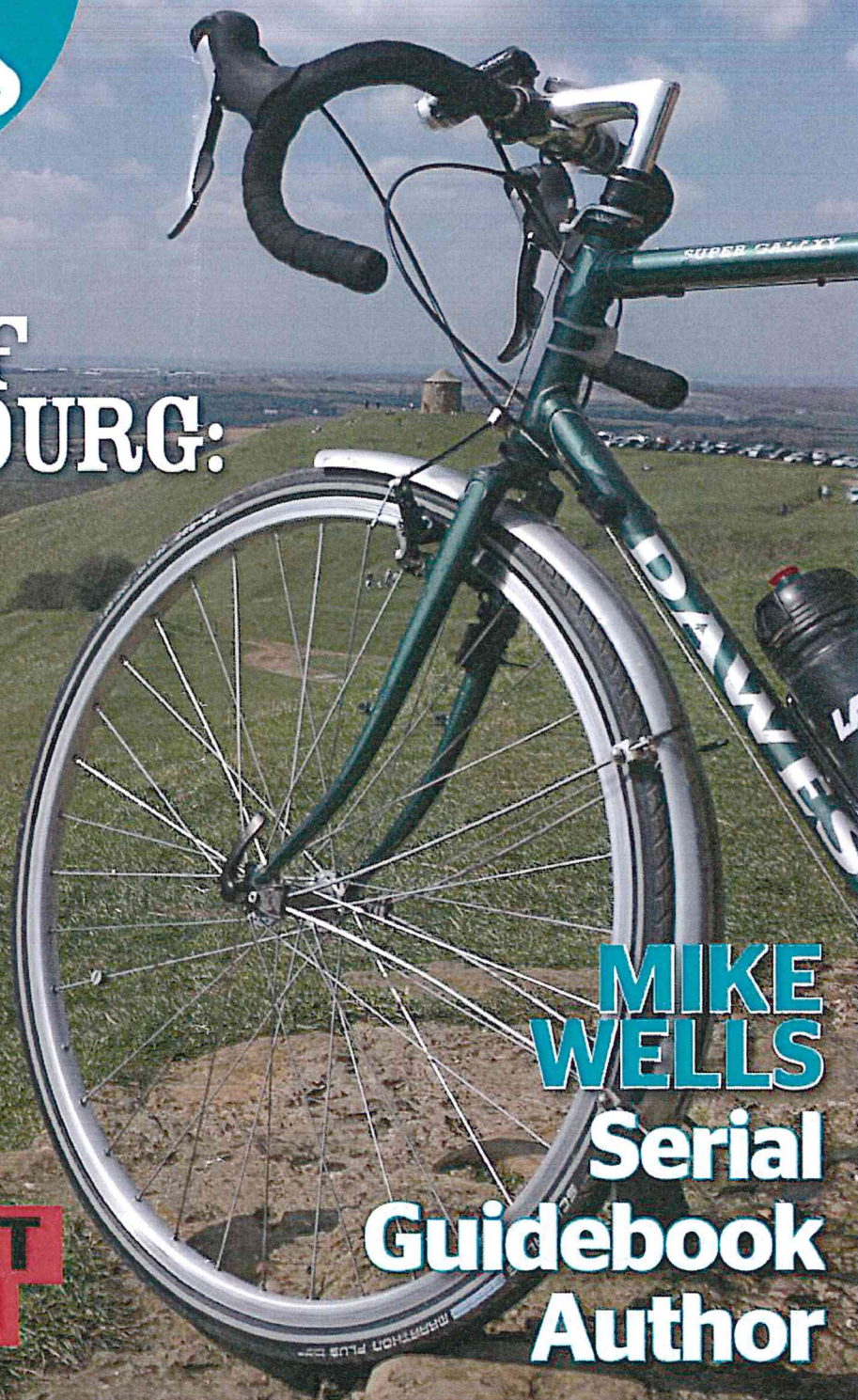




GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG: GRAND CYCLING



**MIKE
WELLS**

**Serial
Guidebook
Author**

**DEEP IN
THE FOREST
- OF ARDEN**

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Old and new on the Kirchberg

GRAND DUCHY: GRAND CYCLING

TWO DUTCHMEN AND A CYCLING ADVOCATE WENT CYCLING IN LUXEMBOURG; STEPHEN DYSTER TAGGED ALONG.

OK, you could cycle across the Grand Duchy in less than half a day if you liked, may be a bit longer if you are going from north to south or vice-versa. Get your head down and you could be in Belgium, France or Germany and not far off the Netherlands in no time at all. Ignore the deep, green valleys with castles glimpsed amongst the forested hills; miss out the extremely cycle-friendly UNESCO World Heritage Site that is the City of Luxembourg; forget that you could cycle along the Moselle and taste fine Luxembourgish wines. Take your

time and you will find a country that holds on to its history and traditions but is as cosmopolitan as they come. Even better, the transport and tourism arms of government have been busy developing a network of high quality cycle routes, much of which is traffic free ninety-percent of which has either asphalt or concrete surface and, if you want to take a train with your bike within the Grand Duchy it'll cost you the princely sum of two or four Euros depending on whether you buy an all day ticket or not, with your bike going free in a bike specific coach (on most trains).

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GRAND DUCHY TOUR

HILLS OF THE NORTH

A fine way to arrive in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, or Lëtzebuerg in local parlance, is along the Vennbahn cycle route, which begins in the ancient city of Aachen, winds its way across the Haut Fagnes or Hohes Venn following the course of the old railway line built to bring coal from the north to Luxembourg's burgeoning iron industry in the late nineteenth century.

Using the Feyen Bike Taxi service we'd taken our bikes from Clervaux, in Luxembourg, across the border to the German-speaking Belgian town of Sankt Vith. Hiring bikes from Miselerland Rent a Bike - delivered to the door of the Hotel des Nations - who also transferred our luggage, offered flexibility regarding a start point.

On the road northward, Gust Muller, cycling advocate and strong supporter of government programmes to boost cycle tourism in Luxembourg, pointed out that around 150,000 people come into the Grand Duchy to work each day. As the owner of the family run Hotel des Nations, in Clervaux, where we spent the first night, said of the cars queuing up outside, "There goes half of Belgium on its way home." So, whilst there were plenty of good road routes and climbs to cater for the



Clervaux Castle, home to the Family of Man

confident and energetic cyclist, the main roads were best avoided by the less confident and families, whilst the minor roads in the Ardennes can have some pretty tough gradients.

BATS

From Sankt Vith to Troisvierges, the southern terminus of the Vennbahn is some thirty-four kilometres, the last eight in Luxembourg. At present the tunnel which marks the border is causing a problem; bats that love the damp atmosphere and do not wish to go elsewhere. So there is a diversion. It is a diversion that gives good views, coming close to the highest point in Luxembourg.

Interestingly, the diversion sign gave both the maximum gradient and the distance; just over a kilometre with a 10% maximum gradient. Nothing to get too worried about, but the aim of the detail is to encourage more people to have a go at leisure cycling. It was, to anyone used to the UK a commonplace hill, but the two Dutchmen in the group got quite excited.

On both sides of the border old rail line wound round the flanks of lush valleys with darkly-wooded slopes above and sparkling rivers below. Entering Luxembourg on a summit means that it was basically downhill all the way to Troisvierges; but not all on the old railway line. Close to the tunnel an enterprising individual has dammed the cutting and developed a fish farm.

Railway fans will not be disappointed by the numerous information boards. On the Belgian side one board explained how the residents of Lommersweiler were so disappointed at the fact that their station had no proper road access from the village that they sabotaged the track causing a goods train to derail and deposit its cargo of syrup and sugar into the river as it slid down the bank.

TROISVIERGES

Again, as Troisvierges is approached, the cycle route leaves the old line. The final tunnel is still in use by cross-border trains from Liege to Luxembourg City. These do not always carry bicycles and even when they do there is an official limit of two.

A place of pilgrimage, Troisvierges (Three Virgins) was reminiscent of Edale as a terminus for the Pennine Way; café, bar and railway station, camping, hotel and so on. Popular with hikers as well as cyclists, the café had a store of leaflets with on-road cycle routes, walks and history and nature trails, including one that follows the footsteps of Luxembourgers attempting to escape



The Vennbahn at Sankt Vith

during the Second World War.

Of all its west European conquests, Luxembourg alone was incorporated into the Third Reich. Thus the Grand Duchy's young men were conscripted into the German Army. Some went AWOL, others did as they were told and some attempted to reach their government in exile in the UK - a long and dangerous journey - to volunteer in the British armed forces.

TRAINING

Our journey onward would be by train to Ettelbruck, calling at Clervaux and some smaller stations. Why? Well, with just the weekend to explore the traffic free cycle routes, the ride over the hills on the roads would eat away the hours. At present a "missing link" occupies the cycle network between Troisvierges and Ettelbruck to the south. Deep in a narrow valley, the railway and the river take up almost all of the space.

The journey is spectacular by train and will be magical by bicycle if a route can be built. If you have time, get off at Clervaux - another

fine centre for sorties on foot or by bicycle into the surrounding hills. Amongst its cafes, hotels and shops Clervaux has a castle. Restored, it is now home to "The Family of Man". This is not a sixties pop-group, but an incredible collection of monochrome images collected by Luxembourgish photographer Edward Steichen who became Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Aimed at showing the commonality of the human condition across cultures, the images are mostly from the middle of the twentieth century. Whilst clearly of the



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Our train awaits at Troisvierges



Gust enters Luxembourg

age, they are timeless. I did not think I could learn so much or be so emotionally stirred by a set of black and white photos.

CYCLING, AGAIN

Ettelbruck is a busy town. PC15 starts at the southern end of the station platform. One should be careful of, but not deterred by, oncoming buses. Cycle path improvements meant that a signed "deviation" was necessary. As ever, the cycle track in town was narrower than the cycle track in the country (there three or even four metres was usual), but a bit of care and consideration got us through, only to find a mountain bike competition obstructing the path with no signed diversion.

Cheekily, or indignantly, we rode on, joining the riders who seemed to be just warming up. Though on trekking bikes, I still maintain we had a fair chance had we taken part. Such obstructions are almost unknown - part of getting used to the relatively new concept of having a national cycle network - and, given the look on Gust's face, are likely to become extinct.

NOT PC49

It is a shame that the designation of national cycle routes is unlikely to get to 49. And if PC49 means something

to you, you may well want to stick to the gentler Piste Cyclable routes that often use former rail routes.

Clearly signed, you could manage without a map when using these. Signs indicate direction, distance to towns, distance to junctions with other PCs and links to local communities close to the route. General maps are available from tourist offices. Consisting of short stretches of multi-use road (usually with cycle lanes) linking often very long stretches of traffic free cycling on old railway lines, closed minor roads and high quality purpose-built cycle tracks, they were an unmitigated joy. Wide enough to ride two or three abreast, with lots of space for families, the surface-smoothness was such that fast-but-careful road sport riders were a common sight.

South of Ettelbruck the route had more small inclines, though the land was less hilly. Away from the rail paths, old lanes and purpose built tracks still followed the river - the Alzette, in this case - sweeping over and around spurs and bringing sudden surprises.

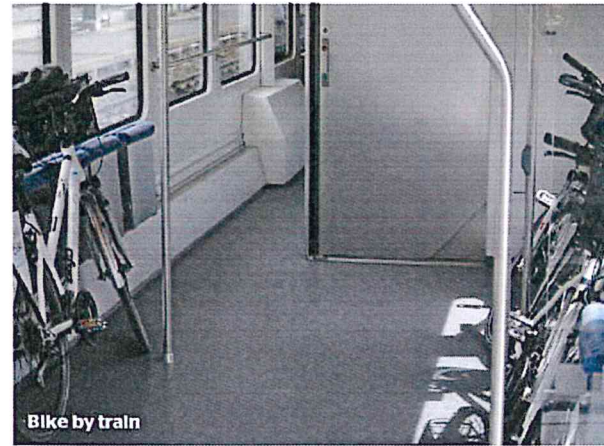
SURPRISES ROUND THE CORNER

Amongst these was Pettingen, a minor village where PC15 joins the village roads and twists round a corner to reveal the ruins of a castle. Typically it is used for local events, having a stage in the centre of the inner ward and a neatly mown dry moat with play equipment in it;

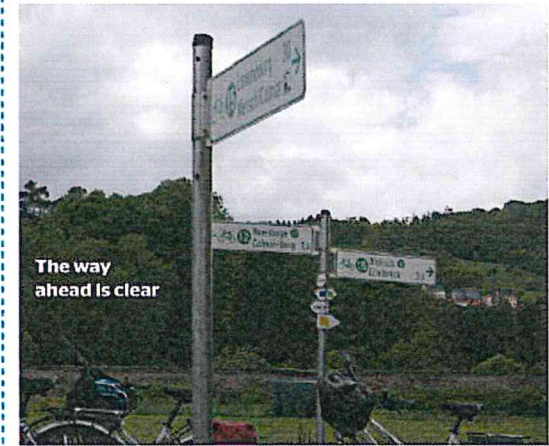
a real adventure playground (and a plus point for family cycling). The village café was visible through a hole in the wall, so Pettingen, though small seemed to have it all. Even better, practically for a small number and bizarrely for the rest, in a small house just around the next corner was the San Marino Consulate. We stopped for photos of this unlikely spot and wondered if anyone would come and check up on what we were doing. Happily, we can announce that the staff were vigilant; as we focussed cameras the gate opened and a head appeared, briefly checking up on us. Clearly, we were not regarded as a security threat.

Mersch was the next town on route. Arriving near the railway station with huge processing plants or left and a garage on the right, picturesque was no word. Gust showed us Luxembourg's first Bike Café and the wonderful, witty street art that was a genuine adornment to the underpass.

He guided us to a favourite café, but it was closed. However, the square to which the café had closed doors was a revelation. Standing alone was a belfry, one corner a sculpted dragon; overlooking the square from across the main road, the chateau sported an intriguing sundial; all notable amongst picturesque



Bike by train



The way ahead is clear

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buildings that belied the dominant industrial landscape that made for the first encounter.

That night we stayed at the family run A Guddesch Hotel Martha, an enterprising business with Bed and Bike status, a cooking school and a bakery as well as being a hotel and restaurant.

INTO THE BIG CITY

The cycle route is being modified through Mersch. Indeed there are changes afoot to further improve the cycle route all the way to Luxembourg City -



though it is darned good as it is. Of course, as a city is approached suburbia and industrial developments impinge on the scenery.

Gust had a surprise in store. Having already cycled in the city on PC1 (which PC15 joins on the outskirts), we followed a new route that climbed through a peaceful forest to emerge on the Kirchberg. It could have been a ride through the woods of the Scottish Highlands; a truly delightful way to emerge in an area which personifies modern, cosmopolitan Luxembourg.

Forty years ago there was little building on this

hill. Now it is home to major international banks and European Community institutions whose glass girt homes make a stark contrast to the skyline of cathedral spires and jumbled buildings across the deep valley.

Also on the Kirchberg are the Philharmonie concert hall, the Museum of Modern Art - with café-restaurant - and the remains of one of the satellite forts built by the renowned Marechal Vauban to help protect the main fortress.

This was a Sunday, so the park was full of people relaxing in the sun. We pondered how many multi-million euro deals or political agreements were reached on the benches hidden amongst the groves. And here, we went our separate ways. I went back to the city centre, to a hotel in the narrow streets behind the cathedral and to explore the older parts of the city.

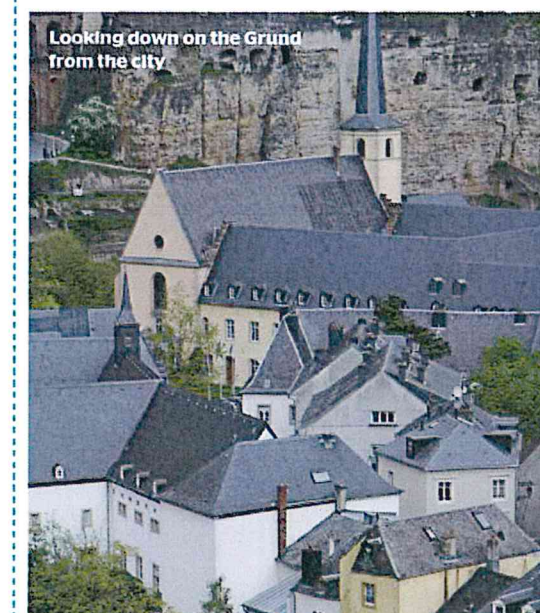
UNEXPECTED LUXEMBOURG?

The National Tourist Board entitles some of its brochures "Unexpected Luxembourg". Truth is that, even having been to Luxembourg City before, I had few preconceptions. As for the surrounding countryside, I knew nothing. What did I find? A fascinating country of contrasts with a culture that transcends its borders - until the nineteenth century the Grand Duchy was four times bigger. A small nation that has worked out how to cope with its size and the pros and cons that brings.



Above all, it is a country that in the last few years has grabbed the handlebars and pointed them in the direction of cycle touring. I'll go back soon, probably with the family, but however you want to tour you find that Luxembourg has a lot to offer.

And in a future edition, we'll have a quick ride to Luxembourg City.



INFORMATION

Maps: general maps tend to include Luxembourg along with parts of Belgium, France, Germany or all three. The Luxembourg Survey covers the entire Grand Duchy from two 1:50 000 maps. These show cycle routes, but for up to date information on those it is best to get the 1:100 000 Luxembourg By Cycle Map, published by Lëtzebuerger Vëlos-Initiativ with support from Visit Luxembourg.

Information on cycling and all else the tourist needs can be obtained from www.visitluxembourg.com. More detailed cycling help could be obtained from Lëtzebuerger Vëlos-Initiativ www.lvi.lu. In the latter case, please remember that this is a voluntary organisation so a reply may take longer than from a staffed tourist office.

Most people who have cycled in Germany will know the Bed and Bike standard. This is now increasingly common in Luxembourg under license from the ADFC. Setting minimum standards, you can be sure of finding secure parking for your bike, a place to dry clothes and other facilities likely to be useful. Around a quarter of all types of accommodation in Luxembourg currently hold the Bed and Bike mark.

Using public transport is simple and cheap. Trains and most buses carry bikes, though in the latter case a little sensitivity to other users does not come

amiss. Bike buses and train carriages are marked by a large bicycle symbol. Cross border trains may have different regulations to those that remain purely in the Grand Duchy. www.cfl.lu or www.mobilitet.lu has information on public transport, though tourist offices will be able to help to.

The Luxembourg Card offers free use of public transport and gives access for nothing to museums and discounts at other tourist attractions. However, it is not necessarily the cheapest way to get about if you only plan to use public transport to carry your bike about and do not intend to visit museums and other attractions.

Some taxi businesses have picked up on the popularity of cycling and carry bikes, picking up or dropping off across international borders. We used Taxi Feyen, from Belgium (Telephone +32 80 34 9302 or +32 80 3490 87 email taxi.feyen@swing.be).

Getting there: transport links are very good, however getting a bike aboard aircraft or trains is not always as easy as might be hoped. Check with airlines and plan a railway trip carefully. Eurostar would give access to Paris or Brussels, both with direct services to Luxembourg City, but bikes will need to be booked on all services. Check for the latest information.

A good option for the British traveller would be to use the European Bike Express service to

Thionville, though these are infrequent. Once part of the Grand Duchy it is a mere twenty five miles or so along the Moselle Cycle Way to Schengen from the south-eastern border of Luxembourg. This would mean entering Luxembourg through its wine-growing area. Luxembourgers I met were proud of their wine - especially the Crémant - and unsurprised to find that so little of it made its way across the borders. For the European Bike Express see www.bike-express.co.uk and www.cicerone.co.uk for Mike Wells' guide to the Moselle Cycle route.

Renting a bike is not an expensive option. In Luxembourg City you could use the Velo'n hire bikes which can be picked up or dropped off at over seventy-five docking stations. A credit card is required. In the city a bike more suited to extended use can be found at Velo en Ville close to the centre of the city in the old Grund quarter (Tel + 352 26 20 01 32 or 47962383 email velosophie@pt.lu). Velosophie offer guided tours or information for self-guiding around the city.

For longer tours, three companies have partnered to support each other. The bikes were used were solid trekking bikes, perfect for some leisurely touring. Ours came from Rent a Bike Miselerland, based in the south of the country, www.visitmoselle.lu. They and their partners also transfer luggage, making for a light-weight day out. I felt that their

charges were very reasonable and certainly were competitive when compared to carrying a bike by train or plane from the UK.

Language is not a problem. All natives speak Lëtzebuergesch, a Frankish dialect in origin related to German but with a strong French influence. As are also taught and most speak French, German and English. This can be confusing at first and you may find that a conversation involves a combination of languages. The key thing is that it is easy to get by.

Accommodation: a full list can be obtained from the tourist offices and a list of Bed and Bike accommodation, including camping, hostels, hotels/pensions can be found on the Luxembourg By Bicycle map. We stayed at the Hotel des Nations in Clervaux, situated conveniently opposite the railway station www.hoteldesnations.lu and A Guddesch Hotel Martha, in Beringen (Biereng), just outside Mersch, www.gudd.lu. Both are family run and comfortable, come from contrasting eras and have excellent, though very different, restaurants.

Note

In the interests of openness, this trip was funded by the National Tourist Office of Luxembourg. However, it really was as good as it sounds. www.visitluxembourg.com