

MAIDEN CITY



Legendary Derry

A city with a troubled past, Derry in Northern Ireland has many stories to relate. KALPANA SUNDER shares a few.

The famous song — *Danny Boy* — originated in this county of Northern Ireland when a local woman heard a tune played by a wandering musician and penned it. It is the place of many defining moments in the dramatic history of Northern Ireland. It has so many names like Derry, Londonderry, Maiden city, etc, that the local joke is that it's now Legenderry! The name Derry is probably derived from the Irish word *Doire* (meaning an oak grove) where Saint Columba founded a monastery in 546 AD.

Derry is one of the oldest, continuously inhabited places in Ireland and is the only completely walled city dating back to the 1600s. King James I gave the city a royal charter in the year 1613 and gave some trade guilds the task of fortifying Derry and planting the county with Protestant settlers.

Reliving historical events

We join our guide from Martin McCrossan City Tours for a walking tour of the impregnable walls built by the London guilds. It's a walk through centuries of poignant history. These walls provide a panoramic view of the city. Our guide does a fantastic job talking about the city's present and acknowledging its troubled past. We start at the Ferry Quay Gate. Here, in 1688-89, when Catholic forces arrived to seize the city, 13 apprentice boys closed the city gates against Jacobite forces, coining the famous war cry, "No Surrender!"

In the 20th century, this battle cry was adopted by the Protestants to conflict with Irish Catholics. The Protestant garrison held out for months in terrible conditions and the 'Siege menu' even had cats, dogs and rats until three ships came across the River Foyle with a cargo of food. There were four original gates to which three more have been added; there are cannons mounted on the walls and they still stand

like faithful sentinels.

There are signs of modern conflict everywhere. From the Bishop's Gate, we see remnants of a wall topped by a high mesh fence called the Peace Wall, which divided the Protestant and Catholic communities. From the Grand Parade section of the wall planted with oak trees, we see the Bog Side, which was a predominantly Catholic working class district. This used to be a hotbed of the civil rights movement. There is a sign saying 'Free Derry', which used to be out of bounds for the police and the army and patrolled by the IRA.

Our guide tells us about the infamous Bloody Sunday incident in 1972 when Catholic civil rights activists marched through Derry protesting against internment without trial by the British Government and were shot at by British soldiers. The peace process started with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 though the two populations still live on different sides of the city. Today, the country's history of war and violence is simply called 'the troubles'.

There are mammoth political murals — a mix of art and propaganda — on the walls of buildings along Rosville Street, which are now a part of the urban landscape. They are the work of 'The Bog Side Artists' who lived through the 'troubles'. There is the moving image of a 14 year old schoolgirl, killed in the crossfire between the British Army and the IRA. A small butterfly has been painted on top, symbolising the vitality of life.

What appeals to me the most is the mural of the silhouette of a dove against a backdrop of coloured squares designed by school children. Historic buildings inside the walls include the Gothic Cathedral of St Columb, which was the first Protestant church in Britain after the Reformation. The widest part of the walkway on the walls is where the term catwalk originated! In the early 1900s, the well-heeled residents

would walk on this stretch to show off their finery and the less well-off residents would say, "Look at those cats!"

Derry used to have a thriving shirt industry, employing about 15,000 people in its heyday, and till very recently used to present 12 linen shirts to the American president every year.

Penchant for the arts

Derry is also the centre of Irish music and culture. Many musicians like Phil Coulter, Dana and the composer of the famous hymn '*All things bright and wonderful*', Cecil Frances Alexander, hail from Derry. We have a session of Irish music by two talented youngsters playing the ivory flute and the guitar at the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin Centre, a gleaming new language arts and cultural centre, which has won international awards for its architecture.

Ciara, who teaches us some survival Irish, talks about their efforts to revive this dying language. We stay at the Beech Hill Country House Hotel, an 18th century home with chintz-covered sofas, memorabilia on walls and landscaped gardens. This used to be the haunt of the Clintons on their many visits to Northern Ireland during the peace process. It's set on 32 acres of gorgeous countryside and a great place to relax after a tour through the fraught political past of Derry.

Patsy O'Kane, the friendly owner, calls it a 'labour of love'. Come 2013, Derry will be the European capital of culture, opening its doors to a year-long celebration of music, dance, verbal arts and history.

As we drive out of Derry, we see the 'Hands across the Divide', a bronze sculpture of two men reaching out to each other, but not touching.

This is a depiction of the spirit of reconciliation in a city which was torn with tumultuous strife for years. In Derry, the city with incurable optimism and a predominantly young population, the party's just beginning!



Boost to tourism

George Town in Malaysia, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is reviving itself with hotels and cultural events.

FRENCH INFLUENCE

Colonial culture

Travel along the East Coast from Chennai to Pondicherry and you will be treated with spectacular views of the coastline, estuary and mangroves. When I get off the bus in Pondicherry, the first thing that strikes me is its clean roads. Traffic is lean and disciplined. As we move towards the beach in the White Town — the French quarter is called the White Town and the Indian Quarter, the Black Town — the crackle of voices fade away. We reach our hotel, a 17th century heritage villa, located at a strolling distance from the beach. Without losing any time, we hit the streets. Exploring the town is easy, thanks to the Dutch for their good town planning. They planned the town before the arrival of the French. The design of the White Town was based on grid patterns with a geometric layout. Rectangular blocks of houses are separated by straight streets intersecting at right angles.

After a quick bite, we head to Sri Aurobindo Ashram on the Marine Street-Manakula Vinayagar Kovil Street intersection. At the tranquil entrance of the *ashram*, I find the source of calmness that envelops the town. Silence follows us naturally. Beneath the frangipani tree rests the tomb of Aurobindo and the Mother. Visitors offer flowers at the tomb and meditate in the courtyard. The scent of flowers, mingled with the fragrance of incense sticks, wafts through the air. We take in the serenity and unfold our minds.

Surprisingly, the French connection of this town continues to this day. Apart from the oval-shaped city, the boulevard, the right-angled streets and 18th century architecture, the colonial influence can be seen on the hats of policemen too.

Almost all the streets are named in French — Rue Francois Martin, Rue Romain Rolland, Rue Dumas, and so on. Buildings are aesthetically coated with subtle colours and bougainvillea adorns many gates. Even the French consulate, Lycee Francois (French High School), Foyer du Soldat (a legion hall for the soldiers) and the French Institute bear the same pattern.

The peaceful and neat Bharathi Park, named after Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi, is located in the centre of the town. It is believed that some of Bharathi's finest patriotic compositions took shape



SLICE OF HISTORY A French war memorial in Pondicherry. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

here. In the centre of the park is Aayimandapam (built in Greco-Roman style), the most familiar monument of Pondicherry. As we walk past the Notre Dame des Anges Church on Rue Dumas, the statue of a triumphant Joan of Arc catches my attention. Images of Milla Jovovich in the movie *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* rush through my mind.

We take a leisurely stroll on the promenade paved with granite. The sands of the beach once hosted the fierce Anglo-French war. Now, dark big boulders harbouring emerald green algae line the shore. The 19th century light house gazing into the deep blue hasn't lost its elegance, though it doesn't guide the sailors anymore. A blue gate confronts you at the French war memorial on Goubert Avenue. The statue of a gloomy soldier in a bowing posture, with both his hands resting on the gun, says it all. On the day of our visit, Foyer du Soldat was reopened. It was decked up with flowers and the national flags of India and France.

Standing tall at the south end of the promenade is the statue of Joseph Francois Dupleix, who served as the French governor of Pondicherry during the 18th century and fought battles against the British.

After a tiring walk, we settle down at Le Café overlooking the Bay of Bengal. A damsel next to our table places an order for *masala* tea. A voice in English with a tinge of French asks for black coffee. After all, Pondicherry is a confluence of cultures.

PRASANTH NANDAKUMAR

After opening a newspaper in December-January, apart from everyday issues of socio-politic and bollywood-hollywood, the readers are overwhelmed with the tourism advertisements as an additional entertainment. All these ads not only showcase the European beauty but they also tempt us for a Europe visit.

Europe is indeed an incomparably ultimate 'Heaven on Earth' and I'm yet to find a tourist who hasn't liked Europe. The nature has applied all its artistic strength to beautify Austria-Switzerland but additionally, the people there have glorified it with the man-made surprises. Italy, time and again reminds the aura of the Roman Empire, becomes an invariable destination because of the Colosseum, Venice, Pisa and Vatican. The tourists tend to spontaneously cheer 'Wow, beauty', upon paying a visit to the Tulip gardens blossoming till 21st May, Eiffel Tower of Paris, Champs Elysees, and Titisee tempting for its Cuckoo clock factory. The landscape of London and its world-famous Bobby resembles with our life in any Indian metro tempting us to visit frequently. Simply put, Europe is 'Once is Never Enough'.

A word of caution is necessary to alert the tourists during this rush hour to Europe because the organizers offering Europe tour are more given the soaring demand. Tourists are lured with tempting offers to win their market share. A lunch in any quality hotel costs at least Rs. 500/- per head and an air-



conditioned coach journey is minimum Rs. 400/- to Rs. 600/- then one can easily imagine the per day cost of a day in Europe - prominently known to be the costliest destination in the world. Generally, a standard Europe service costs minimum Rs. 13,000/- to Rs. 16,000/- per day, inclusive of the air journey, airport taxes and visa. A Scandinavia tour even costs up to Rs. 16,000/- to Rs. 19,000/- per day, given the inflation there. Now if these expenses are quoted unbelievably cheap or unduly high then it essentially becomes a matter of serious concern and the alarmingly low prices at which the 'Europe packages' are being offered presently to kill the competition force the tour organizers to compromise with the quality of their tour. Therefore, for a tourist of Europe the pleasure yield should be of supreme significance since a visit to Europe is not as frequent as going to Kullu-Manali or Darjeeling.

A confused tourist should consider, 'Is this my 1st Europe

visit and how many days?, are more visits possible?, the budget?'. The 2nd timers can opt for Scandinavia, Berlin, Warsaw and Spain-Portugal etc. Across years now for large chunk of satisfied tourists who can spare money but not the time, we've been offering Austria, Switzerland, Paris or just Switzerland.

We usually advice that the 1st timers to Europe should ideally opt for 11 or 21-day tour that covers almost the entire Europe and whenever 2nd visit may become possible one can go to a country of their choice. Experience tells us that tourists are in thank full to us for this advice.

So, friends, we have put all our strength at stake to bring scores of Europe 2011 packages, not just 10 or 20 but whopping 61 options. Let us get acquainted with them this Sunday with full confidence and unmatched hospitality of Kesari.

Veena Patil
Managing Director-Kesari

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