

WALKING IN THE BLACK FOREST

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Going to the Scottish hills is often about enduring the rigours of a hostile environment. Raw, biting winds, thick fog, soggy peat, swarms of ravenous midges and miles to go to the nearest pub. An experience to match Scotland's often bleak and unforgiving history. An experience for all that which few of us would want to turn our back on for too long. But if you ever hanker for something different – a more relaxed, more sybaritic hill experience – turn your thoughts to southern Germany's Black Forest. Green, rounded hills, conifers the height of skyscrapers and a complex network of way-marked paths to lead you over berg and tal (or ben and glen if you prefer). But best of all are the hostelries with which the countryside is so generously sprinkled. Not just in the villages and small towns which occupy steep-sided valleys, but even more thoughtfully (and Germany has of course, produced many great thinkers) on or near the tops of the hills.

To tramp through the summer heat and be greeted by a wayside gasthaus dispensing beers produced under the strictest brewing laws in Europe, is to face an irresistible temptation. And when the same establishment also offers the legendary Schwartzwald Kirschtorte – that most seductive of cakes – then you realise that it is possible to combine exercise and indulgence, virtue and vice in a uniquely satisfying synthesis. Compare that to a misty day in November on Carn Bhac.

There are, however, serpents in this Eden. You can coax your under-powered car up steep hairpins while the rear-view mirror fills up with restless Audis and Mercedes. Climb to the summit of the Feldberg, the highest top at 1493m and you will find a US military installation, radar dishes monitoring the non-existent threat from the east. You will also find a monument to Bismark, the 'iron chancellor', who united the 19th century German states under the militaristic rule of Prussia. Some enterprising soul has scaled the monument to colour the chancellor's nose red – certainly a comment on his liking for strong drink rather than his political leanings. You can ponder the irony that way-marking does not necessarily ease navigation, when the signposts at a crossroads carry the symbols of half-a-dozen different long-distance routes. The map is still not a luxury in the heartland of way-marking. As far as we could establish, Saturday afternoon and Sunday closing of shops is rigorously observed.

There, in a nutshell, is the Black Forest (if you can have a forest in a nutshell). A paradise for the self-indulgent walker. If you hit just the right balance between exercise and indulgence, you could just about come away much the same weight as you went. But maybe getting the balance wrong wouldn't matter too much. After all, there's still Carn Bhac to come home to!