

# adventures in IRELAND

BY NATHALIE ELLISON

A photograph of a stone tower with battlements, likely a historical landmark in Ireland. The tower is built of grey stone and has several windows. In the foreground, a wide set of stone steps leads up to the tower. A group of people, including children and adults, are walking up and down the steps. The surrounding area is a lush green hillside with some yellow wildflowers. The sky is overcast and grey.

Experience Ireland's beauty and  
culture with a Vagabond tour.

Ireland is far more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. The lush South-West coast was unforgettable. The tour was well planned and enjoyable that I would do it all again. Our energy and charisma made our tour memorable.



d. The seven day/six night Vagabond tour started and ended in Dublin and was so tour guide, Samuel Brett, had endless en-



A beautiful evening in Dingle, sitting on the retaining wall, watching the clouds change and breathing in the fresh air. Unforgettable!



A spectacular view from the top of the Blarney Castle

Our tour group met at the Dublin Tourism Center where we eagerly piled into a big black jeep and headed towards Blarney Castle. Including me, our group was comprised of two young women from Austria (the 'Giggling Austrians' as I later called them), a father and son from Switzerland (they were British but had Irish ancestors), a Norwegian (tall, handsome, blue-eyed, lawyer and single, too, ladies!), a mother and daughter from the U.S.A, a fellow Canadian (always ready with a good one-liner), and a woman from Germany who loved us so much, she switched from the five day to the seven day tour.

One of the many advantages of the Vagabond Tour is the limited group size. The jeep could hold up to eleven people so it was a small enough group that everyone could get to know their fellow voyagers. It was awesome to meet people from several different countries and the eclectic mix of personalities and cultural backgrounds launched many interesting conversations and laughter. Our group laughed a lot. That laughter was delightfully facilitated by our fearless leader, Samuel Brett, who was brimming with knowledge, humor and character.

At the Blarney castle I worked my way up through the winding staircase and waited in line to kiss the famous Blarney stone. It is said that whoever kisses

the Blarney stone gains the gift of eloquence, so I was anxious to join the long list of pilgrims before me, in my quest to give it a buss. Accomplishing that momentous kiss required an interesting upside-down maneuver, and it was obvious that my years of childhood gymnastics played a great part in my success.

The castle was worth seeing for many reasons, but one is because of its impressive design features. The spiral staircases were constructed in such a way that potential attackers ascending the stairs were forced to use their left hands to swing their swords. This helped to keep the inhabitants safe at Blarney Castle. Many other obvious defense features were quite something and I marveled at the ability of the Blarney Castle designers to develop so many defense systems inside the castle. It clearly reminded us of the dangerous early years of Ireland, when life required a strong sense of survival.

The Vagabond team is well educated in Irish history, with far more information than anyone could find in a book. I became aware of my lack of knowledge of my own country, as I realized the depth of history & knowledge that Brett demonstrated for his homeland. As Brett drove us around, he was full of tales and stories about fairies and leprechauns (the 'good people' as we were told to call them, to avoid bringing on a curse). Brett favored us by singing enchanting Irish songs as



Cliffs of Moher



Legend says that Diarmid and Grainne were cursed and could not sleep while on Irish soil so they slept atop this five thousand year old tomb.

Portmagee's Bridge Bar where 'good craic' can be found (right) Cliffs of Moher from the left stair view point (below).





we drove along. I had my MP3 player, loaded with music from home just in case I became bored, but not once did I use it. I couldn't take the chance of missing a song, a history lesson, or any of the humor that was continually present in our group.

One of my favorite stops was the Cliffs of Moher. I was humbled by their immense size and spellbound by their beauty. I traveled up both sides of the cliffs in order to see both viewpoints, and highly recommend this for anyone who travels here. I stood in awe and silence, impressed by the magnitude of the Cliffs, and breathed deeply the beautiful air which seems to blow clean and fresh across Ireland. I passed by Three Adorable Freckled Brothers From Boston, and as I was walking they asked me to take their picture. I told them I was from Canada and, since I was a mother, told them that their mother would have a heart attack if she saw them sitting on the edge of the stone wall, just over the cliffs.

Vagabond knows how to select the best places to stop, just for fun. Portmagee, I was told, is "good craic" (this is pronounced 'crack') and I soon learned means 'fun' and should not be confused with the drug! The Bridge Bar was an excellent place to hang out after supper and participate



A quaint little church just beside the Gougane Barra hotel and near the hiking trail.

in some fun. While there, we were treated to a demonstration of traditional Irish dancing, performed by a group of young girls. Next it was our turn to dance. We watched the already packed floor fill to overflowing with people wanting to dance. Some from my group joined in the dancing and although we had no idea what we were doing, we had great fun trying to follow what the locals were doing. We were greeted with an abundance of smiles and laughter as we danced, sometimes landing against others, as though in bumper cars. The pubs are definitely not meant to be for spectators, and are more fun when participating in a part of the action. When I return to Ireland, Portmagee will be a place to revisit. Maybe I will see ol' John Joe again, who welcomed me to Ireland and kept me laughing! <kiss kiss!>

A beautiful hike in Gougane Barra awaits those who arrive here. We hiked up the mountainside and saw

clear streams and refreshing little water falls; majestic trees and breathtakingly beautiful sky. I loved the foxglove flowers growing along the side of the trail. Supper at the Gougane Barra Hotel was delicious and the rooms were comfortable and restful. My small group became comfortable with each other very quickly (a benefit that this small Vagabond tour has over the big bus tours) and many of us during dinner were laughing so hard at our fun stories, that we were wiping tears from our faces.

There is an amazing rock off the southwestern coast of Ireland which is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Skellig Michael of Skelligs Islands, is an early Christian monastery that sits 700 feet above sea level, at the pinnacle of a three hundred plus stair climb, and is not to be missed. After climbing all those stairs, we stopped just before entering the walls of



Skellig Michael,  
seven hundred  
feet high.



View from the top  
of Skellig Michael.

the monastery to have a wee little picnic. Once inside we were treated by the tour guide to the history of Skelligs. He explained the origins and how the monks lived in the cluster of stone beehive huts. It is an impressive structure, especially considering it is at the top of an unforgiving and steep mountain. The trip down the stairs was a little scary, as there are no railings to hold onto. The steps are irregular and steep, so we took our time and several times I had to grab the side of the mountain to steady myself. Despite the daunting stairs the trip was well worth it. The view from the top was astonishing, the air refreshing, and I would definitely do it again.

While in a local Glengarriff pub, we heard the unique music of the Harringtons. Their music was so compelling that several of us bought their CD. Their style of Irish folk music, guitar playing and singing was something I had never heard before and I listen to it continually, since my return to Canada.

### The Harrington's





Our tour group (top), a view from St. Patrick's mountain (bottom), Sam Brett making St. Brigid's Cross (right), the Vagabond-mobile! (far right)





Each destination and activity was fascinating and valuable as part of the tour. We were never on the road too long without a little break to stop and see something, like the Poul nabrone Dómen (or Portal Tomb - I love the legendary story of Diarmid and Grainne) or the Limestone beach, or the Doolin Caves, where the world's second largest stalactite exists. Vagabond offers an impressive itinerary and not one minute is wasted or empty. The countryside is so wonderful and beautiful that one can never tire of it. One of the more memorable places along the drive was the valley with the potato ridges and the stone walls that went right up the sides of the mountains. Brett told us in great detail about the history of the Irish potato famine. We were all deeply moved, and stopped to pay our respects at the memorial in the valley.

Among the activities made available to us were surfing and horseback riding on the coast, kayaking with seals, and hiking. The surfing was exhausting but so much fun. We donned our wet suits, grabbed our boards and followed our instructor to the beach. He gave us some great lessons on belly boarding first and we went out to the water to try. After half an hour, we came back to the beach and he gave us another lesson on standing up on the board. Overall, we spent two hours in the water and didn't feel a chill at all due to the great insulation from our wet suits. I'm not sure how many of us actually mastered the skill, but it was great fun trying to surf. We later cantered along the sandy beach riding horses and I felt as though I was in a movie. This trail ride was catered to each person's individual riding experience so it didn't matter if any of us had ever been on a horse or not, everyone was able to ride according to their own comfort level.

Kayaking out to the seals gave everyone a chance to see them up close, and whether we chose to take a kayak or a canoe (which they call 'Canadian Canoes') we all enjoyed the seals and a little fun splashing each other with the paddles. Hiking through a valley on a 'grand soft day' (lightly drizzly) was relaxing and allowed us to enjoy up close the beautiful countryside. Our hike even came





An old house on one of the hikes.





with some spray painted bleating sheep ('sheep graffiti' as it came to be known in our group). Apparently farmers spray their sheep to identify them, something I have never seen before. All of the activities made the tour exciting and physically challenging, enabling us to enjoy the savory food in the restaurants without guilt of calorie consumption.

It is apparent that Vagabond Tours puts much thought into the daily destinations, and the activities add much variety to the tour. This tour requires some level of physical fitness. Come to Ireland and be ready to see and do more than you have ever seen or done in a week. Learn some fascinating history, and be prepared to make a few like minded and adventurous friends along the way. You will fall in love with Ireland.

Leaving Ireland was difficult for me. I loved it and contemplated what I could take home with me. As Brett says, Ireland is not just a place, it is a way of life. The people there are friendly and seem to work to live, rather than live to work. There seem to be fewer personal boundaries and the Irish accept those who want to join in and take part in the fun. I think a little piece of me will always be in Ireland and I have come away with a fresh outlook on life, one that makes me want to get more out of each day, and enjoy as much as possible. Thanks Ireland, and of course, Vagabond!

**To book your tour, contact Vagabond Tours at: +353 (0) 1 660 7399 (Ireland) or 870-619-4059 (USA). Email to [info@vagabond.ie](mailto:info@vagabond.ie) or visit the web site at [www.vagabond.ie](http://www.vagabond.ie)**

The Limestone fields (left). Doolin's main street on a beautiful sunset night (below)

