

THE ALLURE OF LUXEMBOURG

AT THE HEART OF EUROPE LIES ONE OF THE MOST UNDERRATED CITIES FOR AN IDYLIC WEEKEND BREAK. BOASTING EUROPE'S ONLY OPENLY-GAY PRIME MINISTER AND A COSMOPOLITAN POPULATION, THIS CITY ALSO OFFERS WINDING MEDIEVAL STREETS, STATELY MUSEUMS AND AWARD-WINNING DINING. ALL IN A FABULOUSLY-FAIRYTALE-LIKE SETTING. THERE'S FAR MORE TO LUXEMBOURG CITY THAN TAX BREAKS AND BIG BANKS...

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As our tiny turboprop aircraft tilts and dips on the ascent into Luxembourg's capital (also called Luxembourg, rather confusingly), the view is one of the best I've seen from an aeroplane window. From here, the city's dramatic perch atop a steep cliff is breathtaking; staggered buildings drape down from the medieval centre, spreading out into the Alzette and Pétrusse valleys below, whilst slender bridges with vertiginous arches connect the more modern outskirts. As our taxi arrives in Ville Haute, the oldest part of the small city and the beating heart of Luxembourg, I'm already in love with this Grand Duchy.

As with all cities, everyone has preconceptions before their first visit, and with Luxembourg the first thing that springs to mind is usually its wealth; from the sprawling financial institutes to the designer stores stuffed with Rolexes and Armani suits. And whilst this image holds true – this is the wealthiest nation in the EU with many mega corporations housing their headquarters here – the city also exudes a very special kind of charm, thanks largely to its unique, lofty setting. In the UNESCO-protected old town you will find wealth of a different kind; world-class museums, cobbled streets, green parks and, of course, great restaurants and excellent bars. The surrounding Ardennes countryside is full of vineyards, pretty hamlets and attractive chateaus and castles.

The city can be neatly divided into four distinct areas: Ville Haute, Ville Basse (the picturesque lower gorge area known as the 'Grund'), Gare (home to the train station and many shops and restaurants) and Kirchberg (the modern city, full of banks and EU buildings). My first morning starts with a wander around Ville Haute, an easy-to-navigate section of the city containing some of the main sites. It's tempting to get distracted by the fantastic shopping opportunities, but with a little focus I am soon exploring the excellent six-storey Luxembourg City Museum of History; a great place to acquaint yourself with the city's turbulent history. Just around the corner, the National Museum of History and Art throws up floor after floor of fascinating

objects, from archaeological finds in the basement right up to contemporary art on the top floors.

Next I take a walk along the Chemin de la Corniche, a pathway along the cliff edge that's often called 'Europe's most beautiful balcony'. It affords stunning views down into the valley below, just as impressive from here as they were from the plane. Underneath, the old war-time casemates are carved, anthill-like, into the rock and are also well worth a visit. If you continue this walk, you'll arrive at the impressive Gëlle Fra (Golden Lady) statue on Constitution Square. This glittering-gold memorial sits atop a towering stone plinth that was erected in 1923 to commemorate the Luxembourgers who perished in the First World War. It was pulled down by the Nazis in 1940 and only restored in 1984, and is now a source of great pride for the people of Luxembourg.

At the end of my stroll, I take a handy lift straight down into the cobbled streets of the Grund quarter below. The river winding along the valley here is very picturesque, and the streets are dotted with excellent eateries and bars. You can catch a little art market spread across the little bridge here at the weekend.

That evening, dinner is in Um Plateau, a good spot for modern European fare. Great dining is one of Luxembourg's strong points and there's a multitude of eateries and Michelin starred restaurants to choose



ROB VINTAGE HAS PLENTY OF FUNKY FURNITURE



VIEW FROM THE CHEMIN DE LA CORNICHE



RIVES DE CLAUSEN COMES ALIVE AT NIGHT



THE PHILHARMONIE CONCERT HALL BOASTS INCREDIBLE ACOUSTICS



ENTRANCE TO THE CATHEDRAL OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN

from: try Clairefontaine, Limbo or Meltemi for food inspired by the melting pot of Luxembourgish, French, Belgian, German and Portuguese influences. For a small city, Luxembourg certainly packs in the fun come the weekend. Make a beeline for Café des Artistes on your way into the Grund, an atmospheric tavern where local *chanson* are spontaneously sung around a piano, and the walls are plastered in old posters and banknotes. The manager, François Qüintos, gamely dispenses relationship advice to the mixed punters who range from 18 to 80 and over.

As you climb up the steep street you'll arrive at Dipso, a lively wine bar, and back up in the old town you'll find much of the nightlife centred around Go Ten, an Asian eatery by day and fun focal point by night. There are plenty of boisterous bars further into the Grund area, too. Try the converted brewery are of Rives de Clausen, or, if you want to make a night of it, Hitch, where a nice mix of old and young, gay and straight gather to sip seriously-good cocktails in the city's hippest venue. There are no full-time

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YOU'LL FIND THAT VERY FEW SOCIAL ENGAGEMENTS IN LUXEMBOURG START OR END WITHOUT CRÉMANT. AND, EVEN AFTER QUITE A FEW DRINKS THE NIGHT BEFORE, IT STILL GOES DOWN SURPRISINGLY WELL

gay bars in Luxembourg but, as it's a very tolerant city, you'll find a good mix of all sexualities as well as nationalities – 40% of the city's population are immigrants – wherever you go.

The next day it's off to Kirchberg. You might think there was little here for the casual tourist amongst all the towering glass offices, but nestled on the valley edge is the MUDAM (Museum of Contemporary Art) – a stunning modernist construction by architect Ieoh Ming Pei, which melds marvellously with the original stone of Fort Thüngen. Inside the expansive concrete space there are excellent temporary exhibitions – when I visited, a massive collection of 'art meets technology' was drawing to a close – alongside more permanent works. Just

around the corner is another marvel of modern architecture – the Philharmonie concert hall, a minimalist white venue that hosts some of Europe's finest musical performances. I duck into the nearby Hotel Melia restaurant, Aqua, for lunch, before heading back into town for more exploring; this time of the shopping variety.

As I mentioned, there's no shortage of designer boutiques on offer, alongside all the usual high-street stores, but there are also some uniquely-Luxembourgish experiences you should try. At the Chocolate House you will find plenty of, well, chocolate – more than 60 hot chocolates in fact, alongside cakes and handmade treats that all make perfect gifts. Pull up a seat outside and you can watch tourists snapping pictures of the



THE MUDAM MUSEUM NESTLED BEHIND FORT THÜNGEN



OLD FORTIFICATIONS CROSSING THE ALZETTE RIVER

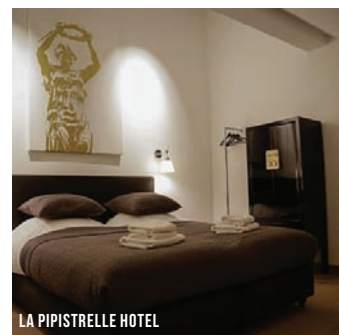
stone-faced guards stationed outside the Luxembourg Grand Ducal Palace, home to the country's much-loved royal family, for part of the year at least. In the city centre you'll also find two pastry shops: the very old and established Pâtisserie Namur and the very modern Pâtisserie Oberweis. Locals fiercely debate the merits of each, but both serve waist-bulgingly-good delicacies. There are excellent antiques shops dotted around, too, and as I explored the Gare district, I fell in love with Rob Vintage, an interior design store specialising in pieces from the '50s through to the '80s. Michelle Rob runs the store and she explained that it used to be her parent's apartment, a couple with a very keen eye for design, which their daughter continues to this day.

I also decide to take a look at LUCA – the Luxembourg Center for Architecture, where the city's Venice Biennale entry is on display. Stéphanie Laurade, the curator of the exhibition, is on hand to explain the fascinating project, which looks at some of Luxembourg's more controversial buildings

through the eyes of a fictional *Twin Peaks*-inspired character.

From this part of the city you can easily take a train to Paris, Brussels or any number of German destinations. Getting around Luxembourg itself is easy, too – your feet will take you most places, or just hop on a local bus; for €4 you can enjoy a day of unlimited travel on all buses and trains in the entire country (one of the few things in the city that is actually cheap!). If you have the time, you could visit the country's most beautiful castle, Vianden – it's about an hour's journey away.

Before I fly home, I return to the Grund on Sunday for an 'Apéro-Jazz' at Neumünster Abbey. Here, an ever-changing cast of local and international jazz musicians entertain keen regulars, who are all quaffing crémant – the country's favourite tipple. Should you take a trip here, you'll find that very few social engagements in Luxembourg start or end without this locally-produced sparkling wine. And, even after quite a few drinks the night before, it still goes down surprisingly well, much like Luxembourg itself. ■



LA PIPISTRELLE HOTEL

STAY

Hotel Simoncini
City-centre convenience in bright, compact rooms
6, rue de Notre-Dame
www.hotelsimoncini.lu

La Pipistrelle Hotel
Book well ahead for one of four beautiful boutique rooms
26, Montée du Grund
www.pipistrelle.lu

Hotel Le Place d'Armes
Seven enchanting antique buildings combine to form one gorgeous five-star hotel
18, Place d'Armes
www.hotel-leplacedarmes.com



UM PLATEAU

EAT

Um Plateau
A large, stylish bar and great terrace for fine dining and evening drinks
6, Plateau Altmünster
www.umplateau.lu

Clairefontaine
Luxembourg's rightful dining institute, expensive and unequalled
9, pl. de Clairefontaine
www.restaurantclairefontaine.lu

Limbo
East meets West meets North and South in this imaginative, exciting restaurant
7, Cote d'Eich