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Reference Letter - Astrid Baur Tours

I have participated in two Astrid Baur tours,

- King Ludwig's Castles and the Bavarian Lakes, in September 2005, and
- The German Rivers and their Castles, in July 2007,

and am pleased to provide this letter of reference.

Astrid Baur is a small, independent tour operator, based in Bavaria, who offers specialized small-group English-language tours which are listed on the Castles of the World website.

Both tours exceeded my expectations.

The two tours differed somewhat in their emphasis, but they shared the same essential characteristics. These were exceptionally well-designed and flawlessly executed adventures that constantly interested, surprised, and delighted me. Both tour groups numbered about two dozen people. Astrid passed on her encyclopedic knowledge of the history and background of the featured sites and areas in a professional but relaxed manner best described as genuine "sharing".

The sensitivity with which these tours were handled only becomes really apparent when one experiences how most other tour directors bulldoze their large groups along at a breakneck pace, oblivious to the interests and wishes of those in their care. The overall pacing and delicate balance between organized activities and free time seemed to be perfect (a bit too much free time for a few, not enough for a few shoppers).

The key to all this is Astrid herself. She is knowledgeable, well-organized, sensitive to people's interests and wishes, and fun. She obviously cares and wants to please.

King Ludwig's Castles and the Bavarian Lakes

This tour provided an in-depth exploration of the origins, settings, exteriors, and interiors of King Ludwig II's castles and palaces. This is Astrid's home territory, and she is the local Ludwig tour expert. But this tour also highlighted the cultural texture, unique historic sites, and striking physical features of the Bavarian lakes area – ranging from the Church on the Meadow UNESCO World Heritage Site to the floral extravaganzas of Minau island to the breathtaking views from the top of Zugspitze mountain.

Participants in this tour stay in the same place all week, at the Landhaus Kössel in Hopfen am See, just outside Füssen. Operating the tour from this single lodging site is a brilliant design feature that saves time and energy by eliminating packing, unpacking, and moving hassles – and increases relaxation and group interaction. The Landhaus was clean and comfortable and well managed and the food was excellent, but it was its unique location and character that made it the perfect base for this tour. It was conveniently located close to many tour sites, but away from urban areas in a country setting with an unmistakable Bavarian flavor.

The German Rivers Rhine, Moselle, Neckar and main and their Castles

Many of those on the Rivers and Castles tour were travelers who, like me, had already experienced Astrid's other tour, which is offered more frequently.

The Rivers and Castles tour is centered around Frankfurt rather than in Bavaria. It differs from the southern tour in two other main ways. The first is that it deals with much older castles and their histories, not the relative glitz of Neuschwanstein, Linderhof, and Herrenchiemsee. Ludwig's three masterpieces were all built in the second half of the 19th century. Burg Rheinfels, where the Rivers tour begins, dates from 1245. Some of the visited sites are Roman ruins. Each of the featured castles is striking and totally unique in its own way.

The other difference is that although the Bavarian tour was all conducted from a single, relatively contemporary home base at Füssen, this tour stayed in a variety of unique accommodations, some ancient, some glitzy. These ranged from a restored portion of the Burg Rheinfels castle ruin to a palatial former hunting lodge to a 4-star art nouveau hotel on the Rhine where we arrived by boat.

Other Notes

The tour itineraries were as posted in detail on the Castles of the World website.

The Bavarian tour, the more popular of the two, features grandeur and scenic beauty whereas the rivers tour is more oriented towards earlier history.

One month prior to each tour I received a large package of useful information, including legal and security tips for travelers, maps, and detailed brochures on sites to be visited.

The limited group size is an enormous advantage, especially where Astrid has arranged for local experts to conduct special tours. A guide can talk to two dozen people, but 54 is an unruly crowd.

Seven days of explorations is an ideal tour length – long enough to explore in depth, but not so long that people in small groups get on each others' nerves.

If you would like to verify my comments or ask for further information, please feel free to contact me at the mailing address above or at brucemckay@sympatico.ca or at (416) 962-8647 in Toronto.

Sincerely,



Note: About two months after this reference was written in September 2007, Bruce McKay began providing website services to Astrid Baur Travel, and continues to do so, though this was not anticipated when the reference letter was submitted..