



FORTY SHADES OF GREEN



STARTED 26 YEARS AGO, WHEN A SCREAM WAS HEARD FROM THE MOUNTAIN," SAYS KEVIN WOODS, TALKING ANIMATEDLY ON THE BANKS OF CARLINGFORD LOCH. "LATER A LEPRECHAUN SUIT, WITH FOUR GOLD COINS IN THE POCKET, WAS FOUND NEAR A BURNT-OUT PATCH OF EARTH." A FEW YEARS LATER, KEVIN FOUND A BAG OF GOLD COINS WHILE FIXING A WALL AT HOME, AND SHORTLY AFTERWARDS HE SAW THREE LEPRECHAUNS SITTING ON A ROCK.

Now retired, Kevin devotes his time to educating people about leprechauns, and he's renowned as The Leprechaun Whisperer. He says there are just 236 leprechaun spirits left in Ireland, and they should be respected and protected.

It doesn't really matter whether you believe in leprechauns or not; when you listen to Kevin speak, you will be both intrigued and captivated by his tales. That's really the case wherever you go on the glistening green Emerald Isle; everywhere is for everyone, which makes Ireland a playground for the whole family.

Hire a car and drive the excellent motorways and scenic country roads, stopping at leisure and travelling at your own pace. It doesn't get any easier to travel in Europe, since Ireland is one of the few countries that also drives on the left-hand side of the road. This all translates into a stress-free holiday, especially if a GPS is guiding you every step of the way. Then

even the driver can sit back and, well, think of Ireland.

Most visitors land in Dublin and hire a car at the airport. The M50 ring road around the city makes it easy to pick a direction. If you head north to the land of leprechauns, stop in at the majestic Trim Castle en route – it's considered to be one of the top historical attractions, while also being the set for the movie *Braveheart*. The quaint town of Trim has more medieval buildings than any other town in Ireland.

To do an informal "study of circles", visit the Hill of Tara, which was the seat of the ancient High Kings of Ireland. It's said that a quarter of Ireland can be seen from the hill, but most impressive are the vast, raised circles on the land, covered in green grass. They are ancient passage tombs dating back to 3000BC, and give the land an otherworldly appearance. Nearby Newgrange looks like an organic flying saucer on a hill. You can go inside and squeeze along the narrowest of passages to walk where the ancients did over 5 000 years ago.

If you decide to head west, the easy-driving M6 motorway will deposit you in Galway in under three hours. En route, take a detour to the ancient ecclesiastical site of Clonmacnoise. The cathedral complex overlooks the lazy Shannon River and is sprinkled with magnificent Celtic crosses in weathered stone. It's calm, beautiful and a peep into an ancient world.

Of course, the city of Galway lies on famous Galway Bay. Not only are songs written about this relaxed Medieval city, but it's filled with music wafting softly from restaurants and pubs in the Latin Quarter, while dedicated flyfishermen stand midstream to cast their lines in the river nearby. Galway is an ideal place to stay for a few nights, and a base for day trips around the area. Take a bus tour to the wild and rugged landscapes of the Connemara, where green Irish marble is cut along with peat from the bogs. Also in the area is grey-hued and majestic Kylemore Abbey, home to Benedictine nuns, a gothic cathedral and a walled Victorian garden so perfect it doesn't look real.

On another day, take a 50-minute ferry ride out of Galway Bay to Kilronan, on the remote Aran Island of Inishmore. Exquisitely windswept and covered in patchwork green fields stitched together with dry stone walls, you can hire bicycles and see the island at your own pace. Homes on Aran are picturesque, and each has a miniature replica standing alongside. "For leprechauns," says guide Owen Hernon, "because they didn't drink enough Guinness, so they didn't grow big like us." He adds with a smile: "Inishmore has a full 20 days a year of perfect weather, with only 15 days where nobody opens the front door."

The intricately cabled Aran wool jerseys originate here, and each family has its own unique jersey pattern, knitted by the women to keep their men warm when fishing at sea.

The Aran islands seem to lie on the surface of the ocean when you see them from the iconic Cliffs of Moher. With their feet in the sea, the Cliffs of Moher are one of Ireland's great natural wonders, offering a protective wall against the moody Atlantic.



Driving along the coastline south, dainty little villages, fields of sheep and grassy-green farms make for constant roadside entertainment. Never do you drive more than a few kilometres without seeing something breathtakingly beautiful. Flowers are everywhere in colourful window boxes and gardens; villages and cities are squeaky-clean; recycling is big; wind turbines are dotted throughout the county to provide clean energy; and the good-natured Irish people live as lightly as possible.

Along a narrow, winding road lined with wild flowers such as Irish fynbos is Loop Head lighthouse, right on the tip of Loop Head Peninsular – with black-and-white dairy cows grazing all around it. From the top you can see the sheer Cliffs of Moher to the north and the Head of Kerry to the south. The Irish coastline is dramatic, and below, the groundsman is busy mowing “Loop Head” into the grass, so we know exactly where we are. With two lighthouses ticked – Black Head on Galway Bay and Loop Head today – the GPS is instructed to head south to Dingle for a third lighthouse and a lone friendly dolphin.

It’s grey-skied and drizzling in Dingle, and I ask the skipper if we are still going out to sea to look for Dingle’s most famous resident: Fungi, the dolphin. The skipper smiles widely through his red beard and answers: “Of course, there’s nothing stopping us at all, and Fungi doesn’t care about the weather anyway.” Actually, neither do the Irish, and they are out and about, rain or shine, as if it’s all the same.

Just a little way out of the harbour, the skipper spots a

dolphin, and all aboard tilt the boat as they dash to one side of the craft. “Yes, it’s Fungi,” says the skipper. And then two more dolphins appear. “Fungi and visitors,” he clarifies. “Fungi has the nick on his dorsal fin.” We are all mesmerised as the dolphins swim alongside the boat, jump clear of the water and frolic, as if with an old friend. The dolphin-watchers don’t even notice the quaint little Dingle lighthouse in the mist on the nearby headland.

Fungi is a bottlenose dolphin that arrived in Dingle Bay in 1983 and simply never left. Other bottlenoses come and go, but Fungi is always there and loves boat visits – so much so that a ticket refund is offered if he doesn’t arrive to greet you. Some say he was given the name because he is a “fun guy”, others that it’s from the ill-fated attempts at beard-growing by the first fisherman who used to visit him in the bay. Fungi always shows up.

Driving the Dingle Peninsular is a must; it’s a miniature version of the Ring of Kerry, and said to be even prettier. The peninsular is also an archaeological treasure trove, with ancient beehive huts and a stone fort, along with a fascinating prehistoric museum replete with dinosaur and many other fossils. Of course, the ocean views as you drive are spectacular, and in summer the road is hedged with wild flowers in riotous colours.

If you have more than a week of driving time, continuing through the counties of Kerry, Cork and Waterford is an obvious choice, before pointing the car back to Dublin. Out of time, counties Limerick, Tipperary, Laois and Kildare are



in my sights along the M7 back to Dublin. The gorgeous, narrow, flower-lined lanes of the countryside have made way for the wide, straight motorway. But it, too, traverses breathtaking landscapes that are always 40 shades of green.

Yes, it does rain in Ireland for the countryside to be this green and lush and pristine, but summer brings plenty of sunshine, too. Besides, even if the weather is cool, the people are always warm, and with eternal humour. With their customary Gaelic greeting of “Taw fall-cha row-at” or “you’re very welcome”, you’ll know you are.

DON'T LEAVE IRELAND WITHOUT

- Tasting Guinness beer, as well as Guinness bread, chocolate and chips.
- Walking the banks of the River Liffey in Dublin, and stopping at cafés and pubs along the way.
- The kids visiting the Leprechaun Museum in Dublin, which will make them feel Lilliputian.
- Seeing live Irish dancing at a pub, or attending the breathtaking Trad on the Prom show in Galway from May to September.
- Climbing a lighthouse for the views of the coast.
- Seeing Celtic stone crosses *in situ*.
- Going to sea to meet Fungi in Dingle Harbour. ■



For more information see:
www.tourismireland.com
www.thelastleprechaunsofireland.com
www.carlingford.ie
www.galwaytourcompany.com
www.tradontheprom.com
www.loophead.ie
www.dingle-peninsula.ie
www.dingledolphin.com
www.celticmuseum.com