

HOME AND ABROAD

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The chief preoccupation of Americans traveling and living abroad these days is watching the daily fluctuation of the dollar's value in comparison to the local currency. The era of the confident, free-spending American tourist throwing around wads of unfamiliar "play money" is gone. A more common sight today is the perplexed frown on the traveler's face on realizing, after laboriously counting out a handful of strange bills and coins, that he has just paid \$18.00 for a \$2.50 lunch of soup, salad, and a half-pint of house wine. Window shopping the markets and stores and reading the fixed price menus pasted outside even the smallest neighborhood restaurants soon convince one that in spite of our home-grown, runaway inflation, the cost of living in the United States is still at a bargain level.

We returned, Jane and I, on October 11 from a five-week journey, mainly in France but also with excursions into Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. Five weeks is a long time to be away from a familiar bed and too long to live out of a suitcase. It was good to be home again. We were relieved to find that chicken can be bought for \$.40 a pound instead of \$1.50, ground meat for \$.99 instead of \$4.00, and regular gasoline for less than \$1.00 a gallon instead of \$2.75.

Apart from the repeated insults to our pocket books and the amusement of foreign friends over our concern about the sad plight of the dollar, it was a pleasant and enjoyable trip. Our foreign travel during the past twelve years has been confined to Europe, and it is always interesting each time to find that other nations have most of the same problems as we, and to discover that they are generally much less critical of the United States, our political blunderings, and our politicians than are we. The French even find Le President Cartoire acceptable. To the West Europeans, America is still a land of promise and opportunity, and our strength their only security against the Russian nightmare to the east. They continue to admire and imitate our lifestyle—even outdoing us at times—and give us high marks on our success in assimilating a polyglot of racial strains and a confusion of national origins.

We covered a lot of ground this time, over 3500 miles, in the smallest, cheapest rental car available, aptly named by VW, the Polo. It performed flawlessly, got 45 miles to the gallon, and was comfortable enough for two people and luggage. We visited lots of old friends in some out-of-the-way towns and villages of France, Belgium, and Switzerland. We were impressed again by Paris, Geneva, and Lugarno, and for the first time, discovered Tours, and also the Belgian countryside and the lovely cities of Bruges, Tournai, and Brussels. We toured the magnificent palace and grounds at Chantilly, north

of Paris, and even visited the battlefield at Waterloo just south of Brussels. We went on long mountain hikes out of Abondance, a small village in the French Alps of Haute Savoie, and picked mushrooms—the orange-colored *Lactaire delicieux*. We spent a restful Sunday afternoon walking through the woods and cornfields of the Sologne in middle France east of Blois, spotting pheasants, rabbits, wild duck, the tracks of wild boar, and picking more mushrooms—this time the golden yellow *Girolles* that hide under the fallen autumn leaves. We became more acquainted with the charming coastal villages of Douarnenez, Benodet, and Locranon in mist-shrouded Brittany. We walked the sunny southern shore of Lake Geneva at Evian and Thonon.

On one sparkling, clear day, we traveled over the Alps on the narrow gauge Glacier Express, following the Rhine upstream past Andermatt until it became a tiny mountain freshet tumbling down the rocks from its glacier source, and then on the other side of the same glacier, followed a similar freshet, the Rhone, flowing in the opposite direction downstream to Brig and the vineyards of the Valais. Even though our time in Switzerland was brief, we managed to crowd in visits to Solothurn, St. Gallen, Appenzell, Chur, Gruyeres, and the picture-book village of Champéry. We came away, convinced again for the fourth or fifth time now, that the Swiss countryside and the Swiss people come as close to the ideal of civilized existence as can be hoped for in Western society.

So even though the old cliché, "as sound as a dollar", no longer has any meaning in Europe, and even though our pocketbooks will be a long time recovering, we still can recommend travel abroad. At the very least, you'll return with a new appreciation of home and the agreeable cost of living in the United States.

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