

Gerry's Diary 32: A holiday weekend, tourist tips and a tax problem (May 8, 2009)

Hi, this is Gerry and this is my Diary for Friday, 8th May, 2009. On this show I'm going to tell you a bit about last weekend - it was a holiday weekend here. And then I have some ideas for tourists coming to Wales. There was a question on the website last time about holidays in Wales. Finally, my wife and I have a little tax problem and we went to see an accountant [1] last week.

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Don't forget that If you have any questions or comments, you can write them on the website, that's www.podclub.ch. I always look forward to [2] feedback from you!

Last weekend was a bank holiday weekend. A bank holiday [3] is the British name for a public holiday. In the summer we have three holiday weekends - those are weekends when the Monday is a bank holiday. The first one is the Early May holiday: that's the first Monday in May. Then there's the Spring Bank Holiday: that's the last Monday in May. And finally there's the Summer Bank Holiday, which is the last Monday in August. The first of these holidays is like the 1st May holiday in other countries, and the Spring Bank Holiday used to be Whit Monday, the Monday after the Pentecost weekend in the church calendar. But as you can see, these holidays are now standardised and they are not political or religious holidays any longer.

We always know if it's a holiday weekend here because Wales has so many visitors then. A lot of people like to come to Wales for their holidays. Some people have a second home here, others rent a holiday cottage [4], and other people stay in bed-and-breakfasts or hotels. We think that this year will be a good year for the tourist industry because of the economic crisis. Because the British pound is so weak, it's very expensive for the British to go to other countries. On the other hand it's cheaper now for Europeans to come to Wales. And one of my listeners, Pia, wrote on the website that she's planning to come to Wales on holiday this year. So where should she go and what should she do?

Well, there's the sea. We have some beautiful beaches and the British like to swim in the sea. But most of my Swiss friends think the water is too cold. Our sea temperature in the summer is about 18 degrees - so you won't die, but it's not like the Mediterranean or the Swiss lakes. And, of course, it's usually a little windy, so it feels colder when you're going in and coming out! But if you don't want to swim, you can walk. Or you can go sailing, or enjoy other water sports.

Then there are the mountains: I told you last time about walking in the Welsh mountains. A lot of tourists come to do some of that. But you must be careful! And then if you want other places to visit, we have lots of castles. When the English king conquered [5] Wales at the end of the 13th century, he built a chain of big castles in North Wales and these are still here. The most famous castle is Caernarfon Castle, and the town is a World Heritage site. It's interesting to think that Switzerland became an independent country 9 years after Wales stopped being an independent country. 1282 was the year that the last Welsh prince was killed fighting against the English and the English king Edward 1st started building his castles. But they are wonderful castles to visit.

And then if you're interested in more modern history, we've got lots of little historic railways in Wales. These are railways in North Wales that were built to carry slate in the 19th century: slate is the grey stone that you can use for the roof of a house, and Wales was the world centre for slate at that time. Now the little railways are running again, but for tourists these days.

They say that we're going to have a hot summer, but it's still a good idea to bring your anorak and be prepared for some rain if you're coming to Wales this summer.

So what did we do last weekend? Well, it was a beautiful weekend again. Both Easter and then this holiday weekend brought good weather - except for last Monday. Then we woke up to grey skies and rain sweeping in from the south-west. We shouldn't complain - Saturday and Sunday were fine, and our garden actually needs some rain. The weather has been very dry for the last couple of months. I know that a lot of you, perhaps most of you who are listening are perhaps not so interested in gardening, but I have to tell you again that gardening is very big [6] in this country. And on our beautiful holiday weekend Saturday we went to a sort of garden fair [7]. It takes place once a year and it is to raise money for looking after historic gardens in Wales. There's an association called the Historic Gardens of Wales. The fair on Saturday took place at a very famous garden centre near where I live. It's so famous that it was somebody in Switzerland, a gardener of course, who told me about it first. He said "Do you know the Crûg Farm Garden?" Well, I didn't at that time so I asked my mother, and she knew all about it. The man and woman who own the place were beef

farmers but then they decided to change and about 20 years ago they started a garden centre for unusual plants. Every year they travel around the world collecting new plants, from places like the mountains of Japan, China, Vietnam and so on. They now have one of the greatest collections of plants that they sell from their garden centre. On Saturday there were lots of other plant people there with their plants, and hundreds of gardeners looking for new things for their gardens. The Crûg Farm people also opened their private garden - a very big garden with all sorts of plants and trees and we had a lovely walk round it. That is, of course, another thing to do if you come to Britain on holiday - visit some of the gardens!

Last week, my wife and I went to visit an accountant - not as nice as visiting a garden. The reason why we went is because we don't know what tax we have to pay here. You pay tax here on your income, your salary, the money that you earn, to the central government. There is also a local tax but that depends on where you live: if you live in a big expensive house you pay more than if you live in a small, cheap house. Then, of course, there's VAT, value-added tax: that's the tax that you pay when you buy something. Anyway it's the first tax that I haven't paid yet since I came back from Switzerland. I wrote a letter to the tax office last September but got no answer. Then my wife telephoned a few weeks ago. The conversation went something like this. My wife said "I'm telephoning about a letter my husband wrote to you last September, about his tax." The woman at the tax office said: "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't talk to you about somebody else's tax." "No, that's OK," my wife said, "We just want to know what we have to do." "Well, tell me your husband's details, and I'll look him up on the system," said the tax woman. "He hasn't got any details," said my wife, "We've been out of the country for 20 years." "Well, I'll just check," says the tax woman. "You won't find anything," says my wife, but she gave the woman my national insurance number [8]. The woman looked it up. "Oh," she says, "there's nothing here." "I know," says my wife, "that's the point. What does he have to do?" "Well, he should write to us." "But he's already written." "Yes, erm, well I think the best thing is probably if he writes again."

So we went to see an accountant. "That's typical," said the accountant. "They closed the local office. Now they have a big office in Wrexham" - that's a big town a long way from here. "And they don't have enough staff, and nobody knows what's going on. They keep losing things." The accountant is now going to sort things out for us.

The accountant's office is in our small town, upstairs above one of the banks. He's a good accountant, people tell me, but when I went into his office, it was so different from a Swiss office. This man and his wife, who works with him, clearly spend nothing on the office. No money for presentation. There are boxes full of files on the floor, papers everywhere. Old furniture. Nothing comfortable about this office at all, nothing to impress the client. But I thought, perhaps this is a good sign. This is a man who's careful with his own money, and he'll be careful with mine, I hope.

I'll let you know what happens. But before I go here's my saying of the day - it's an old expression from the north of England and it goes 'Ne'er cast a clout till May is out' [9]. Now the word "clout" is like the word "Kleid" in German: it means here your winter coat. So the meaning is that you should not take off your coat until the end of May because you can't be sure of warm weather until then. And until the next show in two weeks, this is Gerry, in his coat, saying, take care!

[1] accountant: a person who looks after money (in a company, for example) or here somebody who helps you with your tax

[2] look forward to: wait for something with pleasure

[3] bank holiday: the first bank holiday was a holiday when the Bank of England decided to give its employees a holiday which was not a religious holiday

[4] holiday cottage: a small house that people pay money to live in for a week or two on holiday

[5] conquer: take control of a country by force (with an army)

[6] very big: here: very popular (e.g. Ice hockey is very big in Switzerland)

[7] fair: an event where people bring things for other people to buy

[8] national insurance number: the number that everybody has when they start work in Britain, the number for their social insurance (unemployment pay, pension, etc.)

[9] Ne'er cast a clout till May is out: dialect: Never throw off a piece of clothing till May is over