

Spain - Germany Vacation Diary 2009

Part 2 of 2

It's lunchtime, and Calle Espinel is lined with tables set for outdoor dining. We pass a couple of restaurants offering plates of tapas. The pictures don't appear all that appetizing, so when we come to an Italian place offering a lasagna lunch special, we're sold.

The food is good and satisfying. A group of American girls pause to look at the menu and after a brief quarrel concerning their mutual indecisiveness about what to have for lunch, they head downstairs to the indoor dining area.

After lunch, we meander back toward the bullring. Karen is determined to take a picture of one of the horse-drawn carriages that joust with cars for space on Ronda's narrow streets. Each time she snaps the shutter, the shot is blocked by a passing car or the head of an oblivious tourist.

Her perseverance is rewarded when she finds a stationary carriage in front of the bullring. Trying not to get run over by cars or pedestrians, she positions herself for the shot near the street corner. She frames a pair of white Arabian horses pulling a black carriage, with the white-washed bullring providing the backdrop.



The Palace of the Marquis of Salvatierra.

As the sun begins its descent, the temperature drops noticeably. We make our way back to the entrance to the underground parking garage and find our car intact and untouched. We stop at the parking office at the exit to pay, and no one approaches us. Two attendants are having a conversation, but ignore the line of cars that is beginning to form behind us. Finally, Karen gets out of the car and finds someone who takes our money and gives us a ticket. We place the ticket in the validation machine and head up the steep ramp toward daylight, wary of any hidden hazards that may be awaiting us above. Thankfully no cars or pedestrians block our path, and we enter the street safely. We fire up the GPS, which guides us through the new, modern section of Ronda toward the road back to Estepona.

We decide to take the longer, scenic route. The road meanders through the country side, and before long we see a man guiding a herd of at least fifty goats along the right bank toward the meadow beyond. It is one of those sights that makes you realize you are truly in another place where ancient customs and traditions persist despite the encroachment of modern life.

As the road winds slowly through the mountains, we take the opportunity to pull into the occasional rest stop to take in the magnificent views. The green hills stretch for miles with few signs of human intrusion. The road passes through a small town, and begins a gradual ascent. Off to the left is the startling sight of an entire Andalusian “white town” clustered on a hillside, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.



Horse carriages parked in front of the Plaza de Toros in the old town center of Ronda.

The road descends into a valley, and then winds up, down and around for a few miles before beginning a steady march west toward the Mediterranean sea. Eventually we arrive at the junction with the A-7 highway. We pay a small toll and then speed northeast toward Estepona. We arrive back at the apartment around 5:30pm.

Craig and Amy will be flying home in the morning. Later in the evening, we drive to Malaga and drop off Craig and Amy at their hotel near the airport. Bella, our faithful GPS, guides us straight to the hotel entrance. After a fond farewell, we return to the apartment to get a good night's rest.

Saturday, May 2 – Villacana Resort, Malaga, London, Stuttgart

We check out of Villacana Resort in the morning and are on the road to Malaga by 8:15am. It's a leisurely drive on a Saturday morning, with almost no traffic on the highway. We stop at a gas station at a rest stop just off the highway near Torremolinos. Karen catnaps while I fill up the tank. As we approach the airport, for the first time in the daylight, Bella is once again flawless in providing directions. We veer hard left at the last minute when we see the sign for rental car returns. The

garage is in shadow; a good thing, since the slight scrape on the rear fender is almost invisible. The attendant signs off with a smile and we head off in the direction of the airline counters.

Our luggage vibrates alarmingly as we trundle across the bridge from the garage to the Malaga terminal building. The bridge walkway is lined with local cobblestones. Once inside the terminal we locate the departure board but not our flight since it is still early. Instead, we follow the crowd around the corner and find the British Airways check-in counter. We pass through security without incident. As we start to make our way to the waiting area, the human traffic becomes increasingly congested. Soon we find the source of the congestion: a single customs agent in a booth at the end of the line has created a human venturi effect, much like shoving a piano through a keyhole. Fortunately, realizing the hopelessness of the situation, the authorities relent and open the floodgates, allowing the passengers to file past the woefully undermanned passport checkpoint.

Our flight to Stuttgart is short and uneventful. We rent our car at the Avis counter and follow directions to the underground garage. The car is started by inserting the flat key into a slot, depressing the clutch, and pressing the start button – a first for us. As we leave the garage, we fire up Bella. After a few moments of apprehension, she locks onto a satellite and begins to guide us unerringly to our destination, the Mercure Hotel.

It is nice to return to the Mercure Hotel, where we first stayed in 2008. With the adjacent park, stores, and U-Bahn stop, it is the perfect location for exploring Stuttgart. After checking into our Junior Suite, the same one we had in 2008, we prepare to visit the [Canstatter Wasen](#) spring beer festival.

Strolling through the entrance to Canstatter Wasen, we experience not only a sense of déjà vu, but a wondrous sense of dislocation in time and space as a result of having breakfast in Spain and dinner in Germany. We make a beeline for the Schwabian “food court”, replete with sausage and

beer vending stands. The same band that we saw in 2008 is up on stage, leading the merry-making crowd in a mixture of sing-a-long German folk songs and modern pop favorites. The talented duo consists of two musicians, one skillfully playing a synthesizer and the other singing and playing horn. There is a strong sense of community as young and old sing long-remembered songs together in harmony. The good cheer is almost palpable.

The outstanding German beer is served in large mugs with a generous frothy head. Karen enjoys a glass of fruity German white wine. After a couple of glasses, we find it is easy to join in the song fest. Somehow, the lyrics do not present a problem...!



Sunday, May 3 – Stuttgart, Todtmoos

The Mercure Hotel serves an excellent breakfast. While a bit pricey at €15 per person, it offers something for everyone from cereals to deli meats to hot sausages and eggs, with a variety of fruit drinks and mineral water.

Following a morning visit to the Bad Leuze Mineralbad, we are ready for our drive to Todtmoos in the Black Forest. After less than 2 hours on the autobahn, we take a two-lane artery to the west. Due to construction, we would probably have missed our turnoff into the deeper regions of the Black Forest. The signs were less than conspicuous, but thanks to our trusty GPS we were guided to the single-lane road that led us ever higher into the mountains.

As we climbed and the temperature began to drop precipitously, patches of snow became visible by the side of the road. After mentally reviewing her wardrobe, Karen exclaimed “I am NOT prepared for this!” I reassured her by emphasizing that while we lacked down jackets, we had packed in layers of clothing and would be fine.

The name “Black Forest” dates to ancient times, when the Romans referred to the thickly forested mountains as “Silva Nigra” because the dense growth of conifers in the forest blocked out most of the light inside the forest. As we drive along the circuitous roads, passing under long swaths of dense trees, not only the light is shut out but the GPS momentarily loses its satellite connection. As the road plateaus, we begin passing through mountain meadows and through small villages, some not more than a few houses spaced widely apart. As we pass by the large, modern alpine houses, we are struck by how each property is meticulously maintained. Firewood is stacked neatly in piles, houses are in immaculate condition, and not a scrap of trash is visible anywhere.



View from our balcony in Hotel Funfjahrezeiten overlooking Todtmoos

After about 45 minutes, we arrive in the mountain hamlet of Todtmoos. The village is set in a valley surrounded by towering conifers. After a short ride up a gentle, winding road, we come to the [Hotel](#)

[Funfjahrezeiten](#) which sits on a hillside overlooking Todtmoos. The main building features a large dining room and an indoor pool, sauna, and steam room. Our unit, which we purchased through Interval International as a Getaway Week for around \$575, is in a separate building. We find it to be very much to our liking, with a separate bedroom, a bed in the living area, a fully equipped kitchen and dining area, and a large balcony with a great view of the valley.

On this, our first night, we decide to have dinner in the restaurant. Our waiter, Daniel Pape, grins as he notices Karen's Chargers hat. Being the outgoing sort, he strikes up a conversation about NFL football. It turns out he is a 49ers fan, and can recite recent NFL history regarding the performance of both the 49ers and the Chargers, particularly the SuperBowl of 1995 which we would just as soon forget. Daniel is of medium height, average weight tending on the thin side, and in his mid-twenties...all of which belies the fact that he played American-style football as a running back for 3 to 4 years. Considering that he appears better suited to play cornerback or wide receiver, we marvel that he is still in one piece. He says that after the pounding, he had to hang up his cleats.

Monday, May 4 –Todtmoos, Staufen, Bad Krozingen

The skies are clear and the air is crisp. We decide it's a perfect day for a road trip to [Staufen](#), our favorite medieval town in this region, with a side trip to [Vita Classica Therme](#) in Bad Krozingen.

The 90 minute drive to Staufen takes us through impossibly gorgeous forests and valleys. At nearly every turn is a picture postcard photo opportunity. We find ourselves almost involuntarily pulling off the road frequently to snap pictures of the gorgeous landscapes.

We reach Staufen mid-morning and park along a tree-lined street near the river that runs through this charming medieval town. We cross the bridge over the river into town. Karen yields to the call



Valley in the Black Forest near Staufen

of nature and enters the large restaurant that abuts the river in search of a restroom. As I wait near the entrance, my time is well-spent marveling at the variety and number of pastries displayed temptingly on the store shelves.

We spend the next hour meandering through the streets of Staufen, which maintains its small village feel despite being a prominent tourist destination. The impressive castle ruins continue to oversee the town vineyards from their hilltop perch. Karen enjoys window shopping along the main and back streets.

Our next stop is the therme in [Bad Krozingen](#). Entry is €15 per person for the day. The wellness center offers large indoor/outdoor pools, lounges, saunas, and steam baths. After pampering ourselves for three hours, we enjoy an ice cream at the snack shop. A boisterous German family of four shares the next table. We later see them in the grocery store in Bad Krozingen and then again at a gas station on our return to Todtmoos. I marked it down as yet another odd coincidence in a life full of them, the most memorable being a chance encounter with my college Spanish teacher at a sidewalk cafe in Burgos, Spain years ago.

We drive into Bad Krozingen and park a few blocks from the town center. As we pass by department stores and shops, Karen ventures inside in search of a replacement for the curling iron that melted in Estepona when she plugged the 120v appliance into a 240v outlet without benefit of a convertor. Unfortunately our search turns up empty, but I know it is only a temporary setback as Karen is determined to find a replacement. Our final stop is the grocery store, with its ample supplies of fresh produce and meats and everything else you could want to stock a condo kitchen. We buy as much as we can reasonably carry back to our trusty rental car.

We return to our condo in Todtmoos late in the day and enjoy a home-cooked dinner of pork kebabs, broccoli, beer and wine.



Staufen town square. To the left is the hotel Gasthaus Zum Lowen where we stayed in 2006.

Tuesday, May 5 – Todtmoos, Basel

If this is Tuesday, it must be Switzerland. We pack a small lunch and head south from Todtmoos toward Basel, Switzerland. Along the way we pass through narrow mountain gorges with waterfalls emanating from the sheer rock walls that buttress the road. Suddenly, we emerge into open meadows near the town of Bad Sackingen. As we pass through the small town and navigate its traffic circles, we find ourselves on the two-lane highway leading to Basel.

We locate a parking garage on the outskirts of Basel and buy round-trip train tickets for the short ride into the heart of the city. I ask a local in German for directions to the train station, and he obliges by pointing and explaining. I find it very enjoyable to speak and be understood in a foreign language, even at a basic level. Karen has an interesting experience with a restroom on the train platform in the shape of a cylinder. Getting in and out proved to be difficult, but thankfully not impossible.

We exit the train at the central station and proceed to the TI located just outside the station. Armed with maps and guides, we set off on foot toward the historic center of [Basel](#). Founded as a Roman fort in 44 B.C., Basel was given the name “Basilea” in 374 AD by the Alemanns who occupied Basel after the fall of the Roman Empire. Due to its strategic position on the Rhine River, the city grew in importance over the centuries as a major trading hub and religious and educational center. In the years 1431–49, the city became the spiritual epicenter of the Christian Church. In 1460 Pope Pius II established the first university north of the Alps in Basel.

Today Basel is alternately described as the cultural capital of Switzerland and its main university town. Having survived the Napoleon crusades and the impact of two world wars, Basel is a well-preserved and vibrant city.

Not far from the train station, we come to an underground parking garage housing hundreds of bicycles. Further on, we catch one of the ubiquitous green trams that traverse the city.



The Basel City Hall Building on the Marktplatz, dating from the 14th Century

Our objective is the shopping district. We arrive at Marktplatz and snap numerous pictures of the incredibly well-preserved city hall building, festooned with colorful banners. Eyeing a department store, Karen is once again seized by a desire to replace her long-dead curling iron. This time we find a suitable candidate, but it comes with more attachments than one can imagine and far more than necessary, which puts it out of our price range. We also belatedly realize that all items are priced in Swiss Francs, not Euros, and that Euros are not as readily accepted as we thought.

As we wander the streets, we come across a man and woman in wedding attire being photographed in front of the Hotel Basel. We make the short climb up a hill to the Münster Cathedral overlooking the Rhine River.

Originally a Catholic cathedral and today a reformed Protestant church, the [Münster](#) was built between 1019 and 1500 in Romanesque and Gothic styles. It adds definition to the cityscape with its red sandstone architecture and colored roof tiles, its two slim towers and the cross-shaped intersection of the main roof. Regular services and special musical events take place in the church throughout the year.

We return to the main train station by tram, and spend our few remaining Euro coins at a kiosk on a skinny exorbitantly priced *USA Today* paper and a few chocolates. Back at the car, we fire up our trusty GPS and head for the outskirts of Basel to a suburb called Weil am Rhein, where we plan to spend a couple of relaxing hours at the [Laguna Badeland](#), a waterpark and wellness center. After a couple of hours in the saunas, I meet Karen in the waterpark area where I am told by an overzealous life guard that my long swim shorts are “verboten”. We aren’t sure exactly why, but suspect that loose shorts may prove to be a liability near a wave machine. Later, we find that their Web site is quite explicit on the matter:



We munch sandwiches and apples on our return trip to Todtmoos. It is particularly exciting to pass into the forest from the plains. The demarcation between the two is quite sudden and dramatic. One minute you’re traversing the town streets, the next you’re climbing through a gorge with towering cliffs and trees on both sides. Somewhere in the distance, a Wagnerian soundtrack begins to play...

We stop at Schmidts grocery store on the way back to the condo for supplies. We buy an excellent [German white wine](#) (a half dry, or [halbtrocken](#) variety) and a Tiramisu ice cream confection that turns out to be out-of-this-world delicious!

Back at the condo, Karen prepares an awesome dinner of pork kebabs, mac and cheese, broccoli, beer and wine. Did I mention that pork is a very popular meal in Germany?

Wednesday, May 6 – Todtmoos, St. Blasien

After the extensive road trips of the past two days, we decide to take it easy and stick close to home today. We enjoy a leisurely breakfast of eggs, ham, yogurt, fruit and cereal and plan our itinerary for the day. First, we decide to book a massage with Diana the masseuse for the afternoon. Next,



Karen in the doorway of the kitchen of our spacious condo at Hotel Funfjahrezeiten

we decide on a short excursion to the neighbor village of St. Blasien, a mere 20 minutes by car through the Black Forest.

Arriving in St. Blasien, we park near the bank and purchase a parking voucher for two hours. As we walk through the nearly deserted streets of St. Blasien, it is clear that the hardy residents much prefer the warmth of a home, restaurant or shop to the chilly outdoors. As we pass a small department store, Karen's gaze is drawn to some small appliances in the window. There, in plain view, is a basic, no-nonsense curling iron (240v) with a ridiculously low price tag of €5. When we arrive at the front door, a sign informs us that the shop is closed and that the proprietor will return at 1 o'clock.

We slide on over to the Sparkasse Bank to make a withdrawal. With a little time to kill, we browse more shops and gaze at the many geodes on display in one particular store. Across the river that flows through the town, the huge dome of the [St. Blasien Abbey](#) appears incongruous in the midst of the forested valley.

The St. Blasien Abbey was founded in the 10th century, and was managed by a long line of abbots from 974 through 1806. The abbey church burnt down in 1768, and was rebuilt as a Baroque round church with an enormous dome 46 metres across and 63 metres high (the third-largest in Europe north of the Alps), during the years up to 1781. It remains as the Dom St Blasius, or "St Blaise's Cathedral", so called because of its size and magnificence, not because it is a cathedral in any ecclesiastical or administrative sense. The effects of another catastrophic fire in 1874 were only finally remedied in the 1980s.

The abbey was dissolved in the course of secularization in 1806 and the monastic premises were used thereafter as one of the earliest mechanized factories in Germany. The monks however,



John posing with one of several unique woodcarvings along the St. Blasien Riverwalk



The Dome of St. Blasien Abbey

under the last Prince-Abbot Dr Berthold Rottler, found their way to St. Paul's Abbey in the Lavanttal in Austria, where they settled in 1809. Since 1934, the remaining buildings have been occupied by the well-known Jesuit college, the Kolleg St. Blasius.

The colder weather drives us to the warmth of a nearby restaurant, which serves an excellent goulash soup with home-made bread and beer. Sated, we return to the department store where Karen purchases her €5 curling iron and declares victory.

After a pleasant return drive to the hotel, we meet Diana, our masseuse. She is a very friendly blonde who speaks excellent English. While Karen takes the first shift, I head downstairs to the wellness area for a steam and sauna session. I meet a local in the steam room who says that he is a regular visitor to the wellness facilities here, as are a number of his fellow townspeople.

We return to Schmidt's Market for more provisions, including wine, mustard and candy. Karen prepares another fantastic dinner of brats, mac and cheese, and zucchini. We enjoy watching the music channels on German TV. They feature MTV videos that may or may not be shown in the USA. One particularly good video is [Primavera Anticipada](#) featuring a duet by James Blunt and Laura Pausini.

Thursday, May 7 – Todtmoos, Lake Titisee, Bad Durrheim

Today we are back on the road to visit Lake Titisee and Bad Durrheim. After a quick breakfast of yogurt and cereal, we head for the lake, about an hour's drive from Todtmoos. The road winds leisurely and circuitously through the Black Forest. We come to an intersection near the lake that



View of Lake Titisee. One of two sightseeing tour boats appears in the background.

has a gas station whose name gets our attention. The sign says: “Lidl”. As we emerge from the forest, we are treated to a breath-taking view of [Lake Titisee](#). We pull over at a convenient rest stop to take in the scene. There are small boats as well as two sightseeing boats plying the peaceful waters on this sun-splashed day. The black forest in all its different shades of green rises in the background.

The road runs parallel to the lake as we approach the tourist town of Titisee. We park in a busy public parking lot and make our way into the picturesque little town, paved with cobblestones and lined with bright yellow and purple flowerbeds. We make our way down to the dock, where several boating options are available for hire, including paddleboats, small motorboats, and the guided tour boat. We opt for the latter, and are soon boarding the double-decker. On such a pleasant day, everyone takes a seat on the top deck. The boat begins a leisurely, 30-minute tour of the lake, starting with the south shore and working its way toward the western end. The town itself is small, with only 2,000 full-time residents, but the shore is lined with spacious homes.



The tourist town of Titisee, on Lake Titisee

Upon returning to the town, Karen bought scarves and Christmas ornaments at one of the many kiosks and small shops. I bought a book about the Black Forest region, referred to as Schwarzwald in German. We stopped in a wine shop to purchase a bottle of wine, and picked up some picnic supplies with the idea of having a picnic at a park that we had passed on the way into town.

We drove to the park, parked the car, and walked to the grassy park area bordering the lake. We crossed the road and passed through the turnstile into the park. It was then that we noticed the “No Picnicing” signs. Determining that this situation called for subtlety if not subterfuge, we settled ourselves on a park bench toward the back of the park and sneaked our sandwiches and fruit,

along with sips from the wine bottle. Since there were few people in the park, we felt fairly certain that our little ruse would succeed.

Back on the road, we follow the highway that we had taken to get to the Black Forest en route to the [Solemar Therme in Bad Durrheim](#) and its wonderful water park. The park consists of a number of indoor and outdoor pools, steam rooms, and flowing rivers. The Saunascape area offers a number of indoor and outdoor saunas and steam baths, along with outdoor pools. There is also a solarium and cold water pools, which feel unbelievably refreshing after a hot sauna.



Solemar Therme, Bad Durrheim

I experience at least three aufguss sessions at Bad Durrheim, which are the quintessential sauna experience. At predetermined times, guests gather in the largest sauna rooms and wait patiently for the attendant to appear. Since the aufguss sessions typically take place in the hottest saunas, the trick is to time your entry to both minimize the wait and secure a seat on the lower level where the heat is less intense (read “survivable”). When the attendant appears, he or she begins with a cautionary message about the health risks of participating in an aufguss (it isn’t necessary to understand German to get the message). With a big smile, the attendant begins ladling the scented water onto the hot stones, producing intense steam. After a few spoonfuls, the attendant starts whipping a towel overhead to better circulate the superheated air. The heat feels stimulating and suffocating at the same time, but somehow strangely invigorating. After one or two more rounds, with the heat becoming ever more intense, there is the finale: The attendant pours the remaining water onto the hot rocks to the collective moans of the group. By this time it is so ridiculously hot I find myself actually laughing out loud as the hot air impacts my face like a palpable force. Others smile, chuckle, or grimace, depending on their own experience.

I return to find Karen enjoying one of the saltier pools. In fact, this one has so much salt that even a sinker like me is able to float in a prone position on the surface. Karen tells me about an engaging Swiss lady that she met in one of the pools who had silver hair with purple tinges to it.

On the return trip, we stop at a market next to the highway to pick up supplies for dinner, including beer, wine, and chocolates. Once back at the condo, Karen whips up another great dinner of spaghetti, zucchini, and hamburger.

Friday, May 8 – Todtmoos, Lake Schluchsee, Radon Vital Bad

We awake to yet another healthy breakfast of eggs & ham, fruit, and yogurt. The weather has suddenly turned colder and overcast, not that it matters much to people such as ourselves on vacation in a forested paradise.

We decide to explore the town of Todtmoos in search of our chosen dining establishment for the evening, the Waldwinkel Hotel Restaurant. We make several passes down the main street but are unable to locate it. We stop at the TI on the outskirts of town and get directions. We finally find the Waldwinkel Hotel practically hiding under our noses, tucked away at the base of the road that leads up the hill to our hotel.

Our agenda for today will take us to Lake Schluchsee, a large lake in the center of the Schwarz Wald and only a 45 minute drive from Todtmoos. When we arrive at the lake, it has started to rain fairly steadily. Lake Schluchsee, according to the travel brochures, is a recreational wonderland in the summertime. As we watch the cool vapors rising from the lake, we do our best to imagine water skiers plying the calm waters on a warm, sunny afternoon. We are dressed in layers so are quite warm. Nevertheless, the rain drives us in search of the comfort of a restaurant offering hot food.

We pull off the highway that surrounds the lake and begin navigating the streets of the small town of Schluchsee. The rain is heavier now and cars are scarce, pedestrians more so. Before long we find a hotel/restaurant on the main street that looks inviting. The ambience is once again heavy on the carved wood. Karen notices the numerous collectibles lying about, which give the place a homey charm. We order coffee and Black Forest Cake, which taste as ambrosia to a starving man.



Garden gnomes are prevalent in the village of Menzenschwand-Hinterdorf

As we begin our leisurely drive homeward, the rain has abated somewhat. As we begin climbing the winding road through the hillside, we notice a strange white substance on the ground. Curious, we are compelled to stop and investigate. Karen scoops up a large handful of ice balls (hail).

As we descend into a neighboring valley toward the village of Menzenschwand-Hinterdorf, lingering clouds hug the treetops. Our next destination is Radon Vital Bad, one of several small thermal baths that cater to the local population. As we pass through the village en route, Karen comments on the garden gnomes that adorn a resident's front lawn. Gnomes have long been a tradition in the Schwarz Wald, and are thought to bring prosperity to their owners.

As we park at the [Radon Vital Bad](#), it appears to be uncrowded. We check in at the front desk and are directed to separate locker rooms. The sauna is practically deserted, and I find it very relaxing. I soon join Karen in the indoor/outdoor pool. The facility borders a meadow; from the swimming pool, cows and goats are clearly visible in the distance, as are the beautiful rolling hills of the Schwarz Wald. As the work day ends, the facility is suddenly inundated with locals – friends and families who like to socialize while enjoying a good soak.

Soon we are back at the [Hotel Funfjahrezeiten](#), preparing for our last massage appointment. This time, we enjoy a massage together in the same room with Diana Neumann and Peter Camenzind as our caretakers. As Peter speaks little English beyond “Good” and “Thank you”, Karen and Peter converse little. In contrast, Diana is a veritable chatterbox. They are both expert masseuses, and when our hour finally ends we thank them profusely and give them a generous tip.

We arrive at the [Waldwinkel Hotel Restaurant](#) around 7 pm. The décor is once again heavy on the wood carvings and the family operation gives it a homey feeling. The menus are all in German, and when we attempt to ask questions in English, our waitress says “ein moment” with a smile and summons the owner, a friendly man who speaks excellent English. There is lots of laughter as we joke about the mutual challenges of learning each other's language, and he explains all of the menu choices perfectly. He recommends the trout dishes, a regional specialty.

It takes a while for our dinner to arrive, but we are in no rush. It seems that everyone working is a member of the family, and some are doing double-duty. When dinner is finally served, it is excellent.



Yellow fields of mustard are common along the autobahn to Stuttgart

Saturday, May 9 – Todtmoos, Bad Durrheim, Stuttgart

On our last day in Todtmoos, the air is crisp and the sun is shining. We pack and load the car with our belongings and pay the bill. To the receptionist, I mention how impressed we are with the service and operation.

On our way to Stuttgart, we make a detour to the Solemar Therme in Bad Durrheim from 10:30 to 2:30. It is just as awesome the second time as the first. Once on the autobahn, we pass by numerous fields filled with what appears to be yellow mustard.

We arrive in Stuttgart, guided by our trusty GPS “Bella” once again. We check in to the Mercure Hotel and make arrangements to return the rental car to the garage near the Hauptbahnhof. We park in front of the train station and find the Avis office near the far right side of the platform. No one is available to help us at the Avis desk, so we obtain directions from the EuropeCar representative at the next counter. It would ordinarily be difficult to find, but we remember the location from last year. We drive east from the train station, turn right at the first intersection, then look for a driveway to the bank building off to the right. We take the corkscrew driveway down three levels of the underground garage and follow the signs to the Avis return area. We then take the keys and documentation through a long tunnel that leads back into the train station to the Avis dropoff box. A little complicated, but it works.

For dinner, we choose our favorite Doner Diner. It is a Turkish fast-food restaurant, with menu items very familiar to anyone who has dined in a Greek establishment. I have the equivalent of a Gyros plate and Karen has the lamb. The guy behind the counter doesn't speak English very well and has trouble understanding Karen's request for a German white wine. Eventually we make ourselves understood, and Karen gets her wine. Ordering beer is a universal language and is never a problem!

Later that evening, before the sun sets, we are treated to a sensational, spectacular thunderstorm which we film from our hotel window. Lightning and thunder abound for a long period, and it's pretty impressive.

Sunday, May 10 – Stuttgart

After last night's thunderstorm, we are pleasantly surprised to awaken to a sun-splashed morning. We enjoy another great breakfast buffet at the Mercure Hotel. The coffee is the best anywhere; I drink 3 ^{1/2} cups and started to perspire. There are lots of choices: scrambled eggs, bacon, soft/hard boiled eggs, eggplant, liverwurst, a variety of cheeses & deli meats, juices, and mineral water. Breakfast costs 16.50 each, but with this big of a breakfast we can afford to skip lunch!

I spend the morning and early afternoon at Bad Leuze Thermalbad (10:30 - 3:00). Half of the sauna complex is shut down for maintenance, forcing everyone into a smaller area. Karen relaxes at the hotel and explores the neighborhood, meeting a chatty store clerk who nearly talks her ear off.

In the afternoon we catch the U-Bahn to the Konigstrasse Shopping District near the Hauptbahnhof at the center of the downtown area. After emerging from the U-Bahn station, I ask directions to Konigstrasse (King's Street) from a young woman on the street and she replies in perfect English. We pass through a park-like area past buildings that once served nobility.

Stuttgart has 563,000 inhabitants. It is beautifully located in a valley with steeply rising slopes, and unique for its topography and pleasant climate. Surrounded by gentle hills, forests and parks, gardens and vineyards which extend to downtown, almost 20% of its area is under a land preservation order.



The Stuttgart Old Castle

The public parks and recreational areas cover an area of 5.6 square kilometres. The Swabian city has therefore the reputation to be one of the most beautifully situated cities in Europe.

Stuttgart Old Castle (Altes Schloss) was built around 941 as a simple water-surrounded castle for protection of a stud farm (in German Gestüt from which the original name Stutengarten was derived). It expanded up until the Renaissance in the middle of the 16th century as the residence of the counts and dukes of Württemberg state.

The squares and buildings surrounding Stuttgart Old Castle arose as an ensemble with direct reference to this center of royal power, and still mark the appearance of Stuttgart's historic center today.

In the center of the main plaza stands a monument to Koenig Wilhelm, also known as William I (1797 – 1888), who was King of Prussia and the first German Emperor (1871 – 1888).

Under the leadership of William and his Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Prussia achieved the unification of Germany and the establishment of the German Empire. In his memoirs, Bismarck describes William as an old-fashioned, courteous, infallibly polite gentleman and a genuine Prussian officer, whose good common sense was occasionally undermined by "female influences".

Despite the overcast skies, it is warm and people are out in abundance. This observation is particularly interesting, considering that today, Sunday, many shops are closed. Somewhat facetiously, Karen accuses me of deliberately planning our visit to the shopping district on a day when she cannot buy anything.



Monument to Koenig Wilhelm, the first German Emperor Emperor (1871 – 1888)



Königstrasse, main walking street of the Königstrasse Shopping District

As we begin walking down Konigstrasse in the direction of the Hauptbahnhof, we notice that some shops, including department stores are open. With the crowds out in force, the restaurants and eateries are doing a booming business. Street musicians can be heard playing from one block to the next. A banner stretched between two of the trees lining Konistrasse proclaims that these are "American Days in Stuttgart", honoring Baden-Württemberg's long association with the USA in the rebuilding effort after World War II.

We reverse course and begin walking back down Konigstrasse, window shopping on the opposite side of the street. We don't get very far before we start to feel raindrops. Within seconds, the sky has opened and the rain becomes a deluge. People scamper for the safety of store awnings and dash into covered alleyways between the shops. The downpour begins so suddenly and has caught so many by surprise that we are surrounded by the relieved smiles and laughter of those who reached shelter who are still dry.

Conveniently, there is a U-Bahn station in the next building. In a few minutes the rain lets up, then we walk down the stairwell to the underground train still untouched by raindrops. We return to the hotel and decide to have a simple but delicious dinner at our favorite diner, the Doner Kebab. We arrange for a taxi to pick us up at 4:45am and retire early.

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The taxi arrives right on time, a large Mercedes sedan. We head off in the pre-dawn darkness and our cabbie waves to a comrade as we pass the bridge over the River Neckar. There is very little traffic, so our ride is quick and uneventful. He drops us off at the terminal and seems pleased with the 10% tip.

We the aid of a helpful British Airways attendant, we use the automated check-in machine to get our boarding passes and check our luggage. With no one in line at 5:30am, we drop off the luggage and head for security. In a few minutes we're enjoying a large coffee and pastries at the snack bar. We board the plane on time (naturally) and prepare for the long flight home. It's always good to go home!

The Spa Life: *Soaking It All Up*

Germany has a remarkably vibrant sauna and thermal bath culture, which reflects the country's obsession with feeling good and living well. Blessed with rejuvenating mineral water springs throughout much of the country, **Germans** have been enjoying the benefits of a good soak since the days when the Romans ruled the land. Throughout the ages, mineral baths have been sought out for their healing properties to cure or alleviate muscular and nervous system disorders, heart and circulation problems, skin ailments and a variety of other health related issues. The thermal bath experience has evolved over the years from the natural springs to soaking tubs to full-blown thermal bath complexes. In recent years, these bath and wellness complexes have sprung up all across Germany on a very grand scale, with some being able to accommodate several hundred, and even a thousand or so, visitors. Seemingly, every town that can claim some sort of natural spring is using that as its entrée into the spa industry. The **German** concept of a spa is a far cry from the watered-down American version. Whereas American **spas** revolve around massages, manicures and pedicures, facials and pampering, the spa culture in Germany is a much more elaborate, active and sophisticated affair.

The thermal bath offerings range from small hotels, with one or two whirlpools, to entire facilities devoted to health, wellness, relaxation and enjoyment. These larger *Therme* or thermal baths have several indoor and outdoor pools, soaking tubs, tubs with different

mineral contents and different temperatures, and Roman-style bath houses with shallow soaking pools. In addition to the thermal baths, most of these spa centers have a variety of saunas. Some complexes have 20 or more different types of saunas ranging from traditional Finnish saunas to Russian Banjas to Turkish Hamams, where you lay on large flat stones, to various types of steam baths. These steam baths are often elaborately tiled in colorful Middle-Eastern styles, while many saunas are designed as replicas of old Nordic sauna houses. These complexes usually also have areas for getting a quick bite to eat or drink, and what would a spa in Germany be without a full-fledged bar to get a beer!



*Overview of the enormous thermal bath
and spa complex Therme Erding*

After any amount of traveling in Germany you should treat yourself to one of its many thermal bath and sauna complexes to unwind, relax and recover. It not only will reinvigorate you, but it will also give you a great opportunity to mingle with the locals, and the beauty of it all is that a day at the baths is very affordable—a typical 4-5 hour stay costs only about €20-30, depending upon whether you opt for the sauna facilities, which are €5-10 extra.

If you do take advantage of one of Germany's best leisure activities, there are a few things you should know that will ease

your initiation into the thermal bath and sauna culture. First of all, because you are not likely to be traveling with your own bath towels, you should rent them at the cashier's counter for a modest fee. Two are recommended, particularly if you intend to use the saunas. Also, if you so choose, you can have use of a bathrobe, although it is not necessary. Once you pay at the counter, you will receive a wristband that includes a key for a numbered locker and a "chip". This chip, which is on the wristband, is your all-access pass. It gets you through the turnstiles, keeps track of your time, tallies any food and beverage purchases and allows you to purchase any additional services such as massage or tanning salon time. At most places, the sauna section is separate from the thermal bath section, so if you initially purchase admission only to the baths, your chip will get you into the saunas and you will make up the difference upon your exit. Once you have your wristband, proceed through the turnstiles to enter the changing areas. You first encounter changing rooms (*Kabinen* for cabins) that have doors on two sides. Enter through the one side, change and exit the other side where you can find your numbered locker and store your things. The locker rooms are unisex and not separated for men and women. If you are using the thermal baths, bathing suits are required; however, if you are using the sauna facilities, these are *textilfrei* or no clothing areas. While this can be disconcerting at first, you shouldn't let the liberal attitude surrounding nudity at the spa prevent you from experiencing a great sweat. The no-clothing policy is two-fold in nature. First, it is designed to keep the facilities clean and minimize germs and, second, it doesn't interfere with the whole purpose of the sauna, which is, after all, a good *Schwitz*—and clothing only gets in the way. Once you've changed and made your way to the actual facilities, you can chart your own course as to how to plan your stay. While many sauna fans adhere to a strict regimen that includes a pattern of sauna followed by cool-down and relaxation, it's entirely up to you how to spend your time. You can spend your time sweating away in the saunas, soaking in the minerals in the baths, getting a good steam in the *Dampfbad*, or, if you just want to relax and enjoy, you can use the indoor or outdoor pools and hot tubs or stake out a lounger in the aromatherapy or quiet room for a quick nap. The scope and variety of options at these complexes is shocking and, at some of the bigger ones, you probably could not

experience all of the variety in a single day. For many **Germans**, a day at the baths is a great family outing. The kids can play in the pools and take advantage of the waterslides and splash parks, while the parents relax in the various wellness areas. Since you can spend many hours at the thermal baths, the facilities have cafes and bars that serve everything from pork cutlets and sausages to snacks, and from fruit smoothies and coffee to beer and wine for your eating and drinking needs.



Take a trip back to ancient Rome in the soaking bath at Therme Erding

The **Germans** are so into their **spas** that they devote lots of time and energy to creating unique spa experiences. Many **spas** open up the entire complex on Friday and Saturday evenings and other special occasions, both the thermal bath side and the designated sauna side, for FKK or no-clothing nights. Others put on elaborate Pink Floyd-esque light shows, both in the water and on the domes of the facilities. Still others have theme nights, such as Karneval, and many host special holiday parties for their guests. It's quite an undertaking, and the largest of the thermal bath operators are now even selling the equivalent of private spa "condos" at their facilities so

