

Summer travels in the British Isles

By [Gwyneth Hyndman](#)

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Yosemite High School student Kristi Johnson is well into her senior year after an exciting summer abroad, where she traveled through Wales, Ireland and England as a participant in the People to People Student Ambassador organization, founded by Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956.

"I had never been [beyond] Colorado or Utah," Kristi said. "It was only my second time on an airplane by myself. I was both excited and nervous."

The only Californian in a group of 38 high school students from Wisconsin and Florida, Kristi spent 20 days meeting with government officials, befriending fellow honor students, participating in educational activities and getting to know her Irish host family that she stayed with for much of her time.

"I loved learning about the European culture firsthand," Kristi said.

Through the program she was able to experience some of the highlights of the British Isles like the Tower of London, Stonehenge, the Blarney stone and the ancient Lough Gur in the south of Ireland.

"My favorite part of the trip was the homestay arrangement with my host family in Ireland," Kristi remembers.

"I loved that [they] took me into their home and taught me about their traditions and customs."

Kristi had to go through an interview process before her acceptance into the program. She is able to earn both high school and college credit because of the educational elements the organization offers.

After arriving in London on Tuesday, June 14, Kristi toured the Hampton Court Palace with her fellow ambassadors, once the home of King Henry VIII, and explored the renowned palace gardens. The following day was a meeting with a former member of Parliament; Kristi and her group learned about the British Constitution and discussed the roles of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Monarch.



Yosemite High School senior Kristi at Warwick Castle in Warwickshire, England.

Photos courtesy of Kristi Johnson

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Kristi stated that one difference between home and London that she appreciated was the old buildings, bridges and palaces.

"I was surprised how beautiful it was; how the city was split up. I love the architecture and history behind everything. We don't have the cathedrals or the Shakespeare's theatre here."

A tour of the Tower of London and an afternoon visit to the Convent Garden, as well as a ride on the London Eye (the largest Ferris wheel in the world, built for the millennium celebration) concluded their time in the city before heading out to the megalithic ruin of Stonehenge which Kristi found fascinating because of its mysterious origins.

During a day in Bath, the students explored the famous spa city that was said to have been founded when the healing hot springs were discovered in 860 B.C. by the Celtic king, Bladud. That evening the group took part in team challenges and ice breakers that ended up being a fun way of learning about each other.

"We got really close," Kristi remembers of her team.

They then headed to Wales and Cardiff Castle where Kristi got to climb to the top of the fortress to view the city of Cardiff, Wales' capital. They also got a tour through the Museum of Welsh Life, where they walked through a reconstructed Welsh village from 2000 years ago to a 1980s miner's cottage.

"They keep you really busy," Kristi said, referring to the pace of the program outlined for the students. "It was sometimes hard to process everything because there was so much to take in."

A ferry from Fishguard took them to Rosslare, Ireland, where they traveled to the city of Waterford, known for its crystal. The next morning they were able to see the many stages in the crystal-manufacturing process, including glass-blowing and engraving.

Later that evening they learned several phrases in Gaelic from a local storyteller, Batt Burns, in the village of Sneem and had dinner in a local restaurant as Burns did a presentation entitled "Whisperings."

A journey through the countryside around Killarney gave Kristi a chance to experience the beauty of the area as they traveled in a horse-drawn car around the region's lakes. After taking a boat across one of the lakes, Kristi got to the other side to meet her host family for the next nine days.

A highlight of her trip, Kristi got to stay with a family and learn about their usual day-to-day routines, what they ate for dinner, what they watched on television.

"Lots of soap operas," Kristi laughed. "Both English and Irish. It sounds cheesy but we also ate a lot of potatoes while I was staying with them. We had stews and breads too."

Kristi said that another interesting day was spent learning the game of rugby and the Gaelic sport of hurling.

The next day, the group visited the Blarney Castle where Kristi climbed the 127 steps to take part

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in the tradition of kissing the Blarney stone.

The group visited Limerick, the Cliffs of Moher and Dublin before returning to Wales, where they had a quick lesson in the Welsh language at a local university.

The final day in Wales was spent abseiling 70 feet off a tower wall at Penrhyn Castle.

Back in England, Kristi had a chance to see Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of one of her favorite playwrights, William Shakespeare, before heading back to the U.S.A.

Now at home in North Fork, Kristi is tackling her studies as she prepares to attend Brigham Young University in Utah next year, where she hopes to study psychology.

This summer's adventure has given Kristi a taste of the travel bug and she hopes, at some point, to return to Britain or see more of the world on her own.

"It was very enriching," Kristi said of her time abroad. "A great opportunity."



Kristi "abseiling" from Penrhyn castle in Wales. This was one of the highlights for the National Honor Society student.

Photos courtesy of Kristi Johnson



In wooden boats exploring the lakes of Killarney, Ireland. Staying with a host family in County Cork for nine days was an enlightening experience for Kristi, who had a lesson in rugby and the Gaelic sport of hurling.

Photos courtesy of Kristi Johnson



Kristi and her group hiked 127 steps up the Blarney castle to kiss the Blarney stone in Ireland.



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