

Blog 18 - May 8 - Connemara, Kylemore Abbey, Cong

Our guide was here right on time. We were looking for Tom Naughton, however that was not who picked us up. This morning's guide was Martin Gallagher - and he was awesome.

Martin was a very pleasant young family man who has been working for a tour guide for about 7 years. We were very surprised when he told us that this job took him away from his family for 3 months at a time. He also explained though, that it was a good job, good pay and the way young people have to go in order to make a decent living. Martin had done a tour of French tourists yesterday, so it was nice for him to be doing a personal tour today.

So, today we are off to the Connemara region of Ireland, which will take in the Kylemore Abbey and the village of Cong where "The Quiet Man" starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara was filmed.

The traffic was a bit heavy leaving Galway in our opinion, but Martin kept us interested by explaining a lot to us about the various "licensing" regulations personal vehicle vs. taxi/limousine services. WOW! They should have these type of restrictions in Canada. Did you know there is an app where you can sign in, enter the cab's ID number and see a photo of the driver. People can actually report to the authorities if they see someone driving the cab who is not the "official" driver. One of the reasons for this is because of "multinationals" who come into the area and try to set up unlicensed taxi services. This explanation was so interesting. Thanks Martin.



One of our first stops was at the "Connemara Marble Outlet". What a wonderful shop that was. A person could come out of there broke, but with beautiful, high quality souvenirs. We chatted briefly with Michael the owner's son who was telling us that he had just harvested a bunch of his turf yesterday and he also showed us the small cabbage garden that he had planted and that had just begun to sprout because of the warm sun. (Not sure where that was - we didn't see any sun the last few days). A delightful young man though who was thrilled about the cabbage because he said that he was always hungry.

Across the street from the shop, was another building owned by the family. When we went in, there was a lovely turf fire and the entire back was a "dining" area where the tourists are served hot coffee and warm scones. Martin told us that all the

big bus tours stop there. I actually went in there to get a "coffee to go" but they only had eat in available. There was a lovely peat fire in the fireplace so I took a photo of Kevin, trying to get warm.

One of Michael's daily jobs was to help people cross the road from the shop to the tea house. He helped us get back over and just as we were getting into the car Martin introduced us to Ambrose. The owner of the two establishments. He was just as pleasant as his son Michael.



We learned a bit about Irish Language incentives as well. A smart move by the government of this country as they try to bring the Irish language back. The more points a student has at the time of their graduation the easier it is for them to get into higher levels of education. So, if they take Irish Language as one of their subjects, they get a big bonus. It doesn't matter if they even use the language in their higher educational choices - the higher the points - the wider the doors open for them.



As we continued along our way Martin stopped at the famous bridge which was were part of the filming of "The Quiet Man" took place. It felt nice standing on the same bridge.

I really needed a coffee by this time as I had not had breakfast. We stopped at the Peacock Hotel and while Martin and



Kevin went to get me coffee, I went into the gift shop. Again, there was a beautiful, warm peat fire in the grate. A lovely lady offered to take a photo of me!

Then I went into the shop. I was actually looking for gloves as I could not find the little black ones I had bought and my fingers were already beginning to turn

white on the tips. Didn't find any, but picked up a beautiful Irish Woolen scarf - for ME.



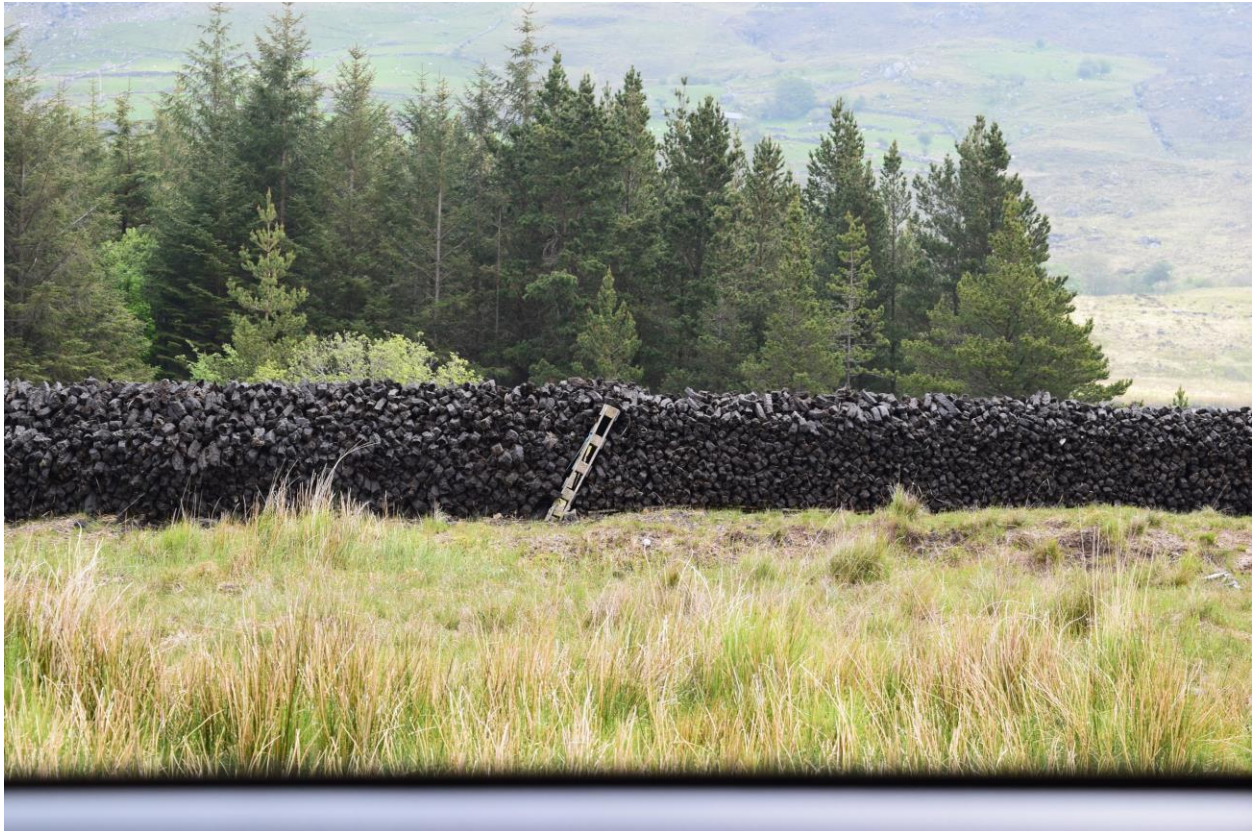
The drive to the Abbey is a long one, but Martin kept us interested by stopping at lots of spots for photo moments. He was telling us about the “crash barriers” along the road. The front of the barriers are covered in wood to blend in with the topography - the steel beams were encased so you could not see them. They looked so natural.

There were lots of cattle and sheep along the way. The sheep at times were right on the road. There are no fences as the land is “crown land” and all farmers are entitled to grazing rights. The sheep, at night, like to sleep at the side of the road as they get the heat that is trapped in the asphalt.

The country roads in Ireland are not as well maintained as the main ones. Often you can see big dips in the road. This is where the peat has settle down, beneath the rock layer. Martin said it is almost impossible to get the politicians to address this issue. If you were going fast you would get that sickening roller coaster thrill.

We drove through several small, picturesque towns. It was a lovely drive. I told Martin how disappointed I was not to have been able to find the Fairie Circle and he said he would try hard to find one for me to see. Most of them are on private land and it is impossible to get into them unless you know the farmers. The fact that he was willing to try was the important thing.

The Fairie Tree lore is that during the famine when so many people died, a branch of the tree with its lovely smelling blossoms was cut and taken into the house to rid the place of the “smell of death”. The smell of death was bad luck, so by bringing in the branch good luck was restored to the home.



We saw lots of “peat” piles as we were driving along and Martin told us so many interesting things about peat. I just thought it was used in gardens and in the making of whiskey. Now I know so much about it - the harvesting - marking the peat - reeking to dry them. Martin actually has a peat fire that heats the water for his house.

Of course talking about peat did bring up a conversation of whiskey. Martin told us about a friend of his who was involved in the distilling of whiskey. It is a new whisky, with lovely peat notes. The Nephin Whiskey website is really worth looking at.



Transformation of the Nephin distillery site underway and the architects impression of what the completed distillery site will look like. Nephin Whiskey partnered with local farmers to grow barley for the project and were met with an enthusiastic response. Their vision was quickly becoming a reality but soon the spirit would be produced and the maturation of the spirit needed to have the same craft and quality as the distillation. Mark was dispatched to talk to the last remaining Master Cooper in Ireland - John Neilly and tell him the Nephin story. John immediately recognized that Nephin Whiskey were creating something special and joined the Nephin family. As there were no buildings ready for occupation on the distillery site, Nephin

decided to open the Cooperage in the town of Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath in the interim. A small village store was also opened across the road from the distillery site.

This was a really interesting story. Martin was going to try to get us a wee dram to taste, but we are leaving tomorrow. Kevin did give Martin his card to see if we could get two bottles shipped to Bettas. Only time will tell.

We finally arrived at the Kylemore Estate - the home of Kylemore Abbey. It was about 11:30. While Martin went to get our tickets, Judi went into the gift shop. SHE FOUND GLOVES.



We stopped into the Administration Centre to make some inquiries about her friend Katie. Katie went to school at the Abbey from 1969-1971. Judi wanted to do something special for Katie and she has set the wheels in motion, so we will see what happens.

What an amazing spot. A lot of the Abbey is currently undergoing restoration but we were able to visit the rooms on the entrance level. They were beautiful. We also saw the trap door under



the massive wooden stairwell where Katie and her friends use to hide and make ghostly noises when the American tourists use to visit. Check out our photos.

We were in the front courtyard and heard a cuckoo bird. We had never heard on before. The Abbey is still home to the Benedictine Nuns. They have taken over the running of the Abbey are they make all the food served in the restaurant, jams, chocolate, fudge, greeting cards etc.

We continued on our walk to the Gothic Chapel which Henry, the original owner had built in memory of his wife Margaret who died shortly after he had built the castle. They had been vacationing in Egypt when she picked up the dysentery virus and died. She was only 34 years of age. The chapel is beautiful and so peaceful. We stayed in there for quite a while.

Because of the cold I suggested that Kevin stay there while I walked down to the family mausoleum. It was a



beautiful walk along the lake. The rhododendrons which everywhere, in fact there were in the process of “thinning” them out. The Earl, his wife and a great nephew have found their resting place in a beautiful secluded spot. The nephew only died in 1989.

Went I got back to the Gothic Chapel, we walked back to the entrance where we took the shuttle bus to the “Walled Garden”. There was a small restaurant there, again stocked with food made by the nuns, where we had a light lunch.



When we finished, the sun had come out (5 mins) so we did go into the walled garden. It was beautiful. At one time there were 21 glass houses in the walled garden but over time they have been destroyed and so today there are only 2 remaining. We didn't want to stay too long as there was a very black cloud overhead. So, we grabbed the shuttle



back, spent a few minutes browsing in the gift shop and then heading to our car. Martin had it warmed up and ready.

Our drive back from the Abbey was really interesting. We had several photo opportunities - beautiful scenery despite the clouds.

Martin tried to get us in to see Ashford Castle, however it has new owners and they will let you in for a drive by at 10 Euros per person. Martin just turned around, we are

glad he did. We did however see some other asses.



Before long we arrived in the beautiful, tiny village of Cong where the film "The Quiet Man" was filmed as well. There is a lovely statue of John Wayne, holding Maureen O'Hara in his arms. We saw the pub where some of the scenes were filmed as well. It is a beautiful little village - we loved it.



On our return trip we passed along side Corrib Lake and saw tons of mussel farms - I mean tons. This reminded us of PEI. We stopped at Killary - this is the furthest salt water inlet in Ireland and it was a perfect place to hide the ships from the enemy.

We stopped to see the “rag tree”. People would tie a paper/cloth on the tree with their concerns/trouble and folklore has it that when the paper/rag disintegrated your worries would banish. (I couldn’t find any paper).

A little further along Martin found Judi her Fairie Fort. She did get a lovely photo, but it was on private land. She told Martin she couldn’t see any Leprechauns. He told her they were too small to see.



Martin had kept us well informed on our day’s travels and he made it a wonderful day. We were dropped off at our hotel around 4:30. A perfect day.!

Tomorrow we leave for Belfast!

KJ

