

Gaelic Magic



BRIAN MORRISON/TOURISMIRELAND



IN IRELAND

every mountain peak, every tiny cove and stream, nearly every rock, has been given a name, though its meaning might be lost to the ages. Stone towers and cottages and churches stand where they were built hundreds or thousands of years ago, erected over such a long history that the architect of one would have seen the other as ancient even in his day. Yet the verdant landscape has a rugged, edge-of-the-world feel, as if in all that time the island could not be tamed—nor its hardy and good-natured population.



THE LOCALS

One could say that Ireland is a place of ghosts—not the kind that go bump in the night, but the shadows of lives past. You can almost see them out of the corner of your eye: the Celtic chieftain, the Franciscan monk, the famine victim. Here the nature of time itself is on display, like a history book with pages always open

Rock of Cashel, Co.
Tipperary

Story | KATHRYN HUNTER



and overlapping. Modern-day residents weave their own lives into this rich tale. Like their ancestors, they're a hardy and good-natured people, riding out the same difficult, dark winters to emerge—a bit wild-eyed—into the welcoming sunlight of spring and summer.

“Irish people are very warm, very friendly,” Bebhinn O’Malley tells me. “We’re very open people, and we love to talk. We love a good story. We love meeting new people.” She pauses a beat, a twinkle in her eye. “We’re also very, very modest.” A surfer and outdoor instructor from Clare Island, Bebhinn is guide, driver and expert-on-all-things-Irish on our tour. She teaches us phrases in Gaelic, including *Súil Eile*, which literally translates to “seeing with a different eye.” Nothing better describes our experience.



CHARTING A COURSE

The island of Ireland is about the size of Indiana, and yet its charms are remarkably diverse. You can approach traveling the country as you would an infinitely long and scintillating restaurant menu: The first and perhaps most difficult decision is whether you’d prefer to sample as many things as possible or to eat your fill of only a few.

We’ve chosen Vagabond Tours’ “Kerry UnCorked” itinerary, which focuses on the southwest. The guide service’s other options—similarly formatted for small groups and traveling back roads through Ireland’s most rustic and stunning scenery—range from a 12-day journey of the island’s entire perimeter to custom trips and less-active Driftwood tours.



ECLECTIC EXPERIENCES

Our group sees famous sites like the Rock of Cashel, Drombeg Stone Circle, Charles Fort, Blarney Castle and Gardens, and the towering seaside cliffs of Sleah Head. We try our luck at stand-up paddleboarding, sea kayaking, golf, cycling, hiking and a little impromptu shepherding. We visit gastropubs and restaurants, breweries and smokehouses; one day we go on a guided foraging walk and feast on a seaside picnic of edible Irish plants. We stay in a wide variety of locally owned, small-town accommodations: an estate house in Dingle, a centuries-old mansion in Bantry, lakeside “glamping” tents in Kenmare, a historic bank-turned-guest house in Kinsale.

One of the most off-the-beaten track experiences is a visit to remote UNESCO World Heritage Site Skellig Michael, where beehive huts stand testament to monks who lived there from roughly the sixth century to the 12th. To arrive on the island, the monks rowed through the rough ocean on wooden currachs. We travel via small and heavily listing fishing boat for roughly an hour, but the experience is not so different: As the mainland recedes, the sense of reality goes with it, and we get a hint of the emotions the monks must have felt in leaving their homes forever, a simultaneous sickness and soaring of the spirit, a romance and a dark fatalism. And, of course, no small amount of greenness around the gills.

Skellig Michael is the setting of the dramatic final scene of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, and the real place is as otherworldly as any space fiction. After hiking up more than 600 steps, you’re treated to a view that, like so much of Ireland, makes you feel as if you’ve escaped the bounds of linear time.



Bantry House Gardens, Co. Cork
(vagabondtoursofireland.ie)



Kinsale, Co. Cork
(ireland.com)



Kenmare, Co. Kerry





Sea kayaking at Old Head of Kinsale, Co. Cork



TABLE & SKIES

When they think of Ireland, some travelers imagine cold, gray days and sepia-toned meals of lumpy potatoes and boiled meat.

The woeful tales of wind and rain do have some truth, given the maritime climate. But Ireland's lush green can be a sight for sore eyes, and the conditions aren't so much inclement as ever-changing. You learn to carry a light, waterproof jacket whenever you stray far, and to appreciate the often-ethereal softness of the light.

Irish cuisine is remarkably flavorful and fresh, often featuring locally harvested produce, seafood, lamb and dairy. Menu items run the gamut from simple fare like vegetable soup paired with homemade bread to innovative seafood dishes centered on scallops, hake, monkfish or other treasures of the icy northern sea. Artisan producers craft farmhouse cheeses, smoked fish, microbrews and breads.



EXPLORING

One day we make an unplanned stop in a farmer's field at a national monument called Caherdorgan, where sheep climb the walls of a thousand-year-old homestead. Over time, the original use of such places was forgotten, and Irish people attributed ringforts and cashels to the fairies, considering them magical and haunted places.



St. Finbarr's Oratory, Gougane Barra, Co. Cork
(ireland.com)

Daniel Lambert, the first of our Vagabond guides during the trip, formerly worked for the United Nations and is capable of rattling off dates and figures like yesterday's news. Our small group—this native Irishman, a red-haired family from Massachusetts, a Texas writer—stand among Caherdorgan's lichen-covered ruins above a sloping view of fields and distant blue harbor. We are alone, and it feels as if we're the first to discover it. Lambert tells us that ancient sites like these are found throughout Ireland, neither hidden nor advertised. Typically you're welcome to explore them at your leisure.

No glass. No guardrails. No signs reading, "Don't touch." Regardless of your roots, it's almost inevitable to feel a part of it all—connected to the souls who passed by here through the ages, one by one, just like yours.



MYSTICAL FAIRYLAND

For all the country's grandeur, it's the little things that will truly steal your heart. The hearty Irish "brown bread." A dip into the bitterly cold, crystal clear waters of saltwater lake Lough Hyne. A stroll through the magical, mystical fairyland that is Gougane Barra, with its dripping ferns and rushing streams. A mist-covered hill or an ancient etching. The way the Irish pronounce "thing" like "ting." Hundreds of these little details and idiosyncrasies combine to create a singular and very personal whole, an understanding of the place that becomes yours alone.

Maybe "adventure," though certainly found, is not what's truly being sought by the traveler on this strange and lovely island; perhaps the better word is "awe." ✦



Muckross House & Gardens, Killarney National Park, Co. Kerry (ireland.com)



Blarney Castle & Gardens, Co. Cork



Drombeg Stone Circle, Co. Cork