

Touring with the Yanks!

All Americans who come to Ireland for vacation are called “Yanks.” It doesn’t matter what part of the States they come from. Usually, older Americans who come to Ireland for the first time take bus tours to the various “tourist” areas. They usually hop on a bus, and take a trip to some scenic, well-toured area of the country. Along the way, they exit the bus, capture a few pictures of a scene, get back on the bus and off to another scenic area. At the end of the day, they arrive at another hotel, take off their bags and head in for a good night’s sleep. The next morning, they are greeted with another ritual of entering, exiting, taking more pictures and ending the day in another strange hotel.

Somehow, through it all, they miss the local flavor. They communicate with each other. They meet other tourists and share the same experience. Hopefully, at the end of their vacation, they will be able to return home, laden down with souvenirs, maybe a warm Aran cardigan for their cold winter and lots of memories to share with their friends back home, informing them that they had a wonderful vacation.

Recently, I spent a week in the company of some “Yanks.” Even though, they spent most of their lives in the South, they now live in Chicago. John, Terry, and my godchild, Katie, graced me with their presence. It was their first trip to Ireland and it turned out to be a most enjoyable one.

Along the way, there were no bus tours, just four people in a car, driving on the wrong side of the road. Obviously, they had to get used to sitting in their driver’s side which now became the passenger side seat.

Each day took us in a different direction but, unlike the bus tours, we returned to the same house every night where we could put up our feet, talk about our experiences that day and maybe enjoy some lubrication.

I was a tour guide each day. With a sat map, we negotiated the narrow roads, to destinations that were steeped in history. We visited tall, majestic cliffs to pose for cliff hanging photos. We visited abbeys built in 1216 where Mass continues to be celebrated without interruption. We visited bog-lands that yielded a view of a Stone Age landscape of stone walled fields, houses and megalithic tombs over 5,000 years old, preserved beneath the growing blanket bog over a thousand acres. We visited castles where famous persons stayed including President Reagan. Of course, we were not financially secure enough to stay there or indulge in their expensive favors. We toured mountains and lakes; ate hamburgers, fresh seafood, vegetable soup, pub food and washed it down with Guinness or water.

We met all kinds of nationalities with a multiplicity of dialects. In some places, the air was filled with French, German, Chinese accents. The American accents were more discernible and were eager to go beyond the formalities of name introduction to sharing stories of places they had been or intended to visit. Of course, yours truly was anxious to share some advice.

I found it interesting to eavesdrop on some conversations. I got a flavor of what appealed to or even surprised people about Ireland. Some were fascinated by the thousands of miles of stone walls; others snapped pictures of newborn lambs and craggy mountains. Some talked about what they missed in the States, especially food. Of course, everyone talked about the weather.

Now that my friends have returned to Chicago, they took with them hundreds of pictures, a deeper sense of history and hospitality as well as a fascination for an unspoiled countryside. But, most of all, they will remember the local folks and the extended family. They now know that, the next time they return for a visit, they are no longer tourists or visitors. They are no longer Yanks. They are simply good friends, John, Terry, Katie who happen to live in Chicago.