

### c. The Sunday Republican

## Ireland's WILD WILD WEST -

*Coastal beauty beckons travelers to Emerald Isle*

**By MARIE GRADY**

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light."

Next, he made the west coast of Ireland.

With apologies to biblical scholars, there is something about this misty, mystical place that harkens back to the beginning of time.

Here, green mountains seemingly carved from the Earth by a heavenly hand tower over homes built on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. At times, it seems possible to swim the depths of human existence simply by breathing in the salty air outside the back door.

Trendy cosmopolitan centers like Westport, County Mayo, notwithstanding, much of this land is God's country; close to the core; not close to the store; far away from the Weather Channel and nestled in the eye of a contrary climate that can confound order and expectation.

Warning: This is not a journey to be taken by those whose idea of a perfect vacation is basking endlessly in warm sun on a sandy shore close to the comforts of home.

It's not that the sun doesn't pay this coastal area a visit from time to time. But like so much about this country of contrast its appearance is unpredictable.

In this part of Ireland, which is less developed than bustling cities like Galway, it is not always possible to hide from Mother Nature ... or from oneself.

I know this country partly because my parents were born here. But I also know it on some deeper level, and one does not need roots here to experience this.

The west of Ireland includes the coastal counties of Clare and Mayo and the rugged, mountainous terrain of Connemara. The stark rocky landscape of those villages lining the coast was unforgiving to farmers, but its unrelenting beauty is among the reasons why so many travel here from around the world.

Nowhere is this quiet beauty more evident than in the islands of The West: Achill and Clare. (Pronounced Ak-ill and Clair). The two islands are easily accessible from mainland County Mayo, with Achill joined by a bridge and Clare Island a short, and sometimes rocky, ferry ride away.

Marie Filomena Mulcahy, a Dublin woman who has made annual pilgrimages to Achill for years, doesn't have to think too long about what makes this largest of Ireland's islands special.

"When the sun sets on the water, it's like a beautiful tapestry with many colors," she says. She is sitting alone in a large room at the Achill Sound Hotel, this woman who could be your grandmother, or your great aunt. There is only one other guest in the room enjoying breakfast but every table is set as if a crowd will walk in at any moment.

Within days it will. They will come not only to be enveloped by towering mountains and ocean breezes but to visit a house of worship dedicated to an ordinary housewife who some islanders say has divine visions.

The house was shut down after a dispute with the Catholic bishop over whether Masses could be said there. But on one day last fall, much to the delight of islanders who rent out hotel and bed-and-breakfast rooms, it was set to reopen.

The house drew busloads of visitors on its first day with the promise of redemption within. But it is hard to imagine a vision more spiritual than the scenery just outside its front door.

"There's nowhere like it," says Mulcahy in a soft voice full of wonder. "It affects you. When you go other places, you enjoy it, but here ... it's very hard to explain it. It makes you think a lot."

It's easy to see why the 56 square miles of Achill are still known as a vacation resort for some Irish as well as tourists. Beaches featuring beautiful white strands are nestled in mountains that feature the highest cliff face in Europe, rising some 2,000 feet out of the sea.

But remnants of a deserted village of stone cottages bring alive a time when the rugged landscape was not so forgiving to its inhabitants. The 3,000 or so people of this island eked out an existence on soil and sea, but the rocky climate was not ideal for farming. For all its fierce beauty, this island was also once known as a place of religious conflict after the potato blight of the 19th century swallowed the main form of subsistence. Many Catholics converted and received aid from Protestant missions while others went to their graves cursing forever those who left their faith for food.

I found this island by pointing my rental car toward Galway from Shannon International Airport in Clare. I picked up Route N18 to Route N59 through Connemara, past Louisburg, Wesport, Newport and Mulrany in County Mayo.

Along the way it is possible in Murrisk, County Mayo, to visit Croagh Patrick, the mountain where St. Patrick is said to have fasted and prayed before converting Ireland's people from pagan-based religions to Catholicism.

Driving through Connemara itself is a sensory experience. Clouds hover over moss-covered mountains that frame pristine lakes. Cows graze in fields. Sheep stare at travelers from grassy perches, almost beckoning them to stop for a while.

If you are driving, and I suggest you do despite high rental prices, you must be vigilant. The occasional tour bus can veer around a corner of a road that is not much wider than a cow path. The intense beauty of the landscape can cause you to forget you're on a road on Earth and not a pathway to heaven.

This must be what the Sligo-born poet William Butler Yeats was talking about when he wrote: "Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from ... every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only."

Sheep, pubs and churches. That's how a friend once described this part of Ireland. But it's also a land of recreation, with signs for horseback riding, fishing and water sports competing with signs for liquid refreshment on the long drive on the left-hand side of the road.

In this land of beauty and contrasts, a day can begin with a wild howl of wind and end with the warm glow of muted sunlight and soft mist late into the evening hours. A home whose bay window reveals a man tapping away on a computer can stand astride a road where a traffic jam can still mean a herd of ornery cows.

This is the bucolic vision of Ireland that many immigrants remember, but The West is one of the few places it still exists.

It may not exist for long, and perhaps that is good. Progress, often in the form of high-tech jobs at American-owned companies, means increasingly sophisticated cities.

But it is cities like these that many Europeans, especially Germans, come to escape.

In Ireland they will find a predominantly Catholic country of about 5 million that by the slimmest of margins only recently approved the right of couples to divorce. It is also a country led by a Taoiseach, (pronounced tee-shuck), a prime minister who lives not with his wife but a longtime female partner.

It is such contrasts that help make this country unique. But is it beautiful because it is different or different because it is beautiful?

I may have been pondering this question when I arrived on Achill after a good four-hour drive (with a stop for lunch in Galway) from Shannon International Airport. Night had fallen and the cold tendrils of the Atlantic were attempting to enfold me in their icy grip as I found shelter in the Achill Sound Hotel.

Here I found a comfortable room and a robust breakfast for under \$35 (off-season), a far cry from the nearly \$200 it cost to stay at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, the capital city far to the north.

Such price differences are not uncommon in this country, where one can often find a lovely B&B outfitted with a private bathroom and shower and complete with a large breakfast and homemade bread for \$100 less than a hotel room.

Rooms advertised as "en suite" should have a toilet and shower and generally don't cost over \$35. But if you need a telephone in your room, you should check ahead of time.

I have never had to reserve a B&B in advance since every other house seems to double as one.

Unlike the Shelbourne in Dublin, where my room included a TV and phone, this room at the Achill Sound Hotel had neither. But its pub had something more: People who knew each other's name and a man whose voice was the Irish version of Pavarotti's.

Egged on by patrons, he sang anything he could remember, and at times his memory was prodigious.

He told me he could not remember a favorite of mine, a centuries-old song called "She Moved Through the Fair," and I resisted his entreaties to sing it myself. Perhaps I had not had enough of what I consider one of the best tasting beers in the world: the amber, creamy, not too bitter, Smithwicks.

It's too bad really. I like to sing, and I sing far better than I speak. But who needs to sing when your soul is remembering melodies that resonate within?

It was later that night I found out this voice that could be Pavarotti's belonged to one Frank O'Malley. It was then I also learned that O'Malley's life had its own sad refrain.

I was still thinking about Frank O'Malley and the cancer that had not stolen his spirit when I arrived on Clare Island the next day after a 15-minute ferry ride from Louisburg, County Mayo.

Thanks to high waves generated by a storm, the short ferry ride was more like an intense amusement park thrill. But I soon found out that Clare Island has its own charms, as one pirate queen figured out centuries ago.

The five-mile long island, now inhabited by about 150 people, was the home of Grainneuaile (pronounced Gronya Wale). Also known as Grace O'Malley, she once ventured out from this quiet ocean enclave to pillage passing ships.

She was among the most respected women of her time (Queen Elizabeth I once entertained her), and she conquered men in more ways than one. She is said to have had three husbands, and the tombstones that bear the name O'Malley outside an abbey believed to hold her tomb speak to her enduring legend.

It is possible to tour this island's handful of historic sites in a rickety van for 20 pounds (\$35). But after a ride to the abbey, I found it more enjoyable to walk.

I didn't actually make it to many sites after walking for miles, but I enjoyed a solitude that was punctuated by a stop at the only store in sight.

This would have proved to be less enjoyable if the rain that morning had continued throughout the day. A whole party from Northern Ireland left on the first boat out because of their mistaken impression that the storm that followed us to the island would last more than a few hours.

Amateurs. I knew better.

Storms on this island of Ireland always seem but a passing interlude designed to remind visitors that the beauty within must be savored.

As the sun peeked through the clouds, I imagined the visage of the pirate queen Grainneuaile I pictured dark, windswept hair and ice blue eyes in the castle that locals say she lived in.

As I attempted to enter (contemplating squeezing through a window when I realized the entrance was blocked off for preservation purposes), I had a nagging suspicion she did not live here.

This nearly perfectly maintained stone fortress seemed far too close to the shore; far too close to civilization. Despite its commanding view of the ocean, it seemed too vulnerable. But, then again, vulnerability is in the eyes of the beholder. And, after all, maybe she needed to see it all: the beauty and the danger.

Perhaps the key to this pirate queen can be found in Louisburg, County Mayo, which has a museum set up in her memory. I know this quaint town near where my parents were born as much as one can know it after a fifth visit.

Much has changed since my first visit nearly 17 years ago. An uncle and two aunts have left this world. New cousins have been born.

Still, this town seems to stay the same, a comforting stop at a place my family once called home.

But one does not need a family connection here to find a peace, however fleeting, that is unparalleled in a world where deadlines and commitments can overtake the wonder of life.

In the Wild, Wild West of Ireland, it is possible in the keening wind to hear echoes of a world where all things are possible. This, it seems, is a universe where hope and truth remain forever fertile as the green hills that surround the ocean.

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