

So when are you coming?

NOVA SCOTIA.COM
Shaped by the Sea

Andorra's attraction

Published Saturday September 25th, 2010

Europe: Nestled between France and Spain, Andorra is one of the smallest and least accessible countries, as well as one of the most alluring

F1 Dale Dunlop
For the Telegraph-Journal

On a recent hiking trip to the Garrontxa area of Catalonia, I came across a road sign for Andorra. Andorra certainly wasn't in my plans but, I thought, why not make a detour to one of the world's smallest and least accessible countries?



Nestled in the eastern Pyrenees, Andorra features winding highways with picturesque views. The 468-square-kilometre country (about half the size of New York City) is only accessible by road.

A glance at the map showed it was possible to traverse the tiny country by entering through France and exiting into Spain. So without further ado it was off to the French border town of Bourg Madame, from whence it was a short distance to the eastern border of Andorra.

Andorra has remained independent of its mighty neighbours, France and Spain, despite a myriad of struggles between the two nations as well as many other kingdoms, fiefdoms and baronies that have claimed ownership of part or all of the Pyrenees in the last millennium.

Described as the Principality of Andorra, the country of 468 square kilometres operates as a sovereign nation with its own flag, language (Catalan) and government. Its co-princes are the Bishop of Urgell, currently Joan

Enric Vives i Sicília, and the President of the French Republic, currently Nicolas Sarkozy.

Andorra is perhaps best known for its shopping. Not being a full member of the E.U. has allowed Andorra to offer its goods duty-free to visiting Europeans. This has helped the country prosper despite the fact that everything it sells has to be hauled overland either through France or Spain.

The savings induce hundreds of thousands of shoppers a year to make the trek up the Pyrenees and back to their home country loaded with goods.

Andorra has no air or train service. The only way to get there is by vehicle, and there is only one way in and out from both Spain and France, which helps explain its relative isolation.

Approaching from the French side, it is a very steep climb up to the Col de Puymorens. But the effort was more than worth it. Wildflowers carpet the mountainsides in all directions. I counted more than a dozen species. These flowery panoramas continued right up to the border a short distance away.

A sign posted just before the border warned goods purchased in Andorra must be declared upon reentering the E.U. It seemed a rather grinchy way of reminding people that just because Andorra didn't levy duties, it didn't mean that France wouldn't.

For 100 kilometres or so there were numerous traditional small towns and villages with the odd ski resort thrown in, typical Pyrenees scenery. What loomed ahead, however, at the Andorran border, was anything but.

A massive cross-border station was under construction, behind which stood an array of equally large modern buildings - out of proportion to anything one would think necessary for such a tiny country. Holding out my passport, I was waved through, which left me wondering why the necessity for the new border crossing if identification wasn't checked.

Disappointed in not getting an Andorra stamp on my passport, I crossed and stopped in the parking lot of one of the major edifices - what Europeans call hypermarkets, similar to our Wal-Marts. There were also more gas stations than I had seen in the past week, all offering gas at substantial discounts from what I had paid only an hour before, in the belief that Andorra might not have such amenities. There was also, of course, a McDonald's.

It appeared thousands of people were willing to drive hundreds of kilometres up winding mountain roads to shop, buy gas and eat at McDonald's. So much for visions of this tiny landlocked principality lost in time, everyone in a bucolic existence herding sheep and milking cows while dressed in traditional Andorran dress - whatever that might be.

There was a new tunnel which allowed the option of dispensing with the hairpin turns by simply driving right through the mountain to reach the next high pass.

Dismissing this option was a wise choice, not only because of the spectacular views of the Andorran

Pyrenees, but the additional reward of coming across a large herd of horses - many with bells and bobbed tails - blocking the highway for a short time. The horses were very approachable. In the past I have come across goats, sheep, cows, donkeys, geese and chickens blocking the road, but never a herd of free-roaming horses.

The horses and the wonderful scenery put Andorra back in my good books. I couldn't help but note the tremendous hiking opportunities this little county offered as I headed toward Andorra La Vella, the capital and prime destination for shoppers.

Andorra seemed to be enjoying a building boom. It was hard to spot a building that wasn't new. In fact, on coming upon an ancient-looking church in Soldeu, I felt compelled to stop for a photograph, despite the fact that I had passed many such churches in France and Spain earlier that day.

At a particularly bright green picnic area that overlooked a small town I was surprised to find the footing to be artificial turf.

Before there was shopping in Andorra, there was skiing. This certainly remains a top attraction. The primary road passes through three ski resorts on the way to Andorra La Vella; Soldeu, Canillo and Encamp. All were impressive in their design, largely tasteful, constructed of inviting stone and wood that skiers associate with cozy fires and great après ski.

The mountains were equally impressive. I made a mental note to return to enjoy the mountains either on skis or on foot.

The road, following the course of the Valira River, descended steadily from the French border as we headed for Andorra La Vella (literally Andorra the Old). Rounding a corner, the city appeared in the valley below, seemingly a solid mass of buildings filling every possible inch of space between the steep mountain walls of the Valira del Nord and the Valira del Orient.

Traffic was now intense and I was pleased to get a spot in the municipal parking lot conveniently located near the city's centre. Andorra La Vella has an array of modern hotels, banks, government buildings, as well as a predominant pyramid-shaped glass building. Walking along the riverbank, access to which the Andorrans preserved on both sides, I headed toward the glass tower, which I discovered to be Caldea, the largest spa in Europe.

Using natural geo thermal springs the Caldea claims to offer more forms of spa treatments than anywhere else in the world. It has the appearance of a giant indoor water park. This could be a very pleasant place to wile away the day for a non-shopper. Curiously, for such a big complex, no accommodations are offered.

Next it was off to the main shopping area on Avinguda Benloch where the crowds intensified and the look of the inveterate shopper appeared on many a face. I needed a new UV filter for my camera as my old one had fallen off and rolled into the Segres River the day before. I bought one at the first camera shop I saw. I used the remainder of my time to explore the rest of the small city. One impressive sight was the Pont de la Uno, a striking modern bridge over the Valira that stops abruptly at a mountain tunnel in the city's centre.

Then it was off for a short trip to Sant Julia de Lora, where more of the giant hypermarkets flanked the road. I decided to stop at the next one to investigate the hype. Before I could, however, the Spanish border was upon me. All potential entrants to Spain were signalled over so vehicles could be searched. Ignoring the piles of stuff in the back seats of most cars, the officers dutifully waved travellers through. Perhaps they were looking for Andorran refugees attempting to flee the horrors of non-stop shopping.

The excursion to Andorra was an eye-opening experience. It was not a rural backwater, but a sophisticated and in most parts, thoughtfully developed little country, much closer to Luxembourg than Vatican City or San Marino. While I wouldn't return to shop, I would welcome the chance to hike or ski the beautiful mountain countryside.

Dale Dunlop is a freelance writer based in Halifax.

Please Log In or Register FREE

You are currently not logged into this site. Please [log in](#) or [register](#) for a **FREE ONE Account**.

Logged in visitors may comment on articles, enter contests, manage home delivery holds and much more online. Your **ONE Account** grants you access to features and content across the entire CanadaEast Network of sites.