

# From Castles to Kilts: ABAC Goes Abroad

July 2002

Written by Mike Chason, Director of Public Relations

We climbed castle towers. We were mystified by Stonehenge. We cruised on one of the most famous rivers in the world. We saw a land where sheep outnumber people. We went to England, Ireland, and Scotland in 12 action-packed days.

Just a few weeks ago, Abraham Baldwin College Public Service and Business Outreach Director Diane Kilgore led a group of 27 travelers on this unforgettable journey. My wife, Kris, and I, were fortunate enough to be a part of one of the most incredible adventures of my life.

The trip has become an annual ABAC event. It's open to anyone who would like to broaden their horizons and have a lot of fun at the same time. Last year's group went to Greece and next year's trip will be to Hawaii. This was my second expedition. Two summers ago, we went to England, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany.

Pack your bags. Here's a day-by-day diary as we visit the ever-so-proper English, taste the Irish hospitality, and soak up the history of the Scots.

**DAY 1:** Taking a charter bus from the ABAC parking lot is the way to go. Leave all the driving to someone else. The flight from Atlanta to Charlotte was right on time, and then it's just over seven hours in the air to London's Gatwick Airport at 560 miles an hour. Great choice of movies on the plane. I filled up three hours with "Lord of the Rings."

**DAY 2:** London is five hours ahead of America so daylight came at 2 a.m. our time. Airport security was tight but I was glad to see it. Our British tour guide was waiting as our bodies slowly adjusted to the time change. Fantastic location for our hotel. Right in the middle of theatre district, just across street from the historic Savoy Hotel. "Lion King" on stage at the Lyceum around the corner.

Splash water on our faces and off we go for a boat ride on the Thames. What a treat to see Europe's largest city gliding down one of the most famous rivers in the world. The guy who bought London Bridge and took it to Arizona really thought he was buying the Tower Bridge which still stands just below the Tower of London. Visit Trafalgar Square, the exact center of the city and see its huge lion statues. Soccer hooligans splash in fountains since the Brits lost in World Cup soccer play that day. All of Europe loves soccer.

DAY 3: Great bus tour of London including a long stop at St. Paul's Cathedral. Burned in 1666. Reconstruction began in 1675. Took 35 years to rebuild. Lady Diana and Charles married here. Prayers said every hour. Off to the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace where the Queen lives. Lots of pomp and circumstance. So very English.

It's easy to get around in London so we walked to the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. Sat on the grass in front of the amazingly beautiful Westminster Abbey in the afternoon. That's where Lady Di's funeral was held. Stopped at 10 Downing Street where the Prime Minister resides. Had picture made with Bobbies (English police) guarding entrance.

Caught the bus to Harrod's, the most famous department store in Europe. Love to walk through the food shops there where the fare includes everything from live clams to rabbit to dressed pigeons. Off to Piccadilly Circus, the Times Square of London. Young people everywhere. Leicester Square loaded with folks soaking up the sun and standing in line to see "Spider Man." Usually, American movies open about three weeks later in Europe.

At Covent Garden, Londoners enjoy a Saturday love affair with the warm weather. No vehicular traffic. People walk, talk, shop, laugh, and eat lots of ice cream. Two Oriental gentlemen draw a crowd by playing the theme song from "Titanic" on what look to be sitars. Not many dogs on streets because most residents live in apartments or flats which don't allow animals.

DAY 4: Bus takes us 40 miles outside London to Windsor Castle, the Queen's country palace. It's the largest inhabited castle in the world spread over acres of lush, green English countryside. The flag was flying so Queen was in residence. She comes out on Friday and returns to London on Monday. En route, we see sheep everywhere and many thatched roof houses. These roofs sometimes last 100 years. Thatchers leave a little symbol on the roof as a monument to their work, could be a rabbit or a pheasant.

Late lunch on the grass at Stonehenge with very wooly sheep just a fence away. My previous Stonehenge experience was watching Chevy Chase in "European Vacation" push over one of the huge rocks which comprise this engineering miracle. Mammoth stones weighing thousands of pounds stacked on top of each other sit out in the middle of a green pasture. Lots of theories but no real explanation as to how they got there. It's cool. I got a t-shirt.

On to the city of Bath which features hot springs and a huge temple constructed by the Romans. The Romans had to be some of the most intelligent people who ever lived. Their water system at the temple still works. It's only been around since 1 A.D.

Guide Josie Fisher tells us that English really respect Americans. "America was built on religion and hardship," she said. True. We need to remember that more. In her marvelous accent, she says Robin Hood and King Arthur were real people in history whose lives have been sensationalized. Every little town enroute to the evening stop at Bristol has at least two pubs in it.

DAY 5: Across the Irish Sea by ferry to Ireland. Bus drives right on to the ship and hides in the hold while we have lunch on the main decks. Breathtaking view as we depart the United Kingdom and head to the Emerald Isle. First impression...green, very green.

Ireland is only about the size of Maine with a total population of almost five million people. It's really two countries, the Republic of Ireland in the south and six counties comprising Northern Ireland in the north. Great Britain controls Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland is independent. When you read of "the Troubles," it's all in the north, usually around Belfast.

Our guide explains that the English decided the Spanish were going to invade through Ireland so 900 years ago they sent aristocrats over to blend into society, marry Irish women and eventually own a lot of land. In the early part of the last century, Ireland had had enough of the Brits. Lots of trouble. Finally came the split. Many people believe as long as the Crown has influence in any part of Ireland, there will be discord. That's your history lesson.

We landed near New Ross, original home of the Kennedys. Green hillsides and lots of sheep and black-and-white cows grazing everywhere. We stay the night in Waterford in a hotel high on a hill overlooking the city and a gorgeous river. Sun goes down at 10:30 p.m. and rises at 4:10 a.m.

DAY 6: Fascinating trip through Waterford Crystal Factory. Expert craftsmen use diamond tipped drills to shape intricate patterns only a few feet away from our tour. Expensive souvenirs here.

Ireland was a very poor country for a long time. Now the world's second largest exporter of technology. They call it the rise of the "Celtic Tiger." The Irish still burn peat in their fireplaces instead of wood. Houses are stone, not brick until we get to Dublin.

Wonderful stop at Blarney Castle where we climb 121 steps up a narrow, winding staircase to the rim so that we can kiss the famed "Blarney Stone." You lay on your back, grab two rails with your hands, lean out over the edge of the castle, and smack a stone that has been kissed by the whole world. Queen Elizabeth I said that Lord Blarney used too much flowery language. If you kiss the stone, you get the gift of gab. That's why Irish eyes are smiling at all these tourists.

We drive to Killarney and stop at one of the most picturesque spots I've ever seen by a gorgeous lake with green mountains rising up in the Irish mist. A brilliant blue sky provides a perfect backdrop. Temperature is a breezy 62. Heaven on earth.

DAY 7: Encounter first light rain of trip in Limerick en route to Bunratty Castle, my favorite stop. It's not a Disney castle. This is the real deal, occupied 1400 to 1800 A.D. Just inside main entrance is a "murder hole," where castle occupants could pour down

scalding hot liquids on invaders. An Irish style Agrirama situated around castle with cottages, animals, and hands-on depiction of early Ireland. Steaming hot bowl of Irish stew and carrot cake for lunch.

Every town loaded with signs for Guinness, the Irish beer maker. In fact, there is no advertiser in America that billboards as much as Guinness. From hats to refrigerator magnets, Guinness is a powerful presence. Can't pass a residential section without noticing red, blue, and green doors. The Queen once asked all Irishmen to paint their doors black in honor of the death of her son. They responded by painting their doors every solid color known to man, except black. On to Dublin.

DAY 8: The capital of Ireland is a huge city of two million people which serves as home to Trinity College. Students who pass entrance exams can go to college for free in Ireland, and Trinity has 20,000 students. The Book of Kells is located there. It's a handwritten account of the Gospels of the New Testament found in a peat bog. Perfectly preserved. Wonderful illustrations. The Trinity Library holds 200,000 books in an amazing place called The Long Hall. Heavy books at the bottom, light books at the top of a two-story floor to ceiling book-packed room.

Visited St. Patrick's Cathedral, one of two Protestant cathedrals in Dublin. The country is 96 percent Catholic. Jonathan Swift buried there. Delicious Shepherd's Pie for lunch at an outdoor cafe. Entire afternoon of shopping topped off by an Irish Cabaret complete with Riverdance-style entertainers and a guy who sounded just like Bing Crosby. I love the Irish.

DAY 9: Take the bus to Belfast, stopping at the Northern Ireland border to change Euros to Pounds. Since Northern Ireland is under the Crown, it uses the British money system. Most of the rest of Europe including the Republic of Ireland uses the Euro. John Deere tractors on the farms. Nothing runs like a Deere, even in Ireland.

We roll through Belfast without a hint of "the Troubles." No sign of IRA terrorists in the notorious Falls Road area as we board the ferry to go to Scotland. Tasty lunch of prawns on the boat.

Bus drives off the boat onto the coast of Scotland. Fantastic view as we follow the rugged coastline in a land that believe it or not seems greener than Ireland. Signs as we leave little towns say "Haste Ye Back!" Stop in Ayr for a snack and pictures. Wind is up, and temperature is 50. Nobody sunbathing at beach. On to Edinboro, the capital of Scotland.

DAY 10: I love the Scots! Everyone is so friendly as we explore the second largest city in the country. Holyrood Palace is where the Queen stays when she visits Scotland. We tour an upstairs bedroom where a mysterious murder took place, blood stains still on floor.

Edinburgh Castle is the most spectacular physical structure I have ever seen. It's located high on a cliff in the middle of the city. It's gone over a 1,000 years without being breached. Seven different gates protect the entrance. A Scottish wedding brings out the gentlemen in their kilts and the ladies in their long dresses and hats.

The Royal Mile winds through the city and ends at the castle. It's lined with shops, pubs, and restaurants. Bagpipes are playing on two street corners. Here's a guy who's dressed like Scot hero William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson in the movie, "Braveheart." Robert Louis Stephenson was born here and so was Sean Connery.

Little statue of dog in honor of Greyfriar's Bobby in downtown square. Great story about a little dog who slept on his master's grave every night for 14 years after his master died. Disney made a movie. Ended our stay with a Scottish Evening complete with bagpipes, men dancing in kilts, and even a sing-a-long of "You'll take the high road."

DAY 11: Postcard-like scenery everywhere as we roll down through Scotland to the Lake District in northern England. Barns have holes in them so the bats will fly in and eat the mice. Stone fences to keep in the cattle and sheep. There are no yield signs, it's "give way." For some reason, lots of rabbits hopping around bushes on side of road. We saw 25 in the space of a half-mile.

We shop for final souvenirs in Grasmere on the way to Manchester. Woolly Herdwick sheep everywhere. Light rain doesn't spoil another fabulous day in the British Isles. We overnight at a golf and country club amid green mountains and tall shade trees.

DAY 12: Up early to load bags on bus for final time. No problems at Manchester Airport. Flight to Philadelphia very relaxing. Short stop in Philly, and it's on to Atlanta where our bus waits. We pull into the ABAC parking lot at 11:30 p.m. Hard to believe we were in basically another world just that morning. The "haste ye back" sign in Scotland urged us to come back soon. Sign me up.