

England, Ireland, Belgian Travelogue 2010

Liverpool with Don and Barbara - Day 1.5	2
More of Liverpool	6
Wales! (no, not Whales!)	12
Ireland — Arrival with Bart	25
Ireland Adventure	25
Wicklow Mountains National Park	29
Butterfly Photography	30
Monastic Ruins	31
Sally Gap	34
Today's Plans	36
Ireland — Bike Riding and Tara	36
Belgium Castle with Nightwise	44
Belgium Antwerp Tweetup	52
Holland & Germany — and Goodbye	67

Liverpool with Don and Barbara - Day 1.5

Optimistic on the first leg - we think all will be well



In Chicago, time for a drink.



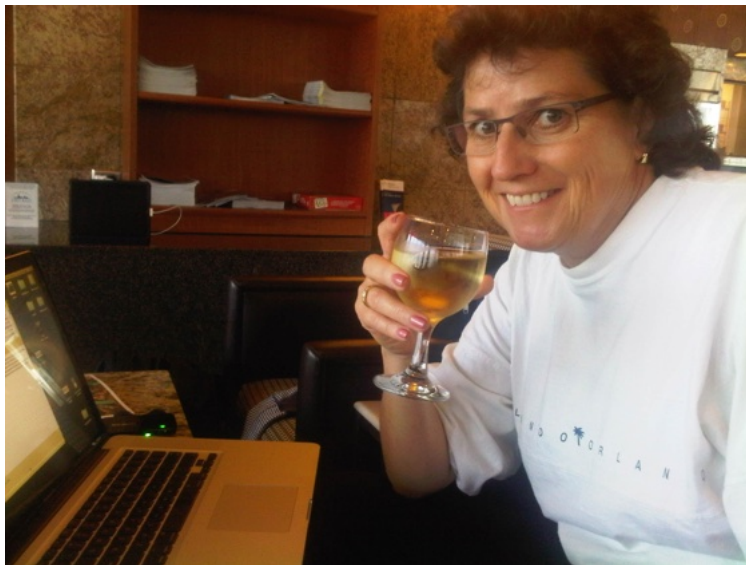
The unscheduled leg from Chicago to London was where we got Business class. Here's the controller for the seat - had to read the manual to learn to use it!



And then I had to show off how much leg room we had!



Sadly, it's time for ANOTHER drink...



Finally at Don and Barbara's house! This is my favorite room - it's called the Conservatory. Here's Steve and Don literally having English Crumpets for breakfast (I highly recommend them!)



So our luggage is with the transport folks, not due to be delivered until tonite, which is the worst possible time of all, right during our Twitter Meetup with about 20 people coming to meet us. Steve and Don have a plan to track down the driver and get the luggage. We'll see how that works out! In any case we're going to start our tour of Liverpool today.

More of Liverpool

Today, Don took us out in the morning and we did some touring around Liverpool. Have you heard of those odd statues a guy named Gormley has put up all over New York - they're statues of humans, and he's placed them on top of buildings? Gormley's FIRST statues were erected in Liverpool. In this case, he planted them on the water's edge, sort of on the Mersey River, but looking out to the Irish Sea. We decided to go see it, but it was

- a) raining
- b) outrageously windy
- c) kicking up a furious sandstorm from the beach

In other words, we laughed hysterically at the complete absurdity of trying to see these statues but not being able to open our eyes for fear of being pelted by sand in them. We ended up cleaning it out of our ears till late in the afternoon!

Anyway, here's a pic of Don and Steve pushing against the wind (we're still happy because the sandstorm hasn't hit us yet):



But when we got to the top, Steve took the camera from me (I was hovering in Don's shadow to save my contacts) and got a shot off: (yup, those are statues)



Then we visited the Apple Store at Liverpool 1 and had coffee where?



We took a DUKW tour (affectionately called the Duck Tours) through the city with Don and Barbara - saw a bunch of cool old buildings.



We stopped for a nice "cuppa" - here's the four of us (in two pairs).



Last night we had what's called a "Tweetup" which is where people who have met virtually on Twitter actually get together IRL (in real

life). This sounds dorky, and I suppose in a way it is, but they're great fun. Don arranged for people who are fans of my show (and fans of his) to come out and have a drink with us. We got about 15 people and just sat around getting to know each other. It was neat to meet people I'd talked to for so long and never actually got to see before. One fan had been listening since the very beginning, and we'd emailed each other for over 5 years, so that was probably one of the biggest fun things about it for me!



We're off to Wales tomorrow to see a castle with another internet friend - a guy who goes by the name Gazmaz. Should be fun!

Wales! (no, not Whales!)

Today will be hard to capture in a quick and witty email but I'll give it my best shot at 12:30 am with a zillion photos to choose from.

There's this guy Gazmaz I've gotten to know through Twitter and podcasting. Had him on my show a couple of times, delightful gentleman, friend of Don's (our host). Gaz drove two hours to Don's house, and then drove us around for literally 8 hours. Most of the trip was in Wales with the intent of seeing the castle where Prince Charles was made into the Prince of Wales.

I thought this building was pretty amazing with all the ivy growing on it in colors:



Evidently, Wales is a country devoid of most vowels, so I enjoyed reading the signs for towns like Ymwelwyr (and they give you the town name in English and Welsh to make it super confusing!)



We went to a lovely lake along the way called Lake Bala:



Along really windy small roads (Margaret - does this bicyclist look nervous to you?)



Steve is happiest skipping rocks...if you look REALLY closely you can see the rock skipping off the splash!



We stopped for a beer and fish and chips - I thought this a really inappropriate combination though:





My beer was so much smaller than the boys...
Then we had a quick little walk into Swallow Falls which were quite lovely



But the pièce de resistance was the Castle Caernarfon where Charles became the Prince of Wales. It was so dramatic, climbing up and down each of the parapets (As Steve said, Gaz never met a staircase he didn't want to climb. They were just narrow enough to let two very thin people pass each other, nice and treacherous as a spiral staircase.

From the outside:



The round platform in the middle ground here is where Charles stood. I should mention it was here before Charles - 1283 was when they started building it, and technically never finished it (Queens gate isn't done yet).



View out one of the parapets - that's the Irish Sea in the background.



Here's a dramatic view back into the castle from the parapet at the north.



Gaz and Steve demonstrating how the spirals of the staircases were designed to benefit a right-handed swordsman (sorry Kyle) from above, fighting a right-handed swordsman from below (ok, Kyle, you and Ken could have been conquerors).



I took this one for Diane so she could see what a baby Charles was at his investiture. He was around 17 at the time and he's Steve and my age now.



Gaz explained to me that these signs meant "slippy fally, bang your head"



I was really disturbed by these boats, they come in the channel during high tide, people jump off in some fashion and then they're beached when the tide goes out. They have double keels, evidently to balance in the mud! I have a recurring nightmare of sailing with my dad into a city street and suddenly the water drains out and we're left high and dry. So I didn't like it!





Geek time- Don finds a wifi hotspot up on the top turret!



And the boys goofing around.



Much thanks to Gaz for an outstanding day, especially arranging gorgeous weather, and making us laugh for an entire day straight!

Off to Dublin tomorrow to meet Bart! Don and Barbara were such spectacular hosts - it seems too short but you do want your hosts missing you when you leave, not thinking "good riddance!" right?

Ireland — Arrival with Bart

Ireland Adventure

We're having so much fun we haven't had time to rest! We landed in Ireland without incident (which was the first time THAT had happened), greeted by our dear friend Bart Busschots. For those of you who haven't been playing along with our home game, Bart is on my show every week in a segment we call Chit Chat Across the Pond. We had never met before in real life so this was a thrill for all three of us.

Bart works at St. Peter's College at the University of Maynooth, which is right outside of Dublin. He arranged accommodations for us to stay on the University campus, and we sort of accidentally ended up with this giant suite called "The Dublin Rooms" and later found out this is where the bishops stay when they're here!







Bart took us through the "chapel" on the campus which was spectacular!



The grounds of the campus are astonishingly beautiful - remember this is where Bart gets to WORK!



Wicklow Mountains National Park

Bart took us on a long trip around the countryside yesterday through Wicklow Mountains National Park. Our destination was Glendalough, a lake with hiking trails and ancient ruins.

Here's a very short video of Bart and me down at one of the lakes along the way that might amuse you: <http://twitvid.com/D7LHJ> (video no longer available and I can't remember what it was of so I can't find it)

On our way we stopped everywhere we saw something pretty! Here's some teeny flowers I liked and Glendalough itself.





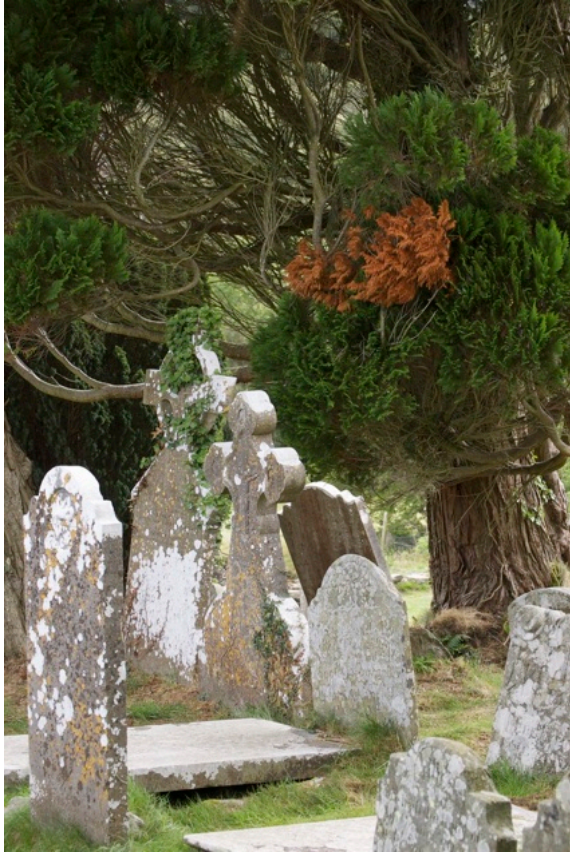
Butterfly Photography

Bart is crazy about photographing butterflies - there are 28 species in Ireland and he's captured around half of them so far on film. His alertness to butterflies became our advantage as he spotted some for us to photograph. I'm rather proud of these two images.



Monastic Ruins

As we left the lakeside we walked through the Monastic ruins, which includes an ancient cemetery and a very impressive tower that Bart said was where the monks may have defended themselves against the Vikings.







As you can see we've even been lucky on the weather - gorgeous blue skies and puffy skies - in shorts most of the time but with sweatshirts from time to time.

Sally Gap

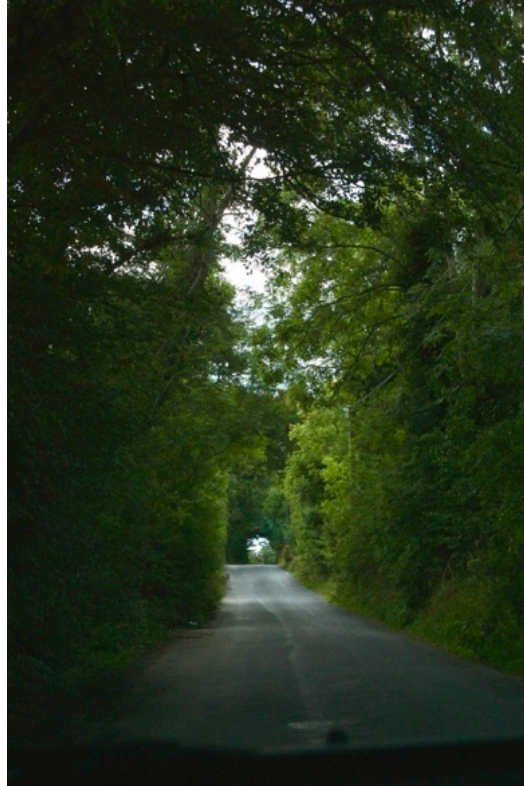
On our way back we stopped at Sally Gap (still in Glendalough national park) for a waterfall and spectacular view all the way out to the North Sea.



I enjoy taking pictures of fools - check out the sign next to these people (they had scaled barbed wire to get to this point). If you can't read it in the small image, the sign says "DANGER DANGER KEEP AWAY" and "ROCK CLIMBING IN THIS AREA EXTREMELY DANGEROUS"



We drove some beautiful country roads along the way:



Today's Plans

Today we have a light schedule: bike ride along the canal, lunch at a "carver", record a podcast (Chit Chat Across the Pond MUST go on!) then a photo walk of the Maynooth campus, followed by a Tweetup in a local pub.

I keep saying I'm going to relax but we're having too much fun!

Ireland — Bike Riding and Tara

I know, I'm going backwards in time, but since our internal clocks are completely borked up, why shouldn't yours be too?

While at Bart's in Ireland, he took us cycling along the canals. It was beautiful and also allowed us to get some much needed exercise!



Bart said the age old line, "if you don't like the weather in Ireland, wait five minutes." We got the chance to test this adage when we saw giant black thunderclouds coming our way. We raced on the bikes to get under a bridge and the skies opened up. We met a lovely man and his young daughter also taking refuge from the rain. Exactly like clockwork, the skies cleared right at about five minutes and we were on our merry way.



That evening Bart had arranged a photo walk and a Tweetup (a collection of Twitter friends in a physical location). We walked the grounds of St. Patrick's College and luckily one of the other photographers (Bernard) insisted on taking photos of US, so he caught my favorite picture of Bart, Steve, and me



On the last day we were with Bart we rolled out of bed at noon (told you our clocks were messed up!) and met Bart at 2pm to go to the Hill of Tara. The Hill of Tara was once the seat of the High King of Ireland, which is filled with ancient (bronze age) monuments. To walk through it all you see are these mounds of grass underneath which are the structures of buildings. there's a majesty to the area (pun intended) as you look out from this very high ridge and imagine the kings who met there.



While on this walk we stumbled into an amazing experience, there was a couple with about 15 birds of prey available to look at, *hold*, and watch fly. The woman let me hold a barn owl first, who was just gorgeous (I'd like curtains made to match the color and pattern of her feathers!)



Then with a whimsical grin he said, "I've got one even better, just for you!" and handed me a falcon - the grin was because she told us they are from New Mexico! Now notice the bulge right under his chin at his chest - that's where they store food they've just eaten. I asked her as he was scaring me to pieces if he was going to poke my eye out, and she said "heck no, he's already eaten - see in there? he's got 3 eyeballs in there already so he's full!" I liked her.



That was all cool, but it was REALLY cool when the guy let the other falcon fly. Here's him just letting her go:



Here she is dive bombing:



And here they are as he's (finally) convinced her to come back in. That did take about 20 minutes of coaxing and for the life of me I don't know why she DID come back, if I could fly and the food was out there, then I'd fly on forever!



Next time I get a chance to write, we'll talk about our trip to Holland and Germany!

Belgium Castle with Nightwise

You can tell that we're having a blast based on the infrequency of my emails! Yesterday we got up at 3 am after a tearful goodbye to Bart the night before, and drove to the Dublin airport, arriving there around 4:30 to return the rental car. It would have been much more fun if the rental car agency was actually OPEN at that hour. Would you believe they don't open till 6? What were we supposed to do for cryin' out loud? We couldn't even leave the car there, because there was no bus to take us the mile to the airport! We tried calling customer service, which helpfully would not open until 8:30!

We circled the airport about 4 times trying to find an alternative, and finally in desperation we put the car in a parking structure, locked the keys in the trunk and took a photo of it in the parking place so we'd be able to explain where we put it. When we got into the airport proper we went to the rental car desk...which was of course CLOSED! We found some paper on their desk and wrote a long detailed explanation of the situation, along with our phone number and got on the plane. It wasn't until today, after arguing 3 times with the people on the phone that I convinced them that it was inappropriate for them to charge me the \$150 they claimed it cost them to have AAA break them into the car. Oh right, you don't have a spare???

Ok, so then we did get on the plane to Belgium, which for once went off without a hitch...until it landed and they just couldn't remember where they parked those pesky stairs we needed to get OFF the plane! After a bit they rustled up a set, and we finally met

our friend Knightwise. That's not his real name but he's so used to it that's what we call him.

Knightwise grew up near a gorgeous castle called Alden Biesen, so he took us on a tour (very unauthorized!) As always the torrential rainstorm parted the minute we wanted to get out - we're like the magic weather people on this trip!

Here's the chapel:



Since Knightwise practically lived in the castle he knows a lot that you wouldn't see on a regular tour, like in this photo where he pulled up the carpet to reveal a tomb right in front of the altar!



Steve and Knightwise chumming it up



and a couple of external castle shots:



You know I have a strong interest in accessibility, so I was delighted when Knightwise showed off the scale model of the castle that was created for the blind. You can feel every feature of the castle with your hands, and there are even Braille instructions on it. Very very cool.



Probably the most entertaining part of the castle tour was when Knightwise took us to places we weren't supposed to go. he took us up into an attic, and we just about died laughing when amongst all these official looking storage files Knightwise found a copy of Microsoft Office 2005! That was before he opened an even higher attic door, discovering original artwork...and then hearing an alarm go off! We skedaddled out of there as fast as our little feet could take us!



Outside seemed a bit safer, so he took us on a tour of the "English park" which means - not trimmed or maintained. I loved it - reminded me so much of our yards in Michigan where my father encouraged as much growth as humanly possible. It was so GREEN!



We finally met up with Knightwises' wife Nyana (also not her real name) to go out to dinner. Here's a "little church" we passed on the way:



One of the problems in their little village is that you can't dig a hole to do some improvements without running into some Roman artifacts. Right in front of the church they were trying to lay in a new driveway and sure enough, they had to call in the archeologists. Evidently it takes forever to do any construction as a result!



I think I'll stop here and give you our Antwerp adventure in another letter!

Belgium Antwerp Tweetup

I'm really losing track of time and day, but I think it was Tuesday when Knightwise and Nyana took us to Antwerp for the day. A real thrill for me was that we took the train to get there! I know that sounds silly to be excited by that but I haven't been on a train since 1977 when my friend Linda and I went to Santa Barbara for the day with our boyfriends in high school!



Nyana and I were quite worried that the boys wouldn't make it back home though, seeing as they were wearing red shirts and all!



Knightwise has a favorite phrase when he's playing tour guide: "look down...look down...look down...look UP!" It was at the Antwerp Central train station that he first blew us away with that trick:



Another favorite phrase of Knightwise was "I'm going to show you a little church". Like this one in Antwerp:



You'll notice that the sky is filled with beautiful fluffy clouds on a bright blue sky - we were dubbed the "magic weather people" - everywhere we went throughout Europe the skies turned lovely and we had great weather!



Knightwise took us to every Mac store he could find (there's not that many and we would go in and change the home pages of the Macs to our own websites!) On the left is knightwise.com and podfeet.com on the right. Steve got this photo off before security hollered at him to not take photos. Oddly that happened in the Liverpool Apple Store too!



Even the Hilton Hotel is grand in Antwerp!



Another "little church". Knightwise was also fond of showing us an ancient building like this one, which celebrated its 1200th anniversary 10 years ago, and saying "when was your country founded again?"



You're probably getting sick of building pictures so here's a shot of the boys in their red shirts again - no idea why they're doing this particular pose, but with Knightwise he's always up to something.



We had a Tweetup planned for later in the evening but we ran into a friend from the show, Peter Boodts before lunchtime so we had pizza at a lovely Italian restaurant sitting outside. He's in a Brazilian percussion band, and was absolutely delightful - had exchanged emails with him for years!



Peter took us to a Chocolatier owned by his sister. This was the weirdest chocolate store I've ever seen! There was full sized chocolate bust of Napoleon in the entry (because this store is in a house where he used to live), there were characters from Alice in Wonderland, crazy creep creatures, everything made out of chocolate. Peter's sister introduced us to the head chef himself, and he graciously posed with one of his chocolate creations. What you can't see here is that every piece of him is a small molded piece like a baby, or a pig, or shoes!



I won't bore you with all of the pictures of the tweetup, but Peter brought an Apple Quicktake 100, which is the very first digital camera they made. On "high res" it would take a grand total of 8 photos! He lowered the resolution to allow 32 entire photos but we're not sure how he's going to get them off of the camera!



You can tell it's a real geek fest if you ask everyone to put out on the table every piece of geek gear they brought in their bags:



Nyana, silly Knightwise, and me at the tweetup. We made everyone wear podfeet pins!



and the next day their dog Scotty was sporting the pins!



That's it for now!

Holland & Germany — and Goodbye

Yesterday we drove to an area that is the intersection of three countries at one point: Belgium, Holland, and Germany. It's only about an hour away from Knightwise and Nyana's house, and goes through beautiful countryside. Scotty came along for the ride - an amazingly well behaved pooch!



On our way they took us to a very somber setting - a US World War II Cemetery. It was majestic and really made you think.



The view from the top of the hill was spectacular, made a panorama of the view looking away from the cemetery.



We got Knightwise and Nyana to sit still for a moment - love this pic of them!



They have a post at the exact point where Germany, Holland and Belgium come together - this is Steve and I attempting to be in all three countries at the same time:



We had coffee there in the part that was technically Holland so we can tick that country off of our list of places we've visited. From there we went to Germany to the town of Aachen where Knightwise and Nyana say they love to go to get, of all things, Louisiana food! Luckily we were also able to continue on our quest to taste every country's beer:

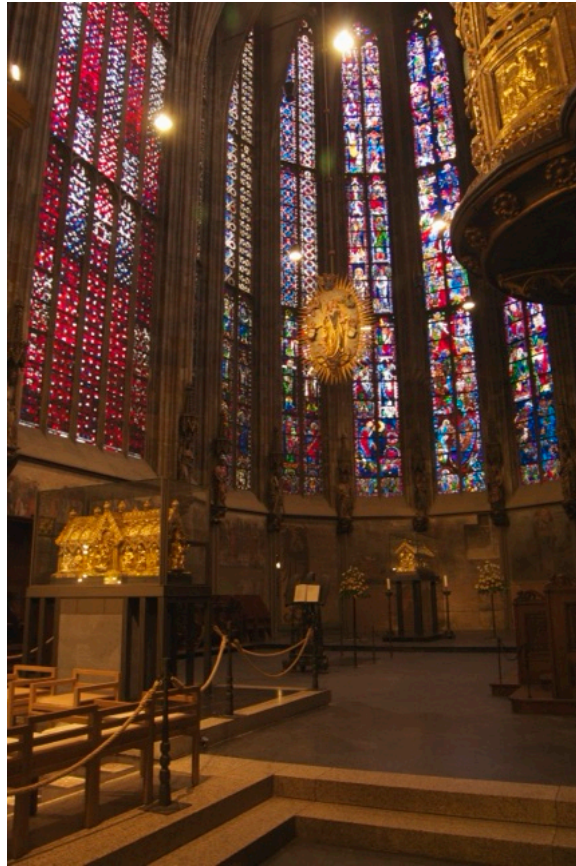


And of course we had to go bother the people at the local Apple retailer. Note that there are no "real" Apple stores in any of these areas, they're all affiliates, but really quite nice.



Knightwise showed us another "little church":





This odd little statue in Aachen is a fountain, but you can reposition the hands and arms of the little figures in it. Knightwise tried to get them to do Live Long and Prosper but they wouldn't cooperate so he joined their clan instead:



And that's going to wind up the trip, as we're currently sitting in the Manchester airport awaiting our flight out to New York and then (hopefully) on to Los Angeles later tonite.

We can't thank Don, Barbara, Gaz, Bart, Knightwise and Nyana enough for their generosity in driving us around, translating menus, choosing appropriate beers, arranging tweetups, filling us to the brim with delicious food, providing a bubble of English speaking in which we could travel without confusion, and introducing us to the comedy TV shows of the regions. We're exhausted but deliriously happy, the trip could not have been better.







Love to all,
Al & Steve