

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.

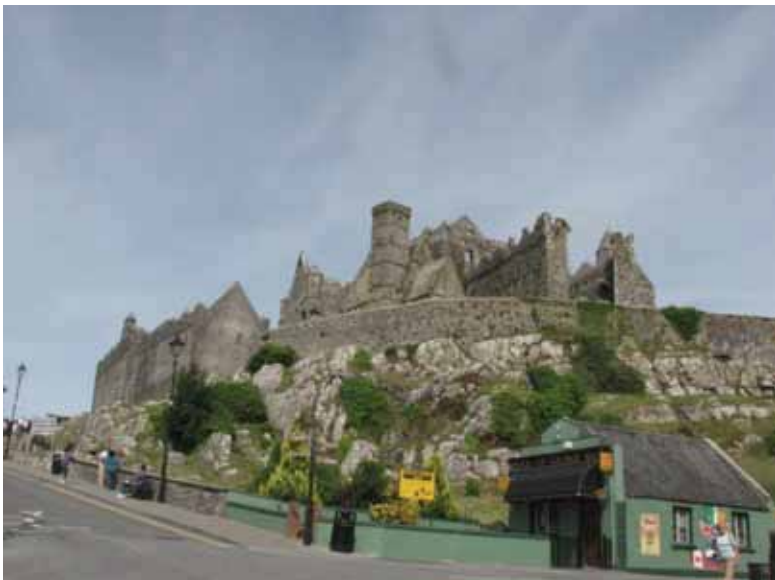
DUBLIN

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, 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!

We went up to the dining room for dinner, and they had a lovely sitting room outside the dining room. We ordered a bottle of wine, and they took our order for dinner there. When dinner was ready, we were then seated in the dining room. It was a lovely change from the group meals we had on the tour, where we had only 3 choices and they were prepared en masse.



We slept in the next morning, as our tour did not start until 11:30. It was nice not to have our bags out and on the bus.

We took a half day Beatrix Potter tour, which took us to Hilltop House, where she wrote her stories.

The house was as she left it, and there were 3 desks where she actually did her writing.

We stopped at Wray castle, which was unoccupied, and were told this was one of the mansions that people put up in the 19th century trying to outdo each other. Beatrix and her family actually stayed there once. The surrounding area was absolutely beautiful!



The whole area was as green as Ireland had been, as they get about the same amount of rain. We then went to one of the lakes called Coniston Water for a cruise.

The boat we were on was powered by solar cells, with a backup engine. It was really beautiful to be on the lake in total quiet. About $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the way through the cruise the batteries pooped out and they had to start the auxiliary engine.

There was another boat there that had an old steam powered engine, and I am sure it would have been quite a bit noisier.



We were dropped off at our hotel where we enjoyed another delightful dinner. That night Kathy had her first introduction to British television programming. She did not believe me when I told her how bad it was. In the US, we get the cream of British programs such as *To the Manor Born*, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, etc. They also only have 4 main channels-BBC1 and BBC2, and ITV 1 and 2. We are so spoiled at home with satellite TV and the multitude of programming.

The weather reports are a joke, as the big discussion was how many different color raincoats the weather lady had. The one thing that really cracked us up was the news reports where they had a pile of newspapers on their desk. They would hold them up to show the headlines and read part of each story. London has a number of newspapers, and all but one, the *Daily Mail*, are tabloids.

The next day we took an all day "10 lakes Tour" which was more far reaching around the Lake District. These pictures below capture some of the beauty.



We were taken to the Castlerigg Stone Circle, which was about 4000 years old. It was raining lightly while I was taking the pictures, and I put my camera under my jacket to protect it. I stopped to take a picture of the sign, and discovered that my camera did not work! I checked it out, and discovered that somehow I had tripped the battery cover and dumped all the batteries out!

I ran back to the site, and started searching for the batteries in the grass. There was a couple nearby whose picture I had taken with their camera and they joined in the search. They had a better idea of where I had been standing, and after a few minutes found the batteries.



We then took a cruise on Derwent Water in a beautiful old wooden boat.



After the cruise we stopped at the town of Keswick for lunch. When I ordered all the passes for this trip, two of the passes came by e-mail. In checking all my paperwork, I discovered that I had not printed them out.

I asked the bartender at the pub where we had lunch, and he told me of one down the street at the Post Office, and that it was on the First Floor. I went to the Post office and looked around and did not see anything, and there were customers in front of me precluding my asking directions. I looked around, and finally realized that I was on the Ground Floor, and the First Floor was one floor up! I found the Internet Café, and downloaded and printed out the passes.

From Keswick, we went through a mountain pass to a beautiful overlook.



From there we went to the town of Grasmere, where Wordsworth's cottage and grave were. Close by was the Grasmere Gingerbread Shop, where we bought some of their famous gingerbread. My only experience with gingerbread was in little gingerbread men, and the gingerbread was so different and delicious! We may order some from them if the shipping was not too costly!

Our last stop was at a slate mine that was one of the few still operating. There was a display of one of the little engines they used to use, and the view from the parking lot was great. One of the items they were selling was house numbers carved into the slate. They had numbers from 1 to 100, and since our address was only 2 numbers, we bought one.



We were dropped back at our hotel, and enjoyed another nice dinner before packing up to go to London. Kathy agreed that this area was the most beautiful she had seen in England.

LONDON

We took a taxi to the train station, and while we were waiting, I remembered hearing about the famous Kendal mints from the Lake District. There was a supermarket next to the station and I bought 2 regular and 2 chocolate covered bars. I had no idea what they were supposed to taste like, and they were quite unusual. I looked at the ingredients, and they were: Sugar, Glucose Syrup, and Oil of Peppermint. On the wrapper they stated that these were high energy bars-they were right- they were pure carbohydrates!

Fortunately, we only had to change trains once today, and when we spoke to the conductor, he suggested we stay on the train from Windermere one more stop because the train to London would be on the same platform. We arrived at the station in London about half a mile from our flat, and needless to say, we took a taxi to our flat.

Our flat was really cute, with a small kitchen and a little patio out back. There was a supply of tableware, plates and bowls, and some pots and pans. I checked the area, there was a small market a block away where we bought some stuff for breakfast.



The first thing Kathy wanted to see in London was the crown jewels in the Tower of London. The plan was to take the Underground Circle Line that would drop us off a block or 2 from the Tower. As we got to the station, there was an announcement that due to signaling problems, that line was not running. I consulted the Underground map I had, and found an alternate route which involved going across the Thames and taking a taxi to the Tower. The taxi driver made a mistake by going through a construction zone, and 5 pounds later on the meter, we were back where we started. In any event we made it to the Tower, and headed to the Crown Jewels.



We were not allowed to take pictures, so I copied these from another website.



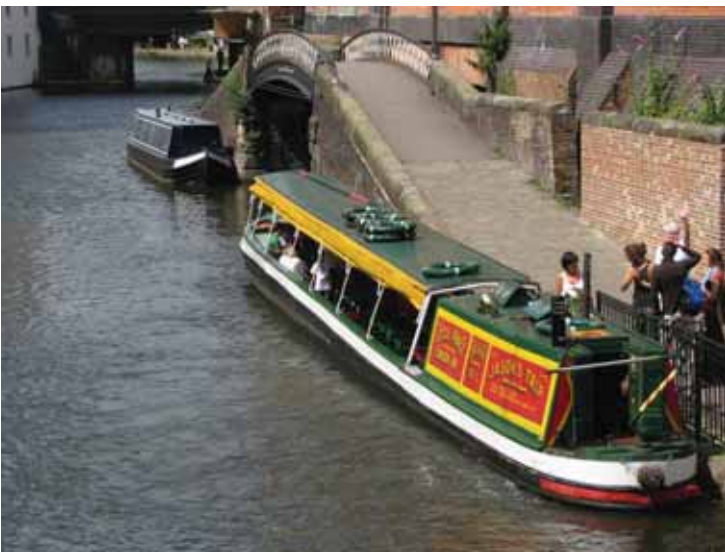
We also planned to take a jet boat ride down the Thames, and the company had moved to a dock right near the Tower. After a few false starts, we found the right dock, and got on board. The ride was absolutely fantastic, and Kathy as a former jet boat driver, really loved it!



Because of the speed, I could not take any pictures as I had to hold on with both hands! After we got back to the dock, I noticed that there was a regular passenger boat that was going upriver to Big Ben, so we took that and arrived just as the clock struck four! It was the first time Kathy heard the real chimes from Big Ben. We took a taxi to the London Eye, which is a 450 foot high Ferris wheel that rotates once every 30 minutes. I got some great pictures of Big Ben and the houses of Parliament.



The next day we discussed what we wanted to do- it was a pleasure to have the freedom to do that. I suggested we take a narrowboat tour through the Regents Canal at the North side of London. Kathy thought that would be fun, so we went to Camden Lock and caught the boat just as it was loading for its next trip. We took the boat down to a place called Little Venice because it was at the junction of 2 canals. There was a little floating café there, so we grabbed a quick bite before our boat returned to Camden Lock.



After we returned to Camden Lock, which was a huge open air market place, we grazed our way through. We had a Turkish dish of a turnover filled with lamb and cooked on the spot, then some Vietnamese food! The greatest fun was people watching, however. We had never seen such clothing, shoes, piercings and tattoos, and that was on the women!



The next day we took the train to a small town near Cambridge to meet friends I met on the Trans Siberian Express. They were really neat people, and I had continued correspondence with them. It was fun reminiscing about that trip and some of the people on the trip. I was worried that Kathy would be bored, but she found it fascinating also.

On this trip we had visited palaces and castles, but this was the first time we visited a home where the ordinary people lived. Both Kathy and I found it to be quite interesting, and Doreen and Ken were wonderful hosts.

The following day we decided to visit Kensington Palace, where Princess Di lived. I called London Transport, and they gave us the numbers of the buses we had to take, We caught the first bus without a problem, but when we got to the transfer point, we saw every kind of bus except the one we wanted. I finally asked one of the drivers what the problem was, and he said there was a 10K run going on and that bus was cancelled. I looked on the map, and found another bus line that went near our destination, and we caught that one. It stopped short of the palace, so we got off and caught another bus that took us right to the place we wanted to go.

To digress, London Transport has a neat thing called an Oyster Card, which you can preload with any amount. You just tap it on a certain place on the bus or train, and it automatically deducts the fare. That way you do not have to buy tickets or have the correct change.

At that point we were ready for lunch, so we ate at a place called the Orangery near the palace in Kensington Park. On each table there was a miniature orange tree about a foot tall with fruit on it. We were fascinated by it and will see if we can get one when we get back home.



There was also a beautiful sunken garden near the palace. Unfortunately, I did not notice the spot on the lens, so all the pictures I took after this have that spot.

PARIS

Since we planned to visit the Louvre, we bought a DVD with about 20 hours of lectures on the Louvre itself and the artworks in it. The DVD was extremely well done and very educational. For example, when discussing the Mona Lisa, our attention was called to the strange landscape behind the figure. In all the times we had looked at the picture, we never noticed the background.

Recently, the train station used for Eurostar (the Chunnel train) was moved much closer to our flat. This made life easier for us, as we had a 7:27 AM train booked.



Unfortunately, since we were not able to book earlier, we had to pay for First Class both ways. We were to get breakfast one way and dinner on the return. To sum it up, they used the same kind of trolleys the airlines use, and the food was comparable to what we got in Coach on British Airways.

BUT, we were in Paris less than 2 ½ hours after leaving London. We caught a taxi to the Eiffel Tower, but the driver missed the turn to go over the Seine and had to backtrack. When we got to the Eiffel Tower, he was embarrassed, and only charged us what the fare should be. Imagine- an honest taxi driver in Paris!

The area under the tower was a mob scene, as one of the elevators was not working, and the elevator to the top was not running either. I spoke to someone in line, and they said the ticket line was one and a half hours! Since we were short on time, we passed, since we could not get to the top anyhow.



We then took a taxi to the Louvre, and had lunch to prepare ourselves for the museum. There was a very nice outdoor restaurant in the North side of the museum where we could people watch.



AS I was standing in line to buy our tickets, I noticed that you could buy the tickets with a credit card, and there was no line. I also got of one of the audio guides where you could enter a code number next to the picture and get an English description and commentary.

Armed with a map of the museum and an article from the Los Angeles Times, we set out. Our first stop was at the Winged Victory. From there we went to the Italian section to see the Mona Lisa up close.



The interesting thing was there was no longer a restriction on photography that there was when I was there 3 years ago. To get to the Venus de Milo, we were told to ask one of the attendants to open a door so we could cut through and take an elevator down to the lower level.



We also saw the famous dual coffin that was featured in the newspaper article. Words cannot describe the opulence of some of the rooms as far as the way the walls and ceilings were decorated. The museum was once a Royal palace and retained the décor that from that era. One of the rooms had signs of the Zodiac high on the walls, and I took pictures of both our signs; Sagittarius for Kathy and Taurus for me.



After a number of hours in the Louvre, we finally got “museumed out” and left. Kathy said she wanted to sit at a sidewalk café in Paris, and one of the most famous is the Café de la Paix on the Rue de la Paix, so we took a taxi to get there. We knew it was a tourist trap when 2 regular coffees cost \$17! Nevertheless it was an experience, and one I enjoyed sharing with Kathy. I also took my life in my hands to stand in the middle of the street to get a picture of the Paris Opera House.



We then did a little window shopping and headed back to the train station. We had a little problem with the line for Immigration, but made the train with a few minutes to spare. The trip back to London was uneventful, and dinner was like airline food on British Airways.

We discussed what we wanted to do on our last day in London, and I suggested we go to Windsor Castle since we had 2 days left on our rail pass. I suggested we just go there and play it by ear as far as what we would do.

By the time we go there, because of a signal problem with the train, it was lunchtime. We found a place near the station called the Cattle Grid, and ordered hamburgers with caramelized onions and brie.

I had told Kathy about the way Europeans and especially Britons use their knife and fork, but she did not believe me. Two ladies sat near us, and we could watch them in a reflection of the restaurant window. They also ordered hamburgers, and proceeded to eat them with a knife and fork. The knife was held in the right hand like a pencil, and the fork was held upside down in the left hand. The food was mashed onto the back of the fork and put into the mouth with the tines downward. They must have thought we were savages devouring our burgers “American Style”.

After lunch we found a double deck bus that was a “hop on- hop off” and we took a tour of Windsor and Eton which was quite interesting. We were able to get some good photos of the castle from the bus.



At one point we got off and took a 40 minute boat ride up the Thames to a set of locks then returned downriver. At the dock were a great number of swans, because everyone feeds them.



We then took the train back to London to pack up and clean the flat. The next morning we took a fast train called the Heathrow Express to the airport.

Our flight was uneventful, but we were stuck on the tarmac for a half hour because another plane was late leaving our gate.

Kathy enjoyed the entire trip, especially when we were on our own. She also fell in love with London and would like to return one day.

One of the things in Ireland that fascinated Kathy, was a Fairy Tree. As we were driving along, she would spot one and I had to try and get a picture of it. A fairy tree is traditionally a tree that stands alone in the middle of a cleared area, or a natural clearing. It is believed to be a pathway to the Underworld of the Sidhe (or elves/fairies). Those who cause harm to a fairy tree are said to be cursed by the Sidhe, and have terrible bad luck. If you even touch a fairy tree you run the risk of calling attention to yourself, and that is not always a good idea when dealing with the denizens of the Other World.

Again, this is very old Irish folk superstition, nothing more. Although there have been documented

cases of strange and somewhat frightening things happening to those who violated a Fairy Tree. There have been roads built around these trees because the workers refuse to cut them down.



To summarize our trip, we took a 7 day bus tour in Ireland, rode 12 trains on our own, and took 10 boat trips which ranged in speed from a slow narrowboat to a fast jet boat. The time in England was extremely enjoyable because we did things at our own pace and did not have to follow the yellow umbrella. There are advantages and disadvantages to escorted tours. We have traveled both ways and have enjoyed each of them.

Below is a picture of the 7 pieces of luggage with which we traveled at our advanced age. God bless the person who invented rolling luggage!



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