

STOPOVER

48 hours in LUXEMBOURG

Because it's there! **Radhika Jha** tells you how to do the little duchy in style

Lakshmi Mittal's only regret at winning over Arcelor, the pride of Luxembourg's steel industry, was the prospect of having to relocate to Luxembourg. He sent his son Aditya instead. I travelled to the Grand Duchy to find out what Mittal senior was missing out on and found a country of fairytale castles, romantic ruins, classy vineyards, three-star French cuisine, cutting-edge architecture and serious shopping. There's a Grand Duke too, and some very trendy bars and nightclubs.

CASTLES AND FAIRYTALES

If it's the Middle Ages you want, head for the old town. Narrow streets, shadowed arcades, diamond-paned windows and secrets—the old town still breathes the air of the past. An easy half-day walking tour starts in front of the **Grand Duke's Palace**, a stately home built in Renaissance style by the Spanish who used it as their town hall before they were chased out in 1684. Turn the corner and walk 200m down Rue de l'Eau to Place Clairefontaine and you will see the elegant façade of the **Foreign Ministry**, a former hostel for monks in Austrian baroque style. Behind the Palace, and to the right is the **National Museum** which is filled with Roman, medieval and renaissance *objets* and has four floors underground. The square in front is called **Feschmaart** (fish market). No smelly fish here, but a dense collection of medieval houses which bear such unfashionably patriotic inscriptions as "*Mir wëlle bleiwen wat mier sin*" (we want

to remain who we are). Further down is the **oldest church in town** named after that most romantic of saints, Michael the dragon-slayer. Cross the street and enjoy the most breathtaking view of the canyon around which the city is built. Bang in front of you is Luxembourg's first **city castle**, built in 963 by a certain Count Siegfried. Only outer walls remain. Its name Lucilinburch, or small castle, became Luxembourg.

Walk up again to the fish market and then head left down a very steep cobblestone lane to the suburbs. The poor used to live here, at the foot of the city's fortifications. Now artists, students and pubs inhabit this fashionable area. Evenings can get rowdy: sleepless neighbours fight it out with late-night revellers, the losers ending up in the Uelzecht river. Once a fearsome, tempestuous river, it created the **canyon** upon which the upper city was built. The French under Louis the Great nicknamed the city the 'Gibraltar of the north'. For without its spectacular natural defences, Luxembourg's location between the French and German empires would've made it just another sleepy border province of either country. Instead neither could agree on who should possess it, and so it just remained independent.

For the rest of the day, get a car or travel by train to three very different and beautiful castles: Bourglinster, Vianden or Beaufort. The first, **Bourglinster**, with its brightly painted dolls-house village at its feet, is only 10 minutes from the capital and boasts one of the country's



finest restaurants within the castle walls. Vianden is a 50-minute drive to the northeast, but well worth the effort. It is the most impressive of all Luxembourg's castles. Victor Hugo once lived there as a political refugee. Beaufort is to the east, about 40 minutes from Luxembourg City. Swans, a beautiful forest lake and also...a torture chamber make it my preferred castle.

The second day in Luxembourg could be devoted to discovering yet more cas-

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The Town Hall and the statue of William II on horseback

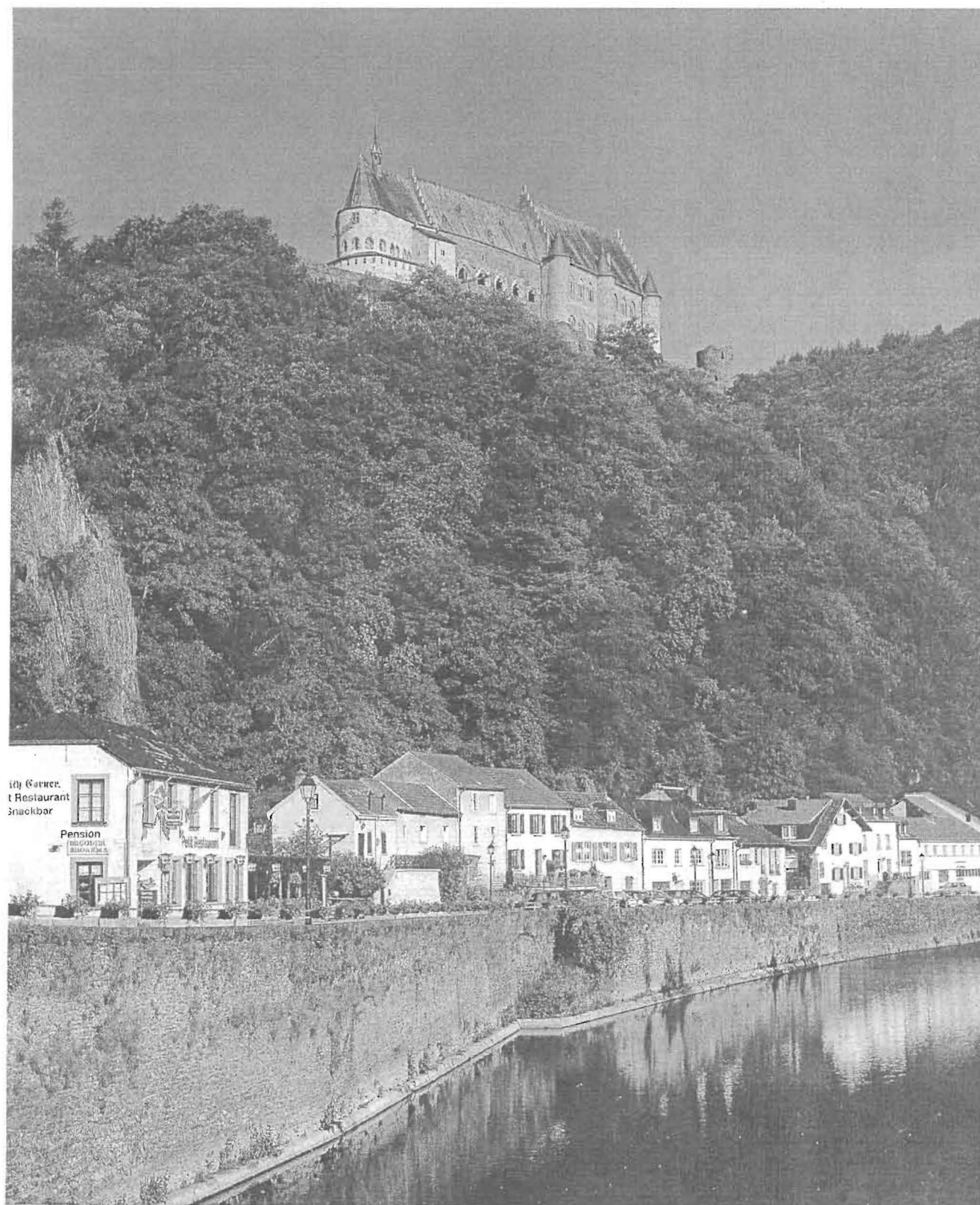
ties and the countryside. There is even a secret valley. The well-named Valley of the Seven Castles begins at Eischen near the Belgian border and gorgeous ruins like Koerich, Septfontaines, Ansembourg, Hollenfels, Marienthal and Mersch dot the fields and green meadows. Only lazy cows watch the cars pass. Few tourists ever visit this tranquil land.

Or you might visit Schengen where the treaties providing for EU-wide visas were signed. On the banks of the Moselle

stands a monument to Europe, stone pillars with the European stars hanging between them. Its muted colours and lack of ornamentation makes one wonder whether it is the foundation stone of an ambitious new political entity or a tombstone to a failed idea. If you've made it this far, visit the village of Wellenstein and taste their wines. Ask for a Pinot Gris, the best, or a Riesling, more fruity. The dry Rivaner or Elbling variety the locals keep for themselves.

ARCHITECTURE

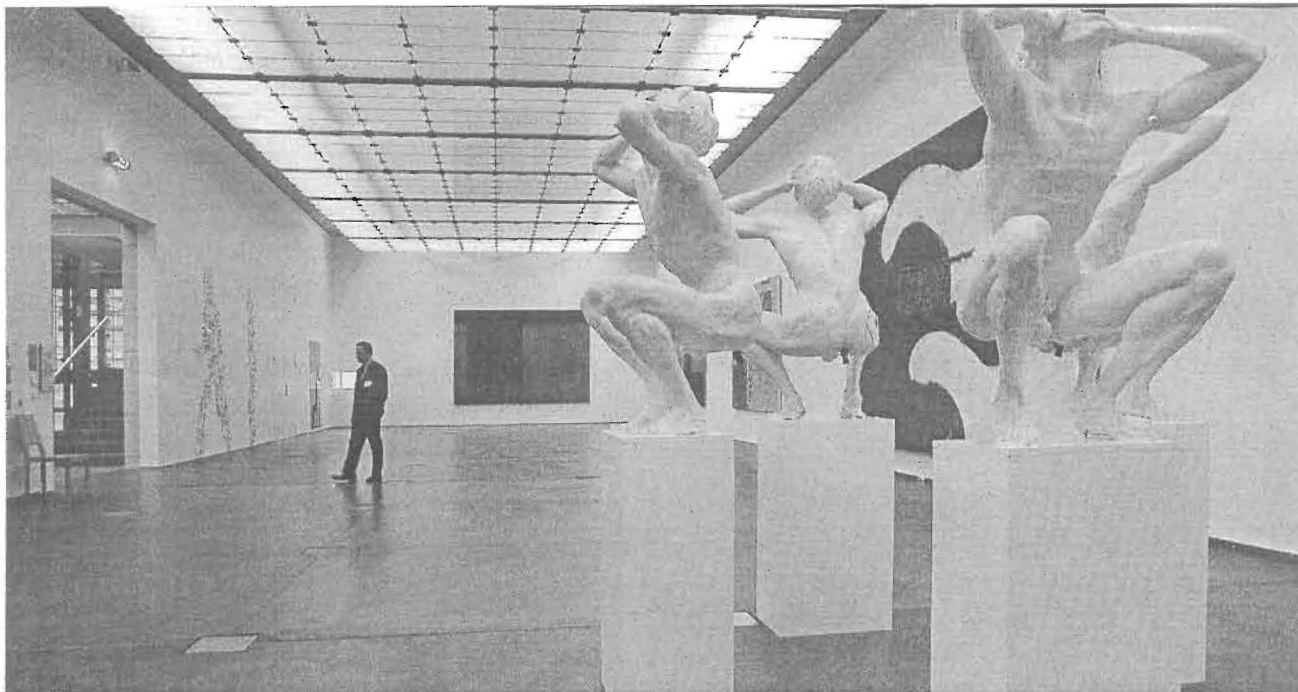
Instead of more old stones, I began my second day by looking up Luxembourg's modern architecture. A very healthy bank balance in the 1980s allowed the wealthy 'burghers' to get the world's best architects to come and build Kirchberg, an ultramodern development not far from the airport. In a sense, the entire area is a modernist architectural folly, a 1980s version of Mussolini's new Rome. Monumental sculptures by Americans



Photographs: DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY

Clockwise from above: the castle at Vianden; the National Museum; and the new Kirchberg neighbourhood

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Richard Serra and Frank Stella, Frenchman Jean Dubuffet and Germans Markus Lüpertz and Penck dot a landscape devoted to money—banks, lawyers' offices and EU institutions.

The first building on my list is the **Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art**, designed by Ieoh Ming Pei of Louvre Pyramid fame. From its gardens the views across the canyon upon the old town are stunning. So before you go in, get a coffee and just lie in the grass.

Two minutes away stands the snow-white shell of the spectacular new **Philharmonic Hall**, designed by Frenchman Christian de Portzamparc—800 filigree columns support an elegant oval. Pop-style lighting adorns it at night, ugly EU buildings surround it.

The British architect Denis Lasdun who did the South Bank carbuncle so roundly denounced by Prince Charles, signed the brutalist all-concrete headquarters of the **European Investment Bank**, on the other side of the highway from both the Museum and the Philharmonic Hall. My preferred sculpture is at its entrance: a giant chair by a relatively unknown artist, Magdalena Jetalova, which makes you look and feel like Gulliver.

Towards the east, US architect Richard Meier designed the offices of the **HypoVereinsbank**. And German archi-



tect Gottfried Böhm did the adjacent **Deutsche Bank**, with perhaps the most beautiful interior of any building I have ever seen.

Finish by having a quick dip in the **Olympic pool** under the enormous inverted shell of a roof created by another Paris architect, Roger Taillibert. You'll then cross a flaming red (Arcelor) steel bridge into the city centre. To your right is a strange but not uncharming squat cube, which houses the **National Theatre** (built 1963). The story goes that the building was destined for some African capital but Luxembourg was in a hurry and bought their design!

SHOPPING AND EATING

The lowest VAT rates in Europe combined with the highest GDP per capita has made Luxembourg a high-end shopping paradise. Get your Guccis and Louis Vuittons here: all the big brands have elegant shops in the city centre. The best and priciest ones are in **Grand'Rue**, **Philippe II** and **Louvigny**. Perfume, watch shops and jewellers are also especially noticeable. Cigarettes, booze and gasoline are also among the cheapest anywhere.

I, however, prefer to get to know a city through the stomach. My afternoon was spent indulging in little sweet things—which Luxembourg does very well thanks

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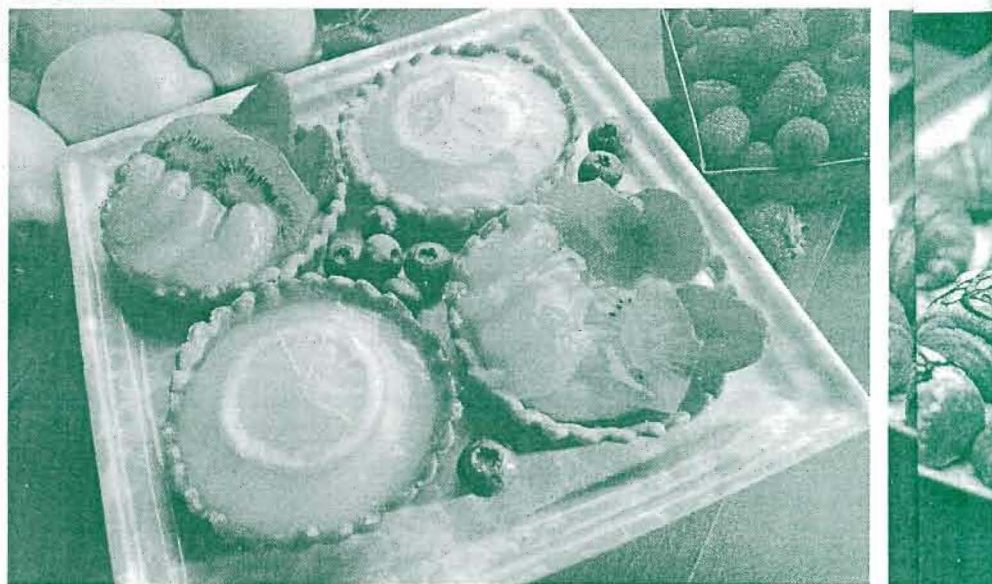
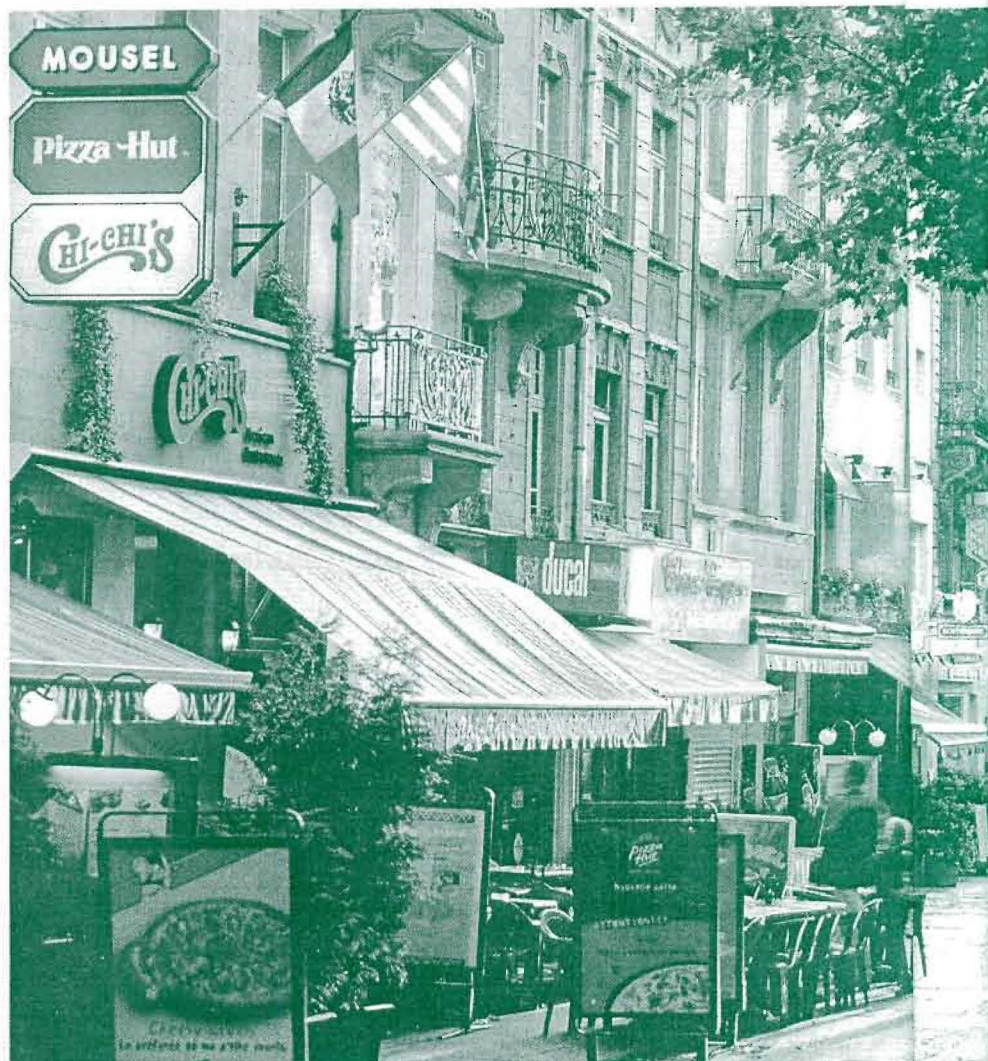
GETTING THERE There are **no direct flights** to Luxembourg from India, but London, Frankfurt, Paris and Zurich are all connected to it by the national feeder airline, Luxair, and so a short stopover gets you there easily enough. A romantic alternative to flying all the way is getting off the plane at **Frankfurt** and taking a train to Luxembourg (3hr along the Rhine and Moselle rivers passing the Lorelei on the way).

This summer the French high-speed **TGV train** will cut travel time from Paris to 2hr. Brussels is 1.5hr by car on the scenic Ardennes highway, 2hr by train.

A **Schengen visa** is all you need for Luxembourg, one of the reasons why it is such a convenient place to visit while on a short work trip in Europe.

WHERE TO STAY The best hotel in the city is **Le Royal** (www.hotelroyal.lu). Another good choice is **Parc Beaux-Arts**, the only hotel in the old town or Parc Belair, 2km off the city centre (www.hpb.lu). Both would charge from €200. Hotels **Le Châtelet** and **Sieweburen** (around €110 for a double) are good value. Le Châtelet (www.chatelet.lu) is situated on a smart street at the entrance to the city's canyon. Rooms are in traditional private houses which are linked together. Sieweburen (siewebur@pt.lu) is a chalet-style hotel next to a forest reserve 5km outside the city. There is a city bus service connecting it to the city centre.

Alternatively, you can rent a car and **stay in a village** along the Moselle river. Distances are short (20km) and prices are lower, though €100 is a benchmark which is difficult to undercut, except in the budget hotels by the airport.



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Clockwise from left: outdoor cafés line the streets of Luxembourg City; inside a specialty restaurant; and treats from a pâtissier

to the marriage of the skills of German and French pâtissiers. Pâtisseries abound throughout the city. The salesman will warn you not to mix the drier coffee cakes (to be eaten in the morning with your tea or coffee) and the real pâtisserie, which you gorge on after lunch or during afternoon tea. **Oberweis** does the most exquisitely colourful and yet tasteful cakes. Since they also have a *traiteur* department they do light, good value and quality luncheons on their first-floor cafeteria. **Namur** is suitably old Luxembourg: known for its traditional cakes like *cramique*, *brioche*, *daquois*, with no fancy new recipes tolerated and a strict attention to the right ingredients. At 4pm elderly ladies in mink and pearls invade its upstairs restaurant to nibble at a fruit tart and share the latest gossip. **L'Autre Traiteur** is the other extreme: they dare to dare. They serve Indian teas you wouldn't find in India and recipes for cakes that are very 21st century.

NIGHTLIFE

Luxembourgers like to go out for a drink after work, then a nice dinner and

round the evening off with cocktails or beers in a noisy, smoky club. So there are a lot to choose from. The restaurants serve mainly French and Italian fare, and some daring *nouvelle cuisine*. Nightclubs are all grouped together. They are to be found in Grund, Hollerich or at Feschmaart. Hop into a taxi and ask the driver to take you to the **Urban** (bar), **Interview** (another bar) or **D:cliq** (which has live music). The **Cat Club**, set in an old warehouse, has a funky restaurant that serves exotic dishes like ostrich steaks and an extremely beautiful neon and chrome bar. The **Marx** is my favourite. Large, spacious with a tiny private garden in the back, it is Luxembourg's most popular bar-cum-club on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings. It's factory-chic décor makes it a very relaxed place to people-watch. **Boz Café** is where the beautiful people go when they want to rusticate—it is 10km out of town towards a village called Bridel. If you are not looking for the red-light district, try to avoid the train station and the streets surrounding it. •



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