

## Ireland trip 2011

We spent six days in Ireland. Keeb was apprehensive about the extremely cheap EasyJet tickets I had got us but all went fine getting over there and back. I had been briefed by my friend Lesley, who is from Northern Ireland, on the "must-sees" and the first thing we did was to map out how to get to two of her recommendations at the tourist information office: The Giant's Causeway and Carrickfergus Castle.

We went to the Giant's Causeway by taking a train from Belfast to Coleraine and then a bus to the Giant's Causeway. We walked along the coastal road leading to the Causeway and were rewarded by the awesome site consisting of huge, hexagonal basalt columns that had been created by volcanic flows that cooled and cracked from top to bottom in that distinctive honeycomb pattern.

There is a legend associated with the causeway and while I was trying to take a photo of this information, another tourist was rotating the poster on which it was written. I told her I was trying to take a photo and she responded "I'm trying to read this!" and continued to turn it. I decided having a fight with this crotchety lady would not set the right tone, so I waited patiently for her to finish and then took my photo.

The legend made me laugh so I will share it here: the causeway was built by an Irish giant, Finn, as a path over the sea to Scotland where there lived a Scottish giant, Benandonner, whom Finn planned to fight. However when Finn reached Scotland he saw Benandonner was much bigger than him, Finn ran back to his wife, Oonagh, and asked her to hide him. Oonagh dressed him up as a baby and when Benandonner saw the size of the "baby" he was terrified of meeting his father. Benandonner ran back over the causeway to Scotland, breaking it up so the path could no longer be crossed.

When we were walking back from the Causeway to the nearest hotel, Irish children came up to us and asked where we were from. We responded "Trinidad" but they did not know that so we said "West Indies" which they did not know either then we tried "Caribbean" and still they did not know that. Their Mum finally said very pleasantly "Welcome to Ireland!".

We made our way to the Causeway Hotel to get a bite and I was blown away by the side salad. I expected a few pieces of lettuce and tomato. What I got was a full meal consisting of: pasta salad, rice in curry flavoured mayo with raisins, egg salad, cole slaw and raw veggies.

The next day we took a train to Carrickfergus Castle and did the castle tour. This twelfth century castle still retained some of its Norman architecture and had a very bloody history. I was amazed that the animated history aimed at children included the fact that at one desperate point, the castle's occupants ate their Scottish prisoners. Once I got over that, I enjoyed wandering around the rooms and Keeb was specially intrigued by the tracks used to rotate the cannons. We also visited the Carrickfergus museum.

## **Ireland trip 2011 (continued)**

We then traveled on to Whitehead where we were met at the train station by Lesley's parents, Mr. and Mrs. McMurray. We all walked along the coastal road from the station to their house which overlooked the sea and had magnificent gardens. These gardens benefited from Mr. McMurray fertilizing them with seaweed from the nearby sea. We had a very enjoyable tea together and learned a bit about what it was like to live through the Troubles in Ireland. When the McMurrays visited London just after the 2011 riots, I was surprised by how easily they took it in stride but understood better having heard that they used to hear bombs going off back in the times of the Troubles. After tea, Mr. McMurray took us for another walk, this time around the bluff to the Blackhead lighthouse near their home. The views of the craggy coastline conjured up gothic stories and both Keeb and I were reminded of the Toco coast.

We decided to visit the Irish Republic for a day and took a train down to Dublin. When we arrived, we took a "hop on hop off" city bus tour and got out at Stephen's Green which turned out to be a beautiful oasis complete with water ways, swans and tree covered areas. Keeb mentioned it reminded him of a miniature Central Park. The edges of the park were lined with paintings by local artists, and we enjoyed checking them out.

We then got back on a bus and were treated to the histories of various buildings and spots associated with famous authors like Oscar Wilde, Jonathon Swift (Gulliver's Travel's) and Bram Stoker. We also had a brief view of the Phoenix Park. The highlight of the bus tour for me was glimpsing a statue of Molly Malone with her wheelbarrow on a street corner, laden with baskets presumably for her cockles and mussels. My Dad used to sing that song to us as children. Poor Keeb was treated to my tone-deaf version of it. We then got out and walked along the River Liffey, stopping in at a couple of bookshops. I also stopped at the green bridge crossing to gawk at a hotel owned by Bono and The Edge.

In honour of having seen the Guinness brewery on the tour, when we stopped to eat, I had steak and Guinness pie.

On the Sunday before we left Northern Ireland we visited the Ulster Museum and the Botanic Gardens. I found the prehistoric sections and the extensive gems area of the museum of particular interest whereas Keeb took in a section on "The Troubles". I was enchanted by the Botanic Gardens. We were fortunate enough to have decent weather for that part of the day. We had tea near the gardens and Keeb was impressed by the apple pie that he was served.

## **Ireland trip 2011 (continued)**

### **Adventures in transport**

On our Giant's Causeway trip, when we got to Coleraine, I found out the bus number to the Giant's Causeway and the bay it would pull into and stationed myself strategically to see it. Sure enough a bus pulled into that bay at the appointed time. I asked if it was the bus to the Giant's Causeway as a formality as I climbed on and was surprised when the driver said "No, Gavaugh". Several minutes later, a bus then pulled up into the bay next to bus we were attempting to board and that turned out to be the correct bus (in the wrong bay). The Gavaugh bus driver pointed out the other bus to us.

Then at Coleraine we confirmed the train number we would need to get on to get back to Belfast and then went to the platform. Now the screen clearly showed two separate train numbers with the second one being ours. In England this would have meant two separate trains would call. So when the earlier train arrived, we discussed whether that was our train but thought it was so much earlier that it could not be ours. So, we sat on the bench, me with my head on Keeb's shoulder, calmly watching people boarding the train. Luckily, one of the staff saw us and hustled us onto that train – a good thing since it was the only one going back to Belfast.

### **Entertainment**

We saw Kenneth Branagh and Rob Brydon in a dark comedy called "Painkiller". It was really silly but made me laugh out loud.

© Jo-Ann Miller