

GENTRY DESTINATIONS

RESORTS | HOMES | TRAVEL | ADVENTURE



OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2018

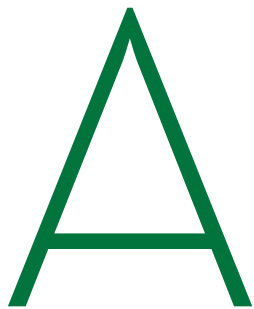
IRISH STONES AND STORIES

An elegant train journey through the Emerald Isle.

STORY BY
FREDRIC HAMBER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR,
DAVID NOTON, AND
HELEN CATHCART





ll of Ireland is like a plum cake richly stuffed with history. Over centuries, its towns and counties have lent their names to the lyrics of musical jigs and reels that can strike a fond chord of memory even in those without a drop of Irish blood. Remnants of some 3,500 castles built in the Irish isles from the 15th to 17th centuries catch one's eye in the countryside, along with pubs and churches amid plenty of proverbial green: the green of field and forest, of lichen, hawthorn, rowan shrubs, and hazel hedgerows.

A more recent feature in the Irish landscape from April through October is the Belmond Grand Hibernian, a 10-car luxury train that offers all-inclusive itineraries round-trip from Dublin.

My four-night “Legends and Loughs” journey began with a bountiful Irish afternoon tea served shortly after departure from Dublin’s Heuston Station in one of the train’s two dining cars. Scones, sandwiches, and cakes were offered as my fellow passengers and I (we were about two dozen aboard) chatted and regarded the scenery en route to Cork.

Part of the fun of such a trip is letting go, knowing that the Belmond team is handling all arrangements from start to finish. In the daydreamy logic of this journey, afternoon tea segued into an early evening visit to the Jameson whiskey distillery. After a private tour of the grounds and malting house, we were ushered into a lab-like academic room where we passed around jars of both malted and unmalted barley to sniff, before sampling four of Jameson’s premium offerings.

We didn’t linger over our empty whiskey glasses as we had to return to the train in time for cocktail hour. The Grand Hibernian’s observation car, plush with woolen rugs from Ulster and creamy walls designed with a nod to Dublin’s classic Georgian architecture, serves as a quiet spot to watch the passing views, or as a social hub during pre-dinner cocktails and canapés (one festive evening, the train manager came through bearing a huge silver tray of freshly shucked oysters). All-inclusive fares include drinks and meals and daily activities.

Onboard culinary offerings incorporate the best of Irish meat, fish, and produce from land and sea, each course accompanied by its own wine. The Donegal smoked salmon that appears on the breakfast menu has been smoked over peat, not wood. A memorable lunch began with asparagus salad and poached quail eggs with spring truffle, followed by a chowder of cod, cockles, and mussels served with a Spanish Albarino.





“All of Ireland is like a plum cake richly stuffed with history. Over centuries, its towns and counties have lent their names to the lyrics of musical jigs and reels that can strike a fond chord of memory even in those without a drop of Irish blood. Remnants of some 3,500 castles built in the Irish isles from the 15th to 17th centuries catch one’s eye in the countryside, along with pubs and churches amid plenty of proverbial green: the green of field and forest, of lichen, hawthorn, rowan shrubs, and hazel hedgerows.”

One afternoon following lunch at a Galway restaurant overlooking the River Corrib, we re-gathered at a pub for a lesson in bodhrán, the traditional Irish drum. Doireann Carney, who has performed with Riverdance, explained the three types of Irish dance, and then tested us: she danced a few steps, her toes and heels tapping on the wooden floor, and we had to echo each particular rhythm by striking our bodhráns. It was an exercise in ear, brain, and hand coordination, after which we all felt we had earned our pints of Guinness.

The guide accompanying us throughout each day, Vincent Butler, was formerly an osteo-archaeologist (he really digs bones, so to speak) who kept us engaged by sharing tidbits of Gaelic phrases, or the reasons why in some regions property lines are demarcated by ancient dry stone walls and in others by hedgerows (an Elizabethan innovation).

Sadly, I spotted no leprechauns on the journey, but Butler explained that their legend dates from Viking times when the Norse would bury their plunder and warn that it was being guarded by the elusive creatures. As we travelled via motor coach through the Burren region of County Clare and passed the 13th-century Corcomroe Abbey, Vincent read a bit of a John Betjeman poem:

*Stony seaboard, far and foreign,
Stony hills poured over space,
Stony outcrop of the Burren,
Stones in every fertile place.*

But most of the songs and doggerel we enjoyed that week were decidedly less erudite. After-dinner performers in the observation car had us clapping hands to jolly tunes like “Old Ballymoe” and “Colcannon (The Little Skillet Pot).”

The train stables overnight, which makes for peaceful sleep. Cabins are comfortably furnished with twin or double beds, a dressing table, and watercolor paintings by contemporary Irish artists. Duvets and pillows are filled with Irish duck feathers.

Each night at turndown, the cabin staff leave the next day’s itinerary near one’s bed. At Blarney Castle & Gardens, passengers of the Grand Hibernian are provided early entrance and a unique private tour to enjoy the estate amid calm before the daily crowds arrive. At Ashford Castle, now a five-star hotel where falconry is practiced, we were hosted for lunch in the capacious George V dining room.



From Ashford Castle we went to Connemara and met a genial fellow who raises and trains border collies as sheep dogs. “To go to the left of the sheep we say, ‘Come by,’” he explained. “To go to the right we say, ‘Away!’” He shouted a couple of commands to one of his dogs who obediently ran high up a hill to a flock of Connemara Blackface sheep and herded them down to us.

The Grand Hibernian offers itineraries of two, four, or seven nights. The four-night tour, which I experienced, is called “Legends and Loughs.” Among the most legendary of loughs, or lakes, is Lough Leane, where we arrived country-style, sitting in the back of the cart-and-horse contraptions known as jaunting cars. Our ride, to the steady clop-clop sound of hooves (no fancy syncopated Riverdance steps this time), took us through part of Killarney National Park, where arbutus trees, a symbol of Killarney, grow wild.

We boarded a privately chartered boat, along with a couple of string musicians and a singer. Crew from the train loaded cases of Champagne for our small group and we left shore. We passed an island that had been home to a monastery where Brian Boru, the high king of Ireland and founder of the O’Brien clan, received his education. With words and song the area came alive, both the happy times and darker periods of Irish history.

Of course, emigration has long been a part of Ireland’s story, and with it the penchant of her exiled children to look fondly back. As we sipped Champagne and regarded the silhouette of Ross Castle in the late afternoon light, we listened to the poignant words being sung:

*And when I’m alone far away from home
I’ll think of the good times once more
Until I can make it back someday here
To Paddy’s green shamrock shore.*

