

# How does an Island Pilgrims pilgrimage work?

**Planning.** By listening to the group each year, and in discussion with our friends at the Centre for Study of Religion in Celtic Societies, at the University of Wales in Lampeter, we think about possibilities for the following year. We chose a theme or lead up to an event that seems particularly interesting. We aim for between 3 and 4 weeks as this enables people to experience, rather than just observe. Integration of these new experiences often happens later, in quiet times. The challenge is to plan as rich a pilgrimage as possible while allowing enough time to unwind, reflect and enjoy. Within these guidelines, we develop the outline plan. Every year we are pulled back to some of the same sacred places, and drawn to some that are new to us. Then we start the emails and phone calls, almost a year ahead, more in some cases. We make the reservations for transport and accommodation, and send deposits to ensure that everything will be in place when we arrive. We extend invitations to the spiritual leaders, the historians and archaeologists who add so much to our days.

**Cost.** Every year we have been able to keep the cost just under Can\$240 per day. This covers all ground transportation, ferries, bed and breakfast and one other meal per day, admission fees, honoraria for guest speakers. It covers the cost of advertising the pilgrimages, and may make some contribution to some costs for us, Chris and Vanessa. We do not undertake this as a business. We are all equal pilgrims and receive no payment for our time. To achieve the low cost we also avoid staying in luxury hotels, and travelling in an air-conditioned coach with a uniformed driver. That wouldn't be a pilgrimage! By keeping the cost down, we can stay long enough to "be" and experience, rather than observe as we drive past at high speed. And we have a wonderful time, meeting interesting people. Most people chose to take some spending money for gifts, for an additional meal or snack most days, and any drinks they may want at restaurants. Because ATMs are easily found, we recommend not taking travellers' cheques or large amounts of cash.

**Accommodation.** On every pilgrimage we enjoy a variety of types of accommodation, such as retreat centres run by different denominations, family hotels, at least one location where we can prepare some of our own meals, and sometimes a B&B. We arrange to stay for 3 or 4 nights without having to repack and unpack, at least twice on each pilgrimage, and usually stay 2 nights in other places. Our costs are based on sharing rooms. Almost all the time these are twin rooms. Very occasionally, there will be a night or two in a three-bed room or a small hostel dormitory. When we plan this, it is always because of some advantage such as location or the ability to prepare meals. If rooms do not have en suite showers or baths, these are always nearby.

*Ffald-y-Brenin in Wales and Drumalis near Belfast*



**Meals.** Breakfast is always provided. Some days it is a continental, but ample, breakfast. Often it is a full Welsh, Scottish or Irish breakfast which is enough to fuel a full day's hard work on a farm! One other meal per day is included, sometimes at a restaurant or hotel, sometimes a picnic as part of a full day's exploration of an ancient monastic site. Some of the most wonderful meals are those we prepare as a group. We ask that people let us know well in advance if they have any allergies or particular preferences or dislikes.

**Smoking.** Our pilgrimages are totally non-smoking, and we ask people to avoid using perfume.

**Transportation.** We travel either in a mini-bus or two passenger wagons. In either case, luggage is very limited, both by the space in the vehicle and by the inconvenience of having to carry a heavy pack up stairs. Chris and I share the driving, happy to be sitting on the right side of the vehicle. Some other pilgrims have also taken a turn, if they are comfortable with the traffic system and tell us of their interest in advance so they can be included in the insurance. In each vehicle, some seats are more comfortable than others. We rotate, taking equal time in each seat. We have a few long days of travel, but the overall distances are not long, the scenery is spectacular, and we enjoy the conversations as we travel.

**The daily routine.** Every evening we discuss the options for the following day. The shape of each day is determined by the weather, the interests of the group, and the balance the pilgrims chose between exploration and reflection, companionship and quiet, walking, study or music at the pub! In some cases a speaker or special journey is pre-planned. In others we have several options and the group will make a selection. We decide what time we will leave the following morning. If weather makes a planned activity impossible, we offer suggestions of alternatives - always plenty of options - and again decide as a group. When we are staying several nights in one place, people may chose to stay "at home" to relax, read, walk or reflect on the journey they have already made. Sometimes, they chose to prepare dinner for the others! Always there is the joy and challenge of deepening our relationship with God, and building the spirit of community and co-operation within the group.

*Cooking our meals and unloading the mini-bus.*



**Worship.** Our group is always ecumenical. Occasionally we know the denomination of a pilgrim before our journey starts, but not usually. We welcome the rich variety of traditions and forms of worship we share in the group. While people may not necessarily participate in all worship activities, this is an integral part of pilgrimage. Some days, one or two of the pilgrims will organize morning or evening worship. Most evenings, we reflect on what we have done during the day, how our sense of "comunitas" is developing as we get to know each other. Several times during each pilgrimage, we spend time with clergy in the area where we are staying. This is always a highlight, as is our practice of worshipping in the church closest to where we are staying. The level of offering made at each church is the individual decision of each pilgrim.

**Equal pilgrims.** What does this mean? This is not a tour with all decisions made by an organizer, with guaranteed comfort throughout, with only very controlled, pre-planned contact with local residents, and with no opportunity to contribute. Chris and I make the advance arrangements, provide an introduction to pilgrimage, to the area, to Celtic Christianity. We do most or all of the driving. In every other area, we all contribute equally. We share the tasks of map-reading, loading and unloading luggage from the vehicle. Some chose to shop for our self-prepared meals, cook, or tidy up. Others lead worship, organize first aid, make music, offer additional information about places we will visit. Each pilgrimage is the product of every participant's contribution. We are all leaders. We are all followers. We each benefit from the skills, care, and interests of others, sometimes discovered as part of the pilgrimage.



*New friends and the trusty mini-bus in north Wales.*



**The pilgrim group.** Until we meet everyone at the airport, most of us are strangers. Our pilgrims have come from all across Canada, from both sides of the USA, from Ireland, and the UK. Each time there are new faces, and some from previous pilgrimages. The youngest was early 40s, the oldest 76. The groups have included married couples, single men, single women, people travelling with friends, others alone, people who have been on many pilgrimages, more who are unsure what a pilgrimage might be. Most have a strong sense of spirituality though not all are attached to a church. All are supportive of the spiritual path of others.

**Does everyone participate in all the possible visits or activities?** We try to have most of our meals together, and to worship and discuss together most days. When a guest speaker joins us, it is nice for the whole group to participate. Apart from that, most people like to take the occasional day as total relaxation. Some of us want to participate as much as possible, then relax after we get home.

**Physical accessibility.** Many of the sites are well off the road. Pilgrims have the option of staying in the vehicle if they cannot get to the site, or just walking as far as is practical for them. Because pilgrimage is about intention, arrival is not the main achievement. Some of the small ferries require some physical agility. All the accommodations have some rooms on either the ground floor or up only one flight of stairs. Few sites have wheelchair access.

**Is pilgrimage right for you?** Pilgrimage can be a wonderful experience. But it is not for everyone. Because we go to out-of-the way places, and stay in a wide variety of accommodations, it is not as predictable as a tour. Because the whole group makes decisions about each day's activities, there are times when the chosen activities will not be the first choice of each individual. But usually pilgrims delight in ensuring that each member of the group has the opportunity to fulfil their heart-felt desires, even if not pre-planned. For some people this level of co-operation and flexibility is a delight, and they love the pilgrim's path. Some people find it difficult initially but persevere and develop new skills and a sense of growth. For others, it seems to be out of the question. Only you can decide whether it is right for you.