



Ireland Escorted Tour

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By

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Our family has experienced many types of vacations – from cruising to fly and drive – but this trip I was able to explore Ireland on an Escorted Coach Tour!

In February, 2010, I joined a group of travel agents on a five night adventure. Our host, CIE Tours, wanted to give this group of agents a small sample of an escorted tour. Normally escorted coach tours run from 10 days up to 14 or 15 days in length. Our tour was only 5 nights, but we were able to experience many highlights as we ventured from Dublin to Shannon, Ireland.

We flew overnight from Newark to Dublin. The average travel time for this flight is 6.5 hours. We arrived in Dublin by 7:00 am. Although I didn't sleep much on the plane, I was excited to be in Ireland. My grandfather was born in Northern Ireland, so this was another reason that I was ready to see the land of my ancestors.

The CIE driver/guide, Frank, was waiting for us upon our arrival. After taking care of essential needs – a restroom for most of us and an ATM for many – we were off to board our motorcoach for the week. ATMs are widely available and will accept the appropriate U.S. card and dispense cash in local currency.

Day 1 –

The motorcoach was very spacious and new. Frank, our driver, explained that CIE Tours uses only the newest coaches for their tours. Starting immediately as we left the airport and for the entire tour Frank was providing us with current information about our destination and also historical information about Ireland and its people. Frank was very knowledgeable, funny and engaging. Throughout the trip this native of Ireland made sure that everyone was comfortable and did his best to meet any need that would arise.

Our first stop of the day was to be the Guinness Storehouse. It was early but I think most everyone in the group was up for a Guinness pint – after all it was 5-7 hours later in the States from which we had traveled!

The Guinness brewery was very interesting and I enjoyed learning about the process of brewing the Guinness and the history behind the Storehouse from the very beginning all the way up through the years, including its connection to the Guinness Book of World Records. When you reach the top of the Storehouse you can enjoy an incredible 360° view of the city with your complimentary pint. If you are not a beer drinker, soft drinks are available as well.

Throughout our week in Ireland, we not only experienced some of the sights and activities that the regular tours visit, but as a travel agent bonus we were able to visit several hotels and resorts. These are in addition to the hotels where we stayed during the trip, allowing us to see for ourselves the quality of the property. The first hotel visit was the Croke Park Hotel. This is a very nice hotel and is located directly across the street from Croke Park. Croke Park is the largest sports stadium in Ireland and the third largest stadium in Europe. It is in the heart of the city, a 15 minute walk from the main thoroughfare O'Connell Street.

After a delicious lunch at the Croke Park Hotel, we headed to the first of 3 hotels for our five night trip. For our first two nights we would be staying at the Maldron Hotel. I found this to be a good hotel, conveniently located near the Grand Canal. Our group was ready to rest but in order to get acclimated to our new time zone it was recommended that we not sleep more than 2 hours during the first day. I did rest a little but set out to take a few pictures of the Grand Canal and the area surrounding the hotel. We had a lovely Welcome Dinner at the hotel. This gave us a chance to get to know all of the people in our tour group.

Day 2 –

Our second day in Dublin was the opportunity to explore Dublin more in depth. We started the day with a local guide who would be with us for several hours. Our guide, Felicity, was very knowledgeable about all things Dublin. Due to the compact nature of our tour length, we had less time than most tours take around Dublin, however, we were able to take in many highlights of this truly enchanting city.

Our first stop, Dublin Castle, was until 1922 the fortified seat of British rule in Ireland, and is now a major Irish government complex. It was fascinating to see the restored buildings. Many of the rooms include furnishings, tapestries and artwork dating from centuries gone by. The throne in the throne room was built for the visit of King George IV to Ireland in 1821.

Next we were able to make a brief stop at Trinity College, Ireland's oldest university, founded in 1592. This amazing world class library today has 5,000,000 printed volumes. Housed at Trinity College is the Book of Kells. The Book of Kells is an illustrated manuscript in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament. It was transcribed by Celtic monks ca. 800. It is widely regarded as Ireland's finest national treasure. Unfortunately, taking photos of the actual Book of Kells is not allowed.

We drove around Dublin exploring the various neighborhoods and architectural styles developed throughout the centuries. I very much enjoyed seeing the different homes, shops and buildings built during four distinct eras – Viking Dublin, Medieval Dublin, Georgian Dublin and 21st century Dublin.

We finished our Dublin tour with another site visit to a Dublin hotel, where we also enjoyed lunch. I would highly recommend this hotel – The Westbury Hotel. The Westbury, one of The Leading Hotels of the World, provides luxury and location! Being in the heart of Dublin provides easy access to shopping, restaurants, and the many cultural options Dublin offers, such as museums, theatres and galleries.

The organized tour was finished after lunch and we had the remainder of the afternoon to explore Dublin on our own. Many in our group chose to shop and others chose to revisit the historical sites on foot that we had seen from the coach or explore parts of Dublin that we hadn't yet visited.

That evening we were treated to an evening of Irish entertainment. The venue – Taylors Three Rock – normally offers Taylors Traditional Irish Cabaret. Since February is a low season for tourists we saw a 'light' version of the show. We had a wonderful dinner and were treated to an Irish trio singing all types of Irish ballads. The show also included 3 Irish Dancers and some in our group even got to participate! Our show was in the regular bar/restaurant, however, for most of the year there is a larger banquet room and the show is even more spectacular than our show.

Day 3 –

I was very excited to be traveling into the Irish countryside. I loved Dublin, but I was anxious to see the green hillside and country roads and villages of rural Ireland.

We headed out and passed through several small towns and villages. We had been very fortunate with the weather this trip. It does rain frequently in Ireland, however, we had been blessed with cold but dry weather since we arrived and today would be no different. Our driver/guide, Frank, was very thoughtful about making sure we had rest stops as needed. We stopped at a pub in Durrow for tea and scones (and to use the facilities). I never felt that I was on the coach too long. There were ample opportunities to get off of the coach to take pictures and such.

Our destination for the day was Blarney Castle. This landmark definitely attracts plenty of tourists. In addition to the Blarney Castle there is a large Blarney Woollen Mills, which has an excellent range of Irish products of all types. There is also a counter-service restaurant and cafeteria on site. The area surrounding the Blarney Castle is beautiful, with woods, gardens and a river. It is a long-standing tradition to climb to the top of the castle, and kiss the Blarney Stone by lying down, tilting the head backward over the castle wall while being held securely by staff who handle some 300,000 kissers a year (not for germ-a-phobes!). Also, keep in mind that it is not an easy climb to the Blarney Stone. The only way to the top of this 15th Century castle is a winding, narrow stone staircase.

Our hotel for the next two nights in Killarney was the Killarney Avenue Hotel. This was actually my favorite hotel of the three we would stay in during our five nights. This 4 star hotel provided old world charm with state of the art amenities.

Day 4 –

On this day we headed toward the coast and one of Ireland's most spectacular tours – The Dingle Peninsula. I truly enjoyed the scenery along the way, which included beaches, mountains, farm lands and authentic stone walls decorating the hillsides in a patchwork of color and texture. The Dingle Peninsula is an awesome place that is definitely worth the drive to see. The roads to reach the peninsula are narrow and winding. We all were very grateful that Frank was our driver. It is not for the faint of heart to drive some of these roads that at times require one of two cars to pull off when approaching in the opposite direction. Not to mention it takes skill to drive from the right side of the car on the left side of the road. Another good reason to take an escorted tour; let the expert do the driving and sit back, enjoying the view!

Another advantage to being on a luxury coach tour is that sitting in the seats of the motorcoach gives passengers a higher vantage point than drivers in cars. There are

many stone walls along the roads in Ireland. We had very large windows at each seat and we were able to see sights that self-drivers may have missed.

After taking many pictures and videos of the peninsula it was time to move on. We were able to stop and visit an incredible resort located in Dingle. The Dingle Skellig Hotel & Peninsula Spa has everything that most people look for in a vacation destination: beautiful setting, award winning restaurant, kids club, indoor swimming pool and state of the art spa. We all wished we could have stayed for a few days!

When we returned to Killarney there was plenty of free time to explore the town and shop. That evening we were treated to a first-class dinner at another local hotel – the Brehon. In addition to dinner we were able to tour this 4 star hotel. This property is a little farther from the Killarney town centre (5 minute drive) but the quality of the hotel, luxurious accommodations and its spa make it worth the distance. This hotel and its sister hotel, The Gleneagle Hotel, are within walking distance of the INEC, one of Ireland's leading entertainment venues.

Day 5 –

We packed our bags one more time to travel on to our last destination of the trip – Bunratty. We would be flying out of Shannon, but before we returned home we had one more day to enjoy the sights between Killarney and Bunratty, home to our last hotel – Bunratty Castle Hotel.

Our first stop was the Foynes Flying Boat Museum.

“On July 9th 1939, Pan Am's luxury flying boat “Yankee Clipper” landed at Foynes. It was the first commercial passenger flight on the direct route between the United States and Europe. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, this quiet town on the Shannon Estuary became the focal point for air traffic on the North Atlantic. Many famous politicians, international businessmen, film stars, active-service men and wartime refugees passed through Foynes. From 1939 to 1945 Foynes was the centre of the aviation world. The Foynes Flying Boat Museum commemorates this exciting period in world aviation.”

The other interesting fact about the Foynes museum is that it is the place where the Irish Coffee was invented! Of course everyone gets a demonstration about how to make the perfect Irish Coffee and a free sample!

We then crossed the Shannon River, the longest river in Ireland, on a ferry. The ferry only runs once per hour, so don't be late!

This was the only day that the weather affected our site seeing. There had been snow the night before and the roads were icy and snow packed in some

places – once again we were glad that Frank was driving. As we drove along the coastline we were very excited to be headed to the Cliffs of Moher. This is one of the country's most magnificent rock formations that rise to the heights of almost 700 feet above the Atlantic.

When we arrived there was a low lying fog. At times it was difficult to see our bus in the parking lot from the front of the visitor center – we would not have a clear view of the cliffs. There are many amazing exhibits in the visitor centre building to educate us about the area and its history and wildlife. A few hearty souls did pay the 2 € to climb up into O'Brien's Tower to take video and pictures. This tower built in 1835 for tourists, generally provides the best photo opportunities of the Cliffs of Moher.

Even though we were on a tight schedule, Frank and Margaret, our CIE Tours rep, arranged for our group to do a quick site visit to Dromoland Castle. If your dream is to stay in an authentic Castle (but with all the luxury of a resort), Dromoland Castle is for you. We were all in awe of this fabulous property.

The first building to be constructed here was said to be late 15th or early 16th century. However most of the castle as it stands now was rebuilt in the early 19th century. The property covers over 400 acres. Activities range from hunting, fishing, horseback riding, championship golf, tennis to luxury spa treatments. Don't let the age of the castle fool you; it has all of the modern day comforts one could want.

Finally, it was on to Bunratty. Our hotel for the night, Bunratty Castle Hotel, is not a castle property but is located within walking distance of the Bunratty Castle. The hotel itself is nice, but ask for a room in the renovated section. Some of their rooms are in need of refurbishment, but the ones that have been renovated are very nice.

To celebrate our last night in Ireland we were delighted to attend the Bunratty Medieval Castle Banquet. We were treated to a delicious banquet and entertained by 'Lords and Ladies' singing traditional songs and accompanied by harp and violin all taking place inside a majestic 15th century castle.

After the show many of our group members stopped by Durty Nelly's, a nearby Pub, for one last pint. It was a short night of sleep since we had to leave for the airport in Shannon by 6:00 am for our 9:00 am flight home.

Summary

Although I wish I could have stayed longer, I truly loved my short visit to Ireland. It was everything I hoped for and more. I hope to return to Ireland in the future to see even more of this enchanting country. **If I can help plan a trip to Ireland for you and your family, contact me so that I can help you plan a trip you will remember for years to come.**

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