

Visitors find Luxembourg packs a lot into a tiny package

Medieval castles, World War II memorials, monuments to history abound

By Norma Meyer • Special to the U-T 5:22 p.m. Dec. 19, 2014 Updated 5:22 p.m.



The view from remnants of the ancient Bock fortress, a stronghold that made tiny Luxembourg the “Gibraltar of the North.” *Norma Meyer*

In the Lilliputian land of Luxembourg, real-life princesses bedazzle, and larger-than-life U.S. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. lies buried in a simple grave. Who knew? I also meandered miles through world-record-long underground tunnels of an ancient fortress that a mythical mermaid haunts. And I soared in a chairlift over a verdant valley dominated by both a monumental medieval castle and heart-pounding history of World War II.

Within 48 hours, I eyeballed much of an entrancing European country just 998 square miles in size (less than a fourth of San Diego County). Being dinky is darn convenient. From Luxembourg's cobblestoned town center, “it’s about a 40-minute drive to France, a 40-minute drive to Germany and a 25-minute drive to Belgium,” a tourism rep said. “You can see four countries in four days.”

Visit here and you’ll step foot in the world’s only grand duchy — that’s what Luxembourg is called because it’s headed by a pomp-and-circumstance grand duke (his name is Henri and, natch, he’s Hollywood handsome). The national language is convoluting Luxembourgish so “Moien!” means “Hello!” (French and German are also spoken.) And if Luxembourgers seem cheery, that’s because, cha-ching, they reside in the second richest country on Earth (the grand duchy is an international banking hub — and tax haven).

And, boy, is this below-the-radar destination as neat as a pin. From majestic castles (more than 50) to cozy hamlets framed by picturesque arched bridges to the vineyard-voluptuous Moselle wine region, you’d never guess it’d been thrashed by various vanquishers over a millennium. Also, I felt huge group hugs for being an American — in museums, memorials and conversations, there’s an outpouring of thanks to U.S. armed forces for liberating Luxembourg from the Nazis during World War II.

My first stop was the emotional American Cemetery, where legendary Patton is buried with his fallen troops from the tide-turning Battle of the Bulge on Luxembourg soil during World War II. Orderly rows of white crosses and Jewish stars mark the remains of 5,076 U.S. service members — including 22 sets of brothers — killed fighting the Germans. Overlooking the graves, between two flagpoles, is Patton’s similar cross. The California-born “Old Blood and Guts” died after breaking his neck in a freak car crash in Germany just months after the war ended in 1945; per his wishes, his body was returned to Luxembourg to be interred with his soldiers. (Years later, because his nonmilitary wife wasn’t allowed to be laid at his side, their children surreptitiously sprinkled her cremated ashes on his grave.)

Miles away, the war comes jarringly alive at the artifact-packed National Museum of Military History in Diekirch, filled with chilling life-size, re-created scenes that thrust you into World War II combat fought right outside the front door. In room after room, with humanlike mannequins, authentic vehicles, uniforms and artillery, you’ll experience the Battle of the Bulge, WWII’s largest and deadliest for U.S. forces, in the brutal winter of 1944-45. The searing centerpiece diorama: Patton’s infantrymen crossing the frozen Sauer river at nighttime, their wounded comrades’ red blood a horrid contrast to the pure-white snow.

The museum is in the Ardennes, a rolling forested region whose big draw is the walled medieval village of Vianden. On a rugged cliff — facing the spectacular Vianden Castle — I stood where a WWII anti-artillery gun fired at the enemy before embattled Vianden became the last Luxembourg town freed by the Allies in February 1945.

You'll get high. A chairlift whisked me over the scenic Our River Valley and Vianden Castle, once inhabited by powerful counts. Afterward, I hiked through walnut tree groves on a woodlands trail to the fairy-tale furnished fortress — inside, I peeked at its Middle Ages wine cellar and beds so short that sleepers had to sit up, because, as my audio guide informed, "Only the dead were laid to rest lying down."

Luxembourg, I learned, was sacked by many conquerors. In its capital, Luxembourg City, I descended into 11 miles of eerie UNESCO World Heritage-listed subterranean passageways — the longest "casemates" or bunkers in the world — burrowed beneath oft-attacked Bock fortress. Luxembourg's founder, Count Siegfried, first built a defensive castle on the spot in 963, the same year he wed lovely Melusina, who turned out to be half-serpent and is still spotted in the river below. In the 17th and 18th centuries, 14 miles of the rock-hewn caverns harbored thousands of soldiers, their horses, weapon-crafters and slaughterhouses to feed warriors battling invaders, including the Spanish, French, Austrians and Prussians. I paused in a dreary dungeon and beside rusted cannons at lookout points affording splendid panoramic views, getting why the promontory-perched stronghold made Luxembourg the "Gibraltar of the North." Later, during World War II, it was used as a bomb shelter that could hold up to 35,000 people.

Emerging outside, I strolled along crumbling ramparts on an elevated view-wowing promenade dubbed "Europe's most beautiful balcony." The Chemin de la Corniche precariously edges over the winding Alzette River, pastel-hued antique homes and steeped churches.

Back in the town center, I ogled where His Royal Highness Henri and Cuban-born wife Maria Teresa play house when they're not hanging in their countryside castle. Their city digs are the 16th century Renaissance-style Grand Ducal Palace next to the parliament's headquarters (Luxembourg is a constitutional monarchy). The palace is steeped in drama — during World War II, after the Nazis deported Luxembourg Jews to concentration camps, they looted the royal residence and turned it into their tavern.

Across the walkway, I trolled for tiara-wearers. This was at the Chocolate House, a 500-year-old onetime nobleman's pad now peddling Hot Chocospoons in umpteen flavors like Apfelstrudel and booze-infused Amaretto Macarons. The plan here is to soak a chocolate-encrusted wooden spoon in a cup of steaming hot milk while sitting outside hoping for a glimpse of the grand duke or duchess or their five grown kids or spouses, all photogenic princesses and princes (but not airheads — one daughter-in-law princess is a bioethics researcher; another princess drove armored Hummers in Luxembourg's Army).

I never saw any of the crowned clan, except in souvenir postcards and smiling portraits plastering places like pastry shops. Despite minor scandals (one son had a baby out of wedlock), they are not stalked like British regals. "We have no paparazzi here," a resident explained. "And the royals are not that bling-bling. They do not show off because that would not be appreciated by the people. We do not have that type of mentality."

Luxembourg's showiness seems more about peace. In Constitution Square rises its national treasure, the hallowed 1923-created Golden Lady memorial dedicated to those who served in both world wars (Luxembourg was also occupied by the Germans during WWI). The gilded bronze woman, who extends a laurel wreath overhead, was hidden from Nazi forces in 1940 and went missing for 40 years until she was discovered buried under bleachers of Luxembourg's main football stadium.

I finished my 48-hour foray on a cruise boat gliding down the Moselle River in wine country, flanked by vineyard-stacked hillsides of Riesling grapes. And this rocked: In the Moselle village of Schengen, I stood on one side of a two-lane bridge, which put me in France, walked to the bridge's other side to be in Germany and from either point looked over at Luxembourg — 3 in 1!

My trip was a side jaunt from Germany, and soon I'd board a comfy bus for a five-hour ride back to Frankfurt. Luxembourg intoxicated until the end — during stops, the bus driver reached into his iced glove compartment, cracked open beers and sold them to passengers, who quietly imbibed along the way.

If you go

Sightseeing deal: For a bargain fee, a Luxembourg Card offers free admission to more than 60 attractions, including castles, the Vianden chairlift, the Bock Casemates, museums and art galleries. Plus it includes free public transportation throughout the country by bus and train, so no need for a car. One-day pass is 11 euros or about \$13.50; two-day \$23.50; three-day \$33.50. Available at

www.visitluxembourg.com (<http://www.visitluxembourg.com>).

Learn more: Trip-planning info including hotels, restaurants and activities at official tourism site,

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