

## Introduction

*Ramblings in Ireland* is a memoir of sorts.

At least it was meant to be a memoir. Or a diary of a walking holiday my husband Bertrand and I had in Ireland. I tried to tell that story but I tend to go off at tangents. Something in a story reminds me of another story and there I go.

This book does have descriptions of the walks that we went on although they didn't always take us where we wanted to go. My stories are not always direct either. This isn't a walking guide but the walks are all real. We did them, and so could you, although I wouldn't use this book to do so.

Walking around Ireland was a great opportunity for Bertrand and I to get to know each other again. It has been a long time since we managed to get away, just we two. It amazed me just how much of each other's childhood and growing up there was to explore.

Though I was born in England I've lived in France for years. I am used to the cultural differences. The trip to Ireland was a chance for Bertrand to discover for himself the joys of another culture, another way of life. He loved the Irish people, the food, the countryside – and most importantly, the Guinness.

There is a lovely French expression “il ne perd pas le nord.” Literally this means “he doesn't lose the north.” It means someone who knows exactly what they want and where they are going. They are focused on their target and don't lose track of it.

That doesn't describe me at all.

I can't read maps. They always seem to be printed the wrong way up. I can turn them the right way but then the names of places are sideways or upside down. I never know which way is north. Bertrand does, and he knows how to read a compass. Makes you wonder why he trusts me to navigate. Maybe he likes getting lost.

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It annoys my daughter when we are talking about something and get stuck on a word. Bertrand gets out his French encyclopaedia and I get out the English one. Then we look it up and discuss its usage and history, which seems to her to take ages. She has to bring us back to the story, which was more interesting than the word. Sometimes she doesn't wait, but shrugs and leaves us with our encyclopaedias.

I can get bogged down with grammar too. I can spend hours researching when to use “many” instead of “a lot of” in positive phrases or how many tenses you can use to make conditional sentences. Luckily my job allows me to correct other people's vocabulary and grammar, otherwise I would lose all my friends! As so many professionals do, I spend my working day telling people how to perform to a standard I rarely achieve for myself outside the office. It's almost like word blindness; I simply don't see my own mistakes.

Life feels quite a lot like that, really.

## Chapter 1: Pre-Ramble

My father hates holidays. He hates travelling and he has become worse with age. He would really just prefer to stay at home and enjoy the garden. Even a trip to the seaside for a day is such an effort for him.

“Oh, do we have to go Irene?” he wails at my mother.

“Yes Laurence, otherwise you will stick to that chair and I will never be able to move you!”

I think that the problem is that neither of my parents learnt to drive until in their fifties and they have never really been very good at it. There was not so much need for it when we all lived in England. Originally from Derbyshire, the family moved to a large town in the Home Counties when I was quite young. A short train journey took my father to the hospital in which he worked. We took the train to go to Cornwall or Devon for our family holidays. Once at our destination, we would walk everywhere or take local buses.

On a few occasions we had quite remote holiday cottages and would hitch rides if we were tired of walking. The family would split into two or three groups depending upon how many of us were there and hitch back to our temporary home. It was quite exciting as a child, but times change and I can't imagine doing that with my own daughter.

I remember one particular holiday in the depths of Cornwall where we stayed quite close to an old railway line. It still had old steam trains running between the local villages. We would sometimes walk up the railway line. Once we even managed to hitch a ride on a train. We just stuck out our thumbs and, to our amazement, it stopped.

Hitch-hiking on that same holiday, we once split up into two groups. Mum and two of my brothers got the first lift. Our second

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little group, my youngest brother, my father and I stopped a young vicar who was going our way. The vicar drove like a man possessed, overtaking everything he came across. We arrived first at the holiday cottage. Our motto for that holiday became “Get there quicker: go by vicar.”

When travelling abroad started to become popular, my mother longed to go further afield than the train would permit. Strangely, as the world was opening up, local public transport was closing down. It became easier and easier to go to the other side of the world while at the same time it became more and more difficult to take public transport to the other side of town.

My mother, enthusiastically, and my father, reluctantly, learned to drive. Once they were in total control of transport and so had an infinite choice of destinations, the joy of travel within the UK ended. My father was a far more reluctant driver than my mother. He refused to drive after dark, in anything but clement weather, and never in a car that wasn't his own. My mother would drive anything, anywhere, anytime. She loved the freedom that her driving licence afforded her and started planning for excursions further afield.

It surprised everyone when my parents announced that they were moving to France after the briefest of holidays here. I believe that my father thought that it would curb my mother's urge to travel; that somehow, if they lived in the place she had wanted to visit, then they would not need to travel any more. My mother, on the other hand, saw it as moving to a central point from which she could more easily travel to other European destinations.

After the move to southwest France, they were both obliged to drive for a few years, as they lived in a tiny hamlet outside the small town of St. Sauvin de Bois, where I now live. Every necessity required driving: the newspaper, a loaf of bread, a pint of milk, a stamp. None of these everyday things were within walking distance for them. This meant that my mother did most of the

driving as my father now had a new obstacle – driving on the other side of the road. They lived in the hamlet for five years and loved the seclusion and the French way of life. For many people who move to this region, this is not the case. There are numerous examples of people who have given up their city life to move to remote parts of France. Surprisingly, some people feel they can do this with children of all ages. After a few years of struggling with the remoteness, the language, rebellious children and French administration, they pack up and go back to their country of origin. I wonder how they feel that they can live in remote areas of a foreign country when they wouldn't consider doing so in their own.

Eventually my parents' insurance company refused to continue to cover them because of the number of accidents they had had. The accidents were not major – a bump here, a scrape there. Being fairly new to the game, they claimed on the insurance policy each time. They didn't realise that this not only put the cost of the insurance up but also that it would eventually lead to them becoming too high a risk for the insurer. They eventually found another insurer who would take them on as a risk – at a price.

Some years ago they packed up and moved to Roumont, a much bigger town nearby so that everything they need is now within walking distance. The town has a permanent indoor market and a weekly outdoor market, a cathedral, shops, cafés, a theatre, two cinemas, bars – everything that a French “Grande Ville” has to offer, all on their doorstep. My mother still drives and loves to travel and visit family and friends. My father has stopped driving altogether and is much happier for it. He can walk to the shops, to the newsagent, to the post office and to the local bar. He has no desire to go further than he can walk and does not see why other people feel the need. He certainly doesn't find any pleasure in planning or going away on holiday.

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For me a holiday is a pleasure from the moment the germ of an idea forms. From the moment we have thought about “when,” I start to dream and plan. I try to find as much information as possible on the internet or by ordering and reading books about the area. My mum tells me that Google is not a replacement for a library or a good encyclopaedia but I really don’t see why not. All that information at my finger tips and I don’t have to drive to the nearest town and suffer the push and shove of the library during busy times, which seems to be any time that I am not working. My husband, Bertrand, loves holidays but, frustratingly, he does not share my excitement and enthusiasm over the planning. Once the “when” is sorted out, the “where” and the “what” are pretty much left up to me.

“Oh darling, I am sure that I will love anywhere you plan. I really don’t mind.” He says.

One day I will book him a fortnight in a Yoga retreat in India and see if he loves that.

The “when” of a holiday is very easy for Bertrand as he does not have a permanent job. This is strictly by choice. He used to run his own company as a sole trader electrician. Running a small company is very difficult in France due to the tax and social security systems. These systems seem to base their charges on the assumption that all companies do at least a third of their business “on the black” and tax them accordingly. This assumption is born out by the company accountants who look at sole trader books and tut, “You really need to do more on the black. You are putting far too much business through the books. How do you expect to make a living?”

After several years of trying to make an honest living, Bertrand gave up and started to work for temp agencies. He finds this rather pleasurable. Contracts are generally short-term, although they can last for a couple of years if it is a big construction site. If he doesn’t like the boss or doesn’t get on with his colleagues, he knows it is

not forever and at the worst, he can pack up his tools and leave. When he wants a holiday he just tells the temp agency he is working for at the time. As long as he gives them sufficient notice, this works fine. He's good at his job and the companies that employ him through the agency often ask for him again. Some have even offered him a permanent job but he prefers to remain a free agent.

For me the "when" of a holiday is more complicated. I work at a language training centre in the English department. We give training courses at our offices and also provide a distance learning programme which is operated by internet and telephone. Our clients are mainly local businesses which have contracts with English speaking countries, although we do have some courses for younger people who are taking the French equivalent of A levels.

At the beginning of each year we are given a holiday calendar showing the red, orange and green periods. The green periods are for when everyone is on holiday. When I first started at the centre, there were more green periods than there are now as quite a bit of the summer was obligatory holiday for us. The French have a long tradition of taking the majority of their holiday in the summer, in blocks of three to four weeks. Some French companies still shut down altogether for long periods during the summer, although this is becoming rarer. The only wholly green week now is Christmas. There are some green days dotted about the calendar, highlighting the bank holidays. There will be even fewer green days next year as many of the religious holidays fall on a Sunday. Unlike the British, the French celebrate their religious holidays on the day they fall and not on the nearest Monday. If the day falls over a weekend, then tough luck – there is no holiday. The flip side of this is "the bridge" when a holiday falls on (say) a Thursday. Many companies do not bother opening again on the Friday so the weekend is even longer.

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Red periods on our calendar are our busy times. Everyone has to be at work during these periods unless they have an exceptional reason to take time off. Some form of proof is very often needed. If you ever attend a funeral in France, the piece of paper you are offered is your proof to your company you were actually there. Most of our clients follow the school year, starting their training courses in September so that is a very busy period. And of course we have the New Year's resolutioners in February. I know this sounds late to all of you living in other parts of the world but the ski season here takes precedence over the actual New Year.

The orange days are the ones that cause the biggest headaches. During these holiday times, any of us can ask for a holiday but there must always be cover in each team and in each department. The orange periods are all in the school holiday periods because that is when the majority of our students take their holidays. The whole of July and August are orange on this calendar. My holiday depends on my training schedules, and whether others are available to take my students.

I have long dreamed of going to China. I would love to cruise down the Yangtze and see the Terracotta Army and the Great Wall. It's a long way to go just for a week or two so I would want to make the most of it. Last January we saw an offer for a three-week trip that coincided with my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I got out the calendar and saw that the holiday was in an orange period with just one red day lurking at the end. Bertrand really wanted to go as well, but my office just could not spare me. Well, that is what they said. They were actually hoping to win a big contract with a local pharmaceutical firm, which would have meant we would all have been very busy. As it happened, the contract did not come to fruition and I ended up spending those weeks twiddling my thumbs and feeling slightly miffed.

Later that year I became quite ill and my group leader, Sue, called the boss to inform him, "If she dies, I will haunt you because she

didn't get to go to China." She is American and so can be forgiven for using phrases like "didn't get to go." I was not in danger of dying but the support felt good. The boss asked if I wanted the time off in the summer to go there instead. Summer is not a good time to go to China as it gets very hot, plus I was also feeling quite rough that summer. Apart from that, the offer from the travel company had expired by then and there was no way we could afford the full price. So I told him I would wait until another special birthday, maybe my 60<sup>th</sup>. I think the sarcasm was wasted. It doesn't seem to work in French.

Organising holidays and some other minor administrative annoyances are the only downside to my job. I love teaching English and I love the people I work with. During the average working day, we don't spend a lot of time in each other's company as we are all teaching. We communicate using Skype, which is strange when we are all in the same building, but a godsend at times.

The person I spend the most time with is Antoinette. We not only work together but live in the same small town, so we would find it hard to avoid one another. We often walk together with her dog after work and grumble about the admin work we have to do, the students, the boss, and anything else that we have a grievance over. Both of us used to have "proper jobs" in finance when we lived in London. We both had problems getting our qualifications accepted when we moved to France, so we became English teachers.

I took a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course and, for a while, taught children. Once I realised that trying to teach teenagers anything is more painful than a bikini wax, I moved into adult education. My only regret is that it took me so long to make the move. Antoinette didn't need to take a TEFL to get the job. She went to Cambridge to get her degree. Like many French people, our boss has a great respect of "Les Grandes Ecoles."

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Nadia is another one of my favourite people. She also works in the English department and has the unusual distinction in our company of having been a real English teacher in a real school. This makes her quite scary for the rest of us, as she actually knows what she is talking about.

By the winter of last year, I was well on the way to recovery but when the winter holiday brochures started to arrive from the ski companies, I felt quite weak. We had happily found reasonably priced ski packages for the previous two spring breaks. Our daughter, Jinx, had decided that she would not miss out on skiing and was going with her best friend, Amy, and Amy's family. As the trip down the Yangtze had not come about, I looked for another cruise a little nearer to home. The cruise I found was on the Nile, stopping to look at tombs, temples and ancient towns. The package was fantastic: full board on the boat and all excursions included. I booked it immediately and bought a book on tombs, temples and hieroglyphics. I was totally absorbed by the idea of Egypt, looking at maps and charts of the areas we were to visit. I learned how to write my name in hieroglyphics and tried out a few Egyptian recipes. Bertrand and I would talk about it in the evenings. He bought a phrase book that we could use whilst we were there.

The week before we were due to fly out, civil war broke out in Egypt and all holiday travel was cancelled.

Our tour operator sent us a voucher for the price of our holiday (to be used by the end of the summer) and advised all travellers to look at the holidays available on the Internet before calling to reserve a replacement. We quickly logged on to the web site. It was very frustrating -- all the holidays were disappearing as we watched. Everyone who had been going to Egypt or anywhere near it had received notification at the same time and was frantically searching to replace their dreams with new ones.

A week after our holiday, peace was restored and holiday activities in Egypt resumed. The Egyptians obviously had not wanted me. I took it very personally.