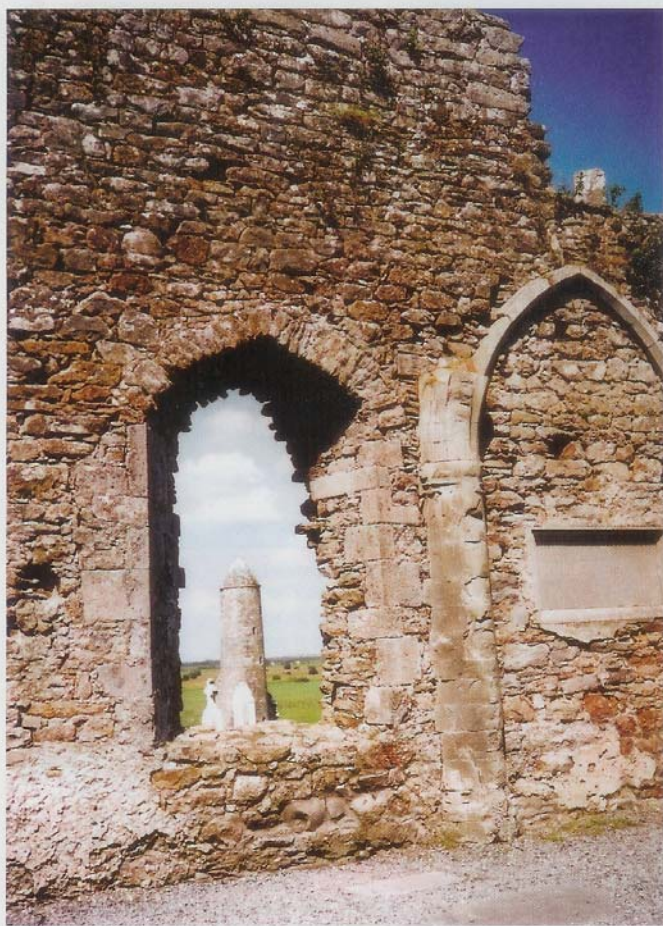


BUS, BARGE AND BLISTERS

Crossing Leprechaun Land

BY BOBBIE CHRISTMAS



WHAT WAS I DOING? In early 2002, I had fallen down a flight of stairs and broken my leg. Yet the following August, I was out tramping over the Irish Burren, a moon-like spanse of slippery limestone riddled with potholes eager to trip me. I dislike rain, yet I sloshed through it 10 out of 18 days. How did I get there, and why was I having so much fun?

I experienced the world's most unusual tour of Ireland, and even though it went against everything in my nature, I had a grand time, and I'd do it again.

Let me explain. I'm edging toward 60. To me, walking my dog for two blocks is a serious journey. I didn't own hiking boots or even a decent raincoat. My sister Jean and her husband Geoff still managed to talk me into joining them on an archeological tour of Ireland with a few folks from Canberra, Australia.

Anyway, I bought a pair of lightweight Lands' End hiking boots, found a backpack at a thrift shop, turned in my frequent flyer miles, packed my London Fog, and flew to Dublin to meet up with about a dozen Australians for a tour dubbed "Bus, Barge and Blisters."

TOP O' THE MORNING AND G'DAY, MATE For almost three weeks I could not tell an Australian accent from an Irish one, because both wafted around me constantly. Toward the end of the trip, I cut a banana in half for my cereal and asked the group, "Does anyone want half a banahna?" I couldn't believe the Australian pronunciation came out of my mouth!

Anyone who has spent time in Australia will tell you Aussies make terrific friends. Their appreciation for the absurd, their sense of humor, their intense curiosity, and their



enjoyment of a good pub can't be beat, and we were in the perfect place to partake of those things and more.

Australian Archeologist Christopher Carter put together the 18-day tour and acted as our guide. His intimate knowledge of Ireland kept us entertained and educated. Before any of us left our native soil, Chris sent information on what to bring, hence the hiking boots and raincoat. He also mailed each of us a 50-page booklet outlining the highlights of our trip and the history of each area we would visit.

We were not going to do any actual digging, but Chris' slant on history always came from the standpoint of an archeologist, and Ireland fulfills any archeologist's wildest dream. Because the land dates back before written history, the laws there demand that an archeologist must excavate and investigate the land before anything is built or remodeled. Wherever we saw churches being restored, we saw archeologists on their knees, little shovels, brushes and pails in hand, chipping out clay pipe remnants and other pieces of the past.

I could sum up Irish history this way: In the name of one religion or another, everybody

invaded Ireland at some time or other. The invaders always caused destruction, but the Irish usually won. Today, they don't care what religion you are — as long as you're Catholic.

Chris had picked cozy bed-and-breakfasts for us to stay at in most locations, which meant our breakfast was covered in the cost. If you've never had an Irish breakfast, you've never eaten breakfast. After you finish your cereal, someone comes out of a tiny kitchen with a plate loaded with toast, eggs, potatoes, tomatoes, one or two kinds of sausages and sometimes even bacon. You'll never leave an Irish B and B hungry, unless you sleep through breakfast.

WALK A MILE IN MY BOOTS

On our first full day in Ireland, the sky over Dublin threatened rain, but it did not dampen our enthusiasm. We laced up our boots and donned our backpacks containing water, sunblock and rain gear. Off we walked to the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) station about a mile away from the B and B. Such a hike wasn't much to the younger folk, but it was a test for me, and just a hint of what was to come. That day we lumbered around Dublin Castle, the National Museum and Trinity College, where we saw the Book

of Kells, an eighth-century Christian-illuminated manuscript. We trudged back to the B and B from the DART station and later hoofed three-quarters of a mile to and from dinner. Back in my room, I rubbed my feet, saw no blisters and fell into a dead sleep.

In the morning, my feet felt fine, and off we went again. The relics we had seen the day before had impressed me. That was until we visited Neolithic sites dating back to 8,000 B.C. I came to accept the fact that Ireland is as soaked in history as it is awash with pubs.

To immerse yourself in history, buy a Heritage Card at any Heritage Site. For a single fee, it's admission to more than 65 historic places in Ireland, including churches, castles, cultural institutions, parks, fortresses and prehistoric sites. Chris bought our cards at Dublin Castle, our first historic stop.

The next morning we climbed aboard a spacious bus to continue our tour. Newgrange bowled me over. A series of earth-and-rock structures, Newgrange predates Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids. Out in the middle of what appears to be pastureland rise bright green, grass-covered humps of earth bolstered by huge boulders carved with ancient symbols. To step inside the main structure, I



Top: The series of earth-and-rock structures known as **Newgrange** served as a burial ground. It predates Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids.
Bottom: Once hallowed ground, this **church** collapsed during an excavation.

had to bend and slide in sideways through a small opening. Claustrophobia notwithstanding, I feared my large frame would not fit through the small spaces. Determination and curiosity pushed me on, and I successfully reached the main cavity. When a guide instructed us to look up, I saw stones overlapping each other to form a cathedral ceiling, with no mortar whatsoever. I stood under hundreds of thousands of pounds of rock, dirt and grass, with only a skinny exit to safety.

On the morning of the summer equinox, the sun enters a small portal over the Newgrange doorway, streams down the hall and illuminates the main burial chamber.

Apparently the light show is the entire purpose for the structure. Sounds like a lot of work for such a brief enlightenment!

LET THE RAIN COME DOWN

Ireland is green for a reason. We encountered rain intermittently, but rarely did it pour so hard that it was unbearable. We learned that the Irish refer to a light rain as a "soft day." We basked in quite a few soft days. As we ducked into yet another pub for lunch (so many pubs, so little time), our Irish bus driver exclaimed, "When it's wet on the outside, you may as well get wet on the inside." We drank to that.

For days on end, I wore my London Fog coat, but it became unwieldy, muddy and wrinkled. I learned a lesson. Never walk up castle stairs — called stumble steps — in a long raincoat. The circular, irregular stairs were built intentionally to trip medieval invaders. They nearly did me in, until I bought a lighter, shorter rain jacket for 20 Euros — money well spent.

Miraculously, the skies cleared at the important times. When we visited Powerscourt Gardens in Enniskerry, the sun shone and emblazoned the vivid flowerbeds.

Best of all, the sun graced us for most of our three-day float up and down the historic canals that lace the country. Before the advent of railroads, the canals were built so barges could transport goods throughout Ireland. They have been restored and are now used for recreation.

Our group rented three barges. Each featured a kitchenette, a bathroom and beds. We received brief instructions from the rental agent on how to crank the engine and steer the long vessels. Within minutes we formed a convoy, trusting our newfound friends and ourselves to pilot the boats while the rental agent waved goodbye from the shore.

During our barge stay, everyone in the group grew closer; that's what happens when you share a bathroom. We even had to turn one bed upside down to form a kitchen table so we could all eat breakfast together. The couples took the larger beds. My bed, suitable for children, resembled a coffin. Still, I slept like a baby. Our water-

way expeditions only took us a few miles up the canal each morning. During the day, we hitched up our hiking boots, tied down the barges, slipped on our backpacks and trampled toward the next historic castle, ring fort, abbey, monastery or high cross. We ate dinner out each night before returning to our floating cabins.

Laws forbid the barges to move after dark, so as the light waned, some folks went ashore for a sip in a pub while others stayed aboard to read or chat. In the morning we moved to our next site, and the "lub lub" of the engine mesmerized us, as did the lush greenery along the banks. From time to time we waved to walkers or bicyclers who traveled the path along the water.

The locks on the canal took four people to maneuver. The ordeal placed two on shore, opening or closing the water gates,

and at least two onboard, steering the barge and watching the sides to avoid banging into the walls as the lock filled or emptied. We had become a team.

OH, BLESSED BUS

After three days of barge dwelling, we climbed on board a bus again and moved to our next location.

I could list pages of historic sites we visited, but I have room only for the highlights. The Cahir Castle in the center of the town of Cahir was one. It featured the restored Swiss Cottage on the grounds. At one time, wealthy castle inhabitants took guests there to dress up and play like poor peasants for entertainment.

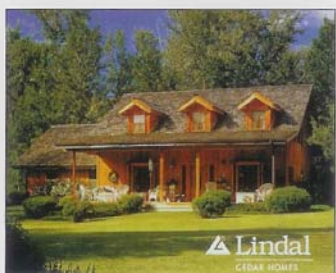
I enjoyed many of the cities and towns, too. The entire village of Kinsale charmed me. Copious hanging baskets of flowers lined every main street. Shops lured me in, and a

local brewery sold a tasty beer available only in Kinsale.

Waterville featured a bronze statue of Charlie Chaplin, who vacationed there often. As we drove by, someone appeared to be chatting with Charlie, but we know he didn't answer; he made only silent films.

Cashel offered us the Rock of Cashel. Looming 300 feet above the town, it houses a complex of medieval buildings. At night, my room featured a view of it high on the hill, lit by colored lights. In Cashel, we ate dinner in a restaurant built into an ancient castle tower, where we could study the old mud-and-stick construction up close.

We arrived in Killorglin in time for the Puck Festival, a livestock event that draws hundreds of visitors to Ireland's oldest fair dating back to 1603. Cars and carnival rides fill the town while jaunty Irish music never stops playing and the pubs stay open all



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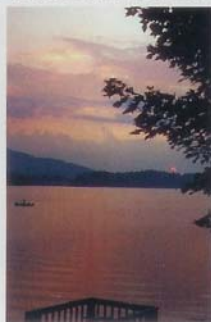
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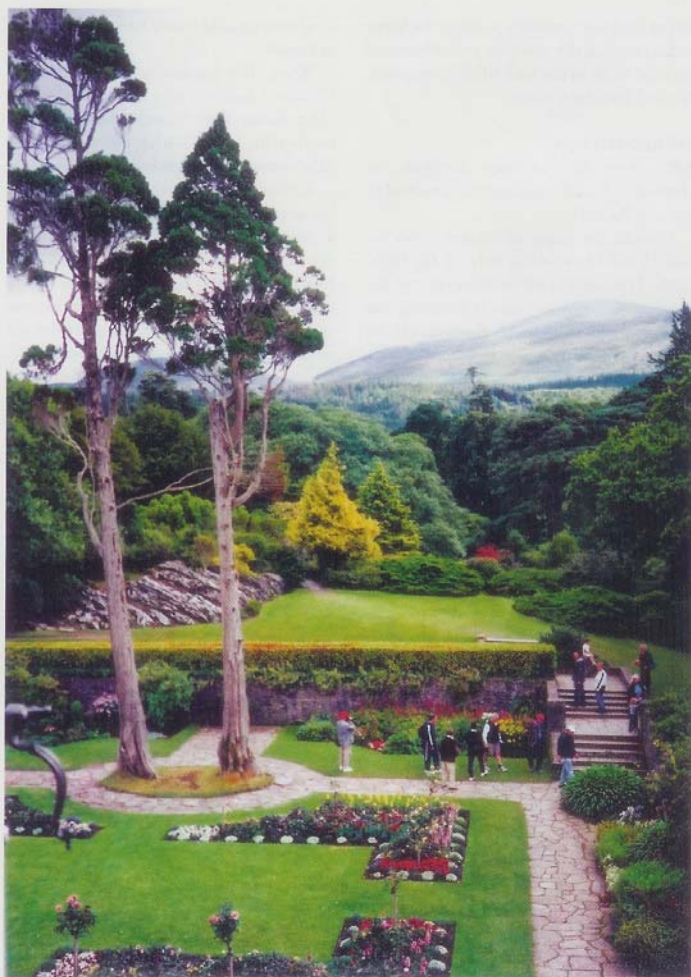


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Vivid lush flowerbeds dot Powerscourt Gardens in Enniskerry. There are more than 200 varieties of trees and shrubs scattered throughout its 45 acres.

night. We also watched the Puck parade, with the honored goat in the rear, a wee bedraggled by the rain. The Laune River rippled through town and provided us with a spectacular reflection of the sunset.

The most unusual walk took us to a tidal island outside of Clifden where we strode for miles over and around sites that dated back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Omev Island is accessible only at low tide, so we removed our

boots and socks and waded knee-deep in chilly water to get there. A local historian guided us to ancient holy wells where early visitors had left gifts of fish bones and string for the gods. Water does not flow from the sites, but faith appears to do so. The wells had deep furloughs around them, where pilgrims had circled the sacred sites on their knees.

We also saw an old church that had collapsed after a man of the cloth with good intentions had botched its excavation. Perhaps that disaster led to the contemporary laws that allow only archeologists to perform excavation in Ireland. The tour guide found a part of the bank that had been exposed by a storm and showed us how to read the layers of dirt, cooking debris and signs of life all the way back to the Stone Age. I picked up one water-smoothed rock as a reminder of the visit. It has become a favored paperweight in my office.

ISLAND LIFE

You can't go to Ireland without visiting the Aran Islands, so we dutifully took the large cargo boat "The Happy Hooker" from Doolin to Inishmore. Dramamine helped me traverse the expanse of angry water in the overcrowded vessel complete with hard benches. When we docked, we needed our land legs to take us uphill to the B and B where we spent two comfy nights.

Inishmore, raring to sell its world-famous Aran Island sweaters, caters to tourists with shops stocked to the ceilings with the knitted garb. I found the sweaters too heavy for even the coldest Georgia day and easily resisted the urge to buy one. Instead, I left the area that fronts the dock and bay and wandered along rock walls past thatched cottages where cows grazed in the yards.

On Inishmore, we went to a theater called Ragús for a show that rivals Riverdance. The singers and dancers, all students on summer break, piled out the front door after the show and spoke with us like old friends. I bought a CD of their music.

We took a little van up to Dun Aenghus, an ancient cliff-top ring fort. I felt thankful for the ride, but the vehicle stopped at the visitor's center. Anyone who wants to see the actual fort must, of course, hike up the stony

terrain. After a long trek, I saw a rock wall ahead. Believing our goal to be only a few hundred yards away, I felt renewed. When we reached the wall, it turned out to be a shield for the fort that stood even farther up the hill. Once inside the fort, the view was spectacular from the high cliffs to the water. The fort certainly could not have been breached by sea, but I understand it was breached by land.

SPIRITUAL HEALING

Every night, my feet ached from our hoofing, but each morning, they were ready for more. My footwear choice had been perfect.

Our booklet said we were to take a walking tour of Galway. We had to meet our city guide near the Spanish Gates. While we waited, I tried to guess who would be our guide.

From afar, a little old lady toddled along carrying a prim white purse. She wore sandals with Band-Aids on her toes. Her leathery skin and wiry hair made me estimate she wasn't a day under 75. I heard myself mutter, "Please let this be our guide; she won't wear me out." She indeed was the guide, and after her initial welcome, she charged off like a greyhound. We could barely keep up. She would have trundled longer and taken us even more places, but we "young" tourists waved the white flag by late afternoon and begged to go back to our rooms.

We later dropped by the village of Knock, a Catholic pilgrimage site. In 1879, Joseph, John, and Mary appeared in a vision to 15 Knock residents who watched for two hours while chanting the rosary. At the sales booths between the parking area and the holy site, sellers hawk everything from mugs to T-shirts imprinted with "Knock." They also sell one-ounce to five-gallon empty containers labeled "Knock Holy Water," to be filled from any of the 20 or so fountains that spew holy water.

Even though I'm not Catholic, my curiosity drove me to the site of the vision, where a small chapel sits and where many healings take place. Crowds filled the pews and said quiet prayers. Folks dragged in on crutches and rolled up in wheelchairs, while others asked for less obvious healing. I felt an almost

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palpable power inside the building. On that site, more than a million prayers had been spoken, and they hung thick in the air. Transfixed, I let the feeling wash over me. Before I left, I too bought a container, albeit a small one, and filled it with holy water. I entered a heretic and left a changed person.

A SONG BEFORE I GO

The official tour ended back in Dublin, where the folks in our group disbanded and traveled on to London and other places. Few went directly back home. Australians get more vacation time than typical Americans, and once they leave their country, they may as well keep going.

Jean, Geoff and I stayed a few extra days to enjoy spending time together, visit friends and discover more of Dublin. We wandered through the National Gallery of Ireland and enjoyed St. Stephen's Green, a lush park filled

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Archaeology Australia
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with statues, flowers and greenery. On Sunday, an artist's market surrounds the park, making for a lovely stroll. Geoff and Jean planned to return and spend weeks aboard a barge, so we made a special effort to find the Waterways Museum and enjoyed a refreshing afternoon learning more about the history of the canals.

The Irish are no less friendly than the Australians, as was proved when a cab driver picked me up at four in the morning to take me to the Dublin airport. The driver played a CD of Frank Sinatra and sang along. He explained that he was Tommy Valentine, "The Singing Cabbie." He showed me newspaper clippings that declared him the "Irish Sinatra." He told me his CD of Sinatra songs was available for only eight Euros. With his Irish accent, he broke into song again: "Start spreading da news ..."

Smiling, I dug through my purse for my final Euros. Alas, I had handled my money efficiently, to avoid having to exchange any on my return, and I did not have enough to buy his CD. I'll never forget him, though, just as I won't forget my adventures in Ireland.

Photos courtesy of Bobbie Christmas.

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