

Real Road Adventures: Liechtenstein

Buckle up! It's time to hit the road less travelled.

Hi, I'm Jeff Wilson, off to explore a micro country that punches above its weight in sustainability and adventure. With wineries, carving, and some of the most original hiking partners ever, get ready for Liechtenstein!

[Standard open]

So what's the pull that drives so many of us to explore new places? You know, I'm not entirely sure, but I know how much happier I am when I get the chance discover somewhere new. And these days I'm on the hunt for destinations that put a high value on preserving natural resources and cultural heritage. And that's what brings me to Liechtenstein.

File this episode under: Great Things in Small Packages. They call Liechtenstein a "microstate." Tucked in the Alps between Austria and Switzerland, it's a mountainous nation that keeps a low profile.

In this series, I'm using sustainable modes of transportation to visit destinations that promote environmentally friendly practices. And Liechtenstein fits the bill.

Liechtenstein doesn't have an airport, but it's easy to get to from other countries.

I flew into Zurich using carbon offsets from myclimate.org and picked up an electric car to travel across Switzerland.

The drive from Zurich to Liechtenstein is just under an hour, and there are no check points, so crossing the border between countries is simple.

This century-old covered bridge across the Rhine, open to walkers and bikers, seems symbolize the easy connection between Liechtenstein and it's Swiss neighbor.

When I started planning this trip, I got to admit I wasn't even sure where exactly Liechtenstein was on the map. But I'd heard so many interesting things about it, I knew I just had to go.

About fifteen miles at its longest point and eight miles at its widest, the whole country is roughly the geographic size of Washington, DC.

Liechtenstein is the sixth smallest country in the world. Officially known as the Principality of Liechtenstein, this is one of the few European countries that still has royal prince as the head of government.

Liechtenstein, along with Uzbekistan, are the only two countries in the world that are doubly landlocked, meaning they're completely surrounded by other landlocked countries.

With a high standard of living, it's the only country in the world that has more jobs than it does residents. Wisely, they've funneled some of that economic success toward protecting the environment.

All of the country's 11 municipalities have been awarded the "Energy Town" label by the European Energy Award program. The program recognizes communities committed to sustainable energy, climate and transportation policies.

In fact, all of the towns and cities here have achieved this recognition, so it's first country that can call itself an "Energy Country."

The capital of Liechtenstein is Vaduz, a pocket-sized city on the Rhine River.

The reigning prince, Hans-Adam II, and his family make their home in Vaduz Castle, just above town.

Besides its work on energy, Vaduz has another reason to be proud: it's been awarded an official Fairtrade Town certificate by the Swiss Fairtrade association. This means that it meets rigorous ethical trade standards by putting people and the planet first.

Sure, it might not be big, but one of the nice things about visiting a small country like Liechtenstein is that everything is relatively close together. And this country makes it easy to explore the best sights by something known as the Liechtenstein Trail.

This is a 46-mile path that passes through all 11 of the country's municipalities. The trail is lined with fantastic scenery, interesting attractions, and great food stops. It's an ideal way to explore the principality.

Many people do the trail on foot, but there's a version that's been modified to accommodate bicycles, while still hitting all the attractions. I've rented an e-bike to make this a full-on electric adventure.

It's also possible to borrow a special bicycle from the Liechtenstein Center for use by people in wheelchairs.

Before you start, download the L|story app. It's a great tool full of maps, historic sites, and plenty of tips.

The app uses Augmented Reality technology that combines your view of the real world with 3-D images to give you insights into important locations.

One more thing. If you want a completely unencumbered experience, you can sign up for the Liechtenstein Trail package. It's a service that handles your accommodations, your luggage transfers, your public transportation, and they even pack a lunch for you.

The trail winds through stunning views of the Rhine River Valley and surrounding mountains.

Getting the feeling you're not alone? Along the trail you might see some mysterious carvings. These eerie figures, known as "the Night Folk," are taken from local Walser legend. When someone dies, these spirits guide that person into the afterlife

The Walser people first settled here starting around 700 years ago.

Originally from the western Alps, the Walsers had a reputation for being "idiosyncratic" and, well "stubborn" - useful traits, perhaps, for rugged mountain life?

While historians aren't exactly sure what first brought the Walsers here, it's clear that many of the people who still live in Liechtenstein's mountainous areas are direct descendants of those early settlers.

A great way to dip into a new culture is to look at the things that people create. In many ways, crafts tell the story of a place and how it's evolved.

Chainsaw carving is the modern incarnation of an ancient art, reaching back to the time when early humans began gouging wood with sharp rocks to create basic tools for survival.

Patrik Walser is an award-winning chainsaw artist. He has a passion for creating objects out raw tree trunks using only this single tool. He used his skill to breathe life into those carved figures we saw back on the trail. He gives me a lesson in Chainsaw Carving 101.

[Soundbites, demo]

Patrik: So you can cut down and in.

Jeff: Yeah,

Patrik: In. Yeah. And on the backside. This one also can go away. We said we make an owl.

Jeff: Yeah. That sounds like something we can create relatively easily.

Patrick: Yeah, yeah. And you can say it when you want that I make a little bit faster so you can carve the face in the end.

Jeff: What's next? Oh this, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Well, if you can't tell, it's an owl. I had a lot of fun here, though. And I might even take this up when I get home.

History buffs can find tantalizing remnants of Liechtenstein's medieval past in the Schellenberg Castle ruins. The castle, which is open for visitors to explore freely, was built 800 years ago and was abandoned sometime in the 16th century. While the castle's exact story is somewhat shrouded in mystery, most alpine fortresses of the day were important for exercising power over contested lands, or protecting key trade routes.

Heading back toward Vaduz, the sprawling fields and pastures of the Rhine valley pique my curiosity about sustainability work in Liechtenstein. I'm off to investigate what's called a "nutrition field."

This project is designed to be a model for responsible and sustainable farming and use of soil. It attempts to answer the question: How will human beings eat tomorrow? The number of people on earth keeps growing, but our planet doesn't.

[Soundbite Florian Bernardi]

Florian: We are talking about five, I think, the big five of the food system. This is the maize. And this here we have the rice.

Nutrition fields are a way to investigate just how many acres are needed to feed the average person. They help farmers make decisions on the best crops to grow to sustain human life. And they're teaching tools that help children understand exactly where their food comes from.

[Soundbite Florian Bernardi]

Jeff: Are there any varieties, any foods that you're growing that are maybe not traditional or not typical, but that you're bringing into cultivation because they're easier to grow or better for the climate.

Florian: Yeah. We have also hemp here.

Jeff: So this is the hemp, and you use the seeds that can become food, oil...

Florian: Protein. You can also make a tea. We have also tea with the leaves.

Jeff: Okay, so you're growing all of this in these fields?

Florian: Yes. Here are the best soils because we're here now, located very near to the Rhine. With the production here, we can get to 30%, 40% of the people and the rest of the food we have to get from somewhere else.

Nutrition fields can also identify useful crops that humans have stopped cultivating, such as goosefoot and maygrass, that could be re-introduced in the future.

If your favorite crop comes in the form of a grapevine (or even if you just love beautiful places), head over to the Prince of Liechtenstein Winery. This area is one of the best wine-growing regions in the Rhine Valley. The vineyard's nearly 10 acres benefit from a southwest exposure, mild temperatures, and excellent soil – ideal growing conditions for wine grapes.

[Soundbites Monika:

Jeff: So, Monika tell us a little bit about the vineyard.

Monika: The vineyard is owned by the Princely family of Liechtenstein since 1712. Actually the vineyard is older than the country because the country was born in 1719.

Jeff: So, it's a very old vineyard.

Monika: Yes. Very old, it's the oldest and most traditional in Liechtenstein.

Monika: You see the color which is quite light. That's typical for the pinot noirs from this region. So this one was in a stainless steel tank.

Jeff: Stainless steel only, right. Ok, so no barrel.

Monika: No, but it is a little bit smoky because it was in big oak barrels, but not for the taste, but only to give a little bit more structure. More complexity.

Jeff: Yeah, so you get a little bit of the tannins.

Jeff: Is this a region where pinot noir is grown typically?

Monika: Yes, the climate is perfect for pinot noir. And we have here a mild ? climate, it's warm, windy weather. So, it's perfect for the pinot noir, and also the soil which match very good because pinot noir loves chalky soil.]

Now, this venerated winery is moving to a totally organic operation while still maintaining its tradition of quality wine-making.

[Soundbite]

Monika: We just started this year the first year with the organic production, and we are sure that will be the future. And are happy that we could do this step.

Tonight, the vineyard is the scene of revelry as locals celebrate a wedding with a very traditional musical performance, complete with woodland costumes. Even the bride and groom join in the band.

Just above the vineyards, Restaurant Torkel basks in an idyllic setting and luminous evening light. This Michelin-starred restaurant, also owned by the Prince's family, occupies a building that dates to the Middle Ages. There's no doubt about authenticity – just check out the enormous wooden beam that stretches across the ceiling. It was once used as a wine press. The restaurant's menu has a local bent, with fresh meat and produce from nearby farms.

In a tiny country like this, it's easy to get recommendations on where to stay. The Hotel Vaduzerhof is located in a historic site in the middle of Vaduz. You'd never guess this building is more than 170 years old, with its modern feel and efficient self check-in/check out system. Like all businesses here, hotels must follow strict requirements on sustainability and environmental impact. This one comes with an added bonus: the best castle views in town.

Liechtenstein is full of small, interesting, locally-owned businesses. On a pretty street in the town of Eschen, the family-run Steinauer Distillery is a labor of love. It provides the area's fruit and wine growers the chance to distill their own spirits.

[Soundbite]

Andreas: So I put in here up to 125 liters of something with a little bit alcohol in it.

Housed in a converted shed, Steinauer produces a whole range of products.

Andreas: About 25 different products. A lot of them are local fruits like pears, apples, grapes, cherries, prunes.

During the height of the covid-19 pandemic, Liechtenstein's Minister of Health launched an appeal to the population to collect "Schnaps." And Steinauer's, distilled the Schnaps to turn it into disinfectant.

Another product, 32PEAKS gin, was the brainchild of three friends who had the dream of creating sustainable gin made from regional botanicals.

[Soundbite]

Jeff: Is this a relatively new product? How long have you had it on the market?

Christian: We call ourselves a gin startup. So we founded it last year.

"32 Peaks" refers to the 32 mountain peaks in Liechtenstein with a height of at least 6500 feet.

[Soundbites]

Christian: We use eleven botanicals, but all sustainable, just here from the region. So every botanical will grow here all in Liechtenstein.

Jeff: Okay, so it really is the taste of Liechtenstein because it's botanicals from here.

Christian: Cheers.

Jeff: Cheers. Oh wow.

Collectors in-the-know tell me that the Liechtenstein is synonymous with pottery, specifically from the Schädler Ceramics workshop in the village of Nendeln. It's the oldest arts and crafts workshop in the country.

[Soundbite]

Jasmin: One of the most difficult parts at the beginning of throwing is the first step. You need to be like half a year...

Jeff: ...just getting here.

Jasmin: ...just to...

Jeff: I don't have half a year.

Since 1836 the company has been making beautiful hand-crafted stone and earthenware.

[Soundbite]

Philipp: So we make everything we make special ceramics on demand. We make urns, we make tiles.

Jeff: So how does it reflect the culture of this region?

Philipp: Until 2000 we made typical floral design. Nowadays it has to be clear design, clear colors but we still make paintings. We make plates with names and decorative items for children. I also have to say we were in a very big crisis. We had to become smaller, and we had enough space here. The Liechtenstein Arts School came and rented a big part of the building. And so we got in contact with designers, with teachers of the art school and they brought us the new design. And working together with the art school it was very fruitful.

Across the street from the workshop, you can take a stroll through a unique relic of ceramics history. Built in 1881, this "ring oven" was used to manufacture bricks. Its circular shape allowed for uninterrupted production as fire was moved continuously from chamber to chamber inside the kiln.

I can't leave Liechtenstein without a little mountain adventure, so I'm making the 30-minute drive to the holiday village of Malbun. In the winter Malbun, is the county's lone ski resort. In summer, it's the starting point for fantastic alpine hikes.

The Sareis chairlift ferries me 6500 feet above sea level over spectacular alpine and Rhine Valley scenery.

From the top, things get even better. The majesty of the Alps spreads out at your feet and you get a panoramic vistas over Liechtenstein and neighboring Austria.

Liechtenstein has a reputation for being a destination for day trips — visitors tend to pop into the country for a brief look around but not to stay. But if you're a hiker or walker, do yourself a favor and devote more time.

This country offers trekking experiences for all ages and abilities, with miles and miles of maintained trails. There are plenty of guided tours available throughout the country, hosted by different kinds of experts

OK, I've double checked, and triple checked, and there's no doubt that hiking in the mountains of Liechtenstein with llamas is an excellent way to spend your time.

With the Llama and Alpaca Treks group in Triesenberg, you can explore the countryside in a new way. Each hiker is assigned an animal partner; my llama is named Balou. I love the fact that each animal has his or her own unique personality.

This hike has it all: gentle slopes, beautiful forests and meadows, mountain scenery. And the best company you can imagine. It's an easy trip that's even suitable for less experienced hikers.

Llamas love getting up on the hillsides where the grass is fresh. It's a blast getting to get to know them.

[Soundbites]

Marc: Balouie was the breeding male. Until last year, he had about eight sons and seven daughters or something like that.

Jeff: Nice big family.

Marc: Yeah. And this here that's Othello. He's the oldest guy that we have and he's 17 years old now. He's really an old one and they're getting up to 20. So as you can see he's quite gray now. When we bought him he was totally black and now he's getting gray a little bit.

Jeff: It happens to the best of us. And you would you like some cheese? Perhaps a little bread? Some kirsch? What do you fancy? What do you think? I think it's all grass. I'm pretty sure it's all grass. Yeah, the cheese is mine. You have the grass.

After about an hour, we stop a beautiful lookout where our furry friends can rest, and we can replenish ourselves with a traditional Swiss fondue over an open fire.

[Soundbites]

Jeff: Smoked fondue. Ah. Excellent. Thanks, you guys. This is a great day. The llamas, the outdoors, the fondue. Thanks a lot. Mm.

Liechtenstein has so many interesting, under-the-radar attractions. I'm really glad I decided to get off the beaten path to explore this small powerhouse of sustainable adventures. My hope is that we can all become not just travelers, but curious explorers who recognize the value of preserving what is special about each place we go.

I hope you had as much fun as I did getting to know Liechtenstein.

See you next time on Real Road Adventures!