

Four members of the Pony Clubs in Ireland, Britain and the United States of America were chosen to take part on the International Fox Hunting Exchange this year. Alyssa O'Neill (Newcastle Lyons), Sinead O'Scanaill (Ward Union) Hazel Windsor-Aubrey (Meath) and Timothy Barnby (Duhallow) were the lucky four Irish Pony Club Members to be chosen to represent the Irish Pony Club on the International Fox Hunting Exchange, which this year was hosted by the United States Pony Club in Maryland, Virginia. Their travelling chaperone was Shirley O'Shea.

Our fantastic American Hunting trip!

We left Ireland on Monday 28th February and picked up a connecting flight in Heathrow, England and arrived into Dulles Airport after a long flight. We had time to get to know each other and after a few mishaps at security (Hazel's hair band, Hazel's bag, and an agricultural stop) we were met by Kirsten Noggle who assigned us to our first host families. My first host family was the Walsh family. Peter Walsh is the whipper in of the Piedmont hunt and is originally from Rathcoole, Co Dublin.

Our first hunt experience was with the Thornton Hill Hounds. We were loaned lovely experienced horses for the day. Mine was a lovely chestnut horse called Colby. The hunt was over very hilly terrain, all through forests and woods and it was a challenge to avoid trees and branches as Tim found out when a branch swiped his leg out of the saddle and sent him flying off his horse!. There was one sighting of a fox and the hounds were very quick off the mark which made the hunt very enjoyable. After the hunt we attended a party hosted by Emily Ristau where we met the rest of the people on the exchange. There were four British Pony Club members, Lauren White, Rachel Ware, Amy Lawson and Joanna Dunn, and two American pony club representatives, Victoria Jacks and Kiersti White.

We were up bright and early next day for our hunt in Orange County. I was dropped off at Kirsten Noggle's yard and helped get the horses ready. I was riding a big grey horse called Pablo and he was a superb hunter. The Orange County Hunt is known for its hounds, which are a very specific colour. All of their hounds have a white and golden/red colouring and they are specifically bred so that they will all be that colour. We had visited the kennels the day before and the hunt whipper in had introduced us to the hounds and gave us many facts and figures about their history and breeding. The hunt itself was one of the best days and we had four sightings of foxes, all from the same covert. The hunt was long with lots of gallops through forests and not without incident when Sinead's mount took a dislike to a chicken coop but then decided to jump it from a standstill, not the most comfortable of jumps!

I moved to Emily Ristau's house with Sinead that night but the following morning I was back with the Walsh's to help prepare my mount for that day's hunt in Piedmont. I rode a lovely thoroughbred called Willow and all day received compliments on how good a hunter he was and he sure was! I hunted that day with Lauren, Rachel, Tim and Stacey, the USA chaperone and coincidentally we were all mounted on thoroughbreds, although some were hotter than others. The day ended with a barbeque in Zimmerman's.

On Friday half of the group had a day off from hunting whilst the other half hunted with Thornton Hill. We headed to the town of Middleburg for shopping and a visit to the sporting library and museum. Middleburg is a very equestrian orientated town, with an emphasis on fox hunting and there are loads and loads of tack stores. The library and museum is extremely interesting with many exhibits including the original programme from the race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral. That night we were invited to a party for the Orange County Foxhounds, which was held in the Party barn, which is owned by Mrs Mars of M&Ms and Mars Bars fame.

Saturday found us up bright and early as we were moving from Virginia across to Potomac. This involved a ferry across the Potomac River, which was the shortest ferry ride we had ever been on! We went straight from the ferry to collect our mounts for that day's hunting. The countryside in Potomac is much flatter than Maryland, but the hunting was as exciting with many fine gallops. After returning to the stables and seeing to the horses we got the opportunity to try our hand at polocrosse, which was great fun. Needless to say after a day of travelling, hunting and polocrosse none of us were fit for anything but bed that night.

On Sunday we got a break from hunting and went sight seeing in Washington DC. A coach was waiting to take us to Washington with our very own tour guide and we got to see the White House, the Capital Building, Union Station, the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam and Korean War Memorials. It was wonderful to see all these places that we had only seen before on TV or in literature. This was followed by dinner hosted by the Master of the Potomac Hunt, where the theme of the dinner was Mexican which was delicious. The weather up to now had been fine for hunting but that Saturday there was not only rain, but snow. It is not just Ireland where you can experience all four seasons in one day. Because of the weather our hunting for the day was postponed. To make up for the disappointment we headed to Montgomery Mall for shopping and cinema. With shops such as Hollister, Abercrombie and Fitch and Forever 21 we weren't too disappointed!

Our last day's hunting was on Tuesday. The rain and snow had made the ground a little boggy, which reminded us of home. Water lying on the ground created more jumping obstacles and we had a great time getting soaked and mud splattered galloping through water logged fields! This was followed by a bonfire party in Jennifer Price's house and we all agreed we did not want to leave, even though we were looking forward to seeing our families the next day.

On Wednesday after saying goodbyes we headed off to catch our flights. It was a really great trip and a wonderful experience. Thanks to all in the Irish Pony Club, the American Pony Club and our host families and all the hunts we visited in America. A special thanks to Shirley, our wonderful chaperone. It would not have been the same without you!

Alyssa O'Neill
Newcastle Lyons Pony Club.