

## 021028 Letzebuergesch

My train from Brussels arrived in Luxembourg City a little after 19:00 (point of reference, Luxembourg is the name of both the country and the capital city). Upon my arrival, my first goal was to find the youth hostel where I would be spending the night. I had a rough idea where the hostel was located and an even rougher map of the city in my guidebook. I threw my bag on my back and set out towards the old part of the city. I walked for a few blocks along the main street when I came to a place where the buildings ended and a bridge spanned out into the abyss before me. I was met by a steep valley that way perhaps 40 meters deep and twice as wide. The opposite side from where I stood was a sheer drop down to the river below that wound its way along the valley. The walls on the opposite side were an opposing array of living rock and bricks piled high to create the promontory where the old city lay. The church spires and roof tops of the old city jutted forth from the impenetrable fortress created by the valleys with an imposing beauty. To my left I could see the valley and cliffs continue as they wound to the right of the old city and out of sight. To my right I could see the valley wind to the left with fortifications on each side of the valley and houses on the terraced slopes opposite from the old city. Through the mist of the drizzling rain, I could see trees in the basin of the valley below as well as paths which wandered along the rivers edge. From the first glance, the ancient capital was stunning.

The sheer sided walls were key to the city's defense and made it a much sought after prize. The city was founded by Sigefroi in 963 when he built his castle upon the natural promontory overlooking the Petrusse and Alzette Rivers. Besieged, rebuilt and expanded more than 20 times, the city became the second strongest fortress in Europe after Gibraltar, hence the name given to the city of "Gibraltar of the North". The city is the official residence of the Grand Duke as well as being home to several of the key EU institutions and over 250 financial institutions.

Luxembourg is the only Grand Duchy in the world. The term Grand Duchy means that the country is ruled over by a grand duke or grand duchess. The current Grand Duke is Henri who is currently the youngest monarch in Europe. The country itself is only 82km long and 57km wide (smaller than the state of Rhode Island), making Luxembourg the sixth smallest country in the world. One third of the 2587 sq km are covered by forests with steel and industry dominating the south east of the country in an area called the Land of Red Rocks. The steel industry forms part of the backbone of the economy in addition to the banking, tourism agriculture and wine growing. It was the banking industry which revived the country after the steel industry declined in the 1970s. The country now boasts the lowest unemployment numbers in Europe. The economy has also been boosted by upwards to 80,000 commuters who live in the neighboring countries.

Luxembourg considers itself to be one of the "capitals of Europe" and therefore the inhabitants speak French and German in addition to the official language of Letzebuergesch (Luxembourgish) as well as having a good understanding of English. During the two years of compulsory preschool, the students are taught only in Letzebuergesch. At the start of primary school, German is introduced and in the second year, French is added. The French and German languages are then both used throughout the secondary education.

After taking in the views of the city from the bridge which gracefully spanned the valley, I wandered across and into the old city. The cobblestone, narrow streets with narrower sidewalks wound through the three story buildings with facades of whites and yellows. Although the city is over a thousand years old, most of the buildings in the old city are from the 18th and 19th centuries. In addition to being formed by the valleys, the city is centered around two squares. After wandering through the city square and past the Grand Ducal Palace with its Renaissance front and the Notre Dame Cathedral with its two spires reaching out into the night, I found my way along a road on the crown of the Bock Casemates and then descended down into the valley below. I had seen pictures of the hostel on the internet and so I was able to quickly find the building. I checked into my unoccupied dormitory room with eight beds before heading back out to check out the city.

After wondering around for an hour or so and checking out the local brew, Mousel, I wandered back and was met by the first of my roommates, Frank from the Netherlands. Frank was in his 50's and was taking a short holiday to coincide with the holiday of one of his sons who was at camp in the Netherlands for the weekend. Frank was in Luxembourg to take walking tours of several of the cities. Another roommate was Dimitri from Moscow who surprised me by wandering into the room wearing a suit and tie. He had just arrived from the airport for a week of business and fun in the city. Both were really good guys and we all got along well, especially since we were all on the same schedule of going to bed around 23:00 and waking up at 7:00. We also had a fourth in the room whose name I can not remember. He was much younger and probably was not very thrilled to be with us since he wanted to go to bed late and wake up late. He should have been in the room next store which was full of students from the US on holiday and eager to party all night. He left after the first night, possibly for another destination or possibly for a more party oriented room.

We all got up the next morning which was Sunday and after a shower, I headed down to breakfast with my roommates with much expectation. However, Micah Thomas and I had been spoiled by the hostels in the Netherlands which offered as part of the room cost the amazing breakfasts about which I wrote. The hostels in Luxembourg did come with bed sheets (the ones in Norway do not, but the sheets can be rented), but the breakfast paled in comparison to the Dutch ones. There was not even yogurt for the musli, but it was still a good breakfast.

I wandered over past the Notre Dame Cathedral where I was met by a parade by the military band. That Sunday was some sort of anniversary from World War II and so the prime minister was attending a memorial service at the church. The current military in Luxembourg is made up of volunteers who number 200, including the large number in the band. Although the army is small, they have participated in a large number of UN missions, notably Korea in the 1950's where a large number were lost.

I went over to the tourist office where I purchased a Luxembourg Card for the day which allowed me free entrance to numerous museums and sites as well as free access to any public transportation in the country. The card also included a guided walking tour of the city. Not bad for only €9. My first stop was the Musee d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg (Museum of the history of Luxembourg City). The museum

was in a renovated building complex with six floors of displays, starting in the lowest level. One descended to the lowest level via a Swiss made glass elevator which was bigger than my room in Copenhagen. The elevator was approximately 5m x 5m and even had seats in the corners. The walls were made of glass, exposing the original stone work of the building.

The displays in the museum had descriptions in French and German, but I could follow along with my English guide issued to me by the staff. The displays which I found to be the most interesting were scale models of the city during several stages in its history. The series of models showed the growth of the city as well as the increasing complexity and strength of the walls and fortifications. As Luxembourg changed hands from one power to another, each seems to have sent their best military planners to the city to add to the fortifications. The French fortress builder, Vauban is especially noted for his work in creating the powerful fortress. At its pinnacle, the fortress had several stages of battlements that extended well beyond the city walls. There were even sluice gates installed in the walls that spanned the river which allowed the rivers to be flooded to create a moat around the city.

In the 1867 Treaty of London, Luxembourg was declared a neutral country. In the political speak of the day, it would seem that this meant that any neutral city was to be rendered defenseless. Plus advances in the art of war had rendered elaborate city walls useless and only a hindrance to the growth of the city. The walls and elaborate battlements were torn down with relish during a project that took sixteen years, leaving little but ruins and those parts which could not be destroyed without destroying the city along with them. The remains of the wall were sifted through and bricks were salvaged for other building projects. Centuries later, the city has realized the draw of the ancient fortifications on tourists to the city and some parts have been reconstructed. The historical value of the old fortifications was recognized in 1994 when the city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The top three floors of the museum were devoted to the documentation of the Nazi occupation of the country during World War II. The people of Luxembourg were as excited as their neighbors at being occupied, an attitude conveyed in the displays. Luxembourg was occupied in 1940 during a surprise attack against the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. A resistance movement was created in the north of the country, but the country fared badly during the war. Many Luxembourg men were conscripted into the German army and were later sent to prison camps outside of Moscow. And in 1944, much of the country was reduced to mud and rubble during the Battle of the Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge). The appreciation shown by the people of Luxembourg for their liberation can be seen by the names of the main streets in the city such as Boulevard Roosevelt or Boulevard General Patton as well as monuments throughout the country to the liberation by the US forces. (I am actually going to mention the Battle of the Bulge a lot in these emails since reminders of the war are still seen all over the country. I think that my emails have shown that I am more of a dove than a hawk, but I do find military history to be interesting.)

After a few hours, I left the museum and went for lunch at a French bakery near the main square. I selected a seat upstairs where there was seating at long, wooden tables which you shared with others. The menus were in French and since my mastery of the language is laughable, I wound up ordering a bit more than I had expected. I

could guess a lot of the words based on my English and Danish, but I did not realize that "et ses toasts garnis" beside the "soupe de tomates au cumin" meant that I would be getting six pieces of toast garnished with goodies along with my soup. So, I also ordered a "jambon blanc et bevire" (open ham sandwich with random pieces of pickle and tomato). Of course, once the waiter put down the soup, I realized my mistake. But, I have a bad habit of blowing off the extra things on menus that I don't understand. A habit which got me into trouble once or twice in China.

After lunch, I took the walking tour of the city. For the next two hours, our guide explained to our group of about a dozen about the buildings of the city in German, French and English. We even got to sample wine and cheese made in the country. After the tour concluded, I went over to explore the Bock Casemates. As part of the fortifications of the city, over 23km of underground casemates were built as shelter for the soldiers and their horses as well as serving as kitchens, workshops and other necessary functions. There were amazing spiral staircases bored over 40m down into the living rock as well as chambers that held cannons that looked out over the valley. Much of the Bock was blown up in 1875 as part of the demolition of the fortifications, but the casemates proved impossible to dismantle without destroying the city. The casemates would prove usefully again during the world wars when over 35,000 people used the tunnels as shelter in case of air raids and shelling.

I wrapped up the evening by renting a bike, going to mass at Notre Dame and getting dinner. Dinner surprised me because I was asked if I wanted smoking or nonsmoking. Nonsmoking sections here in Europe? I returned to the hostel to find Frank and Dimitri hanging out in the main lobby with an Israeli woman who had just arrived. Dimitri asked her why she had come to Europe instead of visiting the countries neighboring Israel. She explained with a sense of disbelief that all of the neighboring countries were Arab countries and her government had warned its citizens that it is just not safe to visit any Arab country at the moment. She then turned to me and remarked that I could not safely travel to any of the countries either. Unfortunately true.

Coming next: the biking begins and I get lost within minutes of my departure. Stay tuned.

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