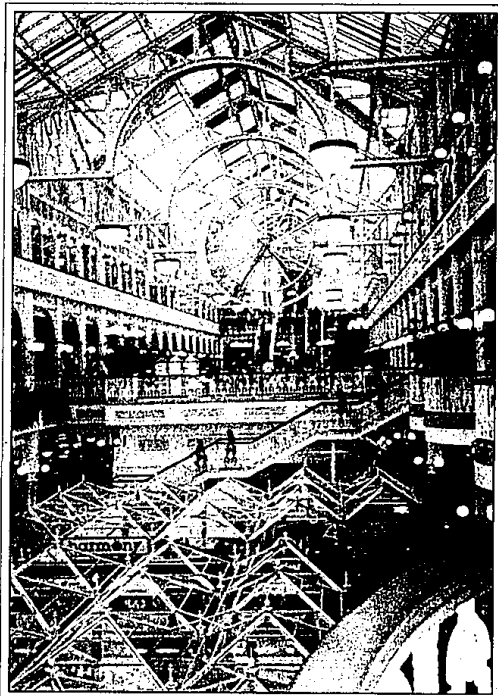


When in Dublin, do as the Dubliners do



Steel girders and glass tower high above shoppers in a mall near St. Stephen's Green in Dublin.

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Dublin, Ireland — A place where nothing is great, but everything is "grand," and talk is cheap but the "crack" is priceless.

Those are the little things an Irish-American learns visiting this Irish city. But on his quest to share some kindred spirit with his brothers in Ireland another fact becomes evidently clear: a) You can run but you can't hide from the eye of America and, b) being an Irish-American doesn't necessarily make you Irish.

The people who inhabit this European city are another thing entirely. God love 'em.

From the runny-nosed urinals who defiantly run out in front of traffic kicking soccer balls to the pesky teenagers who cross-body block you from behind on the sidewalk and promptly turn and say politely, "Sorry," and proceed mowing down other pedestrians in their path, Dubliners are a delight.

While Irish-American visitors tend to imprison themselves in tour buses with drivers describing the sights like leprechauns, our guides let us, to quote a line from "Dead Poet's Society," suck the marrow from the bone of Dublin life.

Jim Walsh and Brian (pronounced Da-reen) Wright and John Tynan would usher us on this cultural exchange.

Walsh and Tynan greeted us at Dublin Airport. The proper introduction to Ireland only needs one thing at 10 a.m. after a Trans-Atlantic flight — a pint of Guinness.

THE BLACK stout looks like the refuse from an oil change with a creamy head on top. Signs around Dublin pubs proclaim Guinness is good for you.

En route to our bed and breakfast, we realized we were foreigners.

The steering wheel was where the glove compartment was supposed to be and when we flipped on the turn signal, the wipers came on. To top it off, everyone was driving on the left side of the road — now that's foreign.

From the onset it's apparent Irish drivers obviously take out the years of invasions, oppression, famine and unemployment in the way they drive.

Coupled with the fact the roads in Ireland make our alleys look like the Lodge Freeway, our little Nissan suddenly became four wheels from hell.

"One thing, don't give anybody a break," Tynan tells us, "because they won't give you one."

Once we arrive at our bed and breakfast, we ditch the car. The green bus is for us.

DUBLIN AT night is gorgeous. City lights reflect off the River Liffey as hordes of young people cross over the O'Connell Bridge to infiltrate Grafton Street.

Nearly 50 percent of the population of Ireland is 25 or younger.

Youthful idealism, though, is doused quickly by unemploy-

ment, which is high despite Ireland being one of the most well-educated countries in the world.

Many of its people will emigrate to the United States, England or elsewhere looking for work.

Walsh, 23, and Wright, 22, want to stick it out. Walsh works as a stock controller for Bus Eireann, the Irish equivalent to Greyhound. Wright is a marketing executive, recently graduated from college.

All the daily rigors of work and school are put to rest as Friday night in Dublin becomes engulfed in one mass fraternity party.

OUR AGENDA includes visits to three Dublin pubs — the Long Haul, Sinnott's and Davy Byrne's. Each place is wall-to-wall with people in their 20s and early 30s.

Upon walking to a new pub, Walsh assures us the women at the next place are more beautiful than the ones at the previous establishment. Of course, this natural progression might have something to do with the growing number of pints consumed at each stop.

Upon arrival at the final place, a striking brunette steps over to chat with Walsh. He sheepishly returns to the group and is promptly chided.

"All the wide receivers get the girls," said one partier to Walsh, who plays American football in Dublin.

From there, it's on to the Olympia Theatre where Dublin blues harmonica player Don Baker will perform. The place is "black," an Irish term meaning crowded, with the standing room only audience making for a hot, steamy night.

WE WAIT IN line for Guinness in tall paper cups, which somehow seems akin to putting champagne in a Gatorade squeeze bottle.

The unapardonable sin is then committed. With our cups sitting on top of the bar we naturally grab them. We're met with a stern look from the bartender, a woman with black hair and a glare to match. She tells us to put them back. She hadn't put the head on the beer yet.

"Foreigners," she mumbles shaking her head.

As Baker wails on the harmonica and people dance to the aerie ways, it suddenly occurs to us we've only had one hour sleep in the past 24.

Undoubtedly, we figure, our heads will ring like the bells at Christ Church Cathedral before Mass next day.

The next morning, no headache, no upset stomach . . . We conclude, indeed, Guinness is good for you.

Of course, the sights of Dublin are taken in the next day: Trinity College, the General Post Office, St. Stephen's Green and Moore Street Market where toothless women hawk candy bars and cigarette lighters from baby strollers.

"Tomorrow you'll read about how a consignment of candy bars mysteriously came up missing somewhere," Walsh says, surveying the scene.

SATURDAY NIGHT includes a listen to some traditional Irish music at place called Hughes. We agree to meet Jim and Brian at a place called Madigan's in downtown Dublin, across from Pizzaland. We wait . . . and wait. Nearly 1½ hours after our scheduled rendezvous we decide to catch the bus back to the bed and breakfast.

On our way to the bus stop on O'Connell Street, we notice there is another Madigan's — next to, you guessed it, a Pizzaland (and we thought pepperoni imperialism was left to the Ilitches and Monaghans). Inside, we find Jim and Brian looking at their watches.

The real face of Irish life, though, reveals itself on Sunday. One of the local soccer teams, Shamrock Rovers, is making its debut at the Royal Dublin Society against St. Patrick Athletic. A crowd of 22,000 jams the lush grassy facility, which is normally used for horse shows (obviously, fertilizer is never a problem).

A friend of Walsh's, David McGrath, reluctantly agrees to escort us to the match. McGrath is a devoted Bohemians supporter — a rival of both the Rovers and St. Pat's. For him, walking into the enemy's stadium is like asking Rudolf Nureyev to play Twister.

A pre-match get-together soothes his indignity, though. With a smile, McGrath presents his visitor with a red scarf of his favorite soccer team.

"I COULDN'T let you go home without having one of these," he said, presenting the scarf like a religious article.

We talk a little soccer, but the conversation quickly turns to American football, something that permeated the Irish sporting scene. McGrath is a wide receiver on the Dublin Tornado along with Walsh.

"Bo Schenbecker is the president of a baseball team?," asks McGrath incredulously. "He seems far too intense for that."

On the subject of intensity, McGrath assures us that Irish soccer fans are much more tame than the British variety. This holds true until the referee misses an obvious foul on a Shamrock Rovers' player late in the second half.

A howl goes up from the terraces, a place where a team's most fervent supporters stand. Several beer cans are hurled onto the field along with a smoke bomb.

The match ends in a 0-0 draw.

Afterward, we go to Wright's home for dinner. Boiled potatoes, green beans and pork are served, as close as it gets to traditional Irish food. Wright switches on the TV to a football game between the Buffalo Bills and the Cincinnati Bengals.

Then we head over to Corrigan's. Inside, the place looks like a family reunion. Young and old alike laugh and enjoy one last drink before the reality of work week sets in.

THE PLACE closes at 11:30 p.m. with the barkeep yelling for everyone to evacuate and no one listening. Finally, we head to the door with the realization our Dublin Days are down to minutes.

We take in one last sight down the street — Kilmainham Jail. This is where several members of the 1916 Easter Rising were imprisoned and later executed. Rebel James Connolly, in fact, was injured and in a wheelchair when the British propped him up and shot him.

Anger sparked by the incident led the Irish people to side with the band of revolutionaries ultimately leading to Ireland's independence.

"We've had a great time showing you around," says Wright as we look at the iron gate of the prison. "We go by these places every day and sort of take it for granted."

But one rite of Irish life had yet to be experienced. We head down to Larry's Take-Away for some fish and chips. The cholesterol, not to mention the salt, would give a rabbit a heart attack.

Nonetheless, the batter-dipped fish and fried potatoes are savoried to the last greasy piece. Finally, at this moment, we thought to have escaped the shadow of America and all its culture.

At least it was until we turned the corner. Then, there it was in all its bright lights and splendor — a 7-Eleven.

O'Connor apparently is a common name in Ireland. There's pubs, even this restaurant in Kilarney bearing a familiar name for Larry O'Connor.



During the day, Dubliners hustle to and fro and buses cruise up and down O'Connell Street in downtown Dublin.