

Beara necessities

Are the Irish really more chilled-out and cheery than the rest of us? *David Bradford* strikes out for 'Rebel County' in a bid to purge his English orderliness

Words & photos Dave Bradford



HEADS UP

A five-day, 230-mile tour around the south-west of Ireland on hired hybrids, taking in the tranquil and stunning Beara Peninsula

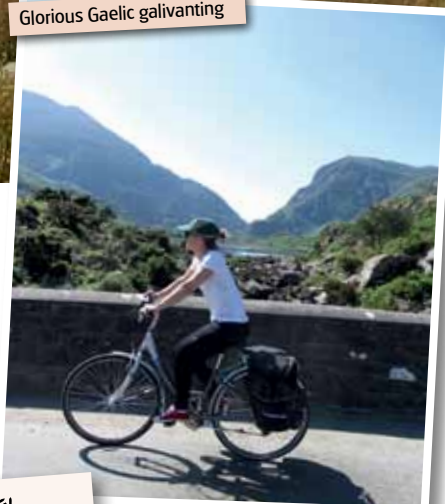


Distance: 230 miles (370km)
Big hills: everywhere
Challenge: ★★★★★☆
Cafe stops: everywhere

Remains of the bay: a holy marvellous view



Glorious Gaelic galivanting



My half-Irish pal Sophie takes pride in her Gaelic lineage, which she likes to think bequeathed her not only charm but also a nonconformist, phlegmatic outlook on life. When she suggested a bicycle tour of her “motherland” — her mother grew up in a village just south of Cork in south-west Ireland — I immediately agreed and set about planning each day’s itinerary. My preparation was militarily fastidious: routes digitally plotted, and contingencies set in place. Sophie wasn’t impressed.

“Stop being so damn English!” she snapped, and clarified in no uncertain terms that we would proceed strictly in the Irish style: laidback, unplanned and taking each day as it comes. Like a foiled spy, I guiltily deleted my GPX files and made only those preparations explicitly permitted: booking flights and bikes. Covertly Googling “SW Ireland weather forecast” yielded an almost unbelievable row of seven grinning sunshine icons adorned with Celsius numbers in the mid-20s. That’ll be the luck of the half-Irish, then.

Cork to Blarney

We touched down in Cork mid-afternoon and took a bus into the city to collect the bikes. “Head west till you

Irish being a bit less, well, you know, bothered.

Our first B&B was pre-booked — I’d secured this one small concession from Sophie. We’d agreed to make life easy for ourselves by spending the first night in Blarney, just a few miles north-west of Cork. Blarney is famous for its magical rock; specifically, a block of bluestone

built into the medieval castle. Legend has it that whoever kisses the stone instantly becomes a silken-tongued, yarn-spinning craic-monger.

Our B&B host Tom Looney substantiated the magic of the stone — and the theory that surname influences psyche — by producing an endless stream of genre-defining blarney from the moment we arrived. It began with cordial confusion: our booking was news to him but no matter because the top-floor room was available... and continued with tales of mischief and rebellion: he built the top storey of the house with his own hands, against the advice of meddlesome architects.

We resolved to have a few drinks, guessing that the collapse of our room would seem less scary if we were sloshed. Over a six-pack with Tom on the patio, we heard about his harem of cats, a cat-phobic American guest who threatening to sue (“Get that critter outta here!”), his part in the Irish property crash (“I sold two for €1m; if I’d kept them I’d be in jail now”), his former life as a hippy on a remote island with a pal named

RIDE NOTE #1

Blarney castle is, apparently, overpriced and its stone neither charming nor charm-bestowing; just a bit unhygienic; if you want entertainment here, go and have a beer with Tom at Pond House B&B.



get to the sea, you’ll love the coast. Perfect weather for it. Just keep going till you’ve had enough,” counselled chirpy bike shop man Cillian. “You don’t have to get back for anything, do you?” Er, unfortunately, yes: a flight home, and jobs. Even so, his presuming us unfettered and free, however misguided, was seductive. Maybe Sophie was right about the

370 km

The Fuge (“that’s what we called him, short for The Fugitive — he was banned from both pubs on the island”) and an overbooking incident in which an American guest ended up sleeping on an inflatable crocodile (“I’d given him a dolphin but every time he got comfortable he slid off”).

Blarney to Killarney

Having bid a fond farewell to Tom, we made our way westward towards Macroom. The B-roads in Ireland are called R-roads, and they vary in character from traffic-free country lanes to busy main roads akin their English equivalent. This morning’s were more like the latter type and got increasingly busy as we approached Macroom, where we stopped for lunch at a little cafe next to the castle. The town has been the site of pivotal English/Irish aggro over the years: at the Battle of Macroom in 1650, English forces under Cromwell’s control slaughtered several-hundred Irish Confederate fighters; 270 years later, Macroom became a hub of tension and fighting between British soldiers and the IRA, and key republican leader Micheal Collins was killed at nearby Béal na Bláth in 1922. (Many of the towns around here have a similarly turbulent past; Cork is known as The Rebel County, referring to the

prevalence of dissent it’s harboured over the years.)

After lunch, we decided to get on to quieter roads and turned north as we exited Macroom — at least three turnings too early, ending up lost in the middle of a mountain range. As Pete McCarthy noted in *McCarthy’s Bar*, his hilarious contemplation of the quirks and allure of this part of Ireland: “the main roads are excellent and well signposted; but as soon as you turn off, it’s like going back in time, a maze of conflicting signposts (if there are any).”

The downsides of getting lost are usually accompanied by an upside: finding landmarks and peculiarities that you’d otherwise miss. After the nasty surprise of an hour-long, very gruelling climb, we turned off downhill towards Carriganimmy and chanced upon Knocknakilla, a 3,500-year-old stone circle. Such was the splendour of the vista, and the moment, that I couldn’t resist giving the biggest and, coincidentally, most phallic boulder a ceremonial little hug.

We finally got back on track and found our way to Millstreet, which we were bemused to learn hosted the 1993 Eurovision Song Contest. How could this

little, unassuming village with its population of fewer than 2,000 people host the biggest, gaudiest singing competition in the world? My fussy English mind still can’t compute the logistics, but never mind. What matters is that a) Eurovision came to Millstreet, and b) Ireland won (with, as you’ll recall, ‘In Your Eyes’ by Niamh Kavanagh).

Killarney to Ardroom

Yesterday didn’t end well. When we arrived in Killarney (hometown of Michael Fassbender, apparently), we foolishly checked into the first B&B we found — on the strength of the fact its female proprietor had, she told us, cycled round the Ring of Kerry the previous weekend. All 180km of it. Which was impressive. More impressive than the complimentary double bind awaiting us inside the only room available: closed windows and sweltering heat, or exhaust gases and relentless road noise. Top honours, though, for unsurpassable breakfast naffery: instant coffee served in a teapot. Really. Suffice to say, we started the day dead-beat.

Thankfully the scenery soon lifted our spirits as we headed briefly west and then south through the Gap of Dunloe. Only now did we realise why this area provided the front-cover image on our OS map: it’s seriously stunning. The winding lane threaded its way up and down through the

RISE NOTE #2

Different rules apply in Ireland. Don't try to understand. Road signs will be erratic. You'll get lost. Don't panic - it's part of the craic.

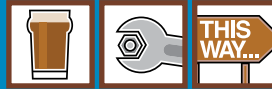


Above left: Away from the towns Ireland is a truly wild place
Above: Murphy’s law: it’s almost illegal not to sink a stout
Far Left: Ancient stone circle envy at Knocknakilla
Left: Grow, grow grow the boat....





It takes a lot to give free spirit
Sophie cold feet



STOP!

Getting there

We flew from Gatwick to Cork, which cost just €61 each return.

Bikes

We hired 21-speed hybrids, complete with racks and panniers, from **The Bike Shed** in Cork for €70 (£59) each for the week.
www.thebikeshedcork.com

Accommodation

We stayed in B&Bs, which ranged widely in quality, but not in price, costing between €25 and €35 (£21-30) per person per night. All were bike-friendly, and these are the ones we'd particularly recommend:
Pond House, Blarney
<http://bit.ly/1aNVqtw>
The Village Inn, Ardroom
Tel: +353 027 74067

Eating

Eating out in Ireland is expensive, with many standard-fare main meals costing around the €20 (£17) mark. Being ravenous after cycling all day, we tended to opt for picnics and takeaways to maximise kcals per euro.



We're on a road to nowhere...

RIDE NOTE #3
A good cycling trip is not about the bike or the cost or the planning. Obey Ireland's mythical message: fate's in charge, so relax, embrace the unexpected and relish the ride.

valley, past lakes and streams as countless viewpoints begged us to pause for a pic and a paddle. Once through the valley bottom and past Erik Bog, we faced a bracing climb out of the southern end of the gap, soon rewarded by panoramic views and, even better, a 10km descent to the market town of Kenmare for a picnic lunch in the park.

After a well-earned baguette and massive cake, we crossed the River Roughty and turned almost immediately right, heading south-west

onto the Beara Peninsula with Kenmare Bay on our right opening out into the Atlantic. The first few miles were, to be frank, slightly dull, with dense trees blocking our view of the sea. Once we made it onto the headland, though, the scenery opened out with sparkling views across to the adjacent Iveragh Peninsula. Something struck us as odd, though: there was *nothing* for miles around.

Apart from a lone dog standing on some rocks awaiting its owners, who had presumably leapt into the sea (a pile of clothes the only clue), plus the very occasional passing car, there were scant signs of life and, more worryingly, absolutely nowhere to buy a beer and/or stay the night. We'd done nearly 50 hilly miles since setting out from Killarney, and Sophie was by now approaching the end of her tether — with an unmistakable flicker of Gaelic ire. Not so laidback now, eh?

Finally an unmistakably village-like huddle of buildings hove into view on the hill ahead. Thank God, an actual inhabited settlement. Ardroom. We dared not assume anything, though, as we entered the Village Inn — the only pub for miles around — virtually on our knees and ready to beg for a bed, or cowshed, for the night. "You're in luck," the landlady smiled serenely like an angel. "We have a house just up there, next

to that sign," she pointed 100m up the road. "There's food in the fridge, help yourselves. You can pay us in the morning."

Having been on the brink of desperation a couple of minutes earlier, we were now cosseted by all the comforts and mod-cons of a modern, six-bedroom family home — all to ourselves, for the price of a regular B&B. This is the payoff when your flagrantly ill-planned bike trip gets tricky: a life-affirming change of fortune. But only in Ireland: unpreparedness in other countries only ends in humiliation and despair. The landlady returned at 10am the next morning as Sophie and I were enjoying a leisurely breakfast — suspicious, I assumed, that we'd scarpered without paying. Not a bit. "Just wanted to check everything was OK for ya," she chirped. "Don't worry about paying now. Leave the money on the side, that'll be fine."

Confident now that the blessing of Irish hospitality would keep us safe, we pedalled nonchalantly south-west for Castletownbere — and promptly took a wrong turn around the superlative-defyingly beautiful coastline of Kilmacatherine Point, ending up almost where we started, back in Ardroom. There was no fretting this time; we'd learnt our lesson. A place as special and hard-to-reach as this, we gladly accepted, would be even harder to leave.

End