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Students dig into research in Ireland

Summary: Three University of Minnesota, Morris students chose a trip to western Ireland last June to shovel dirt, push wheelbarrows and dig with a trowel. In the process, they contributed to research that will help answer questions about the history of Irish Gaelic settlement in the area.

(April 7, 2009)-By Ruth Hamberg '09 – Rather than spending time on vacation or working at a summer job, three University of Minnesota, Morris students chose a trip to western Ireland last June to shovel dirt, push wheelbarrows and dig with a trowel. In the process, they contributed to research that will help answer questions about the history of Irish Gaelic settlement in the area, one that is largely accessible only through archeology.

Dugan Flanders, Corissa Hentges and Sydney Sweep worked at a multi-period site in County Roscommon as part of the Tulsk Excavation Project. The dig, funded by Irish research institution The Discovery Programme, is part of the larger 10-year Medieval Rural Settlement Project, which is dedicated to uncovering the archaeological landscape associated with rural Ireland in the period c. 1100-1650 CE. In contrast to other digs, this program enabled students to learn about cutting edge technology, including a 3D scanner that drastically shortens the amount of time needed to record data.

The academic opportunities were one of the reasons that trip adviser and Morris art history professor Jimmy Schryver chose the project. “[The staff at the Discovery Programme] are used to American students and there is an educational component,” he said. “You learn hands on in a different way and so it complements your classroom learning.” Students had the chance to learn about the 3D scanner and general archaeological methodology, including floatation, which is the separation of organic materials from soil, and the total station, an optical surveying instrument into which they entered the coordinates of their finds. They also gained ample experience in manual excavation. Said Schryver, “The first week the students always ask, ‘When are we going to use the trowel? We've just been shoveling and using wheelbarrows,’ and I say, ‘Trust me, after a week with the trowel you're going to beg to use the shovel again.' And, sure enough, [they did].”

Hentges, now a sophomore at Morris majoring in archaeology, recalled another challenge: “trying to avoid the presents that the sheep left us around, and in, the site.”

Physical exertion wasn't limited to the dig site. For recreation, the group spent their first weekend climbing Croagh Patrick, one of the highest mountains in Ireland and the site of an annual pilgrimage. What appeared to be a mild hike turned out to be an hours-long trek up a steep slope composed of sharp rocks. The slope, combined with the looseness of the rocks, made for an arduous ascent. Flanders, a sophomore, added an extra challenge: he ran most of the way to the peak.

“I thought, 'Oh, I've been hiking on mountains before, on trails,’ but even to get to the base of the mountain, I was thinking, 'This is pretty extreme,’” said Sweep, also a sophomore. The climb was “probably my favorite part,” she said, despite its difficulty.
On a typical weekday, Schryver and students worked for eight hours and returned home to relax or attend a lecture. Students lived and worked with other volunteers from the United States and the surrounding community.

“My favorite part was meeting everyone at the site and making new friends that we got to hang out with after work,” said Hentges. Working and living in close community could have caused tension for some groups, but Schryver and Sweep both cited the experience as one of the highlights of the trip. “The whole dynamic at our house was really good, really positive,” said Sweep.

For Hentges, the trip was an opportunity to travel and explore an interest in the best way possible: direct immersion. “I have always wanted to travel to Ireland [and] I have been interested in archaeology for some time now, so this was a great chance to try it and see what I thought about it,” she said. She further observed, “Studying abroad is a great opportunity to learn about different cultures and a little bit more about who you are.”

Sweep found the work satisfying and changed her major to archaeology after the trip. She also said that it “helped solidify my ambitions to travel.”

The University of Minnesota, Morris encourages its students to supplement on-campus learning with a study abroad experience. To learn more visit Study Abroad or ELTAP or stop by the Academic Center for Enrichment in the basement of the campus Student Center.

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