

It has gripping history, awe-inspiring castles and fine food, The only tourist in Luxembourg

NO ONE goes to Luxembourg. At least, not if they're a tourist. And why would they? It has nothing to offer except banks, rain and grey-suited Eurocrats. It doesn't even get a ranking in the league of popular European city-break destinations.

So why are you going? It was the question everyone asked when I announced my plans for a week-end break.

'Why not?' I've done Venice. The flights to Barcelona and Dublin were full. And Prague these days is so packed with stag-night parties that it's a struggle to get to the bar.

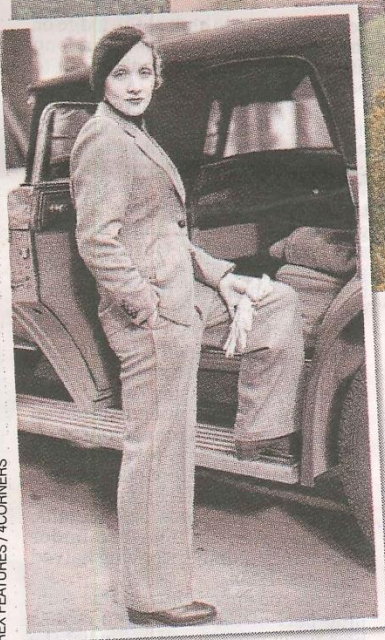
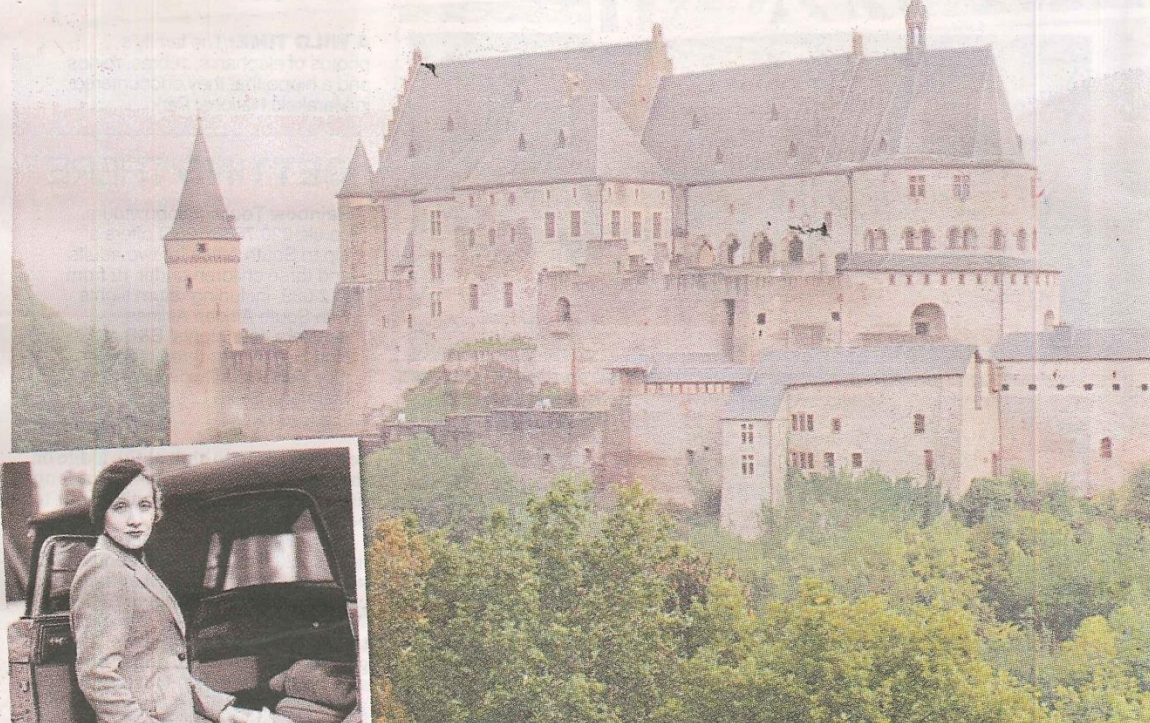
All this seemed to make Luxembourg rather special, a place so rarely visited that no one could tell me anything about it apart from clichés. So: will the real Luxembourg please stand up?

'Let's begin with a few facts,' said Lis, my guide, on my first morning in the country. Fact One: Luxembourg is the only Grand Duchy in the world. Fact Two: at less than 1,000 square miles, it's smaller than Oxfordshire. Fact Three: it has a standing army of 450 soldiers and two tanks.

Two tanks. Little wonder, then, that this diminutive country was conquered by Hitler's panzer divisions in the blink of an eye. They rolled across the frontier shortly before dawn on May 10, 1940. By noon, the country had capitulated and was part of the Third Reich.

'You're interested in the war?' asked Lis. 'Then you must go to the town of Diekirch. You'll soon see why.'

Diekirch, a half-hour drive from Luxembourg City, is a pretty enough place set in the rural heartland of the Ardennes. Here, amid folded valleys, towering escarpments and pine-forested hills, is the National Museum of Military History. Its director, Roland Gaul, has assembled a spectacular collection of 'boys' toys', as he calls them – tanks, guns and army supplies, some of them only recently dug from the local soil. The Ardennes – which



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stretches across Belgium and Luxembourg – was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting of the Second World War. This was where Hitler's forces made their dramatic

IMPOSING: The impressive Vianden Castle. Left: Marlene Dietrich, who sang for American troops in the Grand Duchy in 1944

thrust westwards in the winter of 1944/45, hoping to defeat the Allied armies in the Battle of the Bulge.

Luxembourg lived through a nightmare that grim winter, but the country's war story started four years earlier, as Monsieur Gaul explains. At dusk on that morning of May 10, 1940, a young British pilot named Douglas Cameron was flying over Diekirch when he spied a German column below. He sent his plane into a nosedive and dropped his payload of bombs. As he did so, he felt bullets hit the fuselage. Seconds later,

he crashed into nearby Hirzenhof farm, suffering fatal injuries.

He was one of the first British casualties of Hitler's invasion of Luxembourg.

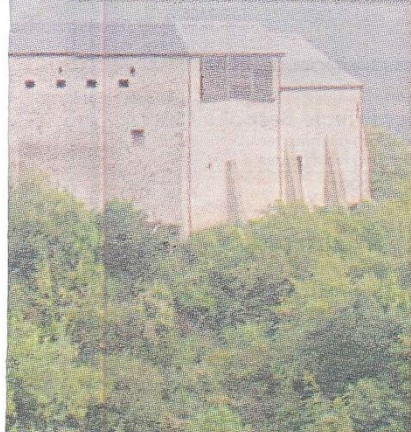
'We're in touch with scores of veterans and their families,' says Monsieur Gaul. Among them is Cameron's daughter, Marion, just ten months old when her pilot-father died. After visiting Diekirch on a deeply personal pilgrimage, she bequeathed to the museum her father's diary, photographs and RAF cap. Like so many items here, they are personal relics of one of the many brave souls killed in the fight to rid Luxembourg of the Nazis.

Monsieur Gaul has established an eclectic collection, laying his hands on everything from tins of green pea soup to packets of powered milk

but **Giles Milton** is still left wondering if he's...



CHEERS: Giles raises a glass before tucking into his pork at the Hotel Victor Hugo in the beautiful village of Vianden, left



for centuries, tossed between medieval Burgundy, Austria, Spain, France and Holland.

The long years of war have left a deep imprint on the landscape: there are hilltop citadels, fortresses and castellated battlements atop virtually every bluff of rock in Luxembourg. The biggest is Vianden castle, a mighty stone fortification with ramparts so gigantic that no invader ever managed to capture it. It could have dropped straight from a fairy tale – it's all turrets and pinnacles – with a backdrop of dark pine forest. The only thing missing is wolves.

from the time. He's also installed a series of full-scale dioramas that dramatically recreate the gruelling conditions faced by Allied soldiers as they fought in temperatures as low as minus 25. 'Many Americans had never seen snow,' he says. 'They got the shock of their lives.'

Everyone, it seems, visited Luxembourg in that desperate winter of 1944. Marlene Dietrich sang for the troops, Mickey Rooney entertained them (there are photos of both in the collection), and Ernest Hemingway reported on the war.

The Germans have not been the only nation to covet little Luxembourg. This landlocked country – sandwiched between Belgium to the west and north, Germany to the east and France to the south – has been the plaything of conquerors

THE nearby village of Vianden is as improbably picturesque as the castle, a sleepy place with cobbled streets, a jewel of a church and the fast-flowing River Our slicing through the valley. This was where Victor Hugo, author of *The Hunchback Of Notre-Dame*, came when he was exiled from France. He'd lent his name to the ancient hotel in which I'd chosen to have lunch.

'Would you care for a local speciality?' asks the waitress.

I would indeed, for I'd yet to sample Luxembourg cuisine. After a glass of local cremant – a sparkling wine – the main dish arrives: two home-smoked slabs of pork, a sluice of broad beans and a wine-infused sauce that tastes of early autumn.

Two hours later, full and recharged, I'm on the road to Luxembourg City, Europe's most Lilliputian capital. It's a delightful stack of yet more

GETTING THERE

Luxair (luxair.lu) offers return flights from London City to Luxembourg from £73. For further information, go to visitluxembourg.com. For hotels, visit parkinn.com/hotel-luxembourg, sporthotel.lu and golfclervaux.lu.

castles, ramparts and lopsided dwellings. I pass the Grand Duke's diminutive palace, where a lone guard is strutting his stuff. I tour the ramparts and casements, suspended hundreds of feet above the River Alzette. And then I almost walk slap-bang into the prime minister, who strolls through the streets chatting to people as he goes. (I have to confess I wouldn't have known he was the prime minister had someone not told me.)

There are restaurants aplenty and a scattering of lively bars. I was told there's even a mixed naked sauna, if mixed naked saunas are your thing.

But Luxembourg is not a place for hedonism, and clubs are few and far between. If you want to party, you'd be better off in Prague. But if you want to explore Europe's most secretive country – a land of castles, twilight forests and the ghosts of hard-fought battles – then Luxembourg might just tick your box.

After a long weekend here, I'd only scratched the surface.