

Travel

The joy of the open road, in beautiful New England



LEFT: A replica of the Mayflower at Mystic Seaport open air museum and (RIGHT) Isabel Conway at the wheel. ABOVE: A plantation looking down on Cape Cod where the Mayflower brought the first settlers



Is there anything more American than the road trip? The nation's passion for the freedom of the open road, immortalized by tales and images of legendary Route 66, have inspired literature and music around stellar journeys.

Springsteen and Steinbeck, Thelma and Louise, Mark Twain — there are just some of those who made liberating, inspirational American road trips.

New England is the birthplace of America with its colonial era ambience and history, interesting cities and wonderful scenery, from the coasts of Maine, Rhode Island and Connecticut to the mountains of New Hampshire and Massachusetts pastoral Berkshires.

A late autumn road trip covers some of the region's countryside, coastline and towns. Like many a road trip, this one is not without adventure and the odd hazard — becoming hopelessly lost after the GPS signal fails in a storm, traversing belting rain and freeway gridlock.

It starts on a high note though. The four times weekly Aer Lingus flight from Dublin direct to Bradley Airport outside Hartford, Connecticut aboard a brand new Airbus A321, is a welcome surprise — a business class upgrade, offering a cocoon of comfort for just over six hours in the air.

Lulled into happy mode, I get behind the wheel of our gleaming KIA white saloon automatic rental from Hertz. My companion, Ann, efficiently sets up the 'Never Lost' GPS navigation and we hit the road. Within seconds we are prisoners of technology. The airport happens to be in the throes of roadworks. 'Never Lost' directs us to a barricaded exit.

Luckily, Hertz supplied an old fashioned paper map, which guides us to our first night's accommodation at Avon Old Farms Hotel in countryside near Hartford.

The plan is to kayak in the Berkshires, hike a famous walking path, discover white sand beaches, mountain views and brilliant fall foliage, and over-indulge on delicious seafood chowder, lobster and blueberry pie. Zig zagging back and forth across western Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connec-

ISABEL CONWAY gets behind the wheel of cars and boats on a visit to the birth place of the United States, with its colonial-era ambience

icut, we manage some of that.

We also de-tour briefly to Hancock Shaker Village (www.hancockshakervillage.org) outside Pittsfield, a living history museum that was home to the Shakers, a strict religious sect that devoted their lives to God and work and were famous for the fine furniture they made. The Shakers eventually died out, having maintained a vow of celibacy.

We enjoy classic clam chowder and fresh seafood at the lovely Madison Beach Hotel on the Connecticut Madison shoreline with its own private beach. In Newport, where our boat trip is cancelled due to bad weather, we drown our disappointment with more steaming bowls full of clams, potatoes, onions, bacon and cream at 22 Bowen's Wine Bar & Grille (www.22bowens.com).

Newport's biggest attraction, apart from America's Cup style yachts in its harbour and cruises out to sea, are gilded age, jaw-dropping homes that hug the Rhode Island cliffs. Known as summer 'cottages', they were owned by the richest of the rich.

Next year marks the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the *Mayflower* when a hardy 100 early settlers arrived from Plymouth, England, ill equipped for the misery and harshness of their new surroundings. At Plimoth Plantation (www.plimoth.org), which overlooks Cape Cod, the colony comes alive at a faithfully reconstructed 17th century village outside the picturesque town of Plymouth, where the new arrivals first settled. The costumed residents are faultlessly portrayed by actors speaking in authentic old English as they go about their daily chores.

“Like many a road trip, this isn't without the odd hazard.”

Visitors who fancy mingling with them can hire pilgrim clothing.

Another outstanding open air museum in neighbouring Connecticut, 'Mystic Seaport' (www.mysticseaport.org), replicates a 19th century coastal village. The gruesome, tragic history of whaling, once a mainstay of New England's wealth, unfolds aboard an original whaling ship, the *Charles W Morgan*. Below deck visitors get an insight into the appalling working conditions crews endured.

Driving along traffic free backroads, we check out idyllic villages and towns in the Berkshires: pretty Lenox, Stockbridge with its grand neo-classical architecture, and Lanesborough, with its quaint timber homesteads where the tri-colour flaps next to a twinning sign with its Co Longford namesake.

Wherever you come in New England, Irish heritage is cherished and you notice a special sense of comradeship with visitors from home. Philip Taylor, who runs a cosy bar restaurant, The Trail House Kitchen and Bar in New Adams (renowned for its grills and generous portions), went home and fetched his charming second generation Irish mother Joan (85) to come and meet us for 'the craic'.

North Adams in north-western Massachusetts, near the famous 2,200 mile Appalachian Trail, is the setting for Tourists Welcome Hotel (www.touristswelcome.com) which has won awards for its eco-friendly design. The back to nature tranquil hideaway blends easily into the forested surroundings. Entering old beech forests on ancient paths once used by indigenous peoples, we hike a small portion onto the Appalachian.

New England's atmosphere-laden Inns have offered lodgings to weary travellers since the 1600s and are highly recommended for their attention and charm. We are lucky enough to stay at two of the best around.

Close to the beach in Madison

along Connecticut's coastline, our GPS has lost its way along tiny roads to Homestead (www.homesteadmadison.com). There's hardly a sign post to be seen after we leave the busy freeway from Hartford.

Our pilgrimage to the Connecticut State capitol is to visit the Victorian turreted grand house where Mark Twain, author of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* lived with his family. An adjoining museum showcases the life and times of one of America's greatest literary figures.

Up in Madison, a warm welcome awaits exhausted travellers from Irish-born Ann McCarthy, manager of luxurious Homestead where free snacks, coffee and port are offered along with healthy breakfast options and a night's sleep in sumptuous accommodation with our own retro record players and a selection of vinyl. Ann's thoughtful parting gift is a handy travelling first aid kit!

Another stand-out inn experience comes a few days later at the Inn at Yarmouth Port, Cape Cod (www.theinnatymouthport.com) run by hospitable retired opera singer Kathleen and her husband Chuck. It's the perfect mainstay for our journey down to Providence, Rhode Island's capital, a city that bursts with more sights, great food and history. So let the road trip go on!

Factfile: Isabel Conway was a guest of Discover New England Tourism www.discovernewengland.org See also www.bostonusa.com; www.massholiday.ie; www.ctvisit.com and www.visthrodeisland.com; For the Berkshires www.berkshires.org Her return flights Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) outbound business class on the comfortable new Airbus A321 Dublin-Hartford, Connecticut (4 flights weekly) and Boston-Dublin, from €241 economy one way with daily flights. Hertz (www.hertz.com) offer a wide selection of good value rental vehicles from the airports. In Boston she stayed at Boston Harbour Hotel (www.bhh.com) close to highlights like harbour cruises, the Freedom Trail, Boston Aquarium and North End (Little Italy).

My favourite holidays

Kim Magee, of Magee Jewellery, shares her childhood holiday memories, and what destination is top of her wish list

■ Where was your favourite childhood holiday, and why.

■ My favourite childhood holiday would have to be the summers spent in Courtmacsherry in West Cork. When each summer came around we would pack up everything and head west for the summer, and still do to this day. West Cork has brought me incredible memories and still continues to do so. It is a place to escape and get away from the madness of the city. I used to throw myself into every activity during the festival week, and loved when we spent our days eating Tayto sandwiches on the beach, but most importantly it is my favourite because it is where my passion for jewellery design began, as I used to sell my beaded designs at the county market and I have been perfecting my craft ever since.

■ Where was your favourite holiday as an adult, and why.

■ Thailand has definitely been my favourite holiday as an adult so far. It has everything to offer and also thought me so many life lessons. Obviously, when one goes to Thailand you can't skip Bangkok so I began my holiday there and then travelled around the islands. Each island has something different but equally amazing to offer. Thailand is a place full of amazing food and the friendliest people. They don't call it the land of smiles for nothing but it also has the most amazing beaches, markets, nightlife, temples and culture. On a whole, it is a holiday destination that has something to suit everyone and is a place I certainly will be travelling back to.

■ What is your favourite short-break city destination, and why.

■ My favourite short city break has to be Prague. I visited the city for new year and it was magical and enchanting. It was bliss to get lost in the narrow cobblestone streets and enjoy the Christmas atmosphere. The old town square is transformed into Christmas Markets and I was able to indulge into the delicious street food. A must-see if you're a cocktail lover like myself is to visit Hemingway Bar, it is a wonderful experience with the best cocktails.

■ Which city or country have you never visited that you would love to see, and why.

■ I would absolutely love to visit Italy. It would probably be a bucket list entry for many people and that is because it has so much to offer. Spectacular cities, ancient ruins, museums, beaches and beautiful natural scenery. Let's not forget to mention the main reason I would love to go and that is for the food, wine and coffee.

■ I set up Magee Jewellery when I finished studying with Design and Craft Council of Ireland in Kilkenny.

I create handmade bespoke jewellery using traditional goldsmithing techniques. I do everything from simple everyday jewellery to engagement and wedding bands. I also remodel old jewellery.

Jewellery creates special moments and life long memories and I feel privileged to be a part of the process. I work closely with my clients and whether it be a gift or maybe a treat for yourself, I like to create a unique and personalised experience.

Get in touch at www.mageejewellery.com or email kim@mageejewellery.com

