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Riding on Eire

Bike tours are a fine way to get in touch with the charms of Ireland

By **Stephanie Ager Kirz**
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“Here, take this cell phone,” said Tony Boyd, owner of Iron Donkey Bicycling Tours, his bald head beaming in the sun. “Just give me a call if you have a flat or need a lift.” His thick Irish accent and jovial personality eased my churning stomach.

We just arrived in the historic Irish west coast town of Ennis, a funny little village laid out for pedestrians, slightly more somber than quaint. Our new, all-terrain touring bikes leaned against a fence in the parking lot of the homely B&B next to a small picnic table where Tony spread out the route maps and the week's itinerary of Ireland's most scenic and popular cycling destinations – The Burren and Connemara.

“You'll be averaging about 30 to 40 miles a day,” he said, “with shorter and longer options if you want.”

I stuffed my rain gear into the panniers and glanced up at the blue sky, hoping it would stay that way.

“Just pack up your luggage and leave it in your room and we'll pick it up and deliver to your next hotel along the route,” Boyd promised. My skepticism subsided, at least momentarily.

When my husband, ever the adventurer, suggested doing a self-guided cycling tour of Ireland, I imagined cold rain soaking through my helmet and bike pants, leg-numbing hills, long, lonesome days and empty stomachs to be finally filled with awful food.



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The Cliffs of Moher, one of Ireland's must-see destinations, rise more than 700 feet above the ocean. Climb to the top of nearby O'Brien's Tower for an amazing view.

- [If you go: Biking in Ireland](#)

The problem was I had been spoiled on other bike trips, which were always with larger groups and several helpful guides.

In China with Backroads, we pedaled alongside a local who translated the schoolchildren's chants. Riding in a tropical rainstorm in Bali, our tour guide swooped in to hand us dry towels and give us a lift in the van to wait out the weather. Paolo, one of our leaders with Ciclismo Classico in Sicily, waited patiently for our group at each intersection so we wouldn't miss a turn.

Now we were supposed to go it alone? Who would rescue us from the Irish rain? No problem, I've been lost, cold and hungry before. I'd try anything once. I agreed to go.

Waving goodbye to Boyd and Iron Donkey Cycling, we shoved off with the sunrise, pedaling down the narrow two-lane roads that bob and weave along the coast in County Clare. Every parcel throughout Ireland is partitioned by stone walls, weaving gray cobwebs through the green pastures everywhere.

Our sturdy, steel bikes soaked up the bumps, riding smooth as a pair of old '57 Caddies. The countryside spread out like a grand picnic blanket draped along the edge of the seashore. Our route led us up to the plunging Cliffs of Moher, the waves crashing 710 feet below, shooting glistening sea spray skyward. It was spectacular.

Doolin and The Burren

The sun, the sea – and not to mention, a tail wind – pushed us toward Doolin. We'd hardly seen a car all day. Somehow my legs seemed to know that the end was in sight, and I charged up a few more hills before my bike coasted down the last steep decline into town, which was a lovely spot set back slightly from the sea.

As promised, we found our luggage neatly stacked in our cottage room for two nights at Cullinan's Seafood Restaurant and Guesthouse. Owned by Carol and James Cullinan, this eight-room inn is touted as having some of the best seafood around. I could only hope.



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Peat bogs are farmed to warm the hearths and homes in an Irish custom dating back centuries.



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Sheep are more plentiful than cars on Inishmore, the largest of the three Aran Islands.



As we nibbled on the local smoked salmon and tangy Inagh goat cheese, the brilliant orange sun set through the windows of the restaurant overlooking a meadow filled with glorious wildflowers. Perhaps it was the wine, but I was feeling a wee bit more comfortable about this solo cycling adventure, at least for the moment.

Doolin was to be our base for exploring The Burren – the name means “a rocky place.” Some call it the “magical kingdom of the fertile rock,” a kind of small, petrified desert. The sloping, carboniferous limestone scarred by grinding glaciers resembles thick pancake batter poured half a mile thick, oozing toward the sea. Bouquets of tender wildflowers sprout up between the cracks.

The Burren also holds the largest collection of enormous megalithic tombs in Ireland, older than the pyramids in Egypt.

Using a map Boyd provided us, we huffed and puffed along a back road outside Doolin until we finally found one of the largest stone burial cairns, called the Portal Dolmen at Poul nabrone. I felt as though we were visiting a spooky cemetery on Halloween. The wind nipped at our bike jackets, and an eerie chill surrounded the graves, dozens of them marked by giant stones that weighed 100 tons or more.

Irish island life

The next couple of days flew by, and before we knew it, we had biked through Galway, Ireland's largest city in the west. Our goal, since we live on an island ourselves, was to explore Inishmore, largest of the three Aran Islands. Sometimes, I was told, the weather is so bad that people wait for days to get on and off the island by ferry.

Our outfitter had encouraged us to book our bike trip, which we did, during late May because it has the best weather. Driving rain blew straight into our eyes as we struggled on our bikes, fighting a relentless head wind, to catch the morning ferry leaving from Rossaveal outside of Galway. Only the sheep, scattered across the road, stayed dry in their woolly coats.

We caught the ferry and dried off during the 45-minute ride. Once on the island, the sun made a welcome appearance as we pedaled past rows of pastel Aran Island wool sweaters flapping on coat hangers in the warm breeze beside the shops.

We discovered that tradition dictated that the womenfolk knit distinct patterns for their fishermen husbands so that, if their sweater-clad bodies were ever found at sea, they would be recognized by the designs woven into them.

Cars are limited on Inishmore, home to 1,000 residents, so bicycles and horse-drawn carts are the mode of transportation for visitors. Since the island is small – five miles long and two miles wide – it was easy to bike to our night's lodging at the end of the island, a stately looking two-story stone house.

Teresa Joyce met us at the door and showed us around the restored home with its 12 cozy guest rooms. As we walked through the sitting room and its overstuffed furniture, she introduced us to her distinguished, well-dressed ancestors, whose portraits hung proudly on the



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Shamrock shoes added a little luck of the Irish, and two bog cutters took a break from hand-cutting fuel logs from the peat bogs in the uplands, to pose for a visitor.

walls.

“My mother, Brigid, acquired the house through her marriage to James O’Flaherty Johnston,” she said. “The Kilmurvey House was built in the 1850s by Patrick O’Flaherty, one of the ‘Ferocious O’Flahertys.’ But now my husband and I run the place.”

She showed us several more family portraits.

“He was run out Connemara in the 1700s and ended up on the Aran Islands, acquiring land from the absentee British landlords who had been evicted for nonpayment of rent and eventually possessed the property that we’re standing on.

“They were a colorful, war-loving lot, those Ferocious O’Flahertys, and were feared landlords, even evicting their own Irish countryman.”

The next day, we pedaled back to the ferry and headed to the “romantic heart of the west” – Connemara in County Galway.

Our route took us past miles of blooming rhododendron bushes the size of trees that form natural borders along the narrow roadways. Now considered a national nuisance – they invade the pastures uninvited and are poisonous to the sheep – they are far too lovely to think of removing.

Reaching the uplands, we biked through the peat bogs, for which Ireland is well known. I found them flat, spongy, ugly landscapes devoid of any trees, but these blanket bogs are fertile ground for fuel. Hand-cut out of the ground in rectangles – like bars of gold – by bog cutters, the peat is shipped around Ireland to warm the country hearths.

Our bikes silently slid up to two old bog cutters who stood in their hip boots, knee-deep in muck, cutting the peat with shovels. Toothless grins smiled and waved us on.

We hurried toward Clifden, a cheery 19th-century seaside resort, also called the “capitol” of Connemara.

Oysters in Connemara

Around Clifden, the Irish countryside was wrapped in a spring coat of colors. Everywhere we biked, Hawthorne trees sprouted a profusion of white blossoms, draping an oversized bridal veil along the lanes.

We arrived in the evening at the Quay House next to the bay in Clifden. I’d heard that Irish superstition considers it bad luck to bring cut Hawthorne into the house, but we found a generous bouquet smack dab on the Quay House’s entry table.

When I asked the lively proprietress, Julia Foyle, about this, she winked and said, “Oh, I



don't believe in those old wives' tales.”

I asked her where we could we find some fresh oysters.

“Mitchell Seafood a few blocks away has the best oysters around,” she said. “Fresh from the bays of Ballyconneely, Cleggan and Claddaghduff, the trucks drive up while you sit there. They don't get any fresher than that, darlin'.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were eyeing the menu at Mitchell's. A platter of two dozen oysters on the half shell arrived with a Guinness and some Irish brown bread. All my fears about bad Irish food disappeared in a single slurp.

Only a bay so clean and clear can produce this kind of perfection. The sweet, salty tang of the sea washed down by a thick, foamy sip from the earth was heaven to my taste buds.

Friendly, smoke-free pubs, oysters and more Guinness, thank goodness, awaited us as we rode to our final destination of Westport.

“Did you miss me?” grinned Boyd as we handed over our rental bikes and his cell phone, which we never needed.

As he lifted the bikes into his van, he looked over and asked, “Did you like being out on your own on the rural routes I planned for you?”


We did.

■Stephanie Ager Kirz and Howard L. Kirz are Washington travel writers and photographers.

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