

## ***Easy Access Travel Ireland Tour 2014***

*And then there were ten.* We should have been a group of 13 but one lady dropped out a few days before our trip began due to illness and another couple just could not make their connections due to thunderstorms, a security breach, etc. and finally gave up after three days at various airports, none of which were anywhere near Ireland.

We all met a day early so we could rest after the long flight and be refreshed and ready to explore the wonders of Ireland. The group's age range spanned almost 40 years but we all bonded easily and as each day unfolded, we shared histories and found out everyone's unique and interesting story. This was what every group leader hopes for. No complaining, great attitudes, lots of laughter and a shared understanding of the difficulties that travelers with disabilities face. They say there is safety in numbers and indeed there was...no one left behind because they moved too slowly and the knowledge that, as a group, we could accomplish our goals of seeing a country steeped in medieval history despite mobility challenges.

Our driver/guide, Phelim, met us at the Hilton Dublin Airport Hotel, accessed our various pieces of mobility equipment and proceeded to load us on the 42 seater coach that would be ours for the next 8 days. The coach was equipped with a side entry hydraulic lift. The scooter users parked the scooters in the back of the bus and proceeded to seats while the two full time chair users had tie downs for their chairs. Crutches, walkers and a folding wheelchair were stored in the back as well. Between us, we had 2 scooters, 2 manual wheelchairs, a power chair, a walker and an O2 portable concentrator. We had more than enough room on the coach and were quite comfortable.



Our journey began traveling across the midlands towards County Galway. We were quickly mesmerized by the scenery and how our pre conceived notions of what Ireland should look like did not fail us. If anything, they did not come close to the reality of what beheld us from that day forth. On the way to Galway we stopped at Rathbaun Farm with its quaint farmhouse and barn that held the new mama sheep and their babies.



After enjoying fresh baked scones and tea or coffee, we were treated to a demonstration of a sheep herding dog rounding up the sheep in the field and a live sheep shearing.



We continued on to Galway and had a panoramic city tour on our way to the Radisson Blu Hotel in the heart of the city. We had no problem walking/rolling into city centre although there were some missing curb cuts in the area close to the hotel which found us venturing into the street and praying that the reputation of the Irish people being kind would be true and they would yield to our mobility equipment. Indeed they did and we all survived the trip! After venturing out and managing a safe return to the hotel, we joined for our official Welcome Dinner in the hotel restaurant, Marina. Thus, our "foodie tour" of Ireland began! We were delighted in the taste and quality of the food from the starters to the ever present desserts. For those that enjoyed salmon (myself included), we were in for a real treat....the salmon was outstanding and melted in your mouth after being fresh caught that morning. Needless to say, the majority of my dinners during this trip had salmon as the main course and I enjoyed each and every bite! Since I'm on the topic of food, I'll continue on this subject. All the food we had at our group dinners was delicious, well prepared and attractively plated. Portions were large and we wondered if they were influenced by the reputation Americans have of being big eaters. If you ordered soup for a starter, it was a rather large bowl instead of a cup. Traditional Irish brown soda bread was plentiful as was a large bowl of boiled potatoes served at every dinner. Desserts were quite delicious and also came in ample portions. The food was enjoyed by all and between the Irish Stew, Fish n Chips, Guinness, Bailey's Irish Creme and huge Irish breakfasts that we ate every day, we are all bringing home some extra pounds with our other souvenirs!

The next morning we headed out of Galway with our first stop at the Celtic Crystal Factory in the village of Moycullen. We had the owner, Mary, who is in her 80's give us a personal history of the factory and a lesson on how the beautiful crystal pieces came to be a reality. My personal favorites were the exquisite colored bowls and vases. We also got to see a master craftsman cut the glass as he did the time honored designs from memory. Quite amazing!



We then enjoyed our journey through the rugged beauty of the Connemara region which is surrounded by lakes and mountains and all the sheep that everyone conjures up when they think of Ireland. This lovely road led to the dramatic Kylemore Abbey

Benedictine Monastery on the grounds of Kylemore Castle one of the most picturesque sights in Ireland.

Kylemore Abbey is famous around the world. From its beginnings as a romantic gift in the 1860's to becoming home to the Benedictine Nuns in 1920, Kylemore is steeped in history and tales of tragedy, romance, royal visits, spirituality and education. Visitors are welcome to experience the Victorian atmosphere of the resorted rooms of the Abbey and gothic church and to explore the magical walled Victorian Garden.

Unfortunately, the Abbey is not wheelchair accessible but the exterior view is worth the time to visit. A visitor center, cafe, gift shop and restrooms are accessible.



Our drive back to Galway found us traveling through the Gaeltacht, Irish speaking region of Connemara. We enjoyed a lovely ride along the shores of Galway Bay and into the seaside village of Salt Hill which reminded me of many California beach towns I'm so familiar with. Salt Hill is a popular vacation destination of the Irish people. The Irish are a hearty bunch; they surf and swim in waters much colder than most of us would consider even putting a toe into!

Tonight's dinner was "on our own" so our 10 member caravan headed out after our return to the hotel and navigated the streets of Galway including a bustling pedestrian area complete with street performers, shops and pubs. All of us were anxious to experience an authentic Irish pub but quickly realized we would be hard pressed to find a pub capable of accommodating all of us with our various mobility devices during dinner hour. After all, this was a bustling college town and the pubs were packed with students taking a break from the arduous task of studying for exams. But we were relentless in our quest and had many pubs to check out. Finally, success! The owner of Busker Brown opened the back room for us and we enjoyed a delicious pub meal and drinks. It was a good room with comfortable leather chairs and we had it to ourselves and a great time was had by all. Our tired group paraded back to the hotel happy and content after a long day.



After a filling Irish breakfast we depart with high expectations for what the day will bestow upon us. We are on our way to the magnificent Cliffs of Moher by way of County Clare and along the beautiful coastline. The cliffs rise more than 700 feet above the Atlantic Ocean and offer great views of the Aran Islands and the Bay of Galway on a clear day. Most of us were brave enough to venture quite a way up the cliffs but the higher we went, the colder and windier it got so we opted to explore the fully accessible Visitor Center which is carved right into the cliffs. Very impressive.



Time to board the bus and continue our day when the real adventure begins....the lift is not working! The group takes this in stride. After all, what is living with a disability if it isn't living with the unexpected? Let me take this opportunity to mention what an incredible group I'm traveling with. Our group is calm, considerate, compassionate and not a complainer in the bunch. So, true to form, we take this "inconvenience" in stride. The luggage is now loaded into the back of the bus and all but one are able to slowly and carefully climb onto the coach. Our chairs and scooters now get stored where the luggage had been. Our full time chair user is lifted in his chair with the help of a group member and another coach driver through the lift opening and we are off once again, this time to Bunratty Folk Park. Unfortunately, our driver did not see the humor in the situation that the rest of us did! We were convinced all would be fine but his his feeling very bad. We arrive in Bunratty and all but one got off the coach, again slowly and carefully. We begin to explore the Folk Park and, before we know it, here is John who waited on the bus for the lift problem to be resolved. Turned out it was simply a matter of some oil being needed on a hinge. I know it could have been much more serious but it wasn't and no one over reacted and the trip continued as planned.

Bunratty Folk Park is a vivid recreation of life in the 19th century set on 26 acres and features 30 buildings in a peaceful rural setting. It is truly enchanting and even has its own pub; the Irish do enjoy having a "pint" when they are out and about. Time to re-board the coach using the now functioning lift and on to check into our home for the next two nights, the Savoy Hotel in Limerick. We were shortly on our way once again back to Bunratty Folk Park for an authentic Irish evening complete with dinner, Irish folk music and step dancers at the Corn Barn. Our group enjoyed front and center seating and returned to the hotel very full and exhausted from the long day.



We got to sleep in a little later today and would have a slower paced day. We were off to explore Limerick which dates back to at least the Viking Settlement of 812. The Normans redesigned the city in the 12th century and added much of the most notable architecture including King John's Castle and St. Mary's Cathedral. The castle overlooks the majestic River Shannon which runs through Limerick. We went through the castle on our own and enjoyed good access through most of it. Locals were re-enacting life in the 13<sup>th</sup> century which was an added bonus to our time here.



We had a marvelous group dinner at the Hampton Grille that evening adjacent to the hotel where most of us indulged in a delicious steak entree. Dessert was a tray of assorted sweets to share and once again we went off to bed satiated and happy.



Another fine Irish breakfast awaits us in the morning and the Savoy Hotel gets the prize for the best breakfast. In addition to a wonderful cold buffet, we can order omelets, pancakes or waffles off the menu. I must mention that smoked salmon was served at most of our breakfast buffets and was amazing. Quite delicious! Please note that we skip lunch most days to compensate for these gastronomic breakfasts and dinners. So now we head to the lovely town of Adare for a stroll through the park and perhaps a cup of coffee but, instead of the good weather we have gotten used to, we are greeted by rain and we opt to forgo this stop. Our driver decides to head to Dingle which is not on the planned itinerary but turns out to be a delightful surprise addition to our trip. Soon as we leave Adare, the rain stops and before long we are treated to a beautiful blue sky and sunshine. Phelim is going to take us on Slei Head Road which is only wide enough for one motor coach at a time and full of curves. No one is prepared for the unbelievable scenery that awaits us as we traverse this narrow highway with views of water and mountains that fill our visual senses with awe. The water is an unexpected blue similar to what one experiences in the Caribbean.





We eventually arrive in the charming fishing village of Dingle, home to Harrington's and their award winning fish n chips. They are very accommodating and can seat us all together. I'm so glad I waited for my fish n chips to indulge on here. Totally yummy and not greasy!





We now continue our journey to our destination for the next two nights at Fels Point Hotel in Tralee, County Kerry's largest town. Our evening is highlighted by another outstanding dinner at Morels in the hotel. This may have been the best salmon yet!

We are ready for another full day as we begin the panoramic and lovely route through the Ring of Kerry also known as the Iveragh Peninsula. We were now on the opposite side from where we were the day before when we drove to Dingle. Our heads were exploding with the visual feast that greeted us each day of this fantastic tour. Beauty unfolded with every twist and turn of the road. In addition to amazing scenery, the Ring of Kerry also provides amazing insight into the ancient heritage of Ireland. On the way back, we stop in the popular town of Killarney for shopping and dinner on our own.



We discover Murphy's Pub which is part of a B&B and is able to get us all seated together. This is where I decide to have Irish Beef Stew made with Guinness, the national beer of Ireland. I don't drink beer but this was delicious! Rain is starting so back to the bus and the hotel. We decide to skip dinner since we had a late lunch but

do meet in the bar for a drink later that night. My drink of choice is Bailey's and coffee. Excellent! The group has truly bonded with one another and we are enjoying each other's company and learning very interesting facts about one another. Everyone has interesting stories to share and we are forming good friendships. This is evidenced by the fact that we spend our free time together rather than venturing out on our own.

And now it's time for the longest drive of the tour as we head back to Dublin for the last few days of our tour and our stay at the Doubletree Hotel. We do make a stop back in Adare on this day and visit the lovely gardens.



Phelim leads us on a driving tour of Dublin city pointing out highlights as we drive along. Dublin is a big contrast to everywhere else we've been and brings us back to the reality of day to day life as we sit in traffic and watch the residents hustle here, there and everywhere as they tend to the rigors of daily doings in a big city. However, this does not distract from the fact that we are in this historic city dotted with Georgian Squares, famous monuments and points of interest including St. Patrick's Cathedral founded in 1191 and Ireland's largest church with a spire rising 140 feet into the sky. As we enter the Doubletree Hotel we are welcomed with their traditional greeting of hot chocolate chip cookies. Dinner awaits us in the Sussex Restaurant in the hotel. It is a lovely room and we enjoy the restaurant to ourselves.

The next morning we embark on our final day of touring as a group and leave the city towards Glendalough which means the valley between two lakes. This is an early Christian ecclesiastical settlement founded by St. Kevin in the 6th century. There are many monastic remains to view. Back to Dublin for some time at Trinity College and The Book of Kells written around 800 A.D. and one of the most beautifully illuminated manuscripts of all times. We have free time for shopping, exploring or a pint of Guinness!



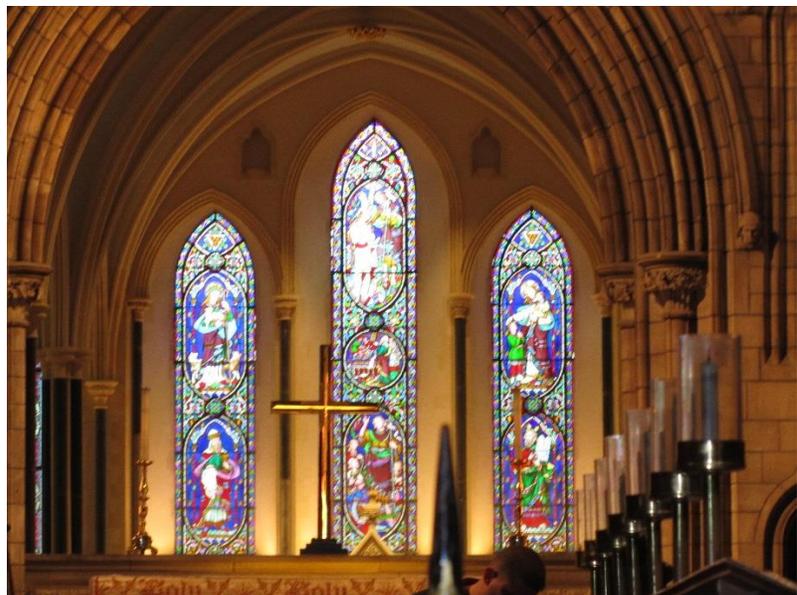
There is only one way to end this amazing tour that the ten of us have been privileged to partake in and that's with another rousing night of Irish festivities. Off we go to the Merry Ploughboy and once again have a traditional Irish dinner complete with fantastic entertainment by the Merry Ploughboys themselves and Irish step dancing by five talented dancers. It was the perfect ending to a perfect trip!



Three of our group departed the next morning but five remained to venture out on our own. Now I must mention Michael, one of the husbands in our group who was always there to lend a hand whether it was securing a wheelchair, directing traffic, being on the lookout for obstacles or scoping out access for us. So, Michael got appointed our unofficial tour guide and navigator for our walking tour of Dublin which was now our last day in this glorious country. Two scooters, one wheelchair, one with a walker and two able bodied spouses took on the city.



Through beautiful St. Stephen's Park we strolled, past stately Georgian Townhomes and Christ Church until we found St. Patrick's Cathedral. We got led in the emergency exit aka accessible entrance and took in the intricate stain glass windows and enormous sculptures.





On to Temple Bar, a popular neighborhood filled with ethnic restaurants and pubs and popular with locals and tourists alike. Our next stop was Grafton Street, a famous pedestrian area brimming with stores and street entertainers. Naturally, we were hungry so stopped for lunch at Gourmet Burger Bar, a popular Irish chain restaurant. In keeping with my tradition of eating different food when I travel, I ordered the ground lamb burger and it was quite good. And that was the last meal in Ireland! After lunch we made one final stop for last minute souvenirs and then got side tracked by some street performers.



Finally started back to the hotel when we were hit with a rainstorm that soaked us through even with the use of hotel umbrellas. But it's all part of the Irish experience and experience Ireland we did. We made dreams come true and made believers out of people with special needs who thought this type of trip wasn't possible. We showed them how we can do it a little slower and a little easier and open the world of travel to all.

