

Prolog

Am 1. Juli 2018 startete ein Flieger mit einer kleinen (aber feinen) Truppe an Bord, bestehend aus HörerInnen der E-Phase und zwei Lehrkräften, früh morgens in den Himmel gen Nordwesten.

Das Ziel: Belfast, Hauptstadt von Nordirland.

Im Vorfeld wurde der Nordirlandkonflikt deshalb ausführlich im Englischunterricht behandelt, die Geschichte Irlands beleuchtet und sich den „Troubles“ per Film, Zeitungsartikeln, Kurzgeschichten und Irischen Songs und Balladen genähert.

So ausgerüstet, stürzte sich diese Truppe nun also in dies waghalsige Abenteuer – von dem (Achtung: spoiler alert!) alle gesund und munter zurückkamen und darüber hinaus mit vielen, vielen Erfahrungen und Eindrücken im Gepäck.

Was genau passiert ist und welche Überraschungen auf die Truppe lauerten – lest selbst im nachfolgenden Reisebericht!

Viel Spaß!

Excursion Northern Ireland/Belfast

Day one /Arrival/ Surprises:

The first surprise: the weather! We had lovely weather conditions – not only on the day of our arrival but throughout the whole stay (about 25 C and sun, sun, sun). Thus, Belfast provided a very warm welcome (but not only literally as we were going to experience later on that evening).

The second surprise: While we were waiting for the bus, we were greeted by one of those Protestant marches, annual celebrations of the victory of William of Orange over James II. (Apparently, we had unknowingly chosen the so-called “marching season” for the period of our stay.) These marches left us every time - others were to follow over the next days - with some mixed feelings since they are so closely linked to the brutal past of this country ...



After we had finally arrived at our Airbnb place in the South of Belfast in the early afternoon, we threw in our bags, went to the nearby TESCO (with which Gabor fell completely in love with) to buy some food and then instantly headed on foot towards the city centre. There, we got a first impression of its diverse architecture and soaked in the vibrant atmosphere of this place stricken by conflicts for such a long time. We decided that it was about time to mingle with locals – and could there be a better place for doing this than in one of those famous public houses – short: pubs?

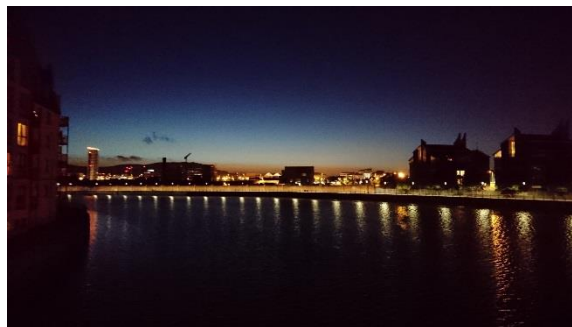
Let me tell you something:

No. There couldn't be.

Here, we experienced the second warm welcome of that day – the outstanding hospitality of the Irish, expressed by their interest in other people, their willingness to help you out whenever they can and - above all – their great humour. It was a fun evening in which we not only got some tips where best to hang out and which site to visit at any case but also discussions about the political situation in Northern Ireland – all accompanied by some live music.



Getting back home to our typical Northern Ireland two-up two-down house that night was kind of adventurous (since we couldn't figure out how to get a taxi (and this might stay a secret forever) but the long walk home got compensated by a last stunning view of Belfast at night.



Day two /Expeditions:

After breakfast, we split the group so that everyone got the opportunity to discover the city on his or her own. While the teachers went either to explore some sites of the city centre or visited the Titanic museum (yes, she was built there!), the students decided to go for a hike. Here are some impressions made by Anifa and Gabor that day:

“Before we set forth on our journey, I knew that there would be enough space and time to explore Belfast on my own. That’s why I took the chance to check out which kind of outdoor activities are offered in, and close around, the city. Ireland’s official website made me quickly make up my mind, by saying that I would have an outstanding, beautiful and scenic view from the top of the 'Cave Hill' - as if they had known how good the weather would be when we were in town.

So, no sooner said than done: When the bus from the airport took us close to Belfast, I already saw the plateau and sort of fell in love with that beauty. I think that I was fairly excited about getting up there, because I - yeah... I couldn’t stop pointing to the top, whenever I saw it, telling everybody we need to get up.

After a pretty enjoyable, funny and quite long Sunday evening, Monday appeared to be the day that each of us had at our own disposal. I have to admit that the little sleep I got the night before made me think about not getting very far, for a few seconds - but luckily Gabor was into the hike.

We started with a little walk through the city in direction of the hill, to get some impressions of Belfast itself. It turned out to be the perfect preparation because we then realized how intensely the sun was shining. Gabor had the great idea to buy some sunscreen - something I would have laughed about if someone had told me a couple of weeks before. Sunscreen, sunburn and Northern Ireland - there must be something wrong. But it wasn’t. We just had extra-perfect conditions.

So, things became serious after the 'shopping'. We took the bus to the outskirts of Belfast, even jumped a little too early out of it, but nevertheless got straight into the park and up the hill. The way wasn’t that long, but quite steep. While I was gasping for air, Gabor still seemed to be able to sing and dance. At least he was sweating like there was no tomorrow. And after something like thirty minutes we had a first glance down to the city which became clearer the further we walked. It was overwhelmingly peaceful, even though a lot of people passed by on their way down. We even passed one of the hills small caves (which is why it is named Cave Hill) into which Gabor was climbing.



We then subsequently walked a little further to a point where we weren’t sure if and where to get up. Because of this, and the fact that my companion is always hungry, we took a lunch-break and enjoyed the outstanding view. While we were eating, the people that passed by unknowingly showed us the way up. When we reached the top, we had a 360 degree view on Belfast and the surrounding country of Antrim. It was stunning. I got a slight idea where the Irish get their creative influences from.



We walked a little bit into all directions, took another rest on the rim and another way down to get back to town. At the bottom of the hill, we decided to walk a little further, with only a slight direction in our minds. That's how and why we saw some of the wealthier areas of Belfast. As we decided to get to the bus, our Map-App had sent us to a wrong bus station as we then realized. So, getting home in Belfast without a car is a different and completely new experience.

The first bus that came was a different one than the app claimed but we knew we could take it. Or let's say: could have taken it. It just passed by. Because we did not wave our hands to stop it. Well, think about it.

The second bus (it was exactly the one maps wanted us to take) definitely saw us - we were wildly waving - but... It just passed by. Sure.

We looked up to recheck the bus number and then saw that sign that shows which busses stop there, also shows, that some busses do not pick up but only drop off at this station. Our bus was the only one which did that at this station. So definitely: no-one never ever (neva-eva-eh-eh) will get that bus at this station. Well done, Mr. Map-App.

When I saw a few taxis driving along, I couldn't help but laugh. Referring to the last night's taxi-story, none of us would get a taxi either.

Thank God we were in no rush or hurry. We waited for the third bus and managed it to be picked up and were brought back to our Airbnb and there altogether enjoyed our dinner and a WC football match on the telly."

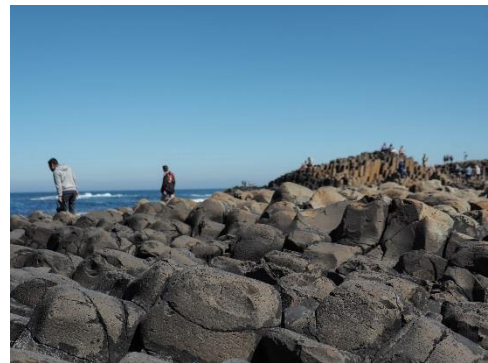
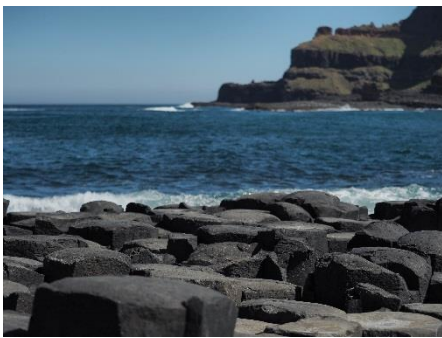


P.S.: The day then ended (again) with another big Protestant parade, this time right through our neighbourhood, the so-called **"Belfast Somme Memorial Parade"**:



Day three/Countryside:

The third day was dedicated to the discovery of the countryside of County Antrim. The tour we had booked in advance started at 9:15 a.m. and about one and a half hours later, we were one of the first visitors to set foot on the legendary **Giants Causeway**:



However, not only this World Cultural Heritage took our breath away, the whole coastline left us smiling like maniacs for the rest of the day:



The tour included several more sites like e.g. the isle of **Carrick-a-Rede** (only accessible via a rope bridge; from there, we were even able to catch a glimpse of mainland Scotland in the far distance!),



several castles (like e.g. the Carrickfergus Castle or **Dunluce Castle**),



as well as the Bushmill Whiskey Distillery and the very picturesque harbor of Carnlough.

We even saw some of the spots where “Game of Thrones” was (and is being) filmed like the *White Wall*, *Castle Black* or the *Bravoos Canal* (where Arya got seriously injured by another girl). (Yeah, I’m sure the nerds among you know what I’m talking about).

In between, we found some time for a break nearby a small river and tasted some “real” Northern Irish food like Fish & Chips/Cheese & Chips and some locally made ice-cream.



Another highlight of the tour that has to be mentioned was definitely our bus driver David who not only provided us constantly with interesting information, legends, wild stories and fun facts about “his” home county, no: at one point he also started singing the whole ballad of the “Green Glens of Antrim” (Note: you have to imagine that with a very “sexy” Northern Irish accent!).

After he drove us back to Belfast safe and sound at around 6.30 p.m., we raised a glass of *uisce beatha* to this outstanding day! **Sláinte!**

Day Four/History:

On our last day, we decided to do a **“Black Cab Tour”**. These tours are political tours (using old taxis) and often Loyalist (U.V.F.) and Republican (I.R.A.) ex-prisoners are the drivers, who help tourists and students around the world understand 800 years of British/Irish history. Walter, our host, turned out to be one of those drivers so it was quite easy for us to get in a taxi (at least for once).



The tour went mainly through West Belfast where a series of separation barriers still exist. These barriers are most often walls, separating Catholic/Irish areas from Protestant/British areas. They had been built during “The Troubles” back in the 70’s, an era of violent conflict between the two religious sects. However, the gates of those barriers are still opened daily in the early morning hours and closed at 6 p.m. every evening.



These walls are paradoxically called “peace walls” and are nowadays mainly used for political messages in the form of murals:



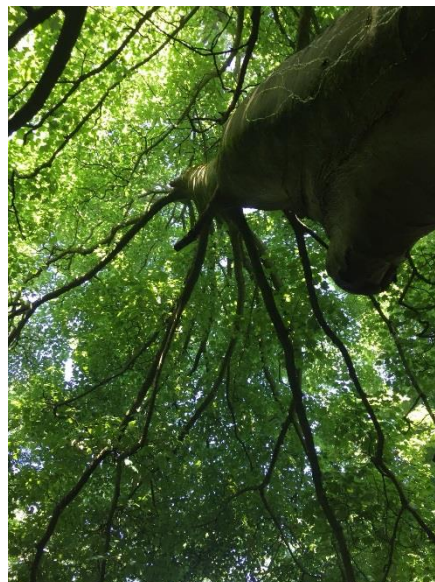
At the end of the tour, we were allowed to perpetuate our names on one of those walls:



After Walter had dropped us off in the city centre again, we spent the rest of the day visiting the permanent Visitor exhibition in **Belfast's City Hall**,



hanging out in the **Botanic Gardens**,



enjoying Irish food for the last time and, finally, 20 minutes before we had to get on the bus to the airport, a last drink in “Garrick’s”, the pub we went to when we first arrived. There, we enjoyed a farewell song by an Irish folk band, exclusively played for us!

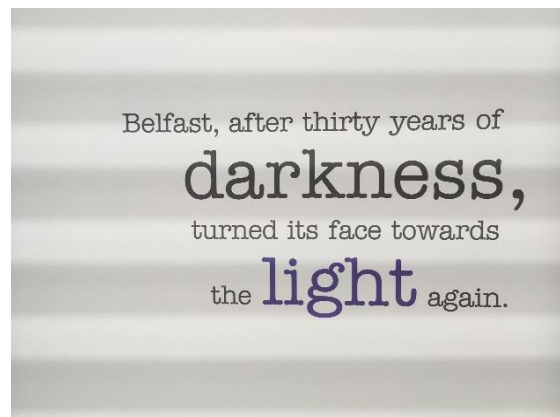


The last hours of this amazing and memorable trip we spent at the airport, waiting for our flight in the early morning hours.

As we finally left that beautiful spot on earth, we took a last glimpse on Northern Ireland just when the sun came up ...

“Slán abhaile¹” the Irish say. We’d like to respond:

Go raibh míle maith agat, Tuaisceart Éireann!² <3



(picture taken in Belfast’s City Hall)

¹ an Irish phrase used to bid goodbye to someone who is travelling home

² “Thanks a million, Northern Ireland!”