

ECHTERNACH, THE ABBEY TOWN OF ST WILLIBRORD

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Imagine unspoilt countryside with superb wild woodland dotted with rock cliffs offering a dramatic view over magnificent valleys, soft rolling hills intersected by streams and other watercourses, caverns and gorges, and deep caves with a very special flora - that's the Luxemburgish Little Switzerland. At the foot of this sheer natural beauty nestles old Echternach.

Famous for its "dancing procession" - a unique religious procession taking place since the night of times on every Tuesday after Whitsunday, where pilgrims achieve spirituality through dancing to a sound of polka played by musicians along the streets until the tomb of Saint Willibrord - Echternach celebrates this year its 1300th anniversary.

In fact, the town's recorded history dates back to 698, when the name of Echternach was officially mentioned for the first time in the charter confirming the donation by St Ermine to St Willibrord, of the land where the Anglo-Saxon monk would later found his abbey.

Born in Northumberland and educated at the Abbey of Ripon - one of the oldest cities in Britain - St Willibrord decided to follow his spiritual drive that took him to Ireland, and later to Friesland where he preached Christianity. While archbishop of Utrecht he passed several times through Trier on his way to visiting the Pope in Rome. He then made acquaintance with Ermine, abbess of Trier, who offered him the monastery and its surrounding land that she owned on the site of Echternach.

Thanks to the monks who joined St Willibrord at the Echternach Abbey, the woodland was cleared out and turned into fertile and productive crop fields, and people came and settled down. The primitive site grew and became an important market, and the teaching of arts and crafts quickly spread under the protection and direction of the abbey where the monks also founded a *scriptorium*.

From the beginning of the 8th until late in the 11th century, the abbey enjoyed therefore a worldwide reputation through its *scriptorium* where illuminated books and manuscripts of an outstanding quality were produced, among them the *Codex Aureus Epternacensis* and the *Codex Aureus Escorialensis*.

After St Willibrord's death in 739, Echternach became an important pilgrimage centre and still to this day, the "dancing procession" and the "Octave" in November witness to that important devotion to the saint who is buried in the Carolingian crypt of the Basilica. Such devotion no doubt owes a lot to the writings that were made on his life and religious action by another Anglo-Saxon monk, Alkuin, who happened to be the famous teacher and advisor to Charles the Great.

Soon were the abbey and church too small for the number of pilgrims coming to worship the holy man's relics, and the Carolingian church of the 8th-9th century was therefore erected on the site, encompassing St Willibrord's primitive abbey. The remarkable Romanesque basilica of the 11th century - which was destroyed and then reconstructed after the Second World War - is in fact the third architectural structure erected on the site with changes and additions introduced in the course of time. The beautiful and simple white marble monument bearing the saint's relics was built at the beginning of this century.

The adjoining abbey of Baroque architecture was constructed early in the 18th century and is at present a high school taking in an underground museum and exhibition hall. A large courtyard bordering the old abbey gardens with the Rococo pavilion and the "Orangerie" encircles the whole complex. On the grounds outside the abbey are a statue and a fountain bearing the saint's name and a bit farther, lies the St Peter and Paul church built on an old Roman site. This small but pleasant church bore different periods of construction from Merovingian to Romanesque and Gothic, and has beautiful wall paintings. It is there, at the church's foot, that a cross-shaped monument has now been erected commemorating the donation made by St Ermine to the Anglo-Saxon monk.

The Echternach Abbey brought enormous benefits to the local population, whose work partly depended on the monks' economical and cultural activity, and when in 1236 the Countess Ermesinda granted charters of franchise to the town, the Epternacians could well be proud of living in a town reputed to be one of the wealthiest of the old Luxembourg county. The remains of the town wall dating back to that period are visible at the farther side of the abbey gardens.

We continue our stroll through this lovely medieval town steeped in history and culture, where you will never be lost for something to see or do all year round. Following the small street leading from the basilica, you reach the ancient market place with its patrician houses and the *Denzel*, a Gothic-Renaissance building of the 15th century nowadays the town hall. In the middle, stands the market cross - which had been removed but was put there again very recently - and the restored Baroque fountain.

Every year during the months of May and June, an international music festival is held in Echternach with concerts, conferences and other cultural events. And for those interested in sporting and outdoor activities, Echternach is also an ideal place for such leisure pursuits: a stone's throw from the historical centre, is the recreation ground with an artificial lake inviting you to fishing, canoeing and other water-related activities. There are marked trails and drives, picnic and barbecue sites and a restaurant; other recreation activities take in hiking, bicycle riding and mini-golf, and playing grounds for the children.

If you are interested in Roman ruins, you will be happy to know that close to the lake there have been brought to light several rooms of a Roman villa with sauna, baths, *hypocaustes* and mosaic floor. The villa apparently dates back to the first century and is the confirmation that a settlement had already existed on the spot long before St Willibrord's arrival and the foundation of his abbey. The archaeological excavation is being pursued and soon a lot more will be shown to the visitor.

Though a very small town, Echternach is a place not to be missed. It is a delight for the tourist with its streets and houses, its restaurants and tiny souvenir shops. Walk around, enjoy the atmosphere, and when driving back home, do not miss the dramatic landscape, because any direction you take, you will be bewitched by the scenery of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg: set in the middle of panoramic vistas, the country fits in beautifully with its title "Europe's Green Heart".

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