



Women – Lives and Legends

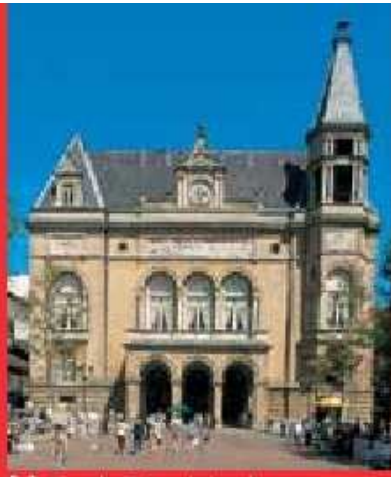


Luxembourg

the city

*bonjour!*





[1] Cercle Municipal



[1a] Ermesinde-Frieze

## Lives of Legendary Women

A stroll through one thousand years of the city's history

Working women and nobility, the unholy and the saintly – the historic development of the City of Luxembourg is inextricably intertwined with the history of women. How did women live in the past, what was their role in politics and business, and which myths and legends were linked with important female personalities? This city walk, put together by the Women's Library "Cid-femmes", provides some of the answers, following not only the traces of the first female sovereigns and rulers, but also the first women to be elected in politics.

On the "Bock" promontory, birthplace of the City, the legend of Melusina is brought to life again. The efforts of women to gain access to training and employment, the commitment of religious and secular women in social work can all be seen in a walk through the Old City. Also clearly visible, however, is the role played by women during the development of Luxembourg as an independent state: whether as political leaders or as opponents, Jewish women as victims of persecution, women resistance activists and collaborators in the Second World War. Last but not least, the walk highlights the inroads made by women in traditionally male domains such as sport and art. The strong presence of iconic women in Luxembourg's history is set alongside the far less known historical reality of the lives of ordinary women in the city.



[2] Palace of the Grand Dukes



[2a]



[2b]



[2c]

[2a] Margaret of Austria

[2b] Mary of Hungary

[2c] Maria Theresa

## The Countess Ermesinde and the Proclamation of Freedom

The walk begins at the Place d'Armes. The carved façade [1a] of the **Cercle Municipal** [1], dating from 1907, is dedicated to Ermesinde, Countess of Luxembourg (1186-1247), and shows the handing over of the Proclamation of Freedom to the citizens in 1244. This document was later celebrated as a gift from a liberal monarch but was actually a contract which not only bestowed advantages on the citizens but also bound them to certain obligations such as military service in time of war. Nonetheless, Ermesinde lives on in the collective consciousness as an exemplary monarch, a devout founder of convents and an exceptional woman in a period dominated by men. This, even though influential female feudal monarchs were certainly not a rarity in the Middle Ages.

## The “Regiment of Women” – Rulers in the early modern age

From the Cercle Municipal, the walk continues across Place Guillaume II (Lux. “Knuedler”) to the **Palace of the Grand Dukes** [2]. The Renaissance wing on the left dates from 1572 and served as the seat of the Provincial Council and the States General. At that time, Luxembourg was part of the Netherlands, ruled by the Hapsburgs who administered the territory as governors on behalf of the Spanish, and later Austrian, monarchs. Under the regencies



[3a] Marguerite  
Thomas-Clement

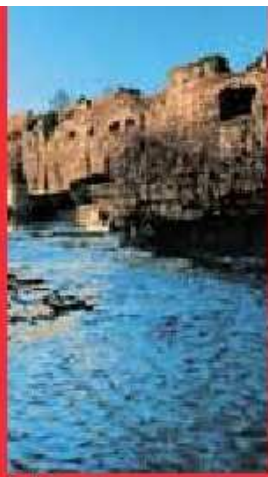


[3b] Feminist demonstration in front of  
the parliament building, 1972

of Margaret of Austria [2a] (1480-1530) and Mary of Hungary [2b] (1505-1558), the Netherlands experienced a cultural and commercial golden age. Empress Maria Theresia [2c] (1717-1780) was an exception to the general rule prohibiting women from succeeding to the throne. She was able to gain military supremacy in the so-called Wars of Succession and later brought in important reforms. To modernise the administration and to limit the tax privileges of the nobility, she established a land register of her subjects' possessions. The present palace building establishes a connection not only with women at the zenith of power, but also - as the place where justice was administered and seat of the court of appeal with women who, accused of witchcraft, were banished from society. The some 2,000 witchcraft trials carried out in the early modern era (1500-1800) are a sombre chapter in the Grand Duchy's history. Throughout Europe, the number of women burned as witches is estimated at 50,000, of which half were in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which then included Luxembourg.

## Political Participation

From the palace, we walk a little further to the **parliament building** [3]. Although there was no sign of a strong women's movement prior to the First World War, women's suffrage was introduced early. In a tense political atmosphere, the parliament voted in favour of women's suffrage on 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 1919. This was based more on strategic grounds than on any deep-seated political debate.



[4] Bock promontory



[4a] Ermesinde  
carving



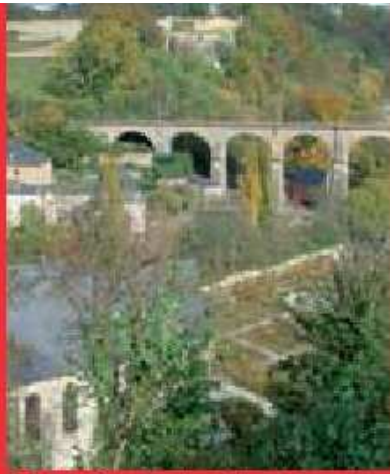
[4b] Mythical creature  
Melusina

The election of teacher and social democrat Marguerite Thomas-Clement [3a] (1886-1979) was the only breakthrough at the 1919 elections and between 1931 and 1965 there were again no women members of parliament.

The better educated and more confident young women of the 1960s were the first to challenge the traditional place of women in society. 1965 saw women elected to parliament once again and, in 1967, Madeleine Frieden-Kinnen became the first woman government minister. Nonetheless, Luxembourg women's rights were still considerably restricted: civil legislation, inheritance rights, divorce and employment law discriminated against women, and contraception was a taboo subject. From 1972, actions undertaken by the feminist organisation Women's Liberation Movement (MLF- Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) [3b], put politicians under pressure to bring in reforms in these areas. Next, the "MLF" set its sights on lesbian rights and abortion legalisation. Even today, four out of five political appointments in parliament and local councils are held by men.

## The Legendary Melusina

Rue Sigefroi runs along the back façade of the palace, on which a carved portrait of Ermesinde [4a] is to be found, and leads to the "Bock" promontory [4] and the legendary birthplace of Luxembourg City (963 AD). According to the legend, Siegfried - the first Count of Luxembourg to be mentioned in a document concerning the promontory and



[5] Pfaffenthal with Maternity Home and "Hondhaus"



[5a] Midwives, Pfaffenthal, circa 1935

the fortified castle of Lucilinburhuc - married a mythical creature called Melusina [4b]. Driven by jealousy, he broke the promise made to his wife that he should never see her on Saturdays and discovered that she took the shape of a mermaid on these days. Thereupon, Melusina disappeared in the currents of the Alzette and has, to this day, never been seen again. In the 19th century, the legend, originally from Poitou (F), was translated into Luxembourgish and Melusina was declared the "Ancestress" of the dynasty, the city and the nation. Her image can be seen on a pillar of the palace (circa 1895) and in a stained glass window of the cathedral (1935-1938).

## Social Engagement and Professional Activity

From the "Bock", we first look left to the opposite side of the valley and the Kirchberg Plateau with the European Institutions. The European Union incorporated from the outset the concept, inter alia, of equal rights for men and women in the workplace. Indeed, Luxembourg did not implement a number of reforms in this area until required to do so by European directives.

Next we look down towards the city district of the **Pfaffenthal** [5]. The former chapel was built by Governor Mansfeld as was the adjoining public hospice for the poor and the sick dating from 1600. They served as temporary accommodation for the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, until the nuns established the city's first school for girls [7a] in 1628. On the left, you can see the



[6a] Former women's prison



[6b] Former glove factory



[6c] Women textile workers

former cavalry barracks, site of the Royal Grand-Ducal Maternity Home and Midwifery Training School [5a] in Luxembourg from 1877 to 1935. Initially, mostly poor and single women were cared for here, hospital births becoming the norm only in the 1920s.

In addition to women's rights to training and employment, the women's organisation, called "Organisation for Women's Interests" and founded in 1906, was also concerned about social deprivation. Women conducted a social survey in the lower city districts of the Grund, Clausen and Pfaffenthal where they observed living standards "easily matching the sorriest images from East London."

We follow round from the "Bock" promontory to the Corniche. At our feet lies **the lower town of the Grund [6]**.

The Hospice of Saint-Jean was founded in 1308/9 by Margaret of Brabant. From 1850 to the 1980s, it served as a women's prison run by Franciscan nuns. Prostitution was frequently the reason for imprisonment. Since the women's prison was moved to Schrassig, the Hospice has been home to the "Naturmusée" [6a], the National Museum of Natural History. The glove factory – Händschefabrik Reinhard [6b] - was on the opposite side of the Alzette. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many women worked in the weaving and leather industries. In 1905, the glove industry employed around 1,800 female workers [6c] and 750 men. The Reinhardt factory had 1,000 workers in 1925 but the factory closed its doors in the 1950s.

Only after achieving political rights did women gain access to state employment and the liberal professions. It continued



[7a] Former Benedictine refuge



[7b] Entrance to the Holy Trinity Church

to be difficult for married women to work. With the decline in agriculture and the textile industry, and the popularity of the status of housewife, the number of women in employment has been falling since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It did not increase again until the 1960s and is still lower than the European average.

## Access to Education

Leaving the Corniche, we go down Rue Large to Rue Saint-Esprit and on to **Rue de la Congrégation** [7]. The early days of education for girls are closely tied to the history of the convents. From the late Middle Ages, convents offered education to the daughters of the well-to-do. The Clariss Convent founded by Ermesinde in 1238 on the Holy Ghost Plateau was one of these. After its move to Pfaffenthal in 1690, the Sisters of the Order of Saint Clare established a refuge in Rue de la Congrégation (Maison Servais). The refuge [7a] of the Benedictine monks from Neumünster (now the offices of the Inspection Générale des Finances) was bought by the teaching order of the Sisters of Saint Sophie after the French Revolution. A commemorative plaque in this building is a memorial to the Congregation of Notre-Dame which, as early as 1628, settled in the district and offered free education to Catholic girls. Originally founded in Lorraine, the Congregation sent a small group of nuns to Luxembourg at the behest of Anna-Maria von Mansfeld (circa 1585-1657) and Margareta Busbach (1579-1651). Margareta Busbach joined the Order in 1631 but Anna-Maria





[7c] Anne Beffort



[7d] Aline Mayrisch –  
de Saint-Hubert

von Mansfeld, the daughter of Governor Mansfeld and Anna von Bentzeraths, “a free and unmarried woman”, was refused by the Order because of her illegitimate birth. Both founders are buried in the convent chapel. Their graves can be visited, by prior appointment, in the crypt of the (now Protestant) Holy Trinity Church [7b].

From 1911 to 1926, the first public grammar school for girls was housed in one of the buildings of the Saint Sophie school. From 1909, the grammar school offered girls an alternative to the Catholic run upper-primary school and facilitated their entry to university. Anne Beffort [7c] (1880-1966), one of the pioneers of girls’ education, was, in 1908, the first Luxembourg woman to receive a doctorate (in literature). The grammar school for girls was founded thanks to the initiative of the Organisation for the Interests of Women under Aline Mayrisch – de Saint-Hubert [7d] (1874-1947), who bore the cost of setting up the school in its early years. This patron of the arts was co-founder of the Luxembourg Red Cross Association in 1914. The “Meedercherslycée” moved to the Limpertsberg in 1926 where it still exists today, as a co-educational school named “Lycée Robert Schuman”.

## War and Political Strife

Leaving Rue de la Congrégation, it is only a few steps to **Place Clairefontaine** [8]. The memorial statue in honour of the Grand Duchess Charlotte [8a] who died in 1985, was erected in 1990. As a result of war, deprivation and debate



[8a] Place Clairefontaine,  
Grand Duchess Charlotte



[8b] BBC-Radio broadcast

about the Grand Ducal dynasty, a tense political situation existed after the First World War. Under pressure from the anti-monarchistic movement, the Grand Duchess Marie-Adelheid abdicated in favour of her younger sister, Charlotte. In the referendum of 28<sup>th</sup> September 1919, the overwhelming majority voted to retain the monarchy under the new Grand Duchess. During the Second World War, Charlotte became an icon of Luxembourg resistance and a personification of the independence movement through her diplomatic endeavours and her broadcasts on BBC radio [8b].

Both world wars brought completely new roles to women. In the First world war, there was hardly any fighting in Luxembourg but, through hunger and crisis, women became more strongly involved in new areas of work. The Second World War is the most significant and tragic event in Luxembourg's contemporary history. 5,700 citizens died, 699 of them women. Women comprised around 15 per cent of the deportees and prisoners of war. 40 of the 139 Luxembourg women imprisoned in the women's concentration camp in Ravensbrück died there. History books tell mostly about male activists and male victims but women were also involved in the resistance. They mainly carried out traditional tasks such as supplying food and washing clothes of hidden deserters. However, there were also a few women who undertook such dangerous tasks as spying and smuggling refugees. On the other hand, some women collaborated with the Nazis, mainly through their membership in the women's branch of the Nazi party or through denouncing others.



[9] Cathedral



[9a] Mary with Jesus Child,  
Kunigunde on her left

## Saintly Women

Not far from Place Clairefontaine is the **Cathedral [9]**. The West entrance on Boulevard Roosevelt was created by Auguste Trémont between 1935 and 1938. It depicts Mary, Mother of God [9a], who has been honoured as the patron saint of the city since 1666 and patron saint of the Grand Duchy since 1678. The crescent moon and vanquished snake at her feet symbolise that Mary not only comforts the distressed but also protects against the forces of evil, especially in time of war. The national dimension of the Marian cult was already very marked in the 1930s. Hence Mary is depicted here surrounded by six “Luxembourg” saints: Peter of Luxembourg, Willibrord, Kunigunde, her husband Emperor Henry II, Hubertus and the hermit Schetzel. Kunigunde (circa 985-1033) was the daughter of Count Siegfried and his wife Hedwig. She and her husband Henry, Duke of Bavaria, were crowned together in Rome in 1014 with the Emperor’s crown of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Kunigunde played an active role in the process of governing. After Henry’s death, she successfully oversaw succession to the throne and then retired to the Kaufungen convent near Kassel, which she had built. She was canonised in 1200 AD.

## Women in Gold

Having crossed Boulevard Roosevelt, we continue the walk to **Place de la Constitution [10]**. In 1841, the country received



[10a] "Gëlle Fra", Place de la Constitution



[10b] Pregnant "Lady Rosa"

its own constitution and state sovereignty developed. The many monuments erected to symbolise the nation's unity and solidarity testify to this sense of independence. Female figures appear on three of the most important monuments ([10a], [12a] and [13]). One of these, the "Gëlle Fra" [10a] or "Golden Lady", is significant on several levels. It was put up in 1923 in remembrance of the Luxembourg men who fought in the French and Belgian armies during the First World War while their own country was occupied by German forces. At the start of the occupation by German National Socialist forces in the Second World War, the monument was pulled down, becoming in the process a symbol of the Nazi dictatorship. It was re-erected in 1985 in its entirety and the "War Memorial" has served ever since as a central place of commemoration. In 2001, a second statue was temporarily erected right next to the first – a copy of the original but this time a pregnant female figure. This work of art bore the title "Lady Rosa of Luxembourg" [10b]. The feminist artist Sanja Ivekovic intended it to represent, amongst other symbols, a war memorial from a female perspective – the myth of the mother of warriors, as well as the unwanted pregnancies of war rape victims. The double monument sparked off a lively public debate over the inviolability of collective memory, contemporary art and the image of women in society.

## **Jewish Women and Persecution**

Leaving the "Gëlle Fra" behind us, we follow Boulevard



[11] Former  
Synagogue, 1930

[11a] Maria Gleit,  
writer

[11b] Hanna Waag,  
film actress

Roosevelt and turn into Rue Philippe II. The site of the present Ministry of Education, on the corner of Rue Aldringen and Rue Notre-Dame, was previously the site of the **Synagogue [11]**, torn down by the Nazi occupation forces in 1943. Little research has been carried out on the history of Jewish women in Luxembourg. The founding of the “Union des Dames israélites” was part of the development of Jewish organisations in Luxembourg City. After 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, many Jews and political refugees found temporary asylum in Luxembourg. Many of these were artists, including women artists such as the writer Maria Gleit [11a] and the actress Hanna Waag [11b]. To pay their way, these women artists organised entertainment such as theatre productions or concerts.

Frequently, it was women who were particularly affected by the regulations enforced by the National Socialists after 1940. Marriage or sexual relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish individuals carried legal sanctions. Non-Jewish women under the age of 45 were not permitted to work in Jewish households. Jewish families were permitted to shop only at specific times and their rations were reduced. Jewellery and valuables were confiscated. On 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1940, members of the Jewish community were ordered to leave the country. Autumn 1941 saw the start of deportations to the concentration camps at Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Izbica as well as to the Lodz Ghetto in Poland. Among the approximately 4,000 members of Luxembourg’s Jewish community in 1940, 1,380 were deported. Only 79 survived.



[12a] Dicks-Lentz-Monument



[13] Memorial to Princess Amalia

## National Poets Commemorated

In 1903, a memorial to the two national poets, Edmond de la Fontaine, known as Dicks, and Michel Lentz was erected on **Square Jan Pallach [12]**. The lion holding the Luxembourg coat of arms, and the inscription “Mir welle bleiwe wat mir sin” (We want to remain what we are) from Lentz’s “Feierwon” are intended to symbolise the desire for national independence [12a]. The “common people” are represented by a female agricultural worker and male steel worker. At that time women were typically represented as linked to nature and inward-looking while men were shown active in physical labour and outward-looking.

## Princess Amalia

Our walk leads us through Rue Beck past Luxembourg’s Women’s Library (Cid-femmes) to Avenue Amélie (1830-1872). Inaugurated in the city park in 1876, the monument to **Princess Amalia [13]** (1830-1872) is the city’s earliest public memorial. Amalia of Saxony-Weimar married Prince Henry, younger son of William II and Governor of Luxembourg, in 1853. The base of the monument is inscribed “Princess Henry of the Netherlands” which indicates that the monument is also dedicated to her husband whose name is linked to the dismantling of the fortress, the withdrawal of the Prussian garrison and Luxembourg’s economic upturn. Amalia herself was not involved in political decision-making. True to the role of women of the



[14a] Elsy Jacobs, world cycling champion



[14b] Lory Koster, 1924, swimmer

period, she was mostly active in charitable works and was honoured as “Mother of the Nation”. This honour was later also bestowed on the Grand Duchess Charlotte (ref. [8a]).

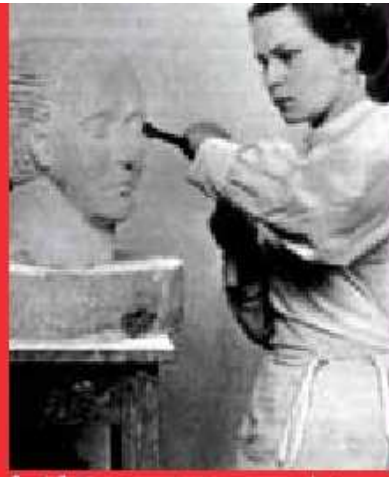
## Sportswomen – long-unrecognised

We descend the steps behind the monument to Princess Amalia, keep left and then turn to the right. On one of the park’s side paths, we find two bronze plaques portraying famous Luxembourg **male cyclists** [14]. There is no mention of world cycling champion Elsy Jacobs [14a].

The city park was a meeting place for sports enthusiasts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were tennis courts and a velodrome near the Villa Louvigny and people ice-skated on the “Brasseurs” ponds. During the cycling season, there was also a women’s race. Ice-skating and swimming were also favourite activities of women. Gymnastics clubs were the first sports organisations to create a women’s section. Luxembourg took part in the Olympic games for the first time in 1912 but it was not until the 1924 Paris Olympics that the swimmer Lory Koster [14b] (1902-1991) was allowed to participate as the first Luxembourg female competitor. She came sixth in the 200 metre breast stroke. After the Second World War, the sporting world opened its doors more and more to women but discriminatory practices continued to dog them. One example is the experience of Pfaffenthal-born sportswoman Elsy Jacobs (1933-1988). The cyclist first competed outside Luxembourg under a French licence because women’s races were banned in Luxembourg!



[15a] Niki de Saint Phalle  
"La grande Tempérance"



[15b] Simone Lutgen, sculptress

She became world champion in 1958 at the first women's world championship competition. However, when the Cycling Federation failed to nominate her for the world championships in 1974, despite her many achievements, she turned her back on Luxembourg in disappointment. Even nowadays, steps still need to be taken to bring an end to the inequality in the treatment of sportsmen and sportswomen with regard to news coverage, prize money and recognition.

## Women and Art

We continue our walk through the park to Avenue Monterey. Here we turn left and arrive at **Place Emile Hamilius [15]** with Niki de Saint Phalles' sculpture "La grande Tempérance" [15a]. This sculpture was part of the artist's Open-Air-Exhibition of "Nanas" which was on display in conjunction with the 1995 European year of Culture. At that time, one of the "Nanas" had to be covered up during the annual Octave religious procession – proof that public debate over the female body still provokes controversy. With few exceptions (e.g. Simone Lutgen [15b] or Thérèse Glaesener-Hartmann), women artists and sculptors were given little support in Luxembourg until the 1980s. Similarly, Helen Buchholtz and Lou Koster were the only two female composers to gain recognition in Luxembourg before the Second World War. Lou Koster [15c] (1889-1973), from Luxembourg City, composed mostly songs in the Romantic style. Official histories of literature do not mention any women born before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A fresh impetus is





[15c] Lou Koster, composer

being injected particularly by young women born in the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, many female Luxembourg artists are taking a critical look at the position of women in society and particularly their own situation as artists. With the “inspirational” sculpture, the journey through one thousand years of women’s history in Luxembourg City comes to a close.

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**For further information on this subject:**

[www.cid-femmes.lu](http://www.cid-femmes.lu): Women’s library and Women’s music forum Euterpe;

[www.statec.lu](http://www.statec.lu), [www.ceps.lu](http://www.ceps.lu): Data and Reports; [www.uni.lu](http://www.uni.lu): Research on Women and Gender, University of Luxembourg; [www.vdl.lu](http://www.vdl.lu): Equality officer of the City of Luxembourg;

[www.mega.public.lu](http://www.mega.public.lu): Ministry for Equal opportunities between women and men; [www.cnfl.lu](http://www.cnfl.lu): National Council of Women in Luxembourg

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### Women's and Gender studies in Luxembourg

Since 1992, the Cid-femmes has run a Women's Library and Women's Music archive which is open to the public and contains over 20,000 books, CDs, newspapers and musical scores. The subject matter ranges from international women's movements and gender research, from women's art and biographies to fiction and poetry and children's books with strong girls' role-models. Alongside this, the Cid-femmes runs and supports cultural, educational and socio-political projects. Visitors with a reader's card can borrow books, CDs and music scores. A café is available during opening hours.

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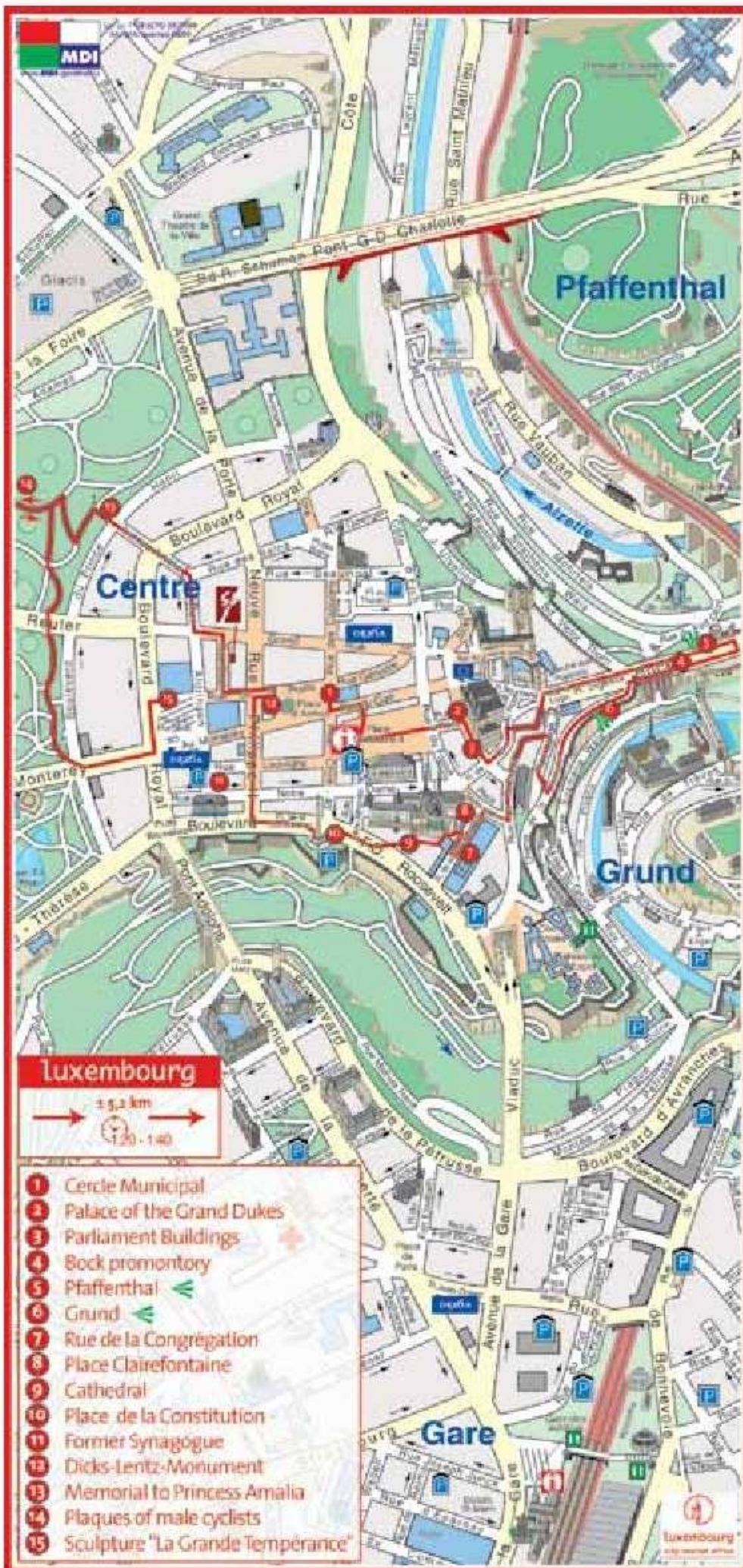
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**Luxembourg**  
 → 5.2 km  
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