

VOLUNTEER VACATION

CHURCH RUINS ... BY THE YARD

By Elizabeth Fryer

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INISHMORE, IRELAND

The sandy beach was a little larger than half a football field, with big rocks at one end and a small entryway at the other - big enough for a single vehicle's passage. Several of us swam in our clothes since we had failed to pack bathing suits. Who thought Inishmore, largest of the three Aran Islands off the southwest coast of Ireland, would have a public beach? I didn't even expect swimsuit weather, though it was early August.

We didn't spend much of our free time at the beach anyway. We had just two weeks to explore this island, one mile by nine miles, with all of its old forts and churches and ruins. That meant two weekends and after work on weekdays.

Our group of 14 Americans was on Inishmore helping Sinead, a PhD candidate from the University of California, with her research mapping, sketching, and photographing medieval churches.

Two weeks were not enough to complete work at all of the island's churches, but we were the second group to visit that summer, with another group to come.

We ranged in age from early 20s to early 40s. Several were teachers. We chose this project in Ireland from several available through University Research Expeditions Program (UREP), which is organized through the University of Cali-

magazine to peruse the ads in the back for a European soft-adventure vacation. Then I happened across a UREP ad. The project in Ireland seemed tailor-made for me because it was one of the few offered in Europe that year and because it was in my price range: \$1,300 plus transportation.

Living and eating arrangements vary by project but are always included in the fee. On Inishmore the 14 of us stayed in a rented house, two or three to a bedroom, though the lone man in the group had a single room. Despite our number and only two bathrooms, it still didn't seem crowded.

We paired up for two nights' cooking duty during our two-week working vacation. After a day in the field, the partnered participants would bike to the market to buy ingredients for that evening's dinner. Soups, salads, and spaghetti were popular meals, but one night we had fresh fish that Oliver had caught in the Atlantic the night before.

Oliver was our driver, delivering us to our work sites in the mornings and picking us up in the afternoons.

Oliver made his living giving tours to folks traveling to Inishmore by boat from County Galway. He waited at the dock until he had a full-enough van and then led the tour past Teampall Bheanain and Teampall MacDonagh, the most intact medieval churches, and the most famous ruin, Dun Aengus, which is more than 2,000 years old.

Oliver didn't have a set schedule, and since he was our transportation, neither did we. A typical day's routine was:

USING GRID PAPER WE DREW THE PRECISE LOCATION OF THE WALL'S STONES WITH THE AID OF THE GRID WE HAD JUST SET.

fornia, Davis and lists 10 to 20 research projects that the university's PhD candidates are working on.

For a fee and transportation costs, any able-bodied person can get involved tracking insect movements in Madagascar, examining the effects of weather on Easter Island statues, observing the nighttime mating habits of underwater creatures off the coast of France, or participating in an archeological dig in the western United States, among other projects.

Costs range from less than \$1,000 for projects in the US to several thousand for travels to far-off places.

I didn't know all this when I bought a copy of *Outside*

8:30 a.m. – Awake and eat breakfast.

9 a.m. – Enjoy the view of the Atlantic from the front porch while we wait for Oliver.

9:40 a.m. – Smile as Oliver arrives, sleepy-eyed but ever the gentleman, offering each person a hand up into the van.

10 a.m. – Begin work setting a grid to the church walls using pins, string, a tape measure, a level, and a plumb. Because of so much equipment, this task progressed more easily with two people. Grid setting was my main duty during the stay. Others had skills that were better used elsewhere, such as determining exact church measurements or

See **VOLUNTEERS** page 16

Vacations that make a difference

VOLUNTEERS from page 13

taking close-up photographs of intricate portions of the ruins. Some hiked around the immediate area looking for anything unusual, such as a misplaced gravestone.

When we arrived on the island, Sinead had taken us on a tour of all Inishmore's known medieval churches. Then we divided up into two working groups. Each set of volunteers worked at one church for a week before going on to another.

At 12:30 we'd usually take a 30-minute break for lunch. Then the afternoon's work would begin. Using grid paper, my partner and I would draw the precise locations of the wall's stones' with the

aid of the grid we had just set. If anyone found something as he or she explored, we all stopped to take a closer look. About 3:30 we'd pack up everything and hike to the road to meet Oliver, who tended to be more punctual in the afternoons.

Once back at the house, Sinead continued her scholarly duties, while those who had cooking duty headed off to the market, some biked to the beach, and others explored the island and its ruins.

One evening I went fishing with Oliver, and on different afternoons I spent several hours searching the southwest edge of Inishmore for the elusive blow holes from which the raging Atlantic is said to shoot 10 feet high.

One day Oliver and his cousin Patrick invited us to the local church for a *ceili*. *Ceilis* (pronounced KA-lees) are like square dances with better music and no caller.

I danced with Patrick, a hulk of a man who tried to teach me the dance as we moved counter-clockwise around the floor of the basketball court

inside the church. But I just couldn't catch on. I shuffled my feet when we passed in the straight-aways, yet when we approached a corner, Patrick would lift me, swinging me to the left as he made the left turn around the corner. My legs flew out behind me like a rag doll's. It was great fun.

Those of us who went to the *ceili* didn't get to bed until early Saturday morning. But that was OK, because the annual Inishmore blessing of the boats wasn't scheduled until Saturday afternoon. Our landlord, Tony, who owned a fishing boat, had invited us to sail on his craft for the blessing.

It was a community event, with many people milling around the docks.

We found Tony's 40-foot vessel, got on board, and headed into the harbor. About 20 boats were making waves and honking horns while a priest blessed us from the dock. It was a memorable way to spend our last day on Inishmore.

That final evening Oliver came by the house and we climbed into his van. He shuttled us to the foot of the path to Dun Ducahair, or Black Fort, built in the Iron Age. Like Dun Aengus, Inishmore's most famous fort, the semicircular Black Fort was built on the side of a cliff so that enemy attacks could come from only one direction.

After exploring on our own, our group got together for pictures. I pulled out my harmonica and played a snappy song while others clapped their hands and danced.

It was the perfect ending to a perfect volunteer holiday. While I'd been too shy to play earlier in the week, I now felt like part of a family, working and cooking with these people, exploring and discovering with them. I can hardly wait for my next UREP experience, which I hope will be soon.

■ View information about past UREP projects at <http://UREP.ucdavis.edu>. The program is on hold until August to allow organizers to review the past 25 years of UREP experiences and make future ones all the better.

For more information, write to UREP University of California, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616; telephone (530) 757-3529, or e-mail urep@ucdavis.edu.

