

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

NOTES FROM A GERMAN JOURNAL

"The new Germany is stunning The place looks upholstered."

- Patrick O'Donovan

It's soon going to be Christmas and I am headed for Germany to do some Christmas shopping, purchase some ship models, and to help judge a pastry contest.

During my trip of one week, as I travel alone, I will frequently pause in some deserted doorway in the freezing temperatures, to record a few notations for this space. What follows are some entries from my journal:

Flight Check: American Airlines to Frankfurt:

The flying time was eight hours and ten minutes. I got to the airport early and managed to get row twenty, an exit row on the twin-engine 767. I had a ton of legroom and the on-board entertainment system peppered me full-time with sudden blasts of American culture. I had never seen the show home improvement before and found it surprisingly well written. Dinner was a choice of steak, chicken, or lasagna. The flight attendants didn't know how the chicken was prepared so I went with the steak. I enjoyed both bites.

The captain came on the PA to announce that "we are carrying an extra pilot tonight so I can get some rest a bit later during the flight. So if you see one of us walking about the cabin - don't worry, there's still a full-time crew up front".

I liked that. And sure enough, he did come walking through the cabin seeing if anyone was all right. I was hoping that one of our readers might be aboard to confront him about the 31" seat pitch designed to cause transatlantic spinal realignment or the removal of mid-plane restrooms in favor of just four stalls in the very rear of the plane. But I think all my readers must have been flying British Airways.

The plane arrived on time - in fact, we were two minutes early. The airport officials in Germany had us wait for two minutes on the runway because we had the nerve to arrive early. I am still uneasy about flying two-engine planes across the Atlantic because I think that larger aircraft handle the turbulence far better. But that's me.

What always has and continues to impress me is the general level of professionalism at American Airlines. From the flight crew to the flight attendants, one senses that it's just a little tougher to land a job with this outfit than most others. There is a kind of Tom Landry-like confidence about the staff. I want my banker to hail from New England, my travel agent to come from the Midwest, my running shoe manufacturer to come from California, and my pilot to come from Texas. But that's just me.

Slick ICE

It didn't seem to me that I would need train reservations from Frankfurt to Hamburg. The stern ladies in the airport rail office informed me otherwise. They

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

finally, after some gentle prodding, came up with the “last seat” on the 10:20 train ICE train to Hamburg. But I would have to sit at a table in car number one, in the last seat. Car number one was a smoking car - and as some of you may recall from my subtle inferences, I am not a smoker.

It turned out that car number one was the last car on the train. I had literally received the last seat on the beautifully carpeted, shiny new ICE train. There were comfortable restrooms in each car, a full dining car and bar, leather headrest reclining seats, and full picture windows. A white uniformed gentleman came by with a cart filled with wines, expresso, and Westphalian ham sandwiches. It was just like the Burlington Northern.

Only one person in the smoking car smoked. And absolutely no one spoke. Not during the entire three hour and twenty minute ride. You could hear a pin drop as we whizzed past the rolling farmland outside of Hannover.

The German silence is interesting to observe. It is unusual in children but even more surprising in adults. And no one stares. Each German has his place, secure, generally affluent, a sphere of quietude.

Why am I the only one here?

I arrived in Germany's second largest city secure in the knowledge that, save for some Xerox people in the lobby of my hotel, I would probably not run into another American for the entire week. This city is somehow overlooked by the tour designers and the “we'll do it ourselves and miss everything” independent travelers. The tourism people tell me that less than 10% of the city's annual visitors are from the States.

A capsule description:

Save for some of it's pre-eminent historical buildings, Hamburg, Germany was almost totally destroyed by Allied bombing. Today, rebuilt along classic modern teutonic lines, with lots of rich red brick, leaded glass, and gold filigree, Hamburg is Europe's wealthiest city.

Two lakes lap up against its shores, including the inner Alster which lays at the feet of the city's most upscale (and in Hamburg that's a very relative term) shopping street.

The people are smartly dressed, there is virtually no crime, the lakefront is absolutely beautiful, the shopping options for Christmas are nearly inexhaustible, the local rivers provide delicious fresh fish dining options, and there's the Christmas thing. There is a spirit about this place during the Christmas season that starts with the Christmas markets and extends like a warm holiday blanket over the entire city. Germans don't get really festive - purposeful is more accurate. But there is a sense of season here that we might well emulate.

Some sober thoughts:

Of course, I'm leaving a few things out. Although it is very trendy , in some quarters, to travel to exotic lands, places where the fois gras has to be flown in by Air France, places where tourists are instructed not to “give money to the

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

starving locals”, I have also been an advocate of travel to the more developed countries of the world.

There is lots that we can learn from these Germans. And if I’m going to be trudging around in freezing temperatures recording my impressions, I want to be able to at least come home with an idea or two. I didn’t learn anything practical during my last chat with the highlanders in Papua New Guinea.

I have for years advocated that we make it impossible to obtain a high school diploma in the United States without first spending at least a month in India. Travel does broaden and, if nothing else, it helps point out to the young and the unconvinced, that we actually aren’t the sole inhabitants of Planet Hollywood.

But I wonder if seeing the emerging “have’s” would not be at least as motivational as remembering that the majority of the earth’s peoples are “have nots. “

They have it in Hamburg. One tourism official mentioned that they were disturbed that some of the Mercedes Benz 100 and 200 class taxis were starting to show their age. “We are trying to update to a higher level of Mercedes” I was told, and indeed I saw many of the new E-class cars that are generally in the \$65,000 range in service as taxis.

Hamburg is the brave new world of conspicuous consumption. It is a land of expensive wool winters coats and Hermes scarves, a land where Porsche Carreras litter the sidewalks. Even the most well traveled visitor is struck by the fact that, just a few hours east of Rosemont, Illinois, millions of people dwelling within the protective confines of the EEC, the mightiest economic entity the world has ever seen, look upon America as a land of intellectually impoverished, poorly dressed, mal-fed, citizens, whose greatest character flaw is lowered expectations and a propensity to allow others to share in our largess.

The gap between the have’s and the have nots of the earth is growing. And the gap between fifteen or so nations on earth with the highest standard of living, and us, is growing as well. And that is, as well, fascinating to behold.

A Familiar Face

The long-haired blonde fellow from Naperville stared at me from a poster freshly slapped on a piece of vacant construction wall along Grobe Bleichen street in Hamburg. Jim, the drummer from Hootie and the Blowfish, is shirtless and well on his way to becoming a German sex symbol. The group is everywhere, being interviewed on German talk shows, profiled on German MTV, and in a series of concerts that are being promoted as the second American coming.

A visiting American in this affluent land of few Americans, can only take comfort in the fact that the Blowfish have replaced Michael Jackson as the mirror image of American culture.

The Land of Spoiled Children

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Traveling in Germany, among the new European Affluents, makes me think about our kids back home. High school students in Germany now rank third in the industrialized world in academic achievement, just behind Japan and South Korea. In fact, German students who are not on a college track, score as well, on average, as America's top college-bound students.

Wondering why this is so, I watch the German parents interact with their kids during the Christmas season.

I am standing in front of HEW, a department store just off the Monckebergstrasse. A large crowd has gathered and I hear what sounds like a German stand-up comic. Getting closer, I look in a store window and see a small theater designed to entertain children while their parents shop for intricate train models and fancy, boxed kits of scientific experiments to challenge inquisitive minds. No "smack me like you want to smack Kathie Lee" Elmo dolls here. The entertainer is a comedy chef, and his routine is entirely elaborate. And the kids aged six to twelve or thirteen, are loving it. His performance is piped through speakers out to the sidewalk throngs, mixing with the sounds of chiming bells across the boulevard and Christmas carols from the nearby record store.

There is something odd about the kids sitting in the theater in the window along Hamburg's main shopping street. It's as though a Benetton commercial has suddenly come alive. They are all colors, and all hues, in pigtails and Ralph Launenesque casual clothing. They are, each and every one, absolutely beautiful and perfect.

There are some things you never see in Hamburg. I never saw an adult discipline a child in public. I never saw a child cry out, spit, run away. The children who were seated in restaurants all seemed to have been introduced to Emily Post at the age of three. How do they do it?

Is It the Dogs?

I think the children are being trained by their dogs rather than their parents. I have never, in all my travels, ever seen a canine culture of such perpetual politeness and seeming indifference to stress. German dogs glide through life on pampered paws, absolutely convinced of their status as humans with an extra pair of feet. At one point during a particularly difficult shopping day, I found myself at the shrimp bar in the Hanse-Viertel shopping arcade, having an aperitif while standing between a Rotweiler that had learned to control his drooling, and a Russian wolfhound whose owner kept feeding it toasted bread points with black caviar.

The dogs are everywhere and they never bark. Dogs are seated on the subway, in fine restaurants, and in the trendiest department stores. They ride the escalators at Brinkmann's proudly, passing from floor to floor with an impervious air, not the least bit concerned with where they are going, satisfied merely to be treated by their owners, as equals.

Labs are very popular. But they're not the "let's watch the Bears blow another one, wanna throw me a frisbee, can I roll in the mud," smiling variety of

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

lab we have in the states. These are serious Labrador retrievers, searching for a place to plop down for a good cup of coffee and a piece of madam's Berliner donut.

A Fish Story:

It's hard to relate one single anecdote that captures a city's mood. But there was a small incident that, perhaps, shows up the dark side of Hamburg, the only dark side that I could find in this eminently elegant, enjoyable, rich Grandmother from Kenilworth, kind of city.

I had discovered a wonderful circular group of small, self-service restaurants, just under the dome of the Karstadt's department store. Like everything involving taste in northern Germany, this plan was well executed. I tried the fish counter, a large glassed section with three brimming patters, each holding a different nordic fish, perfectly cooked. There were three sauces available as well. An unusual ham, chutney, raisin sauce went perfectly with the Haddock. Two days later, I returned again, selected a different fish and asked the woman behind the counter to give me the same sauce I had previously enjoyed.

"No", was her immediate reply. I asked again, smiling as hard as I could.

"It is impossible" she said, putting a serving of the sauce on another customers fish plate while I stood holding my plate of rake and boiled parsley potato. I tried again and she shook her head no.

Perhaps there was a language problem. I asked for the manager. She arrived, demonstrated fluent English, listened to my story, and then said "It does not come with that sauce. You must have Hollandaise." I asked why. She responded "because it is so". But the sauce I want is right there. "We do not serve it that way" was her response. "We have rules".

I walked to another station and found a bit of catsup.

Dinner at the Hotel Atlantic Kempinski

There were any number of memorable meals during this brief trip, but the absolute best was dinner in the dining room of the Atlantic Hotel at a table overlooking the Lake. The Kempinski chain has several beautiful properties in Germany, and this grand dame of Hamburg is one of its flagships. The old world lobby and fiercely attentive concierge staff create the essence comfortable yet elegant atmosphere that so many travelers to this part of the world are seeking.

Tom Cruise had just left, "a really lovely young man" I was assured by hotel staff. Robin Williams and Tina Turner call the hotel home, especially Tina since she is a mega star in Germany and appears in concert quite often. Eddie Murphy, with an entourage that handles nearly everything for Mr. Murphy, including, apparently, conversation, also stays at the Atlantic.

The food would have been justification enough to select this hotel. After walking past a ginger bread fantasy village created out of chocolate by the pastry chef, I sat down to enjoy medallions of liver of pheasant, followed by a delicate consommé into which the waiter delivered several "buttons" filled with truffles. After a few moments, the truffle buttons, warmed by the soup, opened slowly,

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

allowing the black truffle pieces to “swim” and flavor the soup. The main dish was selected by the maitre’d. He brought a beautiful circular platter with spokes of meat curving from a center of cabbage and elderberries. I suspected that the meat was venison. When I inquired, I was informed that “das es Bambi”. It was further explained that the Bambi was fresh, that the chef knew the hunter, and that the kill had been painless.

For dessert, I had an absolutely decadent fresh orange gelato served in a sea of pureed fresh berries. This was followed by a wine that the chef and the maitre d’ had made in the kitchen one long evening.

I could only imagine what the scene out of the wood paneled dining room might be like in the summer as the sailboats glide along the Alster.

A McDonald’s Update:

My late night dinner at McDonald’s was not as successful. I asked for my hamburger with extra onions, no pickles, as I do in the states, because it generally means that I will get one that is freshly made. Again, this was impossible. You take the burgers that are sitting there or you get nothing. They were having specials at McDonald’s - all including fried camembert.

German Television:

There were five or six rather serious looking German TV stations along with a smattering of other foreign language stations, including French television where the news readers had the best ties. I tried flipping channels a few times to see what the Germans are actually watching in prime time>

A Ricki Lake look-alike named Barbel was interviewing Porn stars. Her guests all stood at tables next to one another so you could read the body language. I tuned in the next day and she was interviewing people who were addicted to porn. When audience members agree with something said on stage, they cheer and stomp their boots against the bleachers where they sit. It was all a bit disconcerting.

World Federation Wrestling, complete with German play by play translation seems to be the hottest American show on German television. I am not fluent in the language, but I certainly got the impression that the German announcer was taking Hulk Hogan and Razor Ramone a bit too seriously.

The Chicago Bulls games are also covered with full translation. Herr Longley was actually scoring while I watched.

Finally, I saw an episode of MTV’s “Singled Out” surely the very best example we have that our American society is going to hell in a handbasket. In case you are unfamiliar with this show, 50 women vie for the privilege of a “date” with the contestant who routinely dumps large numbers of them because they lack proper physical attributes. The mindlessness and perverted values of this show, along with the wrestling, and the Kojack reruns, paints a bleak picture of American culture for the better educated and more affluent Hamburgers.

Thank goodness they can, at least, view the elegance and grace of Michael Jordan.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979