#### A brief taste of London and Ireland

#### Job interviews in London

June 1<sup>st</sup> to June 4<sup>th</sup> 2008

I only had three days in London, and most of it was spent in interviews, or on the tube between interviews, at the Kennedy Institute, Mill Hill and Hammersmith Hospital. I was able to see just a little of London, staying with Luke, Shyla and Suma in their trendy new



apartment in Notting Hill, a visit to their local, the Cock and Bottle, Trafalgar Square and a little plain old wandering. Walking around London is quite surreal to someone who had an English education but hasn't really spent any time there - every landmark and train station has a name that resonates, Paddington, Notting Hill, Trafalgar, King's Cross, Waterloo, the Tower of London, Piccadilly, Westminster. So much of our culture, so many quirks and habits, only make sense if you know the historical context - and that means London.

**Passage through Dublin** June 4<sup>th</sup> 2008

After flying from Gatwick to London I was due in Maynooth, but couldn't resist the chance to wander through Dublin. Heavy pack on the back and camera on the front I wandered from the main bus station on O'Connell Street to the Spire (the tallest sculpture in the world) and down pedestrian Henry Street. It could have been any shopping mall in the world. I cut down to the River Liffey and saw Christ Church Cathedral, which I'm going to go out on a limb





and call the most beautiful cathedral in the world. It is elegant and gothic. The first cathedral built on the site was in 1038 by King Sitric Silkenbeard (such a cool name) but the current building was founded in 1171 by King Henry II. It is a Church of Ireland church, and basically empty in a Catholic country (although to be fair, they never built a Catholic Cathedral within the old boundaries of Ireland because even the Catholic churches are basically empty

in Ireland).

I wandered from Christ Church Cathedral to Temple Bar, one of the few places in Dublin with the original medieval street pattern (complete with cobblestone streets), but fairly missable as it seems to have had the culture sucked out of it by tourism/capitalism. Close to Temple Bar is Trinity College, founded in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth I (making it the last of the seven ancient universities of the English-speaking world). The campus is quite beautiful. By this point I was running out of time, so I walked to Conolley station to catch a train to Maynooth.

I was quite surprised in a way that Dublin didn't seem very... Irish. It sort of looked like a lot of Australian cities. The pedestrian mall could have been translocated with Rundle Mall in Adelaide, while most of the buildings looked just like the neighbourhoods in London. I guess the long occupation by the British left its heavy mark on the city, and the recent economic expansion has brought about the global homogenisation.

## A small country town in Ireland June $5^{th}$ 2008

I caught the train into Maynooth, a half hour trip from Dublin, and promptly lost the map I had printed up. On my search for my hotel I wandered completely across town and back, which being Maynooth only took about 15 minutes.



The National University of Ireland is by far the most imposing institution in Maynooth. It was founded as St Patrick's College in 1795 by King George III in order to prevent Catholic priests from having to train in France where they might pick up revolutionary ideas. Secular students were only allowed to enrol in 1968, but they soon outnumbered the dwindling priests. The college formally split in 1997 into the National

University of Ireland (for humanities and sciences) and St Patrick's College (for theology). Catholicism is hardly a growth industry in Ireland after decades of heavy-

handed rule and child abuse, so NUI is easily bigger than St Pat's (NUI has more than 8000 students enrolled, while last year a total of 2 priests were ordained - and this is Ireland's only seminary).

The South Campus is St Pat's, the humanities and mathematics section of NUI, and the admin area, and is simply the most beautiful campus I have ever seen. It had the remains of Maynooth Castle at the entrance, and staggering buildings built around a stunning courtyard. The North Campus is a little ratty, except the brand new Institute of Immunology and Institute of Electrical Engineering (sharing a common building).



After arriving I checked out the main street, which takes about five minutes to walk along before it becomes a long straight walking track down a tree-lined avenue leading to nowhere. I tried out the Indian restaurant last night (which was actually not bad), and then this morning I wandered through the beautiful NUI campus before my interview.



After a surprisingly short interview (their odd legal policies prevent the applicants and the department from actually meeting each other) I had the afternoon free. Due to the trend of Euros to disappear while travelling, I had a cheap lunch at "Supermacs Family Restaurant" which looked just like McDonalds but actually served food (and even better, their pizza was actually good). I had some house keeping time on the computer, but even so I was able to check out

the rest of the town by walking down to the Royal Canal (a 170km narrow and shallow canal built in 1790 from Dublin into the countryside, just as canals were being replaced by train lines) to see where the residential area starts. Checking in at a real estate agent, the price of houses in this small country town is horrific (average 450 000 Euro for ordinary houses).

My travel buddies have unfortunately been hijacked by RyanAir, but hopefully will make it here for our road trip to begin.

### The Neolithic chambers of Brú na Bóinne June 6<sup>th</sup> 2008



Thanks to the ineptitude of RyanAir, Luke and Shyla didn't get into Maynooth until past 2am, so we changed our travel plans a little and I spent the morning showing them what could possibly be my future hometown before catching the train back to Dublin to pick up our hire car.

Luke drove us from Dublin to Slane, unphased by his first time driving on the left-hand side of the road. Slane is a tiny village north of Dublin,

of only around 1000 people. It has Slane Castle (unfortunately closed on Fridays), the

Four Sisters (four large stone houses at the intersection of the two highways, by legend built facing inwards so that the four nosey sisters could spy on each other) and a number of rather crummy places to eat.

We were in Slane to visit Brú na Bóinne, one of



the three World Heritage sites on the island of Ireland. It is one of the largest prehistoric megalithic sites in Europe, in fact of the 900 or so megalithic carvings in Europe, around 600 are in Brú na Bóinne. The area has multiple ancient complexes (older than Stonehenge or the Pyramids), including chamber tombs, standing stones and henges, dating back as old as 3500 BCE. Remains found at Brú na Bóinne have been used to reconstruct the life history of the ancient peoples, showing that on average men lived to be 29 and were 5'8", while women lived to be 26 and were 5'6" (but a small number of people lived out into their 50s).



We went to the burial mound of Newgrange. The mound at Newgrange is 76m across and 12m tall, built in a circle on the hill-top to house the narrow 18m long passage into the small central chamber (with a 6m high roof). The hill had been covered for thousands of years by landslides from the mound, but when it was discovered in the 17th century the tunnel and chamber were still intact (due to the incorporation of gutters and waterproofing with

burned clay and sea-sand putty). The archaeologist who restored the site assumed that the large amount of quartz stones found in the landslip were part of a retaining wall facing

the sunrise (but others have claimed it was actually a paved landing out the front). All up, the makers had to haul in 1/4 million tonnes of stone to build the monument, and even more impressively they had a stunning understanding of astronomy as it was designed such that at sunrise on winter solstice (21st December) a beam of light will enter the roofbox above the passage way and illuminate the central chamber for 17 minutes. Actually this doesn't occur until



four minutes after sunrise, but this is due to the slight changes in the earth's rotation that have occurred over the past five thousand years.

It was very interesting to see, and even more to be inside, this ancient monument. Mind-boggelling to think that genetically we are identical to these ancient peoples, and any child of theirs raised today would be indistinguishable from us, and conversely the break in the transmission of modern science for a single generation would make our children indistinguishable from them.

### Driving along the coastal highway of Northern Ireland June $6^{th}$ 2008

From Slane it was my turn to drive, the first time I have driven in two and a half years (and the first time in more than six years that I have driven a significant distance). I was rather relieved to find that it wasn't difficult at all to get back into the drivers seat (odd

too, that despite living in the US for more than two years it still felt natural to drive on the left).



The plan was to head up to Belfast, see the political murals of West Belfast and then drive further onwards along the coastal road to Cushendall. The Irish countryside is very pleasant to drive through, lots of sheep and rolling green hills. Once we crossed the border into Northern Ireland (there is now no actual border crossing) it changed from sleepy little agricultural towns to more industrial and modern towns.

It was getting later than we had planned, so instead of stopping in Belfast we decided to just drive through it. Thanks to the complete lack of adequate signage, navigation was almost impossible without a detailed map - roads were not labelled, and when they were they used different names from the one on our basic road map. Eventually we managed to muddle our way out of Belfast, but not without cost to our congeniality.



The coast of Northern Ireland was stunning. We got to enjoy the long slow sunset and pink light over the Irish ocean, views of the mountains of Scotland in the far distance, and the smell of salt water. The towns we passed through were all quite cute, but from a gastronomic point of view strangely barren. We had given up hope of finding any food at all when we reached Glenariff which (oddly) had two late night Chinese take-aways open. The food was horrific,

but it let us reach our hostel inland from Cushendall. At the hostel were no other tourists, just locals from Ballymena who came here on the weekend out of boredom. We shared a few beers and Baileys with them, try to stifle rolling our eyes at this one drunk girl and got some helpful advice on our following day.

# Driving along the coastal highway of Northern Ireland $\text{June}\ 7^{\text{th}}\ 2008$

After a day of crummy food, Shyla had set rules for today - a traditional Irish breakfast with soda bread, and either a shepard's pie or an Irish stew for lunch. Luckily, we were able to do both - and see the most stunning natural site in Ireland, the Giant's Causeway.

We had to refill the car after our long day driving, and paid the most I've ever seen for petrol - £1.16/litre (that is \$2.40/litre for Australians and \$8.56/gallon for Americans). Although since Ireland is so small, I doubt most people have to fill up very regularly. We drove to Ballycastle for breakfast above a bakery, which was simply delightful. I had

eggs and fried mushrooms, with a pot of tea and a fruit scone, while Luke and Shyla tried the Irish fry-up with soda bread. Just the smell whifting from the bakery was amazing. I haven't eaten such amazing baked goods since the last time I drove from Canberra to Adelaide and stopped in at the Narrandara bakery.



From Ballycastle to Carrick-a-Rede. Famous at Carrick-a-Rede is the rickety rope bridge which has been used by fishermen for 350 years. The bridge is now stable with iron cables, taking away any of the novelty, but it did make a good excuse to walk along the coast and out onto the bluff, seeing the nesting seabirds on the cliffs and the heath meadows framing the deep blue and turquoise ocean.

From Ballycastle we drove along the coast to the Giant's causeway. The Causeway is another of the three World Heritage sites in Ireland. It is a rock formation starting at the coast and diving into the ocean, formed by basaltic lava cooling rapidly, such that the contraction caused fracturing of the lava bed into hexagonal columns. The Irish legend about the Causeway



is that it was built by Fionn mac Cumhaill in order to walk from Ireland to Scotland to fight Benandonner. After building the causeway he was so tuckered out he had to have a nap, and Benandonner crossed over the bridge for the fight. Fionn's wife Oonagh laid a blanket over Fionn, and told Benandonner than Fionn was just her tiny baby. Imaging



how big Fionn himself must have been Benandonner ran back to Scotland, ripping up the causeway. In Scotland at Fingal's Cave there is a similar formation, representing the other end of the Causeway. The coast along this region was simply beautiful. We had perfect weather, deep blue skies and strong sun, the ocean was gorgeous and the rock formations were interesting.

To fulfil Shyla's second gastronomic imperative, we headed down the road to Bushmills to eat at the Bushmills Distillary kitchen, for Irish Stew, Shepherd's Pie and Pasta Bake, washed down with Guinness.

## The political murals of West Belfast June 7<sup>th</sup> 2008

Our navigation from the Giant's Causeway to Belfast was somewhat complicated by the large number of towns beginning with Bally- in this small region (the Bally- prefix means

"town" in Irish) - Ballymena, Ballyclare, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Ballyrashane, Ballyvelton, Ballybogy, Ballylintagh, Ballyleckan, Ballyvoy, Ballyknock, Ballynafie, Ballygelly, Ballyeaston, Ballynure, Ballypalady and Ballygallagh. Despite this, Luke drove through without a problem while Shyla and I dozed.



Belfast looks like a city still under reconstruction. The old churches and sites still looked shattered, groaning under the weight of neglect. Compared to Dublin, the city has the feel of a hard edge that is slightly unnerving. Walking through West Belfast in particular makes you feel uneasy. The heavy tattoos on everyone are not the body art of Seattle, but rather the political tats from the Troubles. The three decades of guerrilla war, IRA bombings

and unionist suppression of Catholics have obviously taken a hard toll on the city. Whatever mistakes they made, the hard work of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in forging the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland was a lasting good.

We saw the Peace Line wall, made to fence in the Catholics, and the Wall of Solidarity, where the Republicans show their support for other populations politically repressed by a stronger force, with murals painted by the Palestinians, the Kurds and the Basque separatists. And we saw the headquarters of Sinn Féin decorated with the quote from the famous hunger striker Bobby Sands "Our revenge will be the laughter of our children". A reminder that now the Troubles are over.



Following our visit to Belfast we drove to Drogheda, a surprisingly charming city with beautiful churches, old fortifications in the middle of the town and a lovely atmosphere to wander through. We had a nice dinner at a pizza joint and then stayed our final night just outside Brú na Bóinne. All up we drove nearly 700km across Ireland, had a brief, yet enlightening, taste of the Emerald Isle, and I got to catch up with dear friends