

Ireland has a long and complex history. We learned about the monasteries set up in the centuries following St Patrick's conversion of the Irish to Christianity in the 500s. Then followed centuries of Viking invasion and settlement. After taking England in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings the Normans moved on to subjugate Ireland and keep it subject to the British monarch. Eventually Henry VIII disbanded the Monasteries and set in motion 400 years of violent confrontation between Catholics and protestants. Oliver Cromwell also figures prominently in sending armies in the 1600s to destroy many of the Castles in Ireland. Innumerable revolts against British rule were bloodily put down. The potato famine of 1846-1849 saw a million Irish starve to death and another million take ships to the 4 corners of the globe. In the 21st century Ireland has mostly known good times.

Many old buildings we visited have had several buildings on the same site; often changing use from Abbey to store of arms during war and then cathedral or grand family home. Some of the original walls are still obvious. Cathedrals, Abbeys and castles abound. Some are just ruins, some are being restored so they do not decay further and others are being completely restored. Pubs and churches are by far the most common buildings around – in equal numbers.

This pub, The Brazen Head, was first built in 1198 and is still a popular drinking spot. In Dublin where we also visited and tasted at the Guinness Brewery and Jameson's distillery. In Kilkenny Graham also toured another brewery, Smithwicks.

Dublin was easy to get around. We did lots of walking, but also caught a local train to Howth, a small port town on the northern tip of Dublin harbour that is a popular day trip for tourists and locals. We have been lucky with the first 8 days of our stay all mainly fine, but after that we experienced the true Irish summer of drizzle/rain interspersed with sunny breaks.

In Howth we also did a short boat trip around a small island and visited a radio museum – naturally!



Also in Dublin we visited Trinity College, home of the Book of Kells. The picture shows a statue of "Molly

Malone" as she "wheels her wheel barrow through streets broad and narrow", with some local musicians in front of yet another church. Google has a major presence in Dublin.



After 4 days in Dublin we drove our hire car south. Graham is doing a great job with driving in difficult situations. Our VW Jetta is diesel and the engine stops when at traffic lights etc. Unfortunately it has a very poor take off which can cause problems. Then of course, there are all the very narrow roads that challenge the passage of one car let alone two coming at each other. But the scenery is magnificent. Mostly green, although we have seen a fair amount of golden grain crops as well. There are rivers at every turn, all running even though it is mid summer. This picture is of the quaint little village of Avoca where *Ballykissangel* was filmed.

The photo below was one of the prettiest castles we saw, just outside Wexford in the SE corner of Ireland.



A trip to Waterford is not complete without a tour of the Waterford crystal factory where we found out why it is so expensive. Each item goes through numerous stages handled by a different specialist staff member. The chandelier here was one of three hanging in the Waterford cathedral.

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In driving around the south west of the country we learned much of the ancient history of Ireland. This included the remains of a fort dating back to early centuries AD, a ring of stones which was an altar and part of village with remnants of stone huts dating back to 1000BC and a slab-tomb dating back 4 or 5000 years. These structures make the castles and cathedrals seem very young in comparison.



One of the main things we came to see was the scenery and we have not been disappointed. The three peninsulas on the SW corner – Beara, Kerry and Dingle- were all magnificent. The coastal scenery was rocky cliffs for the most part and quite stunning. The occasional sandy beach filled with summer holiday makers would hardly rate a mention in Australia. The most impressive part of all three of these peninsulas was the drive from one side to the other, through a range of mountains. The roads were only one car wide and required lots of pulling off to let others pass, but the scenery was worth the inconvenience.



The farm country is a lush green dotted with patches of golden yellow as the wheat and barley ripen.



In between all of the hills there were waterfalls, creeks, lakes, cute thatched cottages, very nice modern houses with grand stone fences. One time a crazy old farmer bailed us up in the middle of the road to have a chat. We have managed to find a few pubs with Irish music but many of them don't start until 9.30 which is too late for us oldies.

The weather has been very kind to us with most days sunny at times, a couple of really wet days, but often just a shower and then it fines up again. Despite the mild weather (we wear jackets most days), to the Irish this is their summer holiday and many of them are in holiday shacks and down at the beach swimming – mostly wearing wetsuits, while others watch wearing coats.

We are now heading north, stopping just one night in each place. We spent a day on one of the Aran Islands; I asked one of the locals why the stone fences were so close together, the areas seem to be very small for stock. I was amazed to find that the answer is to get rid of the stones. The whole island was covered in stones so they keep making fences to clear the land for stock.



The day was complete with the return boat trip taking us close to the famous Cliffs of Moher which have appeared in a number of films (or filums as the locals say), including one of the Harry Potter series, Ryans Daughter and the TV series Father Ted.



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Our first stop in Northern Ireland was Derry / Londonderry. We arrived on a lovely sunny Saturday which happened to be a significant day in their history. It was the day the city gates were closed by a group of young apprentices against the Catholics back in 1689. There was a significant police presence throughout the town while a procession went along the city walls and through the streets off and on throughout the day. There were 150 bands, mostly fife or button accordion bands, interspaced by groups of men from throughout the UK wearing decorations relating to their organisation – The Apprentice Boys (seems to have some similarity to the Masons). We also went to a museum where we learnt more about the history, which helped to understand what was happening on the day.





The next significant event was to climb over the “giants causeway”. An impressive rock structure on the coast close to Scotland. In fact on a couple of days we could see across to Scotland.



Apart from this causeway, we did not expect the wonderful scenery we saw all along the north and NE coast. This included a number of places used as locations for the filming of *Game of Thrones* – this picture below is Ballintoy Harbour used as the *Iron Islands* in this TV series. And lots of colourful wildflowers.



A few more castles later we arrived in Belfast where we went to the Titanic Experience; this is where the ship was designed and built. We also went to a museum in the south, at the ship's last port of call, Queenstown (now called Cobh / Cove).



In the north we have experienced a couple of interesting new dishes. Up till now it's been lots of fish&chips, guinness pie and Irish stew. We have now learnt about Taco chips – a plate of chips with chilli mince and melted cheese on top (they haven't heard of corn chips or taco shells). And what the Irish call a pasty - a thick potato cake with bits of bacon or mince in it. And of course curry is more likely to be served with chips than rice. Obviously potatoes continue to be a big part of their diet.

It has been an amazing 4 weeks, on the go much of the time. We are now looking forward to some luxury on our cruise out of New York starting in a few days.