

A SCHENGEN VISIT

For the fear it strikes in SA souls, **Richard Asher** plans to spit on the town's pavement, but finds a rather charming spot



ACROSS THE BORDER: Schengen quay, just inside Luxembourg, seen from Germany

Picture: RICHARD ASHER

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MENTION the word "Schengen" to any South African who travels in Europe, and they'll probably just nod in quiet solidarity. They understand. It's a club, with members brought closer by the bonds of suffering. Those long hours in sweaty queues at the Portuguese Embassy. The icy glares from the French bureaucrats. The fees. Those annual tongue-lashings from Great Aunt Heidi in Austria, who thinks it's your fault she must send yet another fax confirming you'll sleep in her loft.

But what do we know about Schengen itself? I must come clean: I thought it was some kind of acronym dreamt up in a Brussels conference hall. Either that, or it was some sort of industrial town in the Netherlands. Sounds Dutch, doesn't it?

I was far from the mark, as I discovered with a start when planning a route through Luxembourg recently. Schengen is, in fact, a tiny village on the banks of the Moselle River. It's



FINE VINES: A view through the vines to the heart of Schengen

only just inside Luxembourg. Germany lies across the river and France is about 30 seconds' drive south. That's why they decided this was a fitting place to sign treaties about opening Europe's borders. The Schengen agreements of 1985 and 1990, which have had such far-reaching consequences, were sealed aboard a riverboat, the Princesse Marie-Astrid.

But what is there now that the politicians have gone? There's a modest restored chateau, where Victor Hugo used to hang out. There's a European Museum. Everywhere, there are vineyards. Otherwise, not much. Even people are in short supply.

I drop in on a late summer's day. The streets are mostly barren. Apart from two little shops, the place is a swathe of shuttered windows. For a South African, it's surreal. To think that such a harmless little place

causes us so much grief. Of cackling Eurocrats there is no sign. To be honest, the vibe is a good one. Suddenly spitting on Schengen's pavements doesn't seem so appealing.

I decide to test the locals by asking them if they can think of a reason why their town is famous in South Africa. The lady in the general store shrugs cheerfully, and the guy whose cellar-refurbishment I interrupt doesn't have a clue either. Their innocence is so endearing you can't be angry with them. This is an ordinary village of a couple of thousand ordinary souls, mostly involved in wine-making. They didn't ask for the millstone of South African opprobrium.

Down at the quay, I find plaques commemorating the Schengen Agreements. A woman wheels her pram along the riverside, not a care in the world. Some chaps in yellow

turn up to sweep the leaves. The real damage wrought from this dock is not a job for brooms, but they're not to know that. The South African traveller here must do his reflection alone, for the locals will go about their business with no guilt.

If the town itself is quiet, the petrol stations on its fringes are anything but. Fuel in Luxembourg is a whopping 20% cheaper than it is across the border, so many come in search of nothing but a refill. I even catch the French police topping up here. Would they be allowed to stop a robbery at a Luxembourgian petrol station?

Giant filling stations aside, Schengen is actually in a pretty neck of the woods. The village might not keep you long, but the wide, busy Moselle is a wonderful waterway to explore. You could start with a morbidly satisfying ride upriver on the Princesse Marie-Astrid herself. Although if you think about it, what happened on board wasn't such a bad thing anyway — without the Schengen Agreement we'd have to stand in way more than one embassy queue. It's just that Schengen gave us a single name to loathe.

But as Schengen itself recedes, all that might fade. Like its famous cousin the Rhine, this river is a never-ending postcard of vineyards and cute villages, although you'll hear more of the loopy Letzeburgesch language than pure German. The scrap-metal barges that cruise up and down are incongruous, but somehow seem more photo opportunity than eyesore. If you don't fancy that boat, there's a 55km hiking trail from Schengen to Wasserbillig, where the Moselle peels off into Germany. This follows both the river and Luxembourg's petite wine route, so you won't go thirsty — which is more than you can say for the queues at certain embassies. — © Richard Asher

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