



I gotta tell you about the autobahn. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. Don't get me wrong, I do want to tell you about the autobahn but I guess I should explain how I got from the LIE to Deutschland!

My TH and I actually went on a REAL vacation. An honest to goodness-pack a suitcase-find your passport-take your dramamine vacation. No book of regs, no route book, no GI's, no RI's, just an Audi 80 ABS, 1988 version - dark blue for those who care about these things - my TH, the alps (all of them), the autobahn and me.

Now, under normal circumstances I would spend a lot of time telling you all about the ancient castles we stomped through in awe. I would go into Chamber of Commerce detail about the stained glass in the cathedrals, the carved stone gargoyles protecting the entrances to villages, the 410 varieties of wine we tasted and the gallons of beer we tested (note selection of verb). But, I know you guys. You don't care about that stuff, do you? Naw, you just want to be reassured that you really can drive as fast as you want on designated stretches of road without fear of flashing red bubbles showing up in your rear view mirror. Be assured!

During the five days we wandered hither and yon through Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Lichtenstein, I heard myself saying the same five words over and over again. These words always generated a knowing smile from my TH - you know the look. It's the sort of gaze that sort of floats over one's face when a radar trap has been outsmarted or a well deserved ticket has been beaten. It's borderline smug but mostly conspiratorial. But I digress.

Let me explain that I know as much about metric conversions as I do about Pythagorean Theory . . . my 10th grade algebra teacher felt the need to retire that year. At any rate, the words, "how fast ARE we going?" kept popping up at propitious moments. Just for the sake of variety I would sometimes whisper, "how FAST are we going?" Inevitably the answer was 185! Inevitably I would gasp, get a firmer grip on whatever was grippable from the right hand seat, take a deep breath and sigh, "but what does that mean in real speed?" Inevitably the response didn't make me feel much better. During one such exchange an AMG 560 SEC Mercedes (steel grey, magnificent) posed a substantial challenge by passing us like we were going backwards. As my TH attempted to maintain gait with this rocket I thought about the concept of "white knuckle traveling," a phrase I have oft used to

describe any scheduled airline. How short sighted I have been!

Road etiquette in Europe, specifically on the autobahns, consists of a handful of hard and fast rules. Rule #1. Stay to the right. Rule #2. Stay to the right unless you are prepared to be or capable of moving at Mach 2. Rule #3. Get back to the right as soon as the guy behind you starts flashing his lights. Light flashing is an elegant signal and speaks volumes. The driver doing the flashing means business and your sole purpose in life is to get out of his way, pronto. Autobahners know how to drive and take great pride in displaying that talent whenever the opportunity presents itself. What is most revealing, however, is the apparent lack of ego attached to this talent. The average autobahner zinging down the road at 180 has absolutely no problem with getting over to the right. It's just not a big deal to permit a faster car to go by. Would that Americans could learn to be so gracious as they shuffle along clogging up the passing lane at a heroic 63 mph.

Know what else impressed me? There is no litter in Europe. The highways are absolutely pristine. There are no discarded cigarette butts, no empty cans of Coke, no Whopper wrappers with oozing ketchup, no scratched out shopping lists, no used kleenex. The well manicured grass grows right up to the edge of the road. There are no offending weeds growing up out of the concrete and I did not see one slab of rubber from a worn tread. There were no dented hubcaps poised forlornly against the lane dividers, no rusted out tail pipes to be avoided. There is a lesson here somewhere.

Europe via private vehicle is absolutely THE way to see whatever country(s) one is inclined to visit. I've done it by train and while that does have it's moments, nothing compares to the open road, assuming your stash of marks, shillings, francs or pounds is sufficient (Lira and Pesos are still monopoly money). Our timing for this sojourn with the drastic decline of the value of the greenback can only be compared to my weekly luck in the lottery. At this sitting I am 0 for 52. Need I say more?

The age of "Europe on \$10 a day" is long gone. I think Mr. Frommer is now up to a per diem of \$25 and that assumes no appetite and little concern for the privacy

usually connected to certain bodily functions. Since creeping quietly into my fourth decade, I consider this sort of traveling tantamount to signing on a tramp steamer headed to someplace you can't pronounce in a body of water you never heard of. I certainly don't need five star ratings but I also don't need to burden the frau of the pension with a sign language dissertation about the pork that didn't sit well. To avoid this embarrassment we split the difference and went the two and a half to three star route and that came to a king's ransom. This is not a complaint, mind you just a hefty dose of reality.

Another reality that kept me wide-eyed was the incredible variety of vehicles sharing the road that I had never seen or heard of before. It's not easy concentrating on the Alps when a Porsche 928 S4 Koenig zips by. This little beauty was playing tag team autocrossing with a Peugeot 205 GTI while I was trying to photograph the Zugspitze. Being the proud owner of a tape of every single world rally championship ever televised on ESPN, I knew that this Peugeot was the road version of the 205 T16, the car that walked away with the manufacturer's trophy in '83 and '84. O.K., I didn't know that, but I do now. So there!

We saw an S1 Sport Quattro, several mid 70's vintage RS 1600 Ford Escorts and a couple of 70's Opel Ascona, but to my mind, VW's head the list of models with totally foreign (no pun intended, honest) names. We saw the Polo, the Passat, the Derby and each one of them had an emblem attached just over the left brake light of two rabbits doing that thing that rabbits are typically noted for. I got pretty good at finding them too!

I really was gratified to learn that Europeans carry on the same love-hate relationship with their cars that we do. I'm also confident that when they visit us they go just as ga-ga over some of our models as I did theirs. Matter of fact, when you get right down to it, language and cultural uniqueness notwithstanding, there really is only one difference between Europe and the USA that amount to anything . . . they haven't quite figured out ice!