

Travels with Anzie: The Cornish Coast

April 2014

Any “Doc Martin” fans out there? No, not the boots; the television series on PBS. Since we were down in Cornwall, we decided we must visit the scene of one of our favorite shows.

You’ll remember that we’re doing a house-swap with friends Bea and David. We’re loving their house, their neighbors and exploring the surrounding area.

Last Saturday we made the six-hour trip from Birkenhead, near Liverpool down to Cornwall, the southernmost province in England. Lands End, the most southern and the most eastern community on the UK mainland lies in Cornwall. We really lucked out finding a last minute timeshare exchange on the Clowance Estate in the village of Praze-An-Beeble. Anzie really should hire herself out as a Travel Planner. She really has a talent for it. Clowance is like mini Downton Abbey with a golf course. We stayed in the former stable and carriage house. Can we detect an aroma in the middle of the night – Essence de Cheval (horse manure)? Perhaps. In any case, the digs are pretty fabulous.

Our first full day, Sunday, we partook of an English custom – The Roast. Any restaurant/pub worth its salt (and gravy) puts on a Roast (aka Carvery) for Sunday lunch. It’s basically roast beef (could also be roast lamb or pork), potatoes, gravy, Yorkshire pudding (in our family we called it “popovers”), plus veggies. The Victoria Inn, in Perranuthnoe, is supposed to be the oldest Inn in Cornwall.

All of the inns and pubs seem to pride themselves in looking “old”. We really enjoy visiting the pubs, and love the authentic look – the hand-hewn ceiling beams, the wood paneling darkened to a deep brown by years of tobacco smoke. Most bars in America have copied the “look”. It’s easy to engage the patrons in conversation. Often they hear our accent and ask, “Where’re you from?” When we respond, “Boston,” nearly everyone has a relative in the area, or else they have made a visit. And the conversation continues. Back twenty years ago British pub fare was plain or else plain awful. We’ve been pleasantly surprised at the improvement.

We just read somewhere that thirty years ago ninety percent of the beer consumed in England was drunk in pubs. Since then the percentage has dropped considerably, due to the VAT. Pubs must charge 20% Value Added Tax. People talk about the many pubs that have tanked because people are buying their beer in the supermarket, thus avoiding the VAT, and doing their drinking at home. There’s a move afoot to have the tax dropped to the 7% tax paid at supermarkets. It’s a shame as 1000s of pubs have closed, impacting the quality of community life. After all, as Prince Charles says, “the pub is the hub” of the community or neighborhood. Think “Cheers”, where “everyone knows your name”.

But I digress ... We decided to spend a day exploring the Atlantic coast of Cornwall. We started at **St. Ives**. Remember the old doggerel?

As I was going to St Ives
I met a man with seven wives
Each wife had seven sacks
Each sack had seven cats
Each cat had seven kits

Kits, cats, sacks, wives
How many were going to St Ives?

Whoever gives the right answer first wins a glass of wine at our house.

St. Ives is the quintessential Cornish seaport town: steep cliffs and grassy hills descending to a sandy/rocky beach; cluster of commercial fishing boats; art galleries and restaurants. There's even a Tate art museum.

Chuck had his first "cream tea" here. It's not actually a tea; it's what you eat with tea. It's a scone cut in half covered with home-made strawberry jam, which is in turn covered with clotted cream. A regional rivalry exists between Devon and the rest of Cornwall. Devon insists on applying first the cream to the scone, and then the jam on top. People have been killed for more minor controversies, I suppose. "Clotted cream" is heavy cream (55% fat min.) that is steam baked, then slowly cooled to bring the cream content to the surface causing clots. It's said that it was brought to Cornwall by Phoenician traders in search of tin.

By the way, mining was the major economy on which Cornwall was based. Tin was the major resource, followed by copper. In ancient times, tin from Cornwall was traded all across Europe and the Mediterranean. The Cornwall landscape is dotted with the tall chimneys, the remnants of smelters. Slate is another major product here. Aside from the occasional thatched roof, every roof is covered with slate. Some homeowners have gone so far as covering their house exterior with slate (see photos).

Newquay (pronounced newkey): a wide crescent sand beach with nicely shaped waves. We saw several surfers, in wetsuits, of course. This is where Anzie discovered a beachside pub that specialized in hard ciders. They offered over 100 different brands. Anzie said she could spend the whole afternoon there on the deck watching the surfers and drinking cider. But, travel on we must.

Port Isaac (aka Port Wenn, for you "Doc Martin" fans): It's a ways out there. There's not much civilization close by. "Doc Martin" has put this town on the map (for Americans like us – the BBC has been making films here for decades). You can see from the accompanying photos that it's a beautiful, small fishing village surrounding a deep cove carved out of steep cliffs. We arrived just as a fishing boat did. We noted that the boats anchored themselves to long chains secured from the stern to the beach and a shorter chain from the bow to an anchor. Even though the harbor is protected by concrete bulwarks, wave action must still get severe. Anzie was very excited about

finding Doc's house and Bert's "Large Restaurant". There are Doc Martin souvenirs everywhere. Chuck, however, was only interested in ice cream.

We stopped at an ice cream shop. Cornish ice cream is fabulous! This from an ice cream fanatic. Remember cream teas? The Cornish have no fear of heavy cream. The vendor had several shelves filled with "Doc Martin" memorabilia. We asked him what it was like when the "Doc Martin" crew came to town. "Delightful chaos," he replied.

Did Port Isaac meet expectations? Not if we expected to meet characters from the series. However, the village is a gorgeous historic fishing village, not to be missed.

Coming soon, Cornwall part 2: Saint Michael's Mount.

A la prochaine,

Chuck and Anne