



The Emerald Isle - Coast to Coast

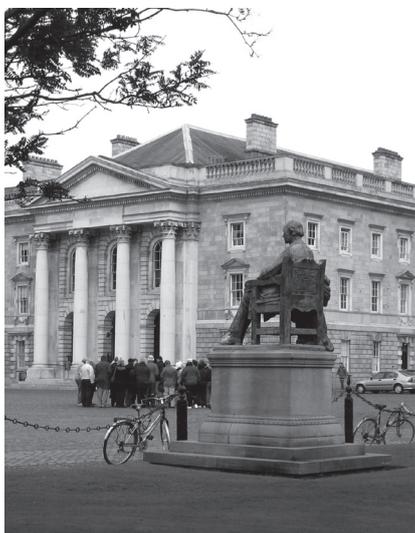
Ireland - the home of leprechauns, Guinness, the gift of the gab, and a lot more besides.

We arrived at the port of Dublin by ferry from Holyhead just after a shower of rain. The trip over from North Wales by the largest ferry plying the Irish Sea, helped along by a judicious amount of Guinness and some excellent salmon sandwiches on the observation deck, was surprisingly calm, considering that the high-speed ferry we'd wanted to catch had been cancelled because of the threat of storms. You can spend a long time happily watching the waves and the sun gradually going down behind the misty outlines of the Emerald Isle....

Dublin

Dublin – a vibrant city full of contrasts, with Guinness, the Book of Kells, marvelous Irish pubs, scruffy suburbs, smart new suburbs, the River Liffey, and the new 120-m Spire of Dublin, officially called the Monument of Light – a metal needle towering into the sky, visible from anywhere in the city, so it's impossible to get lost, or so they say.

Ireland has 4.2 million inhabitants, with 40% of them living within 100 km of Dublin. And the population is still growing. The city is expanding its public transport network as fast as



Trinity College, Dublin

it can: it has a brand-new tram, a solid network of bus routes, and is planning a metro.

The Book of Kells is housed in a special wing of Trinity College and well worth making a special visit to see. We took a guided tour round the college, and were royally entertained (despite a freezing cold wind) by our guide, who was a professor of philosophy at the college and gave one of the funniest tours I've ever heard. The library itself is ancient and really superb, and it has a well-stocked bookshop.

I had no time for shopping, but Grafton Street is the place to go. We stayed at Best Western hotels; the Academy Plaza is nice and central, while Flannery's, on the edge of the industrial area, is something else – a huge entrance hall with a Hollywood style staircase and the biggest bar I've ever seen. We found out why: on Saturday night there was a band playing, and people – also with children – came from miles around. And they love to dress up – many of the girls were wearing strapless dresses, and everyone is very friendly.

Once out of Dublin, there's a lot you can see in Ireland – the famous southwest with the Ring of Kerry, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, the Blarney Stone, or north to Donegal, and all the rest. We went straight across the country to Galway on the Atlantic coast, stopping off at various places on the way, and enjoying the green countryside with ruined keeps dotted here and there. I was soon reminded that the Irish are a horse-loving nation by the huge numbers of horses we saw – sometimes even grazing the same meadow as the cows and the sheep.

Tullamore

Tullamore is the home of Tullamore Dew – which we duly tried, very potable indeed – and the Tullamore



Pub lunch - with Guinness, obviously

Dew Heritage Centre, birthplace of Tullamore Dew Irish “whiskey” and Irish Mist liqueur. I didn't realise this whisky is so popular – it's the Irish whisky of choice in Germany, Sweden, Denmark and large chunks of East Europe. The original distillery has been converted into an exhibition showing developments since the 1600s, and there's a café and a nice gift shop.

Tullamore is literally in the heart of Ireland, and has plenty in the way of ancient monuments, golf, horse-riding, fishing and much more. The Grand Canal built to link Dublin and Shannon in 1756-1804 runs through the centre of the town; it's now only used for leisure – you can rent a boat in summer and cruise to the Shannon.

This is where we had a typical Irish meal – Irish stew with swede and three sorts of potato (stewed with the meat, new and mashed) followed by that good old favourite, bread-and-butter pudding. My Swiss friends loved it. In contrast to the first time I went to Ireland many years ago, it's now possible to get a reasonably varied diet as a vegetarian; all the places we ate at had at least one veggie option, usually pasta.



The Pea Bog Railway, in the middle of the bog

Pub food is good too. We found a pub with an open peat fire one lunch-time, in a small market town: there was a wide range of mouth-watering dishes on offer, which all arrived with incredible speed and were delicious (Guinness is not obligatory) As we could see from the ads on the walls, pub quizzes are popular – the place must have been packed on quiz nights.

Peat Bog Railway

The Blackwater Bog a bit further west covers 100,000 acres and is said to have an average depth of ten metres (how do they measure it...). To my amazement, I learned that 1 million tons of peat a year is harvested from this bog to fuel the nearby peat-burning power station. It's one of three such power stations in Ireland, and supplies 4% of the country's needs.

Peat is harvested in thin layers but only when dry, and then raked up and loaded on to the little train that runs round the site. There's a permanent line – which is where the little passenger train goes on the guided tours – but there are also temporary lines that are taken up and re-laid depending on which part of the bog is being worked at the time. It's the ricketiest little line I've ever been on – but who needs more?

We asked our charming tour guide whether they find much in the bog. They do: huge tree roots up to 7000 years old, a bronze-age village, a lot of small artefacts, and over 100 bodies in the last 50 years, the oldest dating from 3000 years ago. Only the top metre of the bog is harvested, she told us, then it's covered over and used for farming. As well as the train ride, which includes a stop for trying your hand cutting

peat, there's a café and a well-stocked souvenir shop (open April to September, www.bnm.ie).

Galway

Galway, City of Tribes, is an old settlement on the Atlantic coast with a 6000-year old history and great charm. A guided tour by open-top double-decker bus shows you everything except the its mediaeval centre and pedestrian zone: Eyre Square in the centre, the modern Gothic cathedral, the seafront at Salthill, Claddagh village and the old fishing harbour – salmon fishing is really big here.

And the festivals – there must be at least one a month throughout the year, including race week, two oyster festivals, a beer festival, also “Blessing Galway” day, with the so-called monarch's ship with its white sails out in Galway Bay with the rest of them. It's a popular place, especially with Americans.

If you like fish, McDonagh's (fishmongers for more than four generations) is the place to go: superb fresh fish beautifully prepared, which you can enjoy in either the rustic or the posh section. Afterwards we wandered down through the very attractive pedestrian zone looking for entertainment – it was Thursday night and there were a lot of young people around (Galway is a university city).

We found it: an Irish pub with music, so full that people were spilling on to the pavement and you had to struggle to get to the bar. People of all ages and every

description gathered around to enjoy the music. The band was great: we heard a small group with Johnny O'Halloran - accordion, fiddle and bodhran, which is an Irish drum and a fiend to play. He told me they'd performed in Basel about 20 years ago at the opening of Paddy Reilly's. It's a small world!

That was practically the end of our trip. I came back armed with smoked salmon, Irish whisky and green shamrock T-shirts for the kiddies, but I'd love to go back to this very friendly country in summer and see some of the bits we had to leave out. And no, I didn't see any leprechauns.

Getting there, getting around

Fly with Aer Lingus from Zürich or Geneva to Dublin. If you're feeling adventurous (or can't stand flying) take the TGV across France to Paris (three and half hours from Basel), and change to Eurostar to London St Pancras, which has been transformed into a modern international terminal within the gorgeous old Victorian station. Then by train to Holyhead, and take the ferry.

You could also drive there: either take the short Channel crossing and cross to Ireland on the Holyhead-Dublin or Pembroke-Rosslare car ferry, or drive to Cherbourg or Roscoff and take the direct ferry to Rosslare (www.irishferries.com).

For getting around, you can obviously hire a car, but there's also a railway network and a variety of tours on offer (www.railtoursireland.com). And they're starting to re-open old lines, notably the Western Corridor from Galway to Limerick.



The fishing village at Galway, with palm trees