



## THE OBSCURE PRINCIPALITIES ROAD TRIP

TOURING THE TINIEST NATIONS IN EUROPE SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA — BUT AS AVID ROAD REPORTER **CHRIS WRIGHT** DISCOVERED, IT TURNED OUT TO BE A FAR BIGGER TASK THAN HE'D BARGAINED FOR. *DISCOVERY CHANNEL MAGAZINE* HIGHLIGHTS THE CURIOUS LINKAGES THAT BRING TOGETHER SOME OF THE CONTINENT'S MORE MYSTERIOUS STATES, AND MEETS SOME OF THESE NATIONS' MOST COLOURFUL CHARACTERS



VATICAN CITY

# S

Something like a Persian rug is flapping beneath a top-floor window of the Vatican's Papal Apartments, to the delight of at least 5,000 people in St Peter's Square below. There are people with flags, with banners, hoisted upon one another's shoulders. It's like a football cup final. Among the faithful stands a clutch of black-clad priests, in the best viewing spot in the shade.

And then he appears: Papa Francesco, as they call the Pope locally, is at the window, waving gracefully. He speaks for a while in Italian, first about the bible, then Syria, and then he is gone and the crowd disperses. This has been the home of every pope, by and large, since 1377, though Pope Francis has broken with tradition and lives in a nearby suite of apartments instead. It is the spiritual capital of the entire Catholic faith.

The world's smallest state is full of surprises. I had not known Pope Francis would be speaking, and had come only to see the sights of the world's smallest sovereign state, nestled into a north-west pocket of Rome. The glorious interior of St Peter's Basilica, designed by Michelangelo among others, with every square inch of its vast interior ornately decorated; the trek to the mosaic-clad balcony and, through claustrophobic and tilting stuffy stairs, to the packed cupola at the very top of the dome; the treasures of the Vatican museum, most famously the Sistine Chapel and *The*



ABOVE LEFT: ST PETER'S SQUARE, IN THE VATICAN CITY, WHERE CROWDS GATHER TO HEAR POPE FRANCIS, CURRENT HEAD OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, SPEAK

*Last Judgment*; and St Peter's Square itself, with its marble-columned arms thrown out in a gesture of acceptance to the poor. Seeing the Pope is quite a bonus — and it seems a great omen for my trip.

That's because the Vatican is just the first stop on what I'm calling the Obscure Principality Road Trip. Western Europe boasts a cluster of these tiny places, of curious origin and still odder persistence as sovereign states, smaller than most big cities, yet sustained independently for centuries. The Vatican City, the smallest of them at just 44 hectares, is barely a corner of a map of central Rome and has a smaller population than many Singapore high schools. San Marino, Liechtenstein and Monaco are not much bigger, swallowed by Italy, Switzerland and France respectively. And while Andorra is of a mighty size compared to the other four, it still only has two roads in and out of the entire country.

And they are, being European, relatively close to one another — hence this road trip. My mission is to visit them all in four days.

#### SKODA MADNESS

When one is starting a road trip in an unfamiliar left-hand-drive manual vehicle — particularly after being upgraded, against my will, from a Volkswagen to a Skoda — it is best not to start the trip at Rome's central station in the Monday morning rush hour. But needs must. After half an hour of dodging the pushbikes and Vespas across intersections that no GPS could possibly articulate, I am spat out onto the Autostrada with a desperate craving for nicotine. And I haven't been a smoker since 1998.

But after that, the four-hour drive to San Marino is pleasant. Though most is motorway, it snakes across the beautiful undulations of Umbria and the foothills of the Apennine mountains that form Italy's spine. Perugia marks a natural stopping point two hours in, as do countless Umbrian villages, their hilltop forts and Cypress trees visible from the road against the pink and yellow stucco of the houses. Sunflowers roll past.

One thing that bonds most of these principalities, is that they were built on the sides of mountains, and are accessed through challenging roads. Monaco is most famous for this, but it's also true of San Marino, in which folds of switchbacks in the car are exchanged for several more on foot. Although the principality itself (the world's fifth smallest) extends further than this, its focus is within a walled castle: one enters through huge semicircular horseshoes of stone beneath angular battlements.

European sports fans know San Marino as the one football team their own national side is guaranteed to beat in a World Cup qualifier, though many English are scarred for life by the memory of San Marino scoring against them within 8.3 seconds of the kick-off in 1993. Guidebooks tell you it is the world's

oldest surviving sovereign state, dating back to a monastic community founded in 300 AD. But when you visit, you find the best thing about San Marino is the view from it, over rolling Italian hills and the occasional jagged Apennine peak on one side — and towards the Adriatic Sea on the other.

Another commonality of many small principalities is they attract people for duty-free shopping. And San Marino, like Andorra, is jammed to the gills with things to buy: watches, booze, handbags, toy cars (Ferraris preferred), football shirts, souvenir plates, belts. But once you pass these stalls, you reach the true centrepiece of San Marino: two castles, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Guaita and the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Cesta. There is a third too, but it's not open to the public.

From up here, it's easier to realise that one is in a country governed by 16<sup>th</sup>-century

**AFTER HALF AN HOUR OF DODGING THE PUSHBIKES AND VESPAS ACROSS INTERSECTIONS THAT NO GPS COULD POSSIBLY ARTICULATE, I AM SPAT OUT ONTO THE AUTOSTRADA WITH A DESPERATE CRAVING FOR NICOTINE. AND I HAVEN'T BEEN A SMOKER SINCE 1998**

Latin textbooks, though a parliamentary democracy too. The views from the castle are extraordinary, with precipitous drops on one side down almost to sea level, with only the most glancing acknowledgement of safety standards (parents, hold on to the kids near those battlements). Each, viewed from the other, is fairy-tale material, clinging like limpets on to the crust of the rock. It would be no surprise to find Shrek living in one, berating the pesky tourists.

However, one drawback of attempting to see five obscure principalities in four days is that there's not an awful lot of time to spend in any of them when you get there. From San Marino it is a hot, tedious drive to Monaco, seven hours of packed Italian motorway, with the attendant maverick approach to highway driving etiquette. So it's time to hit the road.

#### GLAMOUR CENTRAL

Someone in less of a rush would stop in Bologna, Parma or Genoa, but I press on and arrive in Monaco in the dark. This is



**ABOVE:** SAN MARINO'S FAMOUS GUAITA, THE "FIRST TOWER". UNTIL 1970, SOME PARTS OF IT WERE USED AS PRISONS

#### FLY THE TINY SKIES

You don't fancy driving, yet you want to visit these five places anyway? Well, you can get there by plane, though not directly. Most people fly into the nearest (or most convenient) international airport, then hop onto a bus or train. For example, Liechtenstein is within an hour's drive of three airports: St Gallen-Altenrhein and Zurich in Switzerland, and Friedrichshafen in Germany. Despite the fact that St Gallen-Altenrhein is the nearest in terms of distance, Zurich is probably the easiest to get to and home from, in terms of flights and airlines.

## OBSCURE BUT TRUE

#### VATICAN CITY

As the leader of the Catholic church, the Pope is one of the most important figures in the world, presiding over some 1.2 billion followers worldwide. The traditional title of this Vatican City figure befits his stature: Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the State of Vatican City and Servant of the Servants of God.

#### SAN MARINO

Despite, or perhaps because of its diminutive size, this landlocked country does pretty well for itself. It is commonly thought to be the oldest surviving sovereign state in the world. It has no national debt — unusual in Europe these days — it has the fifth highest life expectancy in the world, yet it has no military. Charmingly, a major source of the country's revenue is from sales of postage stamps and coins, which are highly sought after by collectors for their rarity.

#### MONACO

If you're thinking of moving, Monaco might be an option to consider. The climate's great, there are more yachts than you can shake a stick at, and thanks to massive tourism and casino profits, residents don't pay taxes. Just don't move to Indonesia by mistake — the countries share the same flag design.

#### ANDORRA

For much of the 1960s and '70s, Andorra's entire military budget per year was US\$4.50, a sum just enough to purchase blank rounds, for firing into the air during national celebrations. In 2003, the president of Andorra addressed the United Nations, noting that those times had changed. "Many things have happened since those days and Andorra doesn't even put four dollars and fifty cents towards its defence budget. We don't spend a cent."

#### LIECHTENSTEIN

For a short time in 2011, it was possible to rent the entire country, much as you would rent a hotel room for a few days. Airbnb, a rental platform, priced the deal at US\$70,000 per night. The online profile, which has now sadly been taken down, noted that the country has "500+ bathrooms". The year before, rapper Snoop Dogg had decided he wanted to shoot a music video and also rent the entire country — though this fell through. A local property agent told press afterwards that: "It would have been possible, but Snoop Dogg's management did not give us enough time."

to be avoided. Most people's first sight of Monaco and Monte Carlo (one is a municipality of the other) is from above, looking down at the bay through a sweep of high-rise opulence on every scrap of rock from the border to the Mediterranean. The hairpin bends here are legendary — this is where Princess Grace of Monaco died — and far better done in daylight.

Arriving late, I am just in time to be refused entry to Monaco's ridiculously grand casino, for failing the dress code (jacket after 8pm please). The casino feels like the heart of Monte Carlo. Housed in a twin-towered building that looks more like a palace than Monaco's actual palace does, it is part of a beguiling complex, including a theatre and the headquarters of a ballet troupe. There are at least three James Bond movies that had scenes in this casino, and it's surely the inspiration for the fictional resort featured in Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale*, which shares its Belle Epoque architecture and aloof status. Still, I am

## AT NIGHT I DREAM OF THE VARIOUS CURVES OF THE MILAN-GENOA HIGHWAY AND EVENTUALLY FALL OUT OF BED NAVIGATING A TRICKY TURN, FEELING SEASICK

wealthier for having failed to get in; it costs 10 euros (over US\$13) for entry to the main room, and that is also the minimum bet.

At night I dream of the various curves of the Milan-Genoa highway and eventually fall out of bed navigating a tricky turn, seasick. But next morning, with nobody around, it's easy to see the place's attraction beyond gambling. There is the absurd wealth on the harbour itself, clogged with the finest boats imaginable; one of the world's best aquariums; and the Jardin Exotique de Monaco, an immaculate garden halfway up the hill with some of the best views of the city. Plus of course, you can drive the route of the Formula One street circuit (Sebastian Vettel's lap record: 1:16.577. Mine: about nine minutes. It turns out that when you're not in the Grand Prix, you have to stop at pedestrian crossings).

But the greatest joy of Monaco is driving in and out of it. The country is swept across by three corniches, each higher and grander than the last, with views down to the sea — one way to get a great view is to head for the French town of Eze.

That said, I have brought my GPS along for its terrific sense of humour, and today



MONACO



**TOP LEFT:** THE MONTE CARLO CASINO IS FAMED WORLDWIDE, SO IF YOU'RE IN MONACO TO SEE THE EQUALLY WELL-KNOWN GRAND PRIX (PART OF THE CIRCUIT IS PICTURED LEFT), CONSIDER STOPPING TO TAKE A LOOK. THOUGH AS CHRIS WRIGHT WOULD AGREE, DO DRESS APPROPRIATELY



it is in gallant form. It takes me one and a half hours to get out of the second smallest country on Earth. Had I listened to it, it would have sent me, in this order, into the harbour, the royal palace's front garden, several brick walls, and off a cliff.

#### SKI CENTRAL

Having finally found a way out, it is time to head to Andorra, wedged between France and Spain in the Pyrenees. The driving is largely dull on French motorways, punctuated with pauses to pay tolls. On each of the first two days, these fees run to 50 euros (around US\$69) and I waste a lot of time stopping and starting. Into France now,

**IT TAKES ME ONE AND A HALF HOURS TO LEAVE MONACO. HAD I LISTENED TO MY GPS, IT WOULD HAVE SENT ME INTO THE HARBOUR, THE ROYAL PALACE'S FRONT GARDEN, SEVERAL BRICK WALLS, AND OFF A CLIFF**

the roll call of places I pass is glamorous — Nice, Cannes, St Tropez — but on the highway there is only a fleeting glance of the Mediterranean, or a sandstone massif of the Gorges du Verdon as I pass beneath Provence, until the road heads south at Toulouse for the Pyrenees. Here, things get more interesting, passing through French villages including Ax, famed among Tour de France fans, before another winding mountain road of precipitous drops and hairpin bends, navigated amid very low cloud.

Aside from duty-free and tax haven benefits (most of these places have managed to preserve their independence largely through tax status), Andorra is chiefly famous as a ski resort, but there are good reasons to visit in summer when the snow yields to wonderful walks. Andorra is the biggest of the principalities by far and, although it has no airport, no railway, and precisely two roads in and out (one to France, one to Spain), it has room within for several towns as access points to its three valleys. Beyond the capital of Andorra la Vella, in which the shopping is concentrated, there are many smaller towns serving



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (SIGNAGE, ANDORRA MOUNTAINS)

LEFT: ANDORRA IS NESTLED IN THE PYRENEES MOUNTAINS, SO BE PREPARED FOR BRISK, FRESH AIR AND UNFORGETTABLE VISTAS

ACCORDING TO THE CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, THESE ARE THE POPULATION SIZES OF

ANDORRA  
**85,293**

LIECHTENSTEIN  
**37,009**

SAN MARINO  
**32,448**

MONACO  
**30,500**

VATICAN CITY  
**893**

WHICH ADDS UP TO A TOTAL OF 186,143

## 1.5 CRIMES

PER PERSON  
WITH MILLIONS OF EUPHORIC VISITORS COME SOME SNEAKY ONES: PICKPOCKETS. THIS THIEVES' PARADISE MEANS THAT THE VATICAN CITY HAS THE HIGHEST CRIME RATE IN THE WORLD

MARCH 2  
**2007**

ON THIS DATE, A SWISS ARMY UNIT UNWITTINGLY CROSSED THE BORDER DURING MANOEUVRES AND ACCIDENTALLY INVADED LIECHTENSTEIN. AUTHORITIES ON BOTH SIDES DOWNPLAYED THE INCIDENT. "IT'S NOT LIKE THEY STORMED OVER HERE WITH ATTACK HELICOPTERS OR SOMETHING," SAID A LIECHTENSTEIN OFFICIAL

## MONÉGASQUE

A NATIVE OF MONACO

## MONACOIAN

A RESIDENT IN THE CITY WHO WAS BORN IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

## THREE FILMS

THREE JAMES BOND MOVIES HAVE FEATURED SCENES SET IN MONACO: NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN, GOLDENEYE AND DR. NO, IN WHICH SEAN CONNERY FIRST SAID THE IMMORTAL WORDS: "BOND. JAMES BOND"

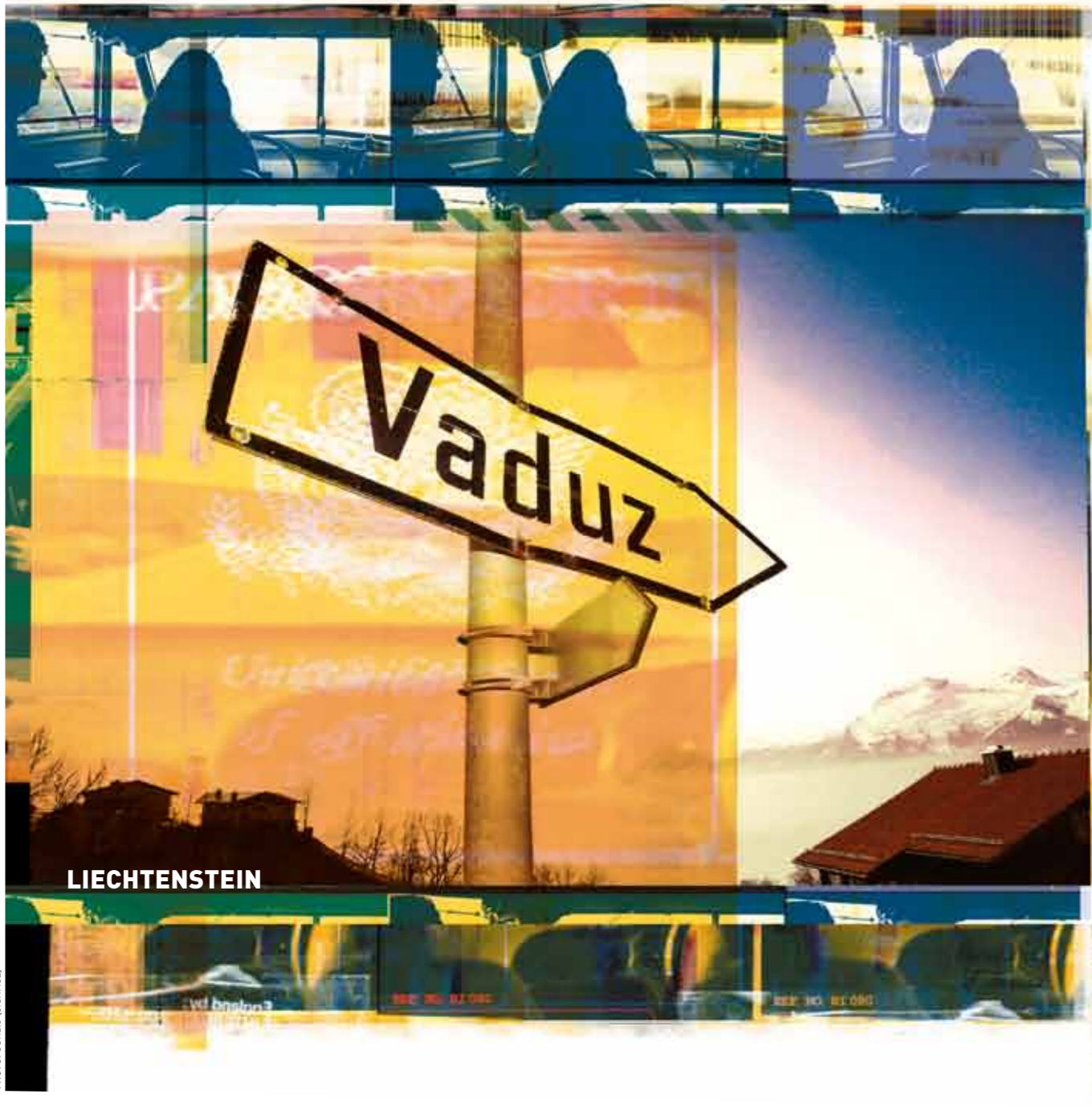


PHOTO: CORBIS (SIGNAGE)

those valleys. An example is Canillo, filled with ski lodges that become bargains in the empty summer: where a modest room might cost 125 euros (US\$172) in Monaco or Liechtenstein, one costs 49 euros (US\$67) with breakfast and dinner when I drop in. From there, walks bring you swiftly away from civilisation, past farmhouses and barns, to lakes and mountains.

Having turned up trying to speak in bad French, I find that's really Andorra's third language: first is Catalan, as spoken in Barcelona, and second Castilian Spanish.

Unusually, Andorra is something of a job-share. It is a monarchy headed by two co-princes, one Spanish and one French. Moreover, the French one is the President of France, currently François Hollande —

## I HEAD TO THE PROPER OBSCURITY OF LIECHTENSTEIN, THE SIXTH SMALLEST STATE IN THE WORLD AND ODDLY, THE LEADING MANUFACTURER OF FALSE TEETH

making him a reigning monarch whose day-job is to rule a country that executed its own monarchy in the French Revolution.

### THE LUXE LIFE

After Andorra, the true obscure principality crusader might head 13 and a half driving hours to Luxembourg — but it's a giant in this company, and not so obscure, hosting the European Court of Justice. Instead, I head to the proper obscurity of Liechtenstein, the sixth smallest state in the world and, oddly, its leading manufacturer of false teeth. This is too far to reach in a day, so I backtrack across the width of France, pausing to admire bridges both new (Norman Foster's seven-pier Millau Viaduct) and old (the

Roman Pont du Gard), before stopping at Annecy, near the Swiss border, for the night.

Entering Switzerland next morning, I refuse to miss the chance to drive across a Swiss mountain pass, and divert to the stunning Furka pass between the towns of Gletsch and Andermatt. It is dizzying stuff, and as the Skoda grapples with the 180-degree bends, it's hard not to look away from the road at the extraordinary rugged purity of the Swiss scenery. I'm aware from bitter experience though, that Swiss speed cameras are more belligerent than their counterparts elsewhere — and indeed, that ticket *will* find you when you go home. Besides, look at this scenery. Why rush?

I am 10 minutes from Liechtenstein before I see the first road sign for it, and its capital, Vaduz, whose focal point is a Gothic

castle on the hill behind the town, where the ruling family still lives. The family has been here since buying the place — and, indeed, the whole of Vaduz — in 1712. It is believed to be the only sovereign state whose rulers came to power by buying their own capital city. The residence is private except for one day a year, but worth visiting for the view down into the valley. As in Andorra, the hiking is sublime, though most visitors to the country come here on a day trip for the passport stamp. Don't count on this though: I didn't even see a passport control booth.

Dinner is a hearty Swiss *rosti*, a traditional dish made of potatoes, and a fabulous German dark beer. It being largely Swiss — Liechtenstein uses the Swiss franc — there is the linguistic multiplicity of that country here, which is just as well. Having floundered

with bad Italian in the Vatican City and San Marino, and bad French in Monaco and Andorra, I think my German is even worse. I'm spared by a waiter who speaks five languages, as people around here often do.

Next morning, it is time to fly home, marvelling again at Europe's smallness. Up in Liechtenstein at 5.45am, in Switzerland by 6am, Italy by 8.30am and landing back in England before lunchtime. As I pull into Milan's Linate airport, the final reading on the car is 3,422 kilometres. And nobody asked to see my passport once.

What have I picked up from my ludicrous sprint across the region? Chiefly, an allergy to French and Italian motorways, and recognition that this should have been attempted over a week. But also, that good things do indeed come in small packages. ●