

Blog 20 - May 9th - The Giant's Causeway, Carrick-A-Rede, and Bushmills Distillery

Our driver from McCombs Buses, Keith Cooke was waiting for us in the lobby when we came down for 9:30. He had a very comfortable Mercedes Benz Van waiting for us. Keith explained our general travel plans for the day. He told us the travel times and the plan of attack to avoid large bus encounters.

The weather forecast was a bit iffy but as Keith explains you can experience four seasons in one day in Ireland. Believe me, after 21 days we are well aware of that fact. We were taking the the Atrium Coast Rd. so it would take us nearly 2.5 hours but our return journey via the interior highway would have us back in Belfast about 5.30 - a 1.5 hour ride.

Keith was excellent, he provided commentary on the history and development of the country as we drove. He mentioned about how the Viking raiders tried to conquer Northern Island but were unsuccessful because the natives were too fierce. So, those Vikings gave up and went after softer targets in other parts of Ireland.

Judi was a little testy today when she realized that she was in the back seat of a van where the windows would not open. So much for her taking photos, especially where the windows were all splattered with raindrops. This type of thing has been difficult for her. To give Keith credit, when he realized that she was not a point and shoot photographer he did everything he could for the rest of the day to ensure she had plenty of photo opportunities and Judi was very grateful.

Our first stop was at Carrickfergus. The Normans invaded Ireland in the 11th Century and built this castle as a "garrison" town with excellent defensive fortifications and sight lines.



William of Orange landed here with a large army which he led to victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Many years later the Irish/Scots garrison came under attack from the English and the castle withstood a siege for several years before falling. We started out just stopping for a photo shoot, but the story was so interesting that we decided to do the "tour". It was a self guided one and easily done in about 30 minutes. We did it in 20 as it was freezing cold up on those ramparts. Interesting short film, great photo opportunities, and lots of history within those walls.



Judi

managed to get photos of the canons, the harbour, the gaols, and suits of "maille"; cross bows etc. We even managed to get photos of those soldiers trying to defend the castle - but one guy was actually shooting inward. Not sure what was happening with that.



We rejoined Keith and our journey continued north. We passed by Holywood - a very elegant area of Belfast where the “money” lives.



It was such a beautiful clear day with bright blue skies. Because of this we were able to see right across to Scotland (about 12 miles) to the Mull of Kintyre. This was a great photo shoot and as Keith said, one that not a lot of people get this time of year because of the coastal fogs. Keith was constantly filling us in on little tidbits of history and we did love this..

We made a stop for a “coffee/bathroom” break in a little town where The Londonderry Inn was located. Winston Churchill’s hotel. While here we stopped to talk to a local artist who painted the most “people” paintings that we have seen in a while “Keith Gillespie”. He said his paintings were “lamb scapes”. If my luggage was bigger, I think we would have taken home one of his art work pieces.

This little village is also the spot where some of the Game of Thrones was filmed. We are not fans, so really don't understand but it seems there is a scene in the film where a girl comes up out of the water, well this is where it was filmed. Lots of tourists go down the narrow stairway leading up to the shore and have their photo taken - arising from the sea. I was going to do it, but there were lots of people wanting this photo. None of them looked like the girl in the film.

We also met Paddy in this little village. Paddy was a famous WW2 carrier pigeon. He was the fastest pigeon to carry a message back to the Allies on D-Day. He was awarded the 'eekin Award" for heroism which was the equivalent of earning the Victoria Cross for valor.



We drove through many lovely, picturesque villages. We received a good education on which villages were Nationalist ones and which were Republican ones. What Keith was very good at was not taking sides. We learned the history - not the gossip. He really was a great guide.

This coastal route that we were taking was one of the top 5 coastal routes for bicycle tours. As Keith said, and as we have heard before, these tours can be a real pain in the butt. The roads are so narrow and once they get in front of you it is very slow going - AND THEY DON'T MOVE OVER!.

Keith described the "glens" that we passed through and he said there were 9 in total. This entire area has become so popular with the tourists and if you could see this coastline you would understand why. In the summertime Keith said that this whole area is "crazy". It takes a heck of a lot longer to get from point A to point B.

The lovely, yellow gorse bush that is EVERYWHERE over here is also known as the “wind bush”. For those not familiar with the look of this bush, it is just like the “broom” that we have in Canada. There were tons of gorse bushes in the countryside as well as lots of sheep. It is the lambing season, so lots of cute little lambs playing around in the field. We were told that the “ewe” can only feed two sheep, so if she happens to have a third one (triplets) the farmers will often give the third one away as a pet. They are a lot of work as you have to bottle feed them, and also, they literally become part of the family and they want to be inside all the time. Guess that’s OK when they are cute little lambs, but once they become fat, stinking sheep try getting them out of the house.



(J) Salmon - my favorite fish. We learned that the salmon were almost becoming extinct in this area. If I am not mistaken from 8,000 3 years ago, to only 800 last year. Because of this drastic drop in the wild salmon, many salmon farms have sprung up in the area. Once the salmon reach a certain size the farmers put them out into the water within “caged areas” so that they can grow. Lots of these holding type tanks can be seen all along the coast.

We continued this beautiful drive through lovely, little towns like Cushenden and Lochdekrema. Kevin spotted a sign on one pasture advertising “crazy sheep racing” but Keith said he really didn’t know if this was a local sport or not. When I looked it up tonight, I found that there was a lot of controversy about this sport. Many animal rights groups are dead set about this sport as it consists hundreds of sheep with teddy bears as jockeys being let loose and raced along a course. I don’t think I would like this at all.



Around 12:30 we arrived at a look out for the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. The name means rock in the road. The road is the “sea route” for the Atlantic salmon. For over 350 years, fishermen have strung a rope bridge 30 meters above the sea to allow them the best access points to catch the Atlantic salmon. To this day the bridge is crossed regularly by the local fishermen, but the spot has become a challenge to thousand of visitors. Many days the bridge is closed because of the high winds that whip through there. In fact, is was closed yesterday. I was able to get some good shots from the vantage point.

The rope bridge was a very disappointing excursion. We were not aware that it was close to 2 km. down to the bridge and that there were 100+ steps down to the actual bridge once you



walked this. There was no way that Kevin could do something with this type of exertion. Had we known this was what we would have to do we would have planned a different type of excursion. Also, we almost didn't even get into the area as we have no voucher, everything was mailed to the tour company so we had nothing to present. Keith dropped us off and was waiting in the car. He said it was public access and they couldn't stop us from walking down.



Kevin didn't even attempt the walk because after 5 minutes he just didn't have the breath. I made it about 2/3 of the way but I was so worried about him I had to come back. Plus, it was freezing and starting to rain. Very disappointing. This morning I saw in the brochure they had given us that a manual wheelchair was available, but we were not told that and it was all downhill so would not have been a safe means of transportation for Kevin, plus then I would have had to push him back up the incline and there is no way that my back would have been able to do that.

We were all getting a bit hungry so Keith took us to a lovely little restaurant (not the one where all the big bus tours go). It was called the Red Door Cafe. Small, delicious homemade food, a peat fire. Perfect.

The next stop was the Giant's Causeway. This time Keith came in with us to make sure that we got in. It took a while to find the voucher online as it was under

Keith's name not ours. We finally got our ticket and met our tour guide. We were fitted out for our headsets and away we went. This was another 1+ km. walk but it was all downhill and we were made aware of the shuttle up and down.



The guide we had was funny and we enjoyed his commentary. It was a freezing cold, windy

walk down. About ½ way down the skies opened up and within 2 seconds everyone was soaked to the skin. So now we were cold and wet. We made it down to the causeway and I got a few photos, but my camera was getting soaked so I had to be selective. There was one more short walk that we could have tried but by this time we were both a bit fed up so we queued up for the bus back, along with about 50 other people. The rain did not let up and it was about a 5-6 minute way for the shuttle.

We did have an umbrella and as I said earlier our jackets were 100% waterproof but it was the areas not covered by either like our legs and feet that were soaked. I think this 21-days of wet Ireland has cured us of ever wanting to come back here regardless of the history and the beauty. We figured out that we had about 5 days (or partial days) of sun. Checking the internet for the weather the two weeks before we left was a waste of our time - woolies is what people need over here at this time of year with a wetsuit and a golf umbrella.

Browsed around the gift shop for a few minutes to warm up. Lovely things in there. The staff also was incredibly nice.



Our next stop was the Bushmills Distillery. We decided to take the guided tour and it was so interesting. Photos were not allowed in the distillery though so we will only have our memories. Sonia our guide was great and she explained the entire whiskey process to us again. It is hard to believe that every single Bushmill's whiskey in the world goes through their giant still. Amazing. Part of the tour was a wee dram of any whiskey you wanted. Kevin and I opted out for a 12 year old Special reserve that can only be purchased at the distillery. It was so good.

The gift shop was wonderful and I did pick up a few things there. This tour was the highlight of our day. There were three times that we had to go outside - from building to building. Everyone got soaked again. After a while you just have to laugh. We did get a nice photo of Kevin making a phone call.



It was around 6 when we got back. At the hotel our guide Keith gave us each a little gift. It was really nice of him. We rested until 8ish and then headed over Robinson's Bar for dinner. This is attached to The Crown so it was very close.

We had a wonderful meal, shared a nice bottle of wine and then came back and literally dropped into bed. Another jam packed day.

JAM - love this -- I will use this saying a lot "just a minute"

Only one more day left in Ireland. Tomorrow is supposed to be sunny. That would be nice for our last day.

K & J