



Pub patrons listen intently to a traditional jam session in Killarney. Photo right: Ancient and modern grave stones fill a burial ground near the Kilmalkedar Church on Dingle Peninsula.



Ireland on two wheels

Discover Emerald Isle gems by biking the back roads

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"You couldn't have picked better weather for a cycling holiday in Ireland, lads," said our amicable driver on the way from Kerry Airport to the town of Killarney. The gregarious Irishman, like most of the natives we met during our travels, filled us in on the local sights — pointing out Ireland's tallest mountain, the 1,039-meter-high Mount Carruntuohil — and gave us a preview of the cordiality we would encounter throughout our week-long bike trip.

Although we arrived equipped with the requisite rain gear after repeated warnings from experienced Ireland adventurers, we discovered glorious sunshine — just the right companion for biking through the southwestern corner of the Emerald Isle.

The first visit to Ireland for two of the three of us, we had based our bike journey on advice from fellow travelers and friends. Another part of the planning process was finding an affordable flight during the height of the tourist season. We killed two birds with one stone after discovering that only inexpensive flights to Kerry Airport in County Kerry were still available at the time we wanted to go — in the beginning of August. Ryan Air, which operates out of the former U.S. Hahn Airbase, charged us about €78 a person for a round-trip flight to Kerry. If flights had been available to Shannon Airport we most likely would have planned a bike journey that took us farther north.

Preparing for trip

In preparation for our trip we searched the Internet for information, booked rental bikes online with an Irish cycle tour company, talked to fellow travelers about possible routes and read as much as we could about the country's history, its people and places to see. As fans of traditional Irish music and cycling we were assured by people who had made the trek in the past that we would easily satisfy both cravings by basing our journey around the Kerry and Dingle Peninsulas.

Our first stop was the bustling tourist mecca of Killarney. A small town by most standards, but fairly large when compared to

many of the towns in the county, Killarney's main attractions are its three streets of row-upon-row of colorfully painted pubs and restaurants, its proximity to the breathtaking Killarney National Park and central location on the roads around the Ring of Kerry and heading up to Dingle and Tralee.

Having arrived on Sunday evening we checked into a pre-booked bed and breakfast, headed downtown and were pleasantly surprised to find that the Irish Cycle Hire representative had kept his shop open late to outfit us with our trusty two-wheeled steeds, saddlebags, bike repair tools, inner tubes and a map.

Traditional music

After enjoying a meal of Indian cuisine we went in search of live music. Our first stop was an outdoor garden featuring a trio on button accordion, djembe and guitar. While the music wasn't stunning, our first taste of a freshly drawn pint of Guinness under the star-filled Irish heavens made us feel right at home. From there we wandered the streets listening to a wide variety of traditional music performed on instruments ranging from pipes to whistles, bodhrans to bouzoukis. Not a bad start.



Bikers and hikers hitch a boat ride through Killarney National Park.

Live traditional music gets under way around 9:30 p.m. in most pubs and lasts until closing around 11:30 p.m. (except during later hours Thursday through Saturday) in most pubs with the pub owner only promising that "someone" will most definitely show up eventually. What that means is that if you want a seat you had better stake out a good vantage spot sometime around 9 p.m. as the pubs grow extremely crowded with standing on-lookers once the trad music sessions get under way.

The next day we headed northwest to the town of Killorglin (setting for the annual Puck Fair festival in August) and out onto the Ring of Kerry for a view of Dingle Bay. Wanting to pass through the picturesque Gap of Dunloe before nightfall, we headed inland at the small community of Glenbeigh, circling Lake Caragh, passing by drying stacks of black peat from the bogs and peat bog ponies, biking on little-traveled country lanes before ascending the path up through the Gap. Sharing the road with horse-drawn carriages and walkers, we were struck by the beauty of the moss-and-heather-covered rocky outcroppings, black water of the lakes and streams flowing under ancient stone bridges. Once at the top with a view of the Purple Mountain we headed down the other side into the lake district where we eventually hitched a ride on a skiff for a nine-mile ride through twisting waterways and out onto the lakes of Killarney. Another five-mile bike ride took us past Torc Waterfall, Muckross Estate and back to the tourist bustle of Killarney.

Cozy pubs

That night with sore muscles and other tender body parts to show for our efforts we settled into a large family-style pub for a big-screen showing of Lord of the Dance, a meal of traditional Irish stew, a couple pints of stout and some of the best traditional music we had yet heard on the trip.

We had been told that Dingle was the place to visit for a wealth of historical sights, live music and more. After a day-long bike ride up and down hills from Killarney to Milltown, Castlemaine, the seaside resort of



Visitors enjoy a buggy ride through the Gap of Dunloe on the Kerry Peninsula.

Inch on Dingle Peninsula, Lispolie and eventually to the town of Dingle, we found another bed and breakfast, washed off the dust and sweat of the trail and headed into town.

Besides the various tourist attractions, Dingle retains its unique flavor thanks to an active fishing industry. Gaily painted pubs and restaurants line the harbor where fisher boats come and go. We discovered a wide range of dining opportunities from a vegetarian eatery to several oriental restaurants, fresh-fish grill house to traditional pub grub. But it's the music that makes Dingle truly shine. As the witching hour approached pubs all over town began packing in music enthusiasts to listen to a couple hours of jigs, reels and hornpipes played by master musicians. There's nothing

quite like the anticipation of that ephemeral moment when the twining of the pipes, fiddle and strings transports one to a higher plane.

Biking around Dingle Peninsula on Sleah Head Drive takes one through incredibly beautiful countryside, past crags that jut out into the sea, ancient burial grounds, ringforts and beehive huts from early civilizations, rustic cottages built by famine victims in the 19th century, Celtic stones, sandy beaches, woolly sheep and age-old coves. At any stop on the route one is bound to strike up a conversation with Americans of Irish ancestry on a quest to find out more about their heritage and fellow Irish bikers with advice about historical sights and road hazards on the sinuous coastal roadway.

Stopping for lunch in the tiny village of Ballyferriter we were rewarded with four pubs in a row. The one we chose offered a first-rate fish chowder soup washed down with a cold pint of you guessed it — Guinness.

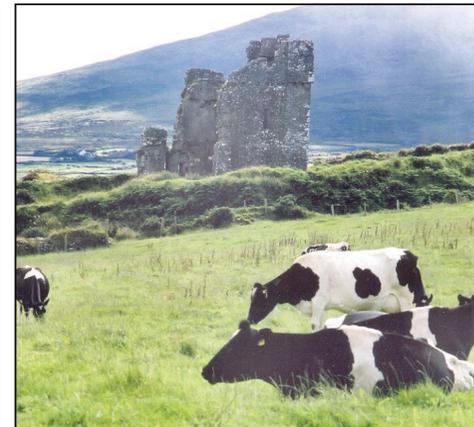
After another day and night of crisscrossing the peninsula, time at the beach and more great music, we repacked our saddlebags for the hard climb up Connor's Pass, the highest pass in Ireland, a swift ride down to the northern side of Dingle Peninsula and on to the towns of Castlegregory and Tralee.

Kerry the Kingdom

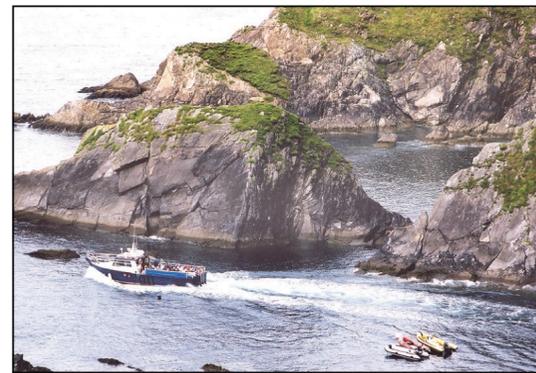
While not as charming as Dingle, Tralee too offered an evening of outstanding music and a day spent exploring Irish history. At the Kerry County Museum in Tralee, one is treated to a



Visitors explore early Irish history on the Dingle Peninsula. In ancient times people made their homes in beehive huts high over the coastal waters.



Cows graze on grass grown on ancient earth in the shadow of an age-old castle near Ventry on Dingle Peninsula. Photo left: Signs, still marked in mile distances, indicate routes from the town of Tralee. Below left: Boats make their way out of a small cove near Dunmore Head.



graveyards, pastoral views of Irish country life and amiable people along the route.

"Did you have a good trip, lads," asked the same taxi driver on the way back to Kerry Airport from Killarney, as we swapped stories about traveling around the Dingle Peninsula. We assured him we had had a great time. "Please come again, you're always welcome in Ireland," he said as he bid us well on our way home.

More information

A week is hardly enough time to cover much distance in Ireland if one wants to spend any time getting to know its people and culture. But a week-long trip does offer a very becoming introduction to this extremely visitor-friendly land. While we stayed in bed and breakfast lodgings (spending about €30 a night) along the trail, there are plenty of cheaper alternatives including hostels and campgrounds.

For more information about flights with Ryan Air to Ireland visit their website at www.Ryanair.com. For information about cycle tours and bike rentals use your Internet browser to search for the many bike companies offering that service or visit www.irishcyclehire.com. Local libraries and book stores can provide a wealth of information including such helpful guides as the Lonely Planet series about traveling in Ireland.