

Returning Unscathed from Summer Vacation

LuAnn and I survived an Iowa Voyagers trip to Ireland last month. I say survived because in Ireland and much of the rest of the world there's really not much to prevent you from accidentally killing yourself.

In Ireland you hardly ever see guardrails. Even at the very popular Cliffs of Moher – which drop 400 to 700 feet straight down to the ocean – there are some warning signs but no real impediments to toppling off the edge. It's windy and rainy most of the time so it's a wonder they don't lose more people than they do.

The cities are no different – sidewalks are uneven and narrow, and there's an alarming lack of railings along rivers and streams. I took one photo of LuAnn pretending to fall in. I always seemed to be tripping over unmarked obstacles and bumping my noggin on low overheads.

We visited the Foxford Woolen Mills, where we were allowed to walk among the active electric looms which were running unattended. When I leaned over for a better look, one of the looms almost grabbed my ID card on the lanyard around my neck.

Here in the U.S. our legal system has somehow devolved into a litigation lottery, so there are significant barriers at every tourist site and warning labels on every product even for the most obvious things. For example, you should never try to grip the business end of a running chainsaw, light a match to check the contents of a gas tank, or wash your daughter in a washing machine. Google up “dumbest warning labels” for a comprehensive list.

A granola bar I bought while we were there had no warning label, but it did have an interesting description: “Roly Poly Crunchie Oats in a Stickywicky Coat.”

If/when we return to Ireland I'll think twice before renting a car – driving on the left side of roads that tend to be significantly narrower than our own is daunting. Driving is so difficult there's a law against renting cars to drivers over the age of 75 (this is a true fact; the best kind).

I have a friend who drives with his left elbow hanging out the window; he scraped up his arm on the gorse (a flowering bush that's everywhere) a few years back

because one constantly needs to drive with two wheels off the road. If two buses meet on a secondary road, one of them has to back up.

We spent our entire trip in Northwest Ireland, which somebody dubbed the Wild Atlantic Way in a burst of marketing genius a couple of years ago. There's a real push on the western coast to attract visitors away from the Dublin metropolitan area. The National Museum of Ireland there, which is full of stuffed animals, is somewhat derisively referred to as the "Dead Zoo."

The weather was uncommonly fair while we were there. During one of our "flash and dash" photo-op stops, our guide pointed at the mountains in the distance and said, "If you can see those mountains, it's about to rain. If you can't see them, it's already raining."

Ollie, one of our excursion drivers, was not impressed when we passed some construction workers "doing up the road" as he put it. Stereotypically, one was digging with a shovel, one seemed to be telling him how to do it and two were watching. "We call them employees, not workers" he said.

A subset of us (subsequently referred to as the "bog people") signed up for an optional excursion to the Ceide fields, a Neolithic archaeological site in County Mayo with the oldest known field systems in the world. I had never heard of it, but it's a relatively recent discovery that had been obscured by blanket bogs for thousands of years; it has a fascinating and modern pyramidal interpretive center.

If you haven't been to Ireland yet, it needs to be on your bucket list; we've crossed it off our ours three times now. While you're there enjoy yourself, but watch where you're going.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons seldom ventures far from the safety of his office at the business he co-owns on the Coralville strip.

