

**O**n the wide main square of the Place d'Armes, in the centre of Luxembourg City's old town, stall-holders are peddling delicious-smelling smoked sausages, crisp potato pancakes and steaming mugs of *glühwein*. Like many European destinations, the city makes a big deal out of Christmas, and anyone who's been to Prague, Vienna or Lille in December will recognise the festive atmosphere.

It's just one reason to visit the little country of Luxembourg – only 60 miles long and 40 miles wide, with a population of 550,000. But even outside the Christmas season it's worth a trip, for Luxembourg boasts some of the best scenery, culture and cuisine that Europe has to offer.

Although somewhat overshadowed by its bigger and better known neighbours of Belgium, France and Germany, Luxembourg actually wields substantial influence. It was instrumental in the founding of the European Union, it's the seat of the European Court of Justice, and the Schengen Agreement was signed here, in the little town it was named after. And because it has belonged, at various times over the past few centuries, to both France and Germany, among others, the country will seem comfortingly familiar to visitors who regularly holiday in those countries.

I discover just how much while strolling around Luxembourg City, the capital; its old town, Grund,

features the type of half-timbered houses lining the river, Alzette, that you might see in Strasbourg, in eastern France. And at one dinner, I order *spaetzle*, a hearty

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The Christmas market in Luxembourg City



Laura Millar discovers a long weekend in Luxembourg is a perfect winter treat

German dish of buttery noodles, followed by *schnitzel*. It seems recognisable, yet different, as the locals speak a dialect known as Luxembourgish, which sounds like a mixture of Flemish and German.

A good place to start getting a grip on Luxembourg's history – notably how many times

it changed hands before becoming independent in 1867 – is at the Luxembourg City History Museum, a modern glass and stone building made from several converted townhouses. It also illustrates the capital's unique formation: it's essentially built on a series of plateaus, surrounded by deep valleys formed by ancient

ivers, which has earned its magnificent fortress the nickname 'Gibraltar of the North'. Decades ago, the only way to get down to Grund from the 'Ville Haute' (or 'high town') was to walk along a very long and very snaking road. Now, it takes a matter of seconds in a lift.

A few steps across from the museum is the imposing Cathedral of Notre Dame, its interiors a mix of Renaissance, baroque and Gothic architecture. ▶







The Adolphe Bridge and National Savings Bank



Cheese spaetzle with broccoli

Exiting through the other side takes me out to Constitution Square, site of the statue of the Golden Lady, an iconic figure perched atop an obelisk. Dating from 1923, she symbolises Luxembourg's independence, though she was removed from her pedestal during the Second World War by the Germans, who broke her into three pieces and hid her under the local football stadium. Thankfully, she was subsequently found and reinstated in 1985. Behind her, over on Plateau Bourbon, is the elaborate, turreted National Savings Bank, which looks more like Hogwarts; connecting it to the Ville Haute are two distinctive bridges, the Passerelle viaduct and the magnificently arched Adolphe Bridge, named after a former Grand Duke.

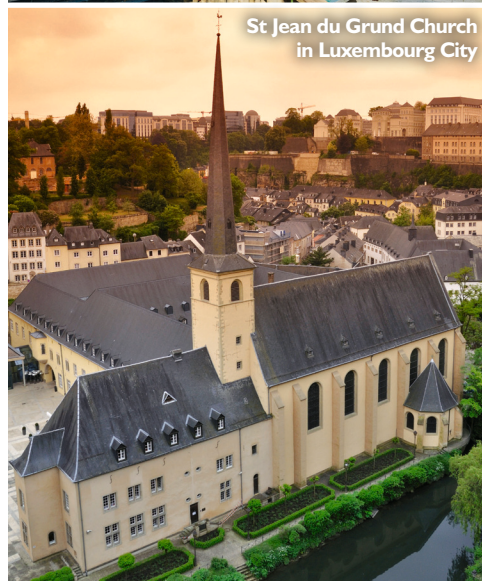
Back on the other side of the town, and perched above Grund, are the UNESCO-listed old fortifications of Bock, known as the casemates. The rocky cliffs used to house various armies over the centuries, with its original construction dating from the 10th and 11th centuries. Today you can wander through the several miles of tunnels which were dug out by soldiers, seeing the rooms in which they would have lived while under attack, or where they stored their weapons.

But just as interesting is the scenery outside the city, which is peppered with ancient castles, hiking trails, and wineries. Even better is the fact that none of these take long to get to by car. I start by exploring the Mullerthal region, nicknamed 'Little Switzerland' due to its craggy, hilly landscape. It's home to Beaufort Castle, originally built in the 11th century and added to in the 17th. The medieval remains are well preserved, with a fascinating underground torture chamber which provides a grisly, *Game Of Thrones*-type thrill, because it's been furnished with recreations of popular torture instruments of the time, such as the rack.

In need of a bracing beverage, I head to Moselle, a wine-producing region located since Roman times along the river of the same name, with a mild climate perfect for growing grapes. The main drink produced is Crémant, a delicious sparkling wine made from various grape blends. At the Caves St Martin, I take a tour of its cellars – the oldest in the country, built right out of the rock – and sample a few of its wines. The chilled Crémant is fizzy, and festive; the perfect pre-Christmas aperitif. Cheers, *santé* and *prost*!



Notre Dame Cathedral



St Jean du Grund Church in Luxembourg City

## Ten things you must do in Luxembourg

- 1 Try a shot of Cassero, a fruity blackcurrant liqueur made at Beaufort Castle.
- 2 Eat *Rieslingspaschteit*, their version of a pork pie, made with Riesling jelly.
- 3 Try out the Tree Climber experience in Bildchensbësch forest, which boasts a range of zip lines and climbing routes. See [vianden-info.lu](http://vianden-info.lu).
- 4 Check out Luxembourg City's Museum of Modern Art, designed by iconic architect IM Pei. See [mudam.lu](http://mudam.lu).
- 5 The famous Family of Man photography exhibition at Clervaux Castle is a superb collection featuring work by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Ansel Adams. Visit [steichen.collections.lu](http://steichen.collections.lu).
- 6 Bring home a box of *baumkuchen*, circular orange and almond biscuits baked around a stick. Find them at an iconic patisserie like Oberweis. See [oberweis.lu](http://oberweis.lu).
- 7 Spot the suits of armour at Vianden Castle, one of the biggest Gothic castles in Europe. Visit [castle-vianden.lu](http://castle-vianden.lu).
- 8 Visit the statue of Grand Duchesse Charlotte in Clarefontaine Square; she helped persuade Franklin D Roosevelt to involve America in the war against Germany.
- 9 Wander round the l'Ilot Gastronomique, a collection of delicious restaurants in Luxembourg City, and enjoy a taste sensation.
- 10 Visit the Battle of the Bulge Museum and see where this Second World War conflict took place in the Ardennes region. See [visit.luxembourg.com](http://visit.luxembourg.com).

### WAY TO GO

Ryanair has recently launched direct flights from London to Luxembourg City from £18 one way ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)). Double rooms at the Park Inn hotel cost from £88 per night. Visit [parkinn.com](http://parkinn.com).