



BADEN-BADEN ON A BUDGET, BARELY

By Manny Gonzalez

EXACTLY HOW I WOUND UP IN BADEN-BADEN, I don't care to tell you, except that a lot of people go to Baden-Baden for their health.

So there I was, on a kind of operating table, staring at the ceiling while undergoing a certain medical procedure, fully conscious. Around me were two doctors and three medical students (this being the charity ward). Though I couldn't really see what was going on, one doctor was looking pale, and every few minutes the other doctor made sounds like these:

"Nicht optimal... (Not ideal...)"

"Aaach!"

"Mein Gott im Himmel (Oh my God in Heaven!)"

"Ooops."

These are not really encouraging sounds

when the subject is a part of your anatomy.

It went on like that for what seemed like quite a long time, until finally I heard "Hallelujah!" and the procedure was over, and I was pronounced Fixed. Or maybe the word was Finished.

And now, a little history

Situated just on the edge of the Black Forest (Der Schwarzwald), for the better part of the 19th century Baden-Baden was THE spa town of Europe. No other place was even close. As a result, it has a downtown that looks like a movie set, with large open spaces, lots of Baroque architecture and big trees.



The grounds of the Casino, which used to attract Europe's elite (top). The author in a beer garden enjoying Schweinebraten and a dunkel Löwenbräu (above).

Baden-Baden has precious little history attached to it. Cuckoo clocks are made in the Black Forest, if that helps you any. But don't expect much black forest. It was all cut down ages ago, and only partially replaced with pines and firs transplanted from North America.

And the truth is that aside from an occasional hold-up of a pilgrim, ravishing of a virgin or disemboweling of a heretic, nothing much ever

happened there. Still, many famous people used to come for the summer, such as Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, the Queen of Prussia and Brahms. They were attracted by the hot springs, the horse-racing, the Casino and the thrill of being near other rich people.

It is easy to get to Baden-Baden if you are in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes coming from Frankfurt. "Let's go to Baden-Baden, Karl!" you say, and an hour and a half later, you're there. However, if your Merc is in the shop or Karl ran off with your wife, you may need to go by train; but first, you have to figure out which Baden to go to.

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The Russians are coming

I have always maintained that you can tell a lot about a city by the dominant retail activity there. As any casual stroll around Baden-Baden will reveal, the most common type of retail establishment is the *apothke* (drugstore). The second most common is real estate brokers. Ergo, I conclude that, though now facing stiff competition for spa money, Baden-Baden continues to attract rich people, apparently rich people with health problems looking to buy real estate. Either that or the townspeople are getting old, and looking to sell out. Take your pick.

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The apothke, or drugstore, is the most common type of retail outlet in town (left). Many real estate signs are in Cyrillic (below).



Württemberg, which is a state in Germany named after "Baden," before "Baden" changed its name. There are also any number of Bad-Somethings. Finally there's Baden-Baden (the former "Baden"), which is shorthand for "Baden town, the one located in the state which named itself after us, as distinguished from other, lesser, Badens." Are you with me so far?

Renaming a bigger area after a more famous smaller area is common in Europe. "France" the country is named after "Ile-de-France," the region around Paris. "Great Britain" (the islands occupied by England, Scotland and Wales) is named after "Bretagne," a smallish region in northwest France (the Normans did that to make the Saxons feel bad, since "Great Norman" just didn't ring right). "Puligny-Montrachet" is a village, formerly "Puligny," whose burghers sought to capitalize on the famous white Burgundy vineyard located in its boundaries. It (the village) now produces diverse wines called Montrachet (the original famous vineyard), Batard-Montrachet, Bienvenue-Batard-Montrachet and Chevalier-Montrachet (all next door to the original famous vineyard) and, of course, Puligny-Montrachet (which is all around the original famous vineyard). It can all get a bit confusing.

But to get back to my escapade in Germany



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In fact, way back in the 19th century, Russians evidently used to come by the buckets. The writer Dostoyevsky lost his fortune here, and was inspired to write a novel about the experience. Tolstoy used it as a setting for Anna Karenina. (If, like me, you balked at reading Russian authors in high school, I think Anna Karenina is about sex. But don't quote me on that.)

There is only one museum of note in town, and it is dedicated to Carl Fabergé (the guy who made the jeweled Easter eggs for the tsars). How

such a museum wound up in the Black Forest is a long story, but evidently a rich – make that very rich – Russian collected lots of antique gold and jewelry, then got worried that his collection wasn't safe from other oligarchs in Moscow. So he went to his favorite spa town, bought a building, and founded a museum.

How not to pronounce Löwenbräu

Like a lot of German villages, Baden-Baden has a beer garden. In fact, it has several. These are real gardens, not beer-halls. I chose this one. If you are like most Anglo speakers, you pronounce Löwenbräu like this: low-en-brow. I assure you this is wrong. If you are smart, and for the sake of preserving the waiter's sanity, you will cease and desist from trying to pronounce the brand name Löwenbräu, and go straight to "ein Dunkel, bitte (doong-kel, a Dark [beer], please)."

Then follow with Baden-Baden's specialty, which is, as in most of Germany, *haxe* (hak-seh) – crisp-roasted pork hoof. Or you can settle for *Schweinebraten* (roast pork, usually shoulder). These are good choices for persons on a budget. With the beer, you may get out for only 20 euro or so per head. There are of course grocery stores, too: 4 euros is enough to eat hearty, if you like cheese and pretzels.

When money is no object (as, it seems, is the case for many visitors to Baden-Baden), go look at some of the ritzier restaurants on the banks of the Oos (the river, or more correctly sophomore creek, that runs through town). Based on the menus I read, it seems you could get quite a nice authentic Japanese Kobe steak with wine, dessert and dessert wine for 200 euros per head, or something Frenchy for only 150.

Hotel shortage

Considering the potential clientele, there are really not so many good hotels here. I stayed at pretty much the best one in town (it being off season), and though decent it was nothing to write home about (and thus, as you notice, I am not writing about it). There was another deluxe hotel closer to the Oos, but it had some so-so reviews. The available range went down from there.

How could this be, I asked myself. The situation reminded me of Nice, which is an attractive bit of real estate on the Cote d'Azur that also has no really exceptional hotels.

The answer is actually pretty simple: the people who support Baden-Baden's economy are not charity-ward transients like me, but chauffeured-Mercedes types who can afford to buy their own houses. Which they will stay in just one month a year.

Possibly, you are not in this income bracket. Still, if you are interested in the Black Forest, or have a few days off from business meetings in Frankfurt, or can wangle a discount price on a medical procedure at the county hospital (and are not afraid to hear "Ooops!" every few minutes), Baden-Baden could be worth a visit.

The author is founder and CEO of Plantation Bay Resort & Spa in Cebu.

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The grounds of the Casino, which used to attract Europe's elite.



The most common type of retail outlet in town.



The Russians are coming. Or maybe going. In case the picture doesn't immediately make visual sense to you, it is of an American-style 3-car garage. The interior might be cardboard and plastic, but the part facing the street has to give the right impression.



The author in a beer-garden, enjoying Schweinebraten and a Dunkel Lowenbrau. Observe genuine Black Forest tree trunk.