

Tales of the unexpected

Why the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg offers more than its size suggests

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The Weekend

The literature from the tourist board invited me to 'discover the unexpected Luxembourg'. True enough, for it was difficult to know what awaited in this tiny country the heart of Europe.

Nestling between France, Belgium and Germany, Luxembourg retains influence from all three, yet offers something unique to the continent. Perhaps this is due to the country's compact size. At less than a thousand square miles, four Luxembourgs would fit comfortably inside Yorkshire.

Correct title is Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, which makes it the world's only such state.

Luxembourg's eponymous capital displays classic continental chic. Buildings are a mix of ornate traditional and cutting-edge modern, often side by side, while leafy boulevards, green parks and cafe culture on Place Guillaume II add to the ambiance.

A deep valley splits the urban landscape, with bridges and viaducts drawing the eye to the ancient city walls on the edge of town. The winding river Alzette creates another visual diversion, to the picture-postcard pastel buildings along its banks.

Top attraction are the Casemates, a labyrinth of tunnels and caves carved into the rock cliffs. Originally defensive, they now present a mysterious journey for 1.5 million visitors a year, attracted by random viewing points across the capital's panorama.

The city's Kirchberg area highlights Luxembourg's bold approach to construction and design. Striking



Looking down on the river Alzette in the capital of Luxembourg.



Walking in the Mullerthal region.

structures, housing centres of business, politics and judiciary, are augmented by Place de l'Europe and the remarkable Philharmonic Concert Hall. The latter is as stunning on the inside as on the outside, as light floods curved walkways that surround the main auditorium.

Nearby, Mudam is the country's Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the architect responsible for the Louvre in Paris. The exhibi-

tions are edgy and chance-taking, just as they should be.

Heading north from the capital, the Mullerthal Region is billed as 'Little Switzerland' and it is easy to see why. The vistas sweep from gently undulating to dramatic rises and falls, highlighting the fact that a third of the country is covered by forest.

This is hiking territory, with pine and spruce adding flavour to crystal-clear air.

Berdorf presents dramatic geology, with sharp cliffs and narrow walkways, as though the stone had been split cleanly by a giant axe.

Rocks are covered by moss and lichen and the canopy of trees creates an eerie magic. No doubt this was the attraction for BBC producers who used the setting for a soon-to-be-screened production of Peter Pan.

The nearby Aquatower is functional and educational, while its lofty viewing platform gives spectacular

access to the rolling countryside of farmers' fields and pretty hamlets.

Mullerthal has other attractions. Beaufort Renaissance Castle is part ancient ruin, part stately home, while also being renowned for the traditional fruity liqueur Cassis de Beaufort.

A few miles away, Moulin de Heringen is a restored 17th century watermill. Traditional bread baking still goes on in the nostalgic stone oven and the fresh smell must be a return call for the many walkers, who regularly stride out from the Best of Wandern centre housed in the same building.

Echternach is the oldest town in Luxembourg and regional capital. Small but perfectly formed, it typifies the rural charm of the country.

I left Luxembourg surprised such a small land could offer so much. Perhaps the best approach is to always expect the unexpected.

Travel facts

- For Luxembourg, see www.visitluxembourg.com
- Fly to Luxembourg seven times daily from London City Airport with Luxair, www.luxair.co.uk
- Travel to London from Sheffield with East Midlands trains, www.eastmidlandstrains.co.uk
- For travel in Luxembourg and to visit attractions, use LuxembourgCard www.visitluxembourg.com/en/luxembourg-card
- For the Mullerthal region, see www.mullerthal.lu
- In the capital, stay at Hotel Simoncini, www.hotelsimoncini.lu; eat at Chocolate House, www.chocolatehousebonn.lu and Brasserie Guillaume, www.brasserieguillaume.lu
- In Mullerthal, stay at Hotel Restaurant Dimmer, www.hotelrestaurantdimmer.com; eat at Hotel Le Bon Repos www.lebonrepos.lu and Hotel-Restaurant Le Cigalon www.lecigalon.lu

Holiday ideas...

Monte Carlo

On the 'small is beautiful' theme, Monte Carlo fits the bill perfectly. Not even a Grand Duchy, the tiny region in the Principality of Monaco is the ancestral home to the Grimaldis - actress Grace Kelly the iconic figurehead of the ruling royal family who are still ensconced in the legendary Pink Palace, close to the equally well-known casino.

www.visitmonaco.com

Andorra

Sandwiched between France and Spain, the tiny principality of Andorra has a surprising amount to offer. Its location means that activities such as walking, horse riding or cycling along its 21 mountain passes are the obvious attractions, but there's plenty of spa hotels for relaxation too.

visitandorra.com

Trip of the week...

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