

Luxembourg: A little nation with large appeal

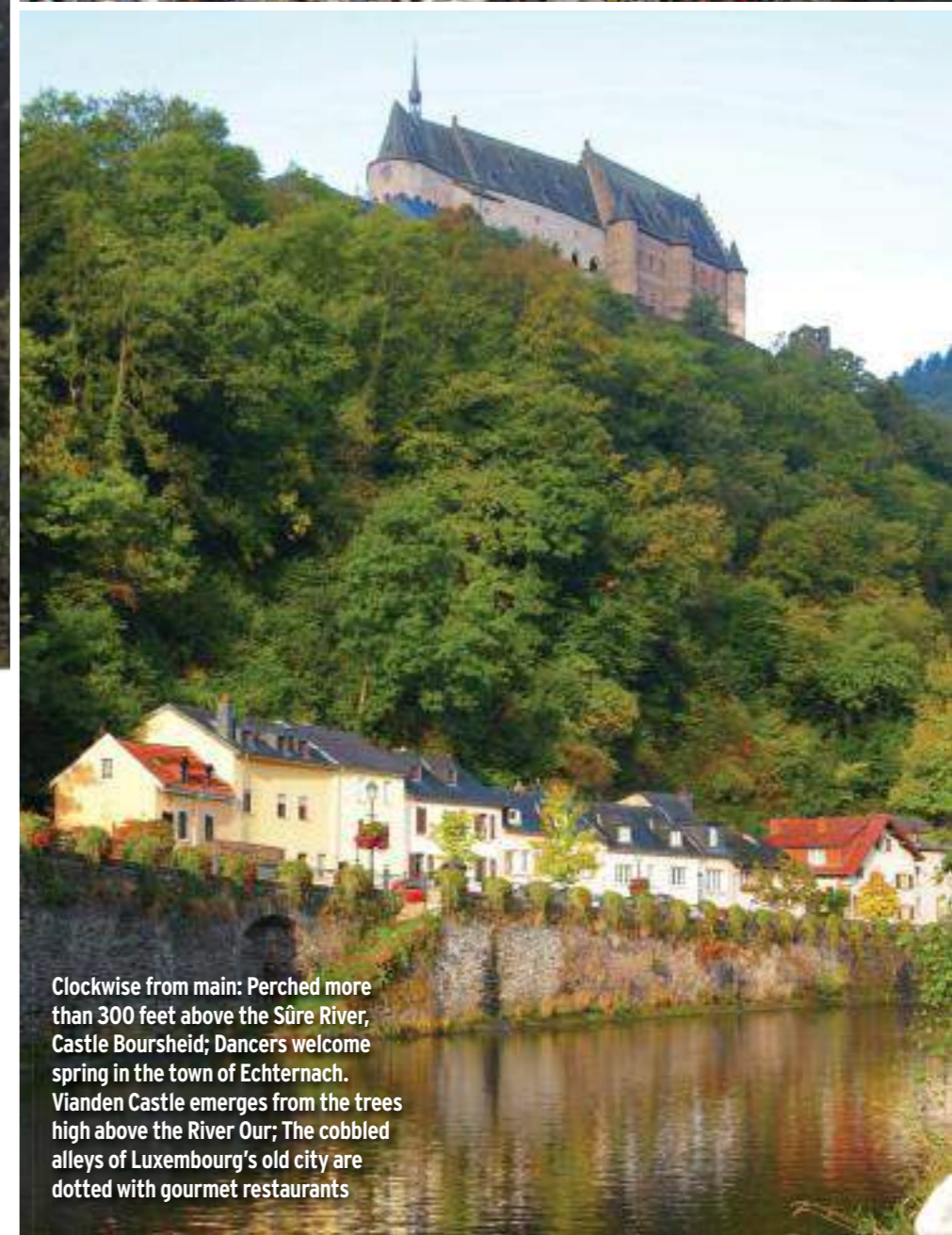
Best known for its Sixties radio station and EU bureaucracy, little Luxembourg is an alluring land of fairytale forests and fortresses, reports **Norman Wright**

TILED TURRETS and castle walls emerged from the treetops high above the old town. Early-morning sun caught the Grand Duke of Luxembourg's standard, flying proudly in an autumn breeze as a sleepy Sunday morning came to life with a few wisps of smoke from the cottage chimneys and the smell of freshly baked bread.

The winding stroll up through the streets of Vianden from the River Our to the castle was one that the French poet and novelist Victor Hugo would have taken many times. The author of *Les Misérables* loved the Ardennes town and he wrote in 1871 after being expelled from Belgium:

"Vianden, embedded in a splendid landscape, will be visited one day by tourists from the whole of Europe, attracted both by its sinister but magnificent ruin and by its cheerful and happy people."

Hugo wouldn't recognise the castle now. No longer a ruin after being superbly restored from rubble following its transfer into State ownership by the Grand Ducal family in 1977, it is now fairytale rather than sinister. The people



are still cheerful and happy, though, if Bart and Wil Peverelli, owners of the Grand Hotel de Vianden, are anything to go by.

After serving an excellent evening meal for our coach party Bart held court in the bar armed with a guitar and an endless repertoire of pop, rock and blues songs to get everyone singing along.

So a spot of fresh air and a walk up to the castle was just what we needed the following morning.

The Grand Hotel is in lower Vianden near the riverside promenade. The castle is over the bridge that links the two parts of town.

On the corner next to the bridge is the house where Hugo stayed, now a museum

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Les Misérables author Victor Hugo

of his life in the town. On the bridge is Rodin's famous bust of the author, a present of the French Senate.

However, Hugo boarded his wife and household in the inn opposite, the Hotel Koch, leaving him free to entertain his mistresses, including an 18-year-old.

Shortly after his arrival from Belgium in

1871 Hugo, approaching his 70th birthday, helped organise the townspeople when fire broke out in the thatched roofs of a dozen houses close to the bridge. With the mayor out of town, his quick thinking in setting up a fire bucket chain from the river and then assisting at the blaze demonstrated his love of the community.

Hugo first discovered the town in 1862 during a trip through Luxembourg and the Ardennes. He had further stays during the 1860s, extolling the virtues of the medieval cobbled streets and the surrounding scenery of the Ardennes forest.

"Your town is not well-known enough; it is not known as it should be, I shall do all I possibly can to make it better known and to

Clockwise from main: Perched more than 300 feet above the Sûre River, Castle Boursheid; Dancers welcome spring in the town of Echternach. Vianden Castle emerges from the trees high above the River Our; The cobbled alleys of Luxembourg's old city are dotted with gourmet restaurants



The River Alzette winds through Luxembourg city

contribute to its prosperity,” he later wrote. The castle is now the most visited attraction in Luxembourg, so Hugo’s efforts have had some success. But this little country, a triangle between Belgium, Germany and France, is more famous in Britain for the pop music we used to listen to in the Sixties, despite the crackling, fading airwaves, than as a beautiful and interesting place to visit.

In recent times it has also been a symbol of the EU, not necessarily popular with many. In truth Luxembourg should be a tourist destination for more of us. Its fairytale forests and castles, its history, both medieval and 20th century, and its food and hospitality are only a Channel-hop and a few hours’ drive away.

It’s a perfect destination for a coach tour and many UK coach operators include it on their roster. We discovered Luxembourg that way.

Our Buzzlines Travel luxury coach crossed from Dover to Dunkirk on the 10am DFDS ferry, also pretty luxurious itself. By teatime we were enjoying Bart and Wil’s hospitality at the Grand Hotel. With someone else doing the driving and an elevated viewing position, it’s a good ride through northern France, skirting Brussels and then up through the Ardennes.

Vianden is a good base to explore, set in the north-east of the Grand Duchy, near the German border. Before you venture further afield, however, the town itself has



The garden quarter of Luxembourg City in the valley below the old city

plenty to offer. By the 15th century, Vianden was famous for its artists and craftsmen, the latter grouped into seven corporations: the tanners, drapers, coopers, masons, tailors, locksmiths and goldsmiths.

The Musée d’Histoire de la Ville de Vianden does just what its name suggests.

Take the stroll up from the bridge to Vianden Castle, which was constructed between the 11th and 14th centuries on the foundations of a Roman castellum and a Carolingian refuge.

Until the beginning of the 15th century it was the seat of the influential counts of Vianden who could boast their close connections to the royal family of France

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and the German imperial court. In fact it is really a castle palace.

In 1820, under the reign of King William I of Holland, the castle was sold piece by piece, and as a result, it fell into a state of ruin. It was a pile of rubble until the family of the Grand Duke of Luxembourg transferred it to State ownership in 1977.

The restoration is superb and a visit is

Clervaux castle in the little town is the home of the Family of Man exhibition of 500 photographs by more than 60 photographers





well worth the effort in getting there (there's a car park at the top). The views across the town and the valley from the ramparts are stunning.

As you walk up, you should call in at the Trinitarian Church. The Trinitarian monks built the church with its two naves and its splendid Gothic vaults in 1248. They had been summoned to Vianden by Count Henry I, whose father had been freed from Saracen captivity by Trinitarians during the Crusades.

Above the entrance portal of the

church there is a very beautiful statue representing the Virgin Mary and the Child dating from the 14th century. The Trinitarian Church was restored after a great fire in 1498. The maintenance of the left nave was a duty that fell on the parishioners, whereas the right nave was looked after by the monks,

Vianden boasts the only chair lift in the Grand Duchy, from the lower town up to a hilltop at 1443ft and to enjoy a gorgeous panorama over the Our Valley.

From Vianden it is only a few miles across the border to Trier, the oldest town in Germany with more than 2000 years as a continuous community.

Founded by the Romans under Emperor Augustus on the banks of the mighty River Moselle, it still has splendid remains of the Roman period when it was capital of their Western Province with

“You can see the ingenious mechanism the Romans used to flood the arena to recreate sea battles”

responsibility for lands from Scotland to North Africa. The Porta Nigra is the best preserved and dominates the centre of town. It was the main entrance to the Roman city, a towering structure built with huge sawn blocks of stone. Its name came in medieval times when pollution



Clockwise from top left: The beautiful ornate Trinitarian Church in Vianden; The Hamm American Military Cemetery near Luxembourg city. Many casualties of the Battle of the Bulge and liberation lie here as well as General George Patton, killed in a freak car accident after the war had ended; Trier Cathedral a former palace from the Roman era

gave the stone a dark coating. The remains of the Roman amphitheatre are in good shape and you can descend under the arena to see the areas where the gladiators prepared and where slaves and wild animals were caged.

You can also see the ingenious mechanism the Romans used to flood the arena to recreate sea battles.

There are remains of Roman baths, the imperial throne room and the wonderful cathedral itself, built on the site of a Roman church.

Trier's claim to fame in more modern times is that it is the birthplace and home town of Karl Marx.

Back over the border we toured through Little Switzerland, a region of craggy forest, waterfalls, caves and rushing streams but nothing resembling an Alp. The highest point is about 1500ft but it's

nonetheless charming. War, particularly in 1939-45, has figured large in Luxembourg's story. Fighting was vicious in the Luxembourg and Belgian Ardennes 70 years ago when the Germans launched their last desperate attack on their western front in December 1944.

The ensuing Battle of the Bulge took only a few weeks for the Allies to suppress but cost thousands of lives of Allied and German troops as well as civilians, and devastated towns in Luxembourg.

The Hamm American War Cemetery near Luxembourg City, with its acres of rows of bone-white crosses, is a graphic reminder of just how many paid with their lives.

General George Patton was one of the victors of the battle when he wheeled his Third Army to the rescue. He survived beyond VE day only to die in a freak slow-speed car accident a few weeks into the

peace. He is also at rest in Hamm Cemetery.

Luxembourg City is itself an ancient town with some striking new areas, including the ultra-modern European Union district of glass and high-rise offices.

After a brief coach ride around this to see how our taxes are being spent, we concentrated on the older parts of the city on an easy walking tour. There's plenty to see and some excellent restaurants and pavement cafés.

Vineyards in the Moselle Valley are usually on most coach tour itineraries and on the way home many stop off in Bastogne for Battle of the Bulge history or in Brussels or Bruges.

Visiting was a real surprise, revealing just how much a little state, often forgotten, has to offer.

Passport to Luxembourg

Luxembourg is a popular destination for coach tours, being ideal for short breaks, with many of the coach companies which are members of the Coach Tourism Council offering tours. They can be found on the website: (www.findacoachholiday.com).

Package prices for tours to the Grand Hotel de Vianden offer great value for money, with five-day/four-night trips starting from as little as £200pp and on average from less than £300pp. All generally include half-board hotel accommodation, excursions and of course travel by coach and Channel crossings, with departures from most areas in England, Scotland and Wales. The examples below are indicative of what is currently on offer for 2014 with prices including dinner, bed and breakfast and travel:

■ From throughout the UK, Leger Holidays has Silver Service five-day/four-night tours staying at the Grand on various dates this summer. Prices are from £375pp and include a walking tour of Vianden, visits to a vineyard, Luxembourg City, Trier and Echternach and touring through Little Switzerland, tel: 0944 846 0808, website: (www.leger.co.uk)

■ From throughout the Midlands, Harry Shaw has similar five-day/four-night tours in 2014 from £200pp in April and from £300 in July, tel: 024 7545 5544, website: (www.harryshaw.co.uk). Other operators to feature the Grand Hotel are Johnsons Coaches of Henley in Arden

■ From the Home Counties, East Anglia and the South East, Motts Travel and sister company Crusader Holidays has a choice of eight four-day or five-day tours (three or four nights) during 2014 from £219/£269pp, tel: 01255 425433, website: (www.crusader-holidays.co.uk)

■ From Sheffield and South Yorkshire, Wilfreda has five-day tours from £269 featuring Trier, Luxembourg City and Vianden, tel: 01302 330330, website: (www.wilfreda.co.uk)

■ Angela Holidays, picking up from Clackett Lane and the Channel Tunnel, has a five-night/four-day tour to Vianden from £269pp, tel: 023 8040 4536, website: (www.angelaholidays.co.uk)

■ From Scotland and the North of England, Glenton Holidays will be celebrating Hogmanay at the Grand Hotel on a five-day tour over the New Year (from £449), tel: 08000 242424, website: (www.glentenholidays.co.uk).