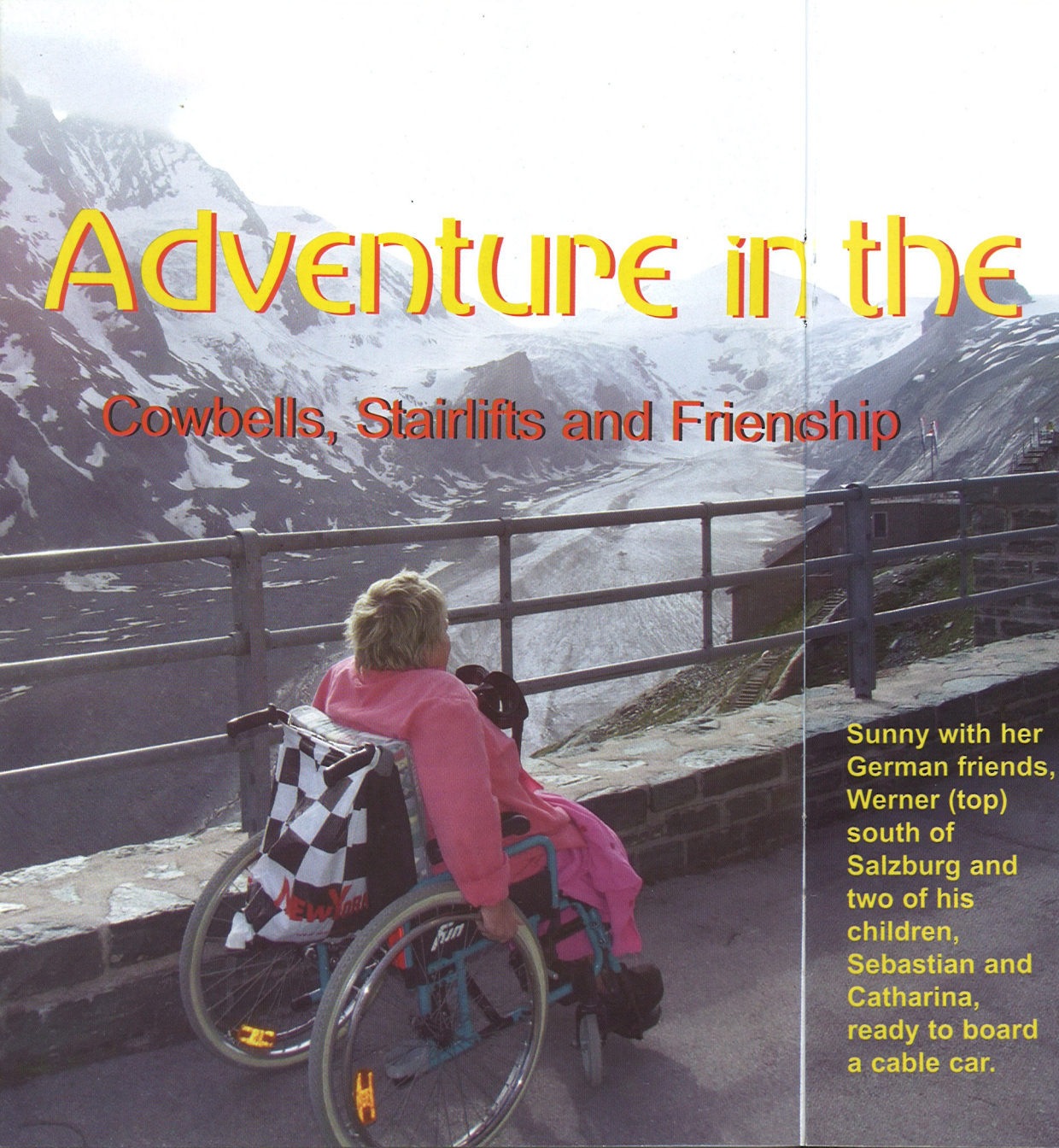


Adventure in the Alps

Cowbells, Stairlifts and Friendship



Sunny with her German friends, Werner (top) south of Salzburg and two of his children, Sebastian and Catharina, ready to board a cable car.



*When minds and spirits
open up, so do
doorways and staircases.*



Bodensee

Two years ago I re-established a friendship with Werner, a German physician I met 15 years ago on a medical research trip to Germany. We are two longtime, but geographically distant friends who are experiencing life from two different, but often-complementary perspectives. He lives in Bavaria, is a widower (his wife died of cancer three years ago) with three children, and a busy rehabilitation neurologist. I am a never-married German-American woman with a disability who is retired from a research job at the University of Michigan. I too, lost my nearby nuclear family at about the same time as his wife died. So, almost as the Brothers Grimm might have penned in a nineteenth century German fairy tale, we found each other again. And has it been great fun!

Due to a 55-year adaptation process with polio's early and late effects, I alternately use a scooter and manual wheelchair most of the time, especially when I travel. I do love to travel and Werner, like many Germans, also favors traveling to distant lands and cultures, so we have been going places together. In just under two years we have been to the Hawaiian Islands, Florida's amusement parks and sub-tropical coastline, Michigan's Lake Superior shores twice, and of course, to picturesque places throughout the Bavarian Alps — places lead-

ing us deeper through the forests, to sparkling lakes and the glacial mountain peaks of Austria. So far, I have been to Germany three times to visit him and he has come to America four times to visit me. Finding wheelchair access in both countries has been a challenging requirement, but well worth our determined detective efforts.

Our first real challenge emerged when Werner initially invited me to his home for a several-week stay. His four-story German house in Bavaria has stairs everywhere. Werner confronted these architectural barriers and created a plan to modify his doorways and staircases for wheelchair access.

He had short ramps built for three doors into his house and a portable step made to help me get into his car. German carpenters seem to be meticulous, clever and timely. Their work went a long way to making Werner's house accessible.

In addition, European mechanical equipment and appliances are readily refurbished and re-cycled. This means that sanitized, good quality medical devices can be purchased for low cost, often by internet, and re-used for years. In this way, Werner was able to purchase two bathtub lifts, a shower chair and two wheelchairs at a fraction of their original prices. One of the wheelchairs was a battery-propelled stair-climber that he could navigate,



Summer skiing at Dachstein (above.)



The Viktoria Hotel.



The stair climbing chair is a little scary. Sunny prefers the chairlift Werner had installed.



with me in it, up his long flights of granite steps. These wheelchairs are available but not widely used in America. Ascending and descending the steps worked but only with his enduring, cautious effort and with no sense of control or independence for me. In fact, it made me pretty nervous. So we decided to use it only for a

trip to a stairs-only European tourist attraction. Werner had a rebuilt, updated electric stairlift installed permanently in his house to take me between floors one and two.

When it comes to wheelchair access, Europe is not easy, but now, Werner can host me for welcomed visits. Actually, he could host

Octoberfest tourists who not only have mobility impairments, but also a weakness for excellent beer.

A better recommendation for lodging is the wheelchair-accessible hotel in Oberstdorf, Germany. Located in the mountains, about an hour from Lake Constance, the Viktoria Hotel was one of three resorts we discovered as we

traveled high into the Alps last summer. Each one was advertised as handicap accessible, but the Viktoria was the most accommodating.

Our room was large with a balcony view where I loved both hearing the

clink-clink of cowbells below and gazing into the expansive emerald mountain valley.

On a more practical note, the spacious bathroom offered excellent adaptations, including swing-down toilet handrails, a roll-in shower and an easy-to-reach sink. The elevators worked well and the bar and restaurant were situated conveniently off the lobby. We noticed that about 60% of the Viktoria visitors had some sort of disability. Most used wheelchairs and many were vacationing with non-disabled friends. Several had service dogs.

Our stay at the Viktoria granted us an opportunity to ride on a wheelchair-accessible cable car into a chilly, foggy mountain panorama (cowbells clinking below); then into the summit's cozy restaurant for a warm Austrian dessert and a cappuccino. On the way down, we noticed there were paved, accessible hiking trails winding throughout the forest and stream areas of the valley.

One day we drove to Lake Constance, which borders Germany, Switzerland and Austria, for an afternoon along the water's paved promenade. This picturesque German destination bustled with strolling visitors, colorful flowers and sidewalk cafes, vendors selling their works of art and views of cruise ships sailing between two imposing lion statues erected to

protect the harbor's portal. My American travel scooter was perfect to use for our hours of "walking and rolling."

Germany, like many "old world" European countries, is not easily made scooter accessible. Although there is no law like the Americans with Disabilities Act, some citizens and business owners try to accommodate disabled people. In Oberstdorf, when a shop owner saw that I was admiring a sweater in front of her store she quickly put down a homemade wooden ramp for us to roll in. Be assured, we bought that red sweater.

We stayed in two Austrian hotels, the Sommerhof and the Goldreid, that were advertised as wheelchair accessible. They were both enchanting, set among the mountain peaks, but also difficult to manage. They had steep ramps up to the front doors or tiny elevators. Their bathrooms afforded no opportunity for someone using a wheelchair to take a bath or shower. In one, I was able to shower in the swimming pool locker room. At the other one, there was no chance at all.

Despite the inadequate adaptations, our Alpine adventures were fun and generate a score of joyful memories. I saw peaceful cows and sheep grazing on wildflower hillsides beneath a snow-capped mountainous backdrop. In Gosau, we were able to get into cable cars through service elevators,



Sunny shopping at Lake Constance.

Sunny with Werner and his children, Constantin, Sebastian and Catharina, at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida.



to ride among the Dachstein glacial peaks. In Murrei, we shared tasty Austrian cuisine in accessible restaurants, drove 12,000 feet up into marmot country at Grossglockner, Austria's highest summit, and awakened one Sunday morning to the glorious sound of several cathedrals' bells.

When minds and spirits open up, so do doorways and staircases which can either figuratively or literally lead to new heights in lovely places. Europe isn't easy. Well, life isn't easy, but friendship makes all things better. *