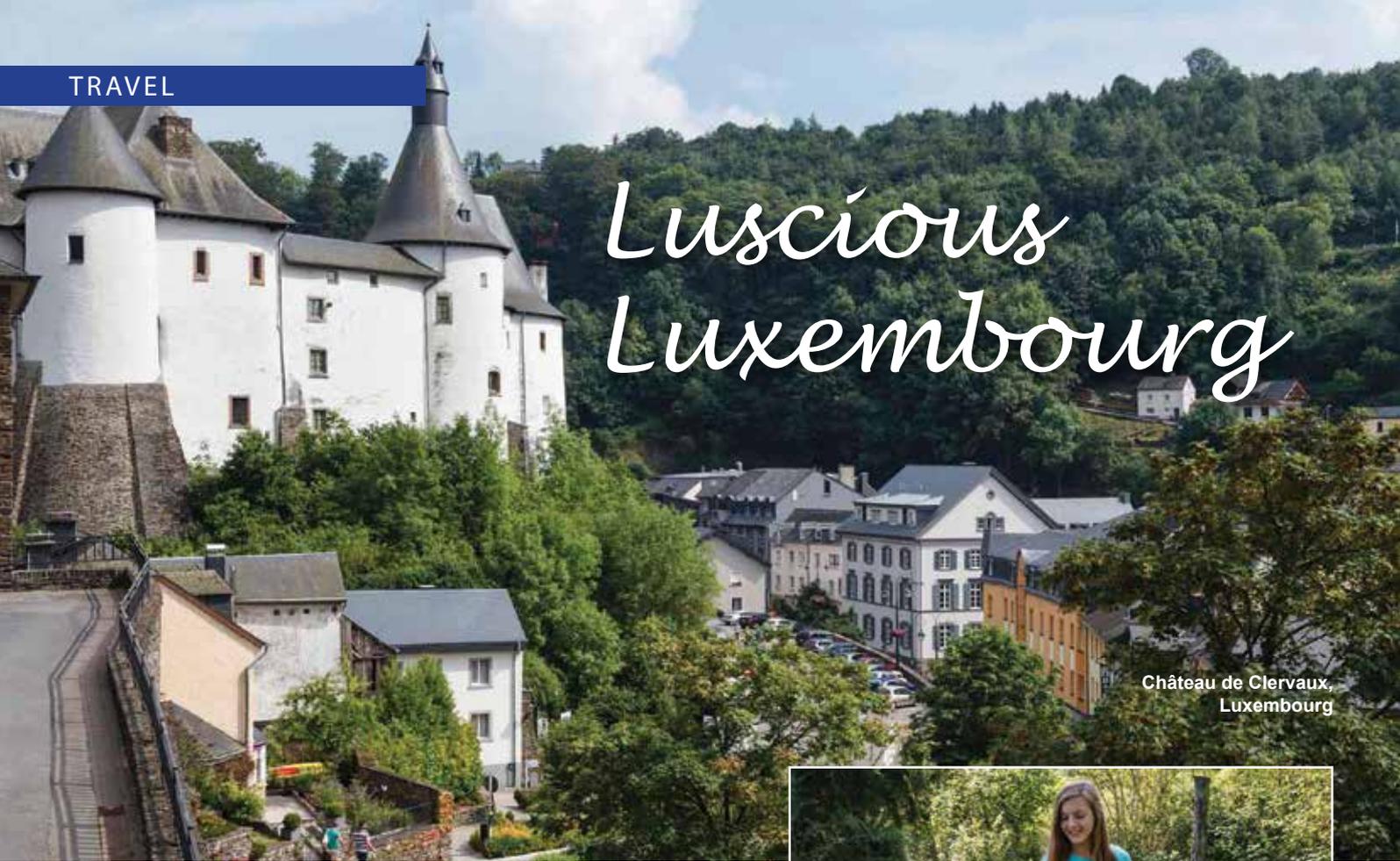


Luscious Luxembourg



Château de Clervaux,
Luxembourg

Hiking trails, lakes and nature parks, a stunning capital and some amazing castles

Words by Helen Werin; Photography by Robin Weaver

I knew Luxembourg was small, but it wasn't until I looked at the map of Benelux that I realised just how little it is. Up against the Netherlands and Belgium, pretty modest-sized countries themselves, it looked positively tiny.

Nowhere in Luxembourg is more than one hour away at most, so the tourist 'blurb' said. This was something I was going to dispute throughout our travels around the Grand Duchy. Many of the roads are so full of bends and wind through such scenic countryside that we just had to slow down to look or get out to explore. This meant that even short distances seemed to take forever.

I must admit that, when a friend suggested that Luxembourg was "about the size of your average English county", I had wondered if there was going to be enough to keep my family occupied for two whole weeks. Then I checked out the images at visitluxembourg.com. There was picture after picture of castles – and I love castles! And

these weren't just any old ruins either, but spectacular fortresses, with fairytale-like turrets emerging from dense woods. The tourist information also enthused about 5,000k (3,106 miles) of hiking trails; it described the Mullerthal region as Luxembourg's 'Little Switzerland' and displayed pictures of picturesque villages, striking buildings and deep, mossy valleys. We were hooked!

We travelled to Luxembourg via Wallonia and France. As soon as we crossed the western border, the roads became very noticeably smoother and the entire landscape looked, well, neat. The lack of roadside enterprises and traffic was remarkable, even if it felt a bit unfamiliar in high summer.

We were staying on camp sites which also rent out comfortable chalets and mobile homes. At our first site, Camping Fussekaul, in the natural park of the Upper-Sûre, we bought money-saving Luxembourg Cards which gave us entry to more than 60 museums and tourist attractions and castles.



Sophie Weaver (14) tries one of the musical instruments on the Sentier Sonore, Hoscheid, Luxembourg



Château Vianden, Luxembourg



Esch sur Sûre, Luxembourg

I have to confess to disappointment at 12th century Clervaux Castle, but it was my own fault. We'd wanted to see the Family of Man photographic exhibition, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It being a Monday, the exhibition was closed. Our consolation was room after room of models of old Luxembourg palaces and castles and a visit to the fascinating little museum next door dedicated to the Battle of the Bulge, stuffed with weapons, uniforms and even food rations.

Clervaux is set in a deep, narrow valley with the Benedictine abbey of St Maurice high above the town. We were drawn to the parish church (1910) by the unusual pyramidal diamond-shaped roofs of its twin spires which give them a strikingly odd perspective. Bourscheid Castle is one of those castles straight out of a children's story book, standing in the most beautiful location on a rocky outcrop 150m (492ft) above the river. It was fun to explore with the great French writer, Victor Hugo, who visited here in 1865, as our 'host' for an audio tour and easy to agree with his descriptions of the views as "glorious".

It was more wonderful views from castle ruins which confronted us at Esche-sur-Sûre. This quaint village, around which the river bends, was to become something of a favourite spot. Steps led up to different parts of what is left of its castle. Some days we took narrow paths high in to the dense woods to a point above a bend in the river, one of the most photographed scenes in all of Luxembourg.

Looking out over the village towards

the castle, this was the perfect postcard cliché. Other days we splashed in the river at Esch. An unexpected shower found us sheltering in the old cloth factory that is now the House of the Natural Park of the Upper-Sûre, with displays showing the development of cloth-making.

Further up the Sûre valley at Lultzhausen and Insenborn are several 'beaches' around the 10k-long (six miles) Lac de la Haute-Sûre. These 'beaches' are sloping grassy areas with a narrow gravel strip edging the water and, as we discovered, a sudden drop-off. It was blissful to glide through the water's comfortable temperature surrounded by a thick border of pines and with the far-off sounds of children's laughter drifting through the still air.

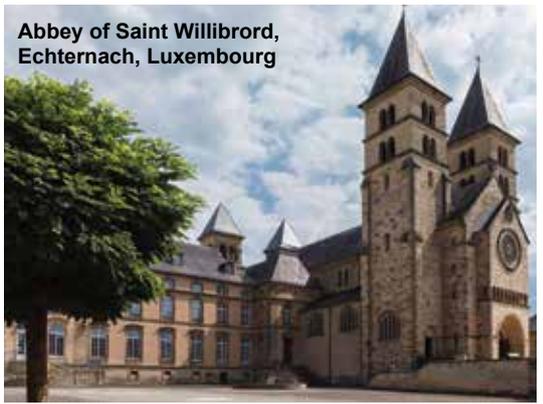
One of my daughter's favourite trails was the 6.5k (4 miles) Music Trail at Hoscheid. With names such as 'whispers of the wind' and 'song of



Walking the Mullerthal Trail near Nommern



Helen crosses the bridge over the Scheissetumpel waterfall near Waldbillig



Abbey of Saint Willibrord, Echternach, Luxembourg

the leaves', the promise of various musical instruments on which Sophie could make as much noise as she wanted lured her deeper in to a heavily-wooded valley. Not-so-tuneful pipes dangled from branches here; a bell-like instrument hung from high up in a tree there. This turned out to be harder than it looked to ring and we had many hilarious attempts to make a strike.

Our Luxembourg Cards gave us free public transport too, so we took a 15 minute bus ride to Ettelbruck from outside Camping Fussekaul and got off at the rail station for the 45 minute ride to the capital.

Our first impressions? Very interesting, especially as we glimpsed splendid fortifications and grand buildings from the train windows. The capital is set on the Bock promontory, a rocky outcrop surrounded by the deep gorge of the Alzette valley. From the bus station, we crossed the high Adolphe Bridge and followed a panoramic path around the promontory towards the Corniche, described as 'the most beautiful balcony in Europe'. It was so easy to get around on foot, passing the neoclassical Town Hall until we reached the Place of the Grand Dukes, with its stunning Flemish-Renaissance façade, in the middle of the Old Town. The staff at Fussekaul also told us that we absolutely must visit The Chocolate House, opposite the palace. As we sat there enjoying enormous slices of gateaux we could well imagine the duke popping out of his front door for a mug of hot chocolate. There are no barriers around this palace!

I was keen to see The Casements (another UNESCO World Heritage site); immense multi-level subterranean defensive passages. It was very easy to lose ourselves, literally and in our imaginations, in this honeycomb of dark, mysterious galleries, of which 17k remain. The first casements were built in 1644 and, during the two world wars they sheltered as many as 35,000 people. Now and then, at the end of spooky tunnels, we'd reach a viewpoint over the gorge. These views inspired us to return to the station via the Petrusse Valley, walking through peaceful gardens below the ramparts.

We'd seen pictures of Luxembourg's only

chairlift at Vianden in all the posters so drove the 23k (14.3 miles) from our next site, Europacamping Nommerlayen. We so enjoyed the chairlift across the river Our and 440m (1,443ft) up to the viewpoint that we rode up and down several times. We could happily have glided above the trees all day, as our Luxembourg Card allowed us to do, but our parking ticket was running out. We rushed back along rough paths in the woods above the town thinking; "If only we had more time to walk here".

The waterfall of the Scheissetumpel is another of Luxembourg's most photographed visitor hotpots. Being Welsh, I am perhaps used to far more spectacular falls, but the modest Scheissetumpel is spectacular. Outside Camping Auf Kengert at Medernach, we squelched through gloopy mud and crunched across bark and gravel on a barefoot walk. Without doubt, our loveliest walks were those in the woods above Europacamping Nommerlayen. Within minutes of crossing Nommerlayen's terraces and entering the trees, the camp site noises waned and we were on part of the 112k (69.5 miles) Mullerthal Trail. Each time we came up here we saw only a couple of other people. Narrow tracks took us through a deep carpet of leaves, even though it was high summer. We stooped to get under rocks and climbed over others, negotiating mossy steps, before coming to tall cliffs and then the tiny, but dramatic, gorge.

I rather hurriedly moved on from the creepy torture chamber at Beaufort Castle, too. It did not help that I'd gone down in to the basement on my own to be met by a variety of macabre instruments on which a prisoner would be stretched. To aid the imagination further, there were graphic diagrams of the rack, ladder and wheel to help the visitor

better visualise the punishment.

We'd been recommended to visit Luxembourg's oldest town, Echternach, on the border with Germany. This photogenic – but undeniably touristy – town is one of Europe's earliest centres of Christianity. While Robin, took pictures of the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Willibrord

and the church of St. Peter and St Paul, Sophie and I visited the crypts of the abbey museum to see dozens of copies of illuminated manuscripts, though some were original. Sophie could not resist repeatedly cartwheeling across the bridge to the German side, though it became immediately obvious to us that the German side was far shabbier, with potholes and cracked roads which we'd missed on our travels in Luxembourg

Our last day was spent exploring the Moselle region. In Grevenmacher, we walked alongside the river to The Butterfly Garden, where tiny birds with the brightest and most beautiful plumage also flitted among the foliage. We must have spent a couple of hours vainly trying to get butterflies to land on us. Nearby, cruise boats were offloading Australian and American tourists to walk the promenade.

We came to the point where the Moselle meets the Sûre and, at Wasserbillig, switched to the German side of the river. Now the valley sides were dotted with row upon row of vines and sunflowers. Much to Sophie's amusement we nipped in and out of Luxembourg and Germany, at times entirely losing track of whether we were in one country or the other.



Luxembourg City

Eventually, Sophie remarked; 'This is just silly. I must have been to Germany about 30 times today!'

We loved Luxembourg's incredibly romantic and peaceful landscape; its lakes and rivers and its laid-back charm. We particularly enjoyed some of its circular walks and hiking trails through the nature parks. And we were seriously impressed that, for such a tiny country, it packs in such a vast number of tourist attractions. No one seems to rush about, even in the capital, yet there's an enviable efficiency about its road links, transport and facilities. And don't get me going about Luxembourg's castles; I still have a few left to see!

* Helen and her family travelled on P&O Ferries' Hull-Zeebrugge route. Daily overnight sailings, with cabin included. Entertainment includes live music, casino and cinema, shopping, coffee shop, great value all-you-can-eat restaurant and fine dining on board. www.poferries.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

visitluxembourg.com

WHERE TO STAY

* Camping Fuussekaul, 4 Fuussekaul, L-9156 Heiderscheid, Luxembourg. +352 26 88 88 1, fuussekaul.lu Chalets/mobile homes are suitable for 4-6 persons (max.4 adults) and have a complete kitchen, living room with TV and gas heating, two bedrooms, bathroom with shower and a furnished terrace. There are 6 different types, three of which are also available during winter months.

* Europacamping Nommerlayen, Rue Nommerlayen, L-7465 Nommern, Luxembourg. +352 87 80 78, nommerlayen-ec.lu Mobile homes and chalets for rent. As with Fuussekaul, this site also has an entertainment/activities programme during the main holiday season. The site is an ideal starting point for beautiful walks through the Nommerlayen forest.



St John's Church from the Bock Casemates, Luxembourg City