

A WALK IN THE EMERALD ISLES

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From a distance, it looked like a large dog moving slowly into the sea with something white and fleshy clinging to its back. Another ten minutes of walking brought things into

focus. On this quiet and remote beach near the western edge of Ireland was a young man exercising a horse in neck deep water. Riding bareback and almost bare bottomed, the lad was nurturing the steed through a briny watercourse. The animal seemed none too happy about the arrangement and soon prevailed via a quick trip back to the beach. It was raining and fifty degrees but the young man was undaunted as he clambered atop another waiting horse and headed back in. Moments later, when we stopped gawking and walked on, several thoroughbreds bore down on us in full stride, replete with costumed jockeys. We thought we were walking on an isolated beach but instead seemed to have stumbled onto an informal race track. We stepped aside as the horses galloped by, noses flaring, foamy expectorant everywhere, leaving us with the feeling of excited invisibility.

This was quintessential Ireland- down to earth, tactile, full of life. We were day four into a hundred plus mile walk around the Dingle Peninsula in southwest Ireland, and the unexpected and entertaining were becoming the norm. We'd signed on for this ten day unguided hike from inn to inn but the value added was the daily discovery of a rich culture with its feet firmly in the past and its head in the future.

The Dingle Peninsula lies on the southwest corner of Ireland, a five hour train ride back in time from Dublin. This relatively small appendage attached to the mainland houses a high concentration of all that is 'Ireland'. Geologically, you can stand on a sandy beach looking over your shoulder at some of the highest peaks in the country. Want to dance an Irish jig? Go to the resort town of Dingle. Like golf, head for the windblown course near

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Dunquin. Like historic structures? Look anywhere. Want local food and talk? Head to one of hundreds of pubs and small restaurants. Looking for Irish wit? Talk to anyone.

You are reminded occasionally by stone pillars that you are, indeed, on the Dingle Way. One day of walking might follow aged rock walls high above villages, crossing streams, then drop down to a boulder strewn beach. Another day might take you on 'green paths', pastures, main roads and through someone's backyard. It all adds up to a 118 mile walk that circumnavigates the whole peninsula and immerses the hiker in a wide range of sights, scenery and experiences. Much of the route is along an ancient pilgrimage route, though today, the more remote parts are the domain of sheep and occasional herds of milking cows.

Our printed guide for day seven stated that we'd 'experience an exciting day's walk to a saddle on the Brandon Mountain range, then drop down enjoying spectacular views along the way, to the shore of Brandon Bay'. In contrast to that optimistic description, we stood in a driving rain at the saddle on the shoulder of Brandon Mountain enjoying ten feet of view and boggy glop under foot.

Nearby was a 2,000 year old Olgham Stone which let us know we were at the pass since we couldn't really tell up from down. Hidden off in the mist was a 'ring fort' that housed underground chambers thought to be the dwelling place of fairies. Further out in the distance was the eerie bleating of a lone, seemingly lost sheep. This four legged fog horn was somewhat reassuring despite the sketchy pathway before us that was a point-blank drop-off into a fog bank.

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Earlier, we'd marched up this typical sheep path, looking over our shoulder at the nearby Blasket Islands, closest point in Europe to North America. The route required us

to tip toe through boggy fens and over random water courses. On higher ground, the pathway became the domain of resident flocks of sheep where eons of their droppings pointed the way upward. The whole show reminded us of the mountainous terrain around our hometown of Seattle, where clouds can drop rapidly leaving the wanderer groping for orientation and dry socks. We moved with our fingers crossed.

This might have been a bit like the leap of faith that St. Brendan experienced in the 6th Century. He had set sail from the mouth of a stream below us in a fragile Irish Currach for points west and the alleged discovery of America 900 years before the voyages of Columbus. Brendan, from nearby County Kerry, was a Christian missionary who went about his work of spreading ‘the word’ and founding monasteries as he looked for the Promised Land with typical Irish diligence. Like us, he sailed away into the unknown, only in his case never to be seen again.

Ireland is the land of so many of our ancestors. Deep in history, stunning landscapes and characters galore, Ireland embraced us with a wink and a smile. Ireland, home of the Celtic Tiger, the namesake for their economic boom of the last ten years, is open and ready for business. Here was a country that exported half of its population 150 years ago due to famine and despair, only to celebrate the lowest unemployment rate in Europe in the here and now. As with America, much of their menial labor is now the domain of the immigrant, in their case, imported Polish, Lithuanian, Nigerian, and Chinese workers.

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Here is the land of Irish football, soccer, rugby, horse racing, cricket, and a particularly ferocious sport called hurling.

Hurling is basically a sport where two teams carry clubs and batter each other and a ball about until time runs out or the last man is standing. It evokes extreme passion and much press. In fact, the Irish are such sports fans that easily half of their many daily papers seemed to be given over to fact and opinion about the world of Irish sport.

On any given day, we'd emerge from our lodging to follow a series of posts signifying the right way to go on the Dingle Way. We'd side step cars, animal droppings, and squalls as we completed ten to eighteen miles per day. We'd follow centuries old rock walls, overhanging corridors of fuchsia, wild rose and buddleia, shorelines, cobbled walkways, and even a gravel road or two. All paths led to a bed and breakfast or a pub, a place to eat nearby. Each one was different from the next and represented a large variety of the tourist accommodations available on an otherwise bucolic stretch of land.

Much of the 'trail' followed a 2,000 year old pilgrimage route. This lead us by archeological monuments of historical significance, but also 'green roads' and paths that were the domain of the cow and the goat. Because we were treated to the wettest weather in 200 years, those quaint byways became suck holes of cow manure, sheep goop and puddles. To step off trail anywhere would lead to either dense hedgerows, or impassable bogs of heather and gorse. Choice three would be a nearby road that was the private raceway for mostly impatient drivers, none of whom understood the value of international relations and our personal safety. No matter, the tradeoffs were worth it.

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The Dingle Trail wasn't really a trail, but a track that connected village and farm, beach and mountain, pub to pub.

In fact, our trip was shadowed by a parallel walk of a fellow from Australia who was traversing Ireland south to north stopping at every pub along the way for a pint to raise money for charity. This 'fund raiser' was embellished by his insistence on carrying a stuffed donkey called Asal. Unfortunately, his mascot was purloined half way through and there was a uniquely Irish outcry in response. Three days later, the Irish Independent newspaper carried this headline: Nameless Woman saves Pub Crawl Aussie's Precious Ass. Not only was this representative of the creative writing that saturated the Irish press, but it also put the man back on his track and allowed him to complete his journey of 254 pints of Guinness and the pubs where they were poured.

On one rainy day, we stumbled upon the western most golf course in Europe. This 'links' course was so remote and exposed that it had a wind sock mid-course to let golfers know the direction of the almost constant wind. Another day, we wandered into a seaside pub that served up two pieces of white bread married by a slice of ham and mustard and called a sandwich. Of greater interest were the locals in rubber boots and wool hats topping off their third or fourth pint of the day. This was indicative of Irish social life (one town had 108 residents and nine pubs) but not Irish cooking.

We had expected mutton and Irish stew, but not the quality seafood, pasta, cheeses, and desserts that were lovingly served in almost every small restaurant we visited. To accompany these meals, including breakfast, was the Irish obsession with corny American music. It was everywhere. We had a fine meal in one ancient restaurant only

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to loudly entertained by a repeating loop of Carpenter songs. We had expected rich and wonderful Irish music everywhere but had to settle for Tom Jones and Frank Sinatra. We

did attend a concert in an old church in Dingle that featured the Irish bagpipe called the Uilleann, but we had to go out of our way to find this. This did not make sense to us, but did add to our impression of Ireland as a land of contrasts.

Near the end of our walk was a geological wonder called the Magharees Peninsula. This 'tom bolo', or headland, connected to the mainland only by sand dunes, made for fine walking. On the west was five miles of the North Atlantic. In between lay a hidden fishing village on picture perfect Scaggane Bay, with the final miles along the rocky beaches of Tralee Bay. In between, we once again ran into horses wandering the beach from one pasture to another giving us no more than a wink and a nod.

The hard edge of historical Irish life was seen daily in the rock constructs used by early pilgrims, sheep herders, and soldiers. One day we passed the Dun an Oir (fort of Gold) where over 700 Spaniards were captured and beheaded by the English in 1580. Another day, we stumbled upon a beautiful rock structure called the Giffany Bridge. In the same year, 1580, English Lord Grey marched his men over this bridge and headed for Smerwich Harbor where he executed 600 captive men, women, and children. Even our last day was filled with historical exploits of Cromwellian soldiers where the population of a Magharee village was 'blown up bt powder' while hiding in the Minard castle nearby.

Ah the Irish! No wonder doom and gloom and the magical world of guilt prevails. Almost daily, we'd see written and public affirmations of their suffering. 'Steal a buoy,

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steal a life' was the script attached to life buoys along the shore. 'Pay the fare or pay the price' showed as a warning for scofflaws in the trams of Dublin. Even on the beach at

the popular seaside resort of Inch was posted, “Farewell dear Inch, As I must Leave, As I have promises to keep before my last sleep’.

We wound down our walk where we began, in the town of Tralee. Here was where old and new Ireland seemed to collide with traditional old streets, churches and gardens facing the specter of chain stores and traffic jams. We did discover their stunning rose gardens and enjoyed two inebriated duffers sitting on a bench harmonizing over the classic ‘Rose of Tralee’, their voices mingling with the mist in ephemeral Ireland.