

**Travel
Dispatches**
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Pörtchach

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We have just a couple more posts to catch up on our past travels. This one covers a week in magical Pörtchach, Austria.

It was time to leave fascinating Vienna and make our way onward. We settle into comfortable seats on a rapid train that passes quickly out of the city and into the vineyard lands of Lower Austria, one of the nine states that comprise the country. The area is named 'Lower' Austria because it has the lowest average altitude of this famous Alpine country.

enjoy these green and rural lands, the fields, vineyards, and mountains, as they go by.



Austria has a population of about 9 million, of which 2.5 million live in and around Vienna, and Graz is the second-largest city with a population of less than 300,000. Most of Austria is rural, so it's easy to leave the big city for a nice weekend or a week in the countryside. We're on our way through pastoral lands and small towns to the Wörthersee, the largest lake in southern Austria, between Klagenfurt and Villach, and we're ready for a few days away from city life.

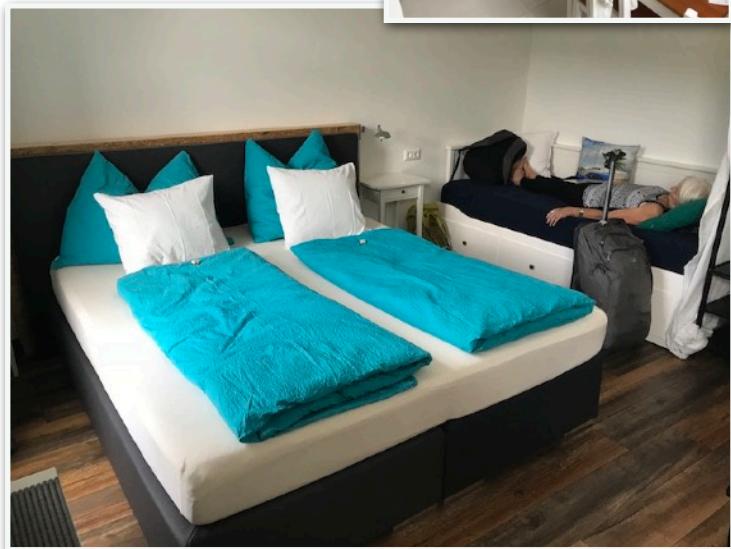
This is where the Danube, the longest river in Europe, leaves Austria on its way downriver through Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania, to the distant Black Sea.

In the picturesque valleys of southern Austria, known as Carinthia, the hills still seem alive with the sound of music – although that movie was filmed far away near Salzburg, in Upper Austria. Still, it's a fine day to be on a train with big windows to





Pötschach (Pronounced *Pert chock*) is a popular summer resort destination for southern Europe, and lodgings can be pricey. But we found a small place – IKEA kitchen and all – that was adequate and clean but not gorgeous. We don't really spend much time in the apartments we rent, so adequate and clean works out fine for us.



There's a table by the window for a quick breakfast, or a good cheap lunch of local cheeses and bread. All through Europe we're pleased at the great variety of excellent cheeses, breads, wines, and other delights available at modest prices in local stores. The grocery choices are so tempting that we sometimes skip dining out, and enjoy a quiet dinner in the apartment.

I write a Dispatch at our window-side table as a light refreshing rain falls outside, keeping beautiful Austria green. It's a quiet morning as people appear under umbrellas in the street below and we're tuned to a local radio station which mostly plays songs in German, and a few classic (as in 'timeworn') rock songs in English. Some of the more interesting tunes are German versions of 'A Rose in Spanish Harlem,' and 'Sound of Silence.' I have no idea what the lyrics are saying, in Austrian German, but it's amusing.

A brief look around town leads us to the bar next door for a couple of tall local Villacher brews and the current World's Cup game in progress. There's no better way to relate to the locals throughout Europe than sharing this kind of moment. We were fortunate that Austria was not in that game, so accidentally cheering for the wrong team was not an issue.



We spend languid days wandering the verdant streets that make up the little town of Pörtschach and we encounter a well-loved light-blue Trabant that's been restored to perfection. The Trabant ('satellite' in German) was an East German car that featured an innovative body made of Duroplast, a combination of recycled cotton waste from the Soviet Union and phenol resins from the East German dye industry. The 'Trabi' was a simple car with a two-cylinder engine that got about 40 mpg. There was no gas gauge, or turn signal indicators, and an oil-gas mixture was poured into a tank under the hood relying on gravity to feed the engine – which of course increased the danger in a head-on collision. The very basic Trabant was often called a "spark plug with a roof." And one journalist even described it as, "loud, slow, poorly designed, and badly built." So what's not to love about this cute little car named after the Soviet "Sputnik"?



The town's quiet, narrow, and ridiculously well-kept lanes beckon us onward past gorgeous homes and tended gardens. And past signs that indicate Johannes Brahms may have been here a time or two.



And soon we're at lakeside, admiring sailboats on moorings dancing to an afternoon zephyr with cloud-shrouded Alpine peaks in the distance. Most of the lakeside is cordoned off for paying guests and so we keep wandering, and watching a couple of kids enjoying their day out in a little Optimist Dinghy.





There are fine places to linger, away from the commercial beach area. A sign reads, “Swimming Forbidden! Landscape Protection Area!” That works for us, and we notice the water is clear enough to watch fish swirling near the shore. Whatever they do to keep the lake so clean, it seems to be working.



Across the lake there are small palaces where the elite of a bygone age once dwelled. Or maybe there’s a modern local industry replicating classical homes for those with the cash to pay for it. And we see an odd tower on a hill across the lake that beckons us to investigate.



We take another route back to the center of things and return to the main narrow lakeside promenade. This tourist town is directed toward German speakers and other central Europeans and we’re refreshingly far from the English-speaking

hordes, although there are plenty of folks available to answer questions and accept our Euros. Like it or not, English has become the lingua franca, the language of business, for most of Europe.



I recently asked a German friend why Germany and Austria were not united as one country, and his quick answer was that Germany is Protestant and Austria is Catholic. Of course, that oversimplifies things, and the fractiousness of the German tribes has

been well-known for centuries. When the Roman Legions marched north of the Rhine they used the divided German tribes to their advantage so well that Tacitus remarked, "Rome has no greater ally than the disorganization of her enemies." Or words to that effect.

The Germans and the Austrians have actually united at various times in history, including under the Holy Roman Empire, the German Confederation after the defeat of Napoleon, and briefly after the First World War. But the Second World War convinced many neighboring countries that they might function better as a divorced couple. I'm sure some of us can relate.



One morning we buy two train tickets to visit the nearby town of Villach, near the western end of the lake. I ask for tickets to 'Veeyach' because that's how our Uruguayan friend Cristina Villach says it. I'm informed by the stern ticket lady that it's pronounced *Vee lochk*, with emphasis on the 'h,' and I decide against explaining how our Uruguasha buddy pronounces her own last name.



We enjoy a scenic ride along the lakeshore and into the valley beyond, with misty Alps and more sailing boats along the way. It's nearing lunchtime as we settle into the biergarten at the Brauerei for a round of the local Villacher ale (A Tradition Since 1738) – with platters of bratwurst, kraut, and soft pretzels. If we lived here, this would be a frequent stop.

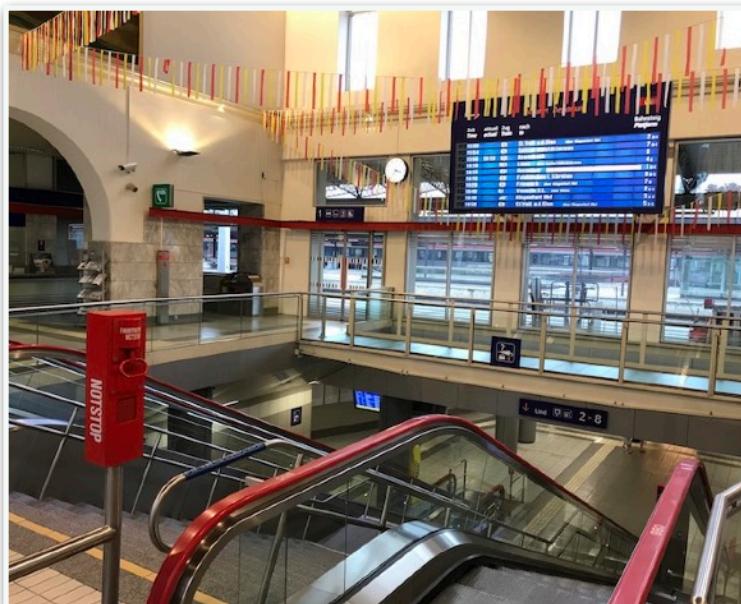


Villach is a modest and tidy town of about 61,000 on the Drau river, a main tributary to the Danube and one of the most heavily-used hydroelectric sources in Europe – and that may explain the clear air in this alpine basin. It's easy to get around town on foot or bicycle, with lots of reasons for frequent stops – like another tall mug of good Villacher ale, or even kitting out with

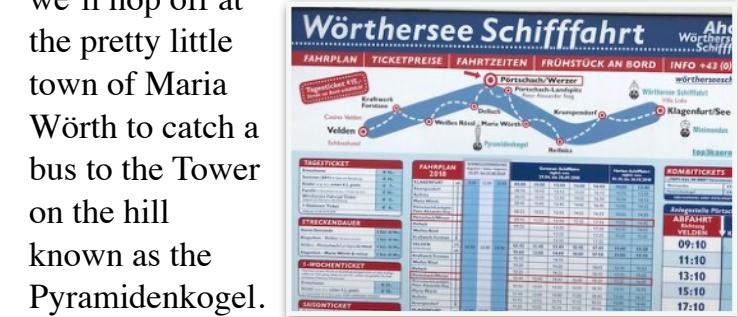
those high quality lederhosen you always wanted but couldn't find at Sears. Or admiring the many pieces of sculpture around town. Or eyeing a finely-crafted stair rail you wish you could ship back home.



After a good day in Cristina's ancestral home of Villach we head back to Pörtschach, and we're grateful for the efficient and affordable rail service which is commonplace in Europe.



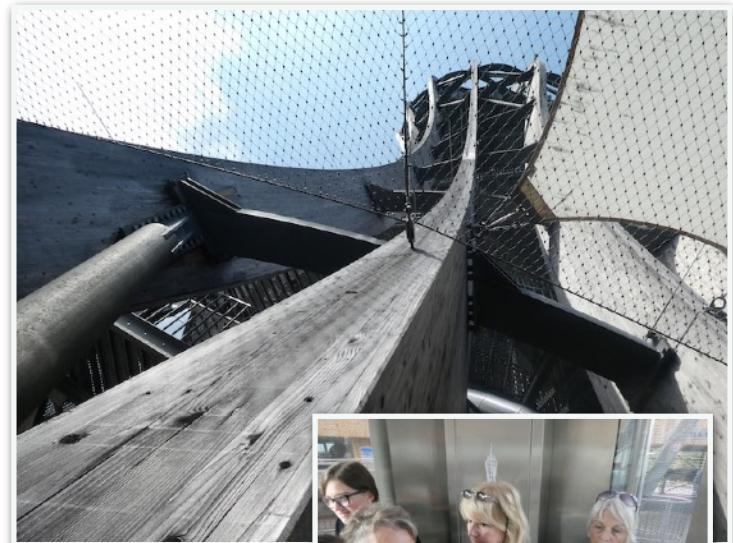
One fine day we catch a ride on the Ferry to check out that odd hilltop tower we can see across the lake. We read the sign as best we can, but we're not sure what a Fahrtzeiten is and decide we don't want one of those. So we score a pair of Tagestickets (Day Tickets) so we can do the whole roundtrip tour to Klagenfurt at the eastern end of the lake and Velden at the west end. And we'll hop off at the pretty little town of Maria Wörth to catch a bus to the Tower on the hill known as the Pyramidenkogel.



The Postbus whisks us through a verdant landscape to a stop near the Tower and we make our way up to this amazing wooden construction. This is the latest 2013 version of the Tower, which replaced an earlier concrete tower that had a challenging spiral staircase to the top. The current version has a number of tourist-friendly features, including an elevator to the top and a spiral chute for the daring (!) back to the bottom.



At 100 meters high, this is the tallest wooden viewing tower in the world. The engineering involved is worth a closer look and the graceful curves are noteworthy, although the weathering of the structure is a bit concerning.



There are two viewing platforms and the views to various distant sections of the Alps are, of course, spectacular. Far below us is the entire length of the Wörthersee and the village of Maria Wörth. On the far side is Pörtschach. And the views back down to the bottom are not for the faint of heart. To the north lie the high peaks of the Gurktal Alps, partially hidden in the clouds.



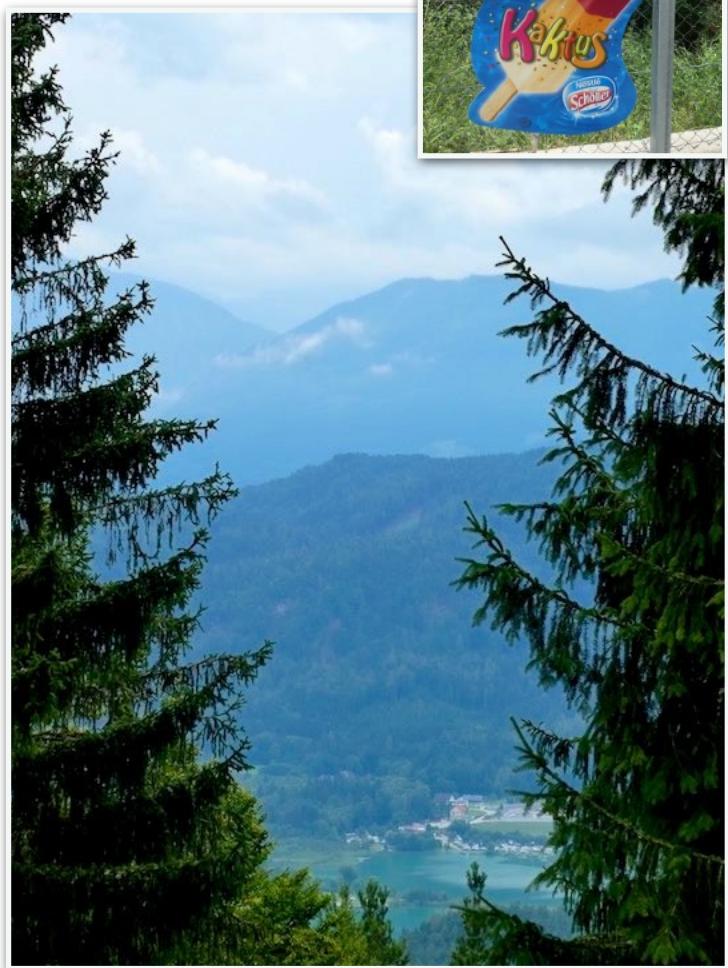
To the south, beyond beautiful farm lands, forests and small lakes, are the tall peaks of the Karawanken, marking Austria's alpine borders with Slovenia and Italy. Those rugged mountains are where the Austrians finally broke through the lines in the First World War and routed the Italian Army, as Hemingway described in *A Farewell to Arms*. As I gaze across this currently-placid landscape the literature and the turbulent history of Europe are always close by.



Our viewing time at the top comes to an end, if we're going to catch the ferry on its return to the dock below. So now it's time to take the 'fast shuttle' (gulp!) to the bottom. The sign says that nobody shorter than 1.3 meters (4' 3") is allowed, so there goes that excuse! A kindly attendant, who speaks multiple languages, packs us each into the chute on a kind of rug while he tells us not to sit up or wave our arms around and stuff like that. Then he gives us a shove. The spiraling slide is 120 meters long and we reach a speed of 25mph. It feels like about 60mph inside that tube, and 20 seconds later we've shot out the bottom and have to clear the way to dodge the next person down. It was exhilarating.



Down at ground level we admire the alpine views again and ponder enjoying a Kaktus pop to remind us of the Sonoran desert. But we still have about an hour or so before the Ferry returns to pick up passengers at Maria Wörth and we decide to hike back downhill on a trail through the woods to the dock.



But once we're deep in the forest we find there are several trails, called the Rundwanderweg, that apparently go all the way around the lake and don't appear to be actually heading toward the dock. We quicken our pace and find a junction with a trail heading back to where we need to be. We hope. We finally break out of the woods near the dock and breathe a sigh of relief – at another adventure that somehow turned out great.



The ferry has other stops along the lake that make us wish we could hang out here for the summer, surrounded by these alpine views, and enjoy a good daily swim in these clear waters. The idea of renting a sailboat for the day is also very appealing. Maybe next time.



Back at the dock in Pörtschach there's time to wander the promenade one last time before we depart. At every bend there's another fine view over the lake to the Alps beyond, and we'll recall this place fondly in years to come. And more kids are out there racing their dinghies on a warm summer's day.



Yet it's somehow become the end of day, and the end of our quiet sojourn by the lake as evening settles across the sky and paints the Alps. We find another good place to settle into some fine victuals featuring, of course, lots of wonderful potatoes and vegetables. Those are some of our favorite sides and we're certainly in the right part of the world for it.

In the morning we'll board the next train for a scenic passage south through the Alps and into northern Italy. Our next stop will be the historic port of Trieste, so please join us for that one! — PRW

