

Quaint with many shades of green, Ireland's a gem

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Ireland is comprised of more shades of green than you can count. Not highly populated, the countryside is generally agricultural with rolling hills dotted with sheep. Cities are relatively small and towns are quaint and colorful with painted storefronts. Most of the cities we visited were easily walkable.

Temperatures are mild by our standards, ranging from the 70s to the 40s with rain always a possibility. Probably the best months for price and weather are April, May and October. Pack a sturdy pair of shoes, umbrella, casual clothes, wind-breaker and sweater or sweat shirt. You'll find the people friendly and eager to help.

Bring a hearty appetite. The cuisine is cosmopolitan. Irish breakfasts are substantial, portions are ample, especially the varied vegetables. Root vegetables like turnip, were mixed with other vegetables. Salads were almost nonexistent, but delicious soups delighted our palates. Fresh salmon, caught in the local rivers, is popular and delicious. To our surprise, coffee shops have appeared everywhere even in the small towns.

We chose the seven-day *Irish Highlights Tour* from Trafalgar Tours. Most participants opt for

the package that includes airfare from their home city and airport transfers. If you plan to visit the United Kingdom first, and book the land-only package, your trip will begin in Dublin. The most popular trips in Ireland seem to be for one week to ten days, traversing the southern part of Ireland from Dublin to Kilkenny, Waterford, Cork, Blarney, Kenmare and Killybegs, then up the west coast to Limerick and Galway before returning to Dublin.

BUS TRAVEL

Bus tours in Ireland offer some advantages. You don't have to drive the rural roads, you'll see a lot of tourist highlights, and get a guide to explain it all.

Dublin, the largest city and capital of Ireland, is home to literary giants Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce. A mecca for the erudite is the Dublin Writers Museum, housed in a stunning Georgian mansion. Dublin's attractions range from castles and museums to art galleries and cathedrals.

A historically entertaining place to visit is the Guinness Storehouse. Once the home of the world's most famous brewer, it now depicts the 250-year history of beer-making. At



The fabulous 100 mile Ring of Kerry traverses a peninsula with the most scenic views of beautiful Dingle Bay.

the end of the tour is the Gravity Bar where visitors receive a free pint of stout or soda and a spectacular view of Dublin.

The building also houses a restaurant and art exhibit.

City Tour, offered by Hop on-Hop Off, is a great way to see the sights. The tours, lasting one hour and 15 minutes, allow you to hop on or off at any of the 16 stops. Buses leave every 10 minutes.

CASTLES, CRYSTAL

Next on to Kilkenny to see its ancient castle, a medieval fortress, on 50 acres, and Reginald's Tower, dating from A.D. 1002, en route to the Waterford Crystal Gallery, the No. 1 attraction, founded in 1783.

Several movies have been made in Ireland, including *Pearl's 1936* and *Braveheart*. Ireland is also the birthplace of

some well-known actors including Pierce Brosnan and Peter O'Toole. We stopped in Youghal, where *Moby Dick* was filmed, and traveled on to Cork to visit Blarney Castle. The castle was built in 1446, and although what remains is a shell of a massive square tower, it's famous for the Blarney Stone. It's difficult to reach but that does not stop tourists from kissing it to acquire the "gift of gab."

Our bus covered the fabulous 100 mile Ring of Kerry. The road traverses a peninsula with the most scenic views of the peaks of MacGillivuddy's Reeks, cliffs, lush lakes of Kilkenny, beaches and beautiful Dingle Bay. Lunch was at Waterville on the Atlantic Ocean, location of Charlie Chaplin's hideaway.

Adare, the third largest city and part on the River Shannon, is a lovely village with thatched roofs and Tudor-style houses. A visit to the medieval Bunratty Castle gave us the chance to see a restored castle with authentic furniture, tapestries and works of art. The castle is the focal point of a 20-acre theme park, Bunratty Folk Park. This is a re-creation of a typical 19th century Irish village with thatched cottages, farmhouses, village streets with shops and pubs, all open for browsing. It included use of a small-scale Greenfield Village.

IF YOU GO

Tour companies to explore include:
■ Trafalgar Tours - (800) 222-7131, www.trafalgartours.com
■ Go Ahead Tours - (800) 242-4686, www.goaheadvacations.com
■ For information about Ireland call The Irish Tourist Board (800) 223-6470, www.Irelandtravel.ie, E-mail info@irishtouristboard.com.

Galway is a major city with a population of 57,000. It's well-known for its university and the traditional Claddagh ring, with clasped hands representing friendship, a symbol dating from Roman times.

At the culmination of a trip to Ireland everyone should take in a good Irish dinner show consisting of a comedian, singers, and of course, Irish dancers. We didn't see one leprechaun, but in the sea of green that is Ireland, they are easily camouflaged.

Norma and Wendy Schonkreiter are a mother/daughter travel writing team. Norma lives in Farmington Hills and Wendy in Seattle.

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