

The **AA** *Motoring Trust*

EUROTEST 2004

MOTORWAY SERVICE AREA TESTS

**Results of the 2004 Pan-European
motorway service area testing programme**

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EuroTest 2004 is a consortium of motoring organisations in Europe:
The AA Motoring Trust (UK), ACI (Italy), ACP (Portugal), ADAC
(Germany), AL (Finland), AMZS (Slovenia), ANWB (Netherlands)
FFAC (France), HAK (Croatia), NAF (Norway), ÖAMTC (Austria)
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MOTORWAY SERVICE AREA TESTS 2004

1-Foreword

Do British motorway service areas give quality and value for money for the 250 million visits made to them annually? The 2004 EuroTest survey of sixty-two service areas across Europe included eight in the UK. Two experienced inspectors visited each service area on two separate occasions. What they found at the time of their visits is highlighted in this report.

The UK results are very mixed – our MSAs come out well for road safety, car parking, family friendliness, choice of goods in the shop, and friendliness of staff, but all too often customers get a bad deal in toilet hygiene, and poor quality food may be served in unpleasant surroundings, and at very high prices.

Overall, the AA Trust's survey shows that many UK service areas offer poor quality for high prices.

But why is this? To some extent it is because the regulatory framework under which MSAs must operate was framed in the 1950s, at a time of limited consumer choice and low traffic levels. Today, consumer expectations are much more sophisticated, and traffic levels and demands on service areas are much greater. And this will increase as traffic on our motorways increases.

MSA operators have to provide free parking for cars and trucks, high cost access roads, and free toilets, as well as 24 hour service. But around 75% of people who stop at an MSA do so just to rest or go to the toilet, and they spend nothing at the shop, the restaurant, or the filling station. They are subsidised by the rest who must pay high prices at the till and the pump.

But that said, there can be no excuses for dirty, smelly and unhygienic toilets, or for restaurant floors covered with food scraps, or tables cluttered with leftover meals. That is solely down to bad management, poor supervision, insufficient training and lack of motivation.

UK motorway users deserve much better. The AA Trust has worked with MSA operators to try to improve standards and bring down prices. We believe the regulatory framework must be changed so that much greater variety of goods can be sold at the shop, and consumers can be given much greater choice.

The Government must carry out a review of MSA provision in the UK. More services are needed to deal with chronic overcrowding and a more liberal regulatory regime that allows MSAs to sell a greater range of goods must be implemented urgently. The provision of free facilities must be looked at to stop cross subsidies through high prices.

The AA Motoring Trust will work with MSA operators and the Government to bring UK MSAs up to the standards of the best in Europe, and to bring down prices to high street levels. Britain's motorway users deserve nothing less.

MOTORWAY SERVICE AREA TESTS 2004

2-Summary of key points

- The tests are designed to examine the quality and value for money of a selection of European motorway service areas (MSAs)
- Sixty two MSAs were inspected in ten European countries.
- None of the MSAs tested was rated "very good" and only 10 rated "good"; 38 were rated "acceptable" and 13 "poor"; Sandbach on the M6 was the only MSA rated "very poor"
- The project was funded by the EuroTest consortium of motoring organisations of which the AA Motoring Trust is a leading member
- The tests were managed by ADAC (the German AA), undertaken by experts from Swiss Gastro Consulting, hotel specialists with a detailed knowledge of the hotel and catering trade. Laboratory tests were undertaken by Synlab, Augsburg in Germany
- Most of the tests were carried out during the Easter holidays in April
- Of the 8 UK MSAs, only 2 were rated "acceptable", 5 were rated "poor", and one, Sandbach, was rated "very poor", the only MSA given this rating
- The highest rated MSAs were both in Germany - Vogtland South service area on the A72 and Berg on the A9

3-UK results

Overall rating

Service area	Overall Rating
M4 Cardiff West - Moto - off J33	Acceptable
M40 Oxford - Welcome Break - J8A	Acceptable
M74 Abington - Welcome Break - J13	Poor
M25 (E) Clacket Lane - RoadChef - J5-6	Poor
M5 (N) Frankley - Moto - J3-4	Poor
M6 (S) Tebay - Westmorland - J38-39	Poor
M1 (S) Woolley Edge - Moto - J38-39	Poor
M6 (S) Sandbach - RoadChef - J16-17	Very Poor

Rating in each category inspected

Categories	Cardiff West	Oxford	Abington	Clacket Lane (E)	Frankley (N)	Tebay (S)	Woolley Edge (S)	Sandbach (S)
Road safety & parking	acceptable	acceptable	acceptable	good	good	acceptable	acceptable	good
Outdoor facilities	acceptable	good	acceptable	acceptable	very poor	very poor	acceptable	very poor
Access/indoor facilities	very poor	acceptable	good	good	acceptable	acceptable	acceptable	poor
Catering	poor	good	poor	acceptable	poor	acceptable	poor	very poor
Shop/kiosk	very good	very good	very good	very good	very good	very good	very good	very good
Service	very good	very good	good	acceptable	very good	acceptable	very good	acceptable
Communication	very poor	very poor	poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor
Hygiene	very good	acceptable	poor	very poor	acceptable	poor	good	very poor
Prices	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor	very poor
Total	acceptable	acceptable	poor	poor	poor	poor	poor	very poor

4-UK versus the rest of Europe

Rating	Number of <u>European</u> MSAs given this rating	Number of <u>UK</u> MSAs given this rating
Very good	0	0
Good	10	0
Acceptable	38	2
Poor	13	5
Very poor	1	1
Total	62	8

5-Results in order of rating by country

Austria		
Map*	MSA	Overall rating
1	Suben West	Good
2	Ansfelden North	Acceptable
3	Gralla East	Acceptable
4	Arnwiesen	Acceptable
5	Kasern	Acceptable
6	Matrei East	Poor
Belgium		
7	Groot Bijgaarden South	Acceptable
8	Bierges North	Acceptable
Switzerland		
9	Bellinzona North	Good
10	Pratteln North	Acceptable
11	Kemptthal South	Acceptable
12	Rose de la Broye	Acceptable
Germany – general		
13	Vogtland South	Good
14	Köckern West	Good
15	Herford North	Good
16	Bedburger Land East	Good
17	Neckarburg East	Acceptable
18	Mahlberg East	Acceptable
19	Großenmoor East	Acceptable
20	Grunewald West	Acceptable
21	Stillhorn West	Poor
Germany - trucks		
22	Berg	Good
23	Wörnitz	Good
24	Waldlaubersheim	Good
25	Mellendorf	Acceptable
26	Gollhofen	Acceptable
27	Ellwangen	Acceptable
Spain		
28	Les Garrigues South	Good
29	El Mèdol	Acceptable
30	La Safor 1	Acceptable
31	El Montseny	Acceptable
32	Belinchón	Acceptable
33	La Ribera	Acceptable
34	La Marina 1	Acceptable
35	Motilla del Palancar	Poor

France		
36	Beaune-Tailly	Acceptable
37	Venoy Soleil Levant	Acceptable
38	Montpellier-Fabrègues	Acceptable
39	Village Catalan	Acceptable
40	Sorgues	Acceptable
41	Sommesous	Acceptable
42	Solaize	Acceptable
43	Longeville South	Poor
United Kingdom		
44	Oxford	Acceptable
45	Cardiff West	Acceptable
46	Woolley Edge	Poor
47	Frankley	Poor
48	Tebay	Poor
49	Clacket Lane	Poor
50	Abington	Poor
51	Sandbach	Very poor
Italy		
52	Secchia West	Acceptable
53	Campogalliano West	Acceptable
54	Po East	Acceptable
55	Adige Brennero West	Acceptable
56	Medesano West	Poor
57	Cremona South	Poor
58	Giovi West	Poor
59	Plose East	Poor
Netherlands		
60	Den Ruygen Hoek	Acceptable
61	Nederweert North	Acceptable
Slovenia		
62	Tepanje	Acceptable

6-Strengths and weaknesses of M4 Cardiff West, Wales

Overall Rating:	acceptable
Family-friendliness:	very good
Location:	Moto service area on the M4 Newport - Swansea between Cardiff West and Fagans
Test dates:	4 and 5 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Facility very well maintained and clean
- 😊 Picnic tables safely cordoned off from traffic
- 😊 Lockers for motorcycle clothing
- 😊 Indoor play area
- 😊 Self-service restaurant well looked after and clean with no-smoking zone
- 😊 Toilets, toilet for those with disabilities, mother-and-baby room and shower clean and well looked after
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room equipped with disinfectant spray
- 😊 Very good results in the hygiene tests
- 😊 Wide range of goods in the shop
- 😊 Staff very friendly and helpful

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Not enough rubbish bins in exterior area
- 😞 Tables very close together in restaurant
- 😞 Hot meals unappetisingly prepared, long wait
- 😞 Small range of meals
- 😞 Test dish (chicken) not tasty
- 😞 Shower door unlockable
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 Phone for those with disabilities unsatisfactory because keypad too high
- 😞 No information terminal

7-Strengths and weaknesses of M40 Oxford, England

Overall Rating:	acceptable
Family-friendliness:	good
Location:	Welcome Break service area on the M 40 London – Birmingham, Waterstock exit
Test dates:	3 and 5 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 New service area, architecturally attractive, well maintained and clean
- 😊 Picnic tables safely cordoned off from traffic
- 😊 Children's playground with high entertainment value, safely cordoned off from traffic
- 😊 Test dish (lasagne) tasty
- 😊 Toilets, toilet for those with disabilities and mother-and-baby room clean and well maintained
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room equipped with children's toilets
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop, including clothing and extensive assortment of fresh flowers
- 😊 Information table with maps and brochures

Weaknesses:

- 😞 No indoor play area
- 😞 Carpet in restaurant not clean in first test
- 😞 No-smoking zone not clearly marked
- 😞 Shower only for truck drivers at petrol station
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 No adapted phone for those with disabilities
- 😞 No up-to-date traffic information available

8-Strengths and weaknesses of M74 Abington, Scotland

Overall Rating: poor
Family-friendliness: good
Location: Welcome Break service area on the M74 Glasgow – Carlisle, Abington exit
Test dates: 3 and 4 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Small, compact service area; well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Attractively designed, well maintained picnic area, safely cordoned off from traffic
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop; nappies sold out in second test, but inspector given "emergency nappy" free of charge
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room equipped with children's toilets
- 😊 Information terminal with tourist information service; lots of material and competent staff

Weaknesses:

- 😞 No parking bays designated for those with disabilities
- 😞 Outside children's playground closed for repairs at time of testing
- 😞 No indoor play area
- 😞 Self-service restaurant not clean; floor and tables dirty; table-clearing service ineffective; tables very close together
- 😞 Access to no-smoking zone difficult for those with disabilities
- 😞 Very inconsistent range of hot and cold meals and salads; hot meals unappetisingly prepared
- 😞 Test dishes (lasagne and chicken) lukewarm and not tasty
- 😞 Toilets not clean; risk of injury on sharp-edged bolts on toilet doors
- 😞 No showers
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 No phone for those with disabilities

9-Strengths and weaknesses of M25 Clacket Lane, England

Overall Rating:	poor
Family-friendliness:	good
Location:	RoadChef service area on the M 25 London Orbital Motorway between Caterham and Sevenoaks
Test dates:	3 and 4 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Picnic area and children's playground safely cordoned off from traffic
- 😊 Meals freshly and appetisingly presented
- 😊 Test dishes (vegetarian and Indian chicken) tasty
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room available
- 😊 Wide range of goods and friendly staff in shop
- 😊 Information terminal available

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Insufficient rubbish bins in exterior area
- 😞 No indoor play area
- 😞 Restaurant not clean
- 😞 Table-clearing service ineffective
- 😞 Small selection of cold meals
- 😞 Toilets dirty and not well maintained; floor dirty; doors damaged and covered in graffiti
- 😞 Toilet for those with disabilities and shower not lockable
- 😞 Shower very dirty and covered with mould
- 😞 Poor results in hygiene tests
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 Staff in self-service restaurant unfriendly and unmotivated
- 😞 Phone for those with disabilities not adequate
- 😞 No up-to-date traffic information available

10-Strengths and weaknesses of M5 Frankley, England

Overall Rating:	poor
Family-friendliness:	acceptable
Location:	Moto service area on the M5 Bristol - Birmingham between Birmingham and Bromsgrove-Catshill
Test dates:	4 and 5 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Lockers for motorcycle clothing
- 😊 Indoor play area
- 😊 Self-service restaurant with bottle-warmer, microwave, baby food and no-smoking zone
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room equipped with disinfectant spray and children's toilets
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop
- 😊 Staff friendly and helpful

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Old building with faded paint, some windows taped up, weathered concrete, faded road markings; insufficient rubbish bins in exterior area
- 😞 No picnic tables; no children's playground
- 😞 Restaurant floor, tables and chairs dirty
- 😞 Poor range of hot, cold and vegetarian meals; no salads; hot meals unappetisingly prepared
- 😞 Long wait for meal: over half an hour in second test
- 😞 Toilets and showers not clean
- 😞 Toilet for those with disabilities cannot be locked
- 😞 Poor results in hygiene tests
- 😞 High prices, especially in shop
- 😞 No phone for those with disabilities
- 😞 No information terminal, no up-to-date traffic information available

11-Strengths and weaknesses of M6 Tebay, England

Overall Rating: poor
Family-friendliness: good
Location: Westmorland service area on the M 6 Carlisle - Manchester between Shap and Tebay
Test dates: 3 and 4 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway and easy to find
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Indoor play area
- 😊 Self-service restaurant with open fireplace, children's chairs and no-smoking zone
- 😊 Wide range of hot, cold, and vegetarian meals and beverages, freshly and appetisingly presented
- 😊 Test dishes (Indian rice dish and chicken) tasty
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop, including delicatessen and regional products

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Access road too short and potentially unsafe
- 😞 Faded road markings on parking bays for those with disabilities
- 😞 Picnic tables and benches made of granite, attractive but very uncomfortable; area muddy and not usable after rain
- 😞 Tables very close together in restaurant; not clean in second test: carpet dirty, tables sticky
- 😞 Toilets not well maintained and shabby; floor dirty
- 😞 Shower dirty
- 😞 Price levels high
- 😞 No phone for those with disabilities
- 😞 No information terminal, no up-to-date traffic information available

12-Strengths and weaknesses of M1 Woolley Edge, England

Overall Rating:	Poor
Family-friendliness:	very good
Location:	Moto service area on the M1 Newcastle - London between Wakefield and Kexbrough
Test dates:	3 and 5 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Attractive picnic area
- 😊 Children's playground with high entertainment value
- 😊 Lockers for motorcycle clothing
- 😊 Indoor play area
- 😊 Mother-and-baby room equipped with disinfectant spray, nappy dispenser and children's toilets
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop
- 😊 Staff friendly and helpful

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Exterior area not well maintained: potholes in the asphalt, faded road markings
- 😞 Sitting area in restaurant too cramped, spaces between tables too narrow
- 😞 Restaurant tables, chairs and floor dirty; ineffective table-clearing service
- 😞 Poor range of cold meals; no vegetarian dish; few salads
- 😞 Test dish (chicken) dry in first test
- 😞 Toilets and shower dirty in first test
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 No phone for those with disabilities
- 😞 No information terminal, no up-to-date traffic information available

13-Strengths and weaknesses of M6 Sandbach, England

Overall Rating:	very poor
Family-friendliness:	poor
Location:	RoadChef service area on the M 6 Manchester - Birmingham between Sandbach and Crewe
Test dates:	3 and 4 April 2004

Strengths:

- 😊 Service area well signposted on motorway; safe access and exit roads
- 😊 Sufficient parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and for those with disabilities
- 😊 Wide range of goods in shop
- 😊 Staff friendly and very helpful
- 😊 Up-to-date traffic information available

Weaknesses:

- 😞 Parking bays for those with disabilities not clearly designated
- 😞 Outside area very badly maintained: potholes in asphalt, road markings poor, façades dirty
- 😞 Not enough rubbish bins in exterior area; litter everywhere
- 😞 No picnic tables; no children's playground
- 😞 No indoor play area
- 😞 Restaurant not well maintained and not clean
- 😞 Range of food poor and unappetisingly prepared; no salads
- 😞 Test dish (fish, bacon with potatoes and peas) not tasty
- 😞 Toilets very dirty: paper on floor, flush out of order, doors damaged
- 😞 Mother-and-baby room dirty; mat broken and old
- 😞 Shower very dirty and not well maintained
- 😞 High prices in restaurant and shop
- 😞 No phone for those with disabilities
- 😞 No information terminal

14-Results: analysis and criticism by the inspectors

A quarter of the 62 motorway service areas failed to make the grade; more than half were only "acceptable". This was the result of the 2004 EuroTest of motorway service areas (MSAs). Not one of the 62 sites tested across Europe was rated "very good". The top graded MSA with a rating of "good" was the Vogtland South service area on the A 72 South in Germany.

The lowest graded MSA, with a rating of "very poor", was the Sandbach service area on the M6 between Sandbach and Crewe. The only categories in which this badly maintained and expensive MSA was rated "good" were road safety, parking and the shop; everything else was disappointing. The Spanish service area Motilla del Palancar was not much better, although it did just scrape a "poor" as opposed to a "very poor" rating.

A total of ten service areas were rated "good". The EuroTest inspectors judged 38 sites to be "acceptable"; these included all the sites tested in Belgium, the Netherlands and Slovenia. Most Austrian, French and Spanish sites were also rated "acceptable". Overall, the inspectors rated 13 MSAs as "poor". The UK had the highest proportion of bad results. *"You can stop for petrol and perhaps buy some provisions in the shop, but we wouldn't recommend taking a break,"* say the inspectors.

Evaluation of the individual categories:

Road safety and parking

The ratings in this category were 10 "very good", 20 "good", 24 "acceptable", 6 "poor" and 2 "very poor".

In many cases, inspectors found it could be hazardous for pedestrians walking from the parking area to the restaurant and other facilities. Cars parked bumper-to-bumper can be a serious safety hazard, especially for children who have no choice but to walk behind the vehicles and are not easily seen by drivers reversing. A further weakness was the parking areas; points were deducted at over a third of the sites either because there were not enough designated parking bays for those with disabilities, caravans and/or other towed vehicles, or because there were insufficient parking bays to meet demand.

Outdoor facilities

The ratings in this category were 3 "very good", 6 "good", 13 "acceptable", 5 "poor" and 35 "very poor".

In general, very few additional outdoor leisure facilities were available. Only twelve of the sites tested scored points here. The only one to score full points was the French Beaune-Tailly service area, which boasts a country path to an archaeological museum, a keep-fit trail and a climbing tower for children. Many sites had no tables or benches for picnicking and no children's playground – the facilities were often uninviting for those that did. On the other hand, at least the overall visual impression of the outdoor facilities was "good" to "very good" at two thirds of the sites.

Access and indoor facilities

The ratings in this category were 1 "very good", 14 "good", 28 "acceptable", 8 "poor" and 11 "very poor".

There was no problem with access to restaurants and toilets for visitors with disabilities in most facilities, the general indoor layout and signposting was "good" to "very good" in most MSAs

Catering

The ratings in this category were 11 "very good", 29 "good", 14 "acceptable", 7 "poor" and 1 "very poor".

The UK service areas were bottom of the table in this category. Only Oxford managed a "good" rating; Clacket Lane and Tebay were rated "acceptable"; and Cardiff West, Frankley, Abington and Woolley Edge were all rated "poor". Sandbach, the lowest rated of all MSAs tested, was rated "very poor" in this category; the inspectors were not convinced either by the selection, the freshness or the tastiness of the meals

Overall, in the rest of Europe, developments have been encouraging: about 65 percent of all sites managed a rating of "very good" to "good".

Shop/kiosk

The ratings in this category were 33 "very good", 23 "good", and 6 "acceptable"

Service

The ratings in this category were 39 "very good", 13 "good", 8 "acceptable", and 2 "poor"

The best ratings were achieved by sites with friendly, helpful and competent staff and a quality of service orientated towards customers' needs. By contrast, travellers stopping at Clacket Lane, Secchia West in Italy or Solaize in France would not be happy with the service where some of the staff at the time of the tests were very unfriendly.

Communication

The ratings in this category were 7 "acceptable", 7 "poor" and 48 "very poor"

A telephone is standard these days in virtually all service areas. However, life is much more difficult for disabled people, especially wheelchair users, who want to use a phone unassisted. The keypads and headsets are often too high, or the booth is too cramped.

Village Catalan in France seemed to be the only MSA in Europe with a phone booth for disabled people worthy of the name: the keypad was about 85 centimetres above the ground, and the booth had an area of at least one-and-a-half square metres.

MSAs in Europe were very poor at providing the latest traffic information, tips on somewhere nearby to stay the night, information terminals and Internet access..

Hygiene

The ratings in this category were 3 "very good", 20 "good", 19 "acceptable", 15 "poor" and 5 "very poor".

The highest score was notched up by the Wörnitz truck stop in Germany, which also won the "Truck Stop of the Year" award last year. Cardiff West (UK) came a close second but two other UK sites were right at the bottom of the league: Clacket Lane North came in last but two, and Sandbach last but one. The worst hygienic standards of all were found at the French service area Village Catalan. Overall, four British and four Italian service areas were rated "poor".

In more than half of the MSAs the toilets looked clean and were both well looked-after and functionally equipped. However, in the hygiene tests, only two sites - Cardiff West in the UK and Wörnitz in Germany - were really up to standard with a rating of "very good". Even so, a "good" rating was given to 14 sites, including four Spanish, two German and two Italian MSAs, and three German truck stops. The laboratory results from France and Belgium left much to be desired, however - all the results obtained there were either "poor" or "very poor".

Prices

The ratings in this category were 4 "very good", 9 "good", 33 "acceptable", 6 "poor" and 10 "very poor".

All eight of MSAs tested in the UK were very expensive and therefore rated as "very poor". These big price differences in the UK, Switzerland and Slovenia were partially caused by exchange-rate effects. However, prices at UK MSAs are very high in comparison with local shops and high streets.

15-Methodology: how we tested

The 2004 EuroTest Pan-European Consumer Testing Programme, focused on 62 motorway service areas (MSAs) in ten European countries. One MSA was located in Slovenia, two in Belgium and the Netherlands, four in Switzerland, six in Austria, and eight in Spain, France, the UK and Italy. The tested service areas were advertised as such on the motorway by clear signs. Facilities signposted by the coffee cup symbol only were excluded from this test, since this symbol clearly refers to smaller operations with a reduced service. Most of the tested sites, which were chosen by the partner organisations in the respective European countries, were on main travel routes.

The on-the-spot tests were carried out by experts from Swiss Gastro Consulting, Böblingen, a firm of hotel specialists with a detailed knowledge of the hotel and catering trade. As in previous years, the inspectors worked mostly during the Easter holiday period from 2 to 14 April between 11am and 11pm. This peak travelling period was chosen, because it guaranteed that the MSAs would be busy. The aim was to get as close as possible to conditions during the summer travelling period, because most families with children have to travel during school holidays and need a service area precisely when they are at their fullest.

The criteria used were based on the needs of a family of two adults and two children including one baby. They were travelling in a car or towing a caravan and wanted something quick, good and inexpensive to eat and drink – they also needed a high chair. They would prefer a self-service restaurant, but where there was none they would make do with a restaurant with waiter service. The baby's nappy needed changing. The family wanted special leisure facilities such as a keep-fit trail, they wanted a competent answer to enquiries about a local garage, a reasonably-priced hotel in the vicinity and the nearest camping site. They also wanted to buy a few things for the journey.

Each site was tested twice - with at least a 24-hour interval - by two different inspectors (and documented with photographs); the MSA management was not given any advanced warning. The test was based on a check list that was compiled by ADAC in cooperation with Swiss Gastro Consulting and updated annually. It covered road safety at the service area from the consumer's point of view, the condition of the entire facility inside and outside, catering, service, hygiene and cleanliness, shopping facilities, communications and prices. A standard menu was eaten at each test. The inspectors undertook swab tests from the baby's changing table, the toilet seat and an inside door of both the ladies' and gentlemen's toilets; these were taken by courier to the Synlab medical laboratory in Augsburg for analysis within 72 hours.

The nine categories of the check list were as follows:

- ◆ **Traffic safety and parking:** **weighting 18 %**
 - ◇ Safety of access and exit roads
 - ◇ Signposting and layout of all outdoor facilities
 - ◇ Parking
 - ◇ Pedestrian safety in outdoor facilities
 - ◇ Safety of leisure facilities

- ◆ **Outdoor facilities:** **weighting 9%**
 - ◇ Availability, condition and comfort of picnic tables
 - ◇ Availability, condition and fun factor of children's playgrounds
 - ◇ Additional leisure facilities
 - ◇ State of repair and cleanliness of outdoor facilities and the service area building (outside)
 - ◇ Condition and availability of rubbish bins

- ◆ **Access and indoor facilities:** **weighting 6%**
 - ◇ Unassisted wheelchair-user access to service area's facilities
 - ◇ Layout and signposting to all facilities
 - ◇ Menu displayed
 - ◇ Additional leisure facilities

- ◆ **Catering (self-service; waiter service second choice):** **weighting 25%**
 - ◇ Air quality and noise level
 - ◇ Available seating, furnishing and condition of restaurant (tables, floor, tableware, cutlery)
 - ◇ Availability and condition of play area, equipment provided
 - ◇ Range of meals and beverages
 - ◇ Freshness and quality of available meals, preparation time
 - ◇ Quality and tastiness of standard test dish: small salad, noodle/meat dish, cup of coffee
 - ◇ Table-clearing service or containers

- ◆ **Shop/kiosk:** **weighting 5%**
 - ◇ Availability of all products in standard batch of commodities: nappies, soft drink, mineral water, bar of chocolate, toothbrush with tooth paste, sandwich/hotdog/snack

- ◆ **Service:** **weighting 5%**
 - ◇ Appearance, friendliness and helpfulness of staff
 - ◇ Enquiry to staff about nearest garage, reasonably-priced hotel, nearby camping site

- ◆ **Communications:** **weighting 4%**
 - ◇ Availability of telephones, including suitable ones for those with disabilities
 - ◇ Availability of traffic information (radio traffic bulletins, Internet)
 - ◇ Information on overnight accommodation in region

- ◆ **Hygiene:** **weighting 20%**
 - ◇ Cleanliness, equipment, state of repair, smell of toilets; cleaning schedule documentation
 - ◇ Availability of toilet for those with disabilities
 - ◇ Condition and availability of mother-and-baby room and shower
 - ◇ Hygiene tests (swab samples) of toilet seats and doors in ladies' and gentlemen's toilets and overlay on baby's changing table

- ◆ **Prices (in euros)** **weighting 8%**
 - ◇ Prices of all elements of test menu (see above) in cheapest price bracket plus a mineral water up to 0.3 litres
 - ◇ Price of 0.33 litres of Coca Cola, 1 litre of mineral water, a sandwich or something similar, and a single pack of paper handkerchiefs in shop

The double test principle of two separate inspections by two inspectors prevents the kind of coincidental results that might arise from a single visit, thus showing the performance of a service area as objectively as possible. In both tests, points were given independently for all test criteria. The average was taken from these two test visits to give the overall result of each service area. Depending on the number of points scored, each MSA was then classified according to one of five ratings: on the positive side "very good", "good" or "acceptable"; on the negative side "poor" or "very poor".

16-Family friendliness: how we tested

To make the methodology for the family friendliness easy to understand, we scored it as follows:

	Points
◆ Exterior facility	
◇ Benches/tables comb. available and functionally safe	1
◇ Children's play area Devices and play area are functionally safe (Yes = lowered and covered screws, lawn, sand or caoutchouc plates; No = concrete or asphalt)	1
◆ Catering	
◇ Equipment Play corner available (Play carpet or special floor covering with play tent or similar features in safe location not at the main or kitchen entrance and not in the smoking zone)	1
◇ Convenience value "sitting" Child seat available (ask, if it can't be seen)	1
◆ Hygiene	
◇ Baby changing room Baby changing facility available and functional (own room, equipment, size)	1

Maximum number of points = 5 Points

Rating

5 points	=	very good
4 points	=	good
3 points	=	acceptable
2 points	=	poor
1/0 point	=	very poor

17-Around the countries

Switzerland

Four sites were tested in Switzerland this year: Bellinzona North, Pratteln North, Kempththal South and Rose de la Broye. Only Bellinzona North was rated "good", the rest were considered "acceptable". This puts Switzerland in the middle of the table.

There was particular room for improvement in the area of outdoor pedestrian safety and outdoor facilities.

Only Bellinzona North and Pratteln North offered a self-service restaurant. Here the range of meals available confirmed the good reputation of Swiss catering - and the MSAs were rewarded with top ratings. The inspectors judged the service to be "very good" in all the sites. Another common factor was that they all had one or several shops. A glance at the prices, however, confirmed once again the low purchasing power of the euro in this high-wage country.

In general, the toilets were functionally furnished and looked clean. Their results in the laboratory tests, however, were only about average. In Kempththal South and Pratteln North, babies' changing facilities were only provided in ladies' toilets - a problem for fathers on their own with babies.

Switzerland had numerous well-equipped picnic areas in beautiful countryside along the motorways. Almost all of them offered toilets and telephones, some also fresh water and fitness equipment. These picnic areas were a good alternative for drivers who preferred a picnic in the country to going to a restaurant.

France

Eight service areas were tested - only one was rated "poor", all the others were judged "acceptable". Although the top-rated MSAs in 2001 and 2002 were in France, only two sites achieved a "good" result in 2003. The overall level fell back to average this year.

The differences in ratings were considerable in the areas of road safety and parking. Every rating from "very good" to "very poor" was represented here. Beaune Tailly offered travellers more open-air leisure facilities - hiking path, children's climbing tower and keep-fit trail - than any other motorway service area in Europe.

Performances varied considerably in the area of catering. The service was friendly with the exception of Solaize. Village Catalan, Sommesous and Longeville South failed the hygiene test completely, and the laboratory results were "poor" at all French service areas.

UK

The results were disappointing: two were judged "acceptable" (Oxford and Cardiff West), five "poor", and Sandbach - the lowest-rated overall - "very poor". This put the UK firmly at the bottom of the table in the 2004 Europe-wide test.

The scores for road safety and parking were at least average, but the British service areas fell way behind the European competition when it came to catering. Only Oxford was rated "good"; five of the sites failed the test completely. Four MSAs were "poor" in the hygiene section, but the high price level increased the number of "poor" overall

ratings to six. It should be said that price levels are generally high in the UK, and the exchange rate against the euro also inflates prices for people from Continental Europe. However, UK MSA prices for many goods are higher than those locally and in high streets.

In general, MSAs are situated no more than 30 miles apart on British motorways, and although in some cases the main building may be closed at night, the petrol stations are open seven days a week, 24 hours a day and they have toilets and usually a small shop. Alcohol may not be sold.

Slovenia

Only one service area, Tapanje, was tested in Slovenia. It was rated "acceptable". The outdoor facilities were given a straight "very poor"; they were neither safe nor well looked-after. The toilets and mother-and-baby room were also rated "poor", and the negative visual impression was confirmed by the bad results from the hygiene samples.

In Slovenia, shops offering food and drinks, daily newspapers, car spares and so on are usually to be found in the petrol-station section, not in the service area. Although the toilets at the petrol stations are frequently locked for security reasons, the key for free use is available at the cash desk.

The Slovenian automobile club AMZS recommends that tourists avoid using sterling or euros in cash because of the poor exchange rate (lower than that received in a bureau de change - you might also be charged a commission of up to three percent) and pay bills either in tolar (the Slovenian currency) or with a credit card.

The Netherlands

The two Dutch service areas tested were both rated "acceptable".

There was room for improvement in the design of the outdoor facilities; they were rated "very poor", as were telephone facilities. There were "good" scores, however, for road safety, catering and service.

Petrol stations cater well for customers in the Netherlands. Shops - sometimes even a supermarket - and often a snack bar, toilets, a toilet for those with disabilities, a shower and telephones are available. More and more fast-food restaurants like McDonald's or Burger King are being built near service areas. However, there are few affiliated hotels, as it does not take long to arrive at your destination in such a small country. It should be noted that having left the parking area, it is usually impossible to drive back to the petrol station.

Belgium

The two sites tested only just managed a rating of "acceptable".

The "very poor" rating for the outdoor facilities reflected that lack of imagination in this area. In Bierges North, neither picnic tables nor a children's playground were available. There were also shortcomings in the road-safety and parking category: pedestrian access from the parking bays to the service area was not completely safe, and those with disabilities had no specially designated parking bays. There was also room for

improvement in hygiene. Although the toilets looked clean and well maintained at both sites, the laboratory results were "poor". However, the inspectors found the catering and prices "good".

Austria

Six were tested this year.

Outdoor facilities at all sites failed the test. However, the inspectors were satisfied with the catering at all the sites. Regarding hygiene, the whole spectrum of ratings from "good" to "very poor" was given.

Austria has several operator chains, and occasionally there are also service areas (usually franchise) run by McDonald's, Eurest, Axxe, Mövenpick oder Servus Europa offering restaurants with waiter service, self-service restaurants and/or market restaurants with a buffet. There are also petrol stations with shops and snack bars, most of which are open 24 hours a day. This also applies to some of the restaurants run by the chains. Mostly, however, the opening times are from six o'clock in the morning to eleven or twelve at night.

Spain

This popular holiday country was strongly represented in this year's test with eight sites. One was awarded a "good" rating, one "poor", and the others "acceptable".

There is no consistent picture in the areas of road safety and outdoor facilities, with scores ranging from "very good" to "very poor". In the hygiene category, three "poor" ratings and one "very poor" were given. Although the laboratory results were "good" in five sites and at least "acceptable" in three, the sanitary facilities and above all the baby-changing facilities were not always acceptable. In the catering area one "very good" and four "good" ratings were awarded; the others were "acceptable".

Italy

The best four Italian service areas inspected were rated "acceptable", the rest "poor".

There were encouraging developments in the areas of road safety and parking with a "very good" rating awarded to Adige Brennero and the rest receiving either "good" or "acceptable". Marked improvements have evidently been made. All service areas were given "very poor" in the category of outdoor facilities. There were no outdoor children's playgrounds or leisure facilities. The inspectors also criticised the sanitary facilities and hygiene. Only Secchia West and Po East were rated "good", Campogalliano West and Plose East were "acceptable", and the others were "poor".

The quality of catering was generally good, with only one rated "poor". Very good quality coffee and sandwiches were served at very reasonable prices. The prices of the standard batch of commodities also confirmed this trend. Five of the eight tested sites achieved a "good" rating in this category.

Italian service areas do not build playgrounds where children can play alone, protected from the traffic. The reason given is that, in Italy, children traditionally stay with their parents, and other guests do not feel disturbed by kids running around noisily in the restaurant.

Germany

Fifteen service areas, including six truck stops (Autohof) were tested.

The truck stops achieved encouraging ratings this year. Following low ratings in the first year they were included in the test (2002), there was a noticeable improvement with exclusively "good" to "acceptable" ratings. The biggest shortcomings were the lack of pedestrian safety in the outdoor area, the lack of parking bays for caravans and other towed vehicles, and the lack of leisure facilities.

Top place in the survey was awarded to the service area Vogtland South because of its high level of family friendliness, safely designed outdoor facilities, very good catering, well looked-after sanitary facilities and friendly staff.

The worst site in Germany with a rating of "poor" was Hamburg-Stillhorn West. It lost most points in the categories outdoor facilities, indoor facilities, catering and communication. The inspectors did, however, praise the friendliness of the staff.

The conclusion

The results of this year's test again varied considerably from country to country. These differences did not always stem exclusively from the quality of the service provided. Sometimes it was simply a result of country-specific traditions- as in Italy for instance, where people do not see any need for children's playgrounds or picnic areas. However, the results of one test year should never be interpreted as a representative overall judgement on the respective countries. There is no country in Europe with exclusively "good" or exclusively "poor" service areas.

18-Families: not well provided for everywhere

Outside there is a tempting-looking children's playground with attractive pieces of equipment, inside a tent full of toys. A children's colouring book is also available, and as the waitress brings the crayons she affectionately strokes the youngest boy's hair. Scenes observed in a motorway service area. A paradise for children, you'd like to think.

Here is the other side of the coin: the playground stands right next to the access road from the motorway and has neither a fence around it nor enough lawn to ensure that the children are protected from the traffic. There are no picnic tables where families can eat their own sandwiches. You can hardly see across the room in the indoor play area; it's in the smoking zone. Meanwhile, a mother tries to change her baby's nappy amidst all the jostling in the ladies' toilets.

This break in the journey was not exactly relaxing for anyone in the family. But it should have been; the whole point of taking a break is to reduce stress levels. After all, a relaxed driver is a good driver. This is why this year the inspectors paid particular attention to the family-friendliness of the service areas tested and rated them separately. The result was sobering: 10 service areas were rated "very poor", 16 "poor". This meant that over 40 percent of the 62 sites tested in 10 European countries failed the test. This is hard to believe, because it is families in particular who use service areas on long journeys to their holiday destination.

In Italy, for example, a country normally known for its child-friendliness, half the tested sites were rated "very poor". A high chair in the restaurant and a board in the ladies' toilet for changing the baby's nappy – that was the extent of family-friendliness in several MSAs.

Looking on the positive side, 7 service areas were rated "very good", 16 "good" and 13 "acceptable". One "very good" site was the French service area Beaune Tailly. Families were attracted here by safely partitioned-off recreational facilities with a picnic area, a country path, a children's climbing tower, a keep-fit trail and a playground that offered a lot of variety. When the weather is bad, an indoor play area provides a welcome distraction. There was a high chair in the restaurant, the shop stocked nappies, and babies could be changed in a well-equipped mother-and-baby room. In short, this is the way mothers and fathers would imagine an ideal service area to be. Other very well-equipped service areas included the overall top-rated MSA Vogtland South, as well as Köckern West and Bedburger Land East (all three are service areas in Germany), Montpellier Fabrègues in France and the two British sites Woolley Edge and Cardiff West.

"Good" ratings went to four Spanish and four British service areas, two sites in Switzerland, two in France, Groot Bijgaarden South in Belgium, and two service areas and one truck stop in Germany.

The fact is that there is more to family-friendliness than just installing a sand pit as a children's playground: for example, picnic tables where people can eat their own provisions. Benches without tables are not very comfortable, and if the surfaces of the benches are broken and worn out, they can no longer serve their purpose. The playground equipment must be in good working order and safe - and if they are fun for

the kids, so much the better. The inspectors also expect an indoor play area that is worthy of the name. A family-friendly restaurant is one that provides a sufficient number of high chairs. And the babies' changing table should be in a separate, functionally equipped room. Of course, extensive lawns with a pond or a keep-fit trail outside, would make the site even more attractive.

But the reality can be very different: the outdoor facilities of service areas often have no picnic tables, and children's playgrounds are by no means standard. No-one enjoys changing nappies on a worn-out table in a cramped corridor between the entrances to the toilets. And anyone who has seen the results of the laboratory samples taken from the baby-changing pads will quickly forget the idea anyway: in 2004, two thirds of all agar/swab samples taken from baby-changing tables again indicated insufficient cleaning and/or hygiene. Germs that can represent a health hazard were found on as many as one in six of the changing tables. All in all, not exactly inviting to parents with young babies.

19-Hygiene tests: tracking down the germs

As part of the 2004 Service Area Test, the inspectors examined the sanitary facilities thoroughly. Even when a toilet looks completely clean, it may still harbour many germs. Most non-experts have little idea about the kinds of microscopic organisms that live in these areas. We therefore collected so-called pick-off samples at each service area during both the first and second tests. Agar plates (shallow dishes containing nutrients), are used for this purpose (RODAC – Replicate Organism Detection and Counting); they are used on toilet seats, toilet door handles, and the surfaces of the baby-changing pads in the mother-and-baby rooms to determine microbial population on the respective surface. The nutrients contained in the agar make the bacteria grow, while neutralizing substances also contained in the agar can deactivate any residues of disinfectant.

The samples were packed in cold bags and taken by courier to the medical laboratory of Dr Wimmer and colleagues (member of Synlab, the Association of Freelance Laboratory Physicians) in Augsburg within a maximum of 72 hours. There the plates were incubated at 37°C for 24 hours. The number of germs was then determined. If no growth could be seen on the plate after 24 hours, it was incubated again for another 24 hours at 37°C. The germs were identified by further routine microbiological differentiation steps.

The Assessment Categories (ACs)

AC 1 – Harmless: many different types of germs were detected, ie environmental germs, skin germs and water germs which usually have very little disease potential. In this category they only occurred in small numbers, ie fewer than 30 CFUs per plate (CFU = colony-forming unit, a measure of the bacterial population).

AC 2 – Indicates a lack of cleaning/hygiene: more than 30 CFUs of all kinds of germs were detected per plate.

AC 3 – Indicates a lack of cleaning/hygiene and a potential hazard to health: pathogenic germs (faecal germs and others) totalling less than 100 CFUs were detected per plate.

AC 4 – Health hazard: large quantities of pathogenic germs were detected, ie a total of more than 100 CFUs per plate.

The result

	Total	AC 1		AC 2		AC 3		AC 4	
		Number	as %	Number	as %	Number	as %	Number	as %
GT toilet seat	124	26	21	69	55.6	21	16.9	8	6.5
GT door handle	124	53	42.7	59	47.6	10	8.1	2	1.6
Baby-changing table	124	51	41.1	55	44.4	15	12.1	3	2.4
LT toilet seat	62	21	33.9	28	45.2	11	17.7	2	3.2
LT door handle	62	31	50	21	33.9	8	12.9	2	3.2
Total	496	182	36.7	232	46.8	65	13.1	17	3.4

GT= gentlemen's toilets, LT= ladies' toilets

Summary

- ◆ Only one third of the surfaces analysed (36.7 percent) were harmless from a hygiene point of view (AC 1). Unlike last year, the gentlemen's toilets scored better than the ladies' toilets, particularly the door handles.
- ◆ Almost two thirds of all samples (63.3 percent) indicated a lack of cleaning and/or the presence of potential pathogens.
- ◆ Almost half of all examined surfaces (46.8 percent) were significantly contaminated by germs (AC 2). This means that these facilities are not being cleaned well enough.
- ◆ Either faecal germs and/or pathogens that can cause wound infections were detected in more than 13 percent of all samples (AC 3), albeit only in small quantities.
- ◆ Large numbers of faecal germs or wound-infecting pathogens (AC 4) were detected in 3.4 percent of all surfaces analysed. The worst culprit here, like last year, was the seat in gentlemen's toilets (6.5 percent).
- ◆ Bad news for parents: two thirds of all pick-off samples taken from baby-changing tables indicated insufficient cleaning and/or hygiene. Germs that are hazardous to health were found on 14.5 percent of the changing tables.
- ◆ 9.7 percent of the door handles examined in gentlemen's toilets indicated a contamination with faecal germs or wound-infecting pathogens; in the ladies' toilets the figure was 16.1 percent (compared to 4.7 percent in 2003).
- ◆ No (bacterial) pathogens were found that needed reporting to the authorities according to section 7 of the IfSG (German Infection-Protection Law). No tests were carried out for viruses or parasites.

The regular hygiene checks conducted as part of the MSA inspections have proved to be effective, since there has been an improvement in hygiene from a micro-biological point of view. Nevertheless, there are few laurels to rest on. Together, operators and travellers can and must improve hygiene in the sanitary facilities. This is possible by:

- ◆ having these facilities – including the door handles – efficiently cleaned and disinfected by trained personnel. For example, if the same cloth is used to clean all surfaces, the germs will not be removed, but just spread around. Then it makes little difference how often the surfaces are wiped;
- ◆ installing disinfectant dispensers for people to wash their hands with in the toilets;
- ◆ providing surface disinfectants for customers' individual use;
- ◆ providing dispensable toilet-seat covers;
- ◆ installing paper rolls for covering the surfaces of baby-changing pads;
- ◆ travellers taking dispensable disinfectant cloths with them in their personal luggage.

And one more thing: the age-old, golden rule of hygiene reads "wash your hands"; after all, most pathogens are transmitted by our hands. There is also another age-old phrase that still applies: "Please leave the toilet the way you would like to find it."

20-How to treat families better

- ◆ **Improve the safety of your outdoor facilities:** The outdoor facilities must be safe for users. This means sufficiently long access roads from – and exit roads back to – the motorway; unambiguously and sensibly regulated rights of way that take into account the faster traffic on lanes for vehicles driving past; clear signposting throughout the site; sufficient parking bays designated for caravans, towed vehicles and those with disabilities; safe walkways for pedestrians and safe fencing around playgrounds and all outdoor seating areas.
- ◆ **Take the needs of families into account:** In addition to an attractive and safe playground outside and a sensibly equipped play area inside, a motorway service area should, among other things, also provide outdoor picnic tables and benches, high chairs indoors, an appropriate range of goods in the shop and a fully equipped, hygienically impeccable mother-and-baby room. The restaurant operators should also have families in mind when designing furniture and selecting the kind of meals they serve. Additional leisure facilities such as sun-bathing loungers and keep-fit trails are always popular. Safety (see above) is also an important issue for families.
- ◆ **Don't forget the needs of those with disabilities:** Customers who are restricted in their mobility, especially wheelchair users, must be able to use all the facilities at a service area without problems; appropriately equipped toilets must be available. Service areas cannot claim that they have telephones for those with disabilities unless telephones can be used comfortably by those in wheelchair.
- ◆ **Improve cleanliness and hygiene:** In peak holiday periods in particular, more staff should be hired and toilets and mother-and-baby rooms must be cleaned at shorter intervals to exclude any health risks to the users. Cleaners must follow fundamental rules of hygiene – eg change cleaning cloths frequently.
- ◆ **Lower your prices:** High prices should be reduced. The best guide for a reasonable price level is that of non-MSA cafes/restaurants and retail shops/supermarkets in the region. Although the maintenance and care of sanitary and leisure facilities, rubbish disposal and the special location on the motorway inevitably lead to higher costs, a break in the journey must also be affordable for travellers on a tight budget. This is in need of an urgent review in the UK.
- ◆ **Offer light and healthy cuisine:** Freshly prepared, light and vitamin-rich meals and vegetarian dishes are in greater demand than ever, and heavy meals can cause drowsiness at the wheel.
- ◆ **Extend shopping facilities:** Gaps emerged in the range of goods offered by the shops: sanitary articles, such as babies' nappies, should always be available. The basic range should also include beverages, sandwiches and snacks for the journey.

21-Prices: when taking a break becomes a sheer luxury

Breaks are very important, specially on long journeys: people need sufficient breaks which allow them to relax from the exhausting car journey and to have food and drink. However, at many service areas the prices are anything but low. If a simple lunch of pasta, a small mineral water, a side salad and a cup of coffee costs €18 per person, the holiday budget for a family of four is extremely stretched even before they have arrived at their destination. It is no wonder that many people prefer a picnic.

Of course, one cannot expect prices to be cheap at a MSA, but offering good value for money is possible, which was proved by the four service areas rated "very good" in this category. Among these service areas, three were German and the fourth was the Slovenian service area, Tepanje. The nine service areas that were rated "good" in the price category were cheaper than the European average: one was in Germany, one in Austria, two in Belgium and five in Italy. Thirty three service areas were rated "acceptable" and price levels were average. Among these are the majority of German, Austrian, French, Spanish and Dutch service areas. Six "poor" ratings were given. The rating "very poor", ie very expensive, was given ten times - to all eight UK service areas, as well as to one Swiss and one French.

But why do prices differ so much between countries? In the UK and Switzerland, which do not belong to the eurozone, the reasons are the exchange rate and the high price level in general. According to a study carried out in 2003 by the Swiss financial institute UBS AG comparing the price of a dinner in a good restaurant in 70 cities world-wide, the average price amounted to 42 Swiss francs or €27. In London, the same meal cost twice as much, ie approximately €55, in Bâle 4€ and in Zurich €37. At a price of €14, Ljubljana is considerably cheaper - this was also reflected in the test of the Slovenian service area Tepanje. An additional factor is the weak purchasing power of the Euro in the UK and Switzerland: in April 2004, €1 was worth only €0.77 in the UK and €0.82 in Switzerland. In Slovenia, however, €1 had a purchasing power of €1.13.

But this is not much consolation to consumers travelling in Europe, as for them the prices - regardless of the reason - are simply too high. Sometimes the inspectors came across massive price differences for similar products - sometimes within the same country.

A few examples:

0.3 litres of mineral water in restaurant:	€2.76 in Rose de la Broye (Switzerland) €2.40 in Kasern (Austria) €1.20 in Matrei East (Austria) €0.90 in Giovi West (Italy)
Pasta dish:	€9.55 in Rose de la Broye (Switzerland) €7.60 in Solaize (France) €3.00 in Village Catalan (France)
Meat/poultry dish:	€1.41 in Kempththal South (Sitzerland) €10.20 in Plose East (Italy) €3.50 in Campogalliano West (Italy)
Cup of coffee:	€2.72 in Tebay (Great Britain) €0.73 in Tepanje (Slovenia)
Sandwich:	€3.95 in Sorgues (France) €1.10 in Gralla East (Austria)
0.33 litres of coke in shop:	€2.20 in Gralla East (Austria) €0.58 in Tepanje (Slovenia)

The standard meal (side salad, pasta or cheapest meat dish, cup of coffee and small mineral water) with pasta cost €6.81 in Slovenia. In the UK service area Tebay, this amount was spent on just a salad. In Italy, the price of the test meal ranged from €7.65 to €9.80, being quite cheap. The prices at German service areas are still reasonable, ranging between €9.20 and €12.40. The German service areas with prices between €1.60 and €13.90 were rated "acceptable". The inspectors had to spend the largest amount of money at the Swiss service area Rose de la Broye where the meal cost €18.33, a price almost as high as at the UK service areas Oxford (€18.18) and Abington (€18.03).

The items in the test basket of goods (0.33 litres of coke, 1 litre of mineral water, a sandwich or similar and a packet of hankies) were cheapest at €2.44 at the Slovenian service area Tepanje. In Germany the same items were much more expensive: €3.95 at the Neckarburg Ost service area, but included half a litre of coke as opposed to 0.33 litres. In the UK, the basket cost €3. In Italy, it was quite expensive compared to the price of their test meal.

The significant price differences within a country show that taking a break at reasonable prices is possible. No one expects to find a bargain at a service area, but in order that families can afford to take a break, the service areas should not take advantage of their monopolistic location on the motorway.