

Liechtenstein



If Liechtenstein didn't exist, someone would have invented it. A tiny mountain principality governed by an iron-willed monarch in the heart of 21st-century Europe, it certainly has novelty value. Only 25km long by 12km wide (at its broadest point) – just larger than Manhattan – Liechtenstein doesn't have an international airport, and access from Switzerland is by local bus. However, the country is a rich banking state and, we are told, the world's largest exporter of false teeth.

Liechtensteiners sing German lyrics to the tune of God Save the Queen in their national anthem and they sure hope the Lord preserves their royals. Head of state Prince Hans Adam II and his son, Crown Prince Alois, have constitutional powers unmatched in modern Europe but most locals accept this situation gladly, as their monarchs' business nous and, perhaps also, tourist appeal, help keep this landlocked sliver of a micro-nation extremely prosperous.

Most come to Liechtenstein just to say they've been, and tour buses disgorge day-trippers in search of souvenir passport stamps. If you're going to make the effort to come this way, however, it's pointless not to venture further, even briefly. With friendly locals and magnificent views, the place comes into its own away from soulless Vaduz.

In fact, the more you read about Fürstentum Liechtenstein (FL) the easier it is to see it as the model for Ruritania – the mythical kingdom conjured up in fiction as diverse as *The Prisoner of Zenda* and Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Climbing the short trail up to **Schloss Vaduz** (p344) for wonderful views
- Journeying uphill to **Triesenberg** (p345) to learn about the Walser community
- Taking the family to **Malbun** (p346) for gentle walking and skiing
- Indulging in extreme hiking along the legendary **Fürstensteig trail** (p346)
- Getting a souvenir passport stamp and sending a postcard



■ POPULATION: 35,365

■ AREA: 160 SQ KM

■ LANGUAGE: GERMAN

History

Austrian prince Johann Adam Von Liechtenstein purchased the counties of Schellenberg (1699) and Vaduz (1712) from impoverished German nobles and gave them his name. Long a principality under the Holy Roman Empire, Liechtenstein gained independence in 1866. In 1923, it formed a customs union with Switzerland.

Even then, none of the ruling Liechtensteins had bothered to leave their Viennese palace to see their acquisitions. It wasn't until 1938, in the wake of the Anschluss (Nazi Germany's takeover of Austria) that Prince Franz Josef II became the first monarch to live in the principality, when he and his much-loved wife, Gina, began transforming a poor rural nation into today's rich banking state. Their son, Prince Hans Adam II, ascended the throne on the prince's death in 1989.

The Liechtenstein clan lost considerable territories and possessions (including various castles and palaces) in Poland and the then Czechoslovakia after WWII, when the authorities of those countries seized them. The family has been trying, unsuccessfully,

IT'S LIECHTENSTEIN TRIVIA TIME!

- Liechtenstein is the only country in the world named after the people who purchased it.
- In its last military engagement in 1866, none of its 80 soldiers was killed. In fact, 81 returned, including a new Italian 'friend'. The army was disbanded soon afterwards.
- Low business taxes means around 75,000 firms, many of them so-called 'letter box companies', with nominal head offices, are registered here – about twice the number of the principality's inhabitants.
- Liechtenstein is Europe's fourth-smallest nation (only the Vatican, Monaco and San Marino are smaller).

to recover these possessions in international courts ever since.

The country's use of the Swiss franc encourages people to see it as a mere extension of its neighbour, but Liechtenstein has very different foreign policies, having joined the UN and the European Economic Area (EEA) relatively early, in 1990 and 1995 respectively.

Known as a tax haven, the principality banned customers from banking money anonymously in 2000. However, it remains under pressure (mainly from the European Union) to introduce more reforms.

In 2003, Hans Adam won sweeping powers to dismiss the elected government, appoint judges and reject proposed laws. The following year, he handed the day-to-day running of the country to his son Alois.

Orientation

Liechtenstein feels small because two-thirds is mountainous. A thin plain – the basin of the River Rhine separating Liechtenstein from Switzerland – runs down the country's west-east edge. The main north-south thoroughfare follows this.

The plain is wider and lower in the north, an area called Unterland (lowland), while the south is described as the Oberland (highland). The country's highest point is Grauspitz (2599m), on the southern border with Switzerland.

