

# Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Mild winter-months in Ireland and Scotland



## Chapter 29

October 2016 - June 2017

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After a lazy summer in France, we were ready for some new discoveries. Scotland, the sparsely populated northern part of Great Britain, and the neighbouring island of Ireland, were on our wish list for a long time. To do those varied countries justice, we decided to spend some five months there. This shall give us plenty of time to discover much more than the most touristy regions.

## **Ireland: a country full of pleasant surprises**

The entire island of Ireland measures 84,421 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 6,6 million. This includes the 1,8 million inhabitants and 13,843 km<sup>2</sup> that make up Northern Ireland in the north-east, which belongs to Great Britain. For a long time, the entire Irish Island was incorporated into the United Kingdom. Back then, the Irish people were rather considered serfs of the British squires, than full-valued citizens. Naturally, this led to tensions and revolt against the rulers.

Between 1845 and 1851, a great famine wiped out a big part of Ireland's population. Approx. 1 million people starved to death and another two million were forced to emigrate, mainly to the US, but also to Australia and New Zealand. After this big tragedy, the revolt against the British Kingdom rekindled.

By 1921, a peace agreement was reached, warranting Ireland independence in most affairs. However, the northern counties got the right to stay with Great Britain. This right was exercised by popular vote. Thereby, today's Northern Ireland was created. Next, a dispute between those in favour of the treaty and those opposing it, spread a new conflict. Two weeks after the pro-treaty side gained victory in the 1922 election, civil war broke out between the comrades who up until then had fought alongside each other against the English Crown.

In the course of time, it got a religious war between Catholics and Anglicans, that raged for the next decades. In Belfast, a wall was built to separate the different religious groups, as terrorist-attacks between the self-appointed patriots became a part of Irish life. Also Christians misuse God as an excuse to kill! After one of the worst atrocities, a bombing in the town of Omagh, that killed 29 and left 200 injured, efforts to regain peace were intensified.

Ireland lives now in relative peace, though every now and then, smaller bombings and attacks still occur, in the north, as well as in the South - in Northern Ireland almost monthly. The hopefully last fatal case of lynxlaw between Ireland's hostile groups was recorded in April 2016! Well, history proved our faint hope of a peaceful Irish future wrong: While we wrote this in December 2016, another political motivated homicide was carried out, again in the name of God...

After all of Ireland joined the EU in 1973, (alongside the UK) both countries enjoyed astonishing economic growth that abruptly dwindled in the financial crisis. However, in 2013 Ireland became the first stricken euro-zone country that successfully exited the terms of the bailout!

## **From Cork to the south east coast: pretty towns and seascapes**

On Oct. 15<sup>th</sup> 2016, the large ferry boat "Pont Aven" of Brittany Ferries, which we had boarded in Roscoff, reached Irish waters. It was a bright sunny morning and all passengers flocked on deck and marvelled at the colourful picture perfect town of Cobh, which the vessel passed shortly before docking at Cork Harbour.

Three days in Cork, Ireland's second largest city (pop.520.000), were our perfect introduction to the Irish Isle. We were charmed by rows of colourful houses, the old town and the many bridges spanning Lee River. We got to know the first



locals who are very approachable. We got to see the first of many castles and other historical buildings; some very pretty, some crumbling.

Upon leaving Cork, we tried hard to always remember driving on the wrong-, not on the right-side, of the road! This was easier than expected, as many country roads are so narrow, the central grass verge is between the wheels anyway. That's probably why the Irish are so religious: they're constantly praying that no other cars or tractors approach on the countless single lanes.

During our first few days, we followed the south-east coast direction Dublin. The weather was brilliant, just as the picture perfect coast line. We took plenty of time driving out to peninsulas, hiking along cliff tops, stopping often on view points and indulged in the delicacies, offered by many café's along our way. Among the many scenic spots and sights along this stretch of coast, we liked best: the Ballycotton Cliff-Walk, Kilfarrasy Strand, the harbour at Dunmore East, the cliffs around Hook Head lighthouse, the village of Kilmore Quay with its many thatch roof houses, and fabulous Johnstown Castle.



## The interior: from the Wicklows to the southwest coast

After overnighing in Wexford, we soon turned inland to the **Wicklow Mountains**. To us Swiss, they appear rather like hills, yet incorporate every aspect of typical Irish mountain ranges. Their round hill crests are usually bald. Rarely you see bare rocks, but neither are trees growing on them. Instead, you see sprawling ferns, heather and blueberries. The Wicklow's higher "bumps" elevate to around 700-800 metres and their soil is of raised bog. In lower grounds, you find patches of mostly commercial timberland, but broadleaves and bushes displayed now their best of autumn foliage.

We continued through the interior towards Ireland's southwestern coast, thereby taking time for some worthwhile detours. Athy on the crossing of Grand Canal and River Barrow, was one of them. In summer, it must be buzzing with tourists renting houseboats. After a good look around town, we were drawn into a cosy café where we ordered snacks, followed by the first piece (of many to come...) of delicious Pavlova.

We reserved two days for the enchanting town of **Kilkenny**. A good choice of restaurants is to be found all over the country, but as tourists abound in Kilkenny, restaurants abound as well. The Irish gastronomy was a very pleasant surprise. Honestly, we didn't expect much more than "pub grub", yet we found easily gastronomic cuisine, supplemented by a good choice of ethnic eateries, also in the countryside. Indian and Thai restaurants were widespread, even Japanese, but much less Chinese. Whatever we got was of excellent quality, even snacks, though this was also reflected on the bill.



Service was always friendly, and usually surprisingly fast, even in busy lunch places. Irish like to socialize and it's very popular to eat out in big groups.

After stopping at the impressive ruins of Kell's Priory and in Clonmel, we reached Mallow. Many green pastoral hillsides later, all dotted with grazing cows and sheep, we arrived at the sea again.

## The Southwest Coast: ring-riding on little known and famous tourist-drives

Starting from Baltimore, we soon marvelled at the spectacular coastline that got our constant companion all the way to Northern Ireland. Now we followed the designated tourist-drive, named "Wild Atlantic Way". The promontory **Beacon Head**, at Ireland's southwestern corner, was a stunning introduction to the varied land- and seascapes waiting for us.

**Mizen Head**, on the tip of the next peninsula, was another highlight, actually one of our best all over Ireland. For a small entrance fee you get access to a bridge leading to a rock island hosting a former telegraph station. The views of the sea and the multilayered purple-grey, massive rocks, are just breathtaking!

Besides the coastline, we were as well delighted by the various pretty, very colourful villages, like **Schull**, Castletownbere, **Eyerias**, and Kenmare. In some, we ended up staying overnight.

As not too many other tourists took advantage of the excellent autumn weather, it was always easy, to find B&B accommodation. We tried to avoid expensive country lodges, but never the less, found modern rooms everywhere. In average, we paid € 70 for a double room, sometimes a bit less, sometimes more.

After going for Irish breakfasts a few times, we were delighted to find that all over Ireland, heavy brown bread is always served as well. They call it "soda bread", as it's not raised with yeast. In the following, we often asked for bread, butter and jam only. We are just not used to black and white pudding, eggs, bacon and sausages for breakfast.



Another Irish habit, we're not used, but had little problems adapting to, was eating ice cream in winter. To lure prospective clients into their shops, oversized ice-cream cones are placed in front of many grocery stores, news agents, bakeries, butchers, take-away's or whatever. Soft-serve was most popular, but also Italian ice cream is in great demand. Around Halloween-time, it was available in all sorts of shocking colours. School children queued for black, green, grey or purple ice cream. It was all about colours, not about taste! A shop attendant admitted to use ash for the black lava flavour, whereas fresh fruit is used for regular flavours.

Back to ring-riding: Very rewarding we found the Ring of Beara and the Ring of Dingle. Both offered fascinating coast lines that could be enjoyed mainly from small narrow roads. It was slow driving but very easy, as tourists were few at the end of October. We were very glad about that, as it spared us from reversing to passing bays, in order to pass other vehicles. On both peninsulas, Beara as well



as Dingle, magnificent vistas can also be had from various pass roads cutting through the interior. From elevated perspectives, the views over countless intensive green fields, partitioned off by low stone walls, down to the ocean, is just fascinating.



Situated between the above two Rings, is the famous and well marketed Ring of Kerry, circling the namesake peninsula. Here, the road is wide, tourists abound and parking lots are plenty. However, we felt the "Ring of Kerry" couldn't keep up to the expectations the brochures were promising. Of course, we compare it with the less touristy peninsulas we've seen before and afterwards. In our eyes, all others rewarded us with more spectacular scenery! Ironically, those who take time to venture out from the Ring of Kerry's tip to the very tip of the Kerry Peninsula, to the so-called Ring of Skellig and also to Valentia Island, get rewarded with outstanding land- and seascapes as well. It is just like an extension of the sign posted Ring of Kerry, but those in a hurry will remain on the "famous main ring". It's not the distance that will prolong this detour in the first place, but the many worthwhile stops along the way. Luckily, we could stay two days in Waterville.

Meanwhile, we were in Ireland for two and a half sunny weeks. We had enjoyed superb food and stayed at charming B&B's. Now it was time for a rest, and so we rented a holiday cottage near Kilorglin, where we spent three weeks. There was still lots to see around this place, like the town of Killarney and its national park, Dunloe Gap or the three big sand spits jutting into Dingle Bay. We took advantage of the many walking opportunities starting right from our doorstep. The large, well equipped holiday home offered views of Carrauntoohil (Irish Corrán Tuathail), with 1.041m Ireland's highest mountain. During our stage, its peak got snow covered, so we had a perfect hideaway during this odd spell of bad weather.



## County Clare: from stunning cliffs to rugged rocks

Leaving our holiday cottage in Kerry County on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, we were lucky to resume our discovery trip through Ireland in the best of sunlight. After several stops at ruined castles and churches, we reached the car ferry that brought us in 20 minutes over the wide waters of the Shannon Bay.

Now we were in County Clare, which we started to discover after overnighing in Kilrush. The **Loop Head Peninsula**



was unexpectedly breathtaking, especially the coast between the lighthouse and the village of Kilkee. There were stunning cliffs, fascinating rock islands and countless free standing rock needles, but almost no other tourists around.

This changed with a bang, when we reached the **Cliffs of Moher**, just an hour before sunset. To get tickets, we had to queue behind other cars, because this place is one of only a few, where you have to pay an entrance fee. Then we parked between 200 other cars and several tour buses, before mingling with hundreds of people on the view points. Admittedly, the sight of the cliffs in the sunset was really something special.

For visitors with limited time or reduced mobility, the visitors centre is certainly the best point to see the Cliffs of Moher. Considering the "circus" even at the end of November, we wouldn't come here in peak summer. However, for those with time and good fitness, there is luckily a less touristy access point to the famous cliffs. South of the visitors centre, a marked turn off leads to a carpark on a farm. After paying a small parking fee, you hike 10 minutes to Hag's head with the ruin of Moher Tower, and that's what we did the next morning. At the tower, you stand already high above the cliffs and get a great view of them from the south. Most people feel certainly tempted to hike along the cliff top walk, where you get even more spectacular views. If you can't get enough, you'll reach the platforms (free) at the visitors centre after 3,5km. Another 4,5km on, brings you to the village of Doolin, from where there's a hiker's shuttle in summer that brings you back to the farm or vice versa.

Despite the tourist masses at the Cliffs of Moher, it was off season, meaning many accommodations were in hibernation. After searching around for a bit, we ended up in a nice backpacker's place in Lahinch. It was refreshing, to speak to the Aussie Bloke who runs the hostel. To us, his English was easy to understand. In any case, much easier than the Irish dialects of the English language. Of course, we wouldn't understand Irish Gaelic, but most locals don't speak it anyway, despite desperate efforts to revive it. Luckily, Irish-English is commonly spoken, though it differs more than a fair bit from the Queen's dialect... Even the English used on Irish websites sometimes reads strange. In turn, locals had difficulties understanding our accent too.

Only 20km further north, we reached the **Burren "stone desert"** with its distinctive rock formations. To us, the rock plateaus along the coast, appeared more impressive than what we later saw in the interior. In the Burren region, many hill tops have bare rock. The omnipresent green meadows can only be found in the valleys. The Burren area is also famous for its historic stone tombs and megalithic sites.

## Connemara: islets dotted lakes and shorelines

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 we reached Connemara, another region renowned for its natural beauty. The southern part of it lies in County Galway, of which we first visited the bustling and beautiful namesake town. The weather had turned dull, but the Christmas market and festive lighting added lots of charm and warmth to the city.

On the next morning, we continued to the little village of **Cornamona**, where a nice holiday house was ready to host us for the next three weeks. It was a posh 170m<sup>2</sup> house with four bedrooms and four bathrooms. Everything was top notch, only the sanitary installations were old fashioned, as almost everywhere under the past, or present influence of the English Crown... Hand basins have always two taps: one sizzling hot, one freezing cold both installed in a "convenient" distance of about 0,5cm from the rim. Flushing of toilets needed some expert skills, otherwise the lid of the lavatory cistern jumps towards you, but your droppings won't disappear...still ready for further inspection... On the positive side, it was the first house without those typically thick carpets.





Large holiday houses are very popular among the Irish. You find them anywhere, be they solitary or in specially built holiday villages. It's quite popular to go on vacation in large groups of family or friends.

Almost every road in Ireland, is flanked with single family homes, which are often big and posh. An impressive 90% of Irish families live in a detached house and most of them are situated in lonely countryside. Therefore, villages are usually no more than an assembly of service providers, shops, restaurants and of course the omnipresent pubs. Every hamlet has a post office and a grocery store.

Our holiday cottage in Cornamona was situated in between the two very big lakes; Lough Corrib and Lough Mask. Both are dotted with islands and islets, as is the coastal landscape. Lakes, islands, bogs and hills that's what the typical Connemara landscape is composed of. Best of all, this natural gem lay almost on our doorstep. We only had to walk up the hill behind the house to see the amazing number of islands in Lake Corrib. If we opted to drive out with our car, we came along many other lakes, or crossed some pass roads before we hit the equally island dotted coast line. Daily, we came along grazing sheep, marked the Irish way: colourfully spray painted. Again, we often had good weather which meant lots of sightseeing and hundreds of photographs. Despite having seen already plenty of marvellous Irish landscapes, the Connemara region was still outshining.

By the way, we didn't find the Irish roads in such a bad state as we had been warned. Obviously there was a lot of progress in the last few years. Apart from major roads, most are single-track, but due to the low traffic, this is hardly a problem. Annoying however, we found the sight restricting hedges that line many roads and the countless concealed entries, confusing side roads and junctions. You can only hope for the best.

No wonder, there are so many crucifixes and statues of the Virgin Mary along the roads. In catholic Ireland, it's pray and drive. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, religion has influenced the island's history and that's why so many town-names contain the name of a saint, and/or the word "kil" which stands for church.

The church still plays a dominant role in Ireland, despite scores of scandals. A recent government-research revealed how raping and unjustified beating of children in catholic schools, was not only widespread, but the norm!



## County Mayo: island tour along the coastline

When we left our cottage to travel further north, it was already December 17<sup>th</sup> 2016. After driving around Clew Bay, we crossed the bridge to **Achill Island**. In summer, it attracts a fair number of holiday makers due to its wild beauty. In December however, most B&B's are closed. Despite the very helpful locals, we couldn't find anything but a hotel. We were "lucky", there was live music in the bar that night. It didn't start early, but went on all night. Between 6 and 7 the next morning, we were woken again by the last drunks who were kicked out and got finally bundled into taxis. That's the downside of life in Ireland. An incredible 12,5% of salaries are spent for booze! To facilitate finding the culprit of drunken brawls, surveillance cameras are common in front of every pub, even in the smallest village. However, as long as the Irish are sober, they are extremely friendly and helpful.



The next two days, the weather was again fantastic for sightseeing; stark blue skies, yet strong winds. While touring Achill Island(146m<sup>2</sup>), Corraun and Mullet Peninsula, we experienced very high waves splashing impressively up on rock islands and the shoreline; frightening and fascinating at the same time.

Only when we reached **Ballina**, the weather became rainy. Luckily, we could extend in the B&B until the sun shone again a day later, despite our landlords being walkabout.

## Northern Ireland: our first glimpse across the border

From Ballina, we turned inland hoping to find some nice lake-side drives. Our hopes didn't quite materialize, on the other hand, it brought us to a highlight we weren't looking for, but are always open to - especially our mouths. We reached the border village of **Blacklion**, from where a bridge leads to the Northern Irish village-part **Belcoo**. We were already pleased with our room in an Inn on the UK side, a bit dearer than we had hoped for, but due to its high standard a real steal. It was actually a very tastefully decorated mini-suite.

Just for fun, Heinz googled for the best restaurant in the neighbouring 175 soul village of Blacklion. In fact, his find happened to be one of the very best addresses in Ireland. It belongs to the multiple awarded, TV-famous celebrity chef **Neven Maguire**. Heinz raised his eyebrows. We surely wouldn't get a reservation tonight? The reviews were all praise, but many remarked they had been waiting for four months to get a table... Well, on this Wednesday evening, we were lucky. Amid a very bad telephone line, we meant to understand that we could come late that evening. Eating at 9:30PM in Ireland? Yes, ONE table was available for the "second session" at 21:30h. After we gave them our credit card details, they held it for us. That way, we indulged in a 10-course dinner in one of Ireland's best restaurants. Other diners had made a pilgrimage expressly for this meal from Belfast or Dublin. And we had only to do a leisurely night stroll over the bridge to the other side of the border.



The next morning, our hotel treated us with a particularly pleasant breakfast. Despite being the only guests, they prepared an opulent fruit platter on top of yoghurt, cereals, wonderful crusty soda bread and a big choice of jams, besides any cooked choice.

After half an hour's drive, we reached the **Northern Irish** town of **Enniskillen**. Obviously, it functions as shopping centre for the region on both sides of the border. It appeared much more urban than any town we had seen during the last two months in the Republic of Ireland. Obviously, here people do live in town. They don't all seem to have detached houses spread over the country side. Somehow, everything appeared more English, including the abundance of fast-food. After browsing through the town, park and some shops, we left along Lower Lough Erne, direction north-west to Ballyshannon, back in the **Republic of Ireland**. Following the coast, we reached the town of **Donegal** and 20km on, our next holiday cottage near Bruckless.

## County Donegal: Irelands wild north

It was December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016, when we arrived at our holiday home near Bruckless, where we were to spend the festive days at the year's end. It was surrounded by farmland and through the windows we could enjoy goat- and chicken-TV all day long. The cottage was large and fairly new, but the furniture was a bit old fashioned. Apart from walks in the surrounding hills, our excursions led us mainly to Donegal's south west coast, another astonishing section of the WAW



(Wild Atlantic Way). The most impressive sceneries, we found nearby at St. Johns Point, around Slieve League Cliffs, Malin Beg (Bay), Glen Head, and Narin Strand where some brave people went for a charity-New Year's dip.

Also very appealing were the small towns of Donegal and Killybegs. One of Ireland's most important fishing harbours is in Killybegs, and its fleet of trawlers was most imposing during the Christmas-New Year's holiday, when most vessels moored in the harbour. Killybegs was also our "shopping town". Around Christmas, most Irish didn't hesitate to take a shopping trolley whereas most other times, they intend to buy

only a couple of articles that can easily be carried by hand. Unintendedly, most end up with their arms packed with dozens of items. Often, they hardly see in front of their nose. This is probably supported by the supermarkets marketing focussed on multi-buy-deals. They smartly seduce customers to buy more than intended; get 2 articles for 5 Euros, buy 3 for 6 Euro, or pay single for a hefty 4 €. Cashiers are always very friendly. If they see that a client is going to miss a great bargain, they always mention it and patiently wait, as you run back to the shelf for some more savings!

After a good two and a half weeks in Bruckless, we continued our tour northwards. As the cottage was reserved by some smart aleck, we couldn't choose our departure day according to the weather. So for once, we had to swallow the pill and hit the road on a foggy day. It was a pity, because the visibility allowed us just to see that North-West-Downegal has a pretty coastline with many sandy beaches. Therefore, we didn't drive a long distance and overnighed already in Dunfanaghy. The next day, we could continue our journey in mostly good weather. We took three more days to discover the rugged coastline of Ireland's very north. While driving along the fjord "Lough Swilly", which reaches 45km inland, we marvelled at the landscape and drove out to virtually every headland, like Fanad-, Dunree- and Malin Heads. Once we reached Londonderry on the shores of Lough Foyle, we had already completed our journey through the Republic of Ireland.

What a great country, and we had the privilege to see it with so much time. It's been absolutely fascinating and we were almost sad to leave, though we had the possibility now, to see across the border and discover the beauty of the seascapes that belong to Northern Ireland.

## Northern-Ireland: stunning Antrim Coast

As Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland is a unitary sovereign state within the United Kingdom. After giving some statistic details on the beginning of the Ireland Chapter, we solely describe what we experienced during our three days in the territory and the most striking differences to the Republic of Ireland.

Nature is as beautiful as all over the Irish isle, the border makes no difference. However, we did quickly notice differences in what people made out of their country and how they live, indeed. Northern Ireland feels much more like England in all its positive and negative aspects. One eats rather "fast" than good, but also the roads are faster, meaning better. People tend to live in town houses of urbanised areas rather than spread out in detached houses in the country side. Human resource managers prefer to give jobs to protestants rather than catholics, but on both sides, most people are tired of this nonsense in the name of religion. It's only the hardliners who continue the war! Unfortunately, some of these patriotic E(i/r)-believers still kill each other in the name of their respective religion. Also Christians murder in the name of God even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!



We entered Northern Ireland at Londonderry (Derry) on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2017. We kept our travel moto and stuck to the coast. After stopping at pretty Castlerock and Coleraine, we were already on the Antrim Coast. We found a beautiful B&B in Portrush from where we ventured out to explore the "Giant's Causeway". This is actually a coastal section with fascinating basaltic rock. Some basalt columns can be seen in the cliff, others lye on each other like stacked firewood, or stand upright on the shore. Maybe the most unusual basalt rocks are abraded and some look like polygonal (usually six-edged) tiles on the floor. It was great to scramble and explore about as long as we liked.



Two days later, we continued eastwards. We often stopped to marvel at the many shapes of sea stacks and cliffs, especially at Curran Strand, Ballintoy Harbour and Kinbane. Only from far, we saw the rope bridge that connects a headland with the rock island Carrick-A-Rede. Many tourists pass this wobbly bridge just for the thrill. Though the weather was rather a bit dull, the coastline was so fascinating, it was twilight by the time we reached Ballycastle. Yet, we only had our late lunch. Normally we would have stopped there for the night, but as we had pre-booked our car-ferry to Scotland for the next day, we continued to Larne without seeing the rest of this stunning coast-line.

## Final thoughts about our visit to Ireland

Altogether, we had spent a bit over 3 months on the Irish Island. Our tour covered 6.200km, mostly along the newly as tourist drive promoted, signposted and upgraded coastal road "Wild Atlantic Way", abbreviated WAW. And that's exactly what we shouted out often indeed.

All those warnings, about visiting Ireland in winter, proofed wrong! We probably had much more good weather days than most people visiting in summer!

Our stage was much more rewarding than we had hoped for. As teetotalers, we worried most about too many pubs and too many drunks. Certainly, there are lots of pubs and excessive drinking isn't uncommon. But we found a way around; we avoided towns on week-ends and pubs at all. Instead, we got the pleasant surprise to find many decent and creative eating places all around the country. Furthermore, that soda- and wheaten bread is a reliable alternative to toast, was the icing on the cake!

Not only the food was delightful, we also met extremely friendly locals, found colourful towns and villages, and miles of impressive coastline. We enjoyed staying at cosy B&B accommodations and luxury, yet modestly priced holiday cottages, all arranged spontaneously. Without masses of other tourists, even the many single-lane roads were easy and enjoyable to drive and this is probably the biggest advantage of exploring Ireland in the winter half year. We loved it a lot and we can well imagine to come back.

## Scotland: Great Britain's far north

Together with Ireland, parts of Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and the French Brittany, also Scotland was influenced and settled by Celts. Nowadays, it is a semi independent unitary sovereign state in the north of Great Britain. With a surface of 78.722 km<sup>2</sup>, Scotland occupies roughly the northern quarter of Great Britain's landmass.

Many of the 5,3 million Scots consider themselves very different from the Brits. Long time ago, before the middle ages, when Britain was not that Great, but part of the Roman Empire, those living up north, were considered barbarians. Therefore, former emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of a wall to protect Britannia from the Scots. Nowadays, "Hadrian's wall" is nothing more than a tourist attraction, like the Great Wall of China or probably soon, the new Mexican wall, all the world is talking about...



## From the Mull of Galloway to Glasgow

On January 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, we disembarked at the Scottish port of Cairnryan from one of P&O Ferries large vessels. Taking advantage of the fine weather, we drove south to the Mull of Galloway lighthouse. In this area, meadows were of an extremely intense green. The many great vistas along the way, made a perfect introduction to our Scotland trip. Only the wind blew so hard, we could barely stand upright. After an overnight stop at Newton Stewart, we continued the next morning through pastoral and forested landscapes to Glasgow.

We had chosen Glasgow as a utility stop because we needed to replace more than just a couple of little things. In the end, the town turned out to be a very pleasant city. Our Ibis Budget Hotel offered free parking and an ideal location, from which it was easy to discover everything afoot. Soon, we had a new camera and other home electronics, as well as new footwear and clothing. Besides, we had visited various sites like Glasgow's Science Centre with its IMAX complex. On the other shore of Clyde River, we marvelled at the modern Riverside Museum, the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, and the concert hall named Hydro, which is nightly illuminated in different colours. The University building, the city centre and the People's Park were of more historic architecture, whereas the age old barrow cemetery enthroneing it all, is of timeless beauty.



## Argyll and Bute: pastoral hills and nice seascapes

After five days, we left Glasgow on the busy highway northwards, but soon turned west to the Kintyre Peninsula. After visiting Inveraray on Loch Fyne, we spent two nights in Campbelltown. As we had approached the Mull of Kintyre along the peninsula's west coast, we were now returning on the different, though equally beautiful east coast. Further north, we continued along the Argyll Coast, where a detour along Loch Sween prove particularly worthwhile. In Crinan, we had a look at the last of 14 locks of the namesake channel.

In the evening, we arrived in the port town of Oban, where we had reserved a townhouse in the centre. It was small but cosy and well equipped with quality appliances. Seeing how many British families live permanently in such a small home, made us realise how spoiled we are in Central Europe. However, the location was just great as everything we needed was within short walking distance, including several supermarkets. That's also where the pupils from the nearby high school grab their lunch. In Ireland, there would have been at least some deli-counters at every corner, preparing fresh sandwiches and other snacks, whereas here in Scotland, school children feed on chips and other greasy calorie bombs or sweets. As they got better things to do than sit down and eat, their fast-food is hastily munched down while walking back to the schoolyard. Plastic cups and food containers are gracefully thrown down the banks. As it may have become customary in many families not to sit down for meals, but to munch in front of the TV, or on the go, many British (holiday-) homes don't have a proper dining table.

Of course, we also made some excursions from Oban. Inland, as well as along the coast, the scenery was often breathtaking. Very impressive was the tidal current "Falls of Lora" below Connel Bridge. Between the tides, it looks like a boiling pot in certain spots.

## Isle of Skye: soaring highlights abound

After almost two weeks, we left Oban on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2017, and ventured northwards. Very worthwhile was the side trip with a ferry to the Ardgour, Sunart and Moidart areas. On one hand we found great coastal scenery complemented with freshly snow covered mountains in the background. On the other hand, we were charmed by knotted old oak woods. After completing this loop, we ended up staying overnight in Fort Williams, only 44 miles north of Oban.

From Fort Williams, most tourists are probably heading to famous Loch Ness. Instead, we preferred to see Loch Lochy, just by curiosity for its name. It was pretty, but actually just another one of many lakes, sorry Lochs. By lunchtime, we crossed the impressively high bridge to the Isle of Skye. This 1,656km<sup>2</sup> (639 sq mi) large island boasts so many attractions, we hardly knew where to go first. Finally we based ourselves for the first two nights in a B&B in Portree.

The good weather lasted and so we set off to discover Trotternish, the Isle of Skye's northernmost peninsula. The striking rock needles, known as "old man of Storr" were visible from far away. Also the basalt cliffs at Kilt Rock, are breathtaking. Then there were steep roads leading inland to some eerie landscapes with craggy peaks. Both, the Quiraing and the Fairy Glen areas were absolutely worthwhile to be explored.

Another day, we set out to Dunvegan in the west of Skye. Once more, we had glorious weather but to get to the lighthouse at Neist Point, we had to fight against the wind up and down a very steep hill. As we drove south later that day, we got closer to the snow capped Cuillin Hills that looked somehow like the mountains in Switzerland. Driving down to Glenbrittle Beach, we came across the so-called "Fairy Pools" that were not really bursting with water, but with people, even at this time of the year. It's quite astonishing, how well marketed attractions can bring in the flocks also in absolute off-season, whereas other, equally or more attractive sights are deserted.



Before leaving the Isle of Skye, we stayed overnight in Broadford. From there, we drove through a pretty valley down to Elgol, nestled on an incredibly steep rock side.

## North Western Highlands: hills, lochs, islands and remote country life

Back over the Skyebridge, we challenged our car once more. This time on the steep dreaded pass road over **Bealach na Ba**, which translates to "pass of the cattle". On its summit on 626 metres, we stood in the snow, yet had great vistas, though some black clouds were approaching. While having lunch down in Applecross, it started raining and we were ever so glad, we had been able to enjoy the pass before.

Along really pinkish beaches, we rounded the Applecross peninsula, later traversing high bog country, and ended up in **Gairloch** for the next two nights. After a day of hiking, we continued north, and observed the seals, abound at "First Beach" (what a sophisticated place name), situated next to the hamlet Second Beach.

Soon we marvelled at the town of Ullapool, beautifully nestled at the shore of Loch Broom. With its rows of white houses, we found Ullapool to be the prettiest village we had seen so far in Scotland. The same afternoon, we reached Coigach peninsula and drove on narrow roads towards Reiff. Thereby, we came across countless viewpoints offering spectacular sights, first of bizarre mountain ranges, and then of the twenty plus **Summer Isles** just off the coast, which look equally awesome in winter.



For the night, we ended up on **Lochinver**, a small but busy fishing village. Fresh fish abound but unfortunately it was mostly served battered, meaning "freshly" (beer-)battered and deep-fried super crispy, as all over Scotland. Finding accommodation was not that easy, but we found great lodging with nice landlords. Only their recommended restaurant was once more, one we backed out before even sitting down, as it

only offered fish & chips made of different species of fish and different kinds of potatoes. Deep frying got an obsession in this part of the world. Once, we even saw a seafood-restaurant advertising "three generations of deep frying excellence"... Also Asian restaurants of all nationalities resort to the deep-fryer, in order to attract locals. Imagine deep fried sushi. And if it's only Pizza and Pasta, it is mostly accompanied by chips, as if the pastry-part wouldn't supply enough carbohydrates. If you look hard, you find decent restaurants, yet we got the impression, they are mainly demanded by tourists. Seeing what locals order, we're not surprised chefs aren't motivated to cook too sophisticated. Also at top-notch eateries, Scots still prefer burgers or fish and chips, even if it's priced as a French gourmet meal.

As remote, as Lochinver is, in summer there are three Michelin recommended restaurants. However, mid February, there was only one, we would consider a good restaurant. They weren't too keen on working long hours. Already at 7 PM, they refused to take additional diners, even if the restaurant was near empty.

Approaching the north western tip of Scotland, we traversed more hills covered with heather and bracken, interspersed by many fjords and lakes, both called "loch" up here. Hills and trees were often thickly covered in moss and lichens. As in many moorlands, you're almost certain to get wet and muddy boots, even if using hiking tracks. Never the less, the area is extremely beautiful and got still more remote and sparsely populated the further north we got. As we knocked on the door of a "Bed & Breakfast" in **Kinlochbervie**, the landlords exclaimed, "oh, you're the first guests in three months!" As they were surprised about our appearance mid winter, we were staggered by hearing and seeing some facets of life in an isolated village. Though the next real town is more than one and a half hours' drive away (Inverness), the locals still need and want to have all modern amenities. Food from supermarkets like Tesco, can be ordered on-line and is being delivered daily with a van to the village square, where it must be picked up. The only disadvantage is that if you receive articles with short expiry date, you have to eat it, as soon as you got it... Thereafter, you arrive well fed at the cinema on wheels, visiting the small villages in the north once a month. We were lucky to see such a vehicle in- and outside. What arrives as a semi trailer truck, gets a full-fledged terraced cinema hall with more than 100 red plush velvet cinema seats. We were quite impressed!



## Along the North coast: astonishing caves and beaches

A severe storm was upon our heels but Durness, where we headed next, had an untypically good forecast. To Brigitte's disbelief, it prove true, though we started in the rain from Kinlochbervie, less than 20 km away, just as the prediction for that place had forecast.

Also true was that there is a waterfall in the giant **Smoo Cave** in sunny Durness. As it has been raining cats and dogs elsewhere, the normally small trickle inside the cave had turned into a thundering cascade. In fact, we couldn't see it, as its spray was as powerful as from engine hoses! So we backed out from the chamber with the waterfall quicker than we had entered it. Thunderstruck and soaking wet, we restricted ourselves to marvel at the giant main chamber. This cave is also unique, because it's 60 m long, 40m wide and 15 m high entrance chamber has been formed by the sea, whereas the inner chambers were carved by the entering freshwater.



Further surprising, were the many sandy beaches along Scotland's north coast. In the right light, they looked almost like out of a brochure promoting the Caribbean. As we passed, it were the beaches along the Kyle of Tongue, that had the most brilliant colours.

In the evening, we got, with good Luck, a room in **Thurso**. Despite the lack of tourists, all B&B's and hotels were up and alive and well occupied. The construction of wind generators and more so, the dismantling of the nearby nuclear power plant at Dounreay, creates several hundred jobs of which most will last for at least two decades.

The day after... February 21, 2017, we set off to discover the astonishing coastline around Scotland's north eastern point. It wasn't really raining, only drizzling a bit, but strong winds prevented us from enjoying the breathtaking cliffs and sea stacks at Duncansby Head lighthouse to the full.

## Along the North-East Coast southwards to Inverness

Now, we had reached the east-coast and thus, proceeded south. Shortly before the town of Wick, we ventured about the ruins of **Castle Sinclair Gornigoe**. Not only the remainders of the once stately building, but also its position among various rock outcrops on the shore, were very scenic.

We heard that **Wick** is a rather ugly place. Maybe people perceive it like that because Wick has, like most towns and settlements of northern Scotland, mostly grey, dark and functional buildings. This didn't make any difference to us, as we have good lasting memories of the place; thanks to an extremely friendly Landlady, and a great meal at a French restaurant. Ironically, the only other diners were a family from France, as well as a Lady who was born in the village, but had been living in Switzerland for 30 years and wanted to invite a friend to a decent restaurant. So that night, we were speaking English, French and Swiss German.

Through April weather, with lots of sun and some brief but heavy showers, we got to Dunbeath. The coastline with its rock formations and cliffs gleamed in the best of light. There was a neat little harbour, a renovated castle and a leaning wall-like rock full of holes. Though it looked rather precarious, we ducked below it during the next shower.

After a drive around Dornoch Firth, we got a plush room at a hotel in **Dornoch**, and a posh meal at the nearby Castle Hotel. During the night, it had snowed on all the surrounding hills. The next morning, we saw quite a few people from hill tribes, with snow covered cars, driving around with only a little peephole in their windscreen. There was no white stuff here on the coast, so we drove out to the lighthouse on the tip of Tarbet Peninsula. Along Cromarty Firth, further south, we looked at the many oil platforms in the wet dock. Maintaining and building such oil rigs is the business the village of Invergordon specialises in.



Early afternoon, we reached the town of Inverness. With 50.000 inhabitants, the first real town we came across, since leaving Glasgow. After checking in at our hotel on the outskirts, we strolled into the city for sigh-seeing. It was a pleasant town for an ABC tour, as the English call it; another bloody church, another bloody castle...



Rounding the Black Isle peninsula, allowed us seeing the oil platforms again, this time from the other shore. After two days, we left Inverness eastwards. Despite the promising signs "coastal trail", we found ourselves trapped in traffic rather than seeing the coast. Also our detours out to some headlands, were more time consuming than rewarding. This suddenly changed, once we reached Buckie. Now we wished to have the time back, we wasted before. We had a good look around the picturesque harbour village of Findochty in the best of light. The sun was already setting, by the time we arrived in Portknockie, but we still admired some

fascinating rock formations around the harbour. There were signs pointing to further attractions, but for the moment, we skipped it. Luckily, we had reserved a holiday house less than an hour's drive from here, so we decided, we'd come back.

## Holiday Cottage near Turriff: time for relaxing and daytrips

On February 25<sup>th</sup> 2017, we arrived at a nice holiday cottage near the hamlet of New Byth, some 10 kilometres from Turriff. It was a large luxurious house with all the goodies we love. Despite its location in hilly farmland in the interior, Aberdeenshire's north- and east coasts were still very close. As the weather continued to spoil us with plenty of sunshine, we hardly took time to rest, but went sight-seeing instead.

We visited several small fishing villages with spectacular settings right on the seafront. The most dramatic seemed to be precariously glued to cliff faces, and were therefore only accessible over very steep roads. Especially the tiny villages of Pennan and Crovie were enchanting, whereas our drive along Gardenstown's shore road deserves to be categorized as adventurous. The "village road" is rather a harbour wall erected directly in front of the row of houses. At various points, the elevated driveway was hardly wider than two metres. Navigating along this windy lane with front doors to one, and a three metres drop, but no crash barriers, to the other side, took our breath away to say the least. Below the shore-wall, there is just the sea and a few rocks. We wouldn't want to be here on a stormy day, when the water probably crushes up to the houses. After this experience, we contended with looking down on villages from above...



Fascinating rock formations were aplenty all along the coast near our holiday cottage, be it sea stacks, rock arches or other caprices of nature. One of the most impressive was the delicate arch "Bow Fiddle Rock", which we admired on the day we returned to Portknockie. Thereby, we came across the village of Cullen, where the famous Cullen Skink, the Scottish version of seafood-chowder originates. One of the restaurants praised itself of having won the "Cullen Skink world championship". We had eaten many of these delicious and filling soups as lunch indeed, as they are available anywhere.

More enchanting rock formations are to be seen at New Aberdour Beach, and south of Peterhead, where we admired the collapsed sea-cave, Bullers of Buchan. This area delighted us also with its impressively high overgrown sand dunes and its lighthouses. For lighthouse buffs, there is a big lighthouse-museum at Fraserburgh, but to us, the town's chief attraction, was its big commercial fishing harbour.

## Last days in Scotland: St. Andrews and Edinburgh

After three weeks at our holiday cottage, we set off to continue our travels. Heading for the Cairngorms Mountains, we followed the lovely Spey Valley. We have never ever seen so many pheasants as here. We came also across forests where beard- and other lichen covered trees abounded, and also across many castles. The mountain peaks were freshly snow covered, yet when we came past Lecht ski centre, it was deserted, as there was not enough snow to operate the lifts.



After overnighing in Ballater, we explored the Valley of the River Dee, where you obviously see that it's often being flooded. Leaving the mountains behind, we came into spring-like pastoral landscapes. After bypassing Perth, we drove out to **St. Andrews**, on the tip of the Peninsula Fife. The many historic buildings and its location on the

seafront, make St. Andrews a real charmer. On the next morning, we started in the best of light trudging many picturesque harbour villages like Anstruther, St. Monans and Elie.

Sure enough, we would have wished the sunny weather would stay, but the weather gods decided today to act like a drama queen: within minutes, a severe snow storm developed and our motivation for some more detours before reaching Edinburgh disappeared. So now we put our bags down for four days, to visit Scotland's capital. It is a big city indeed, yet to us it wasn't quite as charming as we hoped for. **Edinburgh** has many old buildings steeped in history and its often praised layout makes for a pleasant appearance. As not many big shops instilled themselves in the city centre, the streets seemed to us devoid of local people, and so we missed the liveliness we appreciated in youthful Glasgow.

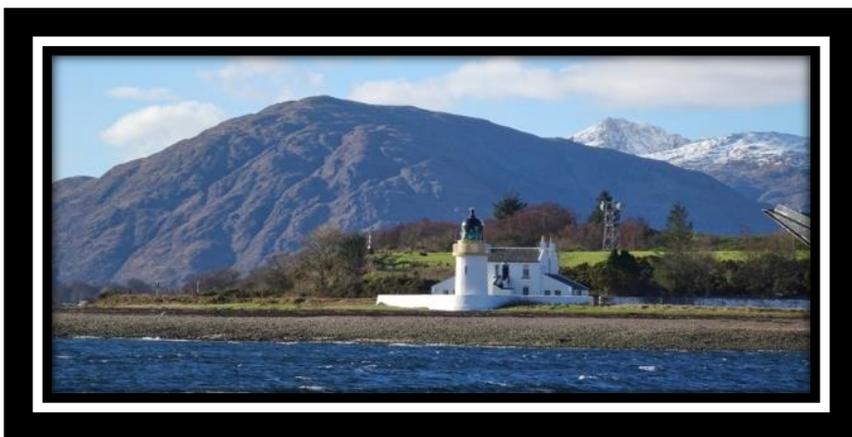


Now it was already time to leave Scotland. So, we admired the last impressions of beautiful Scottish countryside while crossing the council area "Scottish Borders" on our way down to England. North of Newcastle, we spent our last night on the British Isles, before boarding the large car ferry on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 that brought us in a calm night over the sea to the Netherlands.

## Final thoughts about our visit to Scotland

Altogether, we had now spent two winter months in Scotland. Most other tourists might seek to drive the 500 miles on the newly promoted "route 500", yet with so much time our tour accumulated to almost 5.000km. We were lucky to pick an extraordinary warm and dry winter. Temperatures ranged between 5° - 15°C with normally only moderate winds, but plenty of sunshine. That way, we were able to enjoy the great Scottish countryside and the astonishing coastline without masses of other tourist's and without any mossies at all! We had the many single lane roads normally all to ourselves. On the downside, many B&B's were hibernating, as were the best restaurants. As locals seem to prefer "fried excellence" rather than "excellent cuisine" only simple eateries remained open all year. Sure enough, there are always pubs, but we shied away from them, as we don't drink. Consulting "tripadvisor", helped us finding the odd stars on Scotland's culinary sky.

Scotland is really a top destination for nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts. City buffs and lovers of charming villages, however, will probably not find much.



Despite the sharp drop of the Pound Sterling after the Brexit-Referendum, Scotland and all of Britain respectively, is still an expensive destination to travel. Only food, be it in pubs or as ready-made microwave-meals in supermarkets, can be dirt cheap. But if you pay cheap, you get cheap! If you want something decent, you must rob your piggy bank.

For Accommodation, we usually paid about £ 70-80 for bed and breakfast, either in private guest houses or small hotels. We found that some 80% of landlords put "no vacancy" signs out during winter, so choice was limited. On

the other hand, it was probably easier to travel just following one's nose and staying somewhere overnight spontaneously. Also holiday houses could be arranged on short notice and at very lucrative winter-rates.

Despite having been exceptionally lucky with the weather, this flexibility also let us pause if there was an "average Scottish bad-weather day". It was so much more pleasant to go about only after it has cleared up again, than if you have to press on on a wet day, because every night you're booked somewhere.

## Ireland or Scotland: where to go first?

We felt, it was perfect to visit Ireland as well as Scotland, as both offer astonishing nature. In the aftermath however, we think for us it would have been better we had honoured Scotland first, and then the island of Ireland.

Both boast similarly amazing nature - especially along their varied coastlines. Inland, both are dominated by green pastoral landscapes. Despite some landscapes having similarities, they are by no means the same. Every region has its own character, landmarks and sights. We were often astonished, how much there is to be seen in the vicinity of our respective holiday cottages.

Scotland might score with higher peaks, whereas Ireland probably with more hill moors. We couldn't even rate any east- or west-coast higher than the other; in both countries you have to see it all! Surprisingly, both north coasts are dotted with lovely sandy beaches that must be very popular in summer, judging after the countless huge mobile-home parks.

The images of romantic ruins of castles and churches can be found aplenty in Scotland, as well as in Ireland. However, due to its dark side of the history, Ireland is also dotted with ruins of abandoned houses and hamlets to a rather depressing extent. On the other hand, to us, towns and villages in Ireland seemed much more colourful and appealing than the rather darkish and functional buildings in Scottish villages that are few and far in between. In Ireland, bigger towns are even fewer, yet villages offering good services (also for tourists), can be found more evenly distributed across the island.

If it comes to accommodation and especially quality food, Ireland definitely offers the better choice. Culinary delights are in high demand by locals and tourists alike, and cosy cafés and restaurants can be found everywhere. In Scotland, on the other hand, nutrition is far too much based on fast-food, often available dirt cheap. Ireland is no budget destination at all, though in Scotland we paid in average 20-40% more for everything of decent quality.

Here, we should mention semi-autonomous Northern Ireland: the coastline is equally astonishing and should not be missed. Concerning everything else, it's neither Ireland nor Great Britain - Northern Ireland sits quite in the middle with a tendency to be more English than Irish.

Knowing what we know now, we would recommend visiting Scotland first, then Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland last. That way you get into territory with more charming villages, better Restaurants and decreased prices... What more can tourists wish for?

## Back on the continent: tulips, naturism and midsummer

On March 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, we alighted at Amsterdam's large port of IJmuiden. As we were greeted with warm spring temperatures, we decided for a weeklong tour around the provinces of North- and South-Holland, to see if tulips are already in bloom. Along the way to the port town of Den Helder, we visited many seaside resorts, like Wijk aan Zee, Egmond- and Bergen aan Zee, Callantsoog, and Julianadorp. The next day, we ventured south and admired some hyacinth and daffodil fields, but there was only one tulip field in full bloom. We were lucky to see it just in time before the "flower-mower" beheaded the tulips. In these fields, it's all about growing bulbs, not about nursing flowers!



Later, we stopped in the very picturesque villages of Medemblik and Enkhuizen, before continuing to Alkmaar. As we found a very nice cottage, we stayed for three days. Not only did we re-visit Alkmaar, but made also an outing to De Rijk, the Polder windmills along Kopdammerdijk in the Grootschermer-region, and to more venerable windmills at pretty, yet touristy Zaanse Schans. When continuing southwards, we stopped again at Haarlem, before lodging at Noordwijk aan Zee. From there, we toured the Noordwijkerhout-Region for two days, and that's where we saw most flower fields in bloom, though again, not many with tulips.

We left the Netherlands past the big dams of the Delta project at Oosterschelde. After a last overnight stop in Kapelle in the Zeeland-Province, we crossed Belgium for Germany, where we spent another three days on our way south.



Meanwhile it's already end of April and we stay for about a month in a nice cottage at Le Couderc, a pleasant naturist ground in the French Dordogne Area. Here, we completed this travelogue and prepare for our upcoming island hopping trip. Mid June we're going to spend four days in Helsinki, where we will board a Finnair plane that hopefully lifts us to Singapore, from where we continue to Samoa. Five intense months in the South-Pacific and one in Chile, shall mark the beginning of our next adventure, where next is still written in the stars....

Brigitte & Heinz



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