



The View From Right Field *by Rick Ohler*

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The sophisticated traveler is always aware of his surroundings. He exudes an air of confidence, has familiarized himself with local customs and presents a demeanor that lets everyone know, “Hey, I am at home wherever I go.” On September 12, the sophisticated traveler—in this case your intrepid correspondent from Right Field—alighted from the Boeing 787 and ventured to the taxi stand in front of Dublin Airport. Since we were a party of three—my sweetheart, her Dublin-based son whom she had not seen in several years and me—I offered them the back seat to catch up, while I went to the front passenger door.

“So,” said the cabbie to me in that delightful Irish baritone brogue, “I see youse are go’n’ ta drive, are ya? I’ll just take a rest over here.” Then he laughed heartily. The sophisticated traveler, you see, had gone to the right side of the car expecting to find a seat and had found a steering wheel instead. Can you believe they insist upon driving on the wrong side of the road there?

Tooling along the motorway (what a great word), I was hoping to immerse myself in the Irish experience. “Where are youse comin’ from?” asked the cabbie. Well, wouldn’t you know it? Utter the word Buffalo once, even thirty-five hundred miles from home, and the next thing you know you’d think our Irish cabbie had been in the kitchen with Teressa Bellissimo at the Anchor Bar in 1964 inventing chicken wings. Without so much as a nudge, he launched into detailed discussion about how to make chicken wings with the gusto and flamboyance of Guy Fieri.

I recorded part of his lecture because I love the sound of Irish English being spoken: “So, I fries off a whole (pronounced ‘hoole’) bulba garlic in a knob a butter (which sounds like ‘boouttar’ coming from him), then I take a half a pound of butter, reduce it down, add half bottle (‘BAH-ool’) of Frank’s hot sauce and half bottle of sriracha, then you blitz the you know what outta it and put it up it in a squeezeie bottle. That’s how you make the sauce for Buffalo wings.”

I imagined that might be the end of the chicken wing discussions for the rest of our nine days on the Emerald Isle. After all, we didn’t come across five time zones to hear about Frank’s hot sauce. But I was wrong. What dish do you suppose was on the menu of every pub and café we visited? Bangers and mash? Guinness pie? Fish and chips? Certainly, those are still go-to dishes. But in first place for ubiquity in Hibernian (RIP Snake) cuisine? Chicken wings. Without exception, chicken wings had insinuated themselves into the Dublin gastronomy.

Luckily, we did learn much more on our trip to Ireland than how to make chicken wings. And while the sophisticated traveler generally refrains from making generalizations about a culture or a whole society based on a brief visit, out here in Right Field we feel entitled to make a few observations.

Nothing beats the double decker bus—front seats, upper level—for a great view. It can be a wrestling match climbing and descending the stairs while the leviathan buses lurch their way through an ancient city with roads designed to accommodate two horse carts in the Middle Ages, but the view from 10 feet above street level—even if a trifle voyeuristic—makes the wrestling worthwhile. And the yards in city neighborhoods are not only small, but incredibly tidy and festooned with vines and flowers.

In our experience, every single person (or as the Irish would say, “pear-son”) we met was friendly to us. And helpful. A few times we apparently let our confusion with train or bus connections show on our faces, and a stranger interceded to help us figure out the otherwise inscrutable public transit routing system. Does that mean that friendliness extends to four million Irish without exception? Of course not, but the few

dozen we met made our stay pleasant. *Go raibh maith agat*, I say. If you can believe it, that whole mouthful is thank you in Irish.

I dispelled one myth, started another: Guinness doesn't taste any better closer to the brewery, to me anyway. However, quaffing a pint in a downtown Dublin pub called the Brazen Head, which opened in 1198 (626 years before the Globe Hotel opened) gives whatever you're drinking a fuller, more satisfying taste.

The only word for the Irish landscape is enchanting. Well, enchanting and green, two words. Okay, enchanting, green and enveloping. And inviting. And intimate. And so varied—mountains, pastureland and seashore within 25 miles. You get the idea. The compactness, the finiteness of an island (smaller by a third than New York State), the realization that you can get from one end to the other in a few hours, brought a cozy comfort to this tourist. Because winter is chilly, not cold and summer is warm, not hot, the lushness of the flora persists. There's a feeling of welcoming that's missing in our bigger, vaster North American landscapes. But then you think of magnitude of the history on such a small island—the Celts, worshipping the natural world around them; St. Patrick and the early Christians hoping to replace the pagans' beliefs with gospel; Vikings; Normans; the heavy-handed British overlords; the Famine that inspired the exodus to places like Buffalo; rebellions against the British, culminating in independence in 1921; the "Trouble," as they call the guerrilla wars between Catholics and Protestants not so many years ago; emigration of nearly half the population at one point. The intimate nature of that history taking place on a small spot in the ocean hits home. This is a place you can hold in your hand.

No travel writer worth his air miles and indigestion would claim to have understood a place in nine days. Besides, this trip was a reunion of my sweetheart with not only her son but her daughter-in-law and grandson, whom we had never met, so tourism was not paramount. But my experiences linger and take on meaning as they simmer. I think of our challenges trying to get around in a place where they speak English; then I wonder about all the refugees they've welcomed from Ukraine and elsewhere, those for whom English is as much a mystery as Irish is for me.

And I won't soon shake off the comments of the articulate, Pakistani-born, Irish driver, who took us into the mountains to see the thousand-year-old ruins and magical forests where old Irish souls still dwell. "What is happening to America?" he said on our way to the airport the next day, referencing the January 6 riot in Washington and subsequent assaults on democracy by a former president and his minions. "That's not America. That's third world behavior. We expect better."

We boarded our plane back to North America at two on the afternoon of September 22. I claimed the window seat to hang onto Ireland as long as possible. As we approached flying altitude, the blue sky began to darken, even as we jetted west. Hm, I thought, it must be a function of the northern latitudes having earlier sunsets post-equinox. Yes, that's it; the sophisticated traveler took earth science in high school. And then, to my embarrassment, my sweetheart discovered that the fancy Boeing 787 has window controls. By pushing a button, which I must have inadvertently done, the passenger can darken or lighten the window; it was still very sunny at 38,000 feet. The sophisticated traveler is *almost* always aware of his surroundings.

