

I am arranging this document in two ways: the first part is the narrative, and the second part is the key points so if you truly “do what we did” with minor adjustments, you will not be disappointed in your trip and will have flexibility based on your “must do’s” in Ireland. For those who have the luxury of multiple trips to Ireland, good for you! Our lifestyle and budget probably will allow only the one trip to Ireland in our lifetime and we are not terribly young people. However, at 54, we were the perfect age to be able to navigate Ireland, do a little bit of tasting the fruits of Ireland (beer and whiskey), party with the locals and yet understand and appreciate the history and landscape of this beautiful country and island. In addition, as small business owners ourselves, we did indeed spend overnights at some bed and breakfasts and appreciated the time and effort owners put into the presentation of their homes (and food!). Towards the end of our journey we used hotels - good choices at the end, for when you get tired and have gained your five pounds on “full Irish breakfasts,” you won’t feel like you have offended those who wish to serve you four meats and black and white pudding for breakfast. If we had traveled at 25 or 30 we “might have” enjoyed the night life a bit more but would have definitely still gone to the key tourist points of Ireland.

Side note: we did not go to Dublin at all, only because the beauty of the west coast kept us there. The Burren, the Ring of Kerry, and the Connemara and Cong areas – are all so different, and touring these regions helps you understand the Irish culture and people. In some ways – those who have undergone great suffering and oppression, also have great kindness towards others – they appreciate others and love their country so much that they want to share it with you, and tell you about their history – the story of their country, much of which is tragic. The joy beauty shown in Irish dance and song is in comprehensible to describe: it is not all about jigs and fun fiddle music. Listening to the flutes, bagpipes, drums, fiddlers in haunting tunes is very beautiful. We attended *Trad on the Prom* – which I will write about specifically, as it was one of the highlights of our Ireland trip.

LET’S BEGIN AT THE END

The first day coming home from a long journey almost makes you forget your travels: no view is better than the lovely woods and trees towards the slight hill in our backyard, and no birds as familiar as the ones speaking in the morning as I sit on the deck and write at 6 am. And, it is true, that no kitchen is as lovely as the one at home: the one that I can make my own suppers and brew my own coffee in. It is nice to be served, but eventually, you end up longing for your own coffee and table in which to sit and enjoy it. And, undoubtedly no faces are as dear as the ones of those children that we left behind as we embarked on our journey in Ireland. With that being said, there truly is no place quite like Ireland! And, as our ancestors come from northern European descent, it doesn’t feel like you are going to a foreign country at all: you feel like you have come “home” to Ireland too.

I imagine that anyone who calls Ireland home feels this way upon returning. Or, if you had ancestors or family there, you would be thrilled and very choked up when you visit Ireland for the first time. Hopefully, you can see it through the airplane window, though you could very well land in mist or fog. You would see relatives in every old man’s face and B&B hostess in Ireland. You will love the eyes as they would be like your own -- mostly blue. Red hair is everywhere! But many Irish are dark haired – the young men are stunning with dark hair and blue eyes. Many of the young women serving in retail you can’t stop staring at: their skin is

porcelain, without freckles or blemishes and their eyes – whether they be blue, green or brown, are lined with dark lashes: there is nothing as beautiful as those Irish lasses!

At 6 am in America, I can already tell it is going to be an unbearable day for heat, so I know that anyone who must work outside today is preparing for that, just as those who are on holiday are preparing for whatever they will be doing: swimming, boating, hiking or camping. In Ireland, right now, there are only about 6 hours of darkness (10:30 pm – 4:30 am or so) so when you rise, you look at the mist and the clouds and hope for a sunny day so that you may see the fantastic views of the cliffs, mountains, lakes and ocean.

Everywhere you go in Ireland is spectacular, no matter what coast you are on. There are dry stone rock walls dotting the town and countryside. I never “forgot” they were there though, because they are so unique and OLD. These walls don’t have mortar, and have lasted “forever” because the wind and rain go right through the holes. Hence, they are never blown down by the wind, nor washed through by the rain. Irish countryside is very similar to La Crosse, woody and hilly and very green. Aside from the walls and the fact that you see very old buildings with thatched roofs, and many tower forts (which look like castles, but are homes) and official castles as you drive. I thought the tour guides were saying tara forts, but realized with the dialect, they were saying tower! You want to look out the windows more than you do to take in the spectacular views as you drive along, but on many journeys I was too terrified to look and kept my eyes on the other side of the road, which of course, is the opposite of the USA!

It is hard to train your body and reflexes for this driving with the many types of roundabouts; everything is opposite of the USA, but eventually you begin to understand how the roads work and are grateful for the M and N roads. The M and N roads are major motorways like you see here: bigger lanes, sometimes four lanes that run from the towns. Yes, the “slow lane” is opposite as well, as you must get over from the “merging” lane, left to right. Whew! LOVE those roads: NOT! Oh, but by NO MEANS are Irish roads the same width as our roads – the lanes are narrower on whatever road you travel upon. We should have taken a photo of our rental car and a narrow road – you would understand this so much better!

If I could give anyone advice about driving, it would be to plan a route by the M and N roads, find a home base, and let the local bus tours take you and your nerves on lovely day’s journey around, where the fantastic drivers tell you all about what you are seeing, entwining this with information about history and the economy of Ireland, and occasionally singing you an Irish song. We chose our home base as Galway – on the western coast – for four nights. A brilliant choice, as they say in Ireland! We even had a driver tell us about his family experience with turf cutting, which they use for fuel. Turf is like a peat coal, once it is dried out. The bus drivers know exactly the best places for photo stops, some which are not necessarily touristy. Gary, our driver from Galway Tours, walked with us and brought us right into the bog to show us the turf. He just laughed when “killer sheep” blocked the road and said they will eventually move. We learned a lot about sheep breeding and rounding them up – by the lovely border collies or sheepdogs, and believe me, you can learn about it when *you* go. I am certain that the dogs at the airport are there to not only sniff for drugs, but for turf as it is a big “no no” to take it. It is protected by the government. I liken it to the dirt in Lambeau Field in some ways: you just cannot take it.

Back to the dry rock walls: in some areas you will see what is called vertical rock walls that seriously, go up the mountains – straight up. God awful to build – and why were they built in the first place? We never would

have known why these walls are there without our driver explaining this. In the Burren, County Clare people often comment on them: walls which run from the bottom to the top of a mountain and appear to divide nothing from nothing!

They are known as 'famine walls' and were created by men employed on Work Schemes – usually run by church groups or by landlords – whose main purpose was to create employment for and provide income to the impoverished, often starving, local communities at the time of the potato famine.

Back to the tours and driving: Anyone who travels can do what they want, but we found what worked best for us was to rent a car to give you the sense that you can do what you want and have some control of your destiny and itinerary. We flew into the Shannon airport: I don't care how much more it was to fly there, DO IT, as you will save yourself hours of frustration and travel time to the part of Ireland that is a MUST SEE—the southwest region. Unless you have some big desire to be in Dublin and explore that way, it makes sense to go to this lovely, (international airport, by the way) that is an easy drive out (especially if you have to familiarize yourself with driving). Even when you leave this airport to go home, no worries, you can still buy duty free Jameson whiskey and fine Irish sterling jewelry to take home. The bus drivers all were so great, and you are lulled with their calming voices and information – you never got sick of hearing their Irish accent which was very calming as you rode on the bus tours. The drivers were between 45 and 55 years old and reminded me of airline pilots: gray or silver hair with navy blue tour jackets on with an easy banter as you entered and departing the buses for the many photo stops (and lunch). You would definitely be able to put your life in their hands.

Now, for anyone that knows me (Mary) you are aware that I have an irrational fear of heights. I actually tried to talk Ed out of the Cliffs of Moher because even the photos I had seen scared me. I don't like ferris wheels or roller coasters, flying (the departure and landing) and tall places. Well, if you don't know about the Cliffs of Moher, Google a photo and you will see that I was nervous not only about being on the top of the cliffs, but the ride getting there. Many of the "must do's," particularly the Ring of Kerry (150 mile journey) were Irish rollercoasters. So, in short: take a bus tour! They are only \$20-30 and they pick you up where you are staying. You have regular rest stops, always a nice lunch break and the seats are comfortable and the tour guides kind and wonderful with the young and old. And yes, I wore my seatbelts ALWAYS on the bus—ha ha ha.

Direct flight: best way! Had a cab driver meet us (prearranged), Peter O'Sullivan – to take us directly to our B & B in Bunratty. This was a treat! Peter became our driver for the next two days. Brilliant move – went immediately to a nice bed with a heater going – for a nap before our trip to Bunratty castle folk park and medieval dinner which was less than a mile down the street later. No check in – perfect!

Distance between Ashgrove B&B and Bunratty Castle: about a half mile – walking. Got to know Frank at the Ashgrove. Frank gave us Irish coffee several times and lots of chatting and stories a retired cop from Shannon. Good guy! We got to talking and Frank brought us to the castle around 3:00 or so – needed about two more hours at the Folk Park to see it properly. Durty Nellie's Bar and restaurant were just across the road from the castle – so drinks were very appropriate after dinner, with a 15 minute walk in the beautiful rural countryside home. Bunratty Castle has nice, inexpensive shops, so you can actually buy good presents for the family right there too. Found they had high quality and best prices for jewelry, shirts, etc.

Day Three – Ashgrove was a very nice place. Cozy, the bed was comfy and warm and it was a peaceful rural setting.

Missed our Irish breakfast because we overslept! Peter O’Sullivan (our driver and nicest man ever) was waiting for us and took us to Limerick to meet Paddywagon Tours for our bus tour of the Ring of Kerry – 10 am to 7:30 pm. The Ring is a tour of Kerry County - 150 miles of extraordinary scenery. So glad Ed didn’t drive it and could relax and enjoy the tour and my company 😊. Tour included several stops including lunch and a national park. There was about 1 ½ hour ride to get to the start of the tour so the tour was really 11:30 – 5:30 or so. Peter was there to pick us up and bring us home. GOOD GUY – the best!

We figured rather than paying \$50 a day for a couple days of a car rental we really didn’t need we’d cab it with Peter until Day Three when he brought us to the airport to get the car. By then, we had been on the roads for a while and Ed was ready to drive. As they say in Ireland, this was brilliant!

MONEY hints:

Credit cards: most helpful to use them – don’t take a lot of cash! Notify your credit card company of the dates that you will be traveling so they know when charges come and won’t stop the card. Ask what their transaction fee is for charging international – some may have none; in our case it was 1% -- many have 3%. Run the cards through as euros, not dollars, when you buy. We found the euro to dollar exchange range anywhere from \$1.30 to \$1.36 (bad for us!) so if you ran euros there, you got the better rate. Cash out of ATMs in Ireland gives you the best exchange rates. Trust us on that one. Everyone verified this in Ireland, everywhere we went.

BAGS: Just either buy a bag for presents when you get there or bring a nearly empty one. Check what bag fees are – most allow a carryon and purse and another bag free to bring. United nailed us for one more bag of gifts -- \$100 to bring the whiskey home because we thought we could carry it on. Couldn’t because it was over 4 ounces. Could buy it in the airport and do so though!

SHOPPING: Limerick! Park that with sightseeing as there are three immediate biggies to see with the shopping and eating experience: The Hunt Museum, King John’s Castle, and St. Mary’s Church (prearrange the church though)...

NIGHTLIFE and Shopping: Galway!!! Relax and spend three or four nights here.

Trad on the Prom, plan your stay to see this. Hotel on the ocean: The Salthill Hotel (first choice), the Galway Bay. B and B which is nice and close: Devondell’s. Jewelry: McCarthy’s – beautiful things – great prices.

The Must Do’s for scenery: do all of these by day bus if you can:

Cliff of Moher and the Burren tour

Connemara and Cong (Galway Tours, get Gary’s tour!)

Ring of Kerry (some say this is overrated, but I say if you have a one trip to Ireland thing – do all three) – they are all different