



# *Ireland: The Land Worth a Hundred Thousand Visits*

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Welcome to Éire. Welcome to a land where the North Atlantic collides and dances across an ancient and rugged coast and where the weather's ever-changing mood is as spirited as the people. A land where fairy tales seem possible, and the heart-aching beauty of the countryside has played muse to countless artists and poets.

Recognized as one of the greenest places on earth, this tiny but mighty nation has exported so much to the world in the form of noteworthy people, entertainment, and culture. Yet, it remains largely misunderstood and often unfairly stereotyped. This is just one of many reasons why visiting only once is an injustice.

Perhaps, like me, you've paid a visit and understand first-hand why it's so fittingly called the 'Emerald Isle.' Maybe you were perilously dangled upside down by an elderly gentleman to kiss *cloch na Blarney* (the Blarney Stone) or sipped a perfectly poured pint of frothy Guinness in a colourful Dublin pub. You likely saw a castle or two and, quite possibly, were awed in disbelief at the jaw-dropping *Aillte an Mhothair* (Cliffs of Moher).

With all of these delightful experiences to be had, it comes as no surprise that Ireland is a popular destination that welcomes millions of visitors every year. Unfortunately, though, many people only graze the surface of this unique place. Many, it would seem, only experience the Hollywood cliché of what Ireland is all about.





Photo by Aldo De La Paz.

On my last visit, my family and I stayed a few days in a seaside town, and I remember being struck by the number of cruise liners that would barrel through, making brief port-of-call while en route to wherever was next on the agenda. We watched as droves of tourists eagerly disembarked and scattered throughout the town for an hour or two before being called back to the ship. I thought to myself: *What could they have seen in that short timeframe?* Sure, they had a lovely snapshot encounter, but did they truly get the chance to experience the location? I can only hope that some of them felt a spark of inspiration to return one day.

Between tightly regimented cruise itineraries and boozy, whirlwind bus adventures that promise to visit all the famous spots in four days flat, these neatly packaged holidays leave little time to explore. Now, this isn't to knock packaged trips — they are a great way to see a lot in a limited time. However, they cannot offer everything in one go; it's impossible, especially when considering a place like Ireland.

Even those of us who feed our wanderlust independently and venture off the beaten path on our own itinerary, visiting just once cannot uncover the many nuances of Ireland and the richness of Irish cul-

ture. You absolutely must return; when you do, I cannot recommend enough how fantastic it is to rent a car and explore this destination at your own pace. It might just be the best way to see the country.

Though, be forewarned. Sticking to a tight schedule will not work. You can try (and I wish you luck), but in my experience, it's not going to happen. From encountering blockades of sheep to getting sidetracked by something marvellously unusual or being flat-out unnerved by the narrow roads that snake through the countryside, you'll want to make time for the unexpected. After all, that's part of the charm of this laidback and often quirky country.

When my family arrived in Ireland, we set out with the intention to see and do as much as possible, but soon realized that the allure of Ireland comes in unexpected forms. We learned that we had to slow down and go with the flow. Between taking tips from locals and coming upon unexpected curiosities along the way, detouring became our thing, and I highly suggest it to other travellers. It's also become the main reason we'll be returning to Ireland many more times in the years to come.

There's just so much to experience and learn here, that it's safe to





Photo by Andreas Wagner.

say there's an enriching experience for any interest. Whether you're a nature lover looking to explore remarkable landscapes, a history buff seeking out fascinating finds, or a culture enthusiast wanting to jump right in and meet the people who make this place so special, there's something for everyone. For those eager to explore the natural wonders of Ireland, there are many outdoor activities and unique locations to enjoy. As I discovered, one could easily take a whole trip focusing solely on the outdoors and not be disappointed.

On our last adventure, we chose to drive the *Corca Dhuibhne* (Dingle Peninsula), where the iconic stretch known as Inch Beach beckons beachcombers and ocean lovers to pay a visit. This is also where the impossibly divine views from atop Connor's Pass make you feel as if you're dreaming. As we travelled through this extraordinary landscape, I couldn't help but compare Ireland's lush surroundings to an ornate quilt made in every shade of green known to humankind — all sewn together by ancient stone walls and dotted with gnarled trees. Amid soft rolling hills and craggy peaks, mirror-like lakes reflected the great sky in their calm waters, while ice-cold springs and waterfalls burst into life from the rugged terrain.

Although this was a superb example of the remarkable landscapes of Ireland, it doesn't end there. Some other options are the famous *Mórchuard Chiarraí* (Ring of Kerry), which tracks through the stunning countryside and coastal stretches of *Uibh Ráthach* (Iveragh Peninsula). Take a day trip to Skellig Michael, whose twin peaks rise from the ocean and reach for the sky. Get lost in sheep pastures, and come upon ancient relics as you trek in the footsteps of St. Brendan, or explore the Wild Atlantic Way, where the winding coast will leave you awe-struck. Go inland to County Laois (pronounced 'leash') and enjoy flora and fauna of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, or head to the northern reaches where even more natural beauty awaits. You'll fall in love with it all.

Aside from its striking natural beauty, Ireland is also a place of many histories — from the Bronze Age Celts and mysterious Druids to the tumultuous and often sad events of the more recent past. This island is host to a dizzying number of places for any history enthusiast to appreciate. Of course, a must-see is the long room of Trinity College, which houses tens of thousands of rare books, and the exquisitely ornate Book of Kells. The Rock of Cashel, once frequented by the





Photo by Philip Davenport.

high kings of Ireland and St. Patrick himself, is another worthy place to explore.

Yet, let's not overlook some other gems, such as the impossibly old beehive tombs that date back to the Neolithic Era. The haunted (and not for the faint of heart) Leap Castle and the Titanic Museum in Cobh are other must-sees. At the latter, you'll get a glimpse into the lives of the passengers who departed from this last port of call. From the mysterious pre-Christian burial sites and medieval ruins that dot the countryside to the grand houses of past eras, there are so many historical marvels to see, making this small Atlantic nation the perfect place to return to for further exploration.

For culture enthusiasts, I've found that the best way to experience Ireland's warmth and authenticity is by veering away from the

tourist hubs. Explore the lesser-known nooks of this country's fascinating cities, or get lost among the many small towns and villages, where untouristy zigzagging backstreets wait to be appreciated. The most unassuming neighbourhood pubs and markets are often the best places to chat with curious locals who are often open to conversation... Or, as the Irish would say, *craic*.

As for entertainment, forget what you learned by watching Riverdance. To truly appreciate Irish culture, you need to attend a *cèilidh*, where live music, step dancing, and storytelling is an immersive experience and where you'll learn about Irish culture from a grassroots level. I guarantee that you'll have so much fun you'll want to do it again!

While visiting any destination just once

seldom gives a person the chance to appreciate it in any meaningful way, some places absolutely must be revisited. In my experience, Ireland is one such place. Fondly known as 'The Land of a Hundred Thousand Welcomes,' it should also be known as 'The Land Worth a Hundred Thousand Visits.' ➔