Savouring sights of Kinsale

Great music, fine food and proud sense of history discovered in quaint Irish town

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE   SEPTEMBER 29, 2014

Houses and shops serve as a complementary backdrop to the ocean harbour in Kinsale, a small town on the southern coast of Ireland.

Photograph by: Liisa Atva

"We broke up and I got the house," I quipped when friends asked why, suddenly, I was going to Ireland.

It wasn't actually his house, and became mine only for a few weeks.

We'd talked about going to Europe in April, and his friends had offered the use of their house in Kinsale, a town of 4,900 on the southern coast.

When the trip together evaporated along with the relationship, I asked: "Would they still lend me the house?" Although I didn't know them well, they graciously agreed.

Tom, the taxi driver whom my hostess had arranged, met me at the airport in Cork. After 20 kilometres of pleasant country roads and conversation we were almost there.

"We can take the scenic route to the house," offered Tom. "It's a fixed rate from the airport anyway, so there's no extra charge for the view."

At the next intersection we emerged from a copse of black alder onto a cliff overlooking Kinsale; a pretty little harbour full of sailboats, narrow, winding streets of shops, and crayon-coloured houses on the hills above.

The house, Clara's Cottage, was a three-storey Victorian on a hill so steep that Tom parked the car at the end of the road and lugged my suitcase the half-block to the door.

Next door lived the lead singer of a well-known 1970s rock band — who will remain nameless in order to prevent Kinsale from being overrun by paparazzi. Despite slowing down every time I passed his door, I never managed to bump into him.

The sights

To orient myself, I took Dermot Ryan's heritage walk.

"Did you know that there is a Kinsale in Canada?" said Ryan.

"A town of 200 in Ontario."

With the rest of the group gathered, he continued: "The history of Kinsale is the history of Ireland. The battle of Kinsale in 1601 is said to be the turning point in Irish history. Even though the Irish enlisted Spain as an ally against England, they were defeated on Christmas Eve, the beginning of the end of the old Gaelic way of life in Ireland with the loss of power of the chieftains and clans."

Ryan pointed out the Kinsale Regional Museum and suggested it was worth a visit. Small and unassuming, if I hadn't been determined to take in everything, I might have given it a pass.

When my friend and I visited, local historian Paul Slaney greeted us at the door. Noticing the "No Photos" sign I asked, "Is that to protect the artifacts from being damaged by the flash?"

"It's for the insurance. You could be scouts working for an international smuggling gang and the next thing you know Tom Cruise will come down from the ceiling," he said.

In 1915, when the museum was still a courthouse, the inquest into the sinking of the RMS Lusitania was held there. On its way from New York to Liverpool, the Lusitania was torpedoed by a German submarine 13 miles south of Kinsale. The ship sank in 17 minutes and more than 1,200 drowned. The incident brought the United States into the First World War and launched many conspiracy theories, including that the English allowed the ship to be sacrificed to that end.

As we were leaving, Slaney said — somewhat sadly — "It's just a small regional museum and we don't really get the young people." That's a shame. The museum had an old-fashioned charm, and with Slaney to entertain us, Kinsale's history came alive.

Kinsale also has not one fort, but two — Charles and James Forts. I visited the larger Charles Fort, built in the 1670s by the British, and said to be one of the best-preserved 17th-century star-shaped forts in Europe.

The shape is difficult to discern from within, and the fort was a bit crumbly, but the setting, four kilometres from the

centre of town, is serene. The best view of both forts is from the water, and the one-hour harbour tour offered by Kinsale Harbour Cruises sails by both.

The food

Known as the gourmet capital of Ireland, Kinsale has more restaurants than one would expect for a town its size. The Taste the Wild Atlantic Way Street Food Festival, held in early April, was on. I grazed my way through the stalls offering appetizer-sized servings focusing on Irish cuisine — halibut chowder, fish cakes, seaweed scones, and sticky toffee pudding. I saved the black pudding, a local delicacy made from pork blood and oatmeal, for next time.

The following day, I was invited to be a judge at the 4th All Ireland Chowder Cook Off Competition. When I told some of the entrants that I was an international judge from Canada, they seemed excited to meet me. Along with the two hundred other judges, I tasted as many types of chowder as I could.

Most days, The Poet's Corner, a café and book exchange on Main Street, became my second home: Old-fashioned armchairs, walls lined with books, cheese toasties, carrot, cumin, coconut soup, sticky hot chocolate, Simone, the friendly proprietor, and most importantly, free Wi-Fi.

The credit card machines at the Kinsale restaurants that I visited didn't have a tip option on them. "It wouldn't be Irish to ask for a tip even if it's on the machine," explained one server. However, in the larger Irish cities credit card tipping had been discovered.

The pubs

No trip to an Irish town would be complete without visiting a local pub, and I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with a few.

A short walk from the centre of town was the Spaniard Bar, the second oldest pub in Ireland — more than 400 years old. It looked as if it had been untouched since the Spanish Armada: a warren of tiny rooms with low timbered ceilings, walls and floors of stone, and a peat fire smouldering in the corner.

At the Spaniard for the Saturday evening "trad session," the pub was shoulder to shoulder with people of all ages. The physical closeness, the warmth of the room, and the heart-touching melodies, swept me in and I was no longer a stranger.

At Monday night's trad session in Dalton's pub, the band of musicians grew with the addition of an accordionist, hand drummer, a man playing spoons, and three young lady flutists. When they sang in Gaelic, the soft melodic, almost mournful cadence was a language I'd not heard before.

At the White House, another pub in the centre of town, we were treated to a group of young people playing a mix of folk, pop and trad.

At closing time, when the musicians started playing the Irish National Anthem, everyone stood up and sang.

"Is this something special because it's Good Friday tomorrow?" I asked another friendly local. "No, every day at closing time," she said.

When I returned to Canada, an acquaintance asked: "What did you find to do in one small town for two weeks?"

Everything! I walked every street, visited every attraction, took in every event, and savoured every moment.

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