

# Liechtenstein

June 23, 2010

After the conference at Obergurgl, a very small pasture town turned ski destination, I was able to spend a day in Innsbruck. Taking the bus from the University center in Obergurgl I passed the ski resorts (located well up above the valley floor where the slopes are significantly less steep) where I had sunburned my lips a few days before. Also along the way are fantastic views of the alpine valley that would be a nice place to hike once the snows melt off the paths. Dan Fabrycky and I did go on a brief hike. Walking just past the end of the passable trail and into the snow. We also found a nice steel cable stretching from the valley floor up to some point on the mountain. A barrel-like weight was part way up the cable and when you pluck the cable at one end you can see the wave travel up to that barrel and back.

All along the valley from Obergurgl to Innsbruck, and especially along the railway between Innsbruck and Feldkirch, there are small huts that look like barns. They seem to have lots of wooden stakes and are not widely separated. I haven't got the foggiest idea what they are for, perhaps it is a place to tether goat herds so that they don't wander off and having lots of these wooden shacks in close proximity means that you don't need to walk far to tie the goats up. Anyway, I'm probably wrong, but in the absence of a better explanation, that is what I was able to come up with.

In Innsbruck I spent the day with other conference goers, seeing some of the gardens. Walking to the ski jump arena where the two olympic torches are visible and where you can ride to the top and wonder why anyone participates in such a sport. We took the diagonally running elevator to the top, walked around, then came down by the stairs. At the top of the landing hill it is an impressive sight to see how steep the hill actually is. There was a group of school kids, elementary age, at the olympic park. I wanted a picture with them and walked over to them and started motioning for them to gather around. They slowly figured out what was going on. Apparently, "CHEESE" is universal, because once I started saying it all confusion left and a rousing chorus of "cheese" broke out.

Innsbruck has a few of well kept churches a couple of which we were able to enter. One brief, memorable experience with Innsbruck was the smell of pine trees that I experienced when I first stepped off the plane. There was a wind blowing down the valley from the West and it carried (presumably) the pine scent from the local mountains. It was nice to say the least.

The next morning had one unfortunate delay as I needed to do a batch of laundry. But then, it was off to the train station towards Feldkirch; the jumping-off point to Liechtenstein. Some background is in order. I have a goal, one that may or may not be realized, to visit all of the countries in Europe that are smaller than (or equal in size to) Luxembourg. I've been to Luxembourg already when I was on my LDS mission, though there is always more to explore. I visited the Vatican on my honeymoon. That leaves Monaco, San Marino, Andorra, Liechtenstein, and one that I recently realized I needed to add to the list, Malta. This trip to Obergurgl and Innsbruck provided the opportunity to visit Liechtenstein.

Arriving in Feldkirch I was glad I wore the long-sleeved shirt with an under-shirt. I wished I had brought two. It was relatively cold and sprinkling. The busses weren't running at full tilt because it was a Saturday so I had some time in Feldkirch before I needed to leave. My first step out of the train station was a bit of a let down—the square where the busses congregate is relatively ugly, unlike my romanticized view of the Alpine region of Europe. I poked around a bit and decided to head for a nearby church. Even though the church is right next to the train station, it was long, circuitous walk to get to the entrance. But, I made it OK and spent some time walking in the well-kept cemetery looking at the old and new graves. When the time came to leave, I realized that there was a direct route to the church from the train station platform. I took this route back and headed for my bus.

The express bus to the middle of town (Schaan) was not running that day, so I bought an all-day pass and took the bus that runs through the small villages between Feldkirch and Schaan, the central hub of Liechtenstein. The first thing I noticed was that I should have spent more time in Feldkirch. There are some very interesting corners of the town that are hard to appreciate from inside the bus. My first impression was replaced by my second. Too bad there isn't more time in a day.

Continuing into Liechtenstein, it was great being able to see the places where people live and the whole countryside was fantastic. It was apparently some sort of national race day that day (or something like it) with bicycle and foot races in several of the towns. After arriving at Schaan I switched buses to Vaduz. I could have walked, but my time was limited. The bus was filled with a few old people and a lot of young ones.

In Vaduz there was another bicycle (tricycle actually) race, this one where the riders were seated close to the ground and they pedal with their arms (even parity—with both arms in unison). The riders didn't appear to be physically handicapped so this must be just a style of bicycle racing that I wasn't familiar with. While I was walking around near the local church and city hall, to my delight I found an empty construction site with an unlocked port-o-potty. I then proceeded north through the center of town. I met a young engineer from China who was visiting Liechtenstein while on a business trip to Zurich.

Since we were both travelling alone we decided to travel alone together and hike up to the local castle. We picked up some information from the tourist center just before the start of the 10k foot race. I would have run in the 5k

earlier in the day had I: 1) known that it was going to happen and 2) been in town earlier. 5k even in my Doc Marten's wouldn't have been bad (besides the 5k was free while the 10k cost money). Oh, well. We walked up the winding trail to the castle where the prince lives, took some pictures of the various views along the way, turned back around in the rain (fortunately my companion had an umbrella that he was willing to share), and made our way back to Vaduz. On the way we talked quite a bit about the area, where we are from, and some religion. He mentioned that he envied westerners because he felt that they had more knowledge because they were taught about religion while in China this doesn't happen. I thought that was an interesting insight.

On the way back to the bus stop I picked up some Liechtenstein tee shirts for my kids and a few bars of chocolate. I wished I could have spent more time and in better weather in the country (I only had about 3 hours). Next time I go, I will go on a day when the buses are running their regular schedules. That way I can explore the southern and eastern portions of the country with a reasonable hope of making it back to the train station before the country shuts down for the night. I hadn't realized, for example, that there was a village tucked up in the mountains where you have to go through a tunnel to get there. Tunnels are always fun, right?

A few other interesting things that I learned while there. The Rhine forms the western border of the state. I always like to see the Rhine (though I didn't actually see it here) because it reminds me of my first visit to Europe—Strasbourg for five months while on my mission. When I went to Germany I saw where the Moselle river combines with the Rhine at Koblenz, reminding me both of Strasbourg and Metz. Liechtenstein has just under 40,000 citizens which makes it similar in size and population to the Cache Valley in Utah (a bit smaller in size and, I believe, a bit larger in population—though that probably depends on whether the University is in session or not).

At the end of the day (which was only about 16:00) I made my way back to the bus station in Schaan, then to Feldkirch, finally to Innsbruck. One more remote country visited, a few more to go. Well worth the trip if for no other reason than the fact that upon crossing the border into the country, I was the only person that I knew who had visited Liechtenstein.