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Does the ‘Real’ Ireland Still Exist?



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Street signs to just about anywhere in Ballyvaughan in the west of Ireland. [More Photos »](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/05/18/travel/0518-IRELAND_index.html)

By DAN BARRY Published: May 18, 2008

AN August night in the sea-scented village of Kinvara finds us at Connolly’s, a pub so permanent that if some codger were to tell you it was here before [Galway](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/europe/ireland/galway/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo) Bay, lapping now just outside the door, you’d nod and buy him a pint. My wife and I are hunched at a small table with friends when a smiling woman in a peasant skirt sits beside us, carrying a perfectly appropriate accessory in this corner of [Ireland](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/europe/ireland/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo) — a button accordion.

She is Mary Staunton, a musician known throughout the Irish west. When the inevitable call goes out, she obliges, her fingers skipping across the buttons like children playing frantic but sure-footed hopscotch. Then a white-haired man mentions an old song from his childhood. Does she know it? Why yes, she does, and when her fingers finish their dance, leaving the man smiling, there suddenly rises from across the room the hesitant but clear voice of a young woman who has summoned the nerve to sing. (“And I said let grief be a fallen leaf/At the dawning of the day.”) As she sings, all talking stops: an entire pub, transported. And I think to myself, now this would never happen where I’m from.

Was this the real Ireland? Or was it a rare dash of magic, sprinkled into Connolly’s to validate an antiquated sense of Ireland — a sense rooted in the days when economic inequity between two countries allowed American tourists to spend as though Ireland were one sprawling duty-free shop? Though the country is now experiencing some economic uneasiness, you still cannot help but think: How times have changed.

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time in the western counties of Galway and Clare, and if nothing else, this is what I have gleaned: Ireland can be that place you missed as you traveled around Ireland, looking for Ireland.

Yes, you can find a thatched cottage here and there, if you try. Yes, you may even encounter a white clot of sheep blocking your rented car’s path, raising from musty memory some postcard caption about Irish Rush Hour. But to wander about, looking to bag with a digital camera some approximation of a time-faded Irish postcard, is to miss the complexities of a country that is thoroughly enjoying its wealth and adapting to its European Union membership while at the same time trying to preserve its dreamlike landscape and proud cultural heritage.

You may indeed hear a young Irish woman suddenly break into song in Kinvara. But you may also walk around the corner and be served dinner by a young man with an Eastern European accent instead of a brogue. Travel 10 miles up the road to Gort and you might wade into a celebration of Brazilian culture, staged by a transplanted community that is now an integral part of that old market town.

There you have it: delightful, post-millennial Ireland.

Well versed by now in the lesson that to search for Ireland is to miss it, my family and I once again settled into a self-catered apartment in Kinvara, a village cleaved to Galway Bay near the Clare-Galway border. A generation ago, even a decade ago, you might have called it an unhurried place; now Kinvara captures the transformation of Ireland in so many ways.

The village has a few narrow streets, some shops and pubs, and a stone-walled pier more than 200 years old, from which the distant lights of Galway City can be seen at night and the inhalations and exhalations of the sea can be measured. Across from the pier there looms Dunguaire Castle, which for nearly five centuries has stood on grounds near the ancient fort of Guaire, seventh-century King of Connaught.

The castle’s topmost open windows offer a panoramic view of a Kinvara in flux. Much of the surrounding farmland is being subdivided for new homes, some of them being offered for the equivalent of $1 million and more; they appeal to young professionals looking for an easy commute into Galway, and to affluent Dubliners seeking a second-home getaway. It all leaves one wondering whether the village’s aesthetics are at risk; whether these new developments, and the taxing of the fragile infrastructure they represent, will make Kinvara less — Kinvara-like.

But for now, Kinvara presents curious juxtapositions of the old and the new. Here, for example, an inviting place called the Burren Beo Café occupies an old stone storefront where wireless access is available and where tombstones from a long-gone churchyard adorn the patio. You can sip your caffè latte and imagine the life led by one Bryan Daly, who departed this life at the age of 33, in 1816, and whose headstone lies flat at your feet.

THOUGH Kinvara is perfectly situated for day trips to other points of the Irish west, I often struggle with whether to stay or to go, lulled as I am by the mundane daily rhythms of a village I have come to know in all seasons.

In the mornings, I watch the same white-bearded fisherman — said to be Kinvara’s last — park his old black bicycle by the pier, row a skiff to his rusty-green vessel, and disappear into the bay. Sometime later I see him rowing back to shore, where he mounts his bicycle and vanishes down a narrow lane, leaving me to wonder whether I had actually seen him or simply imagined him.

In the afternoons, I sometimes see the beer truck pull up to Connolly’s, and I watch the deliveryman throw a seat cushion on the ground, bounce the beer kegs precisely onto the cushion, then spin them like squat and silvery dance partners toward the pub door.

And in the evenings, I take walks with my wife and two young daughters along a worn path that meanders along the shoreline and through pastures where cows, horses and donkeys approach, as if seeking the latest gossip from Connolly’s. At the stony pier we watch the bobbing of moored Galway hookers, traditional wooden sailing boats with single masts and glorious billowing sails. Once used to import turf from rocky [Connemara](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/europe/ireland/connemara/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo), the hookers are now the star attraction of a mid-August festival called Cruinniu na mBad, or Gathering of the Boats.

The sun drops, and somewhere voices are raised in song, seducing you to stay snug in Kinvara. But other places beckon, places dotted through the west that represent the old, the new, the real Ireland. If you were to climb again up those stone steps of Dunguaire Castle and peer again through one of those narrow windows, you would see beyond the village a limestone moonscape of hills and crevices, of wild goats and wildflowers, that stretches for more than 100 square miles across North Clare. This is the Burren.

Take any crooked Burren road, whether to Kilfenora or to Lisdoonvarna, to Tubber or to Cassidy’s Pub, and something ancient — a solitary Celtic cross, a crumbled farmhouse, one of the megalithic tombs of stone called dolmens — presents itself. One rain-swept afternoon, friends led us to a Burren mountain called Slieve Carron, which stretches across the horizon like a giant in repose. We donned slickers and walked a mile across cow-pocked fields, through some brush, up a muddy hill, to a tree-canopied pocket as lush as any hobbit’s grotto. Here was an altar made of rock slab beside a spring. And here, deeper in, was a cave where St. Colman MacDuagh is said to have lived and meditated. No beeping of backhoes clearing way for another luxury home; just the beating of rain against leaves.

This sense of exposure, even oneness, with sky, rock and water continues through the short, winding drive from Slieve Carron to New Quay. Found there is a semi-secret place called the Flaggy Shore, a stony stretch along Galway Bay that is alive with lime-green seaweed and bruised-purple algae, with tidal pools and breath-catching winds, with — well, best to step aside and let the unmatchable Seamus Heaney describe the Flaggy Shore experience in his poem “Postscript”:

*... You are neither here nor there,*

*A hurry through which known and strange things pass*

*As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways*

*And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.*

Half a mile away, at the back door of Linnane’s Lobster Bar, [fishing](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/fishing/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) boats rock in the impatient tide; at its front door, two rumpled regulars sit on upturned kegs, offering nods and how-are-ye’s. Between these portals, fine fish and chowder are served. But on this day, and on a patch of pasture just outside Linnane’s and beyond a stone wall, there sit two sleek private helicopters, so out of place in these simple surroundings — and yet very much in their proper place in the Ireland of today. The very rich in Ireland think nothing of zipping by helicopter the 130 miles from [Dublin](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/europe/ireland/dublin/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo) to Galway or Clare for a leisurely lunch of oysters and then back again, thus avoiding the off chance of traffic congestion caused by sheep on some secondary road.

In the Ireland of today, even the famous Cliffs of Moher are different. Not long ago the amenities included a small parking lot, a modest cafeteria and a gift shop. But with the completion early last year of a multimillion-dollar renovation, the country’s most popular tourist attraction now includes the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience, a multimedia center cleverly built into the hillside. It could have been cheesy; instead, it is mesmerizing, with audio-visual presentations that celebrate the intertwined stories of rock, water and humankind.

But the real always trumps the virtual. The cliffs remain a pulse-racing place where a four-mile stretch of improbable green land suddenly stops, and walls of shale and flagstone drop several hundred feet to receive the angry white-foam crashes of the Atlantic.

A change in infrastructure is one thing; a change in culture is quite another. And nowhere is this change more strongly felt than in Gort, about 40 miles northeast of the cliffs and just a dozen miles from Kinvara. My mother grew up on a farm near there, and I’ve been visiting Gort since the 1970s. I have watched it gradually grow from an aged and insular town to a bedroom community for Galway City, some 20 miles away. Farms I remember are now Levittown-like subdivisions.

The real change, though, is in Gort’s new and sizable Brazilian community, attracted in part by job opportunities at a local meat-processing plant. The impact has been extraordinary: Brazilian [music](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/music/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) nights in one of the pubs, Brazilian necessities — from maracuja to mandioca — in the shops, and a Sunday Mass said in Portuguese. There has been the usual awkwardness in this marriage of two distinct cultures, but for the most part the newcomers have been warmly accepted; for example, when carbon monoxide from a faulty oil burner killed two Brazilian men nearly three years ago, townspeople banded together to raise money to help the families.

And every June, Gort serves as host to a traditional Brazilian festival called the Quadrilha. The town center comes alive with folk dances and passionate sambas that could never be confused with an Irish step dance, while the air fills with the aroma of Brazilian cuisine that could never be confused with brown bread and tea.

You will see the Irish at the Quadrilha, some of them wearing the soccer jerseys of [Brazil](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/central-and-south-america/brazil/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo)’s national team, just as you will see Brazilians two months later at the Gort Show, an annual agricultural fair, where inside the community center, locals compete for best mince pie and handsomest heads of [garden](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/gardens/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) cabbage, while in the fields outside, judges in bowler hats ponder before selecting the best-colored colt, filly or gelding. The new Gort is reflected in the flags of Ireland and Brazil that sometimes hang in shop windows, the green in both nearly blending.

Any day trip through the west of Ireland will lead to some new discovery, some new reflection of the steady departure from a twee past that was never quite as twee as tourists might imagine. Yes, there are still places like Cong, the adorable little village in [County Mayo](http://travel.nytimes.com/travel/guides/europe/ireland/county-mayo/overview.html?inline=nyt-geo) whose economy even now hinges on its serendipitous role as the setting for “The Quiet Man,” a movie from 1952 that starred John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara. But a short drive from Cong into the Connemara wildness, where there are often stretches of nothing more than rock, craggy hills and the occasional car, you can find beside an abandoned stone farmhouse a recently built summer getaway, and another backhoe carving into the scenery to make way for another second home. Remote Connemara is no longer remote, and no longer cheap.

There is so much to experience in Connemara, from the ruggedness of its Twelve Bens mountain range to the refined comfort at its old Renvyle House Hotel, that it can seem almost too much at times. And so I return to that place I know a little, Kinvara.

I know that when the evening tide rises at the pier in nearby Parkmore, the sprat-chasing mackerel nearly leap into your pail. I know that on the short ride back to town, in a stamp-size spot called Nogra, there’s a century-old pub and store called Fahy’s Travellers Inn; you drink your pint, hear the murmur of local chatter, then toss your spare change into the can for the African Mission that sits on the bar.

And I know that music tends to break out.

Another August night finds us with 20 others, talking and drinking under an awning outside the Pier Head, a bar and restaurant across the quay from Connolly’s. Those majestic boats called hookers rock gently in the bay. Dunguaire Castle, set aglow by floodlights, watches over Kinvara, as always. It is raining.

Then a man I know starts singing, as is his habit at moments like these. With eyes closed, he sings an old song written by a Kinvara poet long gone, about the cuckoos calling from the woods within, and his love beside him and the tide full in. People fall quiet, many with heads bowed, creating a sense that in all of Ireland there are only these sounds: seawater lapping, rainwater tapping, and one man’s song.

*DAN BARRY is the This Land columnist for The New York Times.*

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