



IRISH GAZETTE



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Exploring Northern Ireland: Off-season surprises

By Kathy McGorray Dougherty

Sometimes the most wondrous things happen when you travel in the off-season. Even in the off-off season, which accurately describes visiting Northern Ireland in January. Our plans included visiting relatives in Co. Tyrone and taking frequent day trips to Derry, Belfast and the north coast (even more wild during the winter). Thankfully, things didn't go exactly as planned.

The first surprise was the weather — not rainy and gray, but sunny. Sunny enough to regret leaving my sunglasses at home. The second surprise, to us non-farmers, was that lambing season was in full swing. The first lamb had been born on Dec. 26, St. Stephen's Day, so we appropriately named him Little Stevie. During the rest of our visit another five lambs were born. My relatives were amused at my insistence on naming them — they know their animals by temperament, not names. The little lambs were cute, fuzzy and cuddly; the ewes were not.

The best surprise came near the end of our holiday. One of our relatives belongs to the local historical society. Typically, the society's monthly meetings consist of a speaker giving a presentation or a short journey to a nearby historical site (there are plenty to choose from). However, in January, they invite



Little Stevie, the lamb born on St. Stephen's Day, with a very protective gang of sheep.

local musicians to come together for a traditional "session."

The best place to hear traditional music is in a traditional setting, and the one-room schoolhouse in the tiny village of Rock fit the bill. Slowly that evening, local folks filled the seats and musicians straggled in. No reservations were made, no musicians confirmed in advanced, so no one knew how many would show up. About an hour after the announced start time, five musicians formed a circle in the front and began playing. No sheet music, hardly even any conversation — one just started and the others joined in. Gradually the circle expanded to 13 musicians. And they kept playing.

Periodically someone in the capacity crowd would stand up

and sing, either a cappella, or with the musicians. At other times, people would approach the front to offer jokes or stories, which I always understood perfectly, even with their strong accents. Always that is, until the punch line. At least everyone else thought they were funny.

During a break in the music, while tea and biscuits were served, I told one of the musicians how much I enjoyed the music. He thanked me and then asked, "Are you from Minnesota?" Shocked, I asked how he knew — was my accent that strong? No — it turns out the musicians had heard there were going to be visitors from Minnesota attending. Word travels fast, even in a traditional place.



Musicians play in the one-room schoolhouse in Rock, Co. Tyrone.

Kathy McGorray Dougherty is owner of Northern Ireland Travels, which specializes in creating personalized, self-guided trips to Northern Ireland. For more information, visit their website at www.nirelandtravels.com.