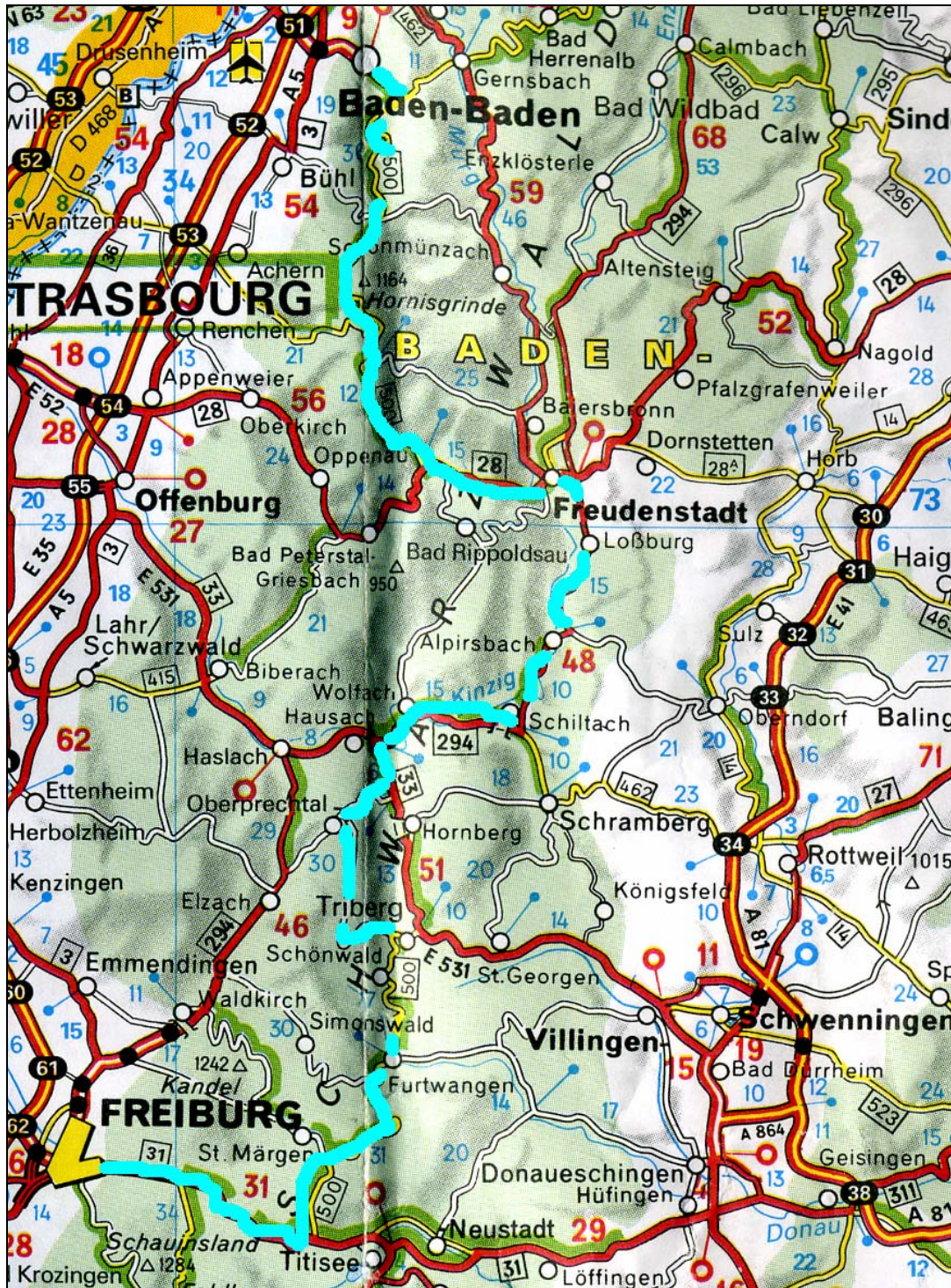
After placing our luggage in the car, we pay the bill and bid goodbye to the wonderful hotel staff. We leave a 4€ tip for our blond waitress from the night before. We walk down the street through another faux gate, thinking it would be nice if they left them standing indefinitely. The streets are now bustling with pedestrians and cyclists, people walking their dogs and running errands. The storm clouds from yesterday are gone. It's a warm, sunny October day, and quite breezy. We cross a bridge over a churning river, and then enter the Sparkasse Bank across the street. The teller speaks English, and change the rest of our dollars into Euros except for \$150 in cash. We are surprised to find that the rate is 1.20, after getting a rate of 1.33 only a week before at the Sparkasse Bank in Schliersee. Could the rate have changed that drastically in a week, could the teller have made a mistake, or were they simply consulting different rate charts? In any case, we were glad for the extra Euros in our pockets.

The day seemed a little brighter as we made our way back toward the hotel, stopping at a busy market to pick up provisions. We find mineral water on sale, then head for the deli counter. I ask the clerk in German if she speaks English, and not surprisingly the answer is "Nein". I place our order for cheese and salami in German, while pointing and smiling. The other clerk points to my Oktoberfest shirt and asks if we've been to Munich. When we say yes, she laughs and says something about way too many inebriated people, that's not for her.



The castle ruins and vineyard overlooking the town of Staufen

We return to the car, and then gas up at a service station/mini mart on the outskirts of town. Gas prices change only minimally from place to place, ranging from 1.17 to 1.22€ per liter. We head north toward Freiburg and the black forest, retracing our route from the day before. We find ourselves going back up the mountain, and then soon arrive at a turnoff for route S500 heading north toward Furtwangen. As we come to the top of a rise, we are rewarded with a spectacular view of the valley below. Densely packed trees extend for miles in all directions, bordered by green meadows and the occasional house.



Freiburg to Baden-Baden through the Black Forest



View of the Black Forest, near Furtwangen

The two-lane road is windy, but that doesn't stop three motorcyclists from passing us at high speed on a blind curve. From time to time we pass through little towns nestled within the undulating hills. On the outskirts of one town, we notice large homes on a hillside, situated far apart. Some look quite old, but all look exceptionally well maintained. Snow will arrive in January and last through March throughout Germany, but winter is seldom as extreme as some northern climates in the USA, such as Minnesota.

After passing through Freudenstadt, we continue north on S500. The road begins to climb and it becomes very foggy. Fortunately, there aren't many vehicles on the road, except for the occasional slow truck. After several miles, the road climbs ever higher. Quite unexpectedly, we come around a curve and discover a large restaurant and adjacent gift store. Although we have wanted to stop for awhile, we never found the right place. After more than 4 hours on the road, this is the right place at the right time.

We climb the stairs to the double entry doors, and are glad for the warmth of the restaurant. Quickly find the stairs down to the restrooms. There is an attendant outside with a plate collecting voluntary donations. I say "zwanzig?" (20 cents), and he smiles and shrugs like, "whatever". He says "Danke" when I put two 20 cent coins on the plate for me and Karen. The restaurant is busy but not crowded. The walls are a light birch color, as well as the timbered ceiling. There is a long, friendly bar and plenty of seating with a view of a lake shrouded in fog. We can barely make out the far shore, and then suddenly we observe ghostly figures moving about, one of them walking a dog, another loitering on the boat dock.

The waitress brings our order of goulash soup, bread, and steins of hearty German beer. It's just what the doctor ordered. Now all we need is a warm fire and a down comforter to curl up in, and we could stay for days. Fortified, we hit the road again and begin the gradual descent toward Baden-Baden. Through breaks in the clouds, we can make out a flat plain far below. Looking at the tiny buildings and roadways, we feel like we're flying. The road twists and turns ever downward, until finally we emerge on the outskirts of...what? Could this be suburban Baden-Baden? We're not sure if we missed a welcome sign, but based on the map we figure this has got to be the place.

Looking for street signs or landmarks, we come to a tunnel, and then find it on the map. We turn left at a stoplight, following a narrow street up into the hills, then down again toward downtown. Now we are driving down a long, tree-lined boulevard, with a park like median in the center separating the traffic lanes. We are on Sophienstrasse, approaching Leopoldsplatz. The map to Hotel am Markt directs us onto a short cobblestoned street that is filled with pedestrians and appears to dead end in a cul-de-sac. Confused, we stop and re-check the map and the little green street signs with directional arrows pointing to several hotels. The driver behind us has the patience of Job, and waits for us to pull over behind a truck so she can pass. Getting our bearings, we discover that what appears to be a pedestrian-only "walking street" does indeed allow vehicular traffic. We drive forward very slowly, as people move back and forth across the street in front of us seemingly without care. The street bends sharply to the left, then left again in front of a palatial building and up a steep hill. At the top is a small plaza dominated by a church with tall spires.

Luck is with us, as we find the last available parking spot in the plaza. Our hotel is just behind us. In the narrow foyer of the Hotel am Markt, we exchange greetings with Frau Jung, a pleasant dark-haired woman who speaks rapidly and is constantly in motion. She reminds me of the waitress/receptionist at Gutshof zum Schluxen near Fussen, doing one job while always thinking ahead to the next one and doing both exceptionally well. She presents us with our vouchers for the Caracalla and Friedrichsbad spas, and then shows us to Room 11 on the 3rd floor. We are delighted to find that our spacious room offers a panoramic view of the old town of Baden-Baden from two levered windows. There is a sofa, coffee table, TV, queen sized bed with karate chop pillows, four enormous closets, and a separate shower/toilet. The high ceiling makes it feel even larger.



Hotel am Markt in Baden-Baden

It's about 4:30 PM by the time we finish unpacking. We then throw our towels and swimsuits into our backpacks and head for the [Caracalla Spa](#). We have no trouble finding it, as it is a 5-minute walk from our hotel. We walk past the church then proceed down a long flight of concrete stairs. On our left is Friedrichsbad, the palatial building that we saw coming up the hill, which houses the Roman-Irish baths. When we arrive at the Caracalla Spa, we present our voucher at the counter. It is good for 2 hours, and we are assessed 4€ for each additional hour. We come to a turnstile and swipe our card, which logs our entry time. There are rows upon rows of changing cabins. We each enter a cabin, where we change into our swimsuits, then hang our belongings in a locker into which we insert the card. We remove the banded locker key and attach it to our wrists.

After rinsing our feet in an antibacterial footbath, we proceed toward a huge indoor water wonderland. There are men's and women's showers on the left, and the walls are lined with small convenience lockers. Along a long curved wall are doors leading to steam rooms and saunas. In front of the wall are rows of lounges, some under heat lamps. There is a large "cauldron" in the middle, where a large group of people mingle under a waterfall. In the center is a large pool, with portals leading to attached outdoor pools. People are frolicking happily in the Jacuzzi in the center, or enjoying a massage from one of many water jets lining the pool wall.

In the adjacent pool, several people float by on an artificial river while others lounge in another Jacuzzi. The pool water feels warm as a light rain begins to fall. We swim back inside through a portal into the large, central indoor pool. As Karen heads for a lounge, I climb the spiral staircase to the saunas upstairs. When I reach the top, there is a sign on the double doors warning guests that the area beyond is nude only. As I enter, there are banks of storage cubes on both sides, where people place their swimsuits and toiletries. As I explore this strange, wonderful place, I find four indoor saunas of various temperatures (warm, hot, hotter, and hottest), footbaths, hot and cold



The Caracalla Spa in Baden-Baden

showers, a steam bath (with hot air jets), a blue room where guests can recline on a lounge and listen to soothing music, an artificial indoor sundeck with heat lamps, a group Jacuzzi pool, individual cold pools, tanning beds, a quiet lounging area...and that's just the indoor part. Outside, a covered wooden bridge leads to a forest sauna and a fire sauna, two cabins nestled in the trees. In the forest sauna, a ladle on a timer automatically sprinkles the hot rocks with aromatic oil. In the fire sauna, guests sit quietly on benches in front of a roaring hearth, which provides the only light source in the room. There are outdoor showers where guests can cool off and several benches under pine trees where they can relax between sessions. There is also an outdoor sundeck where guests can relax for hours at a time. Men and women mix freely, happily going from one experience to the next.

There's even a chart of instructions posted near the snack bar, describing each recommended step in your spa experience. Start with a foot bath to raise the body temperature. Enter the sauna with your skin dry. After 10 to 20 minutes, emerge and shower. One of the more incredibly pleasant experiences is emerging from a hot sauna and proceeding to the shower, where you can pull a chain attached to a large bucket of ice-cold water and experience the equivalent of jumping into a snow pond. "Refreshing" doesn't begin to describe it. Alternatively, you can immerse yourself in a cold water bath. Later, enter the steam room and sweat a while longer. Shower again, then relax and recover in the blue room. Of course, there are many variations on this theme. A 1-liter bottle of ice-cold mineral water can be purchased at the snack bar for only 2.00€, and it never tasted so good.

As we change and look at the clock, we are not surprised to find that we have overstayed our 2-hour voucher. We pay the difference at the exit turnstile, and then head back to our room through a warm, steady drizzle. We change into comfortable, dry clothes and go toward Leopoldsplatz in search of a restaurant. The streets are nearly deserted, as the rain is coming down heavily now. I stop a group of passersby and ask directions to Leopoldsplatz in German, and he responds in English that he and his friends are also tourists, as one points us in the right direction.

We pass several restaurants, and feel like paupers in jeans and sweatshirts compared to the clientele dressed in suits and evening dresses. Teens gather by the McDonalds on the corner, and we are tempted to duck inside. However, we hold out and our perseverance is rewarded a few minutes later when we find a crowded bistro down the street where - miraculously - a table is available. The waiter thoughtfully hands us an English language menu, from which Karen orders spare ribs and I opt for a German specialty, pickled herring. Regardless of how our gastronomical adventures turn out, we know one thing for sure...the beer will always be good. The pickled herring is smothered in enough sour cream to stuff four baked potatoes, but is surprisingly tasty. Karen is a little disappointed with her ribs, but we enjoy watching the rain coming down in sheets from our table by the window. We also enjoy our walk back up the cobblestone street to our hotel, where our comfortable bed awaits.

Tuesday, October 3rd

Baden-Baden

I awaken early to the sound of a steady rain. It's a lousy day for sightseeing, but a perfect day for the spa. Karen and I head downstairs to breakfast, where the energetic Frau Jung welcomes us and introduces us to a sumptuous breakfast buffet. There is a newspaper rack filled with daily papers in several languages, including the international Herald-Tribune. Guests speaking either English or German sit at nearby tables.

About 9:00 I head for the Caracalla Spa. Karen decides it's a good day for doing some window shopping, or nesting in the room, reading and watching TV. After a one-hour massage for a very reasonable 30€, I return to the room in the early afternoon for lunch, and then we prepare for a totally different spa experience at [Friedrichsbad](#).

As we enter the stately old building, we are greeted by the receptionist seated behind a long counter. A menu of spa treatments and amenities is posted on the wall. We hand over our vouchers, which allow us to up to 3.5 hours in the spa. The 8-minute soap scrub/massage is optional, for which we pay an additional 8€ each. The vouchers are worth 21€, so the total cash price for this amazing experience is only 29€! The receptionist explains that they limit the total number of people in the spa at any time. She says I can go in, but we will have to wait until a female exits before Karen can enter. She checks a computer screen and seconds later announces that someone just left so Karen can now enter.

We climb the palatial staircase and head off in different directions to the men's and women's facilities, knowing that we will meet later in the pool area.



Friedrichsbad Spa in Baden-Baden

In a changing cabin, I change out of my street clothes and enter the Station No. 1, the shower area. Each station is marked with a number and description, and recommended time length. There are 15 in all. The attendant provides a towel and points to a row of sandals. The shower is like standing under a waterfall. I move to station 2, the warm-air bath, where guests recline on wooden lounges for 15 minutes. I advance to station 3, the hot-air bath, and realize only with the shock of my feet touching the hot floor that I had forgotten to choose a pair of sandals after my shower. For a moment I feel like Dudley Moore on the hot sandy beach in the movie "10". I make a quick retreat and return with protective footwear to the hot-air bath. After 5-minutes, I move on to a second shower, then enter a room full of massage tables where attendants administer the soap scrub massage. [Rick Steves](#) mentions in his guidebook that the massage is finished with "a spank", so I'm relieved when the attendant delivers a quick rap on the back of my thigh. I reach for my towel, but I'm told I no longer need it.

By now I'm starting to lose track of which station I'm supposed to be at, but manage to stumble into a thermal steam bath. This is actually the first of two. After then second one, I take another refreshing shower then move on to the pool. I discover there are three of them, one for men, one for women, and a third located under an ornate dome. The water temperature in the two smaller pools is pleasantly warm, while the water temp in the large pool is considerably cooler. Today is a mixed day, so men and women move freely from one pool to the next. There are happy reunions as

couples meet and discuss their spa experiences. I meet Karen in one of the smaller pools, and we move on to a large tub with Jacuzzi jets. It's incredibly relaxing to just float in the pools. Strangely, we don't turn into human prunes like we usually would after this much exposure. I figure it must be something to do with the mineral water, which is potable but doesn't taste very good.

After the pools, I decide to forego the cold water immersion in favor of a warm shower. After toweling off, I move to a well-lit area where I'm instructed to apply body lotion and eat tabs of pure chocolate to restore my energy. I then move on to the "womb room", a large domed area filled with soft beds. Guests are wrapped in a sheet and blanket and left to think prenatal thoughts for 30 minutes. I can hear someone snoring softly nearby. After 15 minutes, the chocolate begins to kick in and I'm up and ready to get dressed and join Karen for dinner.

Tonight we are in luck. The Rathausglockel Hotel/Restaurant has space available. The night before, in the driving rain, we found them full up. Rick Steves describes the Rathausglockel as "personal and homey, has long had a good reputation and great food. In the 16th century, prisoners were granted a last meal here before being executed. Eat here if it's the last thing you do." Outside, near the stairwell leading to the storage area below, we find the two anchors in the concrete where the prisoners were chained while they ate.

As usual, Rick Steves is spot on in his recommendations. The manager gives us a large table in the back, and then sees to our every need. After the obligatory half-liter of beer, we are served huge plates of schnitzel (the menu says "you will like it") and sauerbraten, a pot roast with sour gravy. It is indeed the best meal we've had since...two nights ago, in Staufen. We do the best we can, but still can't finish everything, the portions are just so ginormous. Sated, we stagger up the hill a few steps and fall into bed.



The Rathausglockel Hotel/Restaurant in Baden-Baden