

Enchanting Ireland

Our journey then took us north to Belfast for two nights, where we stayed at the beautiful Grand Central Hotel. Our hop-on guide was a fount of information on the history of this lovely city. I was amazed to view this area through the eyes of a local fellow, who told the sad stories of neighbors at war with neighbors and terrible bloodshed; but with a hope for a brighter and better future. The Titanic Museum did not disappoint, as we were given our ticket to board the White Star's newest ship. We felt like we were a part of history, as we followed the lives of the workers in one part of the museum; then we became a part of the ill-fated group of passengers who were about to board the amazing



ship. It gave you chills to stand and look out the windows where the ship launched and feel the excitement they must have felt, knowing full well the tragedy that was to come. We enjoyed a traditional fish and chips dinner at John Long's before finishing off the evening at the rooftop bar of the Grand Central, where floor to ceiling windows offer great views of the city. The next day was spent admiring the spectacular green countryside as we headed to the . Here we were amazed at the 40,000 interlocking basalt columns that face the Irish coast. Was it the footsteps of Finn MacCool or ancient volcanic activity that caused this mystical site?

After leaving Northern Ireland, we headed southwest to Ashford Castle. The drive was one of the most scenic of the trip, as we passed rolling hills of bright green, dotted with fluffy white spots of sheep and cows. I was certainly glad to have an Irish native handling the driving so we could look to our heart's content. As we pulled to the front of the magnificent Ashford Castle and disembarked our coach, a bagpiper was playing a welcome tune for us. I was a little



worried about being chilly in this great stone castle, which was built long ago; but that was a needless worry. Each room was warm and inviting, with stunning features, including heated bathroom floors. The majority of our group tried our hand at falconry. We listened as the guides told us about the daily life of the birds, then enjoyed a long walk around the grounds with everyone taking turns donning the falconer's glove. It was a little scary, but a lot of fun, to have these amazing animals land right on your arm. That night, we were treated to a special dinner before being entertained by a local singer as well as a couple of talented Brendan folks.



We ended the trip back in Dublin, with a tour of the Guiness Storehouse. This working factory/museum tells the story of the Guiness family, who continues today in their quest to make Ireland a prosperous place. Not only do you get to taste the fruits of their labor; but you also get to know the family behind the brand. At the end of the trip, I was already thinking about when my next trip to this amazing place would be.

As Catherine Reilly states, "There comes a time when a trip to the singular beauty of these lands and the infinite hospitality of its people cannot be put off another day." What are you waiting for?