Budget London Travel For The Whole Family

by Nancy Bestor

Planning for our summer trip to France was in the works when we got to thinking it would be easy and fun to tack on a week in London. We were going to be so close to England that it seemed a shame to miss the opportunity to show the girls the sights. Bob and I had both visited a couple of times before, and it has always been one of our favorite cities, so we wanted to share it with our daughters, aged 12 and 10.

While researching lodging options and prices, it soon became apparent that our family of four would be spending at least $175 a night, and that was if we could find a great deal. Also, it is often more difficult to find hotel rooms for four in Europe, and we didn’t like the idea of splitting up. A chance reading of the travel section in the San Francisco Chronicle turned us on to the idea of a home stay. Several agencies serve as brokers for these types of rentals and as a bonus, the price of lodging includes breakfast which, like almost everything else, can be quite expensive in London.

We booked our home stay through www.happy-homes.com. Their agent, Erica Reynolds, worked diligently to find a home that would suit us, and we were not disappointed. For the price of 490 pounds (about $980), we spent six delightful nights in a comfortable Chiswick, London home. Our hosts were a good-natured, retired couple who a few times a year rent out the two bedrooms on the top floor of their home. We also had our own bathroom, and each morning we were

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Spring’s Hottest Travel Products

by Ember Hood

It’s springtime. Flowers are blooming, grass is growing again, and would-be travelers are thinking about their next vacation. Travel Essentials is getting new travel products daily, so we’ve put together a few hot travel items to whet your travel whistle even further. They’re perfect for making your next trip more organized, comfortable, and safe, whether you’re traveling across continents or across your home state. Feel free to call any of our knowledgeable staff at Travel Essentials (800-258-0758) for more information about these or any travel products on your list. You can also check these products out online (and in color!) at our website, www.travelessentials.com.

Eagle Creek ORV Rolling Trunk

A new, slightly smaller rolling trunk from Eagle Creek, the ORV Trunk 25” Bag ($250) is still a formidable duffel. With the perfect combination of a lightweight, flexible duffel and a structured wheeled bag, the ORV 25” makes packing and transportation easier than ever. No matter how heavy the load, the oversized wheels and sturdy telescoping handle can take it, and you’ll always feel like you’re in control of your bag. It’s a big bag, and because of all the packing space, the interior “boot” box and the exterior pockets are perfect for keeping you organized. And, because Eagle Creek is so confident in the

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It’s All About The Food

by Nancy Bestor

As regular readers of this newsletter know, one of the things my family most looks forward to in our travels is food. We are always on the lookout for local markets, food stalls and restaurants where locals eat, as these are the places where one is most likely to get great regional food.

I’m not sure how I came to love and savor the sampling of the world’s varied cuisines. Perhaps growing up eating my mother’s hearty Croatian recipes has something to do with it. Nina came to the United States from the Dubrovnik region of Yugoslavia (now Croatia) when she was 19, married my father fairly quickly—although she didn’t speak much English, and he didn’t speak any Yugoslav—and soon thereafter my sister and I were born. I grew up eating traditional Croatian recipes, like cabbage and kobasice...
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treated to a delightful full breakfast. Some mornings it was muffins, cereal and fruit, others it was waffles, or bacon and eggs.

Our hosts gave us our own key, and we were able to come and go as we pleased. We were a bit concerned with the idea of making small talk every time we were in the house, but our hosts went out of their way to make our stay as private as we cared. Breakfast was set out for us each morning. And most days we would leave without seeing them and return late enough that they were already asleep. Yet when we needed them, they were always available to answer questions and provide any other help.

The home was a five-minute walk to the Acton Town Tube station, and from there a 20-30 minute ride would get us almost anywhere in the city. The London Underground (a.k.a. “the Tube”), is an extremely easy way to get around. We bought three-day travel cards for off peak hours ($30 each). Our 10 year old was free (11 and younger can travel free off peak with an adult) and our 12-year-old took part in the kid for a quid program ($2 per day during off peak hours). There are a host of options for Tube tickets, and the Rick Steves’ London guidebook does an excellent job of helping travelers figure out the pass that best meets their needs.

We thoroughly enjoyed our visit to the British Museum (free!) where we got close-up looks at the Parthenon’s Elgin Marbles, Rameses II, Assyrian statuary and carvings and the Rosetta Stone—now behind glass, whereas on our last trip, 15 years ago, we could touch it. Also behind glass is Lindow Man, also known as “The Bog Man”. He was a victim of an ancient human ritual sacrifice, and his wounds are still visible, as he was accidentally preserved like a mummy in a peat bog for more than 2000 years. Quite frankly he looks like a very old piece of leather in the shape of a human.

Home of the Crown Jewels (yes THE Crown Jewels), the Beefeaters, and one of the great museums of the world, the Tower of London was a favorite stop for the whole family. The Beefeaters, otherwise known as Yeoman Warders, offer free tours of the Tower every 30 minutes. These hour-long tours are very entertaining, as the Beefeaters recount exciting tales full of political intrigue, bravery and love, while sparing none of the often gruesome and grisly details. Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Lady Jane Grey, and many more legendary names all star in these fascinating stories of the Tower’s amazing history.

A world famous Beefeater in action.

A visit to London wouldn’t be complete without a stop at Harrod’s, London’s most famous department store. Owned by Mohamed al-Fayed, father of Princess Diana’s infamous boyfriend Dodi, the seven floors of high-end shopping include an odd and garish memorial to Dodi and Diana. It boasts Diana’s engagement ring from Dodi, the wineglass Diana drank out of on the night she died (lipstick still staining the rim), and both a huge picture and statue of the two. It is certainly quite a sight, especially with tourists lining up to have their pictures taken in front of it. The girls loved Harrod’s huge toy department, with many toys to try out, including a child’s size Hummer, on sale for a mere $25,000.

We also stopped off, with about a million other tourists, to see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace (bit of a yawn in my opinion), but much more interesting was a look at some very famous diaries and books at the British Library (free!). Pages from Leonardo da Vinci’s personal notebook (written in Italian as well as backwards, so bring a mirror!), the scribbled lyrics to I Want to Hold Your Hand by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, the Magna Carta, and much more are all on display.

We spent about $24 to take one of the famous “London Walks” tours. We chose the Beatles Tour, thinking it would be of interest to the whole family. Unfortunately it wasn’t. Our tour guide drove us crazy and we saw the outsides of lots of buildings. Needless to say, it did not live up to its billing. On a previous trip to London Bob and I took the terrific London by Gaslight Pub Walk tour. Of course we were 25 years old and pubs were an important part of our day—every day.

We tried to keep our London food costs to a minimum. We did splurge at a couple of Indian restaurants and once at a pub, but most of our meals came from daily stops at Marks & Spencer. This high-end grocery chain has outlets throughout the city and offers ready-made salads, sandwiches and such that made for great picnics in parks or even on street benches.

Make no mistake—London is expensive. And this bit of penny-pinching gave us more money for other adventures, like guided walks, half price theater tickets (see story on page 6), and entrance fees to the important sites on our to do list. And while London offers a few of the most amazing free museums in the world, these are more than offset by hefty entrance fees at must-see sites like the Tower of London ($92 family price) and Westminster Abbey ($45 family price).

London is a great city, and our six days there were full of fun and adventure. We were always on the go, and didn’t really spend much time at our home stay. That makes it the perfect lodging choice for travelers of all kinds.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She’s still plotting how to get Prince Charles to leave his wife so she can get her hands on some Royal diamonds.
It’s All About The Food...

(Croatian smoked sausage), which is still one of my favorite meals. On our five-month honeymoon trip around the United States Bob and I added to our love of regional food. A wedding gift was the guidebook RoadFood, which lists eateries that specialize in regional cuisines from coast to coast. RoadFood led us to some fabulous and quite memorable meals, particularly in the south and along the eastern seaboard.

Thus when traveling, we’re always keeping our eyes peeled for the places where the locals eat while steering clear of “tourist friendly” restaurants, with “special” English menus, and often, special English prices. Almost all of our family’s most memorable meals have come from “locals” restaurants. A food stall on Phi Phi Island in Thailand, for example, where we went time and time again during our week’s stay—so often in fact that we came to call it “our lady’s stall”. She cooked for us at her two picnic table “restaurant” and because she had no apparent refrigeration (yikes!), every day she’d send a young boy down to the market to collect the Cokes we ordered from her menu. After we placed our order, she’d fire up her one burner stove and wok and pull out meat and produce from a cabinet underneath. She couldn’t speak any English, and we couldn’t speak any Thai, but the food was better than great, and the memories will last a lifetime. Then there was the yakitori stand under the bustling railway tracks in Tokyo. Bob and I sat with the locals in Yurakucho Yakitori Alley, who would sing, cheer, drink beer, and eat delicious grilled meats and veggies on a stick over steamed rice.

Our recent trip to France provided more delicious regional food. France, of course, offers fabulous restaurants with great regional cuisine. But with both our limited budget and a weak dollar, we were mostly looking for good and cheap. Staying near the Jewish quarter in Paris we ordered from a stall on Phi Phi Island in Thailand, for example, where we went time and time again during our week’s stay—so often in fact that we came to call it “our lady’s stall”. She cooked for us at her two picnic table “restaurant” and because she had no apparent refrigeration (yikes!), every day she’d send a young boy down to the market to collect the Cokes we ordered from her menu. After we placed our order, she’d fire up her one burner stove and wok and pull out meat and produce from a cabinet underneath. She couldn’t speak any English, and we couldn’t speak any Thai, but the food was better than great, and the memories will last a lifetime. Then there was the yakitori stand under the bustling railway tracks in Tokyo. Bob and I sat with the locals in Yurakucho Yakitori Alley, who would sing, cheer, drink beer, and eat delicious grilled meats and veggies on a stick over steamed rice.

Our recent trip to France provided more delicious regional food. France, of course, offers fabulous restaurants with great regional cuisine. But with both our limited budget and a weak dollar, we were mostly looking for good and cheap. Staying near the Jewish quarter in Paris was a windfall, as falafel stands abound, and these were falafels like no others I have tasted. This district also served up great bagels and lox, hala bread, and many more delectable snacks and quick meals.

On our long drive from Paris to the Dordogne, using our handy Michelin Red Guide, we found a quiet restaurant outside the small town of Saint Pierre and were treated over several courses to a delicious lunch. The restaurant, La Vigne, had just one other table of diners and a matronly waitress, who spoke no English. Ordering from the prix fix menu (17 euros) we enjoyed an array of five regional delicacies, including chicken and rice in a white cream sauce, a hearty pork stew in a wine sauce with ratatouille, and an indulgent appetizer of asparagus wrapped in bacon. Lunch culminated in the presentation of a cart heaped with about a dozen cheeses from which we could choose. After deciphering, with our less than rudimentary French, which cheeses were from a cow and which were from a goat, we chose three and our waitress cut off generous hunks of each. They melted in our mouths like no dessert ever could.

We also familiarized ourselves well enough with pâtisseries and boulangeries that we quickly became connoisseurs. We sampled the goods of nearly every small town we passed through and while it was all very good, much of it was great! We sampled berry tarts, chocolate tarts, lemon tarts, pain au chocolat, flaky croissants, and more. As an aside, Emily and Sarah (aged 12 and 10) had a fun experience going into a patisserie on their own, to buy a tart. They practiced over and over ordering in French, and were only stumped when the shop owner asked them (in French of course) if they wanted their tart in a box. Not understanding, they politely replied “Oui”. Always a good answer!

While it’s not always easy to find sources for good regional food, a little advance preparation can help a lot. Use a good guidebook for reference, or even two or three. We usually cross-reference between the Lonely Planet and other mainstream guidebooks like Frommers or Michelin in hopes of finding restaurants with multiple recommendations. A good guidebook does much of the research for you, and the three mentioned above are all very helpful.

You can also ask the locals. We’ll often inquire at our hotel, and no matter the answer, we always ask “Do you eat there?” or “Where is it that you like to go?” This approach almost always gets us an inspired recommendation and has also proved quite useful here in the USA.

The internet is another excellent resource. If you have access to a computer when you are traveling or when planning your trip, Google the city you are visiting and ask for restaurant recommendations. The more specific you are the better. A quick search for restaurant reviews of Indian eateries in London, for example, finds many personal and professional reviews.

Finally do some legwork—literally. Walk the neighborhoods, look at the menus, and check out who’s eating therein. This often frustrates our children, because they know when we start walking to find a place for dinner, we could be 90 minutes from sitting down. Give yourself a head start to avoid collapsing from hunger, and follow your nose, as well as your instincts.

This approach led us to a classic corner restaurant in Paris, the Café de Musée, where we ate herb and potato vichyssoise and duck prepared with cherries (19 euros each).

—Nancy, Bob and the girls are off to Turkey for three weeks this summer, and Nancy’s mouth is already watering in anticipation. Until then she’ll keep doing sit ups (or is it start doing situps?)
People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree. — Pablo Picasso

Spring’s Hottest Travel Products...
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Durability and performance of their bags, the ORV 25” Trunk Duffel is covered under their unconditional “No Matter What” lifetime warranty.

Mountain Khaki Pants
The great thing about Mountain Khaki’s Original Mountain Mens Pant ($69.95) is that they are made from one of the most durable cotton canvas materials available. This helps them resist wear and tear, and makes them perfect for the great outdoors. But, because of their manufacturing process, Mountain Khaki’s has managed to keep the pants relatively light, so you can still pack them for a trip without taking up too much of your precious packing space. Iron-tough on the outside, the Original Mountain Pants are also brushed on the inside, for a soft feel against your skin.

The Teton Twill Pants from Mountain Khakis ($69.95) are a light weight and more stylish version of their rugged Original Mountain Pant. The Tetons are durable enough to brave the adventurous terrain you might encounter while on the road yet stylish enough to wear to the office, the theater or out to dinner. The Tetons are made from an extremely fine, high-grade yarn that is woven tightly to improve their durability. Perfect for travel, the Teton Twill Pant can be worn to the opera at night and on a hike the next day, saving you valuable packing space.

SIGG Water Bottles
Made from a single continuous piece of aluminum, SIGG water bottles offer quick and easy water storage without the worry of plastic leaching into your water supply, even if the water sits for days. Eco-friendly, SIGG bottles are not only reusable, but completely recyclable as well. SIGG bottles come in two main sizes and many attractive colors and patterns. The 20 ounce bottle ($19.99) is the smaller size, and it comes in more patterns than the larger 1.0 Liter (33 ounce) bottles ($21.99). SIGG is on a mission to protect our environment from the millions of plastic water bottles that end up in landfills every day. So, support your planet and your pocketbook with an attractive, durable, reusable SIGG Water Bottle.

Michelin Guidebooks
Started more than a hundred years ago to help French tourists find decent food and lodging, the Michelin Red Guides have been a staple in the guidebook community since Andre Michelin started compiling them in the year 1900. Now, 11 countries in western Europe have been added to the series, offering a sweeping and inclusive guide to traveling in that part of the world. The Red Guides are venerated in restaurant circles as offering accurate (and desirable) starred reviews. Green Guides, on the other hand, are a newer incarnation, offering more history, cultural, and local information. They are also frequently narrowed down to cover regions of countries in addition to entire countries. And, unlike the Red Guides, they are available in English (Red Guides are all offered only in the language of the country they represent, but are legible to the masses through the clever use of easily understood symbols).

Gorilla Pod
The GorillaPod ($21.95) is the most flexible and versatile camera tripod we’ve ever come across. Its unique design offers full control of the shape of the tripod, meaning that you can set it on any surface, flat or not. But our favorite thing about the GorillaPod is that its three legs are so flexible you can literally...
Spring’s Hottest Travel Products...

wrap them around a pole, post, fence, branch, railing, or anything else you can think of—and securely anchor your camera almost anywhere. Hike out into the wilderness and easily mount your camera on a tree branch, and set the timer to take that beautiful panoramic shot, only this time you can be in it, too. Group photos or self-portraits are a breeze with the GorillaPod. And so are low-light pictures. Digital cameras are notorious for adding a blur to your photo if there’s not enough light. But, clip your camera to the GorillaPod and take steady-as-a-rock photos every time. The detachable camera clip screws into the bottom of your camera and stays there, so you just have to clip the camera onto the GorillaPod and you’re ready to shoot.

Sunday Afternoons Shirts
Soft, comfortably cut and beautifully draped, the Women’s Tradewinds Shirt ($54.95) from Sunday Afternoons is a wonderful top for every day use. But, hidden under its attractive surface, lies the heart of a true travel garment with sun protective material (40 UPF), built-in ventilation panels, and wrinkle-resistant cloth that dries quickly and wicks moisture away from your skin. The Island Breeze Men’s Shirt ($59.95) offers the same comfortable and travel-friendly properties in a men’s garment. Both shirts are easy to dress up or down and can be worn alone or as an over-shirt.

Moleskin City Notebooks
Aldous Huxley once said, “For every traveler who has any taste of his own, the only useful guidebook will be the one which he himself has written.” Moleskin took that to heart and created the City Notebook ($17.95) so you really can write your own travel guide. Designed specifically for travel within major cities around the world, they are so much more than simple journals. While containing street and subway maps, the City Notebooks leave plenty of room for you to record your own adventures. Customizable tabs allow you to keep track of all your favorite restaurants, hotels, attractions, views, museums, and much more! So, whether you’re spending a week in New York or living in Amsterdam for a year, a City Notebook will help you organize and record pertinent information along with all the thoughts and experiences you don’t want to forget.

LightWedge Paperback
The LightWedge Paperback ($24.95) is, simply put, an ingenious invention. The clear acrylic lens of the LightWedge is made to fit perfectly over the pages of any standard paperback book. LED lights are tucked away, illuminating the lens and the page beneath it, but nothing else. So, you can lie in bed reading to your heart’s content without bothering your bunk-mate. Weighing in at only 6.5 ounces (with four AAA batteries, not included), and measuring only 7.4” by 5.5”, you’ll have no problem at all taking it with you, especially if you use the LightWedge Soft Case ($7.95 for the paperback size, sold separately), which protects the plastic from scuffs and scratches without taking up extra space. Or, if you’re looking for something smaller, the LightWedge Mini ($14.95) measures 5” x 2.25” and comes in a small hard-plastic carry case. The LightWedge Mini is small enough to fit in your pocket and lasts for more than 20 hours of continuous light on two included lithium batteries.

—Ember Hood is one of Travel Essentials’ knowledgeable staff members. When not managing our website, Ember enjoys spending time with her cute one year old daughter, Eliannah.

“With the casino and the beds, our passengers will have at least two ways to get lucky on one of our flights.”
— RICHARD BRANSON, OWNER OF VIRGIN ATLANTIC AIRWAYS
London Theater at Discounted Prices

by Bob Bestor

The quality of London theater rivals New York's Broadway, and while London, by all accounts, is one of the most expensive cities in the world, there are still a few ways to get more bang for your buck in the area of entertainment. One of the best is to take advantage of the daily half-price theater tickets on offer at the Leicester Square "tkts" booth.

The "tkts" booth sells half-price tickets (and for some extremely popular shows, 25% off tickets) for shows with seats available that day. Thus the list of available shows is ever changing, from matinees to evening performances, and from one day to the next. If you are flexible and don't have your heart set on seeing a specific show, this is a great way to experience London theater.

A word of warning: a myriad of "discount" ticket vendors abound in Leicester Square, but don't be fooled. These discounters are, as Rick Steves says, "scammers with an address."

On our recent trip we arrived at Leicester Square at about 9:30 a.m. There was a short line in front of the "tkts" booth, and available shows had just been posted. It's great fun, and quite informative, to talk with others in line about reviews of shows, where they might be visiting from (many are Londoners themselves) and what show they might try and buy tickets for. We kept a couple of choices in mind, based on the posted availability, in case our first choice sold out before we got to the front of the line. I'd also recommend bringing a theater or newspaper review of what is playing. If not for the knowledgeable tourist in front of us, we would not have known that a few shows were not really appropriate for children.

We chose Fiddler On the Roof from a list of about two dozen shows that also included Billy Elliot, The Woman in Black, Phantom of the Opera, and Wicked. For $240 (this is half price mind you!) we purchased four prime seats about twelve rows from the stage at the Savoy Theater.

Another option for discount theater tickets is to head straight to the theater itself. We paid half-price ($116 for four) at the Criteron Theater box office for their madcap presentation of "The 39 Steps" which was originally made famous by the 1935 Alfred Hitchcock film of the same name. The film is based on the idea of an innocent man on the run, and although the play follows this theme loosely, the similarities end there, as the four actors combined to play 150 different roles.

Our seats for this rollicking performance were at the front of the balcony in the small well-worn theater, which is past its prime but still full of character. The theater's ambiance only added to the play's story, although Sarah did get locked in the bathroom for a brief period of time (that, however, is another story).

Discount theater tickets are also available through "tkts" for Broadway shows in New York City. For more information on the London theater "tkts" booth, visit http://www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk.tickets. For New York "tkts" booth information visit http://www.tdf.org/TDF_ServicePage.aspx?id=56.

—Bob Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. Recently he was heard singing in the shower "If I Were A Rich Man..."

News, Advice and Tips For Travelers

- BestTripChoices.com is a fun website that matches travel personalities with appropriate destinations. Their online test takes just a few minutes, and classifies travelers into one of six travel personalities—from an Authentic (likes a relaxing vacation) to a Venturer (prefers extreme risk). I ranked as a Mid-Venturer who prefers adventure travel with limited physical exertion (they read me so well). Based on the personality results, the website recommends types of vacations. It is a fun exercise and it just might give you a few new vacation ideas.

- The IndependentTraveler.com offers good advice on hotel tipping. Here are a few examples: A valet should get $1-$2 (more in bad weather); for hailing a cab, tip a doorman $1-$2; if a bellperson takes your bags up or down from your room, the suggested tip is $1-$2 per bag; and for housekeeping $1-$5 per night (the messier you are, the higher the tip). Also remember when tipping housekeeping to tip for each night instead of giving one large tip at the end of your stay. You may not have the same housekeeper each evening and a single tip may not get evenly distributed.

- For domestic flights beginning after May 5, 2008, United Airlines will charge a $25 service fee for each checked bag after the first one. Check with your airlines, as others are picking up on this new fee schedule.

- The United States is now the seventh-most competitive country in the travel sector, dropping two places from a year ago, according to the Global Travel & Tourism Competitive Report 2008. The report, by the World Economic Forum, places Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Australia, Spain and Great Britain ahead of the U.S. The other three countries in the top 10 are Sweden, Canada and France. The rankings are based on more than 60 variables, including health and safety, infrastructure, local price levels and environmental and cultural aspects. Among the variables, the U.S. ranked a lowly 114th in the openness of U.S. citizens toward foreign visitors.
Especially For the European Traveler

by Robert H. Bestor, Jr.

Following are a few tips from our resident European travel expert that will save you some euros, keep you from getting lost, and keep you from getting ripped off.

Your Money’s No Good Here—Literally

A friend, let’s call him Charles, who visits Europe several times a year for business and pleasure, told me this story. Prior to his departure from the U.S. last month he obtained 10 $100 bills from his bank. At the end of the trip he needed to exchange one of the bills for euros at Gare Lyon in Paris. However, the teller at the bank branch there identified the bill as counterfeit and immediately confiscated it. Asserting that the U.S. $100 bill is the most counterfeited currency in the world, the teller ripped the bill in half and gave Charles a receipt. Of course, upon his return to the U.S., he demanded the bank replace his lost $100. Paperwork has been initiated but Charles is still waiting for his money. Since then I have learned that, because it is so often counterfeited, the U.S. $100 bill is not accepted in many places throughout the world. Take your ATM card to Europe. It’s safer and you’ll get the best exchange rate.

Hotel Deal: Pay for Two Nights, Get One Free

You’ve heard of Romantik hotels, Leading Hotels of the World, and of course Best Western. These are hotel alliances that have come together to create a brand for jointly marketing themselves to the world. One you may not have encountered is Minotel, a group of small family-run, moderately-priced hotels, located mostly in Europe. I’ve found them to maintain a high standard of cleanliness, comfort, and value. One of my favorites is the Hotel Forni in Airola, Switzerland, at the south end of the Gotthard Tunnel. This is a lovely, off-the-beaten-track part of Switzerland that is bypassed by most tourists. The Forni (doubles from $140 in pricey Switzerland) is across from the rail station and noted for its mid-priced restaurant. Its wine list is lauded by Michelin as “particularly interesting,” but a vivid memory for me is an appetizer of earthy sautéed wild mushrooms enclosed in feathery, flaky phyllo pastry.

But back to Minotel. It is currently running a “stay-three-nights-pay-for-two” offer at many properties. For example, for around $100 per night, two persons can stay at the fine little Hotel Solaria in the tiny mountain town of Bivio, in Switzerland’s Graubünden canton. In Tore, near Bologna, Italy, the Hotel Falco d’Oro is about $74 per night double. And in Lyon France the Hotel de la Loire is around $94 per night for a three-night stay. Find others at www.minotel.com.

Driving in Europe: GPS vs. Maps

Don’t harbor the notion that your rental car’s GPS (Global Positioning System) will work in any country other than the one in which it was rented. And don’t expect there to be an instruction book in English. A GPS does not replace, but supplements, good 1:200,000 or 1:150,000 scale maps. Even the best GPS devices sometimes create puzzling routes. Take along maps of the regions you plan to travel and you’ll quickly know when the GPS is sending you the long way ‘round. Old-fashioned maps provide an overall perspective of the region and are useful in quickly locating interesting towns and sights. While the GPS is great in the countryside between towns and villages, it’s positively indispensable in large cities. Without our portable Garmin Nuvi 660 I seriously question whether, without it, in heavy rain and traffic, over poorly marked roads on a dark Sunday night last December, we’d have ever reached our hotel in Poznan, Poland.

By the way, a New York Times article says good portable GPS devices are superior to any automobile factory-installed navigation system. My own experience with the Nuvi bares that out. And, unlike a European rental car’s GPS, it worked throughout Europe (rental car navigation systems typically operate only in the country where the car was rented). The 660 not only directs you to your destination but provides other information and services. There are the basics such as the distance to your next turn, distance already covered, distance remaining, estimated time of arrival, and current speed. It also records the highest speed attained (our ICE train between Brussels and Frankfurt clocked out at 173mph). The user zooms in and out of the two-dimensional or three-dimensional maps by simply touching the screen. It also comes with a points-of-interest (POIs) database with hotels, restaurants, fuel locations, ATMs and more.

Extra features include an MP3 player, Bluetooth hands-free technology, and an integrated FM receiver that picks up TMC traffic reports. Small, light, and easy to deal with on the trip, it was almost flawless in Belgium, Germany and Poland. Of course you must purchase additional software to get Europe coverage. Extra software for European POIs is also available. The 660 lists for $750 but you can buy it online, as I did, for about $200 less. The simpler Garmin Nuvi 270 comes already loaded with European maps and sells on the Web for between $275 and $400. These are great devices but most functional when supplemented with good maps.

The EU Marches On

You no longer have to stop at the border to show a passport to enter the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia from another European Union country. We’ve come a long way since 1989.

—Robert H. Bestor, Jr. is the publisher of Gemütlichkeit, the travel newsletter for Germany, Austria and Switzerland (www.gemut.com) and the owner of Gemütlichkeit Auto Rentals, providing excellent rates on car rentals throughout Europe. For the latest rental rates, email andy@gemut.com.

“A vacation frequently means that the family goes away for a rest, accompanied by a mother who sees that the others get it.”

—Marcelene Cox
Learn the Latest and Greatest Packing Secrets At Travel Essentials Annual Pack It Up Workshop!

Travel Essentials will offer two free packing workshops with America’s leading packing expert, Anne McAlpin. The workshops, Tuesday, April 29 at 2:00 and 6:00 p.m., will take place in Travel Essentials’ Ashland, Oregon store at 252 East Main Street.

These packing workshops will help you learn how to pack light and smart, whether packing for a weekend getaway, or a lengthy trip abroad.

Anne McAlpin is a world traveler, packing expert and author of the popular book *Pack It Up*, which has been updated to include all of Anne’s latest travel tips, and a 30 minute packing DVD. Her appearances on *Oprah*, *CNN* and *The View* have reached millions of viewers. Anne travels the globe teaching the inside secrets on packing perfectly. Her tips include packing smart for airport security, planning the best travel wardrobe, the secrets to packing the perfect carry-on bag, and more.

Last year, Anne spent approximately 280 days on the road teaching packing workshops. She has cruised the Panama Canal 98 times and visited 67 countries. She takes about 25 flights each month, so if she can’t teach you how to pack well, no one can!

Here is a sneak peek at some of her travel tips:
- Always use your business address on your luggage ID tag, you don’t want to advertise your home addresses when you’re leaving home.
- The last thing you want to do on vacation is iron. Rolling your clothes will allow you to fit more in your suitcase and cut down on wrinkles.
- Take travel sized toiletries. Don’t try and pack the entire contents of your medicine cabinet.
- Never pack jewelry or valuables inside your luggage.

Travel Essentials will offer a 10% discount on all regularly priced merchandise on that day to all attendees. Customers who spend $100 will receive a free copy of Anne’s book, *Pack It Up*.

Anne’s packing workshops always bring in a full house, (last year we had to turn late callers away!) so reservations are a must. To reserve your spot, call Travel Essentials at (541) 482-7383 today. Don’t miss this great event!