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HAPPINESS IS A CHATTY GPS

Exploring Ireland in a Roundabout Way

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07 FEB 2014: I hate roundabouts. At the very mention of the word, I think of the scene in the movie, National Lampoon's European Vacation, where Chevy Chase is caught on the inside of a roundabout near the Tower of London - and

circles it for hours on end, as if caught in a vortex, unable to change lanes or exit.



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I knew there were roundabouts in Ireland, so the prospect of driving a rental car on my recent trip caused me a bit of concern. I usually prefer to let someone else do the driving so I can take photos and not worry about the road or parking. However, on this trip I ended up driving a nice black Renault Fluence from Hertz; comfortable and reliable.

My first few minutes were not too encouraging. I searched high and low for the ignition to insert the key, before one of the staff approached and explained that "We don't do that anymore. Now we insert the remote control switch into a slot in the dashboard and push the button that says 'Start'". Okay. 'We' learn something new every day.

I have always driven cars with standard transmission but to facilitate my touring around the country, I requested an automatic car. Predictably, the first thing I did as I pulled out of

the parking spot was to 'clutch' , however we all know that with automatic transmission there is no clutch, so I ended up slamming on the brakes and nearly decapitating myself. Thank goodness for seat belts.

As I left Shannon Airport I nervously chanted the mantra "Drive on the left, Drive on the left". But my brain, suffering from jet lag, didn't quite get it, so I ended up turning right at the first roundabout which is of course, the wrong way. Thankfully there were no cars in the area so I was lucky and that self-imposed scare tactic was enough to keep me driving on the left hand side of the road which was the right side, but to me it mostly felt like the wrong side.

And I'll tell you that those pesky roundabouts continually threw me off course, literally and figuratively, despite a very persistent and talkative GPS that would instruct me with directions such as, "in 300 yards, cross the roundabout, take the third exit on the left to (highway) M18."

The problem was two-fold: Did the unfinished driveway on the left count as the first exit or do you skip that and look for a 'live' exit? Well apparently, the first one counted ♦ sometimes ♦ so I missed exits on a fairly regular basis.

The second problem was that there were in fact two exits that pointed in opposite directions to M18. Most of the time my GPS spoke to me in a lovely, lilting English accent. But every once in a while, it got downright feisty and would try to trip me up by pronouncing the Gaelic version of the place name.

So it would say, for example on the way to Galway,

“Cross the roundabout and take the third exit on your left to M18 in the direction of Gallimh (pronounced as Galli), and because the GPS said this so quickly, I missed the exit by trying to read the Gaelic on the road signs to make sure I was taking the correct one.

My GPS was more than amused and would yell and taunt me to "turn around, turn around".

Now in most places, making a U-turn is not so difficult. On highways and ultra-narrow Irish country roads, it's nearly impossible. Even the classic three-point turn can end up being at least nine points as you quickly shift forward and reverse and pray that no cars or trucks are coming your way.

On Day Three, my GPS stopped talking to me altogether. Never having used one before, I couldn't figure out what was happening, but I assumed it was angry at me for 'something'. The more I played with the 'help' feature, the more frustrating it became.

It was as if the GPS was saying to me "Well if you don't know what's wrong I'm certainly not going to tell you." So as I encountered a huge mountain at night with 'S' turns, hairpin turns, caution signs and bright yellow 'danger' arrows, not to mention the rambunctious driver behind me flashing his bright lights and attempting to do 120 in the 100 km zone (I was doing 45 km and trying my best not to drive into the ditch), I had to hold the GPS in my left hand and follow the outlined route while steering with my right hand and hoping the Indy-500 pretender behind me would go away.

Eventually, I arrived safely at my destination. While

I was stressed and exhausted, I believe the GPS was amused. And the next day it seemed to have forgiven me because all of a sudden it started talking again and impatiently admonishing me to 'turn around, turn around' whenever the mood fit. We were friends again and that's all that mattered. Happiness is a chatty GPS.

In all fairness, I eventually got the hang of driving on the 'wrong' side of the road and negotiating roundabouts. I drove over 1100 km in 7 days, negotiated roughly 40 roundabouts, arrived at most of my meetings on time, and developed a wonderful relationship with my GPS. In fact, on my last day, I'm positive that I detected a slight quiver in the GPS' voice as I returned to Shannon Airport for my flight home.

But you know, now I'm hooked on driving. In Ireland it's the best way to get to those wonderful, picturesque, small towns and villages that the big bus tours can't or won't go to, and it's the best way to pull over when you want to take photos of the cliffs, the coast and the ocean, not to mention the sheep, donkeys, horses and castles. And then there are those gorgeous secluded country roads and farmhouses that beckon you to explore, to stay awhile, to meet the people and share in a memorable conversation.

Exploring Ireland in a roundabout way turned out to be a very rich, rewarding experience, and yes, my GPS contributed greatly.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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