

# Fog Holler European travel blog – part 4

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*[Fog Holler](#) is a young bluegrass band from Portland, OR with a modern approach to this traditional art form. Or as they like to say, “It’s a new shade of grass.” They include Tommy Schulz (guitar), Lillian Sawyer (fiddle), Noa (bass fiddle), and Casey James Holmberg (banjo). As they continue an extended European tour, the band has agreed to share their experiences in a travel blog, available exclusively here at [Bluegrass Today](#). Kianna Mott-Smith, the band’s manager, will be our tour guide.*

Now, as promised, we break from our saga of mainland Europe to bring you the story of our odyssey across the British Isles and Ireland. We needed to head towards France to catch the Chunnel to England, but on the way, we stopped through the Netherlands for one more mainland show. We’d just finished our run in southeast Germany, and drove from the German/Czech border to Ede, which is about an hour from the sea. The venue was called Live Stage Marnix. Upon arriving, our GPS guided us down a dirt road, past the historic manor house to the farm, where we met some exceptionally friendly cows.

Have you ever had a baby cow try to suckle your finger? It’s very cute, and mildly alarming – they have what might fairly be termed prehensile tongues. After fortifying ourselves on a delicious gingerbread beef stew, which, we were told, is in any good Dutch grandma’s arsenal of recipes, the band played a wonderful show in the converted barn, to a very warm reception.

Driving to Ede brought us much closer to Calais, France, where we would board the Chunnel and officially begin our British Isles Odyssey. In Calais, we boggled at the reality of this mode of transport, trying to wrap our heads around sitting in a car on a train that was about to submerge in water. You can’t see the water, of course – you only know you’ve gone under from the pressure you feel in your ears. The train zoomed beneath the English Channel, arriving in England in about 35 minutes flat. The Chunnel spat us out in the town of Folkstone, where we proceeded to misread all of the English signs for several minutes until our brains realized there was nothing to translate. We all braced for confusion and mayhem since we knew we’d need to suddenly drive on the wrong side of the road, but Casey made the switch with nary a hitch. There were several alarmed exclamations from the rest of us as we adjusted – we had to keep reminding each other: no, Casey isn’t driving into oncoming traffic, he’s supposed to be driving on the left.

To celebrate our arrival in the UK, we found a quintessential English pub for dinner. Steak and ale

pies, fish and chips, and good cask ales were had by all. When we arrived at The Chambers, the venue that evening, the sound guy was playing music by Tony Rice, The Johnson Mountain Boys, and The Po' Ramblin' Boys, so we knew we were in good hands. It was a very warmly received show, and novel for the band to get through all their jokes and banter without pausing for explanation or translation. Unfortunately, we didn't get to hang around Folkstone for more than the few hours it took to fill our bellies and play a show – to make our ferry to Dublin the next morning we had to begin our drive across England that night. We arrived in Northampton between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning, and all dove into bed like it was our job; our alarms were set to go off at 7:30 a.m.

Variouly groggy, cranky, or instantly back asleep once the car got moving, we started the next leg of our Odyssey. We were headed to the ferry terminal in Holyhead, and the final few hours of the drive there took us through northern Wales. By that time most of us were fully awake, and we very much enjoyed the amazing consonant clusters of the Welsh road signs and the stunning coastline. The ferry itself was relatively uneventful, besides a minor bout of seasickness for yours truly. Once back on solid land, we embarked on the second half of our drive for the day. We were headed for a port town on the west coast of Ireland, so after one brief glimpse of Dublin we buckled in for about four more hours of driving.

It was with great relief that we finally pulled into Westport, County Mayo. We all felt pretty bedraggled, but the warm welcome we received from Uri Kohen, the Westport festival organizer, made it all worth it. Despite being in charge of four or five simultaneous shows the night of our arrival, he made a point of stepping out and greeting us personally, seeing us to our accommodation, and making sure we were comfortable and happy before resuming his festival duties. In honor of making it to the Emerald Isle (and then all the way across it), we shared a round of Guinness in the courtyard of our inn, with a local Irish bluegrass band playing in the background to make us feel right at home.

The next day we had some time before the band's sets, so we had a chance to explore the local scene a bit. Westport is small and charming, full of boutiques, pubs, and cafes, all in easy walking distance. The whole community was taken over by the Westport festival, with shows happening at various locations all around town, and every inn and B&B overflowing with festival-goers. There's a mystery show as part of the festival every year; folks know the when and the where of the show, but the who is left a mystery until each band walks on stage. This year Uri recruited Fog Holler to be one of the three secret bands, so their first ever show in Ireland was a pure acoustic set in front of an audience packed into an old wood and stone room. It was a very popular show, with folks willingly sacrificing any and all elbow room to fit inside the venue.

That night the band was slated to play as part of the headlining set in the local theater house. Excitement was high and they had a tight set that night. They felt especially welcomed knowing they would be following old Bay Area acquaintances and Nashville Cats Melody Walker and Jacob Groopman of Front Country. After Front Country moved to Nashville, Fog Holler took over their residency at Amnesia in San Francisco, so it was a treat to see them again. We also got to meet the folks from the fabulous Kody Norris Show, and see those fashionistas up close in all their rhinestone glory.

On day two of the festival, Fog Holler played an outdoor set at Clew Bay Hotel. The seats were packed, with locals and festies alike stopping as they passed by to catch a glimpse of the band in their full regalia. Word had spread after their set the night before: in addition to tearing it up musically, Fog Holler has a penchant for matching monochrome outfits. That day they were in head-to-toe lavender, one of Fog Holler's newer looks. Afterwards, we were treated to a proper Sunday roast and fried chicken dinner, the perfect ending to our first welcome to Ireland.

The next few shows took us out of the Republic and into Northern Ireland. Our hosts for the first two days, and the organizers of the house concert the band was playing, are a lovely couple named Sharon and Arnie. They host concerts in their "Red Room" – once a small gathering in their red

painted living room, but so successful that they now take place in their refurbished barn. They have a truly idyllic garden, a lush oasis set against the wild Irish countryside, where we were treated to a small respite after our arduous travels. They took us by Lissan House on our day off, a grand building and estate that used to be the seat of the local baronets. We took a leisurely walk by babbling brooks and a fairy tree, and they showed us around the house itself, pointing out where frequently visiting paranormal experts tend to sense ghost activity.

Here are some of Tommy's thoughts on the Ireland portion of our trip:

"Arriving in Ireland was a much awaited treat for me. Some of the first folk music I ever listened to was a collection of Irish drinking songs by the Clancy Brothers, which gave me a lingering desire to hear that music in person. That was also the first time I heard the banjo which I attribute in no small part to my interest in bluegrass later on. I did eventually get to listen to real-life snippets of that childhood dream, in the form of lovely accordion pouring out of the window of the pub below our accommodation in Westport. Later, walking by a closed shop, I heard a grey-haired Irish pipes player accompanying a poet, which was much cooler than any of the scenarios I had imagined as a kid from Honolulu who liked European folk. At Westport, I observed a ton of appreciation for American folk music with a distinctly Irish flavor. I'm always impressed at how American country music reaches the hearts of those worldwide, even considering old-time music's European and African origins.

Playing in Northern Ireland felt slightly different, since it's part of the UK rather than the Republic of Ireland. People's lawns had a particularly fastidious level of tidiness, which Arnie commented was not ideal for the native ecosystem. A man of my own heart, truly. I heard people mention Arnie and Sharon's venue, "The Red Room," as far away as Belgium. When we first arrived at their home, I was still extremely exhausted from the quick turnaround on the ferry from Holyhead. My only saving grace, I think, was my love of playing with Fog Holler and the powdered astragalus and asiatic pennywort powders that I've carried in a hot-water thermos all across Europe.

I felt like I had arrived as I stepped into the bright, dazzling sun in Arnie's garden, and Arnie proceeded to tell me, with the thickest of Irish accents, that he took great care to plant only native plants. Among them were common nettles, lady's mantle, corn marigold, common foxglove, and field horsetail. I was very excited as it was the first time I had seen many of these much-studied specimens in person. Arnie explained that the nettles are a primary egg laying site for multiple species of native butterfly, but are a hard sell to convince the "tidier" neighbors to keep because, well, they sting – even amid complaints of butterfly-less yards.

The small pond he had installed a week prior was home to tadpoles that kept the slug population in check. The whole yard was made to be their own slice of a native Irish ecosystem. I found it to be a truly lovely experience of like-minded folks with a holistic philosophy on garden-keeping. The Poutin Arnie served us after our show (traditional potato skin alcohol) wasn't too bad either!"

The band's last show in Northern Ireland was in Inniskillin, right beside the River Erne, which connects the lower and upper Lough Erne, one of the biggest lake systems on the island. We briefly enjoyed the breeze and the 40 shades of green, until it was time to get back in the van to catch a 2:00 a.m. ferry to Britannia. We reserved cabins on the boat to snatch around three hours of rest, before disembarking and getting back on the road at 5:30 in the morning.

We drove to Canterbury that day, a tremendously beautiful town of Chaucerian fame. The route to the venue that evening took us right by the old city wall, which is believed to have been built by the Romans around 270 or 280 AD. The part of it that was visible from the road looked mostly undamaged. It was incredible to see the resilience of such ancient architecture, and to feel the effectiveness of such an archaic defensive system, still so imposing even in this modern era, with convenience stores and traffic signals strewn about it.

After a few hours of much needed downtime in the very comfortable accommodation over the venue, the band played their final show of our British Isles Odyssey. Folks were quite appreciative,

and a number of people who had seen Fog Holler play in Folkstone made a point of coming to this show as well. They said hello afterwards, wanting to let the band know that they'd made some new die-hard fans in the UK. Incredibly, it wasn't until this show, at the tail end of six weeks of touring, that we had our first heckler. He was definitely "in his cups" as they say, wandering in right as the show ended and hollering for several encores – he'd missed the show so they had to extend it, naturally! After many a "go on then bruv," and "one more innit!," the proprietor of the venue came and gave him a stern talking to, and the band was released from his belligerent spell.

The next day we were due for another chunnel ride, whisking us back to the mainland for our last week of shows before heading home. As the train sunk beneath the ground towards the water, we all sat in a state of relative shock. After so many delightful shows and several long days of travel, it felt a bit unreal that our Isle Odyssey was coming to a close. With the English language behind us and mainly Dutch and French ahead of us, our impending return to lands of foreign languages almost felt like a return home after spending so long traveling around those parts. I think it started to hit us on that ride: in a little over a week, we'd be heading *home* home. Time to buckle up and soak up our last few dates in Europe!