



IRELAND

IRISH ROAD TRIP

*Slowing down and savoring the countryside,
we map a laid-back tour of hidden gems.*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL

“Can we stop and say hi to the cows?” I asked, staring out at the animals lounging in the rolling green hills.

I uttered that phrase at least twice a day to my husband during the week we drove around Ireland. He always complied, bemusedly, mentioning the cattle farm he grew up on, as he pulled over.

Normally I plan every travel detail in advance—when we went to Tanzania, I had our itinerary set 18 months before leaving JFK—this was different. Feeling the pull of wanderlust this spring, we started looking for destinations outside of cities, easy to explore and fairly inexpensive. Less than a month later we flew into Ireland.

There are many versions of this drive, but our final itinerary was a mix of the planned and the spur-of-the-moment suggestions we received. From a working farm to a seaside town where artisans use the ocean to great advantage, southwest Ireland is full of gems. Here’s where I suggest you start.

DAYS 1 THROUGH 3: GALWAY, GALLERIES + CLIFFS OF MOHER

Starving, exhausted and anxious to explore after an overnight flight, we eagerly made the mistake of accepting coffee while picking up the rental car. Taking a sip, I felt like someone had slapped me, it was so strong, basically shots of espresso disguised as coffee.

In jitters, we slowly drove on the other side of the road toward Galway, stopping at the Old Ground Hotel, a beautiful, historic manor house and, most importantly, one of the few places serving an early breakfast. After eating assorted baked goods, on which we slathered more than an acceptable amount of fresh jams and butter, we stretched out legs in Galway, walking along the Salthill Promenade, ducking into a few shops before getting back in the car to find our hotel. With me only yelling a couple of times: “You’re on the wrong side of the road!” we got sidetracked by Dunguaire Castle on the southeastern shore of Galway Bay before arriving at the Waters Country House, a B&B built atop a natural spring, surrounded by lush hills.

The next couple of days were the stuff of dreams. Waking up to fresh pastries, more jams and not quite so strong coffee before wandering about the nearby towns; Ennistymon with its art

galleries, Lahinch, with its surfers, and on a drizzly, foggy morning, walking the stunning green Cliffs of Moher.

Proposed Stops: Waters Country House, McSwiggan’s Bar & Restaurant, Galway (order the Seafood & Shellfish Coquille); L’Arco Italian Restaurant, Ballyvaughan, An Teach Bia; Ennistymon.

DAY 4: ON THE FARM

“I’m sorry I’m moving a little slow today, I butchered the pigs yesterday,” Caroline Rigney says as she greets us with warm scones at her farm. I’m not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed we missed that.

The flakey, buttery raisin scones are the first hint of the comfort food we’re about to enjoy during our stay. Tucked into the Limerick countryside, the farm is out of a storybook. A red stone farmhouse that doubles as a B&B seems to raise out of the country lane, welcoming in visitors while friendly dogs hurry to sniff them. Rigney and her husband, Joe, raise rare-breed animals, including large, Tamworth pigs, a breed unchanged for hundreds of years. The couple started the farm from scratch, uprooting their city-based lives after falling in love with the plot of land that is now Rigney’s farm. It’s blissfully quiet, with not much nearby except for a 700-acre forest with 1,500-year-old trees. There’s no Wi-Fi and only a few TV channels on the small set, not that there’s any interest in turning it on when there’s a farm to wander and animals eager to let you feed them.

We awoke the next morning to a breakfast of omelets, sausage, bacon and granola all made on the farm. The type of meal that’s decadent without leaving you too stuffed.

DAY 5: OLD WORLD CHARM + NEW EATS IN DINGLE

Over the hills and through the woods, Dingle proves Ireland has the charm thing down. “Quaint” and “adorable” came to mind as we drove through the fishing town full of narrow streets with signs in Gaelic.

Here, farm to table is a way of life. Two Murphy’s Ice Cream locations mean you can start with a cone on one side of Dingle and get another for the walk back to your hotel. All the ice cream is made by hand, but it’s the “salann,” made with

Alternate routes.

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Dingle sea salt, sweet with a pleasantly briny taste I obsessed over. Throughout Dingle, ingredients from the sea steal the show. At the Little Cheese Shop, Maja Binder makes a variety of cheeses from local raw cow's milk, maturing them in a 200-year-old stone storehouse, but it's the Dilliskus Cheese, made from seaweed collected by her partner, that has made the shop a destination. Then, there's the Dingle whiskey. We discovered it by accident at a pub where we meant to order Guinness. It's was the smoothest whiskey I've ever tasted. Made from a distillery based in Dingle that also produces gin and vodka, it's the first to produce a new single-malt Irish whiskey in 25 years.

For an out-of-the-way town, Dingle has incredible nightlife. It's easy to go from pub to pub (several of which have hidden identities, Foxy John's is a hardware store during the day) listening to music.

Proposed Stops: An Capall Dubh, Paudie's Bar, Foxy Johns, The Little Cheese Shop, Murphys Ice Cream.

DAY SIX: ROMANTIC CORK

It would be easy to spend an entire trip in bustling Cork, exploring the shops, restaurants, even a museum dedicated to butter, but it was the English Market, a centuries-old food hall where we met more of Ireland's farmers, that I loved the most.

Outside the city limits, the famous Blarney Stone offered another castle to marvel at before a final night in Ireland at Castlemartyr Resort, a manor home next to the ruins of an 800-year-old castle originally built by the Knights Templar.

Waking up in the 18th-century estate with horses outside the window felt like living in a fairytale.

Proposed Stops: English Market, Cork Butter Museum, Castlemartyr Resort, Sage Restaurant. 🍷

Bridget Shirvell is a NY-based freelance writer covering food, travel and sustainability. Her work has appeared in VICE, Civil Eats, PBS NewsHour and more. When she isn't busy working, Bridget and her husband are often trying to tire out their golden retriever with long walks in the Bronx and along the Connecticut shoreline.

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