



Staying on a farm can be fun in any season

THE CAR is all packed: passports, driver's license and -- most important of all -- rubber boots and lots of old jeans and sweatshirts for the kids. We're on our way from Munich down into Austria to see if farm life is all it's cracked up to be. Ever since coming to Germany, I had admired those idyllic farmhouses situated on the side of a mountain surrounded by meadows of wildflowers and with blankets of geraniums hanging from the balcony flower boxes.

The directions from a friend of a friend read "after the town of Wagrain look for kilometer marker 16, then turn right. Drive up the mountain about three miles and on the right is Sepp's farm, Obergersbach."

It's autobahn most of the way to Wagrain then straight on through on the road to St. Johann. Now all we have to find is marker 16. "There it is!" Now, the next road to the right. The only right turn I see within the next five miles is a tiny road leading straight up and which I take to be someone's driveway. "But that must have been it," we think as we make a U-turn at the first feasible place. Now, to find that "road" again coming from the other direction. "There it is!" It would have been easier to make the turn the first time. Now we have to negotiate the left turn and a convex angle. Ten hair-pin curves later I see a faded wooden sign "Obergersbach." We've arrived.

Sepp and Anna come out to greet us with a shot of home-made schnapps, something like gin but made from apples and pears. Legal moon-shine. Our boys, Stefan aged 6 and Toby aged 4 have already disappeared into the barn where Sepp's grandchildren, Franzi, Peter and Elisabeth are introducing them to the chickens, rabbits and pigs.

The cows are on a meadow further up the mountain and the sheep and goats are grazing further down the mountain. One sheep has refused to accept her baby lamb and the children feed her milk from the bottle. There's always quite a discussion about whose turn it is for that "chore."

Milking Time!

At 5 p.m. Franz, Sepp's son, pulls up in a tractor with a flat-bed trailer. His wife Resi loads the milk cans on the trailer and all the children pile in, too. It looks like fun, so I climb aboard.

Three S-curves further up the mountain we spot the cows. The children help herd the cows into a small "milking shack." Whoever is so inclined can try his hand at milking. Franz and Resi make it look so easy, but Stefan's efforts yield only a few drops. No matter: Franz smiles and patiently lets every child have a turn. The cows, we are told, know very well if they're being milked by a pro or an amateur. They just stand patiently and don't seem to care less what anyone is doing to them.

This is one of the few remaining farms where hand-milking has held its own against the automated milking machines. It is no commercial dairy farm. All the milk stays on the farm for the family and the guests. Whatever is not used is fed to the pigs.

Making Farm Chores Fun

On Sepp's farm, the guest is the reason for being. He has a small income from raising chicks to the age of two months and then selling them, but his main source of revenue is the income from the guests. And that means that the guests are not just a necessary evil, but an integral part of the farm.

Of course the chores need to get done, but to watch Sepp and his family, one thinks life on the farm is more play than work. Sepp can make the most menial chores into a game -- a veritable Mary Poppins.

On our second afternoon when the

HOLIDAYING ON AN ALPINE FARM

By Ginger Henry-Künzel

skies suddenly look very threatening. Sepp rounds up all the guests and puts them to work hurriedly transporting hay from the meadows into the barn.

The children, using small wagons, don't get too much hay into the barn, but they have a wonderful time and are made to feel useful. The adults form a kind of bucket brigade and manage to get most of the hay in before the skies open up and drench everyone. Now I know the true meaning of the expression "make hay while the sun shines." We are all duly rewarded with schnapps and, for the children, fresh blueberry cobbler.

Kids Will Be Kids

After milking, it's time to set the tables and get ready for dinner. The children take turns turning the crank on the centrifuge where the cream is separated from the milk. Toby has found a spoon and is eating the foam as fast as he can. I look around hoping nobody has noticed, but Sepp is standing nearby grinning from ear to ear. Toby is obviously not the first child to have that idea. I have a sneaking suspicion that Sepp has secretly given Toby the spoon. Sepp's biggest difficulty with the guests, as I see it, is trying to convince the parents that kids will be kids -- and that is encouraged on this farm.

Dinner is filling -- noodle soup, pork roast (courtesy of the ancestors of those



Sepp and Anna

pigs we saw earlier in the barn), cabbage, and more blueberry cobbler for dessert. These are wild blueberries from the mountains. Anna says she knows a secret place which she will show me the next day.



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Games and Practical Jokes

Sepp leads an excursion through the fields to the trout pond after dinner. Every child gets a handful of fish food to throw in. Then Sepp has some games to play with the children before they go to bed. These are games involving music (courtesy of Franz on the guitar and brother Michael on the accordion), practical jokes, and sometimes a bit of skill. Nobody loses. The children are now exhausted and fall willingly into bed.

In these quarters it's impossible not to get know the other guests. Everyone is like one big family. Though I had planned to go to bed early, the evening events are much to fun too pass up. For the adults, Sepp has more practical jokes lined up. Being the most recent arrivals, we are the butt of the jokes. Without divulging trade secrets, I can say that eggs, ropes and water play a major role and provide everyone --including us -- with lots of laughs.

The next morning Stefan has already accustomed himself to farm life and is up at the crack of dawn collecting eggs in the barn. Then he finds himself a

stick and helps Peter and Franzi herd the calves from the barn out into the pasture. By the time we come down for breakfast he is cranking the centrifuge again from the morning milking.

Breakfast is cold cuts, cheese, home-made blueberry jam, fresh butter and brick-oven bread. The oven is in the courtyard out behind the kitchen door. Breakfast is so plentiful that we have enough left over to make sandwiches for lunch.

The Blueberry Patch

Anna, as promised, is going blueberry picking today. Another guest, Hans, and I are going along. We drive up to the top of the mountain, park the car and walk into the woods about one mile. There, on the side of the mountain with full southern exposure, are acres of blueberry bushes. Anna has two large buckets, I have one, and Hans a huge basket strapped on his back.

We work with metal combs which strip the berries from the bushes. Anna is much faster than Hans and I. She empties her bucket into Hans' basket and starts again. I'm having trouble



Elisabeth makes it all look so easy

keeping my footing on this incline, not to mention keeping the bucket from tipping over every time I set it down. Several hours later, all three buckets and the basket are full, thanks mainly to Anna, and we trek back to the car with our heavy load. Next comes the task of separating all the twigs and leaves from the berries, first with an antique threshing machine and then by hand. Cleaning forty kilograms of berries is a lot of work, but the reward is a lot of good eating.

Baking Bread for a Crowd

After supper, Anna plans to make bread dough. The largest bowl imaginable

wouldn't be big enough -- Anna uses a wooden trough! Twenty kilograms of flour, a generous helping of yeast, salt and water are mixed together (no Cuisinart on this job). The dough then rises overnight. The oven is a stone building with a chimney and a small door half-way up one side. In the morning, Sepp builds a wood fire in the oven and lets it burn down to coals. The coals and ashes are then shoveled out and the bread loaves (25 large round ones) are put into the oven. They bake from the heat which the stones are now radiating.

The next day, the butcher comes to slaughter a pig. Being kind-hearted and weak of stomach, I decide to take the children for a mountain hike. My husband later filled me in on what an interesting exhibition I had missed and how much he had learned. The smoking and curing is also done on the premises.

The *Senner*

There are numerous possibilities for excursions from the farm including hiking, skiing in winter, a trip to the swimming hole or a visit to a *Senner*. This is someone hired by a farmer to stay with the cows all summer high up in the mountains where the grazing is especially good. In former times, the *Senner* was usually a young girl who was theoretically alone with the cows all season. Folklore and folk songs, however, relate tales of how shepherds and hunters would occasionally keep the "poor young thing" company on those long summer nights!

Because these high alpine meadows can be reached only on foot, the milk must remain there and is made into cheese and butter. A *Senner's* cabin is always a welcome sight to hikers. On a bench in the yard, one can sip a refreshing glass of cold milk or buttermilk and snack on home-made bread, butter and cheese while breathing in the fresh mountain air and enjoying the scenic panorama. Mother Nature at her best!

There are numerous farms throughout Bavaria and Austria which offer farm vacations, some even with a house-keeping apartment to rent by the week. The cost of a room is about DM 20 - 30 per person per day (less for children) depending on whether you have just breakfast or full board. The apartments generally cost about DM 100 per day.

Holiday Information

The Austrian Tourist Office, Neuhauserstr. 1, tel. 260 70 35, can provide you with farm vacation catalogs for each Austrian region.

For farm vacations in Bavaria, pick up a copy of the Bayerischer Bauernverband's catalog, available at Sparkassen and Raiffeisen banks.

Ginger Henry-Künzel, editor of Munich Found, says that her family loves farm life. "On the farm, my kids do chores all day and beg for more! At home, they want union wages just to empty the wash can!"

Photographs by the author.

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