

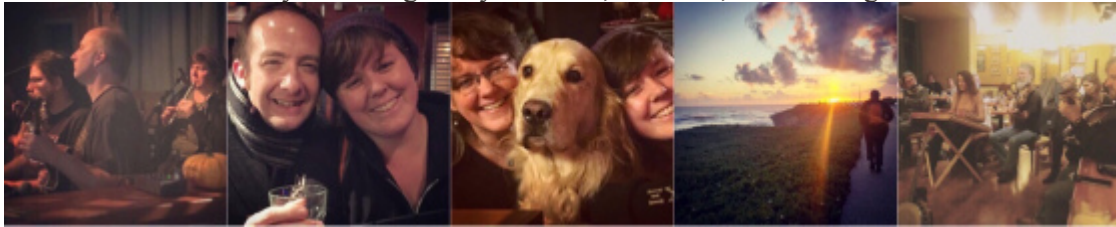
# The adventure begins!

Posted on January 20, 2020

Made it to the airport with several hours to spare, so it seems as good a time as any to start my travel diary.

While I'm excited for my upcoming adventure, the last week or so has been a bit emotional... Goodbyes are difficult, especially given that I've opted to leave my travel plans open-ended, with no return flight booked. The benefit of this is flexibility, but it's stressful to not have an answer to the "how long will you be gone?" question... my best guess at this point is that I'll likely be back in the Bay Area by early July. Stay tuned!

The last week I've been busy attending many sessions, concerts, and visiting with friends and family:



Playing music and hanging out with friends in the last week



Saying goodbye to Alyosha, then Bob, before flying off to Scotland ☐☐

I'm allowed a "purse" on my first flight, but not the second one from Gatwick to Glasgow, so I'll need to condense things a bit before then. I made a handy little diagram to help me conceptualize items that I needed to pack — an idea I got from my sister, who has on occasion drawn out fairly detailed lists of clothes to pack (although she gets into such detail as to draw entire outfit plans). The organization of items changed around a bit, but it's essentially like this:



Anyway, here's hoping that the 2 flights go well! I'm a bit nervous, but looking forward to visiting Scotland again after 10 years away, and excited to attend some awesome events at Celtic Connections (Flook, Imar, some Festival Club sessions & song workshops)

## Settling into Scotland

Posted on January 22, 2020

Just got back from some late-night sessions & am still too energetic to sleep (at 2am here)... it might be the music in my head, but it's probably also the jetlag (it's 6pm back home).



The flights went well — I had an empty seat next to me on the long flight from SFO to Gatwick London, and did a lot of reading of stockpiled articles on my iPad. The layover in Gatwick was painfully long, but I continued reading. Was a bit worried about the baggage restrictions on EasyJet (just one bag for people, like myself, who didn't shell out extra for a "purse" item), but it worked no problem. It was a super short flight, but I still got to Glasgow late, with just enough time to buy some groceries & get settled in at my AirBnB (super close to center of town).





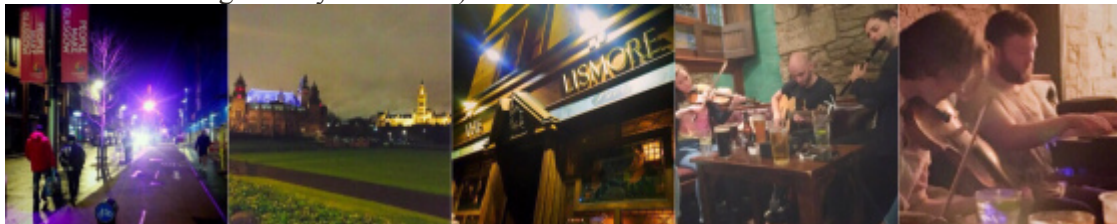
The Glasgow AirBnB

In the morning, Lorraine (a friend of my mom's) met with me to talk me through a bunch of travel tips, as well as to give me a pure dead brilliant overview of the Scottish language! After this, I went back to my apartment to try to figure out how to get the thermostat working. After many texts & 2 phone calls with the AirBnB host (and perusing the manual), I got it working! But it took almost all day...

Following the thermostat struggle, I attended a free concert at Danny Kyle's Open Stage. Some great tunes & songs. It wasn't particularly trad, but sometimes it's nice to take a breather & listen to different kinds of fiddle music, haha ^ ^



After that, I had a quick dinner back at the AirBnB, then walked over to the 9pm session at the Lismore (a nice 40 minute walk with some beautiful sights, despite the late hour... will have to check out the West end during the day sometime)



The Lismore session was excellent, but ended promptly before midnight (the bar turned on the radio). Luckily, there was talk of an after-session. After tagging along for a lift with a couple of new acquaintances from the session, we found a nice little session at the Broadcast & joined in. We played a couple of sets of tunes before calling it a night, then I walked back to my (now toasty-warm) AirBnB.

P.S. Some favorite tunes from the evening, for those interested:

- The Bunny Set (anyone know this one?)
- Soggy's (a favorite of mine) \*
- Coasts of Austria (a great tune I learned from David Brewer)
- Kansas City Hornpipe (a Fred Morrison tune I love)
- Lisnagun (aka Neverending Jig) in C
- Myra's jig
- Fleur de Mandragore \*\*\*

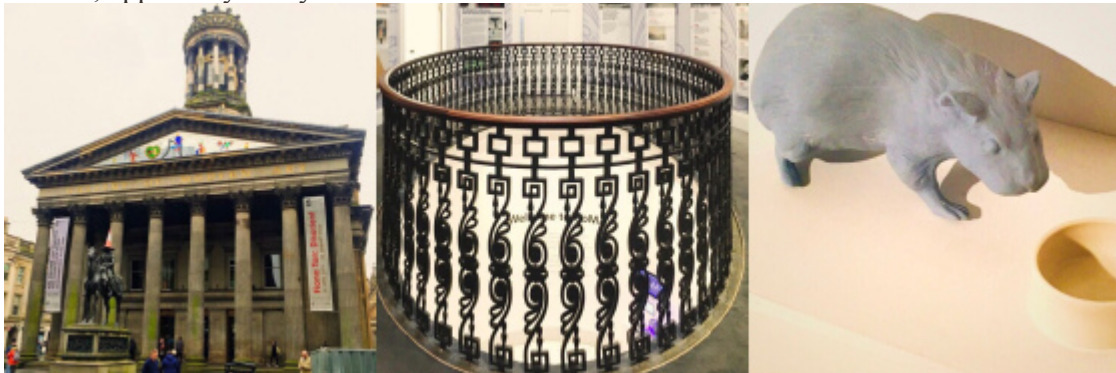
\*\*\* both of these are tunes I heard at a Montreal session too — they've clearly been making the rounds. Great tunes in the key of A!

Sadly, I didn't catch names for many new tunes tonight — it seems like people here (even more than usual back home) just learn by ear & never know the names of tunes in the first place... or maybe the crowd tonight was atypical...

## GoMA, Concert, and Sloans

Posted on January 23, 2020

Made it out during the day to visit a free museum today — the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). An interesting exhibit, with a library downstairs. I want to check out more of the museums around town; apparently many are free.



Walking around town was also quite scenic. I got a few more supplies at a store called LIDL, then walked back to eat before the evening concerts... I enjoyed seeing the street art and the really old building around town, juxtaposed with modern storefronts & giant buses.



I also enjoyed today's free concert (the Danny Kyle concert series), and hope to make it every day to see short sets by various (mostly) young artists. Today a new friend of mine, Brad Reid, performed a bunch of tunes he wrote. Good ones that I'd like to learn. I also really enjoyed the last set of songs with the Kate Doherty & The Navigators band. Maybe I'll get around to posting video somewhere...





After the concert, I hung out with Brad Reid & we walked to a session at Sloans. Tomas Callister & some of his friends were playing there, & it was an epic session! I thought about wandering to find another session after, but it would have been too hard to top, so I opted to head back for an early night in (at midnight, haha)



Thanks for reading! Stay tuned for more adventures!

## Songs and Concerts

Posted on January 24, 2020

Yesterday was such a busy day that I didn't have a chance to write much at all, but I did take some photos & video! (video links below)

So where to start? I woke up a bit tired yesterday, having stayed up late to write the last blog entry (which is why I'm writing in the afternoon today), but I got going in time for the free GCU Campus concert at noon. Some good tunes from a guy from County Clare that I'd met at a couple sessions on prior nights (Craig Harrison & his bandmates in Ape House), then the first live bagpipe music I'd heard since arriving in Scotland! The piper also played low whistle, so that was fun to watch.



Next I spent part of the afternoon at the AirBnB, eating lunch & practicing a few tunes. After this, I went & saw the 5pm Danny Kyle free concerts, this time with mostly singing — I ended up leaving early to hang out with my new friend Brad Reid who was heading home to Cape Breton the next day.



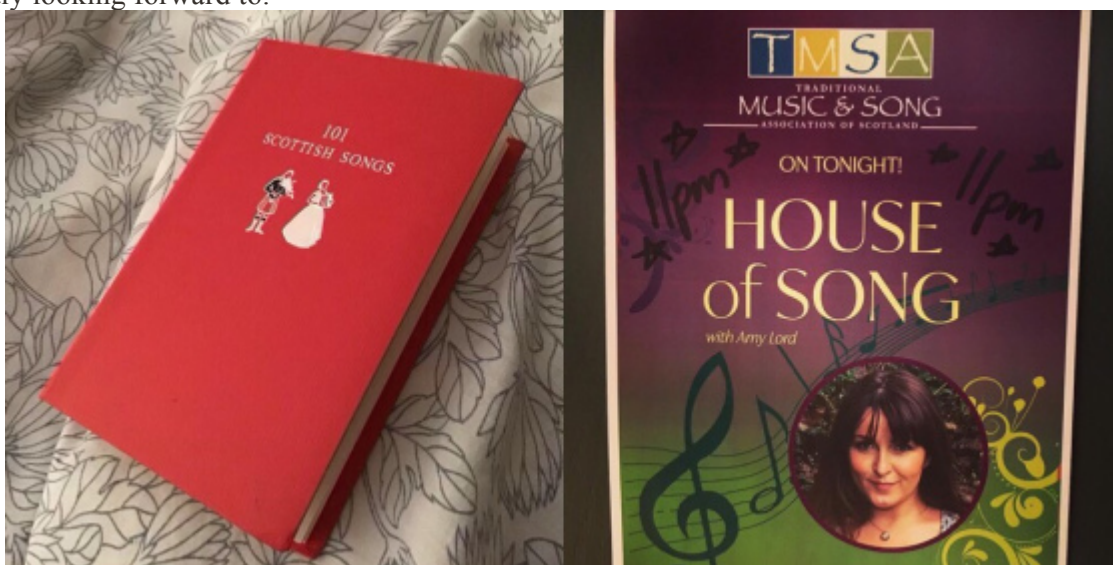
We wandered about, & I had my first Irn Bru at Malone's pub, then back to the concert hall to hear the Young Traditional Musicians of the year perform some great sets of songs & tunes. I tried to capture a bit of video, but my iPad was hardly up to the task...







I stayed up late to join in for a “House of Song” singing circle with Amy Lord and a handful of other singers — and I bought a little book of Scottish songs (my first actual souvenir, since I’m still trying to travel light). I’ll be taking a class with Amy next week to learn some songs of the sea, which I’m greatly looking forward to.



Just got back from today’s afternoon concert (the last of the Celtic Connections on Campus series) & was so happy about the surprise first act, with Adam Sutherland, John Somerville, & Innes Watson (a new-formed trio of excellent musicians). I managed to get one video for those of you back home). The other acts were also pretty awesome, but you’ll have to settle for small photos of those!



Just got tickets for the Michael McGoldrick & Dòchas concert tonight, & will likely head over to sing more after, but we’ll see... Now to quickly eat dinner & head out for more music!



Video links:

My friend Brad Reid playing some tunes he composed (& one Skinner tune). Great stuff! I've been working on learning Haley Smalls, but they're all great tunes:

1. Glasgow Gate: <https://youtu.be/f3VQuoPusMk>
2. Haley Smalls: <https://youtu.be/UGDxjQBhi4s>
3. Bovaglie's Plaid & House Across from Flora's: <https://youtu.be/JX15iwCG60o>

I've also posted a video of a really energetic set performed by Benedict Morris & Mohsen Amini near the end of the Young Traditional Musician's celebration concert (BBC filmed it too, in higher resolution most likely, haha... my iPad camera wasn't quite up to the task, but you get the idea...

<https://youtu.be/dN89nw8p8F4>

Last but not least, the new group: Adam Sutherland, John Bell, Innes Watson...

[https://youtu.be/ByaNK\\_N\\_Xfs](https://youtu.be/ByaNK_N_Xfs)

## Michael McGoldrick and Flook!!!

Posted on January 26, 2020

So on Friday I attempted a load of laundry. I left the washer going while I was out, and then I came back in, spent some time futsing with it before eventually giving up on the "timed dry" setting, and opting to warm the clothes up near the radiators (this is why it's good I have fewer clothes). They came out a bit more cardboardy than I like, but they'll break back in, I'm sure... After this, I stopped in briefly for the free Danny Kyle performances at 5pm, only long enough for a couple sets, since I needed to leave early to get to the Old Fruitmarket venue to see (drumroll...)

... Michael McGoldrick!!! He played with a huge group (like 15+ musicians, including familiar faces: Joe Kelley & Ed Boyd of Flook), & I believe this band was called Fused. This performance was preceded by the band Dòchas, which apparently hadn't been on tour for a decade... they were very good, & I especially enjoyed hearing the songs that Julie Fowlis sang in Scots-Gaelic or puir (mouth music).





I was especially lucky to get a spot in the front row, since I had bought my ticket just that afternoon, but I showed up to the show early enough to stand near the front (no assigned seats). During the concert, I chatted with a nice guy from Glasgow, who once toured California by bike. He told me a bit about how Glasgow had changed a lot over the years (I couldn't figure out if he was sad about it, since he was mostly telling me about how it used to be much more industrial). Anyway, it was an excellent concert, in good company.

After this, I went to another song circle that went til 2am or so, then off to bed. I slept in the next day (in order to sustain the late-night lifestyle), and booked the next leg of my trip in the morning — Edinburgh, Feb 3 through 12... still need to figure out what comes after that!

Then on to see the next set of performers at the Danny Kyle stage. The previous day I couldn't get a seat, so I came half an hour early this time... but the line was already super long when I got there... So I decided to remark on it to the couple standing behind me in line. To my surprise, the guy responded in a southern drawl (by which I mean American). He said they'd come over from Mississippi, & had done so for the past few years as well. He asked which shows I'd been to see, & it turned out they were also at the McGoldrick concert, & were also going to see Flook that evening — I told them where I'd be sitting (important later), & then we shuffled in to find seats for the free show. My favorite act was a singer from Aberdeen named Bob Knight (who sang songs he'd written, often funny ones).



I then walked across town to the Flook concert (at City Halls). I had a seat towards the middle, with a mostly occluded view of the stage. My new Mississippi friends stopped by on the way to their (front row) seats, and I had to suppress a pang of jealousy. I'd booked my ticket in December, but apparently still too late to get seats with a good view of the stage.

The first act was okay, but it was bluegrass (Jacob Joliff band), which wasn't a genre I came to see. I was still feeling sad about the situation, when Mr. Mississippi (I'm terrible with names) came over during the break to tell me that there was a vacant seat right next to him in the front row (!!!) — so of course I got up to sit there (at the small risk of having to go back to my assigned seat if the absent person decided to show up). It was awesome! Flook played all the sets from their latest album, with another couple sets at the end, including favorite tunes of mine: Road to Errogie & Pressed For Time. They also brought in some guest stars, including Phil Cunningham!

I stuck around after the concert to buy my 2nd souvenir (their new Ancora album), which I managed to get them all to sign. I chatted with Ed Boyd briefly (since I'd drawn that picture of him in the Lúnasa concert a while back), and he said he remembered me... then I got up the nerve to talk to my idol, Brian Finnegan. He was friendly, and wrote something nice for me on the CD: "fellow whistling spirit"



Then I went over to the house of song once again (super-crowded this time) before heading back to the AirBnB to write this at 4am... Guess I didn't come to Scotland to catch up on sleep!

ZzzZzzZ

## Fun sessions & 1st festival club concert

Posted on January 27, 2020

So I woke up around noon today (since I stayed up til 4:30am posting the last blog entry) & just barely managed to make for the 1-4pm session at MacSorley's (a 15 min walk from my AirBnB), so I skipped brunch. The session was wonderful; small, but with really skilled & friendly musicians (& a couple singers). We also had some time to just sit & chat, which I'm not usually fond of, but which is really nice when just meeting people for the first time. I led a couple sets of tunes, & jotted down some tune names for ones I'd like to learn. The guy next to me (from Glasgow) informed me of some good sessions in Edinburgh, & mentioned a restaurant called Red Squirrel. I told him I loved hearing the word "squirrel" with a Scottish accent, then he responded by saying he thought the word "mirror" in American accent sounded quite funny — I had to agree...

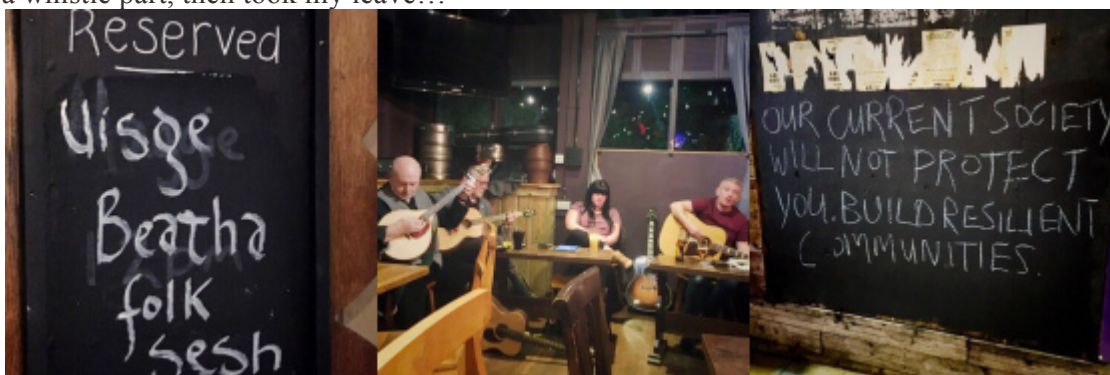


After the session, I had to make a quick dash to grab some food before the 5pm free concert, so I decided it was a good time to visit the famous Blue Lagoon chippy. I asked for their most popular kind of chips, which was curry chips (I wouldn't have guessed). It was nice to eat some warm food as I walked, then stood in line for the free concert. I ran into a familiar face, right ahead of me in line: Linda Rankin — we talked about travels (she's here from Australia for a few months) & exchanged contact info.





The concert was good — my favorite was songs about life in Glasgow, written & sung by Beth Malcolm (unless I misheard — they didn't post a list of band names today). I left a bit early to have some downtime before an evening session, then walked over to a place listed on TheSession.org — The Drake — only to find that it no longer hosted sessions, but a helpful guy at the bar informed me there was another session down the road at Dram. When I got there, I realized they were all guitar players & that it was more of a singer/songwriter session. I played a tune, then later attempted a song with a whistle part, then took my leave...



I walked back over to wait for the Glee Club to open (where I booked my first ticket for Festival Club). I got there a bit too early, so I went to hang out at the Holiday Inn across the street (where it seems a lot of good musicians involved in Celtic Connections are staying). Due to alcohol licensing regulations, most pubs close around midnight here, but the Inn has a bar that apparently stays open til 4 or 5am ... though I haven't been here that late. The place is still hopping at 2am, however, since I've walked past the bar on the way out of festival club & the place has been packed! Anyway, I made my way over to festival club & didn't really know what to expect (they never announce bands in advance), but was excited when they announced The Poozies would be playing (had never heard them before, but had seen their name floating around). They were a fun group, if not exactly my kind of music. But after them, a few familiar faces came into view & I knew it was

going to be a great time — Benedict Morris & Mohsen Amini! There was also a whistle player & bagpiper I hadn't seen before, but he had a really interesting style (and happened to be super photogenic)... his name was Ali Levack. I recommend looking all 3 up, if you haven't heard them before. Mohsen Amini plays with Talisk, and Imar (a group I get to see next weekend)



The last band wasn't quite my thing, and the previous musicians had been so incredible that I decided to call it a night, along with Rebecca Lomnicky who had been keeping me company and taking (\*cough\* much nicer) photos of the performers. But as I was walking by the Holiday Inn, I saw so many people inside that I thought I'd check out the craic. I walked past the crowd to the back room, and realized I'd missed the singing session (probably by half an hour, as it was 2:30 or so AM), but there were some instruments out, so I pulled out my low whistle for a few tunes. The hotel management came in at 3 to shut us down, so I wandered out to the main room — they were playing some lively tunes out there, but were also getting shut down by management, sadly...

I was just leaving when I saw Alasdair Fraser sitting & chatting at a table, so I went over to say hello. To my surprise, he remembered me, and complimented me on my whistle playing. I never know how to take a compliment, but I explained to him that it was his music, in large part, that had inspired me to play in the first place... I told him it was his recording of Calliope House that had first moved me to the point of tears... he kinda laughed, and said incredulously, "Really? Calliope House?"

But anyway, it was a wonderful conversation to end the night on. Alasdair was so kind to me, and even introduced me to a couple other people before I left. I felt less sad about missing out on the lively session, and it really was a wonderful way to end the night... And here I am writing past 4am, once again. At least I have less on the calendar for tomorrow! Probably just walking around & doing some evening sessions...



# Kelvingrove and Seirm

Posted on January 28, 2020

I was planning to have a lazy day, but it was actually sunny for the first time since I arrived in Glasgow! Enough so that I felt a need for sunglasses for the first time (was starting to feel silly for carrying them everywhere...)



I had a notion to walk to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, but seeing as it was so nice out, I decided to take a stroll through the Kelvingrove park. I saw a magpie (I think) & met a very cheerful cocker-spaniel & her less-than cheerful human. The walk was nice, but very cold, so I made my way to the museum I'd heard so much about. As I think I already mentioned, many museums here are free (though they accept donations).



I enjoyed the galleries that had a focus on Scottish history & artwork best of all. Some highlights included the metalwork jewelry & other artwork on display, with celtic knotwork, as well as stranger, more modern pieces (like the floating heads)...



Paintings by Gustav Doré, Joseph Donovan Adam, Henry Raeburn, & SJ Peplow

Eventually I felt I had seen all I really wanted to see (and it was already 4pm), so I started walking over to the free 5pm concert I had a reservation for at SEIRM, south side of downtown. I wasn't sure what it was going to be exactly, & it seemed like an intimate setting, with picnic tables around a central stage, & red curved brick walls (not something I am accustomed to seeing in earthquake-prone California!)



First to play were Aoife Scott & Ron Block, followed by the Poozies

When the concert started, it seemed like it was a bit of an awkward experience for everyone involved (nice atmosphere, all the same). The musicians were under the extra pressure of being recorded on video (with multiple cameras on them at all times), & likewise the audience was a bit more reserved than usual. Even when invited to sing along, no one wanted to sing a verse wrong, or be the only audience member singing (or even clapping). Aoife Scott & company started off the night with some lovely songs, followed by the Poozies (who I had just seen the night before). They were in good humor, as always. The guitarist joked about how this was the strangest gig they'd played (with an audience on 3 sides).



Up next was Dervish

I didn't have a list of bands at hand, so the next group was a complete surprise, and I was super happy to find it would be Dervish playing! I love the songs they sing, and had never had the chance to see them live (even when they had been on tour recently in California) – the timing never worked out. They were great, but like the last couple groups, a bit on-edge because of the setting. They were also down a bouzouki player, and had a new guy subbing in on guitar instead. Still, they got the best audience participation of all groups (it helped that they sang familiar songs: Molly Malone & Galway Shawl).



The last group I saw was RURA (and friends)



The last group that I stuck around to see was RURA (and guests: Ali Hutton, Chris Waite, James Lindsay, Adam Holmes, Finlay MacDonald). I had never seen the group, but was excited to get to hear them — and I recognized their guest player, Ali Hutton. They were all super-skilled players, and a lot of fun to watch.

I was thinking of trying to seek out a session after the concert, but when I walked outside, it was starting to rain, so I opted for the 15-min walk back to my AirBnB (half-jogging, since I'd left my rain poncho behind when I saw how sunny it was earlier... silly mistake!) Now I guess I get to appreciate some lazy time indoors to do laundry & decompress. More adventures tomorrow!

## MK, curry, and sessions

Posted on January 30, 2020

So today was a day I was very much looking forward to — meeting Misha and visiting the MK whistle workshop. Misha doesn't really do tours, but I asked a little while ago if I might stop by and visit briefly, to see what the workshop is like, and see some whistles-in-progress. I walked over (about 20 mins) in some light rain, so I didn't get many photos... but it was actually really nice to have to walk in the rain, since the weather reminded me of coastal days in Northern California, or Vancouver, BC. There were even a few seagulls as I walked along the canal.



As for the whistle workshop, once I got there, it was small, with just Misha and one other guy working (and Misha was mostly upstairs working on the website at the time). There were pieces of whistles all about the place, mostly ones that hadn't yet been anodized, and some prototype high whistles. I asked if I might try one of those out, and Misha pulled out a whole case of high whistle prototypes (the better ones, he said). He told me I could play them and see which ones I liked best. I did so, and he brought me some tea.

They were actually quite good high-D whistles, considering they were only prototypes. The upper & lower registers were quite solid with about half of the ones in the case, and I told him which half I preferred, and my top 2 favorites (really only stood out above the rest because I could lean into the low D, which might not be everyone's preference if they want to more easily jump the octave). He said, "interesting..." and didn't tell me why it was interesting... It made me feel like maybe I got the answer wrong on a test, haha. Anyway, I hope my input was helpful and that he starts selling some high-D whistles. I'd certainly buy one, especially if it comes in a nice color! (I have 3 low whistles he made, and one of them I bought almost explicitly because it was purple, though he also made some small design improvements, including a thumb grip & longer tuning slide, which I've really enjoyed).

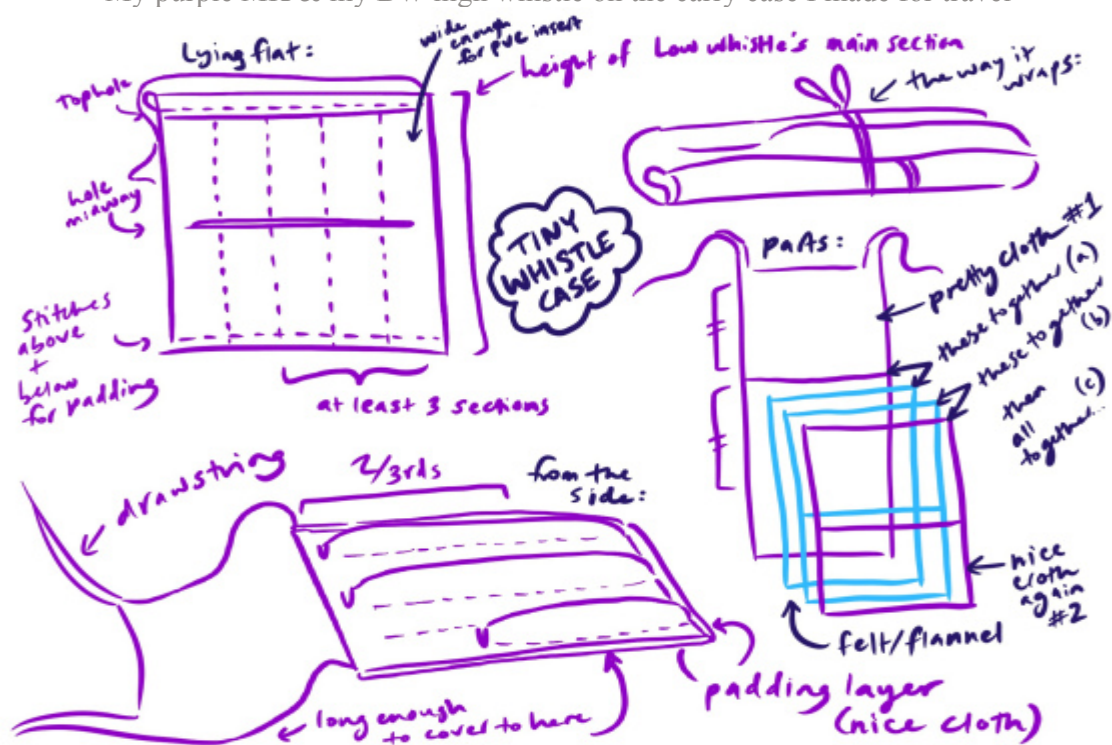
Speaking of tuning slides, I told him about how my tuning slide was a bit loose (this means that when I try to tune, the tuning slips while I'm playing, or when I set the whistle back in the case). He told me it was an easy fix, and took it back into the workshop, pressed it in on the sides (so that the slide itself was more oblong & longer front-to-back than side-to-side). It took him like 2 seconds to do what I had tried to do for like 10 minutes back home (unsuccessfully) with my bare hands, until my fingers were too sore to try any longer... I guess you need special tools to bend brass. Unfortunately,

this is something I'll likely need to do again, since the metal finds a way to warp back into a more circular shape over time, thus coming loose again.

After finishing my tea and briefly chatting, Misha said he had to get back to work on updating the website, so I packed up to go. He complimented me on the whistle case I made, which made me happy. I was a bit worried that he'd disapprove of me toting about a whistle he'd made in something without much cushioning, but he also thought it clever that I was able to stash my high whistle inside my low whistle (I wrap the high whistle in some cloth first, with a string attached so I can fish it out more easily). So anyway, that was a fun little tour — probably more detail than most readers care for, but it was a real highlight of my visit to Glasgow, so I want to outline it carefully in order to look back on the memory later.



My purple MK & my BW high whistle on the carry case I made for travel



My case design, although I made some improvements as I went along...



So after spending some time thawing out & drying my jackets, I went out to see the day's free concert at the Danny Kyle stage. Mostly singers, with one Italian harpist. I thought they were alright, but it wasn't exactly my kind of music.

I then walked over for the Ben Nevis session. I wasn't sure if the place would be packed, or how early it was set to start, so I showed up too early & asked. Sure enough, I had about an hour & a half, so I decided to take the opportunity to go next door to a restaurant called Mother India. It had been recommended, and I thought it was high time to eat out for actual food (aside from chips & curry). I went in & was given a table for two, where they quickly removed half the plates & utensils... I had a moment of doubt about eating there alone. There were two sets of utensils (for appetizers no doubt) & candles on the table. A bit too classy for my taste... and as someone unaccustomed to eating alone, it felt especially strange.



But the waitstaff were nice to me, & even rushed my order (butter chicken & onion naan) when I told them I was hoping to be somewhere else soon... So I ate in record time (for restaurant dining) & hopefully left a decent tip... my first time tipping here, so I'm unsure of the custom...

Then off to the Ben Nevis for some tunes. I was still early, but spotted someone with a fiddle case, so got to chatting. She had just flown over from Finland earlier that day, & we talked a bit about languages. Soon enough some other musicians arrived, & I was pleasantly surprised to see Ryan Murphy among them (of Ímar & Mànran). He sat directly across from me, so I awkwardly announced that I was nervous to play whistle with him there...



But it was a great session, albeit a bit noisy (the pub chatter was intense!) I led one set of tunes, & my new Finnish friend led a few. I was offered a drink, & when I discovered that whisky was an option, I decided to go for it (I don't generally eat/drink during sessions, to avoid getting my whistle clogged). So glad I did. Good stuff, and the perfect atmosphere for a wee dram... The session ended at midnight (3-hr long) & some people decided to go over to the Blue Arrow (a 12-3am session), including myself & Ryan Murphy.



When I got there, I recognized Innes (we'd met a couple of times, & he was always kind & friendly to me). Towards the end of the night, we chatted a bit. Really nice guy (center image above, playing fiddle in that shot). The session ended at 3, after many awesome tunes, & some very exuberant dancing... I'm uploading a video link so you can feel a part of the action (here: <https://youtu.be/ypFc0Dgvg64>). They finally booted us out after one last song... I walked home to write this all before sleep. Hope it's coherent enough!

## Singing Americana

Posted on February 7, 2020 by alinasue

I woke up fairly early today... I was a bit too warm, so I moved my blankets and somehow knocked something over, which meant I pretty much wasn't going to sleep any more... I had some breakfast, and practiced a few tunes... it's amazing how fast time flies by when I am playing music...

It was afternoon before I realized, and I decided to go out to another afternoon session at the captains bar. The last one had been so wonderful, but I had a suspicion that this one wasn't quite going to be my thing... It was described as an Americana session, which ironically enough is not the kind of music I know how to play. but it was still a good excuse to get out and about, and I walked through the Meadows and the George Square gardens near the university, which were both very nice in the sun.



When I got to the session, it seemed very strange to be the only American in the room, and also the only person in the room but didn't recognize any of the songs (okay, I recognized a few I had heard in Irish sessions back home)... But they were welcoming to me, all the same. One guy (named Matt) even offered to lend me his guitar, so I took him up on the offer a couple of times, and sang some of my very small repertoire of American folk songs. My guitar playing was perhaps a little bit embarrassing, but halfway decent, considering I hadn't played in standard tuning for like a year or more.



I left a bit before the session was actually over, since I needed to go and buy some more groceries... I ate a pretty quick early dinner, and then went back to town for a 6 PM session at the Royal Oak pub.



When I got there, there were only a few people at the bar, and two of them were speaking in French... it seemed like a private conversation, so I tried not to intrude... When they had paused, I asked one of them if a session was happening, and he said it was, and that he was going to be playing in it. When we sat at the bench, he pulled out a bundle of whistles (which were mostly MK whistles — a popular choice around here). He immediately looked concerned, looking at his whistle collection, so I asked him why he was upset. He said that he had left his main high-D whistle at home, which was miles away (Scotland uses the metric system mostly, but I have heard people talk about “miles” quite often)...

I told him he could borrow my high whistle (though I normally don't lend it). He played it, said he loved it, and that he wanted to buy it from me... I told him it was very special to me, & I wouldn't part with it. After he had more time to play on the whistle, he exclaimed that he would sell his soul for it... I laughed nervously, wondering if I could trust him not to just run off with it when I wasn't looking, having never met this guy before... It is my favorite high whistle, made by Gal Hiltch, who isn't currently making whistles. It's hard to find whistles that have as nice a high note as a low note, but this is one of the rare exceptions...

Anyway, we played some tunes, and things really got going once a guitarist showed up. I was surprised that we all had so many in common... I was expecting a small quiet session, but instead, it turned out to be a small room & big crowd. Also, even more than usual, it felt like we were performing. People in the pub were just standing & watching us (still chatting amongst themselves), but definitely there to listen... and because of this, we didn't have the usual laid-back time to chat between tunes. It was one set of tunes after another, followed by applause. Very strange. And one guy was sketching us as we've played, as I've done during concerts... it's weird to get a taste of my own medicine in this way (is that even the right idiom?). He drew me with the guitarist, Enrico.



Do you see the resemblance?

So after that “session” I walked over to the Ensign Ewart, where Siannie said she’d be playing. She was there with Sam, so I joined them for some tunes. They played a bunch more that I’d never heard, & Sam sang some more... such a special session! It was louder than the Captain’s Bar afternoon session, but fun all the same. I even sang one, & was complimented on it, which was really sweet... I feel a bit ashamed of my singing most of the time... but I sing anyway, because I love the songs. They also shared out money from the tip jar with me, so I can procrastinate on going to an ATM for another day!



Musicians get some drinks on the house — I asked for smoky whisky & they gave me BenRiach!



I went over to Sandy Bells next, just in time for a few more tunes (that session runs a bit later, in general). I actually ended up leading the closing set — Peter prompted me to play, & I heard someone else say “jigs” so I took those 2 pieces of info together & went with it... Hope I didn’t jump the gun on that one... but people liked the tunes, especially the last one: Kerfunken. They knew all of them, since that crowd is a highly skilled group & the tunes I picked weren’t particularly complicated. Kathryn Nicoll, Peter Thoumire, & many of their longtime friends were there... oh, & there was someone new: Anton, visiting from Russia!

Anton & I had a quick chat, & I told him I’d studied Russian (& French) in college. Funny day to be in sessions, first with a French speaker (from Brittany), then later a Russian speaker. I got to practice a very small amount of Russian (didn’t get up the nerve to speak French, but it’s just as well... my French is less rusty but the crowd was so noisy that I doubt much would’ve gotten across anyway). Ah, such lovely tunes still floating in my head... hopefully more good times tomorrow! I’ve stayed up way too late once again...

## Whisky and loud pubs

Posted on February 8, 2020 by alinasue

Woke up early again yesterday, this time suuuper groggy. I gotta stop staying up late to write my blog... but it really feels like the only natural time — to reflect on my day before I sleep. Anyway, I practiced some more tunes, took a shower, had breakfast. I perused the gig guide (a handy pamphlet that you can find in most pubs here that tells you what music is happening when & where...) I was having tea & tunes when a new flatmate arrived (this AirBnB can have more than one guest). We chatted briefly, then I decided to take advantage of the sun & walk to the castle... but it was overcast by the time I got there.



Gig guide





Fun pictures from around the castle

Still, I enjoyed the walk. I took a few photos and decided to wander back, and then I noticed a whiskey tour that was advertised... I went in to inquire about the tour, but didn't make it past the gift shop... The tour was like £30 (with 5 15ml tastings), but I decided to buy 4 mini bottles of scotch (of my choosing) for £27 instead. Still pricey, but worth getting bottles for what I wanted to do (you'll see).



I got 2 fancy ones (one I'd vaguely heard of called Highland Park, the other was Kilchoman — I had only tried their Machir Bay up to this point, but it's my favorite scotch), & I got two cheap blends (Teacher's & Isle of Skye... both purportedly with vanilla notes, which is one of my favorite flavors).

Then I walked over to the library (not the national library of Scotland, but the less-prestigious one across the street from it) in order to peruse the songbooks. Took some pictures & decided to head back for dinner. Walked through the park in twilight (beautiful time of day), & watched part of a quidditch game, then some casual golfers in the meadows. Scotland knows how to use its parks, gotta say...





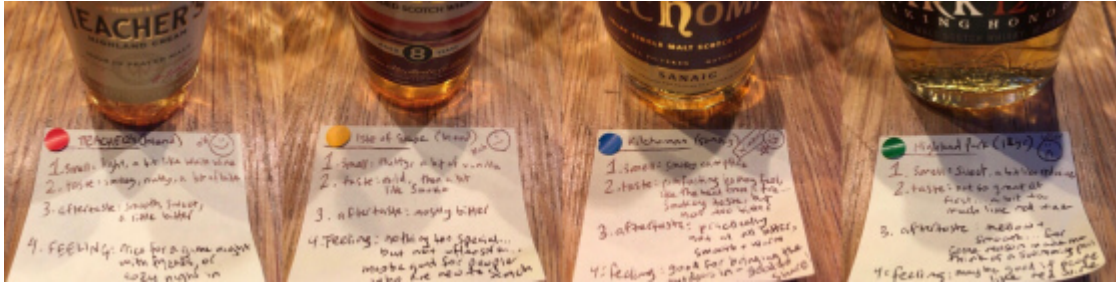
When I got back I prepared for a (drumroll...) blind whisky tasting! I arranged it so I wouldn't know what I was tasting (although ordering effects could have confounded the test a bit). Good thing I'm putting my education to good use, huh?



Materials — 4 mini scotch bottles, 4 identical glasses, 4 post-it notes, 4 sets of matching sticker pairs (one each on the bottles & the backside of the post-its), a pen, & bottle of water (to cleanse palate between tastings, hoping to reduce the order effect).

Procedure — I poured an equal amount of whisky into each cup (okay okay I eyeballed it... but it was MY eyeball, so if I can't tell a difference, it doesn't count, right?) & then obscured the bottles (with labels) from sight as I shuffled the glasses around (making sure not to have the dots on the backs of the post-its showing). I got up to do something else (filler task) & allow ample time for forgetting, then came back to shuffle some more. Finally, I removed post-its (color stickers face-down, of course) & began the taste-test.

I judged on a number of (\*cough\* arbitrary) characteristics, including: smell, taste, aftertaste, & feeling (the catch-all category). I'm sure most of you are sick of this preamble, so here are the results:



Kilchoman Sanaig — highest score by far (no, not a numeric score). Note that I couldn't even describe the flavor because it was just a “comforting homey” taste...

Highland Park 12yr — lowest score, but also note that I recognize that tastes likely differ wildly... It reminded me of red wine, which I very much dislike

Teacher's — took 2nd place for me in this lineup... tasted like a party drink, not too classy, but comforting all the same

Isle of Skye — took 3rd place, since it was so mild as to almost have no interesting flavor, but I'll admit that it could be a good introduction to scotch. Also, having no flavor is better than having bad flavor, so it beat Highland Park (for me anyway)

There you have it! Now you know all my tricks for a nice blind taste test! Go forth & have fun. Let me know if you find a fantastic scotch for me to try (especially one that's peaty with vanilla aroma/flavor).

...

After spending some time eating real food, I packed up to head to the Captain's Bar (was under the mistaken impression that sessions were back-to-back all day there), but I arrived just as one was ending & was told the next one was several hours off. I looked at my calendar (where I've been writing a bunch of options down) & decided to head to the Royal Oak, with a session underway. When I got there, it was just one guy (Grant) singing with a guitar. Some good Scottish songs, but I couldn't play along with many, since C seemed to be his favorite key & I didn't really know the melodies... but being there beat wandering aimlessly until the next Captains session started.

The crowd was pretty intimidating, as with the last time I'd played at the Royal Oak... people were there FOR the music, like attending a free concert. They would applaud between sets & take photos & video. Grant stepped out for a bit, so I decided to play a favorite slower tune, “Carolan's Cup” — to my shock, the whole pub went silent. I didn't play that well, since the panic went to my head & I played the A part of the tune like 3 times, then the B part just once on the first time through, but I got my bearings after that. It didn't help that there was a hand-drummer who was trying to insist on a 4/4 rhythm when it was a waltz (in 3/4, or in O'Carolan's day, 6/8). People applauded all the same... guess if you're drunk enough, anything sounds amazing.

Anyway, it was with much relief that I made my escape... Sadly this was a case of frying pan to fire. I squeezed my way through the crowd at the Captain's bar, put my earplugs back in (I've just been using cotton for sessions, so I can still hear myself play, but not as well). The noise levels were intense, & I don't do well with crowds at the best of times, but I knew Siannie would be there so I decided to power through it.

When we started playing tunes I got completely overwhelmed. Some drunk guys next to us kept shouting stuff like “play freebird!” and one of them sat in the chair beside me (which I had set there as an open seat for a musician, & a barricade against the crowd in the meantime) & kept leaning over me to talk to people who were in the middle of playing tunes... I couldn't take it, & I noticed I was having difficulty breathing (from stress). I tried to calm down, but all I could think was that (1) I wanted to shove that guy out of my face & (2) I wouldn't be able to escape that room if I tried (it took minutes of forcibly pushing through the crowd in order to get to the musician corner in the back, & had become more crowded since then).



Because I couldn't breathe, I couldn't play... & music is one of the best ways for me to calm down... but I couldn't. I started to have a panic attack. Siannie was very kind & offered for me to switch seats & sit next to her, & to get me a drink... I turned down the offer, since I have a bit of a code I like to stick to: I only drink when I'm already happy (& not very much even then). But moving the center helped a bit... It still took me like half an hour to stop panicking, but I was able to play some tunes despite the breathing difficulty.

I was debating whether to describe this episode at all, since I'm not really wanting a bunch of sympathy. I just want to give an honest report of my experiences, & this is an important one... It still surprises me how central pubs are in Scotland. People bring in baked goods from home to just give to people in the pub, & the bartender will put it in a Free Food tin... they treat it like a living room, but it can get so raucous & loud, since everyone's getting drunk. Sometimes the crowd breaks into a spontaneous, dirgelike song... It's a real weird thing to witness, even if it does happen in films. Back home, even the Starry Plough in Berkeley is laid-back and calm during its busiest hours by comparison. I've sometimes had to nudge my way through a crowd during a ceili night, but have never felt trapped in the pub... and Rosie McCann's is mostly a quiet place that people come to have dinner & take in the ambiance of the session (sometimes filming & photographing, but usually at a distance). If someone is singing, I can almost always hear them — here in Scotland you have to shout to get the room quiet enough (& people still chatter).

It ended up being a nice night... an excellent guitarist (Rob Truswell) came & sat next to me, & a piper (border pipes) joined in for a couple sets as well, which did a lot to lift my spirits. Eventually I cheered up enough that I decided to have a wee dram. The bodhran player went & got me some Lagavulin... really good stuff! Hard to tell without side-by-side comparison, but it seemed a little smokey, but mostly oakey. I liked it a lot.



We hung out a bit after the tunes were over, & I chatted with the drummer, who was from Poland. I asked if he would speak a bit in Polish so I could see how much I understood. I caught a few words here & there that were similar to Russian. I bet I'd do better if I could see it written down. He was amused at my effort, I think. After this, I walked back to the flat, called my mom briefly for a chat, & went to sleep...

I forgot that I had a weekend alarm for 9:30am (from last weekend's singing classes), so I only got 6.5 hours' rest, but on the bright side, I had some time to write this post & make myself a weird breakfast: haggis on toast.



I thought it looked like cat food as I opened the can. The cat agreed with this verdict, & jumped on the table to lick my spoon as I had my back turned. It seemed to microwave easily enough (quickly too! I guess it has a high fat content) — not as nice as that burger I had before... but I'm only in Scotland for a few more days; I figure I might as well make myself sick of haggis. Here's hoping that today's sessions are a bit more relaxed!

## Blustery and Dreich Day

Posted on February 9, 2020 by alinasue

So I had a mostly relaxing day yesterday... didn't do too much running around or adventuring between sessions, since the weather was less nice than previous days... cold, windy enough that you had to lean against it, & mostly rainy. It's days like these that I'm really glad to have a nice poncho stowed in my bag at all times...

But sadly, due to rain, I didn't take many photos. I walked to the center of town & picked up a new scarf (a bit warmer, since it's wider & woolier than the one I brought with me)... & most importantly, it matches my color scheme, haha...



I stopped by Sandy Bell's for the afternoon 2:30-5 session. The tunes were good, & I felt comfortable enough to lead some tunes, but not enough to sing (as some who brought guitars/banjoes were doing).



I was the only whistle player there, but they played tunes in easy enough keys, for the most part, and it was a very welcoming session.



I went back to the flat after this to make an early dinner & practice some tunes... Once I get started, I can practice for long stretches of time, but it never feels like enough. There are so many tunes! I tried practicing some more sets, but I have the hardest time forcing them to stick in my head. The sets of tunes I can already play all happened very organically — I would just practice while waiting for the bus & would notice a natural tendency to play one tune after the next... maybe I'm just not waiting for enough buses anymore... But yeah, it was a good practice session, & I had some more of that Highland Park (seemed appropriate for practicing pipe tunes).



Tried some Kopparberg cider from Sweden — very sweet, like soda  
I practiced tunes from 6 until 8:30 or so. Then I made some food (more haggis) & treated myself to a cider — Kopparberg. After this, I walked over to the evening session at the same spot (Sandy Bells). The wind was intense! I tried to get a photo, but it's not enough to describe it... I really had to lead sideways in order to walk in a straight line. Apparently flights & trains are getting cancelled, & the wind is expected to continue for the next few days. Hopefully my flight to Dublin isn't affected.



Anyway, when I got to the pub, the guy who played bass in the afternoon was there again & greeted me at the door. I went & had a seat, & the session leader (Johnathon) sat next to me, alternating between fiddle & guitar. He was a lot of fun to play tunes with, but I admit it's exhausting going to so many 3-person sessions. I feel there's a lot of pressure to play & lead more tunes... & people glancing over really seem to assume we're some kind of band... which I definitely don't understand, & it makes it stressful to play anything...

All the same, I started a few sets of tunes, & sang a couple songs. One drunk guy came & sat next to me, asking to sing a song, so I helped carry the tune for him (he was more shouting than singing, although he wasn't as annoying as the drunk guys at the Captain's bar the day before).

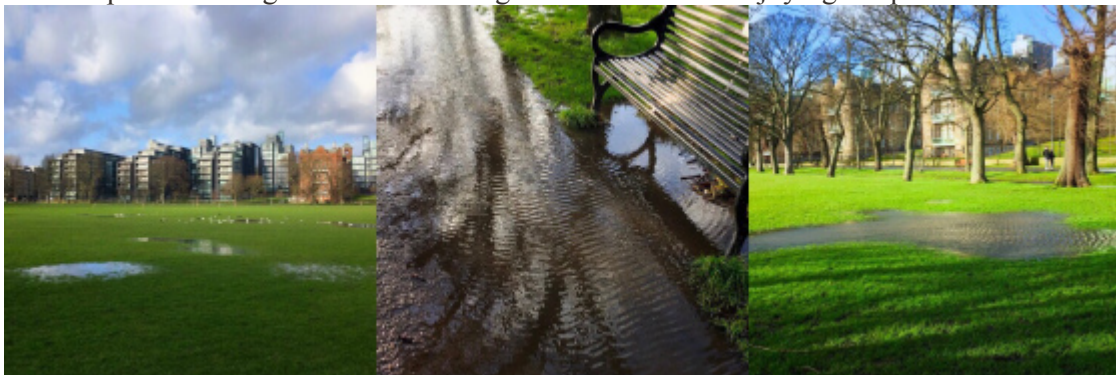
After midnight, I said goodbye & walked through the meadows in the rain... started to write this post, but got too tired & fell asleep. Actually slept 8 hours last night! It's looking sunnier today, but still occasionally raining. Today's Sunday, a big session day, so I'm hoping to have some good stories!

Off for more musical adventures — wish me luck!

## Sunday Sessions in Edinburgh

Posted on February 10, 2020 by alinasue

After breakfast this morning, I walked down to Old Town slowly, enjoying the spot of sun & reflections in puddles along the road. The seagulls seemed to be enjoying the puddles as well.





Once I got to Old Town, I wandered into a cathedral to quickly look around, stopped in a few tourist shops... they seemed to all sell exactly the same products, which seems strange to me... and there are SO many shops for scarves & woven accessories...



Anyway, I made my way over to Waverley's in time for the 3pm session (which I'd heard was excellent). When I got there, there was already a piper sitting at a table... I sat on the other end of the long L-shaped session space (the biggest session I've been to in Edinburgh so far, I think... around 14 people at peak)



The playing was great, though I knew very few of the tunes they played... and didn't catch names for many (they'd play something like 7 tunes back-to-back, so it was difficult to ask the names of any but the last of a given set). Most people here just seem to learn tunes by sitting & playing in sessions also, so that means they also don't know tune names most of the time.

I chatted a little with some of the people at the session, but never had a good opportunity to talk with Mike Katz (the piper from LA with the scottish accent, who had played with Battlefield Band, so I heard). The others seemed very nice, and I had a hard time leaving the session, but I had another session I wanted to get to... also it was 7pm & I was getting hungry...

As I was leaving, the fantastic fiddler (who played with the Tannahill Weavers), John Martin, said it was nice playing with me, & he and a couple over reached out to shake hands. I was surprised that my playing wasn't a nuisance, since at best I had played 5% of the tunes before. He said he might stop over at Cask & Barrel (the pub I was heading to next) just for drinks.

I made my way over to this new pub, & only got a little lost. Stopped at a restaurant called the Pomegranate Express to get a falafel wrap (I wanted something warm I could hold & eat as I walked).



It was delicious, & seemed to have some Thai curry influences. The falafel wasn't dry at all, & tasted a bit like yellow curry & coconut. I'd never had anything like it, but it was delicious. I finished it by the time I made it to Cask & Barrel, where the session was already underway. I was happy to see Siannie there, & sat beside her.

There was an excellent piper there, playing some sweet border pipes (seems to be the popular session choice around here) & also a drummer who occasionally pulled out a trumpet... & while I'm not usually a fan, he played so gently that I actually enjoyed hearing it! Especially when he joined in with me on Lochaber Badger :) I lost count of how many repeats I gave that tune, but it was at least 5...



Unfortunately, all good sessions must come to an end... I said goodbye to Siannie (it's likely the last time I'll see her... for a while anyway) ... it's difficult to say goodbye, & easier to just disappear without a word sometimes, but we've been session buddies this past week & we've shared excellent tunes, and good conversation. I also felt an immediate affinity with her that's fairly rare for me, as an introverted/shy person (whatever you call it)... I'll be sad to not have her company, but happy to know she's out there in the world.

I left the Cask & Barrel in exactly the wrong direction, so had to retrace my steps (the walk of shame! this happens to me more than I care to admit...) — but eventually I made it to my final session stop for the day at Sandy Bells.

I saw a guy standing at the door, & in an effort to make polite conversation, I asked if a session was still underway. He responded in French, saying, “Je ne parle pas le français... euh, l'anglais!” — I suppressed a laugh, & said “ok” as I walked inside. A session was indeed in progress, & I sat down next to the bass/fiddle player from the day before, & across from a new face (someone named Kevin who hailed from Canada — Quebec, I'm guessing, since he was speaking fluently with the French tourists). Kathryn Nicoll was there as well, so after they played a bit of jazz (Kevin's specialty, I take it), I played the tune I'd learned from her earlier in the week: Bonnie Anne. I had a couple tunes to come after it & actually didn't mess up too badly (though it'll get more polished with practice, I'm sure)...



After I'd played my new set of reels, a French guy behind me said (in french) that he loved my instrument, & complimented my playing. I said "merci " & turned back around... but that wasn't the end of the conversation — once he'd learned that I understood him, he wanted to keep chatting. He asked if he could play my whistle. I laughed & pretended not to understand him, but he kept asking (even putting his hands together & saying "pleeease?" in English with puppy-dog eyes).

It was hard to refuse, especially because I wasn't sure how best to politely decline his request en français, but it was near the end of the session, & they kept playing jazz, so I opted to pack the whistle up & remove the option of lending it altogether.

Even though it was just a short set of tunes that I ended up playing, it was nice to see Kathryn again, & the interactions with the French tourists were quite funny. Also, it was a nice evening walk to Sandy Bells & back again. Altogether, I really enjoyed the sessions I attended today — none of the pubs were too noisy.

I think my favorite space for playing might have been Cask & Barrel, though they did have television screens on every wall... but it felt like the least awkward space for musicians to sit (Sandy Bells wouldn't be bad, but customers are constantly walking through the middle of the session to get to the restroom, which is a bit disruptive).

Just 2 more full days in Edinburgh... this week has gone by too quickly!

## First snow in Edin-brr

Posted on February 11, 2020 by alinasue

So I woke up this morning to some dreary grey skies, and by the time I'd taken a shower, I realized it was snowing! Not so dreary after all! I watched the snow whirling from the window & found myself completely mesmerized... I rarely see snow, & apparently it doesn't snow much (or often) in Edinburgh either... but I guess I lucked out. There's some kind of huge storm that's come through the UK, & Edinburgh isn't seeing the worst of it... It would snow for a bit, then go back to sun, then snow again...



Two photos, one hour apart, to give you an idea of the strange alternation between sun & snow



I made brunch & practiced some tunes, then thought about jamming on some tune ideas, & ended up writing a tune that I'm calling "Sun & snow of Edinburgh" — since every time the snow flurries let up, the sky would clear up again & it would look just like a normal sunny day. It's a pretty cheerful, if meandery tune (since snow has a way of not following a linear path). I like the idea of writing a tune in each place, as a non-physical souvenir... we'll see if I can keep it going (unlikely for Dublin, since I'll only be there a few days & will likely be too busy)...

Once the wind died down a bit, I decided to take a fun little walk around the meadows (on paths I haven't yet walked). The snow was already starting to melt in the sun, & it was interesting to see trees dripping into snowy puddles like little waterfalls all along the footpaths.



The light was approaching the magic twilight hour, so the skies were just a little pink, & it was a beautiful walk... even if I was thinking extra hard about where to place my feet, so as to avoid falling & marking myself as a clumsy tourist for everyone to see...



I went to the store to buy more samosas (they're around £1 at a nearby co-op, & delicious) & went back for a quick dinner (somehow it was already 5:30, & I had a session at 6 I wanted to get to...) — then back into the slush (at this point, the paths were half-ice, half-snow). I got to the session as it was already going, but that's fine. The "itchy & scratchy" session plays essentially the same sets of tunes every week, & I was there last week. I don't think I missed too much.





“Itchy & Scratchy” session at Sandy Bells

After the session, a guy I had seen several times before brought out a new mandolin he had bought (c. 1960s German make). I asked to try it, & had a chance to rebuild some callous... I miss my mandolin & banjolin that I left back home! Another thing to look forward to upon my return! After this, I went over to the Ensign Ewart to join a session that Sam Gillespie was supposedly co-hosting. I got there early, so I hung out for a little bit and wrote down some songs from memory into my tiny songbook... (I'll have to check the lyrics later to make sure they are not too far off). A few people walked into the bar, and since they had instruments, I had a feeling they were there to play tunes... So I introduced myself. I forget names too quickly, but the fiddler's name is Rachel Walker (she said there's another fiddler in town with the same name, so I took note!) They all seemed friendly, but one of them mentioned seeing me at the Captain's bar on that unpleasant & busy night, so I got a bit lost in thought & flustered right as the session was starting (way to make a good first impression...) — and it turned out that Sam was stuck down south (likely due to transportation issues resulting from the storm)

They started playing some tunes I knew, but the fiddler (leading the set) dropped into a lower register to harmonize with me, unexpectedly, & I wasn't sure if I had mis-recognized the tune we were playing, so it frustrated me... then she did the same thing on the next tune, & the one after... I was starting to think about leaving, since I was feeling put on the spot...

I got the feeling that they were more into playing jazz & bluegrass, with the whole practice of leaving space for instrument solos, & I'd be okay with that if it were either (1) a private setting with no audience or (2) something I'd rehearsed in some way or another... but yeah, I decided to stay in the session, & let go of my frustration, bit by bit...

Things got better over the course of the night, & Rachel played some excellent tunes & sang some sweet songs. The guy who played 5-string banjo (sitting beside me) also played some good tunes... bluegrassy clawhammer banjo stuff, in mostly whistle-friendly keys!



Rachel Walker on fiddle

It was 10 minutes until the end of the session when 3 older guys walked in & greeted us (they'd met Rachel before) & offered to buy us drinks. I was playing whistle, so couldn't talk, but they got me some of the malt of the month, so I was happy with it. They requested we sing a Steeleye Span song, but Rachel didn't know it, (& I knew it, but had a feeling I'd forget the words, especially if they sang loudly enough to confuse me). So I asked if the banjo player would accompany me on guitar if I were to sing a song by Bob Dylan. Turns out he was a big fan of Bob Dylan, so he agreed (& sadly I couldn't tell him the chords, but I played the tune a couple times through & could at least tell him the key). I sang, & for the first time in a while (if ever), didn't feel my throat tensing up too much as I sang in front of people. I think I sang nicely enough, & it seemed a good way to close the session. After the other musicians left, I hung out with the three guys a bit. The most outgoing of them was trying to find out my "celtic connection" since I had mentioned the festival. Unfortunately, my knowledge for dates & names & family history has always been terrible (my mom would have had much more to say, in my place), but we talked about other aspects of history as well...

I mostly just listened to them talk & theorize as I sipped my whisky & nibbled on some really sweet butter/sugar cube that they called a "tablet" (the guitar/banjo player got it on the side of his hot toddy & didn't want it, so offered it to me... I was intrigued) — it went along well enough with the scotch, though I wouldn't go out of my way to buy one (it was crumbly & tasted like a cookie gone wrong).





At the end of the night, as we were parting ways (they were off to find another pub), one of the guys complimented my singing, telling me that I was a good “chanter” (which means “singer”) — & I was happy to hear it. Normally no one compliments my singing, but I actually sang that night without having to strain my vocal cords ... so I’m glad for the recognition, since it feels like I’ve finally started to get my footing with singing in front of others (still have a long way to go before I can do it with confidence).

I have pretty much the worst stage fright — and you might not know this about me, since I always end up performing, one way or another. Part of it is because I want to push myself out of my comfort zone, intentionally... but part of it is accidental (I don’t attend sessions to “perform” but to participate in a gathering of other music-obsessed individuals) — the performance aspect is something I forget about entirely, until I notice someone taking photos or video, or asking me what my instrument is called...

Well, just one more day in Edinburgh. I really like this city, and hope to come back and visit someday, maybe with my mandolin!

## From Edinburgh to Dublin

Posted on February 13, 2020 by alinasue

I spent another lazy morning at the AirBnB flat, folding laundry & packing bags for travel tomorrow morning, & looking up bus information. I wanted to make sure I’d have enough cash on hand, & get to the airport a bit early. Then I decided to practice a few songs (since I’m so bad at remembering lyrics, a bit of practice wouldn’t hurt)



Important aspect of packing: clearing the fridge

It was snowing off & on again, like the day before. I enjoyed having some tea & brunch in the cozy flat. Eventually I got myself in gear & went out for the singing session with Allan Johnston (hoping I was warmed up & ready to sing). When I got there, I asked to sing after Allan, & he wasn’t super supportive of the idea, so I was nervous right off the bat (he’s really into chatting, & leading songs, but not accompanying songs he’s unfamiliar with).



I told him it was in G (and as I recall, it's a really easy song that mostly alternates between G & C chords), & he played me a G chord to start, then didn't accompany me for the rest of it. It was a real struggle, since G wasn't even an ideal key for me... I was trying to compromise to make it easier for him to find the chords. I was super uncomfortable with how that song went, so my confidence was shaken. A couple more guys showed up, & Allan offered to get them drinks (saying "you two" as though I wasn't there)... it stung a bit.

Then Allan sang one of my favorite songs, & said he wrote it. I was shocked! It was one I'd learned off a Croabh Rua album — "Shore Neath The Tide" — & I never knew who wrote the song... After the song was over, I told him it was one of my favorite songs... Then he talked for a good while about how it's a love song for Co. Clare in Ireland, & how he spent some time in Doolin at sessions... I tried to get a word in about how I sang the song at the Starry Plough & how it was well-received, & how I'm going to Doolin next week... but he's one of those people who really like to talk, & aren't too keen on listening... so I gave up on this nonversation & just listened to the monologue. I stuck around to sing one more song, & when Allan continued to treat me coldly & talk over me, I decided I wasn't really enjoying myself, & I decided to leave a bit early. Maybe social singing isn't for me... I keep trying to get into it, but it feels like I'm always exposing something deeply personal & being met with apathy (with the exception of the nice guys last night).

I walked over to the library to have some quiet/alone time with books... always a comfort to me. I didn't have long to peruse books before it was time to head over to a session I'd heard about at the Zero Waste Hub Café (SHRUB co-op). They said they'd be serving stew to the musicians, & that it would be quieter and more "for the musicians" than a typical pub session. When I got there, I recognized a fiddler from a session earlier that week (she's on an exchange program from New Zealand), and I sat on the couch beside her.



Left-Right: Paul, Lewis, Dominic ?

The session got going & they played so many excellent tunes, I was struggling to keep up & jot names down on my to-learn list. At some point soon, I'll have to look these tunes up, or it'll be overwhelming. Another fiddler came in after I played the Raivlin Reel (by myself, since no one knew it) & she said she loved that tune & was sad to have missed the chance to play it. She introduced herself as Elizabeth, & I recognized her from somewhere, but couldn't locate the memory...

Eventually it came back to me: I had chatted with her & Gaetan (the guy who borrowed my high whistle at the Royal Oak), but hadn't played tunes with her.

She was great, & played some of my favorite tunes. She's doing an exchange as well, but she lives in Boston. I asked if she knew Adam Hendey (who lives there too, as far as I know). She didn't, but I hope they find each other & share some tunes at some point. I also hope she finds me on Facebook, because I was too spacey to get her last name at the time, but gave her one of my cards. I kept asking



her if she knew people I knew, since she seemed so familiar... but it turns out she studied with Hanneke Cassel, and knows Galen Fraser... so that's cool! Fantastic fiddlers!

This was my favorite session space (sorry Captain's Bar) — but they only started hosting sessions last month, & it seems to be a monthly event. It was a wonderful space, & I could imagine myself hanging out there all the time (and volunteering there) if I were living in Edinburgh. The co-op idea (especially a zero-waste one) is a really appealing one, & I've wanted to be involved in something like that for longer than I can remember. How they are financed & managed is something I've never understood — but I'd really like to learn more about it...



Another familiar face (from the session with Sam Gillespie at the Captain's Bar) walked in with her bodhran, & step-dancing shoes: Polly. She let me borrow her drum, & I loved seeing her dance. Would love to learn how to step dance like that! She is from Canada originally, but moved to Edinburgh a while back & started her own bakery/art-gallery in town... but it sounds like she's transitioning over to working with the SHRUB co-op (and providing delicious baked treats to the musicians in the meantime). I enjoyed chatting with her briefly, & I hope we stay in touch.

Following this session, I walked over to Sandy Bells with plenty of time to spare. It was a smaller session than the previous week, with about as much conversation as tune-playing. I was glad to have a chance to hang out, play a few tunes, & chat. I had a bit of the malt-of-the-month, & started a fair number of tunes — even a couple on mandolin, thanks to a guy sitting towards the back who was nice enough to lend me his recently-acquired German-made mandolin (same guy as before). I played “Lost in the Loop,” one of my favorite tunes (by Liz Carroll).

It was snowing outside during the session, but had mostly stopped by the time I was walking back to the flat. I got back & sorted some things for my morning departure, then went to sleep without posting a blog entry... Woke up the next morning to shower & finish off the food in the fridge & tidy up a bit. Then I was off!

The weather was sunny as I was exiting the building (though the sidewalk was still icy from the cold night), but it started snowing again by the time I made it to the bus stop (or “stance” as they call them here). It started looking like a blizzard by the time the bus got going, & I could hardly see anything through the windows!



It had cleared up again by the time I reached the airport, & I was surprised again at how informal airports are here in the UK. I'm used to being treated like a criminal every time I go through security check back home (and if that's how I feel as a white, mostly female-presenting individual, then I imagine it can only be worse for everyone else...) — but they didn't even do an identity check here (no one asked to see my passport, or even an ID card. I just held my digital boarding pass (on my phone) over the sensor, & a gate opened for me.

The only casualty from security was the loss of my yoghurt, which I had been saving as a treat all week, but never got around to eating. I was hoping that they'd let me bring food in, but airports seem to be all about selling foods & souvenirs to departing tourists, so it makes sense that they confiscated it. Still sad, but I didn't make a fuss.

I had an email from Ryanair telling me to arrive 2.5 hours early for my flight, so I did... only to find that they didn't post the gates for flights until just 1 hour before departure, so I wandered about for a bit... The wait wasn't too bad, since I used the time to sort through some photos I took of library books. I was too lazy to enter my info for WiFi access, but was entertained enough editing photos.

When it came time to board the plane, we were funneled outside to wait in the cold for a gate to open (a strange system, having us line up outdoors instead of indoors). We waited around outside for about 10 minutes before boarding the plane. One benefit of boarding outdoors is the nice view of the plane from the ground.



The flight was actually super comfortable (my knees weren't even touching the seat in front of me!) & I continued working on organizing things on my iPad... Soon enough, I could see Ireland! The excitement didn't kick in for me the same way as when I was landing in Gatwick, probably because I've never been to Ireland before, & was a bit nervous. It was still a beautiful sight...





Ireland!

Turns out I had reason to be nervous. While going through Airport security in London & Glasgow & Edinburgh was a breeze (no one even stamped my passport), I went under a good deal of scrutiny before I was allowed to leave the Dublin Airport. As I had feared, not having a return flight booked caused me some difficulty. The guy asked me to show him the AirBnB rooms I'd booked, & tell him when I was leaving. I told him "probably April" & he was clearly unhappy with that answer. He demanded I show him my bank account balance (which I'm surprised is even legal) & I did. Finally, he told me sternly that I am not allowed to stay more than 90 days, or play music for money... then he stamped my passport & I was allowed to enter Ireland.

I was getting super worried that the rooms I'd already booked (over \$1,000 worth of AirBnB stays) would be for nothing, & I'd be forced to fly home then & there ... & looking stressed under scrutiny surely wasn't helping my case. But anyway, I survived that test & got a €3.30 bus pass into Dublin. After a half-hour bus ride to Dublin city center, I arrived at my small room... I admit, I was a little disappointed after getting used to the really nice flat I'd been staying in.



The Wifi was also excruciatingly slow, so I'm glad I downloaded a map in advance. I decided to venture out to the Cobblestone pub without checking their online schedule, since I'd been told sessions are pretty much always going on.



I arrived around 7 & a session was already going (since 5pm), & apparently they have back-to-back sessions until midnight on Wednesdays (or most days?). I chatted with someone next to me, who was only there for the first of the three sessions. She was very nice, & I told her a little bit about my itinerary. After the first session, I decided to get some food real quick between sessions (had only eaten breakfast, & my yoghurt had been confiscated)... so I went and got a discounted sandwich at a corner shop, then rushed back to the second session.



The second session was getting started, & it turned out to be a singing session. There were practically no breaks between songs, or much organizing of who planned to sing. It all felt very spontaneous, as with tune sessions (but for songs, you only occasionally get to sing along). Some guy at the pub also did some excellent spoken word poetry... Another person sang a couple songs in Irish (gaelic) — and I asked him what one of them was about. He told me it was something to do with some guys challenging each other to fight, & somehow a goat got involved... sounded entertaining.





Brendan, Center. Behind him is the guy reciting spoken word poetry.

I kept chatting with this guy, Brendan, and sat next to him when things were shifting around & making way for the 3rd session of the evening. This next session was some really top-notch musicians, who mostly played tunes I hadn't heard, or wasn't strong on... but occasionally they played something dead simple, like "Off to California" (except with more lilt to it than I was accustomed to hearing), so I'd join in & do my best to go unnoticed. I felt it was best to lay low in that session, since none of them went out of their way to acknowledge or greet me.

Brendan, sitting next to me, remarked that he thought it rude the way they were treating me like I didn't exist. I told him they were probably big shots who didn't want to have anything to do with me, but he said even so, they should have been more polite. Ah well, these things happen. The plus-side of passing through is that I don't have to worry about whether people like me or not. It's a bit liberating. If they find me annoying, it'll likely just be for one evening's session...



Left side are brother & sister: John (fiddle) & Kathryn (flute)

But despite the excellent quality of musicianship, I still left the session feeling a bit miffed... kinda like that Waverly session, where Mike Katz never acknowledged my existence. I think I agree with Brendan: Even if (or especially if) you're a big shot, a famous musician, you should be kind & friendly to new faces in a session... It makes a huge difference. I couldn't really put my heart into playing, since I felt excluded, even though I was technically in the circle. Not really the best way to end the night... but I guess there's always tomorrow.

Worst case, I'll be out of Dublin in a couple days & can leave it all behind me.

# Dublin Museum and Uilleann Pipes

Posted on February 14, 2020 by alinasue

I woke up surprisingly early in Dublin yesterday (like 8:30am, after going to sleep at 2am), so I took a shower & heated some beans for breakfast (the only semi-nutritious thing I could find at the corner store that I could carry in my backpack without needing to refrigerate). The beans were pretty good — like maple beans back home, except in a light tomato sauce (similar to spaghetti-o's, if you've ever had that). I've never been a cereal-in-the-morning person, so this worked well for me. Nice hot food to get me going...



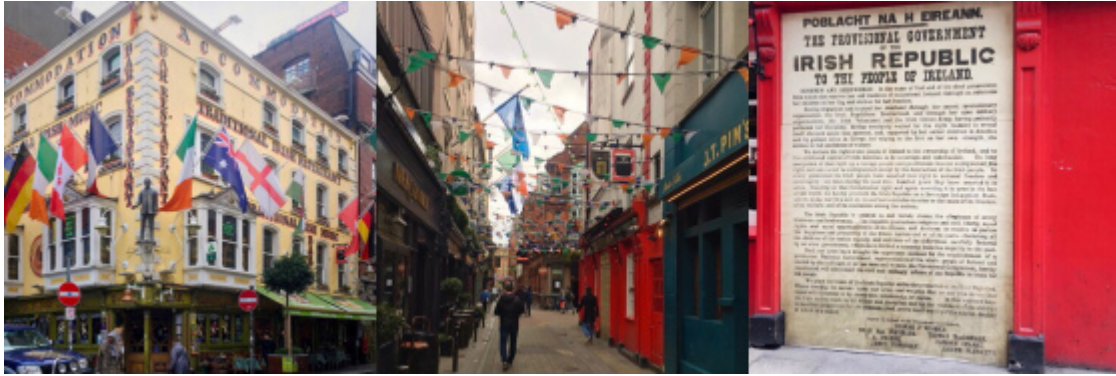
The Dublin AirBnB experience

I walked over to the bus station to ask advice about traveling to Doolin. Unfortunately there wasn't any kind of information booth, just pamphlets, so I had to ask around. Some people told me to take the 12x bus to Limerick, but that didn't seem right to me... Some people I talked to didn't even know where Doolin was at all... but eventually I found someone who actually knew, & I was advised to take the 20x bus through Galway instead... so now I can rest a bit easier (though I still have to wake up really early Saturday).



I decided to wander a bit & take in the sights. Dublin is a lot nicer in the daytime, but still a big city. I wandered aimlessly a while, enjoying the scenery & buildings. Much of the city seemed built around tourism, which makes sense... It also makes for pretty pictures.





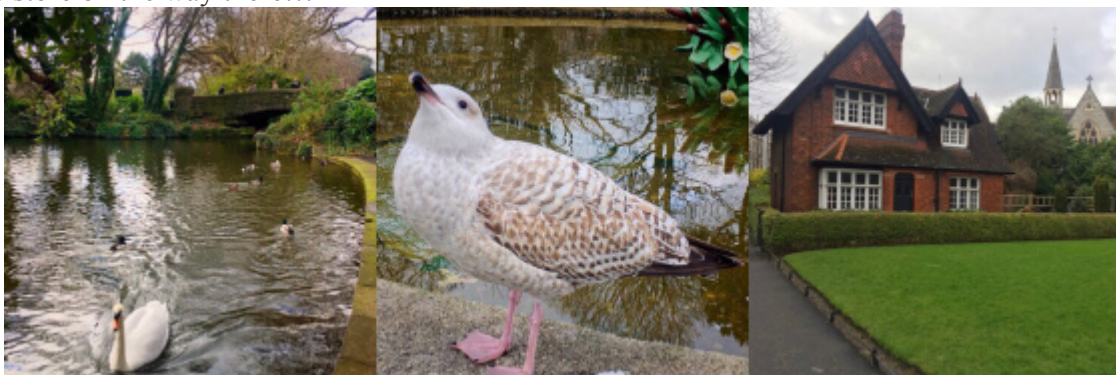
Eventually I found myself in front of a museum... it was free, & seemed like a nice enough place to spend part of the day. I think it was the National Museum of Archaeology. I spent a couple hours there, looking around...



I enjoyed the celtic jewelry & metalwork especially. There were some interesting clothes preserved in bogs as well, and some stone carving. There was one fun hands-on exhibit where people could make a rubbing of a knot-work replica, so I did. Also, there was an exhibit where some people (possibly human sacrifices) had been preserved in bogs as well, but I felt it better not to photograph those... I was surprised to see that the museum cafe was adjacent to the human sacrifice exhibit... Can't imagine wanting to eat after seeing that...



I walked towards a nearby park, where people were trying to eat lunch, but were instead mostly providing lunch to the pesky seagulls, swans, & ducks. It was a nice little park, but I didn't stay long. The weather decided to turn a bit grey & I decided to head back to the AirBnB & grab some real food at the store on the way there...



Sadly, I was getting a headache, & noticed my trusty water bottle had sprung a leak... well, it had a good run... not sure I can fix it. Since I wasn't feeling too great, I had a bit of downtime & watched a

bit of Doctor Who (since it was on Netflix). I didn't finish an episode, but it'll be a nice mindless thing to look forward to when I'm at loose ends & feeling homesick.

At 5pm, I went over to the Cobblestone pub once again. When I walked in, a guy with a fancy filming camera was instructing a couple of young fiddlers in the session to "go out, then walk right past me & sit down like you just got here" — he stuck around for a while, filming at different angles, & around the pub a bit. I'm guessing it's some kind of promotion for the pub, not local news, but I'm not sure. His camera light was really bright, which wasn't helping with my lingering headache... They played mostly fiddle tunes I didn't know — I was told it was mostly tunes from Donegal. Good stuff, but I mostly listened.



As with the day before, there were 3 sessions back-to-back: 5pm, 7:30pm, & I thiink 10pm. The second two flowed into each other more fluidly, since the session leaders from the 2nd stuck around & I didn't notice the transition. But I DID notice that I knew more tunes in the 3rd session — a couple of uilleann pipers showed up & started playing a bunch of tunes I love!



I'd made a friend during the 2nd session, named Eoin, & we talked politics for a bit. He was playing fiddle, but mostly chatting... then he walked away & left his fiddle for over an hour. I was getting worried that he wasn't coming back. But I was having a great time playing wonderful piping tunes & chatting with the pipers. First I talked to a guy named Wynton, who came from New Zealand & has been playing uilleann pipes for 4 years, but highland pipes since he was a kid. I asked him a bunch of questions, & ultimately he suggested I ask the other piper (Nollaig), who had been playing uilleann pipes for 40 years or so. Nollaig gave me a lot of helpful info, concerning my interest in learning to



play... and I'm now seriously considering it... if I have enough savings when I'm done with my travels to buy a starter set, haha.



Wynton playing uilleann pipes



Nollaig (left) playing pipes

We ended the night with a few songs, which were wonderful. By then, the pub had cleared out almost entirely. There had been a good number of people staying to watch the session all night, but I'm kinda getting used to it & getting better at ignoring the flash photography & filming, though it can still be annoying at times. Overall, Thursday was a much nicer session environment than Wednesday, especially later in the evening. People were more friendly & easy to talk to. I'm hoping sessions tonight are nice, since it's my last day in Dublin, for a while at least (but I likely have to turn in early, sadly)...

# From Dublin to Doolin's Wild Atlantic Coast

Posted on February 16, 2020 by alinasue

I spent most of my last afternoon in Dublin booking more rooms on AirBnB, & it started to rain when I went out later in the afternoon in search of a water bottle (which I eventually found, though it seemed like none of the stores carried them). So my day pretty much started with the evening's sessions.

They were excellent sessions, though because of my late start to the day (& longer-than-expected water bottle quest), I got to the first session about a half hour late. I had to cross through the crowded pub to find a stool to sit on, & sit on the outer rim of the circle. But the session was BIG... I didn't think to count, but I'm guessing it was around 20 people packed into a corner of the pub (not as packed as the rest of the pub, for sure).



I've taken to wearing cotton in my ears during sessions — it seems like even the quietest pubs are super loud. The problem with cotton is that it cuts out the highs a bit more than the lows, so I can hardly hear myself if I play high whistle (my fancy Decibullz earplugs cut out both, & much more so, making it impossible to play high/low whistle while wearing them... would probably work for pipes tho).





Anyway, I enjoyed the first session, but kept migrating further into the circle whenever I noticed a vacant seat. There were two children (guessing around age 10) who were playing fiddle, & first the boy left, so I took his seat, then the girl left so I took hers, towards the back wall (which I generally prefer, acoustically). Sitting back there had the added benefit of proximity to the session leader, who for the second session was another uilleann piper.



I loved the tunes we played in the second session, & there were a number of excellent songs as well. Attendance dropped somewhat (more open seats), but I think the session was really at a sweet spot, with the number of players & singers. I was sad when the uilleann piper packed up (he totes his pipes in a saxophone case, which is unusual to see). He had some interesting whistles too, & one had a wooden recorder mouthpiece attached to a tin whistle stem, & he said it was by a french maker. I asked if he would demo it for me, & was surprised to hear that it sounded nothing like a recorder. I guess the mouthpiece doesn't determine the sound?



The 3rd session started up & I was considering turning in early (for my early bus ride the next day), but when I saw a guy taking out another set of uilleann pipes, I had to stay for a little while. This was a younger guy (quite possibly younger than me) & he played beautifully... his pipes were louder, but they made a wonderful sound! I don't think I've ever enjoyed the sound of someone tuning their instrument so much!

Both this guy & the last were making pretty frequent use of their regulator keys, which was great to hear (especially in such close proximity). For those unfamiliar with uilleann pipes, the regulators allow pipers to play chords & counter-melodies (kinda like what many piano players do with their left hand on the lower notes, except pipers are already using both hands to play melody, so they have to use their forearm to press the keys). Pipers will sometimes use the regulators to play droning chords under the melody, which is really nice... but they can also be played staccato, making the

music feel “bouncy” and lively, which is pretty much my favorite thing to hear, though I expect it’s really difficult to do. Any uilleann pipers out there, feel free to leave a comment below & clarify anything I’m not describing well!

It was a great third session, & I was in the perfect spot to hear the pipes, fiddle, & bodhran playing (though mostly the bodhran player was on accordion, I especially enjoyed hearing his drum, locally made & with a great tone!) — I did eventually have to leave, & decided the time had come when they started playing some really complicated hornpipes (to show off, I expect! but note that I’ve never had a great fondness for hornpipes, with a few exceptions). I think it was Belfast hornpipe & Independence hornpipe that they played... among others. After chatting briefly, I took my leave & went back to do some final packing & to sleep.

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The next morning, I woke up before my alarm (whyyyyy?) at 6am. Decided to slowly warm up to the idea of wakefulness by perusing Facebook. Then I took a shower, packed, grabbed my fridge food for the road, left my keys behind, & set out into the dark empty streets of Dublin.

I got there in time for the bus leaving 1 hour ahead of the one I’d been planning to take (7:30 instead of 8:30). Quickly bought a ticket & boarded the Galway 20 bus... When I got on, the driver warned me that this bus would be making all the stops, & that I might be better off waiting for the 20x (x meaning express). But when I thought about sitting at the bus station, rather than sitting in a cozy bus & taking in more sights, the decision was easy (I kinda think of buses as roller-coasters, but usually less nauseating).

The bus ride was nice — mostly a lot of green pastures with sheep and that kind of thing. I enjoyed watching the countryside while listening to pipe tunes on my phone. I drifted in and out of consciousness (have not had a lot of sleep the last few days), but I noted that (of the places we drove through), Athlone looked nice.

Eventually I made it to Galway, which looked really nice as well. I’ll be coming back there mid-March, so that’ll be fun! I waited a while for the bus, had some cheap hot food from the nearby Centa store, then waited some more. The inspectors weren’t super helpful, & told me the driver would know which stop I should get off at (he didn’t), and when I asked where to wait for my 350 bus, the conversation went thusly:

Me: “Which is the bus stop for 350?”

Dude: “To where?”

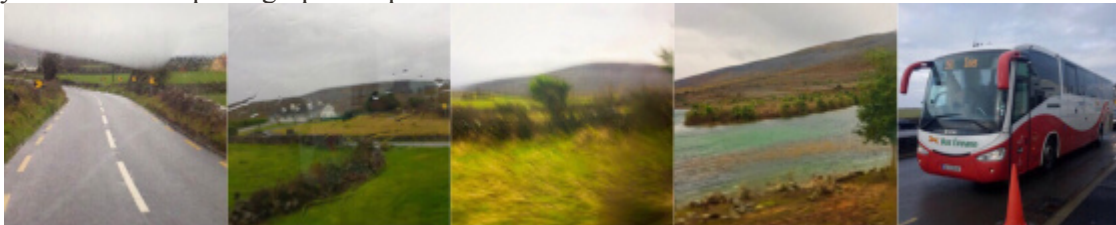
Me: “Ennis”

Dude: “I thought you said Doolin earlier?”

Me: “Yes, but that’s via the Ennis bus...”

(... you can imagine the rest)

Eventually I caught the bus to Doolin. This bus ride (on the 350 bus) was so scenic! I was tempted to just jump out & look around every time it stopped... but it was raining, so I stayed in... & this giant bus was driving around the narrowest, curviest roads. The view out the window started out pastoral (like the road from Dublin to Galway) but at points, literally took my breath away... Sadly my photos can’t do it justice, given the rain... but I’ll be taking the 350 at least a couple more times, so plenty of chances to photograph I hope!





At last I made it to Doolin (Dúlainn is the better-looking Irish version), right after the Lisdoonvarna stop (where the bus had to make an awkward 3-point turn). I stepped out and the rain had just stopped! The sunlight was diffuse & stunning! The wind was cold & bracing. Dublin was a city, like any city. This is Ireland! I immediately fell in love with the place...

I walked across town, following the sparse map on Google to the Lane Lodge B&B/AirBnB down the road, just past O'Connor's pub (where I've heard there's music every night) so I'm at an ideal location (though one end of town to the other is about a 15 minute walk, it's nice to be close to the pub due to frequent rain).



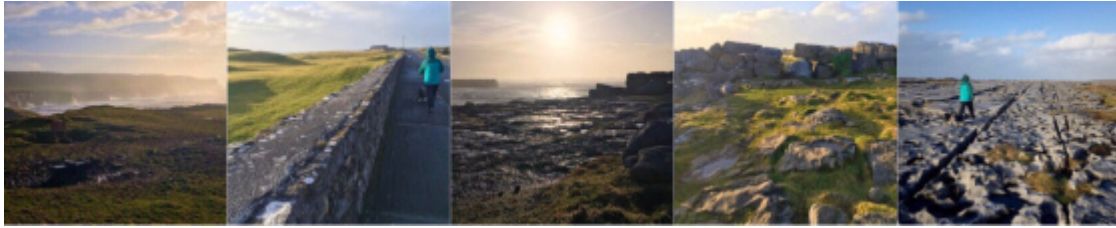
When I got to the B&B, Teresa (the hostess) greeted me at the door, saying “you must be Alina!” — I found out a bit later that I'm the only guest at the B&B until Tuesday (and again a couple days later), and I'll be here for 16 days. Teresa was VERY apologetic about how dull the town is, & offered to refund me if I changed my mind & wanted to go to Ennis instead. I'm already planning on going to Ennis at the end of March, so I don't feel a pressing need to leave this small town just yet.



Also, after weeks in busy cities, this feels like exactly the change of pace I'm looking for... A peaceful place to reflect on my thoughts, & take my time to really soak in my surroundings (figuratively, but if weather predictions are correct, literally as well). I reassured Teresa that I would be plenty busy, studying a backlog of tunes I've been wanting to work on.

I admit, her concern about me made me feel a bit anxious... Did I make the right choice coming here? Will I just be disappointed? I had to shrug off these concerns... Worst case, I have to spend a couple weeks in near-solitude (though Teresa seems very friendly, & I'm sure I'll be able to meet some musicians), & my walks in nature may be very moist... but I think I'm okay with that. And as I said, I'm enjoying the change of pace.

My first question was where the store was (as I've been saving money by making my own food). She said it was “far” (not sure if this is just the small-town mentality of a 10-min walk being far), & offered to drive me around as needed. Very sweet of her... Also, my room is fantastic, & has a great view of the sea! I love this place so much... we'll see if I get bored of it, but I very much doubt it! Teresa & I chatted over tea, then we took her two dogs off on a walk to the Doolin pier...



The view of the frothy sea was incredible. I'm running out of adjectives to describe this place... But I had never seen anything like it. There was a waterfall of rain runoff falling into the sea, which I later learned was around the Cliffs of Moher (famous as a popular Irish tune, but also a beautiful sight, it turns out). I really hope the weather is nice enough that I can wander up there later.

Teresa & I walked with the dogs (what she called taking "a stride") along a rocky beach... if it can be called a beach. The "sand" was essentially huge rocks that were broken up into giant stepping stones, & dotted with soft grassy turf. Again, I don't have the adjectives to describe it. It was SOMETHING, that's for sure! Nice flat rocks with deep crevasses — I was a bit worried about fumbling my phone while taking photos...



I hung out by the frothy waves & played a few tunes, despite the wind (which cuts across the fipple of a whistle and prevents it from sounding). I could only play a few tunes before my fingers froze, but I felt a need to make a musical offering to this beautiful place. Teresa had left a bit ago with the dogs, & it was nice to enjoy the solitude & commune with my surroundings. As I was coming back, & stepping back onto the road, a car was approaching. Sure enough, it was Teresa, back to give me a lift because of the looming stormclouds, haha.



I think those of you who are worried about me back home can rest easy — I clearly have a caretaker here. She asked if I wanted a ride back to the B&B (a 5-min walk) or clear across town to McGann's. I opted for the latter (she said they had good fish & chips, & I was hungry & suggestible). I walked a little before settling in to McGann's for some fish & chips (Doolin cod, chips, and McGann's house coleslaw). I arrived a bit before 6, & the session was set to start at 9, so I had some time to chill & write (these blog posts take a long time, haha). The fish & chips were indeed delicious — and a generous serving as well.





I decided to order my first real Irish Guinness after this, as I'd heard it's better in Ireland. I let it settle a bit (I enjoy watching the color change), then I tried it. The froth was SO smooth — almost creamy. I could drink a pint of that alone, haha. The beer itself was excellent too (though even back home, Guinness is pretty much my favorite beer... probably tied with the Espresso Stout by Eugene's Oakshire Brewing) — and I felt it had a sweeter, almost molasses-y flavor that I haven't noticed before. It was maybe a hint more bitter, but the sweet aftertaste more than made up for this. Good stuff!

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I moved from my table as the place got more crowded (thought it silly to be using a 4-person table all alone), so I asked a couple at a 6-person table if I could sit with them. They welcomed me, and as I surmised from their accent, they were American as well (but southern). We talked about travel, & it sounds like they've been all over the world — living part-time in Guatemala (and the woman had lived in Ireland — Wicklow — for some years earlier in her life). As musicians trickled in, I asked if I could join the session — they said it was fine with them. Then they set up sound equipment, which I was sure was just for singers... But when they mic'd the banjo, I realized something else was going on. They indicated that I should sit by the microphone, & the lady on keyboard (Orla) smiled at me & said "trial by fire." I chuckled nervously. The main session leader, Eddie Costello, responded saying, "we don't do things by half-measures here." They were giving me a mic without ever having heard me play! I guess my fears that people would be unwelcoming here were unfounded...

They played couple sets of reels & jigs (often going from jigs into reels), & then Eddie asked for my name — I told him & then he turned to the mic & said "Killina is here visiting from California, & she's going to play a couple tunes for us!" (I corrected him, stalling for time, and he then corrected himself on the mic, calling me "Helena" this time. Close enough.)

I played several sets of tunes, but none as successfully as the first set (when I picked the most standard tunes I could think of). I'd never played with these folks before, & was unsure which tunes we'd have in common. They led a bunch of excellent ones, including Guns of the Magnificent Seven (which I've been faking a good long while, but still haven't quite mastered) — a great tune.

As the night went on, the crowd grew & a bridesmaid party appeared (bachelorette party? I'm not up on that lingo). A kid who I swear looked 15 (and very inebriated) danced with an elderly woman, which was so nice to watch... Some others were dancing as well (not ceili/set dancing, just casual partner dancing). Good times! It's my favorite thing to play for dancers, especially spontaneous dancing like that!



We played til just past midnight, then as I was leaving, I told the boy (who seriously looked too young to be that drunk) to “keep dancing” — he looked nervous & said “you saw that?” but I assured him that it was wonderful. The walk back to the B&B was nice, & it wasn’t even raining. I wish I could say the same for the rest of the night, but the strong winds, rain, & hail pattered on the window above my head loudly, making it hard to sleep... it was nearly deafening even with earplugs in.

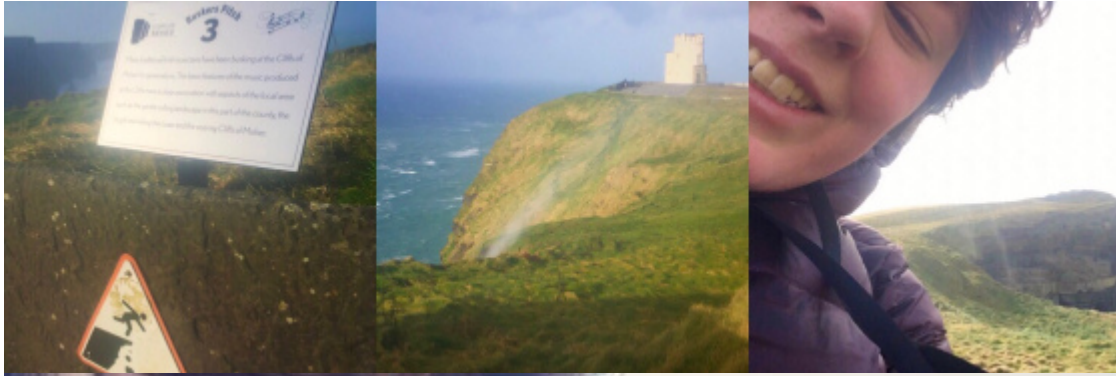
Thankfully, when I woke up fully (not sure I was ever 100% asleep...) at 9am, I noticed the skies were starting to clear. I went downstairs & Teresa offered to cook me breakfast (big perk of B&Bs, it turns out, since I still haven’t made it to a grocery store). She asked about the session, & she filled me in on names I didn’t know (like Orla) — since it’s such a small town, she knows everyone here. It’s pretty funny, but very helpful, since my memory for names is terrible.



I told her I had an inclination to walk to the Cliffs of Moher, & asked the distance... she said it was about 5km (3mi) to get there, but she could give me a ride there, & I could bus back. Given how quickly the weather changes here, that seemed like a better plan, so I took her up on the offer. We walked to get her car from down the street at Fitzpatrick’s pub (where her son works). She dropped me off by the cliffs & pointed out the bus stop, then I was on my own.

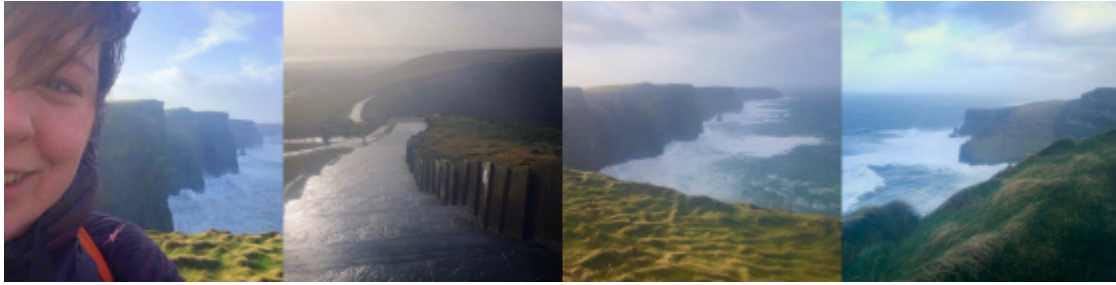






The view was amazing, but the wind was fierce... It almost blew me backwards several times as I approached the pathway along the cliffside (with tall walls all around, never fear!) I walked along one side with a bunch of steps, & some kind of tower, then noticed that the footpath was closed (too dangerous without a tall wall beside it), so I turned back to venture in the other direction.





There was an incline, & as I tried to walk up it, I felt as though I were pressing into a physical wall made of pure wind. I was leaning into it with all my weight & force, but could make no headway. I decided it was too risky to proceed with wind like that, so I turned back to the bus stop. Good thing I did too, because it soon started hailing!

I ran to take shelter inside a small chamber outside the tourism office (closed for the season, or maybe the inclement weather). The hail really stings when it hits at that force (such violent wind), so when I saw a few others struggling against the wind & hail, I called them over to take cover with me. They did, & I hopefully inquired as to whether they drove over (thinking I could mooch a ride). Sadly, they were bus-riders like myself. We waited 30 minutes for a bus together, then I came back to Doolin.

The sun was out when I arrived, so in my hubris I decided to take a stroll & enjoy the clear weather (and less violent wind)... but it soon started hailing & the 10 minute walk back to the B&B felt like an eternity... But I had a hot shower on my return, finger-combing the knots in my short hair (from all the salty wind along the cliffs), & spent some nice lazy time in my cozy bed! So nice to have this haven to return to. I loved the place I stayed in Edinburgh (& it was way less loud at night), but this place feels like heaven. I can see the Cliffs of Moher from my bedroom window! It really doesn't get better than this.

Sitting & writing this, I have that weird feeling of having just come off a boat, feeling jostled by imaginary waves... except it's wind instead. What do you call that? Wind-legs? Anyway, there's a session tonight at O'Connor's, & it's supposed to be an actual session (without microphones), so I'm looking forward to that!

## Car rides and rough tides

Posted on February 18, 2020 by alinasue

On Sunday afternoon, Teresa kindly took me to Lisdoonvarna to buy some groceries (basically a bunch of canned soup) since there's no store in Doolin. She showed me some of her album collection in the car ride over, including the Kilfenora Ceili Band, Stockton's Wing, Katie Theasby, & Daoiri Farrell (who I'll be going to see in concert this coming Saturday!) — she grew up around a lot of the musicians around Doolin, so many are personal friends of hers.





When we got back, I did some research into booking a plane ticket home via the closest airport (Shannon) in County Clare. I found a flight that will get me home by March 28 (in time to see Altan in Berkeley) & I booked it. It was a bit pricey, but I wasn't sure if prices would keep going up, so it seemed worth booking sooner. I'll be in Ireland a bit over a month (here in Doolin, then Costelloe to catch a ferry, then Inis Mór for the Aran Islands Celtic Music Festival, then onwards to Galway, Ennis, then home!)

Soon enough, it was time to head over to O'Connor's pub for the Sunday early session (starting at 6:30 in winter months). I ordered the fish chowder, after Teresa's recommendation. It was excellent. It had local fish & no clams, but I think I prefer it that way. I think I'll have to go back for more at some point — so good!



As I sat down to wait for my chowder, I met another American — she's been coming to visit annually for 23 years! She plays flute, & commended my choice in getting the chowder (apparently it's her favorite as well). As more musicians settled in, I took a stool & sat on the outside rim of the circle.

We played a bunch of tunes, some of them really high-energy (going from jigs to reels seems to be a good trick to keep the energy up around these parts). Some people sang some songs, & the singing dominated the session by the end of the night. I think a highlight for me was when a guy who was either really drunk, or tired (probably both) sang a song... the guy playing accordion accompanied him MASTERFULLY, & it somehow sounded great (if he'd been singing solo, the melody would have been mostly absent).

As musicians were packing up their instruments, I decided to sing a song. As I was leaving afterward, a couple people complimented my singing... which was really sweet of them, but I still feel very nervous singing in front of people (& I struggle to remember lyrics). I only sang at the end of the night because I assumed everyone would be too drunk to remember... Anyway, I walked around the corner on Fisher Street & back to bed (nice to be so close to the pub).

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I woke up the next morning & realized it was maybe too late for breakfast. I dressed quickly & rushed downstairs, but relaxed a bit when I heard chatter. A couple of girls (one from Utah, the other from Colorado) had apparently spent the night & were talking with Teresa about going to the cliffs. Teresa made me breakfast as a neighbor came by for tea (I think this is the most quintessentially Irish thing I have witnessed). I noticed the weather was clearing up, so when I finished breakfast, I got ready to head outside.

I took a stroll, aiming for the water, but I got distracted by some beautiful grassy hills (a pitch & putt golf course, which appeared to be closed due to weather conditions). I walked to the top of the hill, overlooking the Atlantic, & found a nice nook on the hillside, sheltered for the wind. The grass was bouncy and soft, & surprisingly dry considering there had been heavy rain just the hour before. I suppose the high winds blow-dry the hills.



It's hard to describe, but this nook in the hill was more comfortable than most chairs & beds, so I decided to stay there until the sky turned grey again. I played some tunes on high whistle (which I pretty much carry with me everywhere). I always find it easiest to play out in nature... that's where music comes alive for me. I'm always better at practicing outdoors, but it is tricky to do here with the high winds...



I found myself writing another tune, so I recorded it to jot it down later. It's a happy little reel. The day before, I wrote a little hornpipe by the rocks and the crashing waves ... I know, I said I didn't like hornpipes... and I don't really; they're a pain to notate... I still have to tweak it a bit to get the phrasing right.



I moved along when I saw dark clouds gathering... but before I got back to Fisher Street, the clouds had cleared up, so I walked further along to a nearby bridge & along a road... there didn't seem to be much of interest, & clouds were looming again, so I turned back.





It had just started to rain when I got back, but I was excited to see that there was a package waiting for me! My mom had mailed me my ballot (to vote in the primaries) as well as some earrings (valentines present) and a credit card that had arrived for me 2 days after I left for Scotland (poor timing on the bank's part).

I spent a good amount of time that afternoon researching the measures & candidates in the ballot, & filled everything out by mid-afternoon... then I realized that Doolin doesn't have a post office. Luckily, Teresa said she'd be heading to Ennis the next day, & could drop me off to mail the ballot and wander around.

As it got darker, I sorted tunes new tunes on my iPad upstairs in my room, I naïvely thought I'd have time to practice new sets... but I ended up spending a good while writing down my 2 most recent tunes (hornpipes are annoying, & I probably picked the wrong way to write it).

Before long, it was time to head out for the session at Fitzpatrick's. The rain had just stopped... For all my worry over the weather, it really hasn't been all that bad. I keep just missing the rain, & turning back just in time to stay mostly dry. I downloaded an app that Teresa recommended (Accuweather), which supposedly gives the best predictions around here... but they're still not great. My own guesswork has served me better.

I got to Fitz's a bit early, soon followed by Eoin O'Neill (bouzouki), Adam Shapiro (fiddle), Kieran & Jon O'Connell (guitar/bodhran & bass/guitar respectively). They're all part of a band called Fiddle Case, & they were all super nice & welcoming. Kieran sang several excellent songs, as did a woman who joined the circle briefly (Nóirin Lynch; many thanks to my B&B host who knows all the names!)



Orla (with the keyboard, from the session at McGann's) was also there. I sat awkwardly behind her keyboard... really unusual to see a keyboard in a session like that. Besides myself, there seemed to be at least 3 other Americans in the session. It seems strange that even in off-season, tourists almost outnumber the locals in sessions around here... not sure if that's always the case, but I'm so glad that we're welcomed in.

At one point, a woman came by to ask if two girls (step dancers) could dance a reel. We played a reel & the two girls (wearing matching cheetah-print dresses) did their fancy-footwork performance, much to the crowd's amusement. Strangely, after the girls were finished, the mother (to one of the girls, I think) talked them up, almost advertising them to us. It seemed strange to me, & Orla says she would never do such a thing for her own daughter (who is also a professional dancer, it turns out). Later, the mother asked us for a slow hornpipe... when we asked for a specific speed, she replied, "106bpm" (I don't know why she thought that would help us — tapping the rhythm would have been useful) ... She ended up just telling us to slow down as we played, & we ended up with a hornpipe that was painfully slow to play (& still fast for the dance). The mother took a video of the dancers, & I have a sneaking suspicion that the whole thing was part of a promotional video... which bugs me, since the musicians were never really consulted on this. But oh well.

The session was otherwise wonderful, & I especially enjoyed the songs. I didn't lead any sets or sing, but afterwards a lady came up & said she was sad I didn't sing; that she had loved my singing the night before. This surprised me, since I feel like many just feel obligated to pay a compliment following a song, but she clearly went out of her way to compliment me a second time... I guess I'll work on memorizing another song for next week (if I repeat something, the whole town will know about it, haha).

I walked home under the stars, singing as I walked along in the near pitch-dark (not many street-lamps here). I feel so lucky to be here, even with it being an off-season, & with the nutty weather. I really loved the session, but was feeling a bit homesick, so I decided to call my sister before bed. We had a nice late-night chat (for me) & once again I didn't get enough sleep (entirely my fault).

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The next morning, I woke a bit before my alarm (as always), had breakfast, & chatted a bit with Teresa. She commented on my mention of Orla bringing a keyboard, saying "You don't bring a keyboard to a session, full stop." — that seems to mostly be true of Irish trad sessions I've been to, but I guess I've never known why. I assumed it was their size, but maybe it has more to do with the voicing of the instrument itself, & how well it gets along with other chordal instruments?

We got ready for our Ennis errands, & hit the road as it was just starting to rain. As we passed by Ennistymon, it started to hail something fierce! Teresa exclaimed, "I've never seen anything like this in my life" (& when the hail stopped stopped, "T'anks be to God for that"). I love these Irish sayings ("Your man, \_\_\_" is another that I've heard here, & also in Scotland... I love that one especially, & can't really explain why).





We arrived in Ennis & I mailed my ballot. Only free postage within the US, sadly... but I hope it makes it alright! Teresa had an errand in Limerick, so I passed some of the time at Custy's music shop. I bought a couple of stickers & a nice coin purse (to store the stickers in, I rationalized...)



Then I had a quick meetup with someone I'd been told about (by Kathryn Veditz back home) — Sam. We met at a café & just casually chatted for a bit. I lucked out when I asked if he was free, & it was really nice to meet him. He seems wonderful, & it's so nice to have a contact in Ennis for when I come back in the last week of my travels. Nice to have some hot chocolate on the rainy day, too!



I wandered around a bit more after this (back to Custy's to browse the instrument selection). The rain was off & on the whole time, but it wasn't too bad. Teresa came back to town & I accompanied her on her final errands. We got some chips at a falafel house (I got curry chips — a new favorite of mine) & we drove back to Doolin.



Teresa drove past Doonagore Castle on the way home. I almost lost my hat taking this photo! I had a chance to chillax a bit, then decided to take a little walk while the sun was out. I walked towards the water, then walked back through the grassy hills. I made it back just as it started to rain. I'm getting pretty good at reading the clouds & timing my return (just a liiiittle slow). As usual, the view of the wild atlantic was breathtaking ...







I took a shower & decided to stay in after this — to watch some netflix & have some down time. Despite being on vacation, it feels like I really haven't had much time to goof off. Tomorrow should be another lazy day... we'll see. Depends on the weather, I suppose...

## Pubs and new friends in Doolin

Posted on February 21, 2020 by alinasue

A new guest came to stay at the Lane Lodge B&B on Tuesday evening, & so I spent some time chatting with him on Wednesday morning. He's from London, & has been visiting Ireland every year for 50 years. He sings, & enjoys walking out in nature, but has gradually become more and more blind over the years. He doesn't let that stop him from going out walking, however. He has a cane, & high-vis jacket (everyone wears those here, since street lighting is sparse in most places, so it gets very dark).

It was a rainy day all day on Wednesday, so I had plans to stay in, do some trip-planning, organize music & watch Netflix... but in the afternoon I went downstairs for lunch & saw Malcolm standing in the kitchen, looking lost. He said he had a mind to go to the pub, but couldn't find Teresa. I offered to escort him down the road to O'Connor's. I wasn't sure how much assistance he needed, but I didn't want him going out alone in the high winds (the rain had given way to thick mist by this time). I ended up offering my arm for him to hold onto, & we made our way, very slowly to the pub. We got there, I helped him find a seat & buy a pint of Guinness, then left my number at the bar in case he needed an escort later on... I went back to play some tunes, then came down for dinner & found that Teresa had driven Malcolm back home. She offered me some of her leftovers from dinner, & then offered to drive me to Fitzpatrick's for a free concert after (but warned me not to mention it to Malcolm, or he would want to go too).

The band playing was called “Up She Flew“ — it was 2 guys, one on guitar & vocals, the other on vocal harmony / whistle / shaker / sax (sometimes multiple simultaneously). They were alright, & sang some songs I like, but I left a bit early because it wasn’t quite my thing... or I wasn’t in the right mood for listening. I went back to watch some Netflix & sleep.



Thursday morning I sat down to breakfast with Malcolm again. I didn’t have as much social energy, & when I did try to talk, it felt one-sided, since he’s a bit hard of hearing & is lacking visual cues that many who are hard of hearing can fall back on. After asking “Did you sleep well?” ten times or so, I gave up on conversation.

We both had a “fry-up” sorta breakfast, which is my favorite thing here... I love the hash-browns especially — they come in triangles, & are so soft inside that they are almost mashed potato, but crunchy on the outside. I also love the tea here — but Teresa was very confused when I first asked for black tea (she said “no cream or anything?” thinking I meant I wanted the tea plain)... I told her that back home so many people avoid caffeine that you need to specify black/green/red tea...



Malcolm went out for a walk, & I decided to play some tunes. The weather seemed nice, so I decided to dress for the wind & go out for a little walk in the neighborhood. I met with some dogs who seemed to adopt me as a member of their pack (I guess it’s a small-town thing to let dogs roam loose in the daytime. That explains the “so what?” expression Teresa gave me when I told her I’d seen a stray dog the day before...)





I walked with these dogs for a time, until they found a house with the scent of a cat (who I noticed was sitting on a window ledge). I kept walking into the fields, thinking I might eventually make it back to the rocks by the ocean. Sadly, the path got muddier & muddier as I went, with no sign of outlet. Then it started to rain, & I tried really hard not to despair... I fell for the sunk cost fallacy, & thought it best to press on in the same direction...

No luck. The trail ended with 3 gates, back-to-back. I had to turn back around the way I'd come. Luckily I carry a rain poncho with me everywhere, since I really didn't think it was going to rain (suppose my weather instincts need to calibrate). Ponchos are way better than umbrellas in the wind, but squelching through the mud again in the rain was less than ideal.

One nice thing: I found a friend on the way back. A friendly horse walked over to greet me. At first I wasn't sure if it was the aggressive kind that might be wanting to nip at me (as I balanced precariously on the rock wall beside a deep & muddy puddle)... but I think the horse was just lonely & wanted to say hello & inspect me for treats I might be carrying. I enjoyed the encounter, but the horse seemed just shy enough that I didn't attempt to stroke the nose (however tempting!)



I came back to dry off & search for more tunes, then decided to go out & walk around outside one more time. I saw some people taking photos of the waves from my window, so it seemed like a good time to take another walk (as my previous one had been cut short). The waves were tempestuous and lovely to watch, but hard to photograph and describe... I caught a picture of a bird in flight that I was pretty proud of. Due to high winds, the bird was flying in what seemed to be slow-motion, giving me plenty of time to photograph...





Next I decided to walk “downtown” & pass through the pubs, in order to ask about the session schedule. There was a big tourist crowd at McGann’s (a tourist bus was stopping through) but no music. I hung out by the nearby river for a short time, before heading back to McGann’s for a pint of Guinness.





I spotted Eddie Costello & Kevin Griffin (Guitarist & Banjo player from my first Saturday [concert] session) & had a chat with them at the bar, before walking back to the B&B. Of course, the weather seemed fine when I started out, but I was soaked by a freak shower just before I made it back. It felt like I got hit by a wave of rain, then it was clear skies once again, just a few seconds after it started. Here's a photograph about a minute before the rain hit (which felt like I got hit by a wave, rather than a normal rain shower).



I got back & had some dinner, then Teresa was going to drive Malcolm to Fitzpatrick's for some music, & I decided to tag along. I walked in with Malcolm, found a table, & got the waitress' attention so we could each order a pint of Guinness. Two in a day! Maybe the closest thing to a pub crawl I've ever done, haha. We sat down & waited for the music, which started around 8. It was different from the night before — just tunes, no singing. I had a great time listening, but got itchy fingers at times where they played my favorite tunes (like Roaring Barmaid or Spotted Dog).



Malcolm & I had a good time chatting between tunes... he talks slowly, but it seems fitting with the pace of life around here, & I don't mind waiting for him to complete a thought. It helps that he has a lovely accent... I'm not well-versed in different London accent names, but I'd say it's somewhat close to cockney... the "th" comes out as "v" (as in, "don't bover") and his intonation rises in interesting places within a word.

I found out in our conversation that he was an orphan (stuck my foot in my mouth when I asked him about his family — "I 'aven't gOt any..." he said) ... He said the orphanage he grew up in was not nice to him... After all this, I was feeling very sad for him, but he insisted on paying for my drink. I wasn't going to fight him for the bill, but it was an effort to not help him sort out the right change. I imagine that, in his place, I would rather have the independence of doing some things for myself.

He's a really sweet guy, & I wish life hadn't thrown him so many curveballs. When we were talking about the weather, & I described how the waves were crashing into the rocks & exploding into plumes of mist, like fireworks, he lamented that he missed being able to see for that reason... & it was heart-wrenching. It made me wonder if I shouldn't have described it at all.

It reminded me too of a favorite movie of mine while growing up — Paulie — where a talking bird acts as a “seeing-eye parrot,” & describes a sunset to a painter who had lost her sight. That part really grabbed me, as someone who very much appreciates the ability to soak in my environment visually. I can't imagine losing my sight, but as Paulie said, “The things you love most are the things they take away” ... it's important to enjoy everything while it's there (& also enjoy many sensory aspects of life; visual, acoustic, gustatory etc). I am happy to see Malcolm still going out on walks & taking in the scenery in the ways he can; quite inspirational, actually. Don't let anything hold you back from living your best life!

Around 9, Teresa came by to pick us up. I stopped by to say hello to the musicians on the way out, & asked them the name of the tune they had played before “Spotted Dog” (it was “Connaughtman's Rambles,” which I really should have recognized). They asked if I was a musician, & when I mentioned I play whistle, the flute player offered to lend me a whistle. I told him I had mine in my bag, & they asked me to stay & play... so I said goodnight to Teresa & Malcolm, & stuck around for a couple more hours.

They were from Kilfenora (as it happens, the only place in the vicinity that has much dance going on, year-round). The flute player, Adrian, & the fiddle player, Anya, knew a lot of the trad tunes... but they didn't know Brian Finnegan or Liz Carroll tunes. They asked me to play one, so I played “Marga's Moment” a few times. Might as well play a weird 7/8 tune if I'm playing solo anyway, I figured. I knew most of the tunes they played, so I joined in & it was a very fun small session. Glad I stuck around!

I walked back afterwards, and went to sleep... the wind whistled all night, and woke me up a few times. I may not have picked the best time of year to visit, but it is going to be a memorable trip, I think! As I write, the weather has taken a turn for the worse, so I'm mostly indoors today... practiced some tunes after breakfast, and I'm planning to head over to O'Connor's for tunes this evening.

## Rainy days and a muddy hike

Posted on February 24, 2020 by alinasue

For a couple days (Friday and Saturday), the wind and rain were so constant that I hardly went outside... On Friday morning, I woke up & had breakfast (the same as previous days, since I love it). I chatted with Malcolm, & Teresa put on some CDs for me to listen to.

I watched a video of Micho Russell, & decided to spend much of the afternoon practicing whistle after that. Evening came around, & I decided to see what was going on at O'Connor's (the closest pub to where I'm staying).

It turned out to be an excellent session. Eddie & Kevin were there with the usual set-up, but they were joined by an uilleann piper this time — Shane McGrath. He was very friendly (as everyone seems to be around here), and asked to try out my BW whistle when he saw it.





The session that followed (again, more of a concert) was very lively & fun. Shane has a very improvisational and beautiful style of playing both the pipes & the whistle, & I'm hoping to have another chance to play tunes with him before I leave. A highlight of the evening for me was when an audience member requested "Road to Erroglie" (one of my favorite tunes) & Shane knew it as well. He came up with an excellent set around it, & I had a great time playing low whistle while he played high whistle.



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Saturday started much the same as Friday, with breakfast & CDs to listen to... Then Teresa brought out a Micho Russell tunebook, & I holed up with it in my room for a couple of hours, reading the stories & trying out some of the tunes (many were familiar, or slight variations of what I've heard, & some I'd never seen or heard before).

I had a ticket that evening for the Daoirí Farrell concert, & got in touch with Sam about meeting up for dinner beforehand. He brought someone who's been couchsurfing with him (a fellow Canadian, come to Ireland mainly for backpacking adventures). We met at O'Connors, so I had the fish chowder again (my desire for adventure & variety almost always gives way to a love for the familiar). We chatted a bit, but before long it was time to head over to the concert venue (Hotel Doolin). We were there early enough for front row seats (I talked Sam & the guest into joining me up front, although they wanted to sit 2nd row). I mostly forgot to take pictures during the concert (it was so good! The singing and bouzouki playing were beautiful)... I did get a couple pictures, to give you the idea...



Daoiri (pronounced “Derry”) told some jokes (good & bad) & on one occasion, indicated for the audience to applaud as three latecomers wandered in with their drinks. I think it was a friendly way of shaming them for dawdling... pretty funny. There was one long joke he told with a really basic punchline, & Sam turned to me & whispered “5 minutes of our life that we’re never getting back” — it reminded me of the kinds of jokes my morfar tells, haha... At one point, a bouzouki string snapped mid-song, & Daoiri kept playing, then humming as he pulled the loose string out of the way... then picked up the song again without stopping (to much applause). Afterwards he exclaimed, “that scared the beJEEZus outta me!”

I wanted to buy at least one of his CDs (he has 3), but it’ll have to wait til I get home (the tin that I’m using to store CDs is full at this point, which is the arbitrary limit I’ve placed on myself, in lieu of self-restraint). I also wanted to stick around after & chat, but it was already 9:30, so I wanted to see if any sessions were happening. I walked Sam & friend back to the car, then on to McDermott’s (had heard that they have music on Saturdays). When I got there, I was informed that it wasn’t trad, so I doubled back to McGann’s. Once there, I was happy to find my session-buddies, Eddie & Kevin.



There was some kind of love-themed, moulin-rouge type fundraiser going on (still don’t know what it was for). I asked to join them, & they said it would be fine, but said that their set would be over



soon (DJ'd music after 11 or so). I jumped in for a few tunes, & led my groovy reel set (successfully, I'm happy to say)... then I led another set WAY less successfully... oh well. I get nervous playing solo, & Eddie didn't know the chords, so I got lost mid-tune & kinda just improvised on a theme until I was back on track... Hopefully it wasn't too noticeable.

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I woke up on Sunday to nice diffuse light coming through the window, & bolted out of bed. After the last two days of rain, I didn't want to miss one minute of sun! After a quick breakfast & chat, I went upstairs to dress, then out to explore for as long as possible.



I wanted to see the town from another angle, so I walked up the hill for a bird's eye view of Fisher Street & the shore. I ended up walking just a few paces behind a couple of guys, & I figured that either I would seem like a creepy stalker, or I could strike up some conversation. We started chatting, & I found that they were brothers from Argentina (Pablo had been living in Dublin for over 10 years, & Fedo had come to visit for 3 months, so he was getting a bit of a tour). They remembered me from McGann's the night before (hopefully I made a good impression). I walked with them to the Doonagore castle (the one I'd photographed previously before having to chase my cap down the road).



Pablo kindly offered to take my photo, & I took one of the two of them in return. I mentioned an interest in walking along the cliffside trail, & asked Pablo how to get there... He had a guess, but when a car stopped by, we asked directions, & apparently we had made a wrong turn... but the driver

was very nice & offered all three of us a ride to the trailhead. She asked if I was Canadian, by my accent. I wish! She said I had a very gentle way of speaking, so I'll take that as a compliment, haha!



We started along the trail, & the sun was still out... Watching all the waves was so relaxing... I was very much enjoying being outdoors after several days cooped up inside (due to wind, rain, & hail).



We walked a good long way, through puddles & mud, sometimes having to find alternate paths to walk on. I took lots of photos, & my phone battery died from overuse... but luckily I had an external battery to fall back on (I always carry one with me). Sometimes I lagged a bit behind the brothers, just to sing a bit. I always feel inspired to sing when I'm by the ocean... in my mind, it feels like paying tribute to the awesome beauty of the water... lyrics usually spring to mind, but if they don't, I just hum a melody...





The grass was so soft and bouncy that at times I had to just stop & lie down on it. If it weren't so rainy & cold & wet, I would just sleep outside... I really don't know how it's so comfortable... and the grass seems to have peaks and waves, just like the ocean... wish I could style my hair like that!



At some point, the trail seemed to be entirely mud, and I made a misstep, & started sliding. I tried to catch myself, but my arm was sliding as well. I gave in to the mud, which had clearly bested me, & let myself land splat in a mud puddle... I rinsed off a bit in a nearby creek, but was still coated in a layer of mud along one side. I walked the rest of the way a bit more cautiously, but still almost lost my footing a couple of times.



We came out at the road at one point, & there was a sign saying that the Cliffs of Moher path was closed... we were about to walk along the roadside, when an Irish guy (who was lacing up his boots) told us to ignore the signs (saying that no one pays them any mind) & indicated that we follow him. He wanted us to follow him down a steep cliffside, so we ignored him at that point. Both Pablo & myself were a bit more cautious than this local... We turned back uphill towards the Cliffs of Moher, but I was still glad for the detour (it was a beautiful view of the cliffside).



From there, it was mostly uphill to the Cliffs of Moher, & still very muddy (with no barriers against the cliff edges), so we walked slowly & carefully... then some mountain bikers sped by us on the very edge of the cliff... absolutely nuts! Hope they survived that adventure... It wouldn't be my idea of a fun time. It was scary just watching them...





We finally made it to the Cliffs of Moher, & while it was a bit overcast, the weather was still WAY better than the last time I was there! No rain, & almost no wind... I decided to take my whistle out and play some tunes... Pablo offered to film me while I played “The Cliffs of Moher” at the cliffs. Such a wonderfully touristy moment, haha!



We took the bus back to Doolin (I wasn't keen on slipping in the mud any more, & also didn't really want to walk on the road). The bus got me back with enough time to rinse my clothes, shower, get changed, & have some warm soup before the evening session started up at 6pm.



I walked over to O'Connor's... had a slight headache, so I took some pain meds (haven't needed them too much on this trip, I'm happy to say... but I think I got the headache from dehydration). The session was great once it got going, but either my mood got worse later in the night, or the session lost a bit of steam... I just started feeling like I didn't fit in, & was too self-conscious to play.



Still, the people were all very nice to me. Kevin & Eddie were there, along with Orla (keyboard/whistle) & Pauline (banjo/whistle). Pauline showed off a fun trick at the end of the night, with the waitress blowing through the whistle while Pauline did all the finger work... seemed a very tricky thing to do, but I've never tried. Fun to watch, for sure! The pub also brought out sandwiches for the musicians, which were delicious & warm. I normally don't eat at sessions, but made an exception...



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I woke up today (Monday) feeling a bit tired, but had an enjoyable breakfast & chat with Teresa & Malcolm... a bit about politics... They say that around here, people don't have to enroll in health insurance, or file their own taxes... it's all automatic. Sounds nice & simple that way... I had a lot of tea, watched a few funny videos with Malcolm listening in, then went upstairs to finish writing this blog.



# Rainbows and pancakes galore

Posted on February 25, 2020 by alinasue

Yesterday was supposed to be rainy all day (& it certainly started out that way), but gradually the skies turned blue & the sun came out, so I decided it would be worth risking a freak shower to take a short walk in the sun...



I set off in the direction of the old church cemetery (a stone building that was mostly in ruins, from what I saw of it while driving by previously). I didn't know quite how to get there, but figured I'd have no trouble, so I didn't bother looking at a map... I got a bit distracted by some rainbows I saw along the way... tried chasing them before they disappeared, with minimal success.



I had walked all the way to the Russell Cultural Center (named for Micho Russell, I assume), & asked directions from a guy who I'd met at the session the night before. He played concertina, & had been speaking in French, but it turns out he lives in the hills by Doolin. He said he was giving a workshop at the community center (unrelated to music, however). I didn't ask for details, but I wish I had now... maybe I'll see him this coming weekend at the Micho Russell memorial festival, & chat with him more.

I walked back in the direction I'd come, until I found a road right across from McDermott's pub, by the river. The road looked like a driveway, so I'd passed it by without even thinking... but all the roads are more narrow here, & you'd think I'd be used to it by now...



I spotted another rainbow as I walked up the road to the old churchyard, & the hills shone in the silvery metallic light (the skies were grey & the hills stood out in sharp yellow-green contrast). At first, it just looked like another partial rainbow, & then I spotted the other half of the arch... I quickly took a panoramic shot, but it doesn't quite capture how magical it felt.



I still hadn't made it to the graveyard, but I had a feeling that nothing was going to top that moment with the rainbow. As in most cases, the best aspects of any journey are the surprises along the way. Still, I enjoyed trying to read the headstones, & wandering through the old church...



I had planned to sit down & play some tunes, but didn't feel so inspired once there... it was also pretty windy... so I walked through, feeling & conversing with the stones. When I was a child, (maybe 6-8 years old) I was a bit superstitious, & I believed it possible to communicate long distances through stone (this is before cell phones were popular, but a similar concept). I kept rocks in my pockets at all times, with the idea that each stone was tethered to a different person. When I

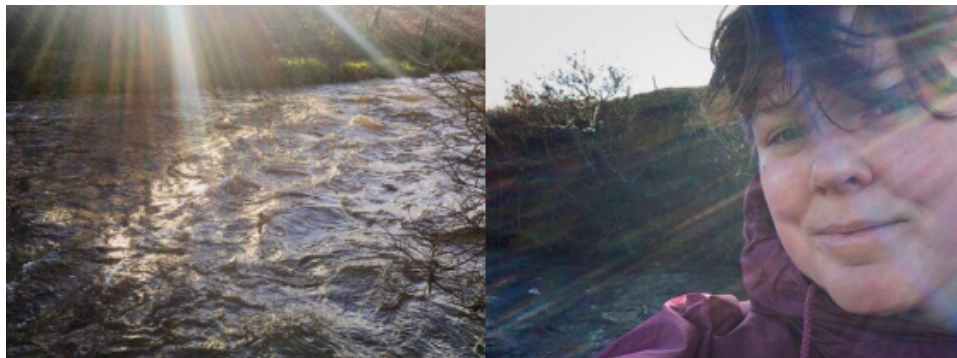


was lonely, I would talk to the stone, knowing that the person (sometimes animal, sometimes no longer living) would hear me on some level...

As I was talking to the gravestones, & it occurred to me for the first time that maybe I'm not the only one who thinks of rocks as communicatory devices. I haven't spoken to stones in a long time now, but in a way, it's a bit comforting. Maybe I should visit graveyards more often. They may not be MY ancestors, but I'm sure they don't mind a few random passersby stopping over for a chat.



I walked back towards McDermott's after this, then decided to follow the river a little ways. It was hard to tell if I was on a footpath, or a farmer's private road (with prominent tractor marks in the mud), so I didn't walk that way for long... but I enjoyed watching the river. It reminded me of good times doing river floats with family, in slightly less turbulent waters (& usually on warmer days). I have always loved rivers.



I stopped by McGann's for an early dinner. I was planning on a late night session, & it seemed like a good idea to eat something filling a bit earlier in the day. After some indecision, I opted for fish & chips followed by Guinness... But I might have to go back & have their stew at some point.



I went back to the B&B for a time, to goof off online & watch some videos... then on to Fitzpatrick's for the session. I got there just on time, & took a seat next to a couple of people I hadn't met before (Chelsea & Anton). They said they're visiting for a few months from Sweden (since they're EU citizens, they don't have the same 3-month limit). They're renting a place somewhere in the area, & invited me to come by & play tunes sometime. I said, "You haven't heard me play yet, you might change your mind" — Chelsea assured me that they would not, haha. People are so nice to me, & I just don't understand it.

I forgot to take photos (again), but it was an excellent session. Eoin O'Neill was there again, with 2 others from the Fiddle Case band, Kieran O'Connell & Adam Shapiro. I told them that they really ought to sell their CDs in an actual fiddle case, rather than a box. Eoin's so funny, & said he'd seen my blog, so he'd have to go out of his way to be nice to me (as though he otherwise wouldn't). He said I should put in a good word for him, & jokingly offered to write the paragraph & send it to me. (Disclaimer: I didn't take him up on the offer... or did I?)

I played one set unsuccessfully... It was ok, but I left out one of the tunes on accident. Eoin held things together, thankfully, & started the last of the tunes that I'd mentioned... Every time I start a new tune in a set, it's like a trust fall with myself... either the memory kicks in at the right time or it doesn't... & because I have a hard time holding multiple tunes in my head simultaneously, & I only have a split second to start the next tune... Sometimes my mind is just a blank, & this is why I'm usually too scared to lead sets.

Later on, Eoin suggested I sing. It was very nice of him to ask, since I'm usually too shy to ask to sing. The song was unaccompanied, & it's one that I would prefer to play whistle for, but I was worried that I would set myself up to struggle with the key. I opted to sing without any instrumental backing, which made the song feel way too short. People seemed to enjoy it all the same. It helped that I was seated with my back to the audience, haha. I probably should have turned around & stood up, but there were a lot of people & I was already pretty nervous. I wasn't sure if I could keep it together if I went into "performance mode" ... But say what you will about rowdy crowds at pubs, the people who come to pubs in Doolin seem to be very respectful of singers. They all pretty much stop talking for the duration of the song (though not always right from the start).

Kieran sang some excellent songs — and he has such a lovely voice... I love both the songs he sings & his way of singing them. There were a few others who came & sang just one song, like myself. I love playing tunes, but sessions that include songs are very special... And I loved hearing how Adam chose to accompany the songs on fiddle, & (at one point) on banjo. He's an excellent accompanist in general, & it was fun to see what he did on the banjo. I'd love to learn to accompany singers (but I get so little practice... gotta practice with recordings, I guess).

The session was over too soon (sessions start late here, & end earlier than I'm used to... 9:30pm til midnight instead of 7pm til midnight or later). Before it was over, I had a chance to play another set of tunes, this time successfully... The session ended after a set of rambunctious reels, and I said some



goodbyes... though I hope to see them again somewhere! Everyone was packing up, & then I heard some singing across the bar...

Harry, a man with a lovely way of singing (who had sung a very funny song earlier) was singing again, so I walked over to pull up a chair in the impromptu song circle. On the chorus, a bunch of people took hands & swayed to & fro with the waltzy rhythm. It was a beautiful moment to behold. And such lovely singing! Songs started spontaneously without warning, & most were good join-in chorus songs. Only a couple were ones I'd heard before. Some nearly brought me to tears (either with hilarity or a feeling of connection to the sorrowful narrative). They were all lovely in their own way...



I didn't sing, since I was content to just soak in all the songs... but someone (later Teresa told me his name: Ronan Burren) asked me to sing AFTER the "last song" ... The people working there wanted us to clear out, so I tried to back out of it, but he just said "a short song!" ... I was flattered that it was requested of me, & didn't want to disappoint, but was also super nervous about overstaying my welcome with the pub. Eventually I stood up (making a motion towards the door) & I sang a couple verses of a song I learned from Shay Black back home, & then my mind went blank from nerves... I think it was okay though, since no one was joining in on the chorus anyway (I find that's often the case when I sing chorus songs... I hope it's not because I sing too erratically).

I chatted a bit with the singers as they dawdled out the door. I especially wanted to talk to Harry, & he told me that the off-season is best for spontaneous singing sessions like this. The pub quiets down & people just share songs until the pub closes. This made me feel very lucky to have made it to Doolin before the tourist season... Sessions may be small, but I often prefer that. And I love spontaneous singing sessions!

I took my leave, & was running through the forgotten verses as I started walking back when a car pulled up beside me. It was Ronan, offering me a ride. It wasn't raining, & I didn't feel a need for a lift, but I wanted to be polite (though in retrospect it may have been stupid to be so trusting of a stranger)... I accepted the offer & got in the back seat. He had offered the ride from what would normally be the "passenger" seat of the car (the right-hand side)... so I was confused & thought the "driver" would be to the left (though of course he WAS the driver). When I got in behind him, he said "sit up front — I'm not a taxi" ... I mumbled some excuse about thinking that someone was sitting up front already, but felt pretty silly as I got out & went around the car to sit up front. He drove me to the B&B & knew exactly where I was staying when I told him it was Teresa's B&B. Nice to be in a small town!

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This morning, I had a late start (alarm actually woke me for once) & I got out of bed, all groggy. Teresa made another delicious breakfast for me, & then I had tea & a nice chat with Teresa & Malcolm. We talked about travel mostly. Malcolm needed help with his boarding pass, & to pay for his room here at the B&B...

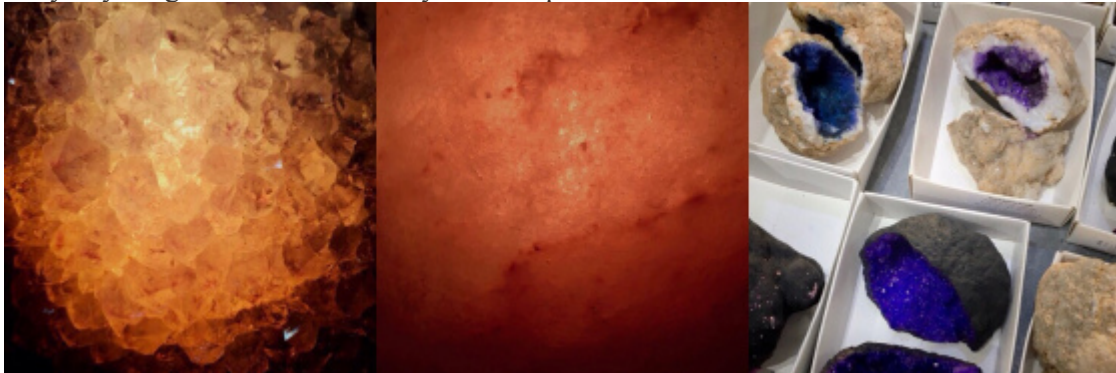
Teresa has been helping him a lot this past week, & it's become clear that he may need a caretaker if he's going to travel in the future... although he'd never admit it. He's almost entirely blind, & very slow about getting around (understandably so), so Teresa is very nervous about him injuring himself on her watch. She's been driving him around town, & usually happy enough to do it, but not late in the evenings (& he often wants to stay out late).

Another guest was coming later, & it turns out I was in a different room than the one I had booked, so I moved into a new room — which is fine by me. I'll miss my view of the cliffs in the morning, but there's something to be said for a change of scenery.

I sang a bit & watched some videos. The weather was mostly nice in the afternoon, but occasionally very rainy & blustery. I heard Teresa call my name, & so I went to the staircase to hear her better. She was inviting me along for some shopping. I still had some supplies, but figured it wouldn't hurt to get some more, & to go sightseeing by car.

She drove to Lisdoonvarna briefly, then Ennistymon. We got some groceries there, & she suggested I get powdered soup (since I'm nervous that my next room in Costelloe will be even more secluded than Doolin). Powdered soup packs more easily than cans, & it seemed like a good idea. Guess I'll let you know how that works out! We left the store & she gave me a caramel wafer biscuit she had bought. It was delicious, & very dangerous... Good thing I didn't buy those! (although I did buy some caramel chocolate digestives... dangerous enough!)

We drove through Lahinch (or Lehinch, depending on the map) to look at some shops... I was tempted to buy some small souvenirs, but I'm trying to hold off on shopping til the end of my trip. I'll be in Ennis last, which I'm sure has enough good shops. We stopped briefly in Liscannor as well, to go to a rock shop ... my younger self would LOVE the rock shop, but once again I had restraint & didn't buy anything... but it was a really nice shop!



On the way back to Doolin, Teresa drove me to visit Brigid's well. It's a place where people go to pray for health, & to remember loved ones... a true shrine, with carefully placed decorations & portraits & rosary beads. It did feel like a sacred sanctuary, although I didn't grow up religious. I am glad that these places exist, & that people share the space to create something magical through collective belief.





I think my favorite thing about the drive was that we made one nice circuit of the area, & got a beautiful view of the ocean when driving from Lahinch back to Doolin. The silvery skies turned just a little orange as they approached the silvery ocean. Even if I had a nice camera & wasn't in a car, I doubt I'd be able to capture it in a photo, so I didn't even attempt it with my phone camera. You'll have to imagine it. The dark clouds were bleeding downwards into the orange glow at the horizon, but the sky & water were nearly the same silvery-grey hue.

We got back to the B&B, & I went upstairs to my cozy new room. After a little time, I went downstairs to heat up a cottage pie I had bought for dinner. Malcolm ventured out to the pub (expecting someone to drive him home, no doubt... it's been hailing on & off all day). I finished my dinner & was very full, & then Teresa offered to make me a pancake for Pancake Tuesday. I couldn't refuse — she really spoils me. She said it wouldn't be right if I visited Ireland & didn't have a pancake on pancake Tuesday. I'm more than happy to abide by these rules...



I loved my desert pancakes, especially with the lime marmalade she brought out. We listened to some CDs & she showed me some videos about Doolin. One of them featured Eoin O'Neill & the Monday night session at Fitzpatrick's ... such a lovely session! We hung out a bit & had some tea... Time flew by, & we looked outside to see the ground completely covered in hail. Teresa phoned the pub to see if Malcolm wanted a ride back — the person on the phone reported that Malcolm wanted to stay another hour & a half... I went upstairs & I think I heard him come in, so I assume someone gave him a ride in the end... Not a good night to be walking outside. I've walked in enough hail at this point to know that it can be pretty painful.

## Micho Russell Weekend, Part 1

Posted on March 2, 2020

I apologize for the long wait (and subsequently, the long post), but I was trying to just keep myself together this weekend... I didn't feel like I could open up about more personal things until I had proper space to deal with them, so I decided to put it off until leaving Doolin. I'll be posting the last few days in 2 segments — Wednesday through Friday (this post) and Saturday through Monday (the next one)...

Wednesday morning I woke up pretty groggy, but still ahead of my alarm. When I went downstairs, I was surprised to find a bunch of people I hadn't met before. I sat down next to one of the newcomers, named Dick. Another Englishman, come to visit for the upcoming Micho Russell weekend here in Doolin. He wasn't a musician, just visiting to listen. He had originally planned to visit last weekend (since the Micho Russell weekend has historically fallen on the last full weekend of February before March), but had to change his flight (a bit costly at £70, but really not much compared to flight costs I'm used to). Malcolm came down & joined our breakfast table, then I finished and went upstairs to practice a few tunes.

It was another ominous day where the sun was shining, but the clouds were threatening... Teresa had offered me a ride to see the Doolin caves later in the afternoon, so I spent some time practicing tunes & watching videos, admiring the sunny hills out the window now & again. Around 2:30, Teresa gave me a ride to the cave on her way to drop Malcolm off in Lisdoonvarna. I went in to see the cave, but sadly I was essentially turned away at the door, since they only give tours for 2 or more people at a time (discrimination against solo travelers? Safety consideration? I don't know, as the woman gave me no explanation). I walked around the grounds a bit, before deciding to leave.







I was about to walk back to the B&B, but decided it would be a boring way to spend the day... and it was about equivalent to walk to Lisdoonvarna instead. I figured I could probably find Malcolm once I got there, and vaguely recalled hearing the name of the pub he'd be at... Rosebud? Roseburg? Roadside? I figured I could find it... So I pulled out a pocket map that Teresa had given me (Google doesn't map trails around these parts well at all). At many points, I had strong doubts that I was going the correct direction, & the menacing clouds didn't do much to bolster my confidence. The road signs were also mostly unhelpful...



Still, I enjoyed the walk, with some views of the burren and the coast. The road was so narrow that every time a car drove up, I was obliged to step off the road (often into rather squishy turf). I didn't mind, but it does surprise me how fast people tend to drive on these narrow roads, when cars might be going in either direction.

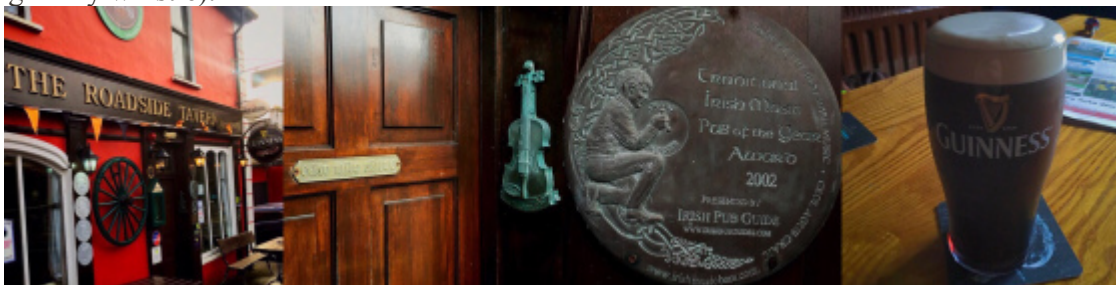




I especially enjoyed the old buildings (sometimes in ruins at the side of the road). It was a good 5-mile walk along the burren & farmlands to get to Lisdoonvarna. I even stopped to play the tune “Road to Lisdoonvarna” (couldn’t miss the opportunity!) — and found Malcolm at the Roadside Tavern once I got there. Turns out, my memory serves me well on the odd occasion!



I settled in to chat & have a pint (so weird that this has become a somewhat regular occurrence for me, but I guess it’s a fine way to pass the time & meet new people while traveling). I only usually go to pubs to play music, & I hardly ever drink when I play (prefer not to have to worry about stuff getting in my whistle).



Teresa came by to give us a lift back — dropping Malcolm off at O’Connor’s along the way. I had some chowder back at the B&B, & Teresa offered to make me a chili wrap (essentially a burrito). It was very nice of her, as she was already busy trying to sort out Malcolm’s flight confirmation & print a boarding pass. Because he’s blind, he doesn’t use a smartphone (no haptic feedback with non-physical buttons), and he can’t exactly look up flight information on a computer either. I assumed someone at the airport would help him print his pass, but Teresa felt responsible for him & had to eventually call up the hotel to get it printed, since her printer was out of ink.

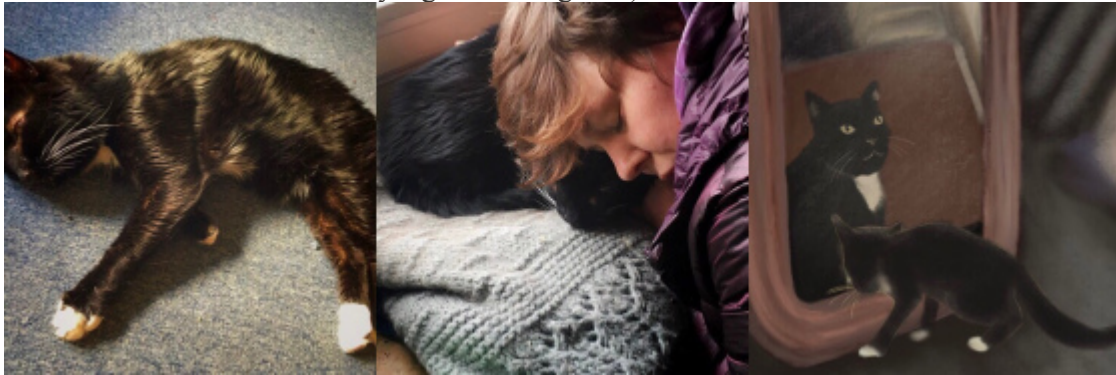
I went upstairs and had a difficult phone call... my cat has been very sick for a long time, & it was looking like this would be his last night (cancer, beyond a doubt, but 3 expensive vet visits with three blood draws only confirmed what it wasn’t... and by the time it was obviously cancer, it was too late to treat it). Anyway, I knew when I left that I might never see my cat again. And that’s what this phone call confirmed... Still, it wasn’t something I was mentally ready for...

I’m not sure if it’s easier to be at such a distance, but I do feel really bad that I couldn’t be there with him at the end... & also just miserable that I’m losing my long-time companion... that I shirked a duty to him by leaving him behind (even though I had booked flights before I knew he was sick). Yeah, I can’t unpack all these feelings now, but I feel like I needed to say something about it, to



explain why I haven't been in the best of spirits (for a while now, but more acutely this week, since I knew his days were coming to an end).

I want to do a proper post about all this later, & maybe I will, or maybe I won't... but for now I'll include a photo of me with Yosh right before I left for Scotland... my last photo with him. And a drawing as well (one I made when I found out I'd be losing him... inspired by the first photo I had of him as a kitten, taken by his foster mom, Barbara Judd... and then a photo of him looking at himself in the mirror before he showed many signs of being sick):



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As on most days when I really should sleep in, I woke up about 2 hours before my alarm went off (7:30am). I went down for an earlier breakfast, since Malcolm was supposed to be catching an early ride to the airport. I chatted a bit, but wasn't really up to being that social, under the circumstances, so I went upstairs to take my mind off of things... decided to start tackling my to-do list.

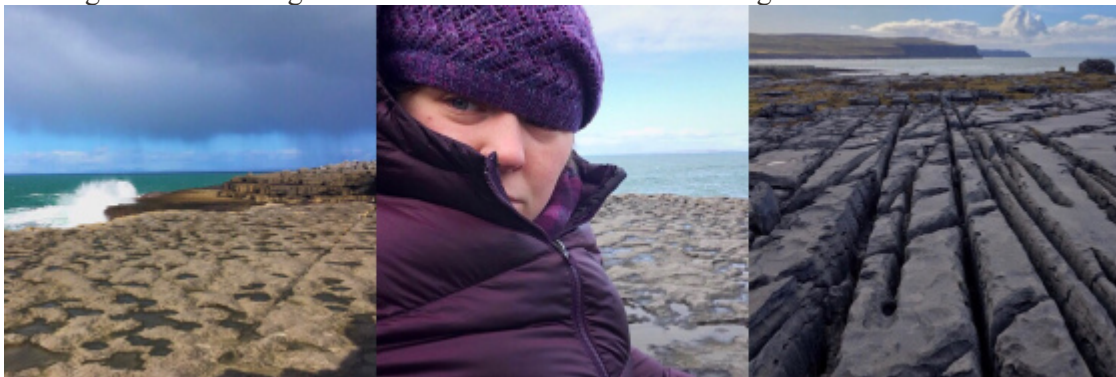
If I have a superpower, it has something to do with being able to counter feeling miserable by doing something else that makes me feel slightly less miserable (chores, calling banks or health providers, paying bills, etc). In this case, my distraction task was borderline fun. I finally got around to registering for a couple of weekend music camps/events. The Comhaltas Convention in San Francisco (with workshops on whistle, uilleann pipes, Irish language, & dance) and the Redwood Music Camp in Boulder Creek (with some of my favorite music teachers [and people] from The Fire and New World String Project). I needed something to look forward to, so booking these events seemed like the best move.



It was sunny out, so it seemed a shame to spend too much time indoors... maybe especially if I wasn't in the best of spirits. I decided to walk down to the sea where it meets the burren...



I thought I'd sit down & just play along with the ocean... but it was so windy that I needed to hide behind the rock, & by that point I was in the cold shade, so my whistle & fingers were too cold to play for very long... But it was still relaxing, watching the waves crash into the rocks again and again. Strange that something so violent would have such a calming effect...



On the walk back, I stopped at the top of the hill of the golf course, to take in the view and relax in the grass for a bit. Then I went back the B&B for lunch, & actually took a nap for the first time in a long while... Guess I've been REALLY sleep-deprived! I can never seem to take naps, even when I want (& need) to...



I forced myself to eat something, though I had no appetite... but I knew being hungry would worsen my mood. I walked over to O'Connor's for Kirsten Allstaff's CD release concert, then changed my mind & walked back to the B&B for my iPad (since I thought I'd be better off keeping my hands



busy, to distract myself from my thoughts). I made it back to O'Connor's in time for a good seat... & then I saw John Joe Kelly doing mic check (the bodhran player in Flook) & my mood immediately improved. I decided to sketch them as they played.

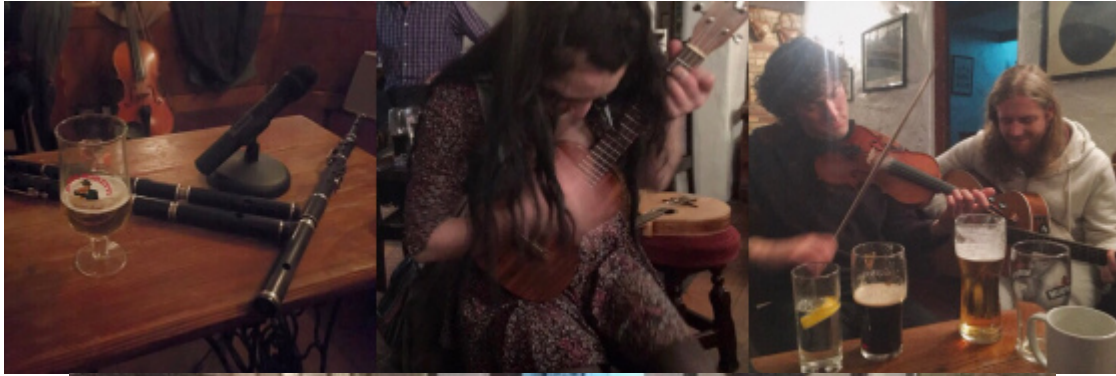
I saw some people looking for a table, invited them to join me (since I had a big table all to myself)... it made me nervous that they were watching me draw, but I always have such time pressure for concert drawings that I couldn't afford to let it distract me too much. Sadly, I didn't manage to draw the fiddle player, since he came in later.



I showed my drawing to Kirsten after the concert, & she said she liked it, then she gave me a CD! First time that's happened, & it was a very sweet gesture. She was, after all, taking it on faith that I would email her the drawing, & didn't even know me before the concert. I also managed to chat with John Joe Kelly! He suggested a selfie, & I'm so glad he did — I always realize after-the-fact that I miss selfie opportunities (with Flook, after their concert, for example!) — I told him that I'd seen him at celtic connections, & then he kept apologizing for not remembering me... such a nice guy!



The normal session started after a bit... Unfortunately, one very drunk guy drove a couple others away, then molested people over the course of the evening ... no one did anything about it. I found out later that one woman (a ukulele player & singer) had a really bad encounter with him... but otherwise the session was good, & I even borrowed a mandolin at one point for a tune (nice sounding mandolin, too!)



When we were packing up to leave, the woman playing uke (Aine, pronounced “Anya” for those unfamiliar with the Irish spelling) asked me if I wanted a ride to Kirsten’s house for the after-party. I thanked her for the invitation, but didn’t quite feel up to partying, so I turned down the offer... But the streets were dark as we were leaving O’Connor’s, & I turned on my phone flashlight to help her unlock her car. While there, she offered me a ride once again, saying I’d be a fool to miss an opportunity like this. She said the pub session was the warm-up, and at the house party people would really let loose, & the real session would start...

Since I’d held things together all day, I figured I might as well take a gamble that I would be okay through the later evening... if there was music, I figured I’d probably be okay... So I decided to accept the invitation. A bunch of us crammed into her car & she drove us to Kirsten & Curly’s place. The road was narrow, dark, & rocky in places. I was a little scared, but we made it there alright. We went in, & I immediately felt that maybe I was going to bum people out. I’m really not sure why I was invited in the first place, since I’m not much of a party animal.

I came in & was offered a beer... but pretty much the only beer I’ll drink is Guinness, & I have a rule against drinking while sad, so I decided to stick to my guns on that... I sat down next to the guitarist from the concert (Cillian) & immediately felt more at ease. He’s a really nice guy, & one of the only people who wasn’t asking me if I was alright (since I wasn’t drinking/smoking with them). When I’m not doing well, the last thing I want is to be reminded about it, or asked to introspect... & I’m not a good liar, so saying that “I’m alright” when I’m not is not so easy for me.

Cillian & Aine were fun to talk to, so I got lost in conversation for a while. Aine mentioned her encounter with a guy they call “melty” — the one who molested various people over the course of the night without repercussions. Aine told him firmly that he had crossed a boundary, but apparently 3 guys sitting next to him responded to her as though she were hysterical. They didn’t take her seriously at all... she was understandably upset & shaken by this, & went outside to reflect on it



before coming back in. Hearing this story, I wish I'd had the guts to get up & talk to someone at the bar earlier... I had wanted to, seeing him harass others over the course of the night. But I always saw people smiling or chatting with him, & being an outsider, I find it difficult to know what kind of relationships these people have.

I also felt that I had to allow for the possibility that other people may not be bothered by the same things as I am... But, going forward, I guess the best I can do is try to respond if something similar happens again. But it sucks that sometimes the only way to deal with a KNOWN problem is to wait for something else to break, & catch the problem in the act. Even then, & even when being on the receiving end, people can often dismiss the complaint as "hysteria"... Ugh...

Anyway, enough on that. Back to the party! There was some delicious chocolate (85% dark) & nuts (hazelnut & brazil nut) provided by a mandolin player... it was amazing stuff! I wish I'd written down the name of the chocolate. Dark & a bit bitter, but so smooth. Really good stuff, apparently from Germany. Cillian was referring to it as "nutella sushi" (the "raw" version) & I congratulated him on being perhaps the first person to describe it that way. Honestly though, I think I preferred it to nutella.

We did play some tunes, & sing some songs. I sang like 3 songs, which is more than I've sung in one sitting (in front of people) since the song circles in Scotland. There's something special about sharing songs... I even sang one with the guitar (Cillian had handed it to me, & another guy asked me to play something)... I gave it a go, & people were disappointed when I stopped after a couple verses... At least they were enjoying it — but it's one of those songs I can never remember lyrics to, & I sing it differently every time... I really only learned it because I enjoy playing the chord arpeggios.

I should probably learn to play more songs on guitar, but I'm still struggling to figure out whether to study DADGAD more intensively, or stick to standard tuning (EADGBE). Most singers seem to play standard (that's what the guitar was tuned to last night), but a lot of Irish guitarists seem to prefer the "open" DADGAD tuning (the notes can ring out more, & you just use a capo most of the time when changing keys)... Standard is what I'm more experienced with, so maybe I should stick with that (but DADGAD does sound lovely)...

Anyway, we played a few more tunes, & Kirsten sang... even sang some Scottish puirt — she told me it was so strange that they were singing so many Scottish songs, since it's normally all-Irish all the time here around Doolin... I told her I loved Scottish music, though, & she herself is originally Scottish (though she's been in Ireland 20 years now). I myself started off with some Scottish tunes earlier in the evening. Good times!

As it was nearing 5am, I asked for a ride back to my B&B, & Curly agreed to drop me off... Very nice of him, since otherwise I would have missed breakfast & a chance to do laundry. Also it's so much easier to sleep in my own room, even if it's not "my room" per se. I went to sleep around 5 & woke up with my alarm at 9:30...

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Friday morning, I had breakfast & was surprised to find the downstairs packed with new guests. One guy started playing the accordion from Teresa's cupboard, & it sounded surprisingly nice (a bit dusty/rusty, but good tone all the same). I went back up to bed, hoping to catch a couple of winks after the long night, but couldn't make myself fall asleep. Can never seem to take naps intentionally...

When it started getting dark, I walked to the Russell Community Center for a youth concert. It was nice to see the Sean Nós dancing & a bunch of young musicians (some playing in public for the first time in their lives). It was raining when I left, but I walked to McGann's & found Kevin — he said he'd be heading to O'Connor's, & since I had to walk back that way anyway (possibly in worse rain later), I decided to head in that direction.



I arrived at O'Connor's & took a seat in the usual session spot, but noticed another session at the front of the bar... It seems that they have multiple sessions at once on Micho Russell weekend. The session with Kevin Griffen & friends got started after about half an hour, but it was hard to not just abandon ship to start playing tunes right away... I decided to stay put, since I wanted to play tunes with Kevin, Eddie, & Shane. Still, I felt like I couldn't really chat, since I don't parse speech in noisy environments very easily. So I just sat in silence for a while — doubly difficult because it left me alone with my thoughts, which weren't the most cheerful.

Once the session got started, it was worth the wait. Eddie & Kevin are excellent of course, and Shane plays the uilleann pipes so beautifully. I love the sound of uilleann pipes in general, but he plays so cleanly and with such a lively style that the session immediately has a great level of energy, & the enthusiasm is contagious. There were fewer songs, since we were in some competition for volume with the other nearby session (as well as the crowd), but we did have a few songs later in the evening. Shane said he'd be at McGann's from 2pm on Saturday, so I decided I'd probably head over there as well.



## Micho Russell Weekend, Part 2

Posted on March 3, 2020

Here's the second half of the weekend (Saturday & Sunday) along with my trip from Doolin to Costelloe on Monday...

I woke up on Saturday to the sound of roaring wind. I got dressed & went downstairs for breakfast a bit early (9am), only to find that everyone else was already finishing. I chatted with Dick for a bit, talking about antiques & crafts. Then I went back upstairs to pack my clothes (that Teresa had so nicely washed & dried for me), before heading over to O'Connors. The wind was blowing something fierce... Worse than even the windiest days I've seen here before, I think (& it has been QUITE windy, so that's saying something). I made it to the pub and was informed that some of the Micho Russell weekend events were being cancelled due to the weather... so I was hoping that sessions would be mostly unaffected, but decided it was probably best to keep my expectations low...



The song class with Deirdre Scanlan got started, & at first it was me & two young girls. Then another person came in, thinking it was a whistle lesson (as the printed poster for the weekend would suggest), but got pulled in for songs. Then 3 guys showed up, & it turned out to be a nice class. Deirdre has a beautiful voice, & a very relaxed teaching style. We covered 3 songs in 2 hours, & she gave us each a chance to sing solo, which I liked as a teaching method (even if it made everyone a bit nervous).

As I was leaving, the 3 guys offered me a ride. I was going to walk 20 mins to McGann's, but the wind & rain were so bad, I ended up accepting the offer. They drove to McDermott's, so I stopped in for a few tunes & some free chips with them before heading to McGann's (and getting buffeted by the wind on the short walk over).



At McGann's, the session was already underway (and quite crowded) by the time I arrived. While McDermott's had been quiet, & the guys had played mostly familiar tunes, McGann's was crowded & they were playing faster, & less familiar tunes. Still, the playing was excellent, & I was happy to have another chance to hear Shane play whistle & pipes. McGann's also brought out some free fried food for the musicians, and there were definitely a good number of familiar tunes (but not many "chestnuts" — as people sometimes call the standard, easy tunes).

We played until 6, then took a break for dinner. I ordered tea & a half-portion of Irish stew. I wasn't super hungry after the chips, but had been wanting to try the stew at McGann's... The tea was not great, but the stew was delicious! It had mashed potato in the center, so it was kinda the inverse of mashed potatoes and gravy... The stew was almost entirely gravy, or thick broth, with nice large pieces of carrots & tender beef. I don't eat much meat usually, so the half-portion was more than enough...



The session started up again around 8pm, & a few more musicians came in. We had to shuffle around a bit, since the guy with a keyboard (Stephen) needed access to a power outlet. I ended up sitting between him & the guitarist. One nice thing about playing whistle is that you can sit pretty much anywhere & not take up too much space.



A girl from the group that had come in to join the session (a singer, not instrumentalist) came and sat next to me at one point, just to chat. She seemed very sweet. The keyboard player next to me told me to ask her for a song... with the pub being so loud, I thought it would probably be an unpleasant experience for her, but I mentioned that I'd love to hear her sing anyway. She eventually did sing a song, but the pub didn't quiet down at all... even though some of the musicians were yelling for the crowd to be quiet. Oh well... since I was sitting right next to her, I could hear her anyway. She does have a lovely voice, & more importantly was a very kind & sweet person. I gave her my card, & I hope she gets in touch with me somehow, since I didn't catch her name. When I walked back, the wind had mostly died down, but it did start to rain (very cold rain, like icy daggers).

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After breakfast on Sunday, I started off to O'Connor's for what I believed would be a whistle workshop with Christy Barry... but when I got to the pub, the same lady working there the day before (who had said the whistle workshop would be on Sunday) acted like she didn't know anything about it.



I sat down & was joined soon enough by a couple other whistlers (one of them from the singing workshop the day before, Don Nolan, the other was a lady who lived somewhere in the area, named Cearbhùil). I played the Christy Barry jigs (in honor of the guy who stood us up, haha) & we traded a few more tunes before some non-whistlers joined us. Cearbhùil went through a few tunes that I really liked, & Don (visiting from Dublin) played the Clare jig in honor of the locale.



A bit of a session got going, & it was a good enough session, but almost all tunes I knew, which was nice. They did play some polkas at 180 bpm, however (I checked, since it felt unusually fast — do set dancers go that speed?) I was just barely able to keep up, but we mostly played tunes at a reasonable (even slow) tempo.



Gradually, more people trickled in, and the session kept going through til evening. At some point, I decided to check out the other concurrent session (again, there were multiple sessions in the same building). I also bought an O'Connor's t-shirt on my way over (gotta slow down with the souvenirs, or I'll have to just wear all my clothes at once on the flight home, haha)...

It was a big crowd, and I was very happy to see a uilleann piper among them. I sat in a high chair towards the back of the group (since I was coming from the other session, I didn't arrive early enough for a good seat). I sat right behind Adrian (the flute player I met at Fitzpatrick's pub the week before). I stayed for a few sets, then realized I was pretty hungry. There wasn't much room at the pub to sit & eat, so I walked the 3 minutes back to the B&B for some chili, & to pack a bit more.



When I got back to O'Connor's, the place was packed, & there were a bunch of children from a music program playing in place of the session I had just left... so I went back to the other part of the bar (where I was playing in the earlier session). I had a nice seat, & Christy Barry showed up, to my delight. He pulled out a duffel bag of whistles and a flute, and I especially loved hearing him play solo on whistle. He played a beautiful air, & I noticed that he does what I do (& what I've been told isn't the "proper" way to play) — he plays vibrato with his breath, rather than his fingers. I think I use a bit of both, but I can't help but use breath vibrato... it comes naturally, the way I would sing the same note... Anyway, I thought it'd be worth mentioning, if only to demonstrate that there are many ways to achieve the same goal; & not too much "right" or "wrong" about it.



I had a great time in that session, and chatted a bit with the people sitting around me. I saw the guy I'd met at Kirsten's CD release after-party, & asked for his name again. At first I thought he said "Midge" but later on it occurred to me that he probably said "Mitch" — but either way, he was a very nice guy & we had a good chat over the course of the evening. He apparently made the mandolin he was playing out of some driftwood. I liked the kinda rough feel of the wood, & he had a maple segment along the back that had ripples, like sand (or waves). I really should have taken a picture! He let me play a tune, so I played my favorite mandolin tune, "Tansy's Fancy" (one that I learned from a Steeleye Span album).

\*\*EDIT: he got in touch with me later — it WAS Midge!

Some fellows from East Clare came in to lead the session, & at first it looked like Christy Barry was packing up to leave, but the tunes they played were so sweet & groovy that I think he changed his mind. I asked Mitch (if that's his name) whether the East Clare style is about the tunes they play, or the way of playing them. He just said "Yes" — so I suppose it's both.



Mitch said it's the reggae of Irish music; more laid-back, kinda groovy (sounds like my taste exactly, haha). That part of the session was particularly sweet, & Christy stuck around for a while... but as he was leaving, I asked if I could get a photo with him, so we walked outside & asked the French concertina player if he wouldn't mind taking our picture. It was a bit dark, but here it is:





I went back inside to see if I could join up with the other session, but it was very crowded, and it seemed like the uilleann piper was no longer there, so I went back to the smaller session in the corner of the pub. I was happy to see the uilleann piper come & pull up a chair. He took over running the session after the East Clare duo left (I never really had a chance to talk to them, so I don't know their names). I talked a bit with the piper. I think he said his name was Patrick (the grandson of Leo Rowsome, I think he said?) we talked a bit about pipes, since I mentioned that I've been in contact with Michael Hubbert about a practice chanter. He told me to get in touch with the South California Piper's Club, since he has some contacts there.

I was starting to feel a bit tired, but I couldn't quite find it in me to leave. There was a dancer doing some sean nos dancing, which was a lot of fun... nice to play tunes for dancers, informally... I went back over to the other session (followed Patrick over there) & found that it was a lot less crowded, but that people were very drunk. When I asked to take a seat, the guy I asked said "okay" and dropped his pint... I felt kinda bad, but it wasn't exactly my fault, so it also seemed weird to offer to get him another drink (since it seemed like he'd had enough already)...

You know, I heard that Christy Barry doesn't drink (semi-confirmed by my conversation with him outside the pub... I lamented how loud the pubs are, & he said that's why he doesn't play much in pubs these days, & people tend to just get drunk enough that they no longer care about the noise). I think I prefer playing sober (also less bother with cleaning my whistles if I just drink water), so it's nice to hear that other musicians feel the same way.

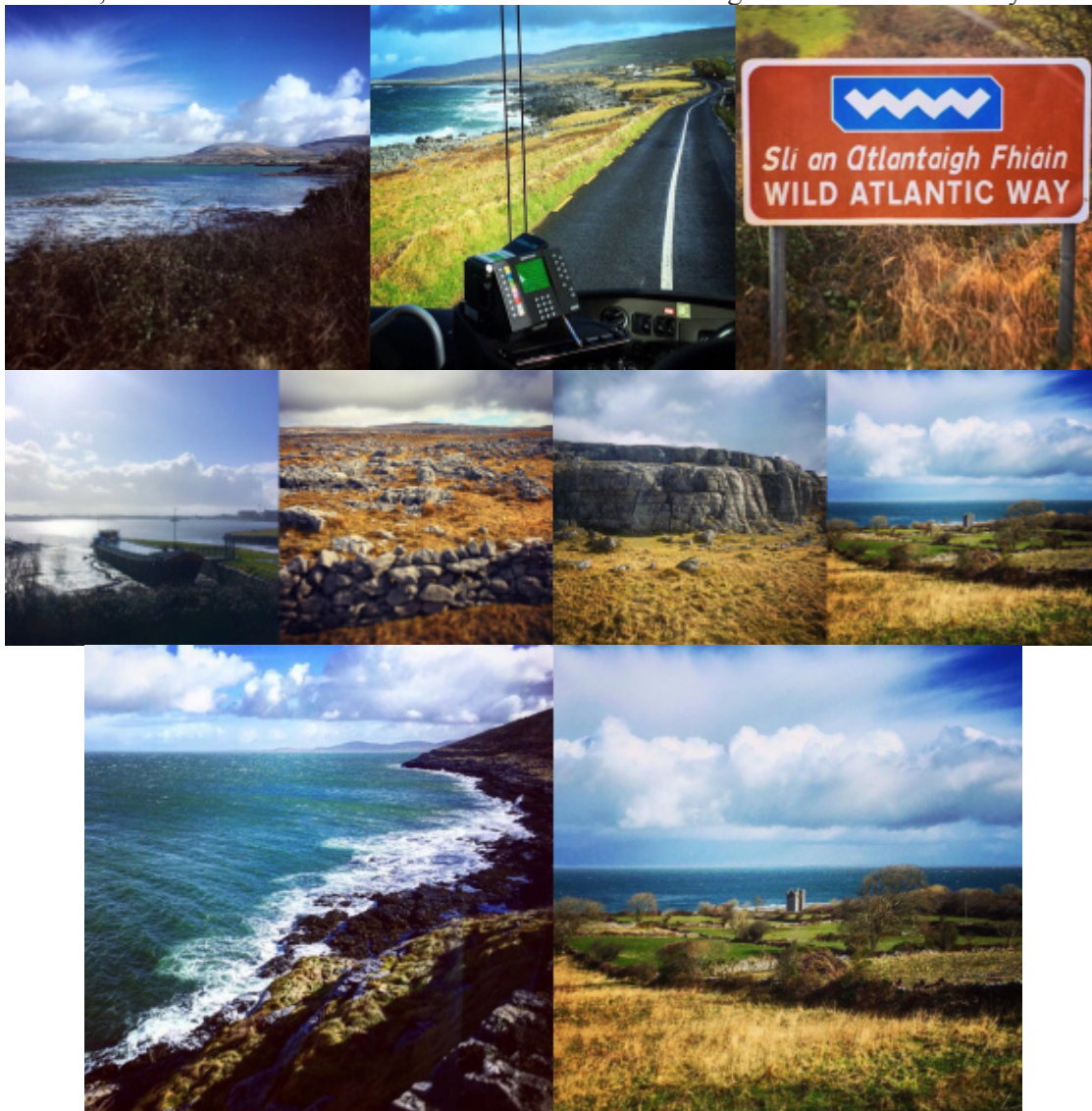
Anyway, the end of the night was a bit less fun, if only because people weren't really sober enough to chat, & it was too loud for me to lead any tunes in there (whistles don't really project as well as flutes or other instruments, which has its pros and cons). I decided to call it a night & head back to get some sleep around midnight.

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I woke up early on Monday, packed the last of my things, and went down for breakfast. Teresa was just about to take off for her own travel vacation, but she still made breakfast for me and Dick. I spent a bit of time responding to emails, and was about to take off, when Teresa came upstairs to say goodbye & give me a gift. I never know what to say to gifts — especially since I felt that if anyone should be getting a gift, it should be her... and such thoughtful gifts, too! It was from the rock shop — both things that I had stopped & looked at, & remarked upon. She's one of those excellent gift-givers, who take note of things you like in order to surprise you with them later.



I walked to the bus stop to wait for the 350 bus to Galway. It arrived & I paid €17 for the ride... seems a bit pricey; maybe public transit isn't all that affordable in Ireland. It seems like, especially in rural areas like Doolin, everyone has cars. I guess buses are mostly for tourists, which could explain the cost. Still, the sun was out and the bus ride was beautiful along the Wild Atlantic Way.







I got off in Galway to wait for the 424 bus to Costelloe (where I'm staying a couple nights before heading to Inis Mór (weather permitting)). It was raining in Galway, just like the last time I stopped over there. Hopefully when I head back there in a couple weeks, I'll see some nicer weather there. The bus was packed, and the fare was about as expensive, €13... so €30 to get from Doolin to Costelloe. And I needed to pay in cash, so I'll need to make sure to hold onto some in order to make the return trip. The windows were a bit fogged over on the 424, so I didn't get many pictures... but went on a short walk once I arrived, and saw some beautiful sights around the (very small) town.





Spending the day mostly catching up on some things, and taking it easy... it was a busy weekend, so it's nice to take some time for myself (that sounds really funny when this whole trip is about taking time for myself, but there it is!)

## Ros an Mhíl to Inis Mór

Posted on March 4, 2020

I woke up on Tuesday feeling sniffly... pretty clearly a common cold (no cough or fever, so I'm pretty confident it's not coronavirus)... good timing for a cold, in the grand scheme of things. From my brief walk around town the day before, I surmised that there really wasn't too much going on in Costelloe (some spell it Costello, or Casla in Irish, which literally means "sea inlet"). There was a pub, & I could have done the same walk as the day before, but I opted to spend the day indoors, drinking tea & eating soup.

When I arrived at the apartment the day before, I was a bit taken aback when my host said he had only the one key for the whole place (I think he doesn't usually lock it at all). This ended up making things pretty awkward & uncomfortable, since I felt I couldn't leave without permission to borrow the key, & the host would occasionally leave & then call me to ask me to let him back in (meaning that if I went on a walk out of wifi/cell range, I would miss the call). So in the end, there were multiple reasons to stay put... I watched some YouTube, Netflix, did some reading, & mostly read & responded to emails.



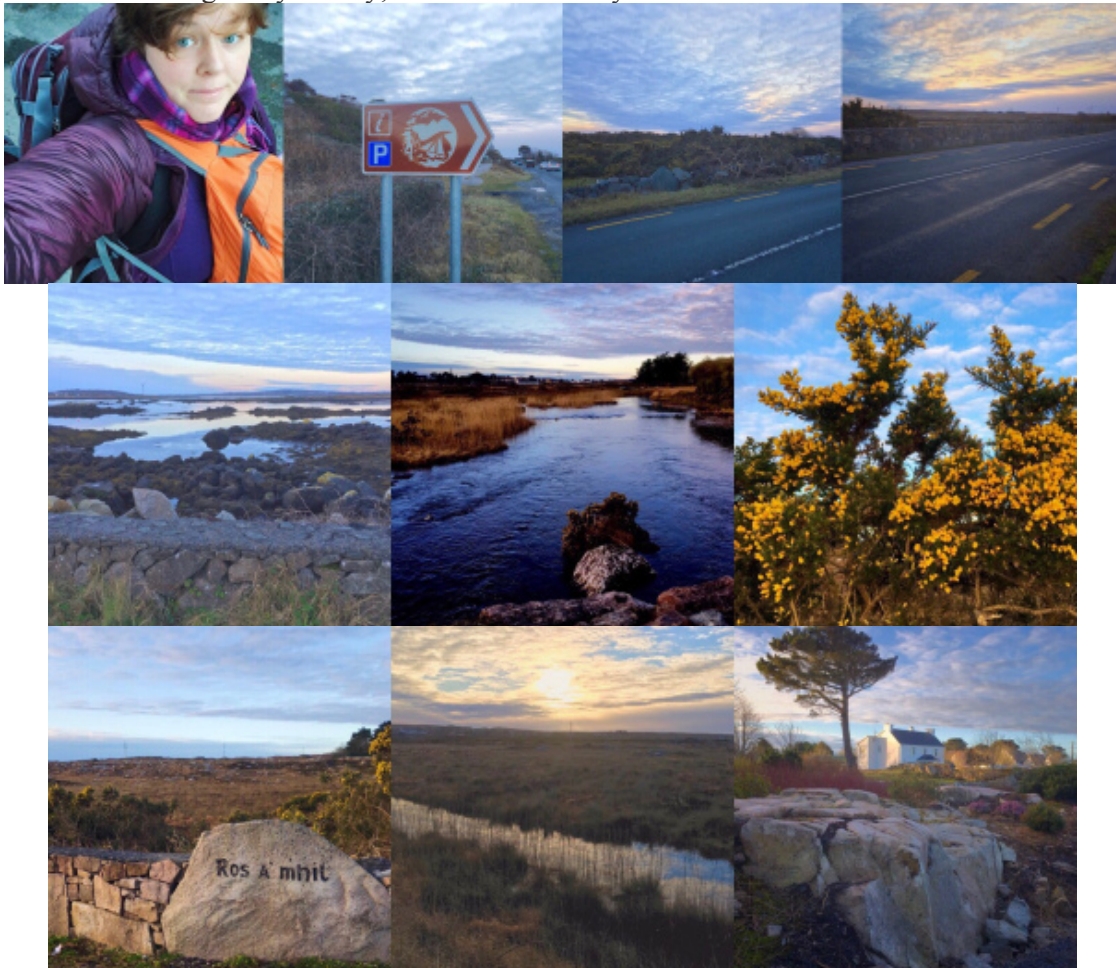
Anyway, I couldn't really practice tunes while feeling congested, but watching videos helps when I feel homesick. It occurred to me at one point that a bath would be wonderful (steamy air, relaxing, good all around), so I set one up... but the tap went cold. It suddenly dawned on me that what my host meant when he said earlier that "there should be enough hot water for a shower" is that there's actually a hot water limit. I haven't experienced that in an apartment before... so the bath plan didn't really pan out. Well, I had one, but it was cold. Still, it was nice to have a R&R day to try to recover from the sniffle...

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Somehow I still managed to wake up before my 6:30 alarm on Wednesday... & it was still dark in the room, with curtains open. Oh well, I guess it gave me a chance for some reading online. When the sky started to brighten, I took that as my cue to get ready to hit the road.

I had mostly packed the night before, & my towel had some kind of dirt on it from when it fell on the floor earlier, so I didn't bother with a shower. I made some ramen & texted my host to tell him I was off... not at all going to miss that place (the first time I've been truly disappointed by an AirBnB experience on this trip — though it's not as bad as the "cozy cocoon" I stayed in while visiting Montreal, haha).

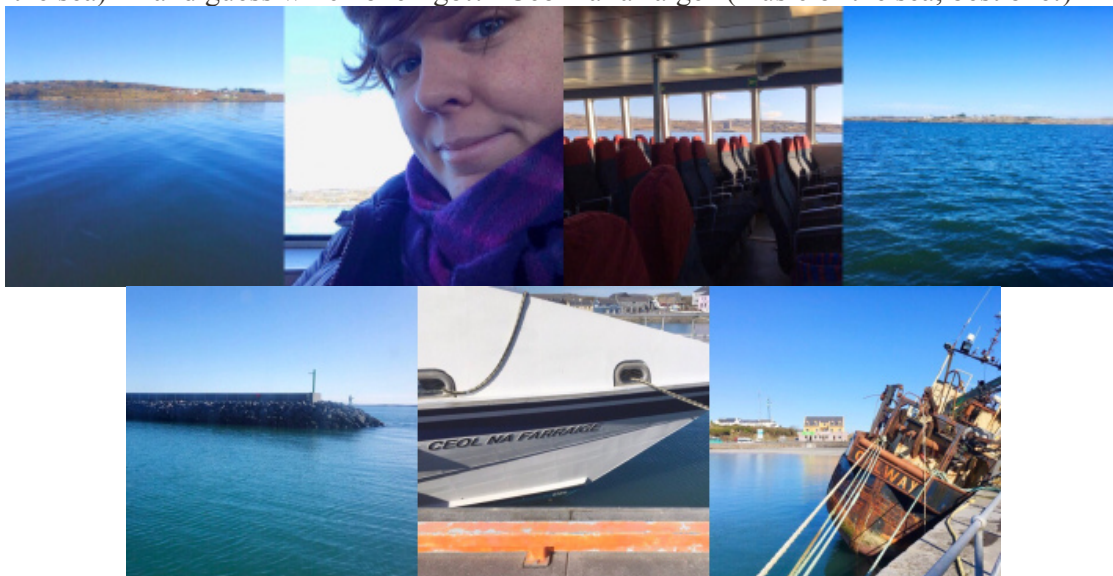
The walk to the ferry (in Rossaveal, or Ros an Mhíl in Irish) was very nice, with the clouds scattered away from the horizon, and reflected in the water... but for most of the walk, there was no sidewalk, so I had to step into brambles & mud whenever a car came my way. Oh, & I was carrying all my stuff, so I was walking fairly slowly, but it wasn't really that uncomfortable.



I made it to what I thought was the ferry, but the building was abandoned... I was starting to come up with a contingency plan on my way over (always the pessimist), so I was already formulating an email in my head to the ferry company about issuing a refund for a ticket they shouldn't have sold (though it would be a bit more painful to cancel my AirBnB & book other accommodations)... but luckily I saw someone in a truck, so I asked him about the ferry. He says THAT office would be closed for another month, but that there was another ticket office down the road, just past the ferries. I thanked him & walked over to the office to get my tickets "printed" (the lady at the desk just wrote on some scraps of paper — one for the way there, the other for the way back).



I was still a couple hours early, so I wandered around a bit, but ended up mostly sitting on a bench & taking in the peaceful view of the docks. Eventually my ferry arrived with a bunch of travelers (presumably from the Aran Islands) & I was surprised how many there were! I had been waiting all on my own, & wondering if I would be the only one to ride the ferry. But by the time we left the dock, there were probably about 20 people onboard. Oh, & the boats were all named "X na farrage" (X of the sea) — and guess which one I got? "Ceol na farrage" (music of the sea; best one!)





The ride was nice, though I didn't get to go out & feel the salt spray (my favorite part of riding on boats)... but it was still fun to ride the waves — the ferry went so fast! The whole ride (from Rossaveal to the docks of Inis Mór) was just about half an hour, I think. We disembarked, & I walked to the information center to ask about dance/music. No dance, but there's music on weekends. That seems to be the case pretty much everywhere in winter months in Ireland. About as much music & more dance around the bay area, back home. Travel sure helps me to appreciate little things like that...

As I was about to leave, someone walked in & asked me "are you Alina?" — it was my AirBnB host, Cliona, who came to offer me a ride to the place (I was planning to walk, but happy for the lift). She gave me a quick tour on the way there, along with walking tips. Her dog was watching the road by my shoulder the whole way there, & was possibly miffed about losing her seat up front to some random stranger.



When we got to the house, Cliona showed me to my room (a studio attached to the rest of the house). She told me that her grandfather, born in 1930, built this house from stone quarried right behind the house (and carried via donkey) when he was just 18 years old! That's nuts!

Anyway, I dropped off my heavier bag, then walked back to the dock to check Joe Watty's for the session schedule (the facebook page & website just had February times listed). I asked a woman at the bar, & she pointed to the February list... I looked at her quizzically & said, looking at my watch, "I was pretty sure it was March..." She had this sudden look of realization, & assured me it was the March schedule. I'm guessing it was a typo, but pretty funny.



From there I walked back to the docks to see the Sweater Shop & the bike rental (might do that later if the weather stays nice). For now I want to take in the sights slowly. Plenty of time to explore the island... I decided it would be nice to have some non-canned food, so I stopped at the store on the way back.



The walk to & from the house is so beautiful... green fields, stone fences, & ocean as far as the eye can see. Also cows — a good number of cows. Pro tip: they come running towards you if you sing, & sometimes moo loudly in response. Not sure, but they might be trying to tell me to shut up, haha.

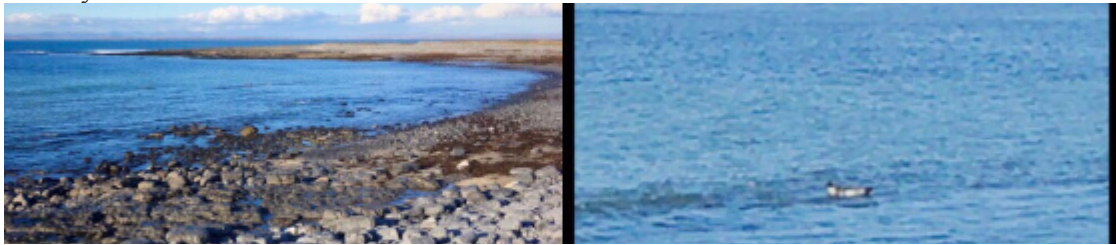


I got back, put groceries away, & made some lunch... kinda weird ingredients, but it felt perfect for my slight sniffle — oxtail soup with red cabbage, white pudding, and some spaghetti. And some tea! I was feeling pretty good, & it was so nice outside that I decided to go for another walk down to where the seals supposedly hang out.





Didn't see any seals at first, but played a bit of whistle (til my fingers were too cold), & by that time, 1 seal had come to do a little body-surfing in the shallows. It was pretty far, but I tried to take a photo. Can you find the seal?



I walked back to the house, & stopped off at the old monastery... Possibly from the 8th century. People had left stones with names on them, so I left a lucky wishing stone for Yosh. Not sure what it means, but it felt like one more step towards closure for me, & I'll take what I can get at this point.



Then back to the studio — the house cat & dog both came up to greet me upon my return. I decided to take a quick shower, eat the last of the soup, & watch videos in bed. A pretty good day, all in all. I was a bit worried about coming here, since there wasn't much promise of music, & everyone I talked to seemed shocked that I'd be here for over a week... but if other days are as nice as this one, I think it'll end up being a real highlight for me...



# The wormhole & wren on the rocks

Posted on March 7, 2020

I woke up Thursday morning & stayed in bed reading for a bit (still recovering from my cold). I heard a knock on the door, so I got up reluctantly, & met Clíona (the hostess) at the door. She had 2 muffins on a plate for me. We chatted for a bit (about the shower, which has been acting up), & she ended up giving me a lot of helpful advice about where I could go walking.

I pulled out a map because I figured it would be easier for her to describe the route ... but the tiny map didn't really have all the roads either... so I had to do my best to remember her instructions (later wish I had just recorded it on my phone)...

She reassured me that it was a small island, so "you can't get lost" & an annoying little voice in my head responded "challenge accepted!" ... She left, & I packed a day bag for my walk (took the muffins for my lunch), then left as quickly as possible, ever mindful of the fact that in Ireland, the sun waits for no one.



I turned to go uphill from the house (a new direction for me) & towards the high road. I had just made the first turn onto the main road, when it started to rain. Fortunately, I had brought my handy rain poncho (one that my dad gave me on our trip to Scotland 10 years ago, which I've been carrying in my bag every day... and using almost every day). It rained for about 10 minutes, then I kept wearing the poncho until it dried off in the wind.



I turned and walked up along a gravel road, with an excellent view of the south-side of the island... I could see the rain clouds off on the horizon, with grey tendrils streaking down towards the sea (not so fun to be in, but beautiful when viewed at a distance) along with a patch of golden sunlight...



I walked along, and saw two elderly gents chatting by the road. I couldn't understand them, but I'm pretty sure they were speaking Irish (Gaelic)... I was trying to decide whether it would be better to



greet them in Irish or English, when one of them said “hello” — I breathed a sigh of relief as I said “hello” in response, but was also a bit saddened to miss my chance to speak Irish in Ireland with real native speakers... but I was also afraid to start a conversation I wouldn't be able to finish. I kept walking along past them, and saw that one of them had left his bike leaning against the stone wall... such an idyllic, and classic thing to see in Ireland. The stone walls are everywhere — created (and recreated) by hand, with stones brought over short distances. It truly boggles the mind to look out across the island, and see walls of hand-placed stones as far as the eye can see. And the bike against the wall is such a perfect symbol for trust in a community, that no one would try to ride off on the bike as a prank or in theft. I would say that of course you can't get too far on the island with a bike, but you also see the same sort of thing (bikes left unlocked and unguarded) on the mainland.



As I walked along, I came to a junction where I could go in one of 3 other directions. Of these, I knew I wanted to go either straight ahead (an unpaved grassy path) or right (a gravel path uphill) to get to the small township of Gort na gCapall, right next to my destination: Poll na bPéist (“the wormhole”). I opted for what looked to be the more scenic path (also potentially more coastal).



As I walked along, it became clear that the scenic path was actually just a labyrinth, winding its way between cow and horse pastures. Still very scenic, but definitely a maze. I was a bit disappointed, but not at all surprised, when I finally came to the dead end... It was a gate, into a field with no clear outlet. I turned back, but didn't regret the journey.





I took the uphill gravel path, which was a bit less scenic, but had plenty of cows. I even encountered a man and child, coaxing several cows uphill to greener pastures. “Taking the cows out for some exercise?” I asked, jokingly. The man replied without humor, “I’m taking them to a new field; not concerned about their exercise.” I laughed to indicate that I had meant it as a joke, but he may have just written me off as looney by that point. Ah well.



I made it to Gort na gCapall, many cows later! Lots of rustic farmhouses and sheds, as well as a little monument at the center of town, dedicated to Liam O’Flaherty (1896 – 1984), a famous novelist from the town. I’ll have to look up and read one of his books sometime!







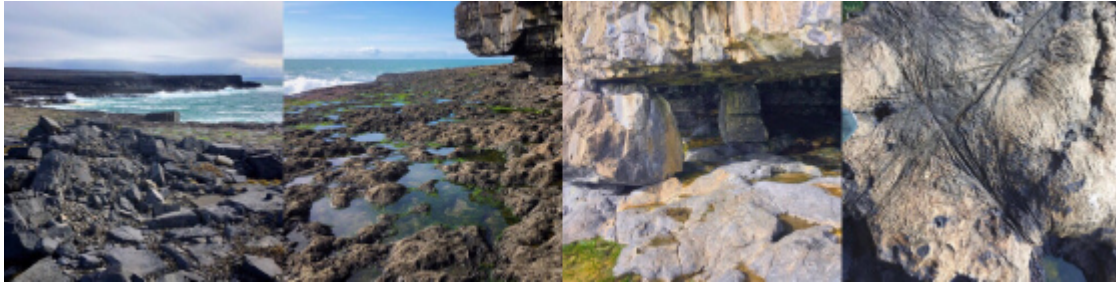
On my way out from the shrine, I noticed a painted stone at the nearby intersection, indicating the direction of the wormhole. I was very glad for the sign, since my free travel map was limited (as was my Google map). I followed hand-painted signs and arrows all the way to a dead end, then doubled back and saw a hole in the wall to step through. Definitely a labyrinth (and yes, I mean like a David Bowie film). No talking caterpillars, though. One of those would have been nice.



The arrows became more sparse as I walked across the rocky plains... I had no idea which direction I was headed, were it not for the occasional, faded arrow that I chanced across. I was smart enough to sometimes look back the way I'd come. I had the sinking feeling that all the rock would start to look the same, and that I'd be lost out in the middle of nowhere with no cell reception. I had also stupidly left my phone's charger back at the studio (& was already down to half battery).



Finally I came to a sign that said "Wormhole 150 m" (in which direction, unclear... but I was close!) and I kept walking, hopefully in the right direction. There were several moments where I felt like turning back. The waves were crashing loudly & violently into the cliffside just 20 feet or so to my left, and there was water and algae all over the ground at my feet (I was essentially walking over lifeless tidepools). To my right was a cliffside overhang, with so much overhang that it appeared to form caves... I ventured inside one that had a couple of natural rock supports built in, so I felt less risk of being crushed... but I didn't stay in for long, since I didn't want to push my luck.



The urge to turn back was strong, and difficult to resist. I had to keep mentally imagining that my dad, sister, and uncle Tedd were with me. They would never turn back at a time like this... they seek adventure and seem eager to take risks. I don't necessarily want to be that way myself, but I was also thinking how disappointing it would be for all of you to read about my journey to the wormhole, only to turn back before I got there... so I pressed on.



(Click [here](#) to watch a short video I took at the wormhole)

And it was worth the 5-mile hike! I first saw the Poll na bPéist and for a moment the fear went away... the wormhole is like a naturally-occurring, giant swimming pool. I had seen photos of it before, but nothing really compares to the reality of turning a corner, walking along, then seeing it appear magically over the side of the ledge you're standing on. Like I said, the fear went away for a moment, but then it came back tenfold. I decided to sit down and watch it, and eat a couple muffins. It's funny how you can trick your brain into going out of fear-mode by eating (I expect this is the reason people stress-eat). I did feel better while eating and watching the waves (which occasionally crashed over the edge, or out from within the "pool") ... but got a bit of a fright again when I almost fumbled my water bottle, and had the mental image of it rolling down the slope, & over the ledge into the pool.



On the way back, I explored more of the caves... I only slipped on the algae once (and it was while I was congratulating myself on being careful and not slipping... that's hubris for you!) I made it back to the solid rocky terrain (well, there was an occasional wobble). I thought I might get by, following the same arrows I had come in by, but many of them were obscured from my vantage point, and I ended up going astray. I suddenly found myself missing the labyrinths, with the clear walls to follow.



Thankfully, I had made the occasional glance behind me as I'd come in, and had some rocks along the horizon to guide me back to the entrance. When I came through the hole in the wall, I felt a strange urge to get on hands and knees and kiss the soil. But I didn't — I'd seen too many cows walk along these roads. I like my dirt a bit less fresh than that.

By the time I made it back to Gort na gCapall, I'd walked 6 miles, and my feet were super sore (I'd walked 11.5 miles just the day before). I had originally planned to keep walking through the north part of the island, but opted to loop back along the slip road (coastal road) instead. Hopefully I'll have a chance to head up that way later on.



I stopped for a little while to lie down on the grass, overlooking a beach. Thought that maybe my feet would feel better after resting. They didn't really, but it was still a good excuse to relax on the beach, with the sun still out. I ate an orange, and listened to the waves for a time. Then I made my way back south to the studio apartment. It wasn't too far to go (maybe 3 miles), but my feet were so sore that it felt like forever. Usually I can sing and distract myself while walking, so the distance doesn't register, but my cold had progressed to the point that it was a bit painful to speak (didn't stop me from talking to cows and horses that I passed by, or the occasional bird)...



I didn't take many photos, in an attempt to conserve battery. But there were some nice rock walls, and other rock structures along the way. So I got some photos of animals and rocks mostly. The ocean was beautiful as well, but for the most part I only caught glimpses of it over the fields, or better views that I had already taken photos of the day before... Still, it was a nice walk, despite the pain to my feet.

I got back and decided to take a break from Facebook (difficult while traveling, since it feels like my only way to stay connected with everyone back home), but it was becoming un pleasant, mostly unhealthy distraction. I'm not leaving forever, just for a time. I'm going to miss seeing what my friends are up to, but am always happy if anyone wants to drop me a line, either here as a comment, over messenger, or as an email. I love that I have this opportunity to travel, but I'm a homebody at heart, and being this far away from friends and family is not easy for me.

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I woke up on Friday earlier than I'd hoped, but managed to get back to sleep for a couple hours, thankfully. I was feeling more sick than the day before (maybe shouldn't have gone on such long walks while sick)... think my tonsils were swollen. I drank a bit of tea & took a shower (REALLY wish I could take a bath, which is what helps me the most when I'm sick back home)... But anyway, looking on the bright side, my mom reminded me that I should be enjoying the experience of being sick overseas — that it forces me to slow down & really take in my surroundings... and, as she said: “how many people can say they've been sick on Inis Mór” — haha. I laughed so hard at that. She always knows what to say to get me laughing. After a small breakfast (mostly tea, & a bit of peanut butter and an orange for vitamin C), I went outside... wasn't quite feeling up to a walk, but luckily the seaside is right outside the door, just a 2 minute walk. I sat down on a grassy patch & took out my whistle to play some tunes.





The wind wasn't too bad, & it didn't seem like rain was too imminent. I had a tune come to mind, but didn't know the name of it offhand. I went as far as I could, drawing it out from memory, but eventually got stuck & decided to cheat & tunepal it for the 2nd half (for those unfamiliar, Tunepal is a useful app for finding mostly trad Irish/Scottish tunes from live audio — like a Google search for celtic music). It was a tune called “Bird in the Bush” — and shortly after I played it, a small round brown bird came out and started hopping around on the rocks in front of me.

For a while I just played tunes that came to mind, then went back to playing a slow air I first started playing on Yosha's last day... I didn't write it down, because writing airs down feels sacrilegious somehow... even more than most music, they defy containment... it's more like playing a feeling, that moves like tides or firelight, in semi-predictable shapes that never fully repeat. My air moves around a small theme, & builds from it & returns to it, & sometimes goes somewhere entirely different. I will write it, as I do with all my tunes, but I don't think I'll ever be happy with how it looks on a page...

Anyway, after the air, I moved into another kinda trancey march, one which also moved along a simple theme. It just came to mind, so I played it as I thought it... and the cute little round brown bird was bouncing around on the rocks as I played, looking a lot like the bouncy ball that indicates which words to sing during karaoke. As I've said before, I do always enjoy playing music for dancers (that includes birds). I figured the bird was enjoying my tunes, which made me happy... then the bird started singing along, & really put me to shame — such lovely birdsong! I'd heard it before, but had never seen the bird behind the song... and here it was: tiny, brown, round, adorable but not particularly impressive in appearance. I looked online when I got back, & determined that it must have been a wren! ([Link](#) to Birdwatch Ireland page about the wren)

I played one more new tune while on the rocks, and decided I would name it for the Poll na bPéist experience the day before... a fast little slide (luckily I didn't experience a fast slide down into the wormhole, haha). After this 3rd new tune, I decided I had better start writing these down before it became overwhelming, so I walked the short distance back to the studio.

After writing tunes for a bit, Clíona came by to tell me that the guy had come by to fix the shower while I was gone, but since I hadn't been there he had to leave... ugh... Then she said she'd heard me playing & told me to play her a tune. I hate performing on my best days (& when I can barely breathe to play, this isn't one), but out of politeness, I felt obliged to perform something. When I was done, she told me how good her daughter is at whistle (not exactly a confidence-booster... being put on the spotlight & then feeling like a comparison was being made all along)... But at least she told me I could use the laundry machine (though I had to guess at how to use it, as they're all pretty different from back home).

I ate some soup, finished writing out tunes (good enough for now anyway), & made a couple calls. Then I watched a few videos and decided to stay in for the night... it was a tough decision, since there was possibly music happening in town, but I wasn't really feeling up to the hour-long walk, and wanted to recover enough to have a good time on Saturday, when the main session of the week takes place at Tí Joe Watty's.

# Tea and Soup and Rainy Days

Posted on March 12, 2020

I haven't written for a while, since I've unfortunately been juuust sick enough, and the weather has been juuust bad enough that I haven't been able to go on many adventures for the past few days... But I'll recount as much as I can remember, and I hope it's interesting enough all the same...

I found myself awake at 7am on Saturday (same as the day before, but I was unable to get back to sleep this time). It occurred to me that I must be hearing something through my earplugs (I'm a very light sleeper, so I wear them even when I'm all alone). Sure enough, after a couple seconds I heard footsteps. The walls here are paper thin. The building appears modern, but I happen to know that an 18-year old born in the 1930s constructed this side of the house, & soundproofing it may not have been his number-1 concern...

I read for a while, then got up to heat soup & tea at turns, a couple of times each over the course of the day. I practiced some tunes & spent the day indoors (it was raining pretty constantly, & very windy).



I had plans to walk to town in the evening, & finally caught a relatively dry spell around 5:30pm. I walked to "The Bar" (one sign of being in a small isolated community, that a name like that doesn't cause confusion).



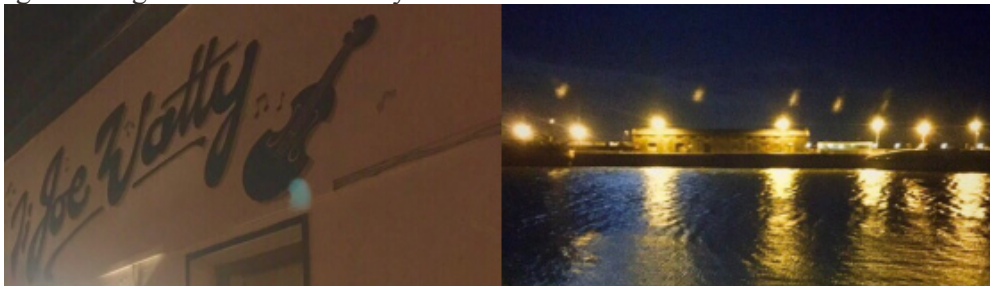


I had heard that there would be music there Saturday night at 7:30, so I had some fish & chips, & read more articles as I waited. The musician showed up with his guitar & keyboard (I never learned his name), & the bartender I'd been talking to asked him (on my behalf) whether I could join for some tunes on whistle. I was told, indirectly, that it was okay... but since it was just one guy at his gig, with microphones, it seemed too weird to go up & ask to play.



I listened to him sing song after song (some that were familiar, or even ones that I like). I was content enough to listen, but a little after 8:30 he asked if there was a whistle player in the audience who wanted to play. I felt that I had to acknowledge that it was me, & went up to play a few tunes with him (leading the tunes on mic too, since he was just playing chords on guitar)... I was a bit self-conscious and out-of-it (still a bit congested too) & my nerves got the better of me towards the end of my first set of tunes... I ended up making up the second part of a tune entirely, because my mind went completely blank. I much prefer sessions to performances...

I asked to play one more set of tunes, to redeem myself. It went better than the first, but not as smoothly as playing a tune that everyone knows in a session (he was coming up with chords on the spot, & I get the sense that he hardly ever plays trad music). I stuck around for a couple more songs after leaving the "stage" and then made my exit.



I walked over to Joe Watty's, with music starting between 9 & 10:30 sometime (the bartenders I asked earlier didn't know). I was running out of reading material, so when the first musician arrived, I walked over to ask if it was an open session (the bartender had earlier led me to believe that it was), & I asked if I could join for some tunes... He said it was more of a gig, but that the other bandmates might be okay with me joining for a couple "songs" (unsure if he meant singing or playing, I decided to back off a bit... I was kinda tired of performing while still recovering from this lingering congestion).



Playing in a session is one thing, where I can play along with tunes that I know & not have a microphone in my face... but being asked to lead tunes (or songs) in a performance setting, with complete strangers, isn't really what I was mentally prepared for. So I guess Inis Mór is a bust for sessions (at least in the off-season, before summer). But since the bartenders told me that these events WERE "sessions" I have my doubts about proper sessions happening much at all around here. It seems strange to me that all the sessions I've been to in Ireland (whether frequent or seasonal, big or small) have more of a performative element to them. Many have microphones, which makes it awkward to ask to join in... And I get the sense that it's standard for pubs to pay the session leaders (or main performers, rather) a set amount. Back home, that's not always the case... Sometimes musicians leave out a tip jar, sometimes drinks are comped for all musicians (usually with a limit per person), and sometimes the session leaders are paid, but there's no real standard practice.

I'm honestly not sure what works best in the long term, though I do have concerns (on a personal level anyway) that being paid can detract from the joy of playing music. I feel like providing free drinks might not take away from the joy of playing as much (making it feel like "work"), but I also don't really drink while I play, for personal reasons... and I do worry that it could result in alcoholism for musicians who are prone to that.

As for a tip jar, or direct payment to session leaders, I feel like it promotes a sense of inequality among musicians that isn't really beneficial, and can lead to resentment. So yeah, none of these feel like great options... But of course this is all personal to me, & I expect many feel very differently about it. I do think that the performative aspect of "sessions" here in Ireland does change the culture around playing in pubs quite a bit, for better or worse.

They were 3 excellent singers, who each took turns leading songs & backing each other up. I pretty much decided to just listen as they sang... eventually I ordered a hot whiskey (seemed a good fit for getting over congestion, since it's basically just whiskey and lemon, heated so that it's almost like tea). I asked for fewer cloves, since I'm not such a fan of their smell, and for that reason it wasn't as spicy as I would like it to be, in general... but still good.



At some point, when they were no longer a trio, I was asked to play a tune. One band member (one of 2 brothers) left because he was feeling unwell, so I sat at his mic and played a few reels, then back to take my seat. Again, it was the only semi-trad music played all night (modern compositions, but in the trad genre), so I was really self-conscious and had some regrets about asking to play at the beginning.





I returned to my hot whiskey & continued to sit and enjoy the songs. It occurred to me that there was a song they might know, that I could play an instrumental break for, so I suggested it and they invited me back onstage (luckily they were okay singing it in the key of D, since I only have D whistles with me).

After this, I took a seat again, thinking that would be the last time I'd join them onstage... but later in the evening, an older gent from Donegal (Philip Doherty) came over while the musicians were on break, and told me he liked the tunes I played earlier, and suggested that I play another trad set... I didn't really have anything in mind, or much stamina for playing music solo, but since he was so nice as to request it, I decided to see if it was possible. The other 2 guys were okay with it, and I played a tune (this time absentmindedly forgetting to tell them the key it was in). It was a waltz, and I played it a few times through, so as to give the guitarists a chance to find the chords with confidence... but I felt like it could have gone better. I take solace in the fact that most of the guys hanging at the pub around midnight probably weren't sober enough to notice anything amiss. The walk back to the AirBnB was very pleasant, with only a small amount of freezing rain part-way through. Following the road by moonlight was surprisingly easy. I didn't have need for a flashlight... and the ocean waves were so beautiful in the night; I wish I'd been able to take a photo, but it wouldn't have turned out.

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On Sunday, I slept in and woke up at 10:30 for the first time in a while! The hostess went out of town the day before (all the way to Dublin for a film festival — her husband's tractor was featured in one of the films, if I recall correctly), so there weren't any footsteps to wake me early in the morning... I was still feeling fairly congested, & decided to spend most of the day indoors.

It sucks to have a cold while traveling... I feel like I came all this way to explore, & it's a bummer that I'm forced to stay in (out of desire to not expose others to the cold, especially during the coronavirus pandemic panic, but also because I can hardly function well enough to get dressed & walk around). I ended up spending most of the day watching Netflix... I can't even play much music or sing while this short-of-breath (a problem with only bringing my whistles). I've played a bit the last few days, but it takes a bit of a toll... and I want to recover quickly.

I did, however, get a little time outdoors. I was told there might be music at Joe Watty's at 8pm, so I walked over at 7:30 in the early evening darkness. The ocean waves are beautiful by night, lit naturally, without streetlamps. I expect that this is part of the island ambiance that I haven't been able to put my finger on before... everything lit purely by stars and moonlight is a really special thing. Closer to town, there are a few streetlamps, but I find that I much prefer pure moonlight (of course, the moon is nearly full, so I might feel differently if it were a new moon, or completely overcast and stormy)... but the eyes adjust so much better to moonlight than lamplight (Almost as if human eyes evolved to navigate by moon and starlight!)

I made it to Joe Watty's & was informed that nothing was happening. I kinda expected as much, since it wasn't on the printed schedule. I wandered to the edge of town, by the ferry dock, then back to the AirBnB. The whole trip took about an hour, to cover 3 miles total. Not bad, for feeling sick. It only rained a little on the way into town, but the wind was pretty intense both ways. Not too cold, though! I wish I could take night photos more easily... I feel like I fall even more in love with the island at night; it's enchanting by moonlight!

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I spent all day indoors on Monday. It was another day full of soup, tea, and repeat. I watched Netflix pretty much all day. I probably could find something more "productive" to do, but can't seem to focus well enough on anything, for more concentrated tasks, sadly.

Each time I thought I'd reached the worst of the cold, it seemed to worsen, so I needed to find something to take my mind off of the hopelessness that comes with not getting better fast enough, and movies do that pretty well for me. At least it was raining all day, making it easier for me to stay in without feeling too guilty about missing out on potential adventures.



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Tuesday was another day in, for the most part. Another day of mostly eating soup & drinking tea... but I'd been running a bit low on ingredients for soup, so I decided to walk to the store (the same 3-mile walk that I take to get to The Bar or Joe Watty's). I've been pretty good about avoiding contact with other people while sick, and I'd been putting off going to the store because of this... but it was time.







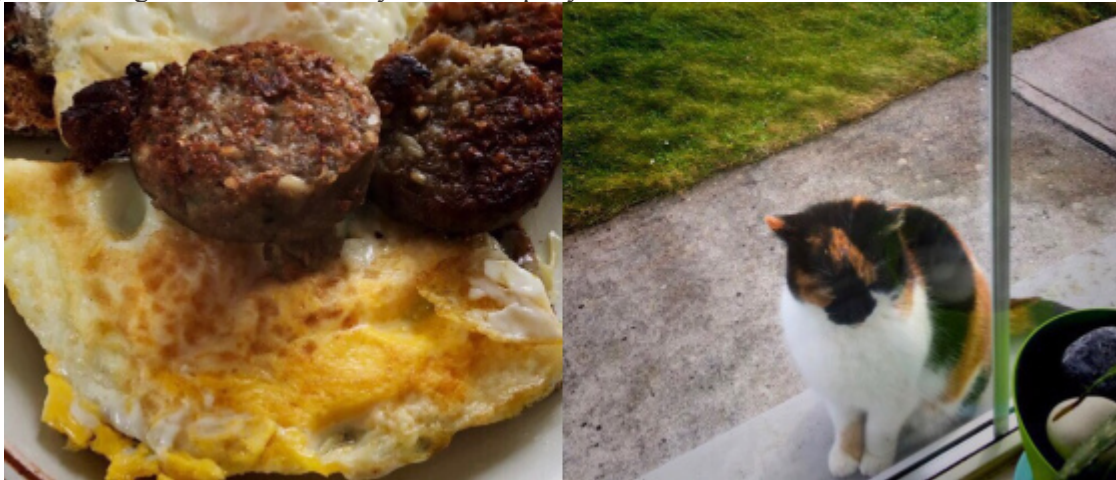
It was nice to have a reason for an outdoor excursion. I took it fairly slowly, since I was feeling congested still, but the fresh air was very nice. When I got to the store, I also dawdled a bit, since it was the most interesting thing I'd be doing all day. I got both more and less than I had set out to purchase (more snacky items, but they were still out of hand sanitizer, and I forgot to restock on noodles)...



On the walk back, I tried to rescue a beetle crossing the road (probably should have just left it alone, but was feeling guilty that it would probably get squished if I did nothing). It was a beautiful black beetle, about 3/4 the length of my thumb. Most would probably see it as a pest around here, but I got a twig and nudged it across the road in the direction it was walking. I felt bad about it, since I flipped it over towards the end, and it didn't move to right itself (it played dead instead). I had to just leave it that way, since I had already prodded it enough... but I hope it was okay in the end.



I had my first real breakfast in a while on Wednesday — eggs and white pudding on crunchy rye bread (which basically tastes like toast to me). It was nice to have something to eat that WASN'T soup, for a change. And occasionally I had company at the windowsill...



It rained & hailed all day, so going out didn't seem very doable. I was also still coughing a bit, so I made up my mind to skip the evening excursion (there might have been music at Joe Watty's)... but it was a difficult choice, so I spent some time chatting with my sister on the phone. That cheered me up — also the time difference between here and home has shortened from 8 to 7 hours, since Ireland doesn't have daylight savings until March 29th (after I head back home, as long as my flight plan doesn't get messed up by the corona virus disruptions).

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I woke up feeling a bit better on Thursday (though I had to resort to using one of my precious few cough drops in the morning for the first time). Clíona paid me another early morning visit to discuss the recent travel bans from Europe to the US, asking me if I had looked into it... I read up on it after she left, and it sounds like US citizens are exempt from the ban, and the ban doesn't apply to the UK/Ireland YET, so that's good... but I'm still worried.

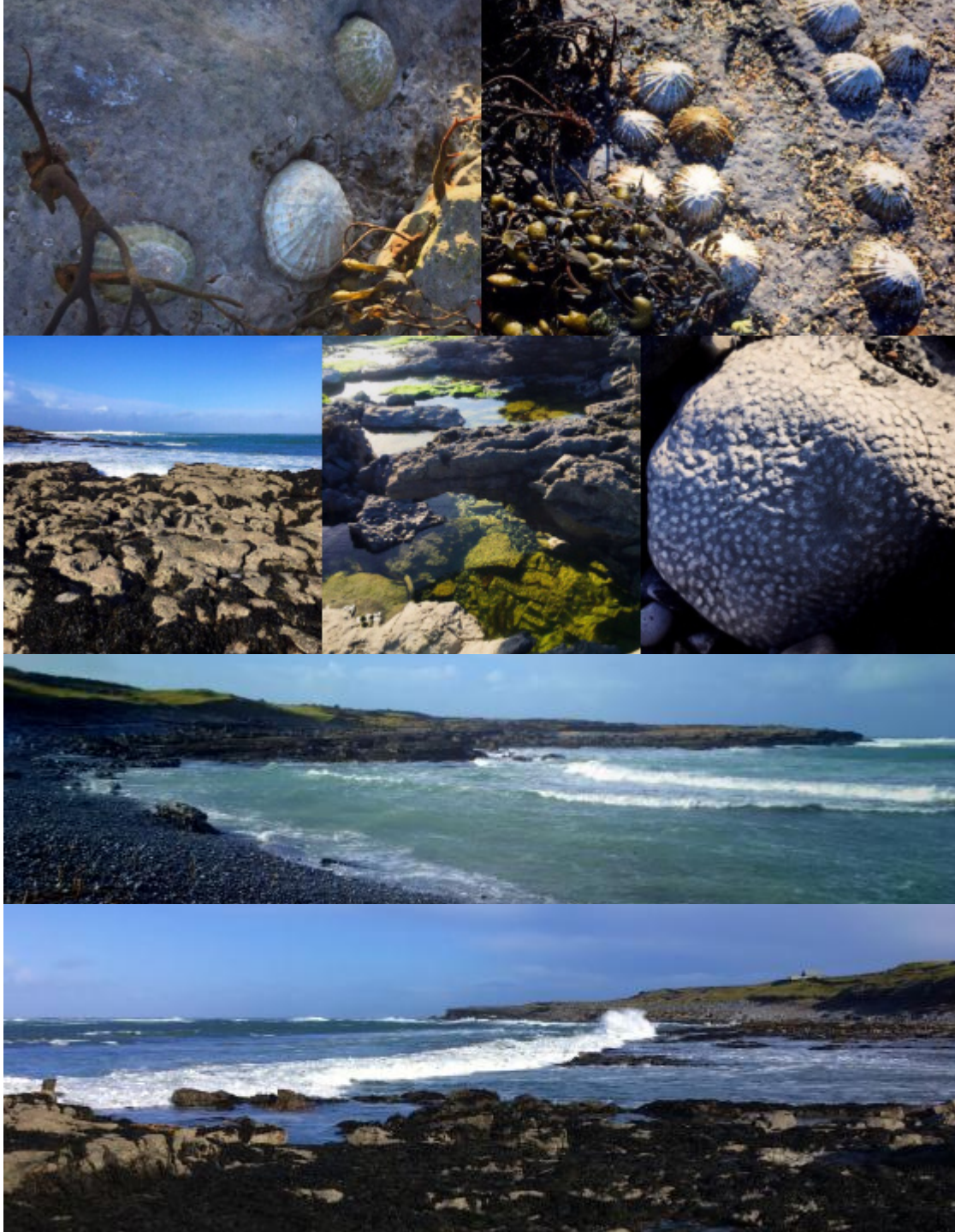
But since it's entirely out of my hands at this point (the rest of my trip is booked), if I have to stay here longer, I'll just have to find more places to stay... and that's all I can do. Stress is only useful if it can help me get more done, and in this case it's not helpful, so I need to let go of it.

The weather outside was all over the place, going from rain to sun and back again all morning. At one point, the sun coming through the windows was so warm that I thought it'd be nice to go out for a short walk to the nearby beach... but by the time I had jacket and shoes on & stepped out the door, it started raining (light rain, but dense enough that I'd get soaked anyway), so I went back in.





Finally it was sunny again, so I decided to rush out the door and take my chances. I went down to the beach to collect seashells for a while, and listen to the waves. They pull the rocks as they retreat from the shore, and it sounds like applause. The sun stayed out for a while, and I wandered down the beach and collected more rocks and shells than I'll be able to take with me... but collecting is fun, and it's very cool to think about where the rocks have been, and the stories they could tell.





## Last weekend on Inis Mór

Posted on March 15, 2020

I woke up feeling much better on Friday (except for a dry throat in the morning again), and I actually managed to sleep in a bit, which was nice. I spent a bit of time reading (and curating articles to read later), then made some breakfast. I thought about going out, but the weather prediction said it would be raining (I probably could have just ignored it, since it seemed sunny)... but I spent a bit of time practicing some tunes while I waited for the sun to stick.

Once it did, I went out walking. As I exited the AirBnB, I noticed another rainbow above the ocean. I guess that stereotype about Ireland IS true — rainbows all the time here! It helps make up for the fact that it's always raining, I guess!



Thanks to the time I spent reading up on small Irish birds, I recognized a few on my walk: a blackbird (which should really be called “orange beak” since that’s by far the most distinguishing characteristic) and starlings on a telephone wire. I also think I heard the wren, but that bird is a master of obscurity. Didn’t see it at all. I don’t have the right kind of camera to be getting pictures of the birds, but it’s nice to know their names anyway. Starlings have nice little white speckles in their plumage, which look like stars in the night sky... but you have to look carefully to see it at a distance.





There were also the usual friendly cows and horses grazing in fields as I made my way to town. Then as I was passing Tí Joe Watty's, I saw a dog darting out in front of a car and then jumping over a fence. I thought it looked strikingly similar to the dog that lives at the house where I'm staying... then when it came up to me and seemed to know me, that was confirmation enough for me. There was no collar or leash to hang onto, but the dog seemed willing to follow me as I called Clíona. She seemed unconcerned, and said the dog would make her own way home just fine (though it was over a mile away, when walking directly). I told her the dog was darting in front of cars, and she seemed somewhat worried about that. She said she'd come pick the dog up, and so I told her the direction I was heading (since the dog seemed eager for company and happy to walk "with" me... at least 20 feet in front of me at all times).



Every time a car passed by, the dog would run towards it, as though in greeting, and sometimes just stand in the middle of the road as it slowed down and tried to drive around... then the dog would chase after the car once it passed. My heart nearly stopped every time. It was very stressful.

I've seen a dog get run over once, and I never want to relive that experience. I kept hoping Clíona would show up to pick up the dog, but she never did. Cars drive so quickly around corners and over hilltops here, and it's enough to scare me when I only have myself to look out for... so as much as I love having dog company, the walk was a bit less relaxing than I would have liked.

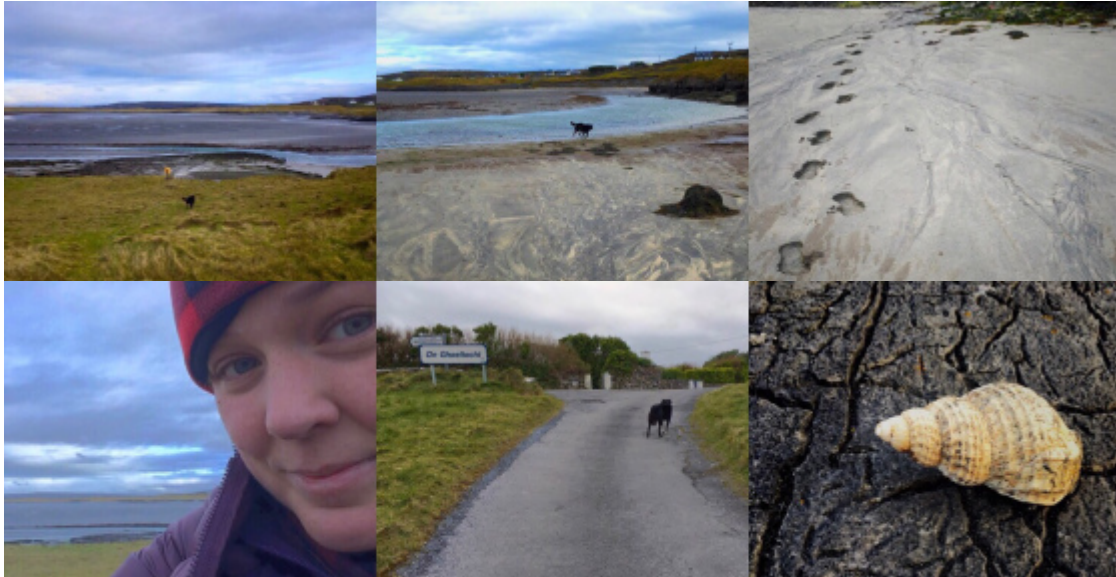


Still, the buildings along the coast were nice. There were a bunch of doll-sized houses (with thatch roofs) at several houses, and I was wondering what that was about. Small peace offering to faery folk or garden gnomes? House for children to play with? Oversized mailboxes? Does anyone know?



I eventually made it to my destination: an trá mhór (Trawmore) — the big beach on the South-Eastern side of Inis Mór. I kinda expected it to be more... beachy. It really just felt kinda mucky, and too squelchy to walk any great distance (though the dog had a grand ol' time, rolling around in the kelp and jumping through the shallow water). I walked a little ways, enjoying the soft yet compact sand... but when it started to turn to muck, I made my way back.





We encountered another dog on the way back. Part beagle, by the looks of it. The dog that had been keeping me company wasn't super eager to play (a bit worn out maybe?) but the other dog was persistent... so all of a sudden, I found that I had become the chaperone to TWO dogs. I walked them off the road and onto the beach, to reduce the likelihood of an incident ... but there wasn't anything I could do to reel them in, so I mostly tried to relax and not worry too much, busying myself with seashell collection.



Eventually I made it back to Joe Watty's, where I wanted to go and listen to music. I had to leave the dogs to make their own ways back home. I'm not even sure where the beagle lived, so I hope they were as street-wise as everyone assumed them to be. I guess it's a small enough island.

I went into the pub, washed my hands, sanitized my table, and ordered some Irish stew with chips. It was maybe too much food, but I haven't eaten out all week, so I got excited. I was also really thirsty, and guzzled my water when it arrived. As a result, I accidentally breathed it instead of swallowed, leading me to choke and cough a bit. I apologized to the people sitting closest to me, assuring them that I had just forgotten how to drink water, and that I didn't have the sickness (as far as I know). A group of people who I'd seen as I approached the pub started singing by the time I sat down. They were decent, and definitely a formal band, but mostly played American music ... though I think they were either French or German (or Swiss?) — I couldn't figure out their accent at all. Mostly guitars, with a couple maracas and a harmonica thrown in for good measure. But since I wasn't expecting the early band, they definitely exceeded expectations. When they finished, I did a bit of reading and writing, waiting for the late night band.



They showed up as I finished my stew and chips — it was the same guy I'd seen the previous Saturday: Padraig Jack (the one I talked to before the show last time, when I thought it might be an open session). This time he was joined by the third brother, Eamon (the other two played with him the previous weekend). They sang a bunch of excellent songs, and both have such wonderful singing voices. I didn't ask to join this time, since I already knew the drill: more of a performance than participatory event. I decided to draw instead (the musicians, & the birds above).





When they finished (around 1am), I walked the 30 minutes back in the misty rain. There was a complete cloud cover, so it was quite dark. I've decided that the walk is a good deal less fun in the darkness... but it wasn't too bad.

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On Saturday, I woke up when my watch started buzzing. It was a reminder to do laundry. I wish I had set it a bit later, since I was actually successfully sleeping in for once. Oh well.

I did some more reading on the coronavirus, & decided to log into Facebook again to see how my friends were faring. It's a difficult time to disconnect, since I want to hear about how people are doing... I just wish there were better ways to stay in touch, that don't always turn to bitter battlegrounds every time the subject turns to politics.

Anyway, thanks to my foray into the internets, I started having some anxiety... thinking about the pandemic turned into self-pity about coming to visit Ireland at the "wrong" time, as well as concerns about being quarantined or something upon my return. Thankfully, I seem to have recovered from my head-cold... but I can't afford to get sick in the next couple weeks, which is stressful in itself. To busy myself while it rained, I decided to get started on laundry. I put my clothes through the washer, no problem... but when I went to transfer them to the dryer, I couldn't get it to work. I had to wait several hours before my host came back to plug the machine back in... so it took all day to do one load.

I made some chili while I waited, with my remaining supplies (including some heavy cans of beans, so I don't have to lug them out of town later on. Then I sorted laundry, got dressed, & went out for the evening's music.

The walk in the twilight was nice, but I was a bit sad to not get out earlier in the day (though it was quite cold & windy all day, with rain into mid-afternoon). My anxieties were still getting to me, but I felt a bit better while walking at least.

It was about 7:30 by the time I got to town, so I decided to stop in at The Bar to see if they had early evening music. They didn't, & it was pretty crowded, so I walked back to Joe Watty's to eat & stake out a spot. Good thing, too, since there were no tables when I arrived. I waited, & the table I'd sat at the night before eventually opened up.

I ordered fish & chips, & the fish was so buttery & delicious! It was cooked in a dill batter, which complimented it well. I think this was the first time I've thought it tasted good enough that it didn't need any kind of sauce (though I dressed it in vinegar and lemon juice all the same). I think I prefer Joe Watty's fish over The Bar's (but it's hard to say, since they both serve the catch of the day).

However, Joe Watty's food is a bit pricier, in general.



Padraig & Eamon (the two who had played the day before) showed up to play again, along with one of Eamon's brothers (didn't get his name). They sang a lot of the same songs, but I didn't mind hearing them again. I did some reading and stuck around until midnight or so, when I started feeling a bit tired.

I walked back in the starry night. It was still dark, since there were some clouds and no visible moon, but it was definitely preferable to the moist and cloudy night before. I made it back and went to sleep by 1am or so.

I woke up on Sunday around 7:30, did some online reading, then had a shower (the shower here is more of a trickle than anything, and I think a shower/bath is ironically the thing I am most homesick for). I had some breakfast of left-overs, then got dressed to go walking. It seemed like a sunny day, and I thought it would be nice to head over to Dún Aonghasa (one of the main tourist attractions of Inis Mór; a prehistoric fort overlooking the Atlantic).

It rained a bit as I walked over, now and then... just often enough that I left my poncho on for much of the walk (silly as it looks). Every once in a while, I would spot a rainbow out on the horizon, and it was nice to take in the ocean air.



It was about 4 miles before I made it to Dún Aonghasa, and I walked through a cute (but deserted) shopping center (mostly for sweaters). I wasn't sure if everything was closed on account of it being Sunday, or if it was due to the coronavirus pandemic. I made it to a building with "Dún Aonghasa" written on it, so I assumed it to be the entrance... but the doors were shut.



I was pretty bummed that I couldn't even walk up to the fort, after coming 4 miles. I didn't know if it would be open, but I'd figured I could at least walk close enough to the exterior, to take in the view... a bit disappointing, but I guess I got a good walk out of it anyway. I turned back towards the beach, then took another path towards Clochán na Carraige. I was going by the drawing on the signpost, and figured it would be better to see something than simply turn back the way I'd come. I followed a muddy path off the road, and eventually came within view of the beehive, drystone hut.





It may not sound like much to get excited about, but this was EXACTLY the kind of thing I love. There were no restrictions on entering (only signs saying not to damage the structure), so I walked inside (had to nearly go in on all fours) and then stood up inside. It was incredible, and hard to really describe... it was just rock, so nothing too unusual here... but just being there felt so special. It's amazing that a structure so old, of mysterious origin, is still standing... and in good enough shape to hold up to the elements. I stood inside as it started raining again, and while it was a bit drafty (with a cross-breeze between the 2 doorways and 1 window), I didn't feel a drop of rain.



I decided to hang out for a bit, and play some tunes. My fingers were cold, so I knew I wouldn't be able to stay long, but I played a few tunes I'd written, then a few more. I wouldn't say the acoustics were all that special, but being sheltered from the wind was cause enough for celebration. I played until my fingers were as cold as the stones, then decided it was time to take my leave of the special

place I had found. In the end, I think I enjoyed the Clochán more than I would have liked the Dún Aonghasa.



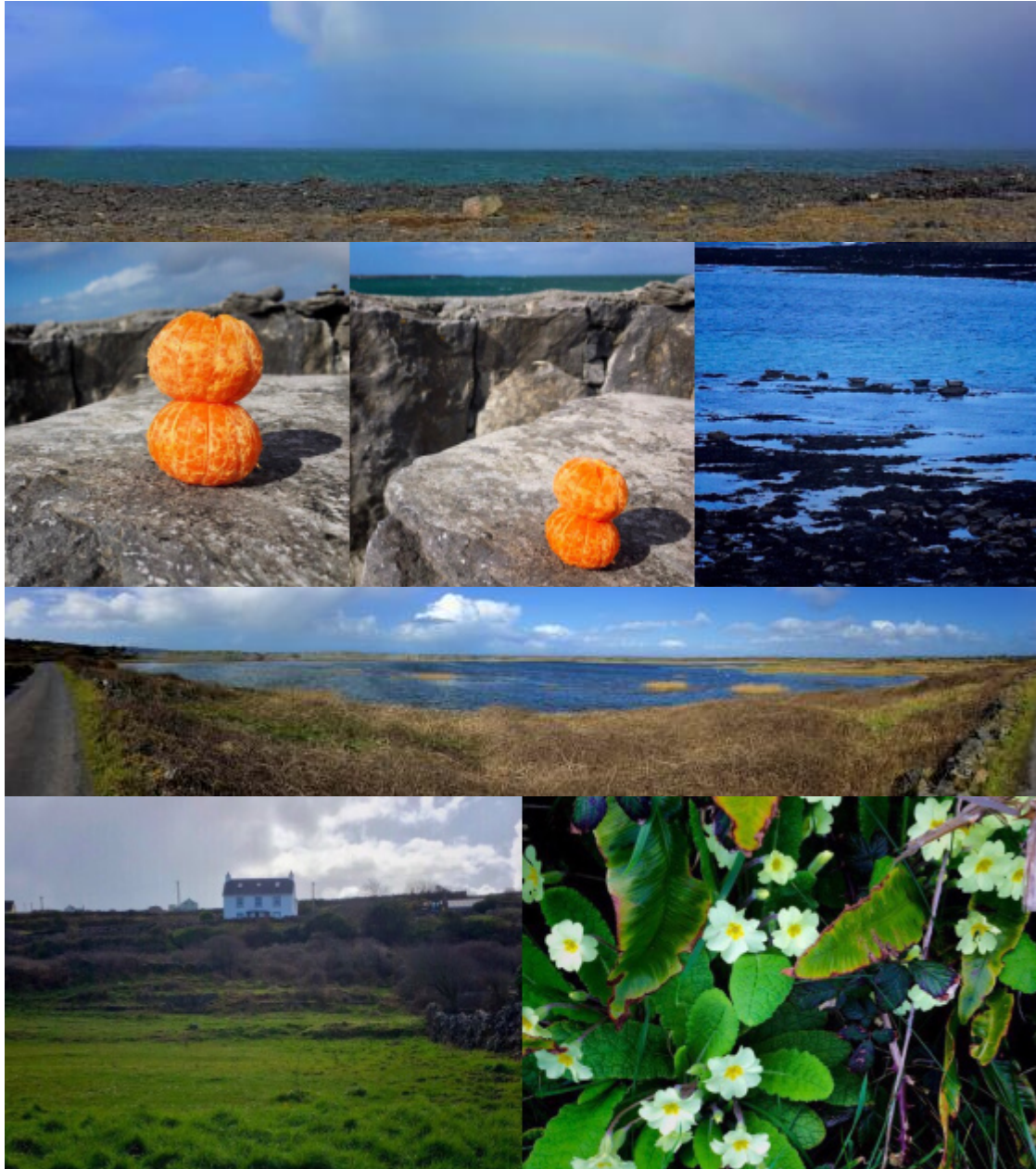
I decided to take a slightly less muddy path back to the road, but soon enough ran into a problem with that plan. The gate was locked, with barbed wire on top to prevent people from hopping the fence... but I was stupid enough to try anyway. I had a thought as I was almost over the top of it, that maybe I'd be better off removing my jacket, but it seemed like too much trouble... but I should have listened to my instinct, since I managed to snag the loose edge of my jacket as I hopped down, ripping a hole in the nylon (tricky to mend).

I had never tried to mend a puff jacket before (since this is the first one I've owned)... but I decided to try to stay optimistic, and I did what I could to temporarily "patch" the hole with something sticky, in order to keep the fluff inside. All I had on hand that were at all adhesive were post-its, but it seemed to do the trick.

I walked back the way I'd come, enjoying the sea breeze and practicing playing the bones I'd brought with me (a rhythm instrument, when played properly... a noisemaker, when played with my level of competence). The ocean was beautiful, changing from blue to silver in the light, and I even spotted some seals! There were around 8 little shiny banana-shaped blobs, bobbing up and down in the shallows...







When I got back, I looked up how to repair puff/nylon jackets. As I had feared, everyone recommended using a special kind of tape (that I don't have time to order or find in a shop, since I use the jacket every day). I opted to do my best at sewing it, even though it wasn't recommended anywhere I looked. The jacket HAS stitches, so I figured as long as I was careful and used a small needle, it would probably be okay. The first few stitches seemed to be pulling more down out, which made me nervous, but as I went back over the stitches several times, it got better. I ended up with a thick, caterpillar-like "scar"... but I guess my jacket can be proud of its battle wound. And more importantly, the tear won't get worse.



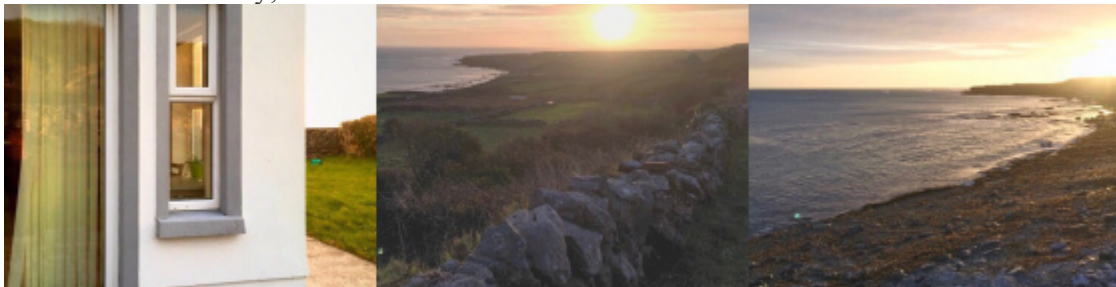
I got a notification saying that my AirBnB host had cancelled my visit to Ennis... so now I need to scramble to find other accommodations (in Ennis or elsewhere, but not too far from Ennis, since my flight is scheduled to depart from the Shannon airport on the 27th). I've also been hearing that pubs are closing down, in light of the pandemic... and all of this news together was really bringing me down, so I decided to call my mom. She always knows how to put a positive spin on things... and I find that when I talk out my problems with her, I end up laughing about them more often than not. Sure enough, I was in better spirits by the end of the call... though I still don't know what to do about my Ennis plans...

## Heading home from Ireland

Posted on March 20, 2020

I woke up with an alarm on Monday, intent not to oversleep, but ended up getting up & going around 7am (only a bit earlier than I've been getting up normally). I packed & tidied up, sad to leave the small place I had come to feel at home in... but that's how it goes.

I was just leaving the building & walking down the gravel driveway when Clíona drove up (guess she gets up well before 6am!) — I said goodbye in person, & she commented on the egg carton I had in my hand. I explained that it was leftover seashells & rocks I had found... too many to take home, so I was going to deposit them back near the beach. She pointed out one rock & said “but that's a fossil — you should keep that!” I thought about it, then decided to take her advice, thinking that it gets confiscated at security, so be it...



I walked to the ferry, through town, & deposited shells and stones as I went. Mostly I ended up placing them on the tops of fence posts... and a jogger passed me by & gave me a funny look. Later on, an older woman doing her yard work gave me another funny look (& I wasn't even placing shells at that point)... maybe people just give funny looks to ANY strangers on the street during this pandemic. At least Ireland still has a lot to offer, in terms of natural beauty, even if playing music & dancing is off the table...





I made it to the ferry, & almost witnessed someone's wheelie suitcase roll off of the pier (he turned his back on it, & the wind pushed it along). I tried to get his attention, & he luckily caught it before it took a surprise dip. The ferry workers set up the ramp & a hand sanitizer station, then we boarded & I took a seat up front (despite the warning a small girl gave me about the ride up front being too rough & nauseating). The waves were indeed even rougher than last time, but in general the weather was nice. I count myself lucky that it wasn't raining on either day that I took the ferry.





The windows weren't too clean, & the view was mostly waves anyway, so I didn't take many photos. When we landed in Rossaveal, I caught the bus to Galway. It was associated with the Arran Island Ferry company, & it was a lot cheaper (€4, compared to the €13 I spent to get to the neighboring town from Galway). If I were to do this trip again, riding to the ferry straight from Galway would be better (but of course, the ferry leaves from Doolin in the summer tourist season, which would have been even better still).

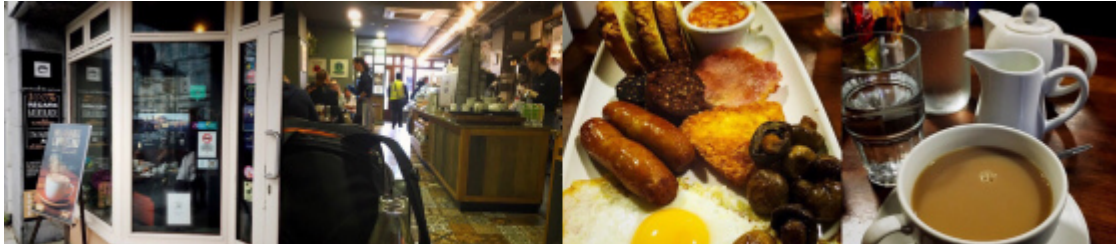
The driver had a scarf over his face, I suppose to protect from projectile spittle... not sure how effective that is, but I decided to copy him. Maybe I can benefit from any protective placebo effects that arise from feeling more safe. Stress is a real danger when it comes to the immune system, so any little thing I can do to reduce stress is good right now.

I made it to Galway for the 3rd time, & the 1st time without rain/hail... still overcast, however. It was about 10am when I arrived. I walked from the bus to see where I'd be staying (though my host wouldn't get there until 1pm). I took a wrong turn, & decided to head back to town, to one of the only 2 cafés (and businesses) that were open. I stopped over at Centra first, to buy some supplies for the 10 days I was planning to stay in Galway & Ennis (who knows how long supplies will stay in stock, once the panic sets in).



With my groceries in hand, I walked over to Esquires Coffee house, & ordered some Irish breakfast. So much food! But I overheard a waitress saying that they've been mandated to close their doors after evening tonight, so it could be my last chance to eat out in Ireland (spoiler: it was).





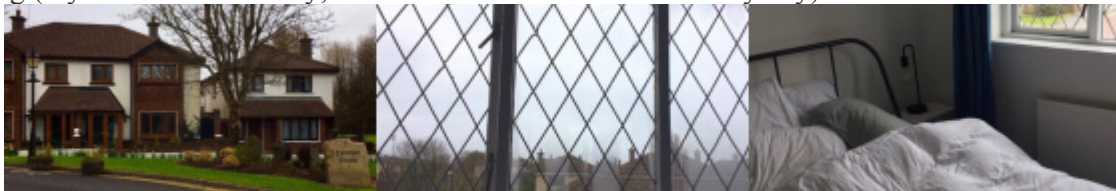
On my brief walk around town, it was looking pretty deserted... cars & buses on the roads, but hardly any pedestrians (apart from joggers). All the bars were closed, but since it was early in the day, this didn't seem too unusual. In the evening, pretty much everything would be closed (even the handful of grocery stores & pharmacies that are currently open during business hours).

It's very strange to finally be in a city, after many weeks in small towns, only to find that nothing is happening... I guess, in a way, I've had good training in solitude & entertaining myself. In Doolin, I spent most days walking alone & only occasionally going out to pubs. Then on Inis Mór, I essentially quarantined myself for over a week... The remaining 10 days will likely be similar, in many ways, to the last 5 weeks since leaving Dublin. I don't particularly mind being alone; I didn't feel lonely, only stressed that I may not be able to return home...

Still, there's something more sad about nothing happening while staying in a bigger city. Especially on St Patrick's day, a time of year that would normally be like a big city-wide party. I'm not a big fan of big parties, but it's strange to not have music to look forward to...

I sipped my tea & passed the time in the café, as I waited for 1pm before heading over to meet my AirBnB host. One waiter was very fun to watch, as he was so nice to everyone, as if they were old-time friends. I might have assumed that he WAS in fact old-time friends with these people, except that he treated me the same way. I wonder if it's difficult to do that, & if it's like a performance... or maybe he has a really friendly demeanor by nature & really sees the best in every stranger he meets. I like to think it's the latter, but I can't know for sure.

Eventually 1 o'clock rolled around, so I paid up & walked to the AirBnB to meet Katie (the host who had driven all the way from Dublin to let me into the house). It was a nice walk, but it had started raining (my curse with Galway, since I've never seen it on a sunny day).



Katie greeted me, but kept a "1-meter distance" at all times. She let me in & instructed me on the use of her sanitization station by the front door. There are usually pretty strict house rules, but she's staying out of town with her partner, & everyone else who was to stay at the AirBnB had to cancel, due to the coronavirus. It was just me, so I could rest easy about having to bend the house rules (about when I was allowed to use the kitchen & shower, mostly).

I had only JUST got my things up to the room where I'd be staying when Katie asked me about my flight home. I told her it was on the 27th, & she remarked that it might be too late... she said around 70% of outbound flights were being grounded, & that "if you don't leave by Sunday [the 22nd], you might not be able to leave at all." This, as you can imagine, sent me into a bit of a panic.

She gave me the phone number for the American Embassy in Dublin, so I called. I asked for some clarity, & the person on the phone responded by saying "we cannot offer any clarity" & gave me a web address to hear about COVID-19 updates as they came in... So I hung up & decided to contact Aer Lingus.

At first, I tried to manage my flight via their website (since there was a notice on the page saying they were experiencing a high volume of calls). Unfortunately, the button to “manage flight” was either broken, or not designed to move flights with multiple airlines (JetBlue was to be my 2nd flight, from JFK to SFO). I had no option but to try calling.

I was on hold for 2 hours with Aer Lingus, when finally someone answered! I was so elated, but 10 seconds into the conversation, I realized I could only understand half of what the person was saying at best. And it wasn't even poor reception, I just was struggling to understand her accent! I couldn't believe that such a small thing could prevent me from having a conversation, after such a long wait... so I kept repeating back to her what I thought I had heard. Her accent seemed American at first, but there was something underlying it that made vowels hard to hear, & her mic was hot, so the consonants were also sometimes difficult to discern.

We had been talking for about 10 minutes, & it finally sounded like we were getting somewhere... she said she could move my flight to March 20th for no cost (since the flights were the same price), & I was just repeating the flight info back to her to make sure I had it right, & the call dropped!!!

I was devastated. I frantically tried to redial, but my cell connection was no good. Calling from Wifi wasn't working either... I redialed about 20 times before the call finally went through, & had to wait another 3 hours on hold! I had posted about being on hold (during the first attempt) to Facebook, but decided to hide the post, because I was getting flooded with notifications & messages, & feeling too overwhelmed to respond. Especially after the first call dropped... Sorry if I made anyone concerned for me by doing so.



I wish I could say that the waiting paid off, but suddenly, without warning, the call dropped again (while I was still on hold). I immediately redialed, & got a voicemail message saying that they were experiencing a high volume of calls, & telling me to use their online request fork instead (which I had already done). I decided to wait 24 hours to hear back via email, & after that I would have to buy another flight home. Better to spend €500 to fly home than €500+ for another couple weeks in quarantine when I could be home instead.

It hurt so much to know that if I could have just gotten someone on the line, I could have moved my flight for free... but there was nothing I could do that I hadn't already done. I called & texted with family, & while they couldn't offer much help or guidance, they did cheer me up...

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I woke up early on Tuesday, again due to stress. I kept checking to see if Aer Lingus had written back. No luck. I took a shower & made some food (LOTS of potatoes) while I waited... I decided to find lyrics for the song that I had heard some people would be singing at noon on St Patrick's day. I took a video of myself singing it, indoors with a window open, since it was raining outside. I guess I can take comfort in the fact that if the St Patrick's day parade hadn't been cancelled, it would've



been rained on anyway. I recorded the video on my phone, which rested on top of a stack of pillows (best thing I could think of). I had to do several takes, since the phone kept falling over.

[Video link for Óró](#)

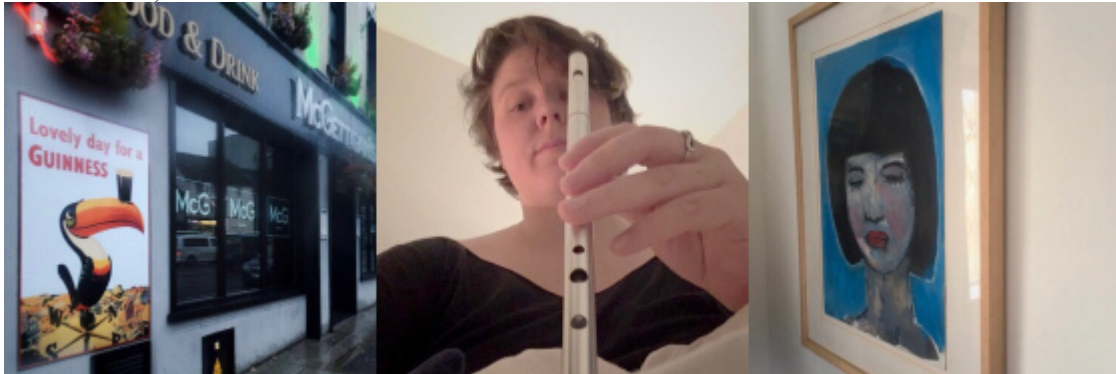
I tried to relax & watched a movie about St Patrick on Netflix. It was more of a history documentary, but a worthwhile watch all the same. There were uilleann pipes in the soundtrack (captioned as “orchestral music”). I waited til 3pm or so before ultimately deciding to book another flight (hoping to get reimbursed for the other Aer Lingus flight later, but not counting on it). I booked a flight for March 19th, flying from Shannon to Heathrow, to SFO. There was just a 1-hour layover, so I was happy with it. I finally felt relaxed enough to go for a walk.



It was a walk in the rain, but a nice walk all the same. I pretty much just went to the bus station and back... stopped in at the station to check that their online schedule was accurate, and that their schedule wasn't disrupted. A person working the desk reassured me that they were operating as usual, with no cancellations. I wandered a bit through a park square before heading back to the AirBnB.



I started packing when I got back, then played a few tunes that my friend Mike (back in Santa Cruz) had sent to me. It felt nice to do something relatively normal, as I had been under such stress for over 24 hours... then I checked my email. My flight from Heathrow had been cancelled (no reason given, just a brief memo).



I had to go online to manually reschedule the flight. Luckily there was another flight leaving Heathrow later in the afternoon on March 19th, so I selected it & tried to relax... but I was very shaken by the experience, since I had booked a flight & it had been cancelled shortly after... I tried to get some sleep & relax, but found it nearly impossible.

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I spent the first half of Wednesday checking email frequently, to see if my other flights had been cancelled... the one from Heathrow to SFO was showing up in red on the website, without any explanation of what "red" meant, so I think I was justifiably concerned.

I tried calling British Airways (where my 2nd set of flights had been booked), but had no luck getting through. I'm honestly not even sure if I was calling the right number, since I tried several different numbers, but couldn't even get a ringtone.

I was forced to give up & try my best to work on the assumption that everything would be fine. I had initially planned to head to the airport in the evening, and spend the night there waiting for my early morning flight (I had heard some people saying that anyone heading to the states should get to the airport 5 hours early... and 5 hours before 7:30am is the middle of the night). I didn't want to take any chances in heading to the airport the morning of the flight (buses could be cancelled, etc).

I decided to leave the AirBnB a couple days early, and head downtown for the 2pm bus (would rather be anxious closer to the airport, rather than in Galway). I finished packing, left some canned food behind (for the 2 days I didn't end up staying), left the keys behind & shut the door. I bought a bus ticket & waited for the 2pm express bus to the airport. I was one of 2 passengers (& the other guy sat right across from me, which was annoyingly close, given the circumstances).







I managed to sleep a little on the bus (have been losing sleep over stress, so I guess I'll take it where I can get it, even if it means missing out on the views from the bus). I set an alarm so that I wouldn't miss the airport stop (the bus goes on to Limerick). I got off at my stop & walked into the airport. I don't think I've ever seen an airport so empty!

There was, nevertheless, a line at Aer Lingus' check-in (I suspect because they don't have a functioning website or phone line). I waited for about half an hour (luckily I had all day). When I was able to talk with someone, I asked if I could check in for my flight & have my boarding pass printed. After a bit of difficulty, another guy at the desk came in (I suppose he was higher in the pecking order & had better access permissions). They managed to print my boarding pass & suggested I stay at the hotel across the street (about a 2-minute walk away). They were so relaxed, & I admit that it rubbed off on me a little. They reassured me that I could show up for my flight at "half six" (6:30) and there would be plenty of time to catch my flight... Suddenly my plan to sleep at the airport felt a little bit ridiculous. Besides, restful sleep would come in handy if I was to make it through the next day of stress.

I walked to the hotel across the parking lot. The room came to about €80, which was a bit pricey compared to the AirBnB rates I had gotten used to, but worth it to be in such close proximity to the airport, with Wifi. I couldn't log into the airport Wifi, & had a bit of difficulty at the hotel, but eventually got it to work.

It's annoying how many wifi systems require you to make accounts that link to your email, then ask you to verify your email before you proceed... if I use cell service to get to my email (assuming my device has cell service), I have to interrupt my wifi login in order to open my email... I tried to find a work-around with my iPad & phone in tandem at the airport, but that didn't work there... It felt like pure luck when I got it to work at the hotel.



I stayed in room 219, which felt like a lucky number somehow. I took a shower, then spent some time chatting with friends & family online, which was really nice. I was super tired on the bus, but was too wound up again after getting to the hotel to get to sleep right away... so I watched some Netflix. Unfortunately, I feel like I've run out of relaxing shows to watch, & everything left is a bit scary... not good for relaxing before bed. And I would read, but the articles I gravitate towards also tend to be news related, & all of that is too stressful right now.

But thankfully I was able to get to sleep early, at 7:30pm. It took a while before my thoughts switched off for the night, but I was very glad for the blackout curtains at the hotel...

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On Thursday, I woke up before my alarm, around 4am. I turned on a light in order to start waking up properly, took a shower, & enjoyed some complimentary tea in the room. After charging my phone a bit, I checked out of the hotel & walked to the airport to see if they could print the boarding pass for my connecting flight (the guys I talked to the day before had suggested I check back as early as 5am to get my 2nd boarding pass).



I was surprised to find that there was actually a line that early... mostly people coming to check bags. With all the confusion around flights, I'm thankful that I managed to pack so light (can fit everything in just one backpack if I need to). I got to the front of the line & found that they were still unable to print my British Airways boarding pass...

A bit worried, I decided to move along to go through security... I was hoping that my difficulties in checking in for that flight & getting a boarding pass weren't because the flight was likely to be cancelled. Since I needed to check in for my flight & get my boarding pass in Heathrow, I guess it's just as well that I have a 5-hour layover now... but still less than ideal.

The security gate at the Shannon Airport had no line, & I got through without any difficulty... I even forgot to move my hand sanitizer into my "liquids" bag, but they didn't notice. Once through, I decided to use the extra down-time to buy a sandwich to use up loose change — €4.50 exactly! It was a chicken tikka with mango chutney and lettuce sandwich, which is very much the kind of sandwich I would make for myself (although I'd be more likely to make a burrito). It was good! I still felt a bit queasy from stress, but eating helped a little (especially since the last "real" food I'd eaten was an orange the afternoon before).

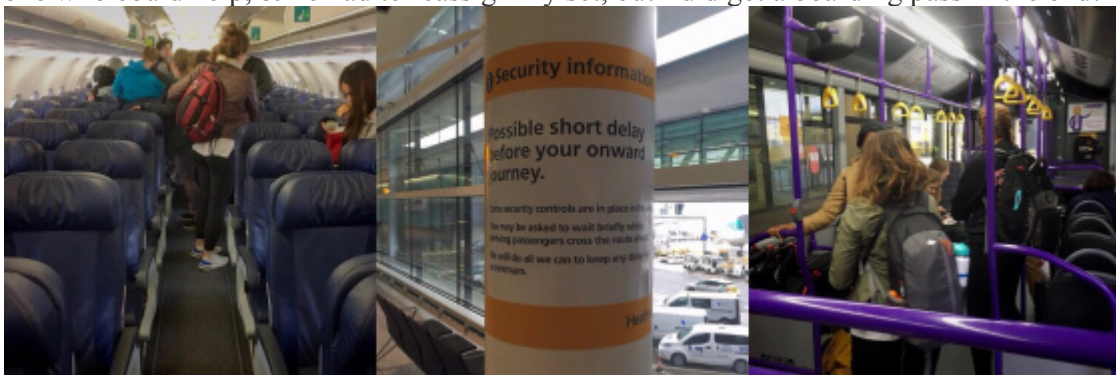
I sat & waited to board the flight, then as I got on the plane and took a seat (with a whole row to myself), I spotted a rabbit hopping about on the tarmac! I tried to take a photo, but the zoom caused the camera to lose focus. Oh well. I enjoyed seeing the sun rising over the horizon, and got a picture of that anyway...





The views of Ireland from the plane were quite beautiful, before they were obscured by a blanket of clouds. Lots of glinting lakes & rivers, and a nice patchwork all across the land. I took some timelapse video, but it doesn't quite do it justice. In the end, maybe it's good that I flew to a connecting flight in Heathrow, rather than JFK. I wouldn't have been able to take in the Irish countryside the same way if I had flown straight across the Atlantic.

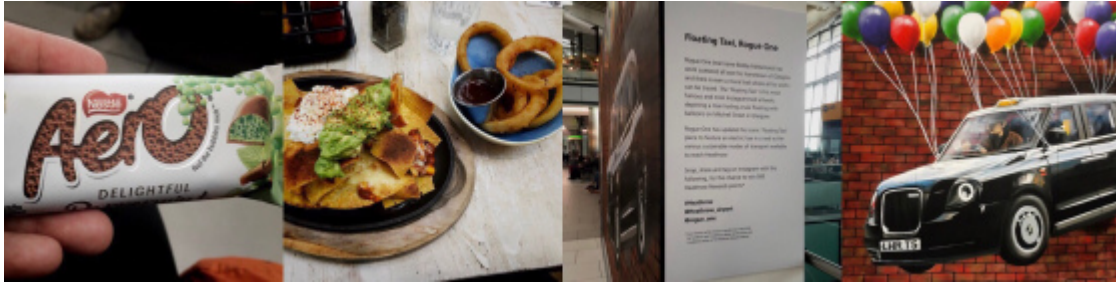
I landed in Heathrow & made the trek from Terminal 2 to Terminal 5 (long enough to warrant a 10 minute bus ride). I went to get my boarding pass printed at a kiosk, but it wasn't working... I found someone who could help, & he had to reassign my set, but I did get a boarding pass in the end!



Relieved, I walked on through security. There was more of a line this time, but I got through without any trouble. I had expected additional screening procedures (for COVID-19), but they said that US citizens are exempt (for now). I bought some chocolate treats once I got through, with my remaining £2 and change. Figured I deserved something sweet for the plane ride. It's good that I was able to use almost all my change, since Currency Exchange booths only accept full bills.

I found a place to charge my phone & sat down for a bit. I was right next to the departure information screen. I noticed that about half of the flights had been cancelled (including the earlier flight to SFO that I had originally signed up for). Someone sitting across from me was chatting on the phone & saying that his flight was cancelled, so he was waiting to see if there was another flight leaving later in the day... he seemed very relaxed, given the circumstances. If it were me, I might be in tears.

I decided to stretch my legs a bit & find some food. I ordered nachos & a side of onion rings... both a bit overpriced for what they were... but it was warm food. I didn't want to just have another sandwich. I then wandered around for a while, looking for a comfortable place to sit & charge my phone. Unfortunately, there aren't very many good spots for that at Heathrow, so I eventually walked back to the area I had originally sat.



It felt like a long wait, but finally the boarding terminal was announced, so I walked over to board the plane... up until the very last minute, I was expecting some kind of cancellation. My confidence had been entirely shaken after the first cancellation, but thankfully I had been worried for no reason. Everything went smoothly, and there weren't even any special screening procedures required of me, in the end.

I boarded the flight & was a little sad to be sharing my row with someone who coughed a bit... after weeks in near-isolation, it seemed such a shame to be exposed all day to risk of contamination at the airport & on the flight... But the girl moved a few seats away in order to lie down across empty seats, so I ended up with a row to myself after all (not that it makes a big difference on a small plane anyway).

I wore my scarf over my face, except to drink water, orange juice, or tea that was served every hour or so... None of my previous flights had given out even pretzels for free, so I was very happy to have found an airline with complimentary food. British Airlines, everybody! They even gave us ice cream bars halfway through the flight, & 2 hot meals. Good stuff!



I watched several movies on the flight, avoiding sleep so that I could try to fall asleep at a "normal" time more easily when back home. We landed just as the sun was setting over San Francisco, after 11 hours in the air... since I had woken up at 4am, and my brain was still in a different timezone (2am instead of 7pm), it had been a long day. Somehow I didn't feel tired.



We had to answer a quick survey upon entering SFO, regarding COVID-19 symptoms (cough, fever, shortness-of-breath). I didn't report any of these, & hope I didn't catch it on the plane... But they instructed me to quarantine myself in isolation for 14 days & track any symptoms as they develop.



Luckily my dad & stepmom have a downstairs apartment that they've been renting out, which is currently vacant. I lived there before while working at UC Berkeley as a research assistant in 2012-2014 or so. It's been remodeled a bit since then, so it's even nicer. My dad picked me up from the airport, gave me a mask & sanitization napkin, & drove me home. I really appreciate them having me stay on short notice... I hope that isolation won't feel too lonely, since I'm in the same house as family, & the same time zone!

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I went to sleep around 10:30, and woke up at 4:30am. I really tried to sleep in, but my brain wouldn't shut off. I got up to have breakfast, after taking a moment to appreciate my ridiculous hairstyle. This is why I don't usually shower at night... then there's no hope for my hair to sit flat. I'd say that not having to worry about keeping up appearances is one benefit of isolation, except that I decided to share the picture! Ah well, who needs dignity anyway?



I made some eggs on toast, then decided to get started on documenting the last few days. And here we are! The end of the great adventure! Scotland, Ireland, and a couple airport experiences in England. It was a really great trip, altogether.

I met so many amazing people! I think that meeting new friends was the main highlight for me — and I hope to stay in touch with them online, & maybe see them again the next chance I get to visit! It's a bummer that I had to leave before playing music in Galway and Ennis, but I suppose it's something to look forward to if I get a chance to visit again.