

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

I want to start out by saying that my study abroad trip was truly the experience of a lifetime. I never thought I would study abroad, even though I always held the idea in the back of my mind. Typically, you hear of study abroad experiences being for an entire semester, but due to my involvement on the women’s swim team that would not be an option for me. I also barely could go off to college just two hours away from my home town without being too homesick. After a presentation about another summer study abroad experience in one of my classes I began to do some research. I stumbled upon the Dublin, Ireland trip and it was a perfect fit from the start. What really stood out to me was the fact that this trip had a special education focus to it. As a special education major, I continue to be amazed at the opportunities and experiences Illinois State offers to their special education students. My parents got on board and after that things started to move quickly. When I learned about the scholarship opportunities I was thrilled. Cost was something that worried me about a study abroad experience, as traveling is indeed expensive. I was beyond thrilled and grateful to receive two study abroad scholarships. It was such a big help financially for myself and my parents. This gave us the gift of not worrying about the finances of the trip and I could focus on preparing for this fantastic opportunity. If any student is worrying about study abroad because of the financial aspect I would highly encourage them to apply for scholarships. These scholarships can give you, like it gave me, the experience of a lifetime.

On May 14th, I bid my family farewell at O’Hare airport and embarked on my biggest adventure yet. I had never traveled across an ocean before and doing it without my family by my side was a huge step outside of my comfort zone. If this experience taught me anything it’s that I am way more independent than I give myself credit for. This idea that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step is so true. That first step, considering study abroad opportunities, led me to O’Hare airport on this day ready to journey 3,673 miles to Dublin, Ireland.

Our 3 weeks in Ireland brought adventure and opportunity in two different capacities. We explored on our own and with our group the beautiful country of Ireland, and we were also given the wonderful opportunity to observe and interact with students and teachers in Dublin.

Adventure:

Our trip provided us with a lot of time to explore Dublin and the country. For three weeks, we embarked on a new adventure each day. Whether that was a bike ride in one of Dublin’s many parks, or a trip to Belfast, Northern Ireland, we had our fair share of adventure. We made our way to the northern, western, eastern and southernmost parts of Ireland.

Our first week we spent a lot of time exploring Dublin and learning about the city and all it has to offer. One of our first days we had our first experience with Dublin public transportation as we took a train to a coastal town called Howth. While in Howth we went on a beautiful scenic cliff walk and I tried fresh fish and chips for the first time, and might I say it was delicious! That first week we took a trip to Glendalough, an old monastery, which was rich with history and some of the most breathtaking views after a hike/climb up a mountain on the grounds of the

monastery. One of our best cultural experiences also came this first week. As a group, we went to a traditional Irish dancing class and busted our best dance moves to some live traditional Irish music. Our first weekend in Ireland, a group of girls and I took a tour up to Belfast which proved to be one of our most memorable weekends of the trip. With nothing but the backpacks on our back we navigated Belfast, explored the Titanic museum and got to see some of nature's true wonders in the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge and Giant's Causeway. We took about 20,000 steps on our second day in Belfast, but every step was worth it.

Week two in Ireland we spent a lot of time in local schools as well as in and around Dublin. We were given a free day during the week and a group of girls and I took a tour to The Blarney Stone and Cork City. The Blarney Castle was beautiful and we all puckered up for the stone for the gift of gab for 7 years! We spent some time in Cork City, another one of Ireland's many historic and beautiful towns. Our second weekend we traveled as a group to Galway for some unforgettable experiences. Before arriving in Galway, we took a trip to the Cliffs of Moher. I have seen countless pictures of the Cliffs but seeing them in person was an experience like none other. It's hard to truly describe their beauty. Our second day in Galway we spent on the Aran Islands. While on the Aran Islands we navigated the islands by bike. This really gave us a chance to see the whole Island and explore on our own. We even ran into 2 donkeys along the ride! I had my favorite meal of the trip in a quaint Irish restaurant. After lunch, we hiked up to Dún Aonghasa, one of Ireland's most beautiful cliffs and an old fort. With each passing day, I had to pinch myself that I was really in Ireland, experiencing new and unexplainable beauty day in and day out. That day on the Aran Islands was one of those days. Upon returning to Galway City after our day on the island we had some time to explore the city at night before heading back to Dublin in the morning.

Week 3 we had some more school visits and a trip to an Irish town called Kilkenny where we saw one of Ireland's most notorious castles and visited a group home/living residence for individuals in and around their community with disabilities. This proved to be a memorable experience meeting the staff and residents there. After a wonderful group dinner at the end of the week we made our journey back to the states. This trip had two very distinct adventures for myself. Adventures around Ireland, exploring, hiking, and learning was a major highlight of this once in a lifetime experience. Throughout this trip, we were also privileged with the opportunity to experience Irish primary, secondary and special schools which sparked adventure in myself as a future educator.

Opportunity:

When I enrolled at Illinois State University I took that first step into the adventure of education. Each and every experience I have had at school is shaping the teacher that I will become and my study abroad experience continued to do just that. I am so fortunate to not have only had the experience of traveling but to also visit schools and meet teachers and students while in a different country. Each school visit I found myself feeling right at home in the classroom. This experience in Ireland has shown me how much I deeply love educating young people and watching their minds and their hearts grow.

While we were in Ireland we visited primary, which are like our elementary schools, and secondary, similar to our middle and high schools. We also had the opportunity to visit some special schools, where the entire student body have various disabilities and learning needs. A couple of experiences really stood out to me. First, was a trip to an all-girls school. There I observed a 4th grade classroom where students shared with us their local and global goals. They identified problems, formed solutions and took actions to create the change they plan to make. Each time a young girl stood in front of the class to talk about a new goal my heart smiled for the future. Each of those girls will make a positive impact on the world with what they are doing now and with their passion for the future. Being an educator is a privilege. We will shape the minds of the next generation and I can hardly wait to instill that passion for change in my students like I saw in that 4th grade classroom in Ireland. Secondly, while at an all-boys school in Dublin we were fortunate enough to visit the Autism Spectrum Unit and meet the students and staff there. These students and staff were incredible to meet. Their facilities were outstanding. They had one of the most amazing sensory rooms and classroom set up I have ever seen. As my journey in special education continues I look forward to creating my own classroom like I saw in Ireland that is as positive and welcoming as it is for the students at that school. At each school and facility we visited, we met faculty who cared so deeply for their students and their families. I left each school visit with a smile on my face and great anticipation for the future when I too get to be an educator and have a classroom of my own.

My trip to Ireland was a journey of a thousand miles, as well as being a part of my journey at Illinois State and into the future. I feel so grateful to have taken part in this trip to Ireland as I have learned, seen and grown so much as a person. I had reservations about study abroad, most do, but I encourage it 100%. Don't be afraid of the unknown, don't stay inside your comfort zone, because often life's grandest adventures start with that first step outside your comfort zone.

Yours truly,
Molly Hill



