Thrill-seeking in Europe

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Arguably the best hot-air balloon experience in the world is reason enough to get up at 4 a.m., spend $200 for a morning float above the rock formations. As I stood in the basket land into the sky, I gazed in wonder, mesmerized at the erosion-shaped countryside.

But there was one experience listed in our book that I had yet to do personally: traverse a mile-long cable, setting off with a local guide on the "iron way" from Murren to Gimmelwald (www.klettersteig-muerren.ch), the only path that zigzags up the side of a mountainside, using just steel rebar spikes jutting up from the rock.

"We" is mostly what remains. As the cable car ascended, the guide said, "OK, now it gets easier?" And he said, "No. Now comes 'die Hammer Ecke'."

After one particularly harrowing crossing -- gingerly taking one rebar step after another -- I was thankful I was white-knuckled and my heart in my mouth. Even after the "trail" of the "Felsenspur" ended, there was a 15-minute climb up and down a 45-degree incline, setting off with a local luger to find out how hard it is to "slide like a beaver" on a summer luge track.

A handy summer track, the Tegelberg Luge, is near Neuschwanstein, "Mad" King Ludwig's castle in Bavaria (www.siampredict.com). With an eight-second perpendicular drop, the luge zips passengers from 60 to 90 miles per hour over the mountain for a perilous, but rewarding experience. The fun begins with the rush of blood to the brain as you slide down a 45-degree incline, followed by a guided tour of Neuschwanstein's magnificent halls.

Operating the sled is simple: Push the stick forward to go faster, pull back to apply the brakes. For the inexperienced, it takes a bit of practice to stay upright. If you want to be more grounded, go to the Alps to take a wild ride on a summer luge track, possibly the best of its kind. By the end of the season, you'll be a giddy-crazy fan of the sport. On a summer luge track, you're flat out, 90 degrees downhill, going a blistering 45 miles per hour, with a 20-foot drop and once-upon-a-time, it's all over. It's exhilarating. It's scary. And it's a way to see the Dolomites.

In Austria, try the Biberwier Slide (www.biberwier-webcams.at), which has a 670-foot drop, zero time in the air, and a top speed of 90 miles per hour. Once you're at the bottom, you're up for the next ride.

"We" is more. If you want to travel less, stay home more. But there is a thrill to it all.
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