



# Ireland, Decidedly *Not* by the Book

**She's got no time for Blarney.**

**ANN COCHRAN's visit to the Emerald**

**Isle is all spas, horses and castles.**

Planning a vacation to a new place is half the fun, but even travel writers can become overwhelmed by the list of tourist musts that appear in every guidebook and magazine article. A bit of advice: Paying attention to your own interests, hobbies and preferences will create a more rewarding trip.

We heeded this advice on a recent trip to Ireland. So instead of kissing the Blarney Stone, buying Waterford and touring Dublin, my family and I spent our Irish vacation riding horses, enjoying a new spa and driving around the Ring of Beara. We chose multi-star accommodations over charming B&Bs. Our two nods to tradition? We decided we couldn't be in Ireland without playing golf or staying in a castle, and we traveled to Ireland on Aer Lingus.

My husband, his 26-year-old daughter, my 17-year-old son and I flew from BWI into Shannon Airport, the small, uncrowded gateway to the beautiful south and western

regions of the Emerald Isle.

We picked up our Murray's rental car and drove directly to the Cliffs of Moher en route to Galway where we were spending our first night. It was well worth the jet-lagged effort to see five miles of breathtaking cliffs rise up 650 feet out of the Atlantic. A tower at the edge provides great views and a perfect opportunity for anyone — like my teenage son — who dares to sit on the edge to have their photo taken by someone looking straight up from the base.

Ireland's weather is famously unpredictable. For us, hail fell on us twice, briefly, at the cliffs and again during a round of golf. In one day, sunny weather would yield to cool rain and back again. Layering clothing is essential in Ireland, regardless of season, and rain gear is advisable.

We chose Galway for an overnight stay because of its convenience to two natural

wonders: the bogs and mountains of Connemara, a wild, rocky area to the north; and the Burren, a vast limestone plateau to the south. It was sunny when we arrived in Galway late that afternoon, but we chose not to walk around the city. Instead, we sipped tea in the solarium that faces the bay. Over dinner in the hotel dining room, we chatted about SAT scores (my son's) and life in London (my husband's daughter). Good parenting decision but definite travel mistake, because in the morning, rain made a town tour unattractive. Driving to Connemara came off the agenda, too.

All four of us discussed our anticipated likes and dislikes before the trip, and

**Above, the countryside outside of Ennis. Facing page, clockwise from top: Dingle Peninsula, Elaine Fitzgerald and two girls rollerblading in Kinsale, a view of the Cliffs of Moher.**









Mary O'Neill, innkeeper at Seagull House in Kinsale, and owner of a local pub.

then again on this first morning of rearranged plans. We decided to be casual and frank. If we weren't in the mood to tour a church or drive to a highly recommended scenic sight, we wouldn't. If we started something and decided to cut it short, that would be okay as long as we agreed.

On that note, we headed south through the Burren, where Mediterranean and alpine plants grow side by side. In this unusual environment, 28 species of butterflies thrive, as do some odd birds and animals. April wasn't warm enough to see the flowers emerging through the limestone crevices, but before long it was sunny, and we enjoyed a beautiful drive.

Driving in Ireland is challenging, and not only because of the left-side setup. Most roads are curvy and narrow. I told the rental car company we had no preference for automatic since we drive standard; however, driving was exhausting and my husband was happy to not have the added distraction of shifting. Pre-departure, we printed directions for every leg of the trip from Ireland's automobile association Web site (TheAA.com). The only significant mistake we made was not paying attention to counties. When we ended up — bewildered — in the wrong Thomastown, an old woman in a pub laughed, "You're not the first one, dears."

Our second destination,

Kenmare, was all charm, with good restaurants, which we sampled, and live music, which we passed up in favor of getting to bed early. We stayed at The Park Hotel, built in 1897 on Kenmare Bay. The place is full of massive antiques and enormous fresh flower arrangements. Palm trees flourish there, since the region never freezes. Two South American Falabella miniature horses contentedly graze on the back lawn that sweeps down to the water.

I love a great spa, and the Park Hotel's new one, Samas, is spectacular. Guests book a three-hour block with a treatment to be

great courses in the area, including Ballybunion and the Old Head.

On the advice of the Park Hotel concierge, we took a scenic drive around the Ring of Beara instead of the Ring of Kerry, in part because Beara is supposed to be a half-day excursion instead of Kerry's full day. Aside from less mileage, there is less traffic and commercial activity on Beara because the roads can't accommodate tour buses. For us, Beara still took a full day. Did you know you can get lost on a peninsula? We did, twice, leading to lots of laughs in and out of our car. When I stopped in a pub to

## When I returned home, I searched ebay and purchased an oil painting of sheep — from a man in England.

decided upon at the appointed time, depending on your mood. The three-hour block forces you to spend time in the sauna, steam, and the shower with Irish mist, monsoon and rain forest settings. I could have spent half a day in the infinity pool experiencing the illusion of being in the nearby lake. After a flower-filled footbath and massage, the attendant brought me to an all-glass lounge where my husband's daughter Tiffany was already in a chaise swaddled in warm white towels. Tea is served, and sleep is irresistible.

Choosing convenience over fame, we golfed at the Kenmare Golf Club adjoining the hotel. Only three miles away is the Ring of Kerry Golf and Country Club, known for stunning water views. The hotel's Web site lists other

get directions, a man took one look at my Ring of Beara map and said, "Where you are is not on that map." Luckily, we were not far off route.

Later, we ended up heading across the peninsula instead of following the coast. "Shouldn't we be seeing water all the time?" asked my son Harris. Oops. In Ireland, every drive took longer than estimated, partly due to unfamiliar territory, but narrow roads with totem poles of tiny signs don't help.

A re-discovered interest in horses led me to Cross Country International, a tour company that specializes in walking tours and equestrian vacations for amateurs to Olympians. Among their Irish offerings, they have programs at Mount Juliet resort, in County Kilkenny's Thomastown.

High, bas-relief ceilings, vibrant fabrics and pale walls in Mount

Juliet's elegant dining room, library and other public rooms make it reminiscent of the White House. I easily caught the spirit of an aristocrat while riding a gorgeous horse along a river lined with fields of daffodils, past thoroughbred horses and their foals, trotting past the imposing 18th-century mansion toward the stable yard that could be a Masterpiece Theater set.

Across a few fields, resort guests can visit the impressive Ballyhinch Stud farm (brochure available for interested parties with lots of cash) and, elsewhere on the 1500 acres, Irish foxhound kennels. Golf at Mount Juliet is world-class: Jack Nicklaus designed the course, and Tiger Woods played (and slept!) here, home to the American Express World Golf Championship and the Irish Open. Like large American resorts, Mount Juliet has more activities than anyone can do in a weekend, even a long one. We never got to the trout and salmon fishing the staff is proud to discuss, or to the archery or shooting. I always manage to squeeze in a spa visit. It's not that I needed to relax, but it was great to get in from the hail.

In keeping with the aristocratic feeling Mount Juliet bestowed, our last day and night in Ireland was at Glin Castle, a 500-acre estate on the River Shannon and not too far from the airport. The property was granted to the FitzGerald family in the early 14th century. To our delight, the 29th Knight of Glin was in! No simple country squire, Desmond FitzGerald is Harvard-educated and one of Ireland's leading authorities

on decorative arts, architecture and furniture. His family has held onto this land for 700 years of riches, poverty and oppression. He and his wife, involved hosts, joined their overnight guests for dinner, breakfast and a leisurely tour.

We did not shop much in Ireland where, understandably, small-town storefronts are not open 24/7. I still wanted a good souvenir, though, and fixated on the sheep that dot every hill of the kelly green panorama. When I returned home, I searched eBay and purchased an oil painting of sheep — from a man in England. It arrived two weeks later, rolled up in a hard cardboard tube. Lovely! The painting cost \$60 and the framing \$250, but who's complaining? It is a treasured reminder of a great family vacation, its charm undiminished by country of origin or method of purchase.

### GETTING STARTED

**Galway Bay Hotel**, [GalwayBayHotel.net](http://GalwayBayHotel.net)

**Hotel Park Kenmare**, [ParkKenmare.com](http://ParkKenmare.com)

**Glin Castle**, [GlinCastle.com](http://GlinCastle.com)

**Cross Country International**, (800) 828-8768  
[EquestrianVacations.com](http://EquestrianVacations.com)



