

Our 2010 Vacation in Ireland

We arrived in Dublin on Saturday, May 22 and made the about 2-hour drive west to the Inny Bay B&B in Co. Westmeath, north of the town of Athlone in the Irish midlands, on Lough Ree. We learned a bit about using a GPS, because had neither a street address nor coordinates for the B&B. We had to get close and stop at a house to ask directions. The B&B is on private land at the end of a 2 km long private road. We took a three hour nap to adjust for jet lag, and then drove to the nearby town of Ballymahon where we had sea bass, and of course, potatoes for dinner. The Inny Bay B&B is a pretty place amid nice scenery, with pastures, swans, the lough and the Inny River.

Sunday's breakfast, like the others at this B&B was huge, with bacon, kippers, etc. We took a morning walk along the Inny River. Then we visited Locke's Distillery Museum in Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath. It's said to be the world's oldest licensed pot distillery. The works and museum were interesting and the sample of its whiskey was excellent.

We next headed for Clonmacnoise, in Shannonbridge, south of Athlone. It's an early (6th century) Christian site with an Abby ruin, a church (St. Kiernan's, Church of Ireland), a tower ruin, and a graveyard noted for its Celtic (or "high") crosses. On our way there we spotted a castle ruin and found the curator there. It was Clonony Castle, built around 1500 by the MacCoughlan clan, ceded to Henry VIII by Jon Og MacCoughlan, and then given to Thomas Boleyn to ennoble him when Henry wanted to marry his daughter Ann. The curator and her friend who was helping her with castle restoration had two miniature schnauzers with them. One was black with floppy ears like Lyla, although both dogs had undocked tails.

We completed our sightseeing at Belvedere House and Gardens, in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, getting some looks at Ireland's Grand Canal along our way. We were a bit late arriving and because it was close to closing time they let us in for free. We toured the lovely Victorian walled garden and saw the House. We had dinner in Ballymahon at a Chinese Restaurant called the Jade above Kiernan's Pub, which was having some traditional Irish music in a live session. I asked if I could sit in and being told it was all right, went back to the B&B and fetched my harmonicas. We had a grand time playing until the 11PM Sunday night curfew.

Monday, May 24 brought us some bad sightseeing luck and taught us a lesson. Ireland is over-marketed, delivering less than promised and in a deep recession with many advertised places closed. We'd hoped to ride the Blackwater Bog Railway and tour Athlone Castle. Both were closed for economic reasons. Instead, we took the tourism center's suggestion to visit and walk the Lough Boora Parkland in Co. Offaly.

That night while Ruth rested I went back to Athlone to play in a session at Sean's bar founded 860AD and said to be the oldest continuously operating bar in Ireland.

On Tuesday, May 25 we left for Galway, visiting the castle ruin at Rossmore along the way. We also got another lesson about the Avis Garmin GPS navigator. First off, Avis doesn't update them and when you're on new motorways that parallel replaced old roads it doesn't know where you are. Second, one must understand Irish addresses. We were looking for the Consiglio B&B is the Salthill section of Galway. We had no idea that Salthill is not a destination Garmin understands. Third, the Avis agent told us to simply enter "Main Street" if you can't get the navigator to find the destination. We did that and

it simply took us to the nearest place in Co. Galway that had a main Street. That turned out to be Headford, some 45 minutes outside of Galway City!

On our journey we paused to visit Roscommon Castle (ruins), c. 1154AD and Donamon Castle, one of the oldest inhabited buildings in Ireland and presently the HQ of a missionary society that assists handicapped people. We found the Consiglio and were welcomed by its very nice hostess. It's only a few minutes walk from the beach and the pedestrian mall in Galway City, and was also convenient to a laundry. We had dinner at a place called Dáil.

On Wednesday, May 25 we visited the walled town of Athenry, Co. Galway. A Canadian tour group invited us to piggyback on its guided tour, which was being delivered by Seamus, very entertaining and colorful local guide. We ate lunch in Athenry at a lovely tea shop called, appropriately, Sweetie Pies. A little girl, about 2, at the next table ate only the pink icing off her cupcake. We walked the Galway beach to give us more appetite. Then we went into the tourist section and learned another lesson: The Irish have no notion of heart-healthy food, and there's a depressing sameness to menus everywhere: rich, fried foods and nearly no variety. We chose the one restaurant we could find that had a bit of variety on the menu, and both the food and service were terrible. I had very dry pork medallions. We asked to see the desert menu and after waiting unattended on for 45 minutes decided to leave without paying the check. Then I played in a session at Monroe's Tavern.

On Thursday, May 27 we set out driving to Doolin, Co. Clare with a stop at the beautifully restored Dungaire Castle in Kinvara, Co. Galway. Our next stop was at Ailwee Caverns and Raptor sanctuary, well into the Burren in Co. Clare. A fox crossed the road ahead of us.

We visited the Cliffs of Moher on Friday, May 28. The cliffs are 700 feet high and besides hosting numerous bird colonies also provide spectacular views. We went up into O'Brien's Tower on the Cliffs. We also visited the Pulnabrone Megalithic Tombs and then lunched at Caherconnell Stone Fort before also visiting Corconroe Abby, Bell Harbour, and St. Coleman's Abby "Bishop's Quarter", a ruin and cemetery. We also photographed wildflowers, ponies, stone fences and other views around the Burren in Co. Clare. We stopped in at Cassidy's Pub Carron, Co. Clare for Dan to have a pint and found beautiful views overlooking the Burren. We also heard a cuckoo call in the wild for the first time ever, and learned that they only call during their spring mating season.

On Saturday, May 29 we took a guided Burren walk, and besides seeing beautiful sights and learning a lot, we heard more cuckoos. We had lunch at Monk's Pub in Ballyvaughn, Co. Clare, where Dan and a local accordionist named Matty had an impromptu music session enjoyed by about a dozen people. We went to Blackhead Point on Galway Bay, Co. Clare near Fanore, where we climbed along the Burren rock, took photos and collected a few seashells. We had dinner back in Doolin at Gus O'Connor's Pub where Dan also played in a traditional music session.

On Sunday, May 29 we took the tiny ferry *Tranquiliti* from Doolin to Innis Oirr, the smallest and nearest of the Aran Islands. En-route we saw puffins and other sea birds. On the charming little island we were met by a pony trap to take us to our B&B, where Ruth was happy to learn that Brid the charming hostess is also an avid quilter and that an American woman who married an islander runs a quilting center on-island. We had tea

with Brid and took a walk around the picturesque island and through its maze of stone fences, seeing a seal colony, the sacred St. Enda's Well, an 8th century church, the quilting center, and a children's display celebrating the *Plassy* shipwreck rescue 50 years ago. We dined at the only possible place, O'Flaherty's Hotel and I made music afterwards with some local fellows.

We had a tasty and ample breakfast on May 31. At breakfast we met a couple, Tim & Shaheen. He's from Dublin. She's a nurse living there but is originally from Mauritius. Tim and I walked to the O'Brien Castle together and then we joined the ladies. We walked about together to the seal colony, well, church ruin, etc. and had lunch together at *Teach an Tae* before we saw them off on the ferry. I got Tim's phone number and stored it on my phone so that we could meet for dinner when we got to Dublin later. But it turned out my phone died and I was only able to get in touch again via e-mail with Brid's help after we returned to Dominica. What a shame. They're a nice couple.

On Tuesday, June 1 we left Innis Oirr on the morning ferry instead of the afternoon as we'd planned because it was raining. We used the extra time to drive to Galway, find an ATM (there are none on the island), and get laundry done. We had lunch at nice a place Brid recommended, Clare's Tea Shop. We were looking for the Corrib View Farmhouse B&B that we'd booked through a travel web site – it had none of its own. Instead, we'd found the address for the Corrib View Farm B&B through its web site. The two places are 30 miles as the crow flies from each other on the east and west shores of Lough Corrib. But we did not know that. We got to the "Farm" (in Annaghdown, on the eastern shore) and learned of our mistake. We tried to cancel the "Farmhouse" but she left her phone off the hook. After finally reaching her through the travel site getting us her mobile phone number, she told us she'd charge us anyhow. But she never did. Our hostess told us the mistake happened often. Another funny thing happened that day: Ruth looked at our digital travel alarm clock and announced it wasn't working because the display read "E12". She was holding it upside-down. The time was 5:13! We visited the Church of St. Brendan in Annaghdown – he's "The Navigator" said to have aided some Irish to reach America before Columbus. We went to The Thatch in Headford to eat, and there saw the Angler's Rest Hotel where we'd gotten directions to Galway back on May 25 after the Garmin had screwed us up.

On Wednesday, June 2 we took in Ross Errily Friary and looked vainly for leprechauns at Ballymacgibbon Cairn. Then, on our way to the tourist village of Cong, Co. Mayo, at the north end of Lough Corrib, where the movie "*The Quiet Man*" starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara was shot, we had a stroke of good fortune. We spotted a sign offering Lough Corrib cruises and decided to take one. Captain Patrick Luskin heard me remark about my harmonica to Ruth. And asked me to play for his passengers, in return for which he's give us a free morning lake cruise and free afternoon cruise including a visit to the island of Inchagoill and a church said to be built on the island by St. Patrick, and where his nephew and navigator's rudder-shaped grave marker is (it's the second oldest dated Christian grave in Europe). It also included Ashford Castle (Co. Galway) and its grounds (Co. Mayo), rich in history, once owned by the Guinness family, now a 5-star hotel. Between cruises we walked from Ashford Castle to Cong, and after the 2nd cruise we walked the path is the castle's woods. Then we headed for Campbell's Pub in Headford so I could play in a session and had a bad experience: One self-proclaimed

musician, an American expatriate, started spouting nazi-like slanders against Jews. I “corrected” him and we left before I became tempted to make the lesson more physical. We drove through Cong again on Thursday, June 3, deciding to avoid the major motorways and take a scenic route through Co. Galway’s Connemara region to our B&B, the Olde Castle on the Renvyle Peninsula. We took lots of pictures because the countryside kept getting prettier and prettier. We made a stop at the lovely Kylemore Abby and its Victorian garden. We passed through Killary Harbour where Ruth bought some yarn for Mathilda, and saw one of Ireland’s two true fjords. We had our lunch in Tully Cross, the last village before reaching the Olde Castle. The views at the tip of the Renvyle Peninsula are truly breathtaking. We had our dinner at the nearby Renvyle House Hotel, a luxury accommodation with a golf course; expensive but delicious. We walked along the shore before retiring.

On Friday, June 4 we walked the Ellis Nature Trail and the Diamond Hill Trail I Connemara National Park, Co. Clare and then went to see the Dan O’Hara Homestead in Lettershea outside of Clifden, Co. Galway. We had dinner at the Bard’s Den and listened to some traditional music both in Letterfreck, Co. Clare.

On Saturday June 5 we drove out towards Roundstone, Co. Galway. We were taking photos along the way, and at one place the entire flock of sheep came to us as if they wanted their pictures taken. We stopped at one beach and walked and collected some seashells and then stopped for the views at Dog Bay beach. We walked around in Roundstone where we had lunch overlooking the bay and Ruth bought a pair of silver earrings. Then we drove to Clifden “The Capital of Connemara” and walked to the ruins of the 200-year old Darcy’s Castle. We gathered wild strawberries along the Beach Road and walked through a pasture path at one point to the back of a sign hung on a fence. The other side of the sign said to beware of the bull! But there were no cattle in the pasture. Along the way we met a couple sitting on the Cliffside taking in the view. Later that evening after dinner in at Marconi’s in Clifden (the first trans-Atlantic wireless tower in Europe was built nearby) and desert bought at a bakery, and tea at the White Dragon, I went to play in a session at Lowry’s Pub and – small world – one of the musicians, Garry O’Meara was the man in the couple we’d met. We bought his CD and two of Mickey Martin’s. Then we drove the Sky Road back to the B&B getting some great sunset views and photos.

On Sunday, June 6 we left Connemara on the long drive to Grange, Co. Sligo. Along the way a ram leapt into the road ahead of our car and we only narrowly avoided it. Near Grange we found Drumcliffe, where W. B. Yeats is interred along with his 27-year younger wife at the church where his grandfather had been rector. We saw beautiful Ben Bulbin and a round tower across the road from the church. We visited Mallagamore Beach, which is long, wide, and shallow, and was full of people on the unusually warm Sunday in the 3-day bank holiday weekend. We strolled the beach, took photos and collected shells. We also crossed over briefly into Leitrim County to see Lough Glencar and Glencar Falls. We had a great dinner back at Lang’s in Grange, and I had a wonderful fun-filled session of mostly American C&W music at Moran’s Pub in Grange. Monday, June 7, the Bank Holiday, began strangely. Darned near everything, even places advertised to be open, were closed (or out of business). The Garmin sent us to a field in the middle of nowhere when we tried to get to Riverton to see a garden and bird exhibit.

When we did get there it was like a scene from *Twilight Zone*. The place was open but totally deserted. The sandwich shop in the village did not sell – you guessed it – sandwiches. We drove on to Strandhill, Co. Sligo where we had better luck. In Strandhill we saw surfers and Knockneara and climbed sand dunes that must have been 200-300 feet high. We also could see the tidal causeway to Coney Island and took the drive over and strolled and walked to see St. Patrick's Chair, but could not get close because there was a bull in the pasture. Dinner was an adventure. The service was so bad that they apologetically made it gratis. I played some more at Moran's that night.

We left Grange, Co. Sligo (on the West coast) for the long drive to Ardee, Co. Lough and the Smarmore Castle B&B just northeast of Dublin in the east on Tuesday, June 8. But first we made a stop a Grange craft store recommended by Brid Poil back on Innis Oirr for Ruth to buy some quilting fabric. There are few quilting shops in Ireland, it turns out. Then we made the 4½-hour drive, not really wasting a day because it was raining just about our whole way. Smarmore Castle was built in 1320. We had the Knight's Room. The grounds now include a health club, gratis to guests, with pool, sauna & steam room, and a restaurant. This castle stay was our one lodging extravagance, and we decided while there to extend our stay from two nights to three.

On Wednesday, June 9 we visited Slane Castle in Co. Meath on the near the battle site on the historic River Boyne and after sampling its whiskey decided that it was the one we'd return with. We also went to Grove Gardens to see some birds. We ate at the restaurant in Smarmore Castle that night.

We had nice weather all day on Thursday, June 10. We went to the Battle of the Boyne Visitor Center and Newgrange and Knowth megalithic sites, all in Co. Meath. Imagine standing in a chamber where 5,000 years ago people waited for sunlight at dawn on midwinter day! We also visited Mellifont Abby, St. Mary's Church and Monastarboice, famed for its high Celtic crosses and round tower. Quite a day! We dined well at Mulligan's in Ardee.

On Friday, June 11 we drove to another lovely B&B, the Harbourmaster's House on the Grand Canal. On our way we visited Trim Castle, the largest castle ever built in Ireland and Birr Castle *Demesne* (French for "Domain" the owners' preference) Gardens, Science History Center, and Great Telescope. The castle was the home of the Rosse family, great scientists and observers.

We had another "typical Irish" experience on Saturday, June 13. We started out looking for "Larry's Heritage Village", which was advertised and signposted. What a bust! It was a scale model village – sort of plastic flamingo-like. And it was closed down, with a sign blaming the economy. But one could see and photograph the whole place from the road; it was the size of someone's yard. So, we drove Portumna Castle and also took a nature walk in Portumna Forest Park to Rinnmaher Point on Lough Derg in the Park, where we spotted a "marsh hen". We had dinner that night at another restaurant named "The Thatch. The theme is popular. At the small general store and pub in Shannon Harbour (pop. 30) we found and purchased a miniature schnauzer mug made in nearby Shannonbridge. We were invited aboard the *Johanna*, the canal barge houseboat conversion (for sale) tied up in front of our B&B and had a glass of wine and pleasant chat with the owner couple. I had a long, great night in session from 10:30 PM to 1:00 AM at Houhe's Pub in Banagher, Co. Offaly (besides me on harmonica, Theresa on

piano & vocals, Olivia (a pretty lass) on button accordion, and Keir on banjo); a fellow who came up from the crowd to sing (and a pretty fine tenor at that) put his arm over my shoulder and shared the mic with me.

On Sunday, June 13, another rainy day, we had a lengthy drive to the Willowbrook B&B in Co. Tipperary. We ate at Dan Larkins in Tipperary and I later joined a traditional music session there.

It cleared in the late morning on Monday, June 14 and we drove to Limerick (where the local poetry appeals to me) and toured King John's Castle. (Yes, the "Evil Prince John", brother to King Richard "The Lion-Hearted" of Robin Hood fame). John never set foot in it. One could see the economy's devastation in the many boarded-up shops in Limerick. Next we saw Grange Stone Circle, Ireland's largest. Then we went on to Killmallock Medieval Dominican Priory Friary and Abby ruins. We happened on a park with a picturesque mill. Finally we took the Silvermine Drive back to our B&B for its scenery. We had a nice cod dinner at the Orchard restaurant.

On Tuesday, June 15 we began an eventful day at Bunratty Castle & Folk Park, Co Clare. The place has many attractions as our 110-slide show of it demonstrates. Then we went to Foynes Flying Boat Museum, Co. Limerick. I wasn't certain that Ruth would like that sort of thing, but she had a great time there, trying the flight simulator (and crashing) and viewing the exhibits. I remember seeing a flying boat go over our schoolyard and thrilling me. Then we went to nearby Knockpatrick Gardens, Co. Limerick owned, maintained and run by Helen & Tim O'Brien. We strolled around the gardens taking pictures and had tea with Tim & Helen. I was able to help them with a computer problem too.

On Wednesday, June 16 we left for the Twin Oaks B&B in Kilkenny by way of Holycross Abby and the Rock of Cashel, Tipperary. We lunched at a tearoom in Cashel. While we were driving we saw a man walking a miniature schnauzer – and Ruth noted our 4th schnauzer sighting (she counts them). We had a great dinner at Café Sol in Kilkenny and I played in a pub session.

We took in Kilkenny Castle, Rothe House & Garden, St. Canice's Cathedral (with a 130-step round tower that I climbed) and the Black Abby, all in Kilkenny on Thursday, June 17. We also visited Woodstock Gardens and Arboretum just outside Inistioge village, near Kilkenny. We saw rows of monkey puzzle trees and were given a tour of the expansive grounds by an employee named Larry on his motorized cart. On our way back to the B&B we stopped at Walslough Village, a recreational complex with thatch-roof self-catering cottages and a catch and release angling lake only 5km (3 mi) outside Kilkenny, where we spoke with a young man who was catching perch. Dinner that night in Kilkenny was another "Irish experience": They're nuts about sports and betting. The soccer World Cup was on TV, complete with those damn horns, and playing not only in pubs but restaurants as well. There was no escaping it. In soccer, "football" as they call it, the most exciting thing is watching the grass grow.

On Friday, June 18 we drove on to Kildare and the Moate Lodge a 300-year-old farmhouse B&B. We went into Kildare for lunch. We climbed a 133-step round tower, the 2nd highest in Ireland (and you can't go up the other). Then we went into the St. Brigid's Cathedral. I stopped for a pint in Kildare and we watched horse racing on a large screen TV. I asked Ruth if she wanted to place a bet, and she said "yes" so we crossed the

street to a Paddy Power off-track betting shop. It had TVs showing horse and dog racing plus athletic events around the world. After a while Ruth decided to place a bet in the 5PM race at Royal Ascot. She chose horse #6 because Mathilda was born on the 6th. It was the 2:1 favorite. What a thrilling race! Yards from the finish the horse surged from 4th to win by a nose! We went back to The Moate Lodge and took a walk to the Moate with Stevie, the Springer Spaniel. What fun! Stevie ran parallel to us in a field of barley and true to his breed, kept spring up to keep us in view. It was funny. We walked to and around the Moate where I dared to try a rope swing. The moate is also the site of the finish line in the 1903 Gordon Bennett Cup in auto racing.

We had a memorable day on Saturday, June 19 at the Irish national Stud Farm, a tour of which also includes the 100-year-old Japanese Garden and St. Fiachra's garden. A colorful guide explained the workings of a thoroughbred stud farm in interesting and often funny ways. We met a couple from Belfast, Gerry & Lynda Black. He's a locksmith and former jockey with an interest in country music. He gave us two of his CDs on which he does guitar and vocals. Finally that day we took a scenic drive around Grand Canal sites in Co. Kildare and visited St. Brigid's Well.

On Sunday, June 20 we drove to the Straffen Steam Museum and Larchmont Gardens and found both closed! So we drove into Dublin and our B&B and I returned our rental car. We took a bus to Dublin's famed O'Connell St. where throngs of tourists were milling about the line of t-shirt and junky souvenir shops. We had a nice Italian diner in the Temple Bar section and retired early because the next day we would take a morning ferry across the Irish Sea to Holyhead, Wales.

Back in Dublin on Tuesday, June 29 we visited Dublin's Zoo and Trinity College where we took a campus tour and went to see a page from the Book of Kells. There was a glass-case exhibit of other 12th-14th century illuminated manuscripts just outside the Book of Kells room, and an American woman tourist nudged me and actually asked if they were handwritten! We also did some gift shopping. We flew back to the US on Wednesday, July 30.