

## Ireland – A Journey around the Emerald Isle

It was in October of 1987 when I made my first trip to Ireland. It began with a flight to London to meet up with my dear friend Jiggy who would join me for a tour of Ireland. I landed in London in terribly windy wet weather, but Jiggy’s flat was warm and cozy. After a cup of hot tea, we walked to Brompton Road to do some shopping at Harrod’s, London’s oldest and most prestigious department store. I was totally amazed by the “Food Hall” that had every imaginable item I had ever seen. I ended up buying a large box of my very favorite “Bendix Bitter Mints”.

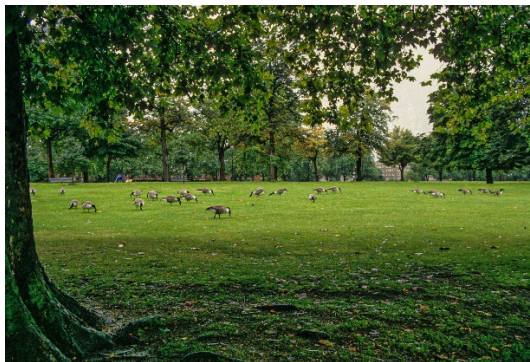


Harrod's Food Hall



Seafood Display

While Jiggy returned to the flat, I decided to take a long walk through central London to visit many places that I remembered from the six months that Marion and I had lived in London after returning from travelling across Africa. As I walked from Victoria Station to Sloane Square, an old man approached me and asked for directions to Victoria Station which was only one block away – and why ask me? From Sloane Square, I continued to Knightsbridge, Hyde Park, Notting Hill Gate, Holland Park, Ladbroke Grove, and Harrow Road, all very familiar neighborhoods, before returning to Jiggy’s place. (note: virtually the entire time I was walking in the rain against a stiff cold wind!)



Hyde Park



Ladbroke Grove

That evening, Jiggy and I were invited to attend the opening night of the opera “Werther” by Massenet at the London Coliseum. The performance was produced by a friend of Jiggy, and we were fortunate to have a drink with him during the intermission. The production was a “radical” departure in set and lighting design from the more traditional production. It could be described as very stark, shadowy, and mostly black – very dramatic! At the end of the opera, there were more than a few “boos” from the audience, but both Jiggy and I felt it was really a brilliant piece! After a quick bite to eat that evening in a local pub, we were up early at 6:00 am the next morning to catch a taxi to Paddington Station, then by tube to Victoria Station to board the “Gatwick Express” train. We arrived at Gatwick Airport in plenty of time to check in for the Ryan Air flight to Dublin. Surprisingly, it

was considered to be a “domestic” flight and crowded with lots of “pin-striped” businessmen. Shortly after takeoff, breakfast of “Bubble and Squeak” was served – a very traditional English dish of boiled cabbage, potatoes, and bacon. (note: my mother often fixed this for us at home)

After about 45 minutes, we landed in Dublin amid very strong 50 knot winds. Then we sat in the airport café to have a cup of coffee and some fresh baked scones while we discussed our travel plans. From the airport, we took a bus to Hueston Station in central Dublin to buy tickets for the train to Galway. We had about two hours before the departure of the train, so we decided to take a bus into downtown Dublin. However, Jiggy wasn’t feeling very well by then, so she chose to spend the time in the “Powers Hotel Café” while I visited the Irish National Museum where there were some amazing displays of antique gold and silver work. After visiting the museum, I joined Jiggy for the bus ride back to the station to board the train to Galway. The 3-hour train journey took us through an incredibly beautiful “emerald green” landscape that slowly unfolded before our eyes! Meanwhile, the sun continually played tag with the clouds as we passed large expanses of barren moors, heather, and peat bogs on our way west to Galway.



Travelling by train to Galway

As we arrived in Galway, the rain had begun to fall again, but the smell of the sea air was wonderful. Not far from the railway station, we spotted a lovely place to stay – “Mrs. O’Donnell’s B&B”. But by this time, Jiggy was really feeling under the weather and chose to retire to our room to rest. I decided to explore the town and arranged to meet up with Jiggy later for dinner. It wasn’t long before I found a classic Irish pub near the town square in the “Great Southern Hotel” by the name of “O’Flaherty’s”. I sat down at a table in the corner, ordered a pint of Guinness, and began to write in my journal while I waited for Jiggy. But after almost an hour had gone by, I figured that she was not going to show up. So, I started looking for a place to have dinner. Not far from the town square, on a narrow cobble stone street, I saw an old pub called “Tigh Neachtrain” (Gaelic for “Nectar House”) with a small restaurant above it.



At the bar in the pub with a Guinness

As I entered the pub, it was crowded with locals, being that it was a Friday evening, but I was able to find a seat at the end of the bar. After I ordered a pint of Guinness, I asked the bartender about getting a table in the

restaurant above the bar. He said I would probably have to wait for quite a while as there was a party going on – but he would check for me. About ten minutes later, he said there was one table open and asked if I wanted to have dinner. When I went upstairs, I discovered a beautiful old wood paneled room with a large stone fireplace in the corner. And indeed, it was a very small restaurant, having only 8 tables, all but one occupied by a group celebrating a birthday.



As I sat down at the small table in a corner of the room, I overheard their conversation and discovered the party was in honor of Mr. Eric Newby, a well-known British author who had just published his latest book titled “Round Ireland in Low Gear”. It was a guide to travel in Ireland by bicycle. When the birthday cake was cut, I was generously offered a slice, but unfortunately, I never had the chance to speak with Mr. Newby. Meanwhile, I enjoyed an excellent dinner of fresh local salmon topped with caviar, shrimp, and mussels, as well as fresh steamed leeks in cheddar cheese sauce. It was a wonderful evening, but I wished Jiggy could have shared it with me.

The next morning, Jiggy and I walked over to the Great Southern Hotel near the railway station to hire (rent) a car to see the moors of Connemara northwest of Galway. Then we shopped at a local market to buy some food for lunch before heading out of town. The stormy weather was beginning to clear up a bit and we could see the Aran Islands in the distance as the road followed the rocky coast. We stayed on the “back roads” that wound their way through tiny villages of old stone houses with thatched roofs and fields surrounded by stone fences. Although the countryside was rather bleak, almost like alpine tundra with high rounded mountains, it had a stark beauty of its own. In many places there was an abundance of rock and heather whose landscape almost resembled parts of interior Alaska.



The moors of Connemara

At one point, when the sun managed to show itself briefly, we hiked up a narrow country lane past a few small stone cottages, expanses of peat bogs, and flocks of sheep to the top of a hill. There we sat on a large rock outcrop and ate our lunch of cheese, soda bread, and apples, along with a bottle of Guinness. Just as we finished our lunch, a soft rain shower passed overhead, as if to remind us of just how brief was the ray of sunshine! Despite the wet weather, the views of the moors and the lake below were beautiful.



The countryside of Connemara



A place for lunch

After lunch, we drove down to the coast and stopped to visit the ancient ruins of “Renvyle Castle”. It was a typical Irish “tower house” facing the Atlantic Ocean on Connemara’s north shore. It was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Joyce clan. Legend has it that a wedding was taking place in the castle when, suddenly, the O’Flaherty’s stormed in and massacred all the guests, save one who escaped to give an account of the attack. At that point, the O’Flaherty’s took possession of the castle. Later, in 1540 Donal O’Flaherty married Grace O’Malley who was known as “Granuaile”, a famous Irish pirate! (such interesting history) After I took some photos of the ancient ruins, we walked out to the very edge of the sea and encountered very strong winds blowing in from the turbulent ocean.



Renvyle Castle



Ringling the castle bell

Since it was now getting late in the afternoon with the weather deteriorating rapidly, we chose to head back to Galway. Unfortunately, Jiggy was still not feeling well, so I volunteered to do the driving – my first time at “right hand drive”! But I managed to negotiate the narrow, twisting country roads with only a couple of “close calls”. Once we arrived back at Mrs. O’Donnel’s B&B, Jiggy went straight to bed, and I was once again facing dinner alone. But before going out for dinner, I tried to make a long distance collect telephone call to Esri in Redlands from a public telephone booth on the High Street. (note: no cell phones or internet available) However, it soon became clear that I had no idea how the telephone worked! Just then, an operator came on the line to assist me, fortunately. But when she asked me for the number of the telephone to “ring back”, I had no idea because the telephone booth didn’t have a number posted! So, there was no way to make a connection – very frustrating! After the disaster with the telephone, I walked across the street to “McSwiggan’s Pub” for a pint of Guinness and a delicious plate of fresh fish and chips. As I enjoyed the meal, I listened to the local conversations and wrote in my journal. Once again, I wished that Jiggy could have joined me. Meanwhile, a small group of local musicians played lovely traditional Irish folk music – it was a wonderful evening in Galway!

The next morning, Jiggy and I enjoyed another traditional full Irish breakfast at Mrs. O'Donel's B&B before picking up some medicine at the local Chemist for Jiggy's cold. Then we left Galway to head south along the coast to County Clare as occasional sunshine and intermittent rain showers followed us. As we passed through a large area known as the "Barrens", an extensive region of moors and rocks, we saw an old man leading a donkey and cart with a small dog sitting atop the donkey's back. Just then, a tour bus stopped to let its passengers take photos. Further south along the coast road we came to the famous "Cliffs of Moher", a spectacular area of extremely steep cliffs rising vertically over 700 feet above the ocean. And near the edge was a young man playing a flute as he watched the sea birds gliding on the strong wind off the sea. On the highest point above the sea was an old stone observation tower known as "O'Brien's Tower" that was built in 1835. From the top of the tower the view was spectacular on a clear day when one could see the Aran Islands, as well as almost the entire coast of County Clare!



Donkey cart in the village of Kilkee



"Cliffs of Moher" – County Clare

From the Cliffs of Moher we drove south along the coast to the small town of Kilrush where we arrived during the "Saturday Market". It was quite a surprise to see lots of ponies and horses for sale in the middle of the town square. While there must have been bargains to be had, we opted to continue on to the historic village of Tralee (Tra Li in Gaelic) in County Kerry on the famous coast road known as the "Ring of Kerry". All along the route were gorgeous scenes of high rounded mountains, lovely green fields, old stone cottages, and of course the sea. The sun continued to play tag with the clouds as we came to Waterville, overlooking Ballinskellig Bay and the Skellig Islands. Not far from the old town was "Valentia Island" the most westerly point of land in Ireland.



Ballinskellig Bay & Valentia Island



Along the "Ring of Kerry"

And it was there in August of 1858 when the first transatlantic cable was laid to Newfoundland, and the first message between Europe and North America was transmitted! As evening approached, we looked for a place to stay and found the "Bayview Hotel" situated on the coast with a gorgeous view of the ocean, and it was only 10 pounds a night (about \$15 at the time)!



Luckily, we had arrived just in time for afternoon tea and scones beside the stone fireplace in the lobby. The roaring fire felt great as a cold wind suddenly blew in from the ocean. An elderly Irish lady ran the hotel and a young German folk singer who was learning Irish ballads helped out with the hotel chores to pay for his room and board. The arrangement seemed to work out well for both of them. After a while, the hotel began to remind me of the old British TV series called “Fawlty Towers”, starring John Cleese of Month Python fame! When we made our way up to our room, we encountered a stuffed Irish Setter in the hallway at the top of the stairs, and I wondered if it had been a family pet?

That evening, Jiggy and I walked along the coast to “Smuggler’s Inn” where we had a “wee dram” of Irish whiskey before dinner. The specialty that night was fresh grilled Hake, a local fish closely related to Cod, topped with sautéed apples and fennel, citrus and coriander - fabulous! After dinner, we walked back to the Bayview Hotel for a pint of Guinness in the hotel pub. At one point during the evening, a young Irish girl stepped up to the stage and began singing the Irish national anthem – immediately everyone stood to face the flag in one corner of the room. Eventually it was time to retire to our room where we were lulled to sleep by the sound of the surf crashing on the beach below our window.

The next morning, as I was trying to find the electrical outlets in the room, the response from the hotel owner was “we just opened and haven’t got things quite together yet”! (note: again, a reminder of Fawlty Towers) After a delicious traditional full Irish breakfast, we continued our journey on the Ring of Kerry through a rather stark, yet beautiful coastal landscape that eventually gave way to softer, more lush green meadows as the road left the coast and headed inland. After several miles, we came to “Moll’s Gap”, a unique example of a “glacial breach” where a 500 meter (1600 feet) deep glacier had broken through the mountains 25,000 years ago during Ireland’s last ice age! Beyond Moll’s Gap the road took us past the lakes of Killarney, the largest being “Lough Leane” (Lough – Gaelic for lake), before we arrived in the historic town of Killarney.



On the road to Killarney



“Lough Leane” – County Kerry

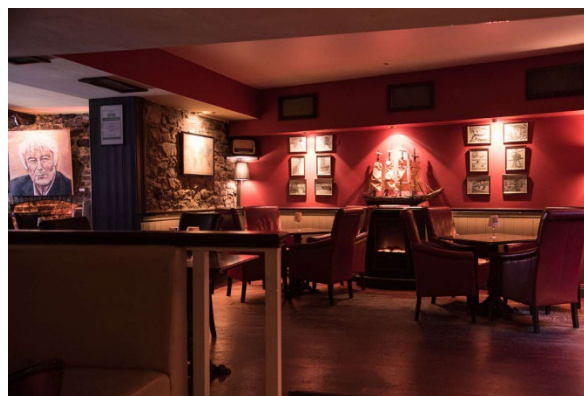
Following a short tour around the town with its many beautiful 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian buildings, including “St Mary’s Cathedral”, we continued northeast to the village of Mallow. Here we stopped at “Kepler’s Pub” on the

town square for a delicious Sunday afternoon dinner of roasted lamb and potatoes before making our way to Dublin.



Kepler's Pub, Malow – County Cork

That evening, we sat in the “Abbey Tavern”, a very traditional 16<sup>th</sup> century Irish pub, where we shared a couple of pints of Guinness while we recalled our adventures traveling around Ireland. Looking around the pub, we spotted photos of famous people who may have sat where we were sitting, such as Princess Grace of Monaco, Ted Kennedy, Katherine Hepburn, John Wayne, and even Garth Brooks! It was a wonderful evening together and a fitting way to end our journey.



“Abbey Tavern” - Dublin

The next day, Jiggy was on her way back to London and I was headed home to California with lots of great memories of my first visit to the “Emerald Isle”. But it wouldn’t be my last trip to Ireland! So, stay tuned for the story of my next visit to Ireland.



Our route around Ireland



# Photo Gallery



County Kerry



County Clare



Connemara – County Mayo



County Kerry



Jiggy – Connemara



Sunset – Ballinskellig Bay



County Clare



Along the Ring of Kerry



"Tigh Neachtain" pub – Galway



"The Ould Plaid Shawl" pub menu - Kilkenny



The Portland Arms pub – Great Portland Road, London