

Published April 25, 2024. Editor's Headline: A Trip to Germany and Switzerland

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I recently spent four winter weeks in Germany and Switzerland, where the climate is milder than high-altitude Wyoming.

In the past I made flight reservations on my own, usually with Lufthansa or United, but these days it's had to do anything without an agent's involvement. I ended up with Turkish Airlines featuring late arrival and early departure times that inconvenienced my hosts, who live a 90-minute drive south of the Frankfurt airport. While Turkish Airlines followed standard procedures, e.g., by charging extra for seats with more spacious legroom, several things stood out:

Amenities included free wine and beer with the main meal. I noted that few passengers availed themselves of the offering.

The airline screens kept announcing the times for Islamic prayers.

A minus point: In Economy Seating, the airline kept showing pics of the comforts of First Class, with a white-clad chef serving delicious-looking tidbits to a passenger, seats that change into a chaise-lounge or bed, etc. Since my place was close to the service station that divides the two "classes," where I could glimpse the "other side," I saw that First Class had lots of empty seats, meaning the airline makes little profit from its expensive fares. The observation prompted me to sneak into a First-Class seat during the night where I extended it into a "bed" with the touch of a button. I took an hour to stretch out my legs in this manner, a welcome interlude, and returned to my proletarian accommodations before my violations might be discovered.

In Germany my hosts were the cousin named after me and her husband, who care for an elderly, disabled woman living in their downstairs apartment. Frau Inge's care is mostly left to my cousin. The woman lived with them last time I visited, when, with Edith's help, she climbed the stairs to join us for the midday meal. Now, Edith brings all the meals downstairs. She also helps the woman to get out of bed in the morning, wheels her into the bathroom to wash her from head to toe, and helps her get dressed. The work is compensated via the woman's monthly pension income augmented by the state's caregiver pay, but I wonder if the remuneration is adequate. My cousin ran up and down the stairs throughout the day. A special ringtone on their landline alerts Edith when her ward requires her help.

On my Europe tours, which happen every five years or so, I always visit my nephew Rolf, Edith and Josef's son, and his wife. In his late teens Rolf stayed with us for a summer in California, where he bonded with our sons and took excursions on his own by bus and bicycle. In adulthood Rolf and Kerstin moved to Switzerland for teaching jobs then unavailable in Germany. Since then they have attained Swiss citizenship, which allows them to retain their German one. The couple petitioned for citizenship when they discovered that non-citizens cannot acquire a parcel of land or a house. Switzerland is not part of the EU and so, it maintains its currency of Swiss Francs over and against the Euro.

The couple's fifteen-year-old twins have grown tall and independent-minded. A few years ago the family undertook an extended vacation in the U.S. during which they visited all three of my offspring and their families, even my Texas ones, using a combination of train travel and rented RV. I returned to California while they were there to share some of their time in San Francisco.

On my previous visits, Josef drove me the four hours to my Switzerland destination and Rolf drove me back, but this time I took the train to Basel on a Sunday, where Rolf would meet me at the train station hall's Information Booth. As I descended the train, I found myself engulfed by a sea of fellow travelers that carried me to the escalators moving to and fro the hall below. I knew the hall would be crowded with pizzerias, cafes, and sandwich shops, not to mention merchant booths selling everything from haircuts to clothing to newspapers. I wondered how on earth I'd find Rolf and the booth.

As the escalator moved downward, I heard a familiar voice calling from the ascending one, "Hallo, Edith!" Rolf had arrived early and decided to meet me at the platform. I was glad to see him; it spared me a search for our meeting place.

In Basel we strolled through its old town, gawked at its cathedral, and visited a museum Rolf had been wanting to take in. Then he drove us to his home in Wid erswill, a tiny town near Interlaken of less than 2000 at the foot of the Alps.

"The hamlet swells to double or triple in size with visitors during the tourist season," said Rolf.

In the days that followed, the weather was mild, encouraging me to get to know the town during various strolls, meeting Kerstin for lunch and, one afternoon, for a swim in an indoor pool. The family rarely uses their car. Both Rolf and Kerstin ride their bikes or use the bus to get to the train that takes them to work. Since the evening repast is light, consisting of slices of bread and cheese with side helpings from a tossed salad and a piece of fruit, most evenings after work Rolf drove me into the mountains for a leisurely walk or to nearby points of interest.

My return trip was slated for a Sunday. Rolf arranged for me to take the train from Bern to Basel, where I'd have to change trains to return to Germany. In Bern the family had been invited by friends for the midday meal, but the twins chose not to come with us. Their son had plans to take the train and go skiing with a friend; their daughter had an invitation to a sleepover birthday party. She would take the city bus to get there.

Bern, like Basel, has a well-preserved old town with gabled homes and timber-framed houses. "The town of Bern took its name from "bear," Rolf explained as he bought a small package of pastry bears to take with me. Changing trains in Basel proved no problem. I simply went down the escalator from one platform and up another to the platform for the international train. Passsport control was a minor interlude while the train travelled on.

