

Autobahn



Adventure

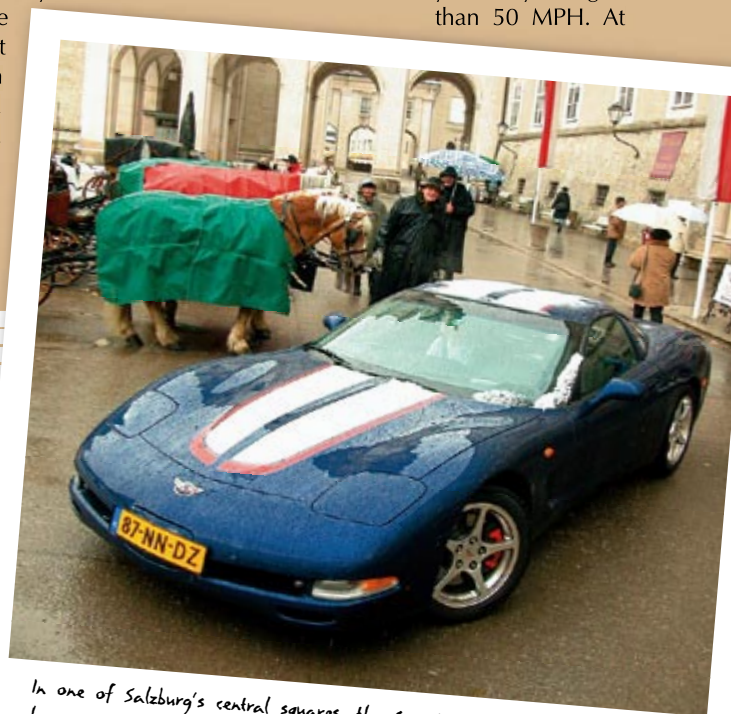
DRIVING THE ULTIMATE C5 IN GERMANY

BY RICHARD TRUESDELL / PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR, NORMA HOWELLS AND INGMAR TIMMER

It's probably a fantasy that's crossed the mind of more than one Corvette owner since 1953: cruising on Germany's famed Autobahn in their Corvette, encountering the sign with a circle, bisected by diagonal lines indicating that the next section is unrestricted, giving you the signal to put the pedal to the metal. (Due to congestion, most of the Autobahns, like their US Interstate counterparts, are now controlled by speed limits, with aggressive enforcement by the Polizei [check spelling!] or speed cameras.) Your speed climbs and you get settled in, comfortable, somewhere around 250 KPH – or around 155 MPH.

Just north of Baden Baden on the A6 is just such a stretch of Autobahn, a ribbon of flawless concrete, smoother than the freshest Interstate you've ever driven in the US. You flash by cars to your right, in some cases, overtaking them by more than 50 MPH. At this speed you see some taillights in front of you...a BMW M5, just minding his own business, cruising along at speeds almost twice those legal in the US. You settle in about 10 car lengths behind, not flashing your lights to have him pull aside, comfortable feeling out your Corvette at speed.

Suddenly his right directional blinks. German lane discipline being what it is, he pulls aside to let you pass, and since it's 10:30 PM, he knows not what you're driving. In my case,



In one of Salzburg's central squares, the Corvette attracts the attention of horsepower of the four-legged variety.



▲ The new Aying brewery in Aying, Germany, replacing the building next door to the Hotel Aying that now serves as a museum.



▲ Typical Orthodox-style spire on a Roman Catholic church in Aying, Germany, in Southern Bavaria.

on a trip to Germany this spring, I'm living this very fantasy in a Commemorative Edition, Euro-spec Corvette – a Corvette with something extra. I can't resist the opening. As the lane opens in front of me, I downshift from sixth to fifth, and my Corvette immediately rockets from 155 to 175 miles per hour, verified by the head-up display projected in front of me. I'm too scared, and totally focused on holding on, to risk glancing down at my instrument cluster.

Above 175, the rate of acceleration slows but still the Corvette pulls, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180 flashes on the display. I'm sweating, but totally into the experience, literally holding on for dear life, driving faster on a public road than I've ever imagined possible. Finally, with Karlsruhe just ahead, and with it a posted 130 KPH speed limit, I take one final glance at the head-up display; it reads 182 MPH! I've done what I set out to do, to drive America's premier sports car, as fast as it and I am capable, more than 180 MPH on a public road. Oh, and I'm now drenched in sweat, having expended more adrenalin than I knew I had in me.

I know what you're saying. Even the more powerful domestic version of the



Alexander Moosbauer and Katharina Fischer, in traditional Bavarian costumes, pose with the Corvette in front of the Brauerei Gasthof - Hotel Aying.

Z06 has a listed top speed from Chevrolet of "only" 172 MPH. How can you think we'll believe you drove it at 182? According to Joe Jacuzzi, GM's domestic Chevrolet and Corvette PR rep, Euro-spec Corvettes include some Z06-specific parts such as the Z06 brakes, suspension components and the wheels, along with the carbon-fiber hood. And we suspect that maybe a less restrictive exhaust is part of the package as well.

In any event, this attainable top speed, nearly 300 KPH, partially justifies its almost 90,000-euro price tag on the continent. At today's rate of exchange, that comes out to over \$100,000. In a land where a Ferrari 360 Modena or limited-edition Porsche 911



Inside the baroque parish church in Ruhpolding.

On the hill overlooking the hamlet of Ruhpolding is this Roman Catholic church, the site of the Ruhpolding Madonna. ▼



will be in the same general price range, it's essential that a Corvette offer comparable performance. There is a small group of enthusiasts on the other side of the pond who want a Corvette even more than one of its hallowed competitors. In Europe, the distribution of Chevrolet and Cadillac is handled by Kroymanns Corporation in Amsterdam. Kroymanns operates a chain of high-end dealerships in Europe and is probably better equipped (than whom? GM?) to grow GM North America's business on the continent.

When queried by Corvette Enthusiast about the indicated speeds on our Autobahn dashes, Communications Manager for GM Performance Cars David Caldwell had this to say: "The speed you saw doesn't surprise us. We give an estimate of when the car's electronics will begin cutting off fuel supply to the engine – that's what our top speed statistic is based on. Under certain real-world conditions, certainly that number can be exceeded a little bit...as you did! Joe Jacuzzi gave you excellent guidance on the fact that the 2004 Commemorative Edition version for Europe is somewhat akin to a Z06 (from an appearance and chassis standpoint). It's the first time we've ever done a specific special model for Europe."

Philosophically, the Corvette's chief engineer, Dave Hill, weighed in with his own comments. "The C5 has been recognized around the world for its quality, performance

and value. We're very proud of that. Corvette is completely American. I think it's a bit of an example of the best America has to offer. And, we've seen the C5 earn increasing respect around the world. As we enter the sixth-generation era, of course we want to continue this momentum. The 2005 Corvette is better in every respect than the car it replaces... and we're building it to be absolutely world class, able to be enjoyed and appreciated around the world."

On the issue of top speed performance, Hill added these observations: "We not only want Corvettes to be quick and powerful, we want them to be easily controlled and confidence inspiring...even at high rates of speed. It's especially important for a car as powerful as the C5 – even more so for the 400-hp 2005 model – that we ensure the car is stable, comfortable and easy to operate during performance driving. The C5 is very capable in this regard. The 2005 C6 version takes this to the next level with a top speed rating of 186 MPH (300 KPH). Of course, this kind of top-end performance is rarely achieved in the real world – at least I hope that's the case! The extensive aerodynamic development, a new, more compact exterior and greatly revised chassis enable the C6 to be more capable and solid at all speeds."

After Kroymanns' Dick Braakheke handed me the keys, I was off on the first part of my trip. This would take me past Düsseldorf, Köln and Frankfurt on my way to Karlsruhe and Geneva, Switzerland, for the international auto show which would also be the 2005 Corvette convertible's world premiere.



In Jettingen, about 30 miles south of the Stuttgart Airport just off of the A81 (a favorite unrestricted-speed Autobahn for Mercedes test drivers working out of Sindelfingen), you'll find Renz US Cars (www.renzuscars.de, info@renzuscars.de 001-49-07452-75822). A full-service repair facility specializing in US cars, it's operated by a Corvette enthusiast of the first order, Walter Renz. With almost 20 years of experience in GM vehicles, specializing in Corvettes, Renz US Cars, located literally in the backyard of Mercedes and Porsche, makes owning an older, Autobahn-capable Corvette in Germany a practical reality.

VISITING GERMANY AND RENTING A CORVETTE

For travel from the US, Germany offers two strategically located gateways for the car enthusiast. For most visits to Germany, you'll arrive in Frankfurt (FRA), served by many US carriers (American, US Air, United) as well as German flag carrier Lufthansa. Even more convenient is Stuttgart (STR), which at one time served as Delta's mini-hub with its own separate terminal. Now from Atlanta, Delta serves Stuttgart with a non-stop from Atlanta as well as code share service connecting through Paris on Air France. For a comprehensive listing of all available flights, try Orbitz (www.orbitz.com), but to book the lowest fares, try the members-only subscription site, Best Fares (www.bestfares.com).

Crazy as it may seem, it's possible to rent a Corvette while visiting Germany. While mainstream rental car companies don't stock any C5s in their fleets (they do have some BMW, Mercedes, Porsche and VW models not available in the US and are worth the experience), like in the US, there are specialized companies that offer exotic sports cars for hire.



▲ Inside the parish church is the famed Ruhpolding Madonna, an example of Bavarian craftsmanship dating back to 1230.



▲ On the Hintersee, we stopped in at the Seehotel Gamsbock for a mid-afternoon snack.



▲ With the majestic Obersalzberg in the background, where Hitler's Eagle's nest once stood, the Corvette cuts a path on the roads outside of Berchtesgaden.



Outside a cafe in Berchtesgaden, our Corvette attracts the attention of a group of German Corvette enthusiasts.

Then it would be back to Karlsruhe to pick up my girlfriend for a trip through Germany's Alps and a visit to Mozart's hometown of Salzburg, Austria.

KARLSRUHE TO MUNICH

With business in Munich, we took the most direct route from Karlsruhe, the A8, which avoids the central areas of Stuttgart, Ulm and Augsburg. While there were several unrestricted sections, Friday-afternoon traffic precluded any explorations of our Corvette's top end. This allowed us to listen to the CDs loaded in the rear-mounted changer and enjoy the car's Bose sound system. Because we wanted to do some sightseeing in Munich, we stayed at the conveniently located Hotel Leopold.

For automobile enthusiasts, Munich is a tale of two museums. For those wanting a slice of Germany's technology and science heritage, a visit to the Deutsches Museum should be the first stop. Think of it as the German equivalent of our Smithsonian Institution. While the automotive collection is extensive, if you're an aviation buff, you'll think that you've died and gone to heaven. One of the most noteworthy exhibits is that of a Messerschmitt ME-262, the world's first operational jet fighter and one of just seven originals left in existence.

As Munich is home to BMW, any visit here must include a visit to the BMW Museum, adjacent to BMW's world headquarters, which is shaped like a 4-cylinder engine and is literally across the street from the Olympic Stadium that hosted the 1972 Olympics. While the emphasis is

obviously on the BMW marque (you won't find any BMWs in Bowling Green, will you?), the width and breadth of the collection is impressive.

On previous visits to Bavaria I've stayed at the Brauerei Gasthof - Hotel Aying in Aying south of Munich, and this year I was in for a surprise. While on the outside, the hotel looks traditional, like so many others you'll find in Germany, the rooms have recently undergone a costly and extensive renovation, combining old and very modern elements. The hotel has been serving guests since the 14th century and, as the name implies, is connected to the family brewery that for many years was next door to the hotel. A few years ago it was relocated to a state-of-the-art facility on the outskirts of town and, for beer lovers, it's not to be missed. When staying at the hotel, don't be surprised if your hosts leave a bottle of beer on your pillow at night instead of the more customary chocolate.

GERMAN ALPINE ROAD

The Deutsche Alpenstrasse (German Alpine Road) was built in the 1930s, and was one of the early attempts by the Nazi Party to put people back to work after Hitler assumed full power in 1933 during the Great Depression. If one had to compare it to a road in the US, the Blue Ridge parkway would probably be its soul mate, each an example of the road builder's art. Running 200 miles between Lindau on Lake Constance to Berchtesgaden in the German Alps, it is the scenic alternative to driving the last section of the A8 between Munich and



From any angle, in any country, on any continent, the C5 is a true classic. It's parked about a block from Mozart's favorite cafe.

Salzburg.

We exited the A8 and headed south to Ruhpolding. We made our way to our first section of the Deutsche Alpenstrasse, RT 305. While Duke Wilhelm established a hunting lodge here in 1597, its primary claim to fame is the Ruhpolding Madonna housed in a parish church overlooking the town. The Madonna dates back to about 1230 and serves as an excellent example of traditional Bavarian

craftsmanship.

Continuing east on RT 305, officially part of the Deutsche Alpenstrasse, we were able to exercise the Corvette's capabilities on tight turns and sweeping, high-speed bends, all framed by spectacular Alpine vistas on both sides. Our next stop was a slight detour to the Hintersee, home of the northernmost glacier in the Alps. From the deck of the Seehotel Gamsbock, we enjoyed a mid-afternoon snack (some custard concoction that certainly isn't on the Atkins diet) while looking out across the lake at what could only be described as a picture postcard.

Back on RT 305, our next stop was Königssee on the northern end of the lake. Nestled into a deep valley, carved by glaciers eons ago, Königssee is also home to the church of St. Bartholoma at the foot of Mt. Watzmann, the second-highest peak in Germany. Since we were on a tight schedule, we had little time to soak in the scenery. We promised ourselves we'd return.

If any place in the Berchtesgaden National Park is known to Americans, it's the town of Berchtesgaden itself. Its familiarity is due in part to the infamy associated with its best-known inhabitant, Adolf Hitler, who made his summer home here, the Eagle's Nest on the Obersalzberg high above the town. If you watched the movie "Band of Brothers," you'll recall the scene where US troops entered the town at the end of the war.

Although destroyed by Allied bombers and the postwar West German government, who feared that it might be a rallying point for neo Nazis, it is now the home of the Dokumentation

Obersalzberg. It was closed at the time of our wintertime visit but can be reached by bus or hiking in the summer months.

We decided to stop for the night at the Hotel Krone, a little more than a block from the train station (bahnhof), a small hotel with two suites, 12 doubles and six singles. Run by the Grafe family, it is exactly what you would expect plus so much more, including an exceptionally well-equipped fitness center. While there are far fancier hotels in the area, you would be hard pressed to find a friendlier atmosphere, so typical of this part of Bavaria.

The following morning we headed for directly to Salzburg, the home of favorite son Mozart. Like many old European cities, the roads in the central district are narrow and somewhat inhospitable to the girth of the Corvette. We got out in the central district to snap some photos when an old Austrian woman started screaming at us, "Englander, Englander, move! You're not in England."

We drove the car out of the square when a bearded gentleman about 30 years old came up to the car. "Don't mind her, drive your car over here," he said in Eastern European-accented English. Turns out he was an artist from Croatia who had a booth, like many others, in the main square of Salzburg. Norma couldn't resist. She bought one of his paintings for a paltry 10 euros, knowing that she got a bargain.

BACK TO KARLSRUHE

By the time we were done sightseeing in Salzburg it was time to drive back to Karlsruhe. Unfortunately, Sunday afternoon traffic seemed as bad as rush hour on the 405 in LA near LAX. At this point I glanced down at the information display and for the trip, which included lots of high-speed Autobahn travel, it was reading 22.1 MPG! So much for all the comments about the inefficiency of low-tech pushrods.

Oh, one more thing. There's still the issue of documenting the Corvette's top speed, in case you still don't believe my previous claim of 182 MPH. Driving back from Salzburg, we detoured south on the A5 in an attempt to duplicate my previous top speed run; this time, with Norma onboard, we would get a photograph of the speedometer and tach to document the velocity. My girlfriend is a great sport; after all, she's crazy enough to drive with me. The first attempt at a top-speed run resulted



▲ The square, populated by artists, this one from Bosnia, encourages us to park our car next to his stand. He thinks it's good for business.



▲ Salzburg's central city contains many arches dating back centuries, just wide enough for the Corvette to navigate through.



▲ Recently renovated, all the rooms at the Hotel Aying are spacious and charming, with touches of a Bavaria from an earlier era.



▲ Gourmet dining in a casual and relaxed setting is the order of the evening at the Restaurant Ladentisch at the Hotel Aying.



Site of the 1972 Munich Games, the Olympic Stadium still stands, across the street from BMW headquarters.

in an indicated speed of 175 MPH – pretty good, especially with all of our luggage, but I knew that there was another 180-MPH run left, especially since I wouldn't be handicapped aerodynamically as I was in the night run from Geneva, having to drive with the headlights up.

Two additional passes resulted in our velocity being hindered by traffic and slow pokes in the fast lane, very unusual for Germany. Finally we decided on one final attempt, heading north from Baden Baden back to Karlsruhe. The road looked clear, and following the previous technique, I downshifted into fifth. Again, the now-familiar snap to 175 MPH, already more than the quoted top speed of the US-spec Z06. Everything looked good as 176, 177, 178 and 179 came up on the display. Norma had the camera ready and got the shot just as the speedo nudged 180 – just as I could make out a car coming into our lane about a half-kilometer ahead. Hitting the brakes, I brought the Corvette down instantly to 130 (it's good

to know the Corvette's brakes are as good as its engine), quickly coming up on the rear of some lowly VW Golf packed with what appeared to be teenagers and a driver who had yet to learn good lane discipline. While he cost us a second run over 180, we were satisfied, and without hesitation decided to call it a day.

I still had a five-hour drive to Brussels that night, and after that, about a 90-minute drive to Amsterdam to Kroymann's' showroom to return the car and get a lift to the airport for my return to the US. For as long as I live, I'll never forget my week in Europe with the Z06, truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and surely any Corvette owner's fantasy dream drive and proof positive that the outgoing C5 was, and will always be, a world-class sports car.

TRAVEL TIPS

In Germany, the prices on the menu are typically inclusive of both sales





▲ 170 MPH 5000; RPM 22-2 MPG; fifth gear.

tax and a service charge so, unlike in the US, tipping is not customary. If you received what you consider exemplary service, feel free to leave a few Euros on the table, but 15 percent of the bill isn't necessary or expected. You won't always get ice in your Coke, but you're better off sampling one of the local brews that the region is justifiably famous for, and that typically cost about the same as a soft drink.

Researching German-language Web sites is a snap with the translation engine on the altavista.com web portal. If you use Google as your search engine, which you can set in your preferences to select only Web pages in English, you can also cut and paste any URLs that look promising in the altavista.com translator at: babelfish.altavista.com/babelfish/tr. Then select German to English in the drop-down menu. The text will be a bit funny, but should give you the basic meaning.

No special license is necessary to drive in Germany but, unlike in the US, lane discipline is generally excellent. Trucks are restricted to the right-hand lane except to make an immediate pass and German drivers stay to the right, except when passing, and normally move back to the right once the pass is completed. For details on driving in Germany it's a good idea to visit www.eurodriverregs.co.uk/. For a history of the Autobahn, visit home.att.net/~texhwyman/autobahn.htm.

Half the fun of traveling in Germany is finding small, family-run hotels and guest houses to crash at after driving several hundred miles during the day. Many offer clean, comfortable and charming rooms for less than 60 euros per night (around \$72) and include a filling breakfast in the morning. Great sources are two guidebooks, *Europe's Wonderful Little Hotels and Inns* (A. and C. Raphael) and *Karen Brown's Germany Charming Inns and Itineraries* (K. Brown). ■