

CORNWALL, ENGLAND

This is part 2 of our 2011 European trip story.



Previously, I had been all over England and Scotland, but never made it to Cornwall in the extreme west of England. I searched the Internet looking for a tour of Cornwall and Devon, and came across “Cornish Welcome” tours. We exchanged a bit of correspondence with the owner, and we were quoted a price for a 5 night stay. We would be staying at a Bed and Breakfast owned by our guide and his wife in the middle of Cornwall. It is nicely appointed, and we would have breakfast and dinner with them. I also found there were a number of scenic railways there and hope to ride one. I reviewed what we paid for a 7 night tour of Ireland last year, and it was about the same cost. Although we enjoyed our tour of Ireland, we were on a bus with about 40 people and the food was unremarkable and mostly overcooked. Some years ago, I took a private half day tour outside of Lisbon, and saw more in that half day than I could have seen in 2 days on a tour bus. We were convinced this was the best option for a tour of Cornwall, and how right we were!

Day One

We told the ship we were disembarking at 8 AM, but were really leaving at 9AM. This meant we would have less trouble finding our luggage as most people would have picked up their bags by that time. As we left the terminal with our bags, our host and guide John was waiting there with a sign with our name on it. That was quite reassuring, as we had never met.

We loaded our bags and got under way. The first part of the 300 mile journey was on British motorways, which are like our freeways. You do not see much of the countryside going along at 70 mph! We stopped for coffee along the way at what we call a roadside rest stop, and there was a Starbucks there, along with a Subway and some other local fast food places.

As we got further west, the roads got smaller, and we were excited when John told us we were going to Salisbury to visit Stonehenge!

Stonehenge is a prehistoric monument located in the English county of Wiltshire, and 8 miles north of Salisbury. One of the most famous sites in the world, Stonehenge is composed of earthworks surrounding a circular setting of large standing stones. It is at the center of the most dense complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in England, including several hundred burial mounds.

Archaeologists believed that the iconic stone monument was erected around 2500 BC, as described in the

chronology below. One recent theory however, has suggested that the first stones were not erected until 2400–2200 BC, while another suggests that bluestones may have been erected at the site as early as 3000 BC. The surrounding circular earth bank and ditch, which constitute the earliest phase of the monument, have been dated to about 3100 BC.

I had heard it was fenced to prevent people from tamping down the earth around the stones. In my mind that meant a chain link fence! We were pleasantly surprised to see only a rope a few feet off the ground surrounding the monument.





It was an awesome sight! To think the builders had to quarry the blocks from many miles away and transport them overland on rollers. These stones weighed many tons, and we were told to get the lintel stones on top of the others, a dirt ramp was built and the stones pulled up. The dirt was then removed, leaving the stones in position. We had no idea that John would stop here on our journey, and Kathy was really thrilled and surprised. This mysterious place, and the reason for it, had always been a place of wonder for both of us. To actually be there and walk around it, thinking of the ancient people who built it was something we'll never forget.

On our way to Cornwall, John had another surprise for us. In the Dartmoor National Park, we stopped at a very unusual bridge called a "clapper bridge". This bridge was not as old as Stonehenge, as it was built at least 700 years ago! For us in the United States, that is incomprehensible. It was constructed by laying big flat stones across the piers, and for a long time was on the main road from Chagford to Tavistock, and is the largest of its type in England.



We arrived at St. Leonard's house (our B & B) and were greeted by John's charming wife, Jane. The house dates back to the early 1500's and lies on the bank of the River Kensey. It is on the Cornwall/Devon border about 1 mile outside the historic market town of Launceston. There is a small bridge over the river near their house that dated back to the 1300's, and the views of their rose garden and neighboring horse pastures add to the charm of their home. What a picturesque home they have! We felt comfortable right away, and enjoyed every moment of our stay with them.



Over tea and drinks we will got to know each other and discussed the week's program to ensure that we were entirely happy with all the arrangements. The plan was to do one big site and a lot of little things rather than trying to do too much in any one day. We shared a lovely dinner with our hosts before getting a good night's sleep in our spacious bedroom.

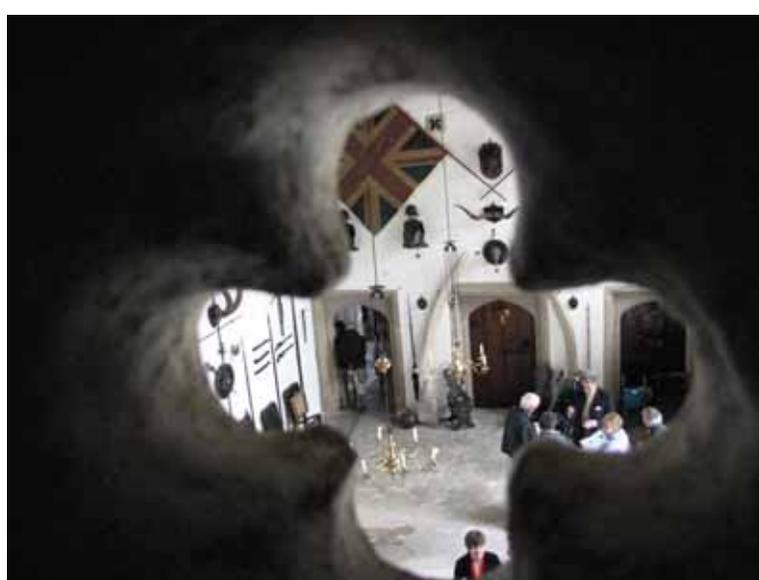
Day Two

We had a hearty full Cornish breakfast, prepared by Jane and served by John. A Cornish breakfast usually consists of eggs, English sausage, and a rasher of English bacon, mushrooms, broiled herbed tomatoes and toast. We were then taken to Cotehele, a Tudor house with a splendid collection of textiles, armor and furniture set in extensive grounds overlooking the River Tamar. It was built in the 1400's, and is a house with many stories, myths and legends and little has changed since it was built. A visit to the house is a magical experience and we considered this one of our favorite historic houses in Britain. Before we arrived at the house, we saw an unusual structure with 3 portals. John explained that is was a lime kiln, where limestone is burned to make slaked lime, for construction. There was also a small sailing

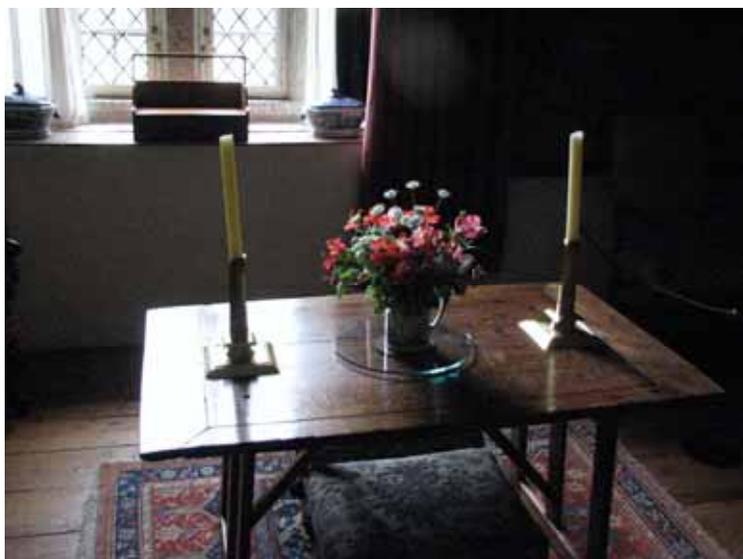
ship on display as the type of ship of the period.



We entered through the main gate, and into a dining room. The walls were covered with all manner of weapons, and there was a small quatrefoil hole up in one corner of the room. John explained that it was a peephole that the owner of the house used to spy on the guests!



We toured the house, exploring the bedrooms, study, and kitchen, thinking about the lives of the people that lived there. In one room there was a plaque denoting the marriage and death of a lady of the house. The dates were only three years apart, and I commented on how sad that was. It turned out the two people were cousins, were in love with each other, but could not marry. They both married others, and after their spouses had died, they did marry because they were past childbearing age.



We exited the house, and toured the beautiful gardens that led down to the river. In the distance there was an interesting railway viaduct.



We left the estate, and traveled through the back roads of Cornwall to get to a pub with the unlikely name of “Who’d Have Thought It Inn”!



It was a very charming place on the back roads, and had a spectacular view of the landscape, including the River Tamar, which we saw when we visited the Cotehele estate.



After lunch, we drove through the countryside to Bodmin moor, and high on the moor was the Jamaica Inn. The inn is famous for being the base of smugglers in the past and has gained national renown for allegedly being one of the most haunted places in Great Britain. It is also known as the setting for Daphne du Maurier's novel of the same name, published in 1936. The young author at the time was inspired to write her novel when, having gone horseback riding on the moors, she became lost in thick fog and sought refuge at the inn in 1930. During the time spent recovering from her ordeal, the local rector is supposed to have entertained her with ghost stories and tales of smuggling; he would later become the inspiration for the enigmatic character of the Vicar of Altarnun.



Day 3

After another hearty Cornish breakfast, we set out for Bodmin, to ride the Bodmin & Wenford steam Railroad. It is a small railway, operated by rail enthusiasts, after the line was closed to regular traffic. They have a number of steam engines, and vintage rail cars.



I was able to visit the switch house, which contained levers to control the rail switches and signals. It also had a diagram of the complete line to help the switchman.



I was lucky enough to get a picture of the engine coming towards the station veiled in steam.



Riding the train worked up an appetite, so John took us again on the back roads of Cornwall to a delightful pub called the Rashleigh Inn at Polkerris, right on the coast. We watched a group of people taking windsurfing lessons, all in wet suits. That water has to be cold, even in summer!



After a delightful lunch, we headed for the town of Fowey, pronounced “foy”, and took the chain ferry across the river. The ferry uses powered cogs or drums on board the vessel to pull it along by the cables. The cables or chains have a considerable amount of slack built into them, in order that they sink below the surface as the ferry moves away, allowing other vessels to pass without becoming grounded, snared or trapped.



After disembarking the ferry, we drove to Polperro on the south Cornwall coast. We wandered through the town until we found a shop that sold fudge. We bought some that tasted of the “clotted cream” for which Cornwall is famous. The tide was out, and all the boats were sitting on the harbor bottom.



After leaving Polperro, we drove to Minions where there were some abandoned tin mines. Some of the mine structures were still standing. In contrast, right in the middle of a field, were highland cattle with their bangs.



Our last stop on a very full day was a fascinating small church in the town of North Hill. The church has been a place of worship since the 1400's.



The most fascinating part of the church was a crypt of one of its wealthiest members. Thomas Vincent died in 1606, and his wife died in 1601. It was carved from slate, and shows Thomas and Jane flanked by their 7 daughters and 8 sons. The skulls above some of the children indicate they predeceased their parents.



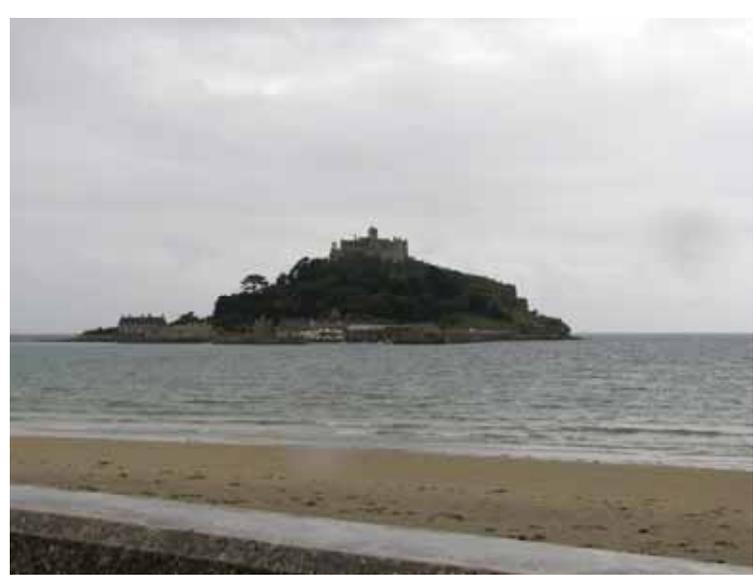
It was a very full day, but not at all stressful. Thanks to John, we did not have to "follow the yellow umbrella", and we were able to set our own pace.

Day 4

We started our day with another wonderful Cornish breakfast, and were on our way to St. Michael's Mount. We took the road towards Lands End to visit the site. This is a rocky island crowned by a medieval castle and church which is accessible on foot at low tide across a causeway or at other times by a short boat trip. The oldest buildings date from the 1100's when a Benedictine priory was established here. The monks who built Mont St. Michel in France were also responsible for the construction of this structure.

We timed our arrival for high tide, so we could take a boat across instead of having to hike along the causeway. Unfortunately the heavens opened up and we took shelter in the car until it let up.

We then made our way to the dock and took the small boat across to the landing.



After the small boat ride, we walked from the landing to get our first close look at the castle. The climb up was steep and uneven, but well worth it once we got there.



The church of St. Michael and All angels was rebuilt in the 1300's on the footprint of an earlier church built in 1135. The organ dates from 1786, and there is an unusual cross called a "lantern cross". It dates from the 1400's and has four panels, one on each side. They represent the crucifixion, virgin and child, a king and a priest.



We also visited the beautiful blue drawing room, with Chippendale chairs and coats of arms. One of the interesting items was a model of the castle made by the butler from champagne corks in the 1930's! The model is beautifully to scale, and made from corks because the family was accustomed to drinking champagne with the fish course.



The entire time we were visiting the castle, the tide was going out, and it was possible to see the outline of the causeway under the water. The picture on the right shows what it looks like at low tide.

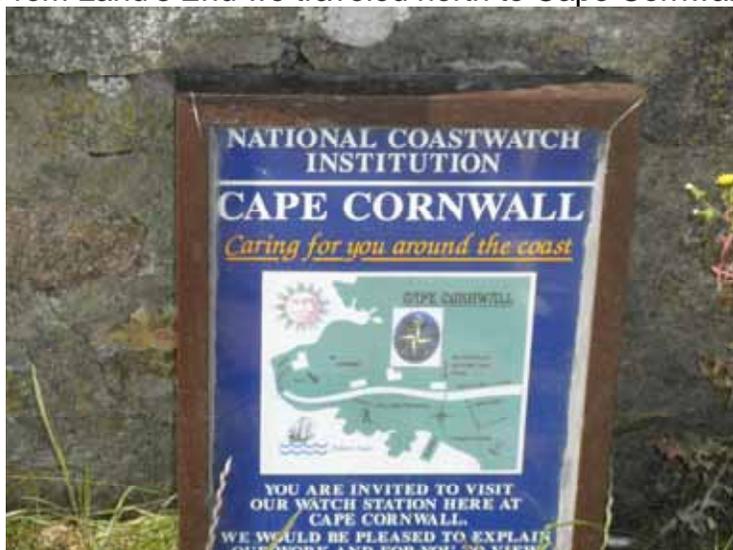


After returning from the castle by boat, we had lunch at a pub on the mainland called The Godolphin Arms, which had a view of the castle. Across the street from the pub was a house that had what looked like a bougainvillea painted in its wall.



From Marazion and St. Michael's Mount, we took the little back roads towards Land's End, where a small theme park is built. The comment was made that to see the best thing at Land's End, all you had to do was take ten steps away and look at the sea.

From Land's End we traveled north to Cape Cornwall, a very picturesque spot on the ocean.



We then drove to the picturesque town of St. Ives. The town is a maze of one-way streets, but we were able to find a place to park and sightsee. We stopped to look at one of Cornwall's oldest and most famous Inns, a favorite haunt of locals, fishermen, artists and tourists all year round.



Believed to date from about 1312 A.D., the Sloop Inn is situated right on the harbor front at St Ives with only a cobbled forecourt and road separating it from the sea.

Day 5

This unfortunately, is the last full day of our visit to Cornwall. We have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. John and Jane are wonderful hosts, and John must know every back road in Cornwall.

We started the day off slowly, to give my legs time to recover from climbing St. Michael's Mount yesterday. Our first stop was at Widemouth Bay (pronounced widmith), and we stopped at an overlook that had a bench dedicated to a man who used to come up there every day to enjoy the view.

While we were there, a couple joined us, and the man was holding a tortoise! He explained that he had rescued it when it was small, and nursed it back to health. He also said it was a great way to meet people.



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From there we drove to the town of Boscastle, which was devastated by a flood in 2004. On that day, warm air picked up moisture due to residual heat from the Atlantic. The air travelled towards the South West Cornish coast with the prevailing winds. Upon contact with the vertical coast, it resulted in heavy rainfall on the afternoon of 16 August 2004. Seven inches of rain fell over the high ground just inland of Boscastle. The ground could not absorb the water, and it all swept down the normally gentle stream as a wall of water. The picture below is the way the stream normally appears. The tourist information center had a video of the flood, and showed cars, vans, and trees being thrown up against the bridge! The bridge on the right is a new bridge, as the old one was washed away in the flood.



As a result of the flood, 75 cars, 5 campers, 6 buildings and several boats were washed into the sea; approximately 100 homes and businesses were destroyed; trees were uprooted and debris were scattered over a large area.



Leaving Boscastle, we headed toward Tintagel, legendary home of King Arthur. John told us that the town was very touristy, and we could get better food at a nearby place he knew. We drove down another small road, and came to the little village of Trebarwith Strand. There was a pub called the Port William Inn, which nestles into the cliffs overlooking the dramatic Trebarwith Strand on the North Cornwall coast. When the tide is out, there is a mile of golden sand which can be viewed from the inn. Unfortunately, the tide was in, but the scenery was still beautiful.



After a great lunch, we were fortified to face the challenge at Tintagel. John explained that to access the island, there is a set of steps to climb down, and then another set to climb up. My legs were shaking just thinking about that. However, if it is the only way to see such an historic site, it has to be done. Kathy did not agree and said she would watch from down below and wave. Tintagel Castle, with its wonderful location, is set high on the rugged North Cornwall coast, and offers dramatic views, and fascinating ruins. The castle is steeped in legend and mystery; said to be the birthplace of King Arthur, and nearby is Merlin's Cave. The castle is also featured in the tale of Tristan and Isolde. With a history stretching as far back as the Romans, Tintagel Castle is one of the most iconic visitor attractions in the south west of England.



The first pictures are the approach to the castle, which are extremely steep.



Upon reaching the top, we passed through a small portal to enter the courtyard.



Looking down from the courtyard, to the right was a small cove called The Haven, where slate was loaded onto boats in the 1800's. There was Kathy waving. Across from The Haven, is Merlin's Cave, made popular by Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"



There were not much more than ruins of the castle, but the views were spectacular. The small pyramidal rock in the center of the left picture was near where we had lunch.



After descending from the top, we stopped at the inn at the bottom where we met Kathy for a genuine Cornish Cream Tea. It consists of a scone, clotted cream and jam. Clotted cream is a thick cream made by indirectly heating unpasteurized cow's milk using steam or a water bath and then leaving it in shallow pans to cool slowly. During this time, the cream content raises to the surface and forms 'clots', hence its name. According to Jane, the clotted cream from Cornwall is superior to all others. I always thought a scone was like an English muffin, but it is much denser and sits in your stomach for quite a while. John was quite surprised at the size of the ones we got, as they are usually much smaller. In any event, it was a nice finishing touch to our time in Cornwall.

Day 6

Unfortunately, our time in Cornwall had come to an end, but the memories of the hospitality of John and Jane will be with us forever. We loved spending time with them in their home, getting the flavor of how people really live here. No large tour company or hotel chain can offer a priceless experience like this.

All in all, this was a fantastic trip of full days. Looking at the map, we were as far northeast as Bode, as far southeast as Saltash, and as far west as Lands End. We covered hundreds of miles on small one or two lane roads where tour buses could not go, and discovered delightful off the beaten track places.

We would highly recommend "Cornish Welcome" tours to anyone who wants to really experience and enjoy this lovely part of England.

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