

CRUISING

the

SHANNON

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Every year, my husband and I go on a trip to celebrate our wedding anniversary. Last year, we decided to try something a little different from the luxury ocean cruises we had been going on for the past few years. During our honeymoon years ago, we had cruised along the Llangollen Canal in Wales on a little canal boat. It was beautifully idyllic to drift along at our own pace, parking the boat anywhere that looked interesting and enjoying the countryside. We looked forward to more of the same in last year's trip.

This time, we chose the lower Shannon and its loughs (lakes); this river runs southwards from near the Northern Ireland border, dividing the western and eastern parts of the Republic of Ireland. It played a very important role in Ireland's social, cultural, military, economic and political history.

Pre-trip preparations

We looked forward to seeing the famed lush green views of the Emerald Isle and her ancient ruins lost in the mists of history and legends, while floating blissfully along in a little floating home. We rented a small but completely equipped two- to three-berth motor cruiser from Carrickcraft (one of the larger boat hiring

companies), and decided to start our week-long journey from Banagher, a little river port that was closest to Clonmacnoise – the most magnificent ancient Christian site.

We made the booking and took tutorials, which included modules and videos on how to steer, park and care for the boat, online through their website. We also learnt how to navigate the river according to the charts provided and what all those little green, red and white signs sticking out of the river bed meant. Finally, we took an online test and were qualified to rent and drive the boat on our own.

Hello, Banagher

There was an option to be picked up by the boat company from Dublin airport but we decided to rent a car instead since it was cheaper to rent the car and keep it sitting in the boatyard for the week. We thank God for that as it turned out that we needed the car very much over the week! The drive was easy and we passed through gorgeous rural scenery on our way there.

We arrived on a cold, wet day in Banagher, a small town with one main street comprising several pubs, restaurants and a lone (but surprisingly well stocked) supermarket and nary a touristy shop in sight. Our boat was ready for us and we were immediately taken out on the water to assess our competence at handling it, and we passed with flying colours – *phew!*

Unfortunately, we were then informed that the "mini beast from the East" was expected that weekend (St Patrick's Day weekend). The "mini beast" was a large arctic air mass blowing down from Siberia and was expected to bring subzero temperatures, cyclonic winds and heavy snowstorms. We were advised



Birr Castle is home to the Great Telescope (Leviathan), the largest telescope in the world in the 1840s

not to cruise during that time and to stay in a sheltered harbour. The boatman gave us an extra electric heater and some blankets, wished us luck and left us to it. Basically, we only had two days of cruising before the storm was expected – what a dampener on our plans!

Nevertheless, we spent the rest of that evening familiarising ourselves with the boat, stocking up the kitchenette and getting our first taste of an Irish pub.

Casting off towards Clonmacnoise

The next morning, we woke at sunrise to beautiful weather and brilliant blue waters, and immediately cast off towards Clonmacnoise. We soon discovered that cruising on a river is very different from pattering along a canal. We had to constantly watch out for navigation markers and compare them to our charts to ensure that we stayed on the correct side of the channel and not end up grounding ourselves on the river bank.

The task was made harder as the river banks were flooded and the edge of the visible water could actually be the middle of someone's garden. Additionally, we could not just dock anywhere we liked, but only at designated jetties. With some practice, and struggles, we made it safely to our destination – Clonmacnoise.

Clonmacnoise is an ancient monastic site founded in the sixth century and was a renowned centre for religion and learning. Set in verdant green undulating grounds on the banks of the Shannon, most tourists arrive by road but its beauty is best appreciated by approaching it from the water. As we drew near, the morning light and rising mist created an ethereal view; as we rounded a bend in the river, we started to see the first of the ruins seemingly glowing and surrounded by a halo. It was like a scene that came straight out of a movie, but so much more breathtaking. We were able to berth our boat at the jetty just under the site (we became quite good at reverse-parking and parallel-parking!)

We took our time wandering around the ruins of a cathedral, many side chapels (called temples), two well-preserved round towers (which served as refuges against Viking raids), three intricately carved high crosses and many Early Christian gravestones.

Snowed in!

As we got back into the boat, the sky started to pour again. As visibility was poor, we had to peer through binoculars to find the river markers. The journey was slow going and it took a lot of steering to stay on course as the wind was quite strong, the water choppy, and we were going against a strong current. My idea of cooking a pot of soup for lunch while on the go to warm up the cabin and our insides only added to the condensation fogging up the windows.

As we headed towards Athlone, the biggest town on that stretch of the river, the intermittent rain made everything look grey, and flooded the lush scenery we were expecting. There were many different large flocks of birds that flew alongside us and



Driving the boat



Clonmacnoise bathed in ethereal morning light



Woke up to find ourselves snowed in

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we were able to observe them closely as they circled, dived and fed. Other than that, there were no signs of life at all – we seemed to be the only people crazy enough to still be cruising on the river!

After spending a night in Athlone, we headed back to Banagher intending to head south towards Lough Derg but decided to heed the weather warnings and take shelter at the homeport. We awoke the next morning to find everything blanketed in snow. The roads were too icy for driving as well, so we spent most of the day cuddling and catching up on emails!

We also walked into Banagher and watched the St Patrick's Day parade. It was a rather informal little affair involving local hobby groups, school children and some livestock, all braving the unseasonably cold weather, fortified by lots of Irish whiskey and ale!

Subsequently, the weather remained too bad for cruising so we decided to just use the boat as a hotel and drove around visiting the sites

with our car. The most noteworthy site in the area was Birr Castle, the site of the Leviathan of Parsonstown, the largest telescope in the world completed in the 1840s. It is located in a large, beautifully maintained garden and quite a marvellous sight to behold.

After this slow respite, we embarked on a rushed second week in Ireland. We drove around the rest of Ireland, visiting the pretty coastal town of Kinsale, navigating the vast rocky moonscapes of the Burren, driving the famous Ring of Kerry and the Dingle peninsulas, marvelling at the awe-inspiring cliffs and coastlines made famous by *Star Wars* episodes VII and VIII, and walking on the Giant's Causeway. But this adventure, of course, is a whole new story for another time...



Dining on board

To most people, this trip may have been considered a washout, but it was a good trip for us as we had lots of cosy couple time. On hindsight, if we embarked on this trip again, I would do it with a few more crew members to make it easier to handle the boat. I would also do it later in the year – possibly in May – when the weather is better and the daylight cruising hours are longer. ♦