

The World Tour

Republic of Ireland Tour - September 2013

Ireland is green. You know that already? Respectfully, if you haven't yet been there, you only think you know that. However many different shades of green you can name, it's not enough to describe the landscape of many greens patchworked together by stone walls. Mile after mile of green dotted with cows, sheep and occasional horses, sometimes an ancient ruin poking up from the countryside.



From our seats in a comfortable coach, the 48 of us traveled many miles of green landscape, from Dublin to Galway, then to Killarney, the Dingle Peninsula, Blarney, Cobh, Waterford and back to Dublin. For many of those miles we were entertained by our guide Jerry's history, lore and personal reflections. Sometimes he played Irish music that complimented the scenery and left us to nap, chat or think our thoughts about all the places we'd been.



Although we traveled long distances, no one ride was very long as it was interrupted by a special visit or tour. We hit the ground running after arriving in Dublin, and were taken directly to the Glasnevin Museum. As the national necropolis, where the luminaries in Irish history have their final resting place, it was a fitting start to a week in which we seemed to run across graves everywhere. These were a reminder not only of the age of this civilization but the tragic scope of its history. Often the graves were dilapidated and impossible to read, as many were in Clonmacnoise, our next stop. Our guide told us

about the history of this monastic settlement, founded in 545 AD by St. Ciaran, including the politics that were perhaps as critical as religious reverence to its history.



From Clonmacnoise, we rode to Galway and saw several sites from the bus before stopping at the Cathedral of Our Lady. There on one wall, amidst beautifully carved stations of the cross, was a mosaic portrait of JFK who won the heart of the Irish in his 1963 visit.

The 4-star Radisson Blu Hotel was our home for 2 nights. It was in the center of this somewhat bohemian and fun-loving city and we were able to walk to shops and pubs during our stay. It's not established who set the record for pubs visited but several among us gave it their best shot. It was in a Galway pub where we first got to enjoy Deirdre's superb Irish dancing.



On Monday, we toured Connemara, taking a cruise on Killary Harbor, Ireland's only fjord, on the catamaran "Connemara Lady". Watching the passing landscape through the mist, we enjoyed Irish Coffee and got to know each other further. Getting to know each other progressed throughout the week, of course. During a stop for souvenirs and "rest" on our way back to Galway, we got to know Bruce a whole lot better. He had left his fancy camera in a pub. Because the coach couldn't turn back on the narrow road, Bruce had to sprint there and back. We credited him with a 9 minute mile, as well as



world-class absent-mindedness.



On Tuesday we reached the Cliffs of Moher, an incredible formation of dark limestone rising nearly 700 feet above the ocean. We toured the cliffs and had lunch in the visitor center. Then, in order to cut considerable time from our trip to Killarney, we took a ferry across the Shannon River Estuary – yes, the entire bus was packed in between milk trucks with only inches between.



We checked into the Scotts Hotel in Killarney with time to spare to check out the town and perhaps do some shopping. After a good dinner, it was pub time. We were invited for “special music” in the hotel bar – none other than our teenage companion Sonny. Who knew that he was a talented songwriter and guitarist?! By the time the night was over, Sonny had played for a group at the hotel courtyard, had joined the local musicians in a pub and had developed a significant Irish fan base. Deirdre did some dancing to the delight of a contingent of Sue’s Irish relatives who joined us that evening.



The next day we toured the beautiful Dingle Peninsula. The decibel level on the bus was notably higher after a visit to the Dingle Brewery. Familiarity as well as enjoyment of local beverages had combined to fully erase any restraint we had practiced at the beginning of the trip. All bets were off from this point.



On Thursday, we drove through Cork, stopping at Blarney. We shopped at the Blarney Woolen Mills. Some of us did the backbend necessary to kiss the Blarney Stone in Blarney Castle. The next stop was Cobh where we had a walking tour which included the departure site of the Titanic passengers and the landing site of Lusitania victims.



We drove from there along Ireland's southern coast to Waterford where we checked into Dooley's Hotel. By now we were well acquainted with the incredible Jerry, our drive and guide. He was a font of information on all things Irish, from history to politics to sheep. He taught us, both by affirmation and

personal example that the Irish are a rebellious people, and always critical of authority. Fortunately, the advent of the European Union expanded the scope of Jerry's critique beyond simply Ireland. (Not a fan!!) Jerry shared personal reflections and experiences. We got to wait in nervous anticipation of his daughter's scores on the exams that would determine her access to future education. (She excelled)

The power of Jerry's mystique was revealed by this episode: Jerry told us the story of St. Bridget who asked the king for enough land to build a church. The king cleverly replied by giving her a handkerchief and promising to give her the amount of land that it would cover. Bridget placed the square of cloth on the ground. Four swans appeared. Each took a corner of the cloth and pulled until it was a vast size, certainly ample enough for a church. The king had to keep his word to Bridget. At the end of this story, two voices chimed out from somewhere in the bus, "Is that story true?"

A guide for many years, Jerry has seen it all, and likely nothing we could do surprised him....but we tried, some of us more than others (no names).



Friday, in Waterford, we enjoyed an informative and amusing walking tour which ended at the House of Waterford Crystal. It's not clear who spent the most on Waterford treasures at the end of the factory tour but a likely contender is Donal.

From Waterford we rode through Kilkenny and stopped for tea and scones at a 140 acre farm in



Jerpoint. Within the boundaries of the farm was the footprint of a medieval village complete with ruins.



After visiting with the donkey and horse in the old stable courtyard, we followed the owner and his Chocolate Lab out to the ruins. We saw more graves, including one purported to be that of St. Nicholas. Over our tea and scones (to die for!) the lady of the house told us more about the history and the house itself. Outside again, we watched a demonstration of a sheepdog herding sheep. That dog was all business.

On to Dublin, where we spent 2 nights at the Grand Canal Hotel. We had our first dinner in the city aboard La Peniche, a canal barge and restaurant. The next day we had a coach tour of the city which identified key sites before bringing us to Guinness, quite different in scope from the Dingle Brewery!



The statues of famine victims were haunting.

In informal ad hoc groups, we went to various places during the afternoon, some shopping (last chance until the duty-free area) and a number of us indulging in fish and chips. In the evening we went to different locations for dinner. A large contingent of us chose dinner with Irish music and dance at the Arlington Hotel in Temple Bar. It was a perfect end to our trip: light-hearted, very spirited and very Irish.

We covered a lot of ground in one fantastic week. If I had to summarize the key elements that made it such an exceptional time I'd have to say

- 1) The country itself with its remarkable beauty and its incredible history,
- 2) The lyrical and gracious Irish people who extended Cead Mile Failte (a hundred thousand welcomes) at every turn, and
- 3) The people I was with: Donal and Annette, the incomparable Jerry and my fellow travelers.