

## 021104 Velo Tour of Luxembourg: Luxembourg City to Echternach

The next morning Monday, October 14, I got ready to set out for my first day of cycling. I was making some last minute adjustments to my pack when Dimitri, my Russian roommate who was getting ready for a meeting and must have seen that I was anxious to start my trip, gave me some very good advice. He stopped me told me to go into the bathroom, to look at myself in the mirror and to tell myself that everything would be all right. I recommend it. I got my things together and after bidding farewell to Dimitri, strapped my bag to my bike and set off. It only took a few minutes for the bags to fall back off the bike as I was climbing the steep side of the promontory of Luxembourg. After picking up the bag, I was able to figure out a much better method. My bike, (named a Checkered Pig) had a rack over the back tire to which I lashed my backpack using the straps from the backpacks and the cable lock that came with the bike.

I had with me a pack rain cover made by EMS which I could use to cover over the bag in the case of rain. I had my Gore-Tex parka as well as a fleece to keep me warm and often I would take off the parka during the warmth of the day. My pants were made of Supplex which are light and dry very quickly in the case of rain and I wore them over a pair of cycling shorts. And of course, I had on a helmet as well as my cycle glasses with interchangeable lenses to protect my eyes even if it was not sunny. My Gore-Tex boots kept my feet warm and dry and I had gloves as well. All of the precautions against the rain and cold meant that I could just enjoy the ride and would eventually pay off.

I had purchased a book listing the bicycle routes in Luxembourg as well as the accompanying map of the routes. The book had warned that the routes were badly marked in some places, but I was not prepared for just how much of an understatement this warning was. What was worse was that the map was misleading. The cycling map was an adaptation of another map and the colored lines on the map used to indicate the cycling routes often covered over the names and numbers of the roads along which the cycling routes ran.

My first goal was to get myself to the EU section of the city which is removed from the old city by one of the valleys. The EU buildings were being built on the top of a plateau and the area was a mecca for construction. Roads and buildings were being constructed everywhere. The buildings included the Court of Justice as well as offices and other administrative buildings. I got myself turned around at one point, but after about 45 minutes of trying to figure out where in the EU area I was, I finally discovered what had happened. I made my way to the end of the EU area where I would find the start of the trail that I wanted to take to Echternach where I had made hostel reservations for the night. The route was a paved trail which wound its way through the woods at the end of the EU development. After being lost, I was filled with naive frivolity at finding the trail head and I set out on my way.

The parts of the cycling route which ran through the forest were great. The paths were of paved concrete and about a car width wide. Once I got on one of these cycle paths, everything was great until I reached a junction or a town. It is the towns that were the worst because the path ended and the route then continued along the streets and without frequent consultations with my map, it was easy to lose the route. I

learned this the hard way in the third kilometer of my ride. I entered my first town and naively went in the direction the route marker pointed. The road wound back and forth down the side of a steep hill for several kilometers, all the while I was getting more and more nervous that I had not seen another route marker. I stopped a few times to try to figure out where I was and finally, at the bottom of the hill, I figured out that I had gone several kilometers in the wrong direction. I had to backtrack up a lot of the hill until I reached a road which I thought would cross the route. The road eventually did cross the cycle route, but I had to stop every few minutes to check my alleged location and I had to climb some really monstrous hills. Forty five degree monstrous hills that left me drenched as one after another presented itself with sadistic glee. Finally, finally I found the route. I was so frustrated that I was only a few kilometers from the start of my ride, but I had taken hours to get there. I had already biked at least fifteen kilometers and all of the backtracking had cost me time and energy. From then on, at any crossroad I stopped to consult the map and although tricks presented themselves, I was on to their ruse and was no longer taken in.

Shortly after getting back on track, I had to stop to take a break for lunch of tuna from a bag (thanks Sue and Ginessa) as well as Power Bars and chocolate. I needed the break to settle down after such a frustrating start or I would not enjoy the ride ahead of me.

The ride from Luxembourg City to Echternach was about forty kilometers in length, not including all of the extra excursions that I took at the beginning of the ride. The trail would take me through little towns, but mostly through forests and pastures. The trail must be very popular during the summer because I would occasionally pass quaint little restaurants, pubs and stores that were set up in stone buildings along the way and seemed to cater to the cyclists. However, during the many hours of my ride I passed only one other cyclist and a two hikers until I reached the end stage of the ride.

Although the start of the route was quite hilly, the middle thirty kilometers of the route zigzagged through fields as I progressed along the rolling hills. The wide fields that opened up before me offered beautiful views of the surrounding pastoral countryside. The fields were dotted with scattered homes and stone barns. Most of the land was undeveloped or fields with most of the houses congregated in the hamlets, the location of which were marked by church spires. The people of Luxembourg are mostly Catholic and Mary is the patron saint of the country. I could see images of Mary in the churches as well as in shrines that I occasionally pedaled past.

My velo guide book did have had a few notes about the countryside that I passed through, but more about the history of the countryside that I was riding through would have been great. At one point, I passed in front of a large, yellow building standing on a hill with several large antennas reaching out from the hilltop. I would later find out that the building had been Radio Luxembourg during the war. In 1944, the Allies captured the transmitter and set up "Radio Anne" which the OSS used to broadcast messages at the same frequency as "Radio Berlin". The OSS transmitted demoralizing comments by German POW's who had volunteered to work for the allied secret services. The transmitter was closed during the onset of the Battle of the Bulge in 1944, but a few Allied forces reopened the transmitter on December 23 and were able to broadcast intelligence gleaned from the Germans.

The route was quite beautiful and would be the highlight of my cycling trip. Around kilometer thirty, the countryside began to become hilly again. The cycling route took up an old rail bed that had cut its way through the hills. I would eventually come upon a tunnel that bored its way through one of the hills which was pretty neat to cycle through. Once out the other side, I came upon a camp ground with about a dozen campers, mostly from The Netherlands and Belgium. The ride would continue through beautiful forest with rocky outcroppings on the sides of the trail as well as a stream. It was picturesque to be riding through the autumn colors of the forest and to be the only person around with only the babbling brook to my side to break the silence of the forest.

As I began to draw within a few kilometers of Echternach, the trail began to flatten out. The ride through the hills and forest had been slick with moisture and fallen leaves, but the park officials had been on the case. I was passed at one point by a machine that was driving along the trail and sweeping all of the leaves and debris off of the pavement. I also passed a family of bikers who must have been on a day trip from Echternach.

I rode through one little village that had a reconstructed bomb as part of a memorial near the bike path. Apparently, one of these large bombs had been discovered in a field in the 1990's. It had been dropped by a Flying Fortress which had to drop all of its ordinance after it came under attack during a bombing raid of Germany. How many other bombs and landmines still are hiding under the ground in Europe is anyone's guess.

I passed along Echternach Lake, the largest lake in Luxembourg where I had a rest and then shortly thereafter arrived at my destination of Echternach. Echternach is a beautiful little city on the bank of the River Sure which separates Luxembourg from Germany. The town has cobble stoned streets lined three to four story brick buildings. It is a small town dominated by the Basilica of St. Willibrord and an abbey. The basilica suffered substantial damage during the Battle of the Bulge as did the rest of the city. I later saw pictures taken of the city taken in 1945 and it is amazing how well the city has been restored. Echternach was bombed twice in 1944 during which time it changed hands back and forth between the Germans and the US Army. The 83rd occupied the city in early December 1944, but the Germans took it back on the 16th. Finally, Patton took the city on December 26, all of which left precious little of the city to claim.

The city is now really nice and a great place to spend a day or two. I arrived in town about 15 which was about two hours before the Youth Hostel would open. So, I wandered around the town for a while. I also crossed over a bridge into Germany just because I could. Luxembourg has lower prices than most of Europe for gasoline, beer and cigarettes and so lots of Germans, French, Dutch and Belgians commonly cross the border to purchase what they need. Finally, worn out from my trip, I settled down in a tea shop to wait till I could check into the hostel.

I really enjoy staying at the hostels. Don't get me wrong, choosing to share a room with eight strangers is putting myself outside of my comfort zone. I enjoy having my own space to unwind and on this trip, I needed my space to stretch after my long

rides. Plus, you risk being in a room with a group who wants to party all night. But, some of the best memories that I would take away from this trip would be the people that I met at the hostels at which I stayed. As the saying goes, measure your travels not in miles, but in the friends that you make along the way. Especially being a backpacker on my own, I was drawn into groups of other solo travelers with ease. So although, I did not make friends with a lot of people in the towns of Luxembourg through which I passed, I did meet people from all over in the hostels. I would never have traded those experiences for a sterile hotel room of my own. (Note that you can also get private rooms at the hostels, but they cost more than the dormitory rooms).

I checked into the hostel to find the belongings of one other person already in the room. I got cleaned up from my day of riding and set out on the town in search of dinner. During my wanderings in the afternoon, I had already decided upon a Chinese restaurant for dinner and it wound up being a great experience. I was met at the door by a Chinese woman who welcomed me in both French and German since the local inhabitants speak both languages. Rather than to ask her to speak English, I switched to Mandarin and she was willing to be patient with my Chinese which was a lot of fun. Dinner was delicious and very filling, just what I needed after a long day.

I wandered the city a bit more before returning to my room for the night. Eventually, my roommate for the night came in. He was originally from France, but was working as a chef in Luxembourg. We chatted for quite a while before turning off the lights for the night. Some of what he told me was a bit confusing because his English was a bit confused and my French had already proved to be unreliable and I had to infer from context of the English. He was thirty-two years old and was working in Luxembourg as a dessert chef because the money was fantastic in Luxembourg (Luxembourg has more Michelin-starred restaurants per square kilometer than any other country in the world). Plus he said that he liked Luxembourg better than his native Paris because there were a lot less immigrants (referring to Muslim and Eastern European), a comment which put me off a bit but is shared by a lot of people in Europe at the moment. I told him about Denmark and he was amazed that there were only five million Danes. But then I got him on the topic of food and he set my mouth watering by describing some of the dishes that he liked to cook. I went to bed eagerly awaiting my breakfast the next morning.

Jeff

p.s. For those of you living in the US, please don't forget to vote tomorrow!

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 [Previous](#) | [Next](#)  | [Return to Main Page](#)

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