

IRELAND, ENGLAND, & PARIS 2009, or 3 WEEKS WITH 7 PIECES OF BAGGAGE

Kathy is half Irish, and has wanted to go to Ireland to see where her ancestors came from in County Mayo. I had never been there, so this will be a new experience for me. I wrote to a number of different tour companies, but we had gotten a book on Ireland and it had a picture of Ashford Castle in it. The Castle is on grounds of about 150 acres that are beautifully landscaped.

Well, it turns out the tour we selected has an overnight stay at the Castle, plus dinner there. Since it was only a 7 day tour, and since I am retired, I had a suggestion for Kathy. Here is the plan:

Take the 7 day tour of Ireland, take the ferry across to Wales and spend 3 nights in the Lake District of England, rent a flat in London for 7 days, and take the Chunnel to Paris for the day.

The beauty of the internet is that I could get all the train and ferry schedules on-line and make our plans accordingly. I also bought our train, underground and attraction passes on-line.

Here is what really happened:

In checking on our flight reservations, British Airways offered an upgrade to a section with wider seats and more legroom. I discussed it with Kathy, and in her usual wisdom said, "We will hate ourselves if we are wedged into regular seats for 10 hours instead of the upgrade". I immediately contacted BA and upgraded us.

IRELAND

Our flights were uneventful, even changing from the new Terminal 5 at Heathrow to another terminal. This was done by a connecting bus that wandered all over the airport before depositing us at the terminal.

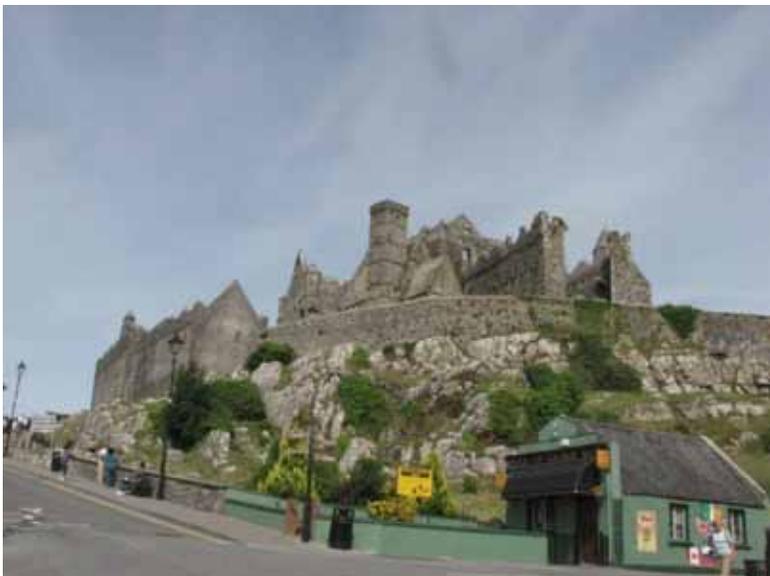
DUBLIN

We took a taxi from the airport to our hotel, and the driver was quite interesting. He belongs to a rowing society, and for charity, he and 7 other men rowed from Dublin to Holyhead in Wales. It took them 12 hours to complete the crossing.

We had just gotten our room keys when our tour bus pulled up with the rest of our group that had been on a city tour. I introduced us to the tour manager, and got the details for the rest of our trip.

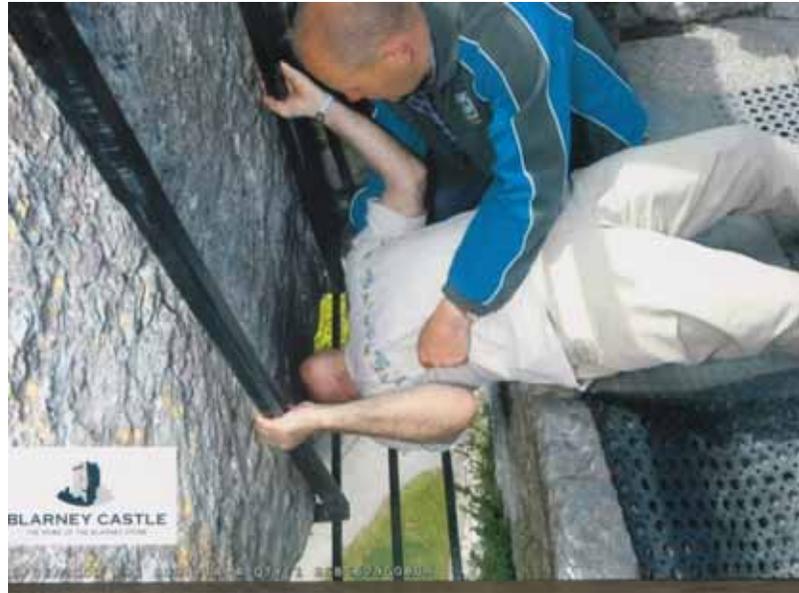
KILLARNEY

We drove through the Curragh, which is the heart of Ireland's horse country. We stopped at the Rock of Cashel, an impressive pre-Christian settlement. The dramatic limestone rock, crowned with secular and religious buildings, dominated the flat countryside for miles around. There was a ruined abbey in the fields in the distance, and I took a picture of it from the Rock of Cashel.



We then continued on to the village of Blarney. We browsed through Blarney Woolen Mills to shop for Irish knitwear and crafts, and I bought a genuine Irish cap. I walked across to Blarney Castle with its magical stone that gives the gift of eloquence for a kiss. I climbed the 123 steps and did the deed!

We were told we could pass it on with a kiss, so Kathy waited on the ground until I came back and I kissed her!



Afterward, we headed to colorful Killarney. The town on the lakes is famous for its lively pubs and open, cheerful atmosphere, of what the Irish call 'craic!', Gaelic for fun. Apparently some took this too far, when two Irishmen who had a few too many tried to hit on Kathy. I will admit, she is a very striking lady, and one of the men said, "Please tell me you are not married". Kathy told him that she was, and that I was standing a few feet away!

We then took a ride in an Irish horse cart that was really fun. We stopped at an old castle by the side of the lake, but it was closed and we could not go in to see the inside.



THE RING OF KERRY EXCURSION

The next day we traveled the road that winds around the beautiful Iveragh Peninsula, better known as The Ring of Kerry. It is undoubtedly one of the most magical places in all Ireland. Here mountains, valleys, lakes and sea blend into a landscape that is often breathtaking beyond words.



As we climbed up higher on the road, we could look down and see an ancient circular fort and the harbor in the distance.



When we returned, we had an option to either take a 2 hour hike or return to the hotel. Even though my calves were still letting me know about the 123 steps in Blarney Castle, I opted for the hike. We stopped at Torc Waterfall for photos; then took a leisurely hike with a qualified guide. We walked along the lakeshore and past the farmlands of the Muckross Estate, admiring the spectacular scenery.



That night we went to an Irish ceilidh at Kate Kearney's Cottage near the gap of Dunloe, featuring music and dancing. There were 3 musicians and two girls dancing. It was a lot of fun, and I had a chance to discuss the difference between Scottish and Irish bagpipes with one of the musicians.



CONNAMERA

This morning we crossed the Shannon estuary by ferry and entered County Clare. I had to take the obligatory lighthouse photo for my brother-in law.



We stopped for a walk along the Cliffs of Moher, rising approximately 700 feet above the pounding Atlantic waves.



There was an observation tower, but we could see almost the same thing from the cliff edges.



We then traveled north across the Burren, a suddenly stark and barren landscape. It looked like a volcanic landscape or the surface of some other world.

We stopped in for afternoon tea at Rathbaun Farm and meet a Galway farming family as they carry out their everyday chores. We watched a sheepdog at work herding the sheep into a pen so the farmer could shear one.



We watched as the farmer sheared a sheep and let Kathy feed one of the lambs.



After leaving the farm, we drove on to tour Galway, "City of the Tribes," including lovely Galway Cathedral, which had a beautiful stained glass window.



KILLARY FJORD EXCURSION

We headed out the next day for Killary Fjord, boasting some of the finest scenery in Ireland. At Killary Harbor, we boarded a boat for a cruise with Irish coffee, through the calm waters of the bay.



We were supposed to see some dolphins, but unfortunately, they had not read the schedule, so we did not see any.

After the cruise we stopped at lakeside Kylemore Abbey, a castellated neo-Gothic mansion, occupied today by a Benedictine community of nuns who came from Ypres after World War I.



ASHFORD CASTLE

The next day we drove on to Cong, a village with a deliberate old-world feel, and the setting for *The Quiet Man*, filmed here in the 1950s and starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. Cohan's Pub was supposed to be the place that John Wayne first met the locals. Cong is also where we entered into the grounds of majestic Ashford Castle.



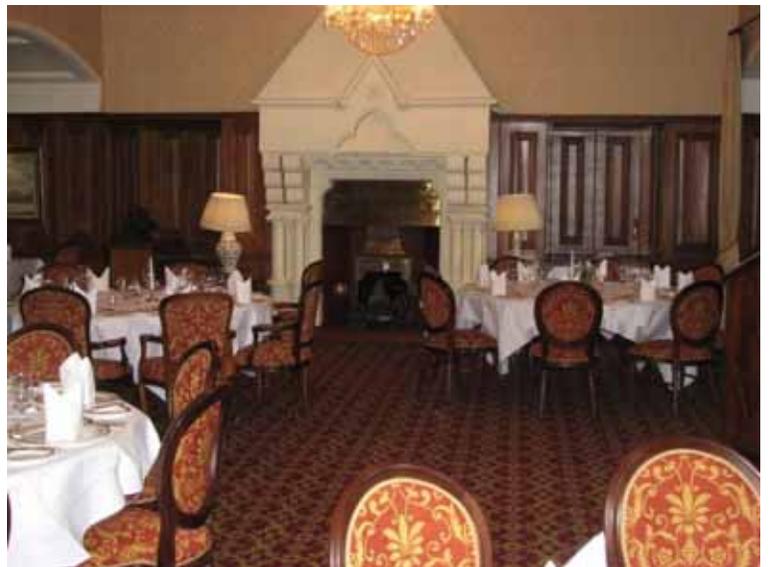
Before we checked in, we took a boat ride on Lough Corrib. The big surprise was when we landed on an island that held a 12th century Augustinian church and a 5th century church that was St. Patrick's! It is a little difficult to get one's mind wrapped around the fact that he worshipped here 1200 years before the Pilgrims landed in North America.



The castle began its early days as a Norman fortress to protect the narrow corridor between the two lakes, Lough Corrib on the North, and Lough Mask to the South. The estate changed hands a number of times before being bought by a member of the Guinness family. They spent millions of dollars restoring the castle to its former glory, and in 1939 donated it to the Irish state.

John Ford used the surrounding area to film "*The Quiet Man*", and there are Quiet Man tours run from the village of Cong.

The pictures of the castle speak for themselves. The rooms were comfortable, and the dining room and sitting rooms were beautifully decorated. The bottom left picture is the view from our lovely room.



DUBLIN

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast this morning and took a stroll on the estate. We then crossed the midlands to Dublin where we spent the balance of the day sightseeing. It was a pleasure to be on the motorway instead of winding through narrow country lanes.

We had the bus drop us off near Trinity College see its truly unique world treasure of the 8th century Book of Kells. It was beautifully illustrated, and enlargements of some of the pages decorated the walls of the exhibit. The book is an illuminated manuscript in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament together with various prefatory texts and tables. It was transcribed by Celtic monks in about 800 AD



We then visited St. Patrick's Cathedral, founded in 1190. There was a stone inside from St. Patrick's well.



Our last stop on our tour of Dublin was to stop at a real local Irish pub. It was over 250 years old, and was the oldest continually open pub in Dublin.



The next morning, having left the tour, or as Kathy called it "Following the yellow umbrella" we took a taxi to the ferry pier. We had a choice of two ferries; the regular one that left at 8:05, and the fast ferry that left at 8:45. The fast ferry arrives at Holyhead an hour earlier than the regular one. I took the obligatory lighthouse photo as we left Dublin at a slow speed, that is until we cleared the harbor. It was quite a ride- the ferry goes about 40 knots, and standing on the open deck was to risk getting blown over. About a third of the way across the Irish Sea, we passed the earlier ferry.



We arrived at Holyhead in Wales, collected our luggage and headed to the train station, which was a short walk from the baggage pickup point. We took the train from Holyhead in Wales, where the ferry docked into the Lake District. The only problem was that we had to change trains twice, with all of our luggage. Fortunately, each train we had to catch was on the same platform so we did not have to do any hauling up and over to other platforms.

ENGLAND LAKE DISTRICT

We checked into the hotel, and we were told we were going to be in the Lodge. We explained that we had made the reservation for one of the garden cottages a year ago, and that was what we wanted. All of a sudden, a cottage became available, and we settled in. The cottage was very nice, and had its own little patio. We relaxed on the patio to recover from the ordeal of getting there. It was taxi, ship, 3 trains, and a taxi!