

WHEN IRISH EYES ARE SMILING:
Spring-time cruising along Ireland's west coast

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by

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I peered out from under *Hawk's* hard dodger at a heaving circle of steel gray sea under an inverted bowl of white. Despite the press of sail and the angle of heel, we drew no closer to the shifting white curtain laying always a few boat lengths ahead. A procession of six-foot swells appeared behind us, lifted first our stern and then our bow, and then disappeared again. Despite the eight knots of boat speed registering on our instruments, my senses insisted we were just bobbing up and down on our little patch of gray water, not making any forward progress at all.

Somewhere off to starboard, the swell born in mid-Atlantic spring storms ruptured itself against the rocks and skerries surrounding Mizen Head, the detached headland marking Ireland's southwest corner. Ten miles over our stern lay the "teardrop of Ireland" – Fastnet Rock – for tens of thousands of reluctant emigrants, the last bit of their beloved Emerald Isle they ever laid eyes upon. Isolated in our tiny sphere of white, I found myself wondering again at the fierce love and incredible loyalty those emigrant Irish maintained for their homeland. What was it about this island, I thought, that could make born and bred Americans misty-eyed and nostalgic on St. Patrick's Day? From where I stood, I failed to see the charm.

We had woken that morning to a forecast for fresh southerlies backing southwest and increasing to gale or storm force by evening with poor visibility in fog, showers and heavy rain. Not a day we would normally have chosen for a twenty-five mile coastal hop, but southwest winds funneled up Crookhaven Harbour, the narrow inlet where we had spent the last few days, and a storm from that direction would make the anchorage uncomfortable if not untenable. Since leaving our winter berth in Kinsale in mid-March a few weeks before, we had learned the importance of flexibility in dealing with Ireland's temperamental spring weather. We set aside our fantasies of sailing around Fastnet in light winds and sunshine and headed for Lawrence Cove on Bere Island at the mouth of Bantry Bay, the first all-weather harbor after rounding Mizen Head.

Had it been a bright, sunny day, the next few hours would have been idyllic – with eighteen knots of wind on the beam, we averaged an easy eight knots under working sails. But the poor visibility and an announcement of "imminent" gale-force winds made us heave a

sigh of relief when we rounded the easternmost point of Bere Island and entered Berehaven, the half-mile wide, six-mile long channel separating Bere Island from the Beara Peninsula.

Regarded as the finest natural harbor on the west coast of Ireland, Berehaven played a key strategic role in controlling the Atlantic during World War I when the entire British fleet lay at anchor here on several occasions. Churchill complained bitterly when Neville Chamberlain gave the island and the harbor back to the fledgling Republic of Ireland in 1938 right before the outbreak of World War II, and he secretly negotiated to trade the six counties of Northern Ireland for the right to use this harbor during the war. But the Irish remained resolutely neutral, leaving Churchill to rely on harbors in Northern Ireland and Scotland and us to wonder how a united Ireland might have altered the last sixty years of history.

As we entered Lawrence Cove, a cozy notch cut into the northeast corner of Bere Island, the fog lifted enough to reveal low, rocky hills covered with the yellow blossoms of blooming gorse amidst the faded gold and green of last year's grass. In the close embrace of the nearby ridges, the wind died completely, leaving us to motor across a placid lagoon toward the small marina tucked at the head of the narrow cove. We approached the first pontoon to see a burly man dressed in a black slicker striding down the dock to meet us. As he caught our lines a woman joined him. "You know, we're really not open yet," she said, and then proceeded to make us feel as if we were old friends returning for a long-anticipated visit.

By the time *Hawk* had been fueled and watered and secured to withstand hurricane-force winds, Phil and John Harrington, the owners of the Lawrence Cove Marina, had recounted the history of half the boats on the docks, given us walking maps and guides to the island and directed us to the small community of Rerrin for groceries and a pub. In the one-lane village of half a dozen colorful buildings just over the hill from the marina, we wistfully read the menu outside Kitty's Café, not yet open for the season. Just then, Kitty herself popped out the door to shake out a feather duster. She took one look at us and shoed us inside, seated us by the peat fire, handed us the newspaper and disappeared. A few minutes later she reappeared with grilled sandwiches and salad while repeatedly apologizing for the sloppiness of the tidy little room, her work clothes and the lack of anything substantial to eat.

A few hours later, as I snuggled up against Evans' back under our down comforter in our forepeak berth, only the occasional slap of a halyard against the top of the mast and the low moan high overhead hinted at the storm raging outside our sheltered cove.

Ireland's magic lies in such simple day-to-day experiences. The Emerald Isle casts a spell over people. The most cynical visitors succumb to the irresistible charm of quaint

villages full of colorful houses, rolling green and gold fields bordered by undulating drystone walls and the inevitable rainbow arcing across the horizon between humpbacked mountains. But the real charm of Ireland lies in its open and friendly people, who have so far rejected the helter-skelter pace and suspicious reserve of the modern world. The Irish still have time to spend with their neighbors elbow-to-elbow in a tiny pub, over a pint that lasts most of the night. Everyone from age eight to eighty participates in an evening of Irish music, including visitors who will be boisterously encouraged to sing a solo before they leave.

But the country has more than its share of kitschy souvenir shops selling key rings decorated with leprechauns or four-leaf clovers and “tourist” pubs that faithfully simulate the trappings but fail to deliver the essence. Traveling by boat allowed us to avoid most of this. But even more, sailing speed proved eminently well suited to absorbing and experiencing both the scenery and the culture of Eire.

A few days after our foggy rounding of Mizen Head, we left Berehaven to explore the half-dozen anchorages in Bantry Bay. The sun shone brightly, the water sparkled and we could see all the way down the twenty-mile long bay. Hungry Hill, an eroding peak of glacier-scoured gray rock that rises to almost 2,000 feet, dominated the rugged Caha Mountains, the rocky spine of the Beara peninsula. A swirl of black rock and yellowed vegetation covered the barren peaks, making the fringe of green fields studded with white houses at their bases seem unbelievably soft, lush and fertile. The light changed constantly, turning brilliant a white house and green field in the foreground before skipping up to brush a rocky crag in the background; a minute later, the mid-ground of gorse and scrub would be illuminated and the rest of the scene would be shadowed.

That changing light transformed the scenery from moment to moment, while ashore the scenery itself changed – the rugged, blasted-looking, rock-covered peaks rising and falling behind the fields dotted with sheep and clusters of houses. For several minutes, the sun’s rays picked out a waterfall dropping sheer from two-thirds the way up a mountain in a tracery of lacy, white plumes. Then light and shadow shifted, and the waterfall was gone, leaving us wondering if it had really been there at all.

As we approached the town of Bantry, the rich smell of peat smoke met us before we’d even dropped the anchor. It led us ashore and into a pub, where we savored a bowl of thick fish chowder before the glowing embers of the peat fire. In the middle of the banter and blarney that accompanies an authentic pub lunch, the bespectacled publican gave us a wink. “Living off the interest, are ye?” “Starving artists, more like,” I responded. A disbelieving

smile left little doubt my answer had fallen into the blarney category. In the sum of such multi-faceted experiences, glimpsed but rarely grasped by visitors traveling at automobile pace, lay the country's real magic. Sailing this coast allowed us to absorb Ireland, to let it seep into our pores and get under our skin.

“There's breaking water about a hundred yards off that point,” I said. “There – did you see it?”

“Got it,” Evans responded. He stood on the cockpit seat holding a folded chart in a Ziploc bag looking out over the hard dodger. We had left Inishbofin, one of a series of offshore islands paralleling the west coast, an hour ago, bound for Killary Harbour, the only sea loch in Ireland. As we had moved further north over the last few weeks, the sailing had grown more challenging. Since Galway, the water had become increasingly shoal, and many harbors lacked sufficient depths for our seven-foot draft. Small islands, scattered rocks and large shoal patches surrounded the larger islands and blocked the harbor entrances. On the chart Evans held, asterisks surrounded by yellow patches and large green splotches lay strewn across the blue water we were navigating, itself carrying ominous notices like, “Pollock Shoal – breaks” and “O'Malley's Breakers.” As we closed with the mainland, we had rocks, breaking water or small islands on every side, some only a few hundred yards away. For the first time, I was grateful for the large Atlantic swell which broke over anything less than eight feet deep.

Inishbofin, or Bofin Island as Inish means “island” in Gaelic, served as the center of piracy along this coast for many years, a constant thorn in the side of the British during the reigns of King Henry VIII and his daughter, Queen Elizabeth. Grace O'Malley, the pirate queen, used Inishbofin's splendid natural harbor to shelter her fleet of pirate galleys. She raided as far away as Scotland, and in 1596, at the age of 66, she's reported to have raided the island of Barra, the southernmost of the Outer Hebrides chain. But the increasing size and firepower of the English warships eventually overwhelmed her fleet of fast sailing, thin-skinned vessels, until the English could finally claim in 1600, the year Grace O'Malley died, that they had cleared the coast of pirates.

The other offlying islands we had sailed by or visited in the past few weeks had histories every bit as colorful as Inishbofin – and even more ancient. Skellig Michael, the 700-foot high rock lying off Bollus Head just south of Valentia Island, served as a monastic retreat for Coptic monks from the 7th to the 12th or 13th centuries. The thousand-year old monastery buildings lay on a ledge, called Christ's Saddle, up 500 feet of stone stairs. In

Galway Bay, Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands, appeared to be one continuous layered wall of gray stones when we sailed along its shores. Originally, the island consisted of flat, limestone rocks covered with boulders, but, over the course of three and a half millennia, successive inhabitants stacked the boulders into fences, broke up the flat slabs and made more fences, then covered the rocky ground with a combination of seaweed and sand to create topsoil. Now boulder or block stone fences, hand laid without mortar, divide the island into thousands of grassy plots the size of small suburban yards.

I'm not sure what impressed me most - the work required to make such inhospitable bits of land support a human population, the challenges of navigating vessels powered by sails or oars through the surrounding reef-strewn waters or the pressures of population and warfare that would have made either necessary. But in the history of this coast, we began to glimpse the forces shaping the Irish, forces that stretched back some 5,000 years to the standing stones and passage tombs of prehistory.

As we entered magnificent Killary Harbour, an eight-mile long sea loch bordered by 2,500-foot high mountains on one side and steep-sided hills on the other, the future stood juxtaposed against the past. A fishing boat lay alongside several of the large blue buoys arrayed in neat rows beneath steep slopes covered with what looked like a cultivated field, the furrows standing out against the pale green backdrop. The binoculars revealed that this cultivation was very old, the remnant of several centuries of labor that ended a very long time ago. Much of this land was totally depopulated during the potato famine that ravaged Ireland from 1845 to 1851, when about one million people died and another million emigrated, reducing Ireland's population by one-quarter. As we approached the boat lying under these long-fallow fields, three men heaved one of the buoys up on deck and began harvesting mussels off the ropes underneath. They waved energetically as we passed, and I realized that one form of farming had given way to another in this eight-mile long fjord.

Similar economic transformations have occurred throughout the country. Ireland's booming economy has brought back a generation of men who spent decades abroad sending money home to wives and children. We met them leading tours, driving taxis, opening B&Bs, working fish farms and starting small computer businesses all along this coast. This unexpected prosperity took us aback – the country's *Angela's Ashes* image has yet to catch up with the reality of its Emerald tiger economy. The Irish we got to know greeted this new-found prosperity with a "Thanks be to God," the same way they welcomed a bright, sunny day. They had lived with poverty too long to expect this sudden reversal of fortune to be any more reliable than the weather.

As we left Ireland's Blacksod Bay a few weeks later bound for the Outer Hebrides, a certain bitter sweetness accompanied our departure. Maybe, when we finally decided to give up our nomadic existence, we could buy a small cottage in one of the delightful little villages on the west coast and I could watch the changing light and the restless ocean through the window over my desk while I wrote, then we'd retire to the local pub of an evening for a pint in front of the fire and some banter with our neighbors...

Aids to navigation. Like the rest of Europe, Ireland uses the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) System A that puts red buoys to port when returning to harbor – the opposite of the American system. The further north we went on the west coast, the less likely hazards were to be marked.

Charts/guides. The Imray charts proved to be inexpensive, accurate and detailed enough in conjunction with the Irish Cruising Club sailing directions, *South and West Coasts of Ireland*. The charts are made of waterproof paper and hold up reasonably well in the damp weather. Imray charts C53, C54, C55 and C56 cover the entire west coast of Ireland. The ICC guide is widely available and the newest edition has been updated to include more detailed information north of Galway.

Chartering. Chartering options remain limited along this coast, although more boats and operators appear each year. Sail Ireland Charters, the only bareboat operation, is based in Kinsale on the south coast within striking distance of Bantry Bay on a two-week charter. A number of crewed yachts operate in Irish waters and most will accommodate any itinerary, up to and including a ten-day circumnavigation of Ireland. For the most up-to-date information, check the Sail Ireland website at www.sailingireland.com.

Fuel. Diesel can be purchased at the marinas (see below) or along fishing piers. It can also be purchased from most gas stations, however, diesel for boats is highly subsidized. We paid about \$2.00 per gallon at the marinas and \$5 per gallon at gas stations.

Marinas. Along the sixty-mile stretch of coast between Mizen Head and the Shannon River, three marinas with water and fuel can be found – Lawrence Cove Marina on Bere Island in Bantry Bay, Dingle Marina in Dingle on the Dingle peninsula and Fenit Harbour Marina in Tralee Bay just south of the Shannon estuary. Kilrush Creek Marina lies within twenty miles of the mouth of the Shannon. No marinas exist beyond the Shannon, though plans for half a dozen have been proposed. Complete information can be found on the Sail Ireland website.

Tides and currents. The MacMillan Reeds Small Craft Almanac provides tide tables and current charts. Tides vary from seven to fifteen feet, with ten being about average. The difference in the range between neaps and springs can be as much as six feet along parts of this coast, making a perfect anchoring spot untenable a week later. In many harbors, the areas around piers and docks dry at low, so care must be taken to avoid going aground if tying up.

Trip planning. We cruised the west coast in March and April, when spring gales had us holed up in sheltered anchorages every couple of days and the large swell made sailing difficult in anything less than fifteen knots of breeze. June, July and August offer much more settled conditions, with temperatures averaging in the mid-70s. September can be a wonderful month, though in some years the fall gales start in mid-September and don't end until after Christmas. To cruise the west coast, most charterers either fly into Cork and pick up a boat in Kinsale, or fly into Shannon and pick up a boat at Kilrush Marina or in Galway.

Weather. VHF weather forecasts are broadcast several times a day. An announcement on 16 includes a channel to switch to for the broadcast. Gale warnings were announced when issued and every hour or so for a few hours after. The BBC does sea area forecasts on Radio 4 on a frequency of 198 AM, 92.4/94.6 FM at 0048, 0535, 1201 and 1754 local time.