

Religious spirit, rural charm live on in Ireland

By David Warner

When the lights go on again all over the world and the mood to travel anywhere returns, definitely consider Ireland as a destination.

Ireland is many things: courageous history; picture-book lakes and hills; cozy, thatched cottages with turf burning in the fireplaces; friendly little villages; sheep grazing on hillside pastures; and twisting, narrow roads that make driving an adventure.

The ancient land of the ever-young's unspoiled countryside is a supreme attraction for visitors, especially Americans. A number of areas are classic tourist stops: Connemara; the Cliffs of Moher; the Aran Islands; Killarney; Dingle and Donegal. Among other highlights are Puck Fair for the crowning of the "he-goat," the Kilkenny Beer Festival, Blarney Castle, the Mary of Dunglow Festival, the International Four-Day Walk, the Westport Sea Anglers Festival and the Castlebar International Song Festival.

But what really makes a trip to Ireland work is the country's people — some of the most distinctive, polite and friendly you'll meet anywhere. New acquaintances soon become old friends. With a smile, a wave, a nod of the head, you'll realize the difference the minute you arrive in Ireland.

The people are glad to see you — the man you pass carting milk to the creamery, the woman busy in her garden, the children happy in their play and going to and coming from school. You are very welcome, indeed, whether you stop to chat, ask directions, or simply return a "hello" for the tipping of a cap or the wave of a hand.

St. Patrick may not have been the first to bring Christianity to Ireland in the 5th century, but he can take most of the credit for converting the Irish from their paganism with such great diplomacy as to avoid the spilling of a single drop of martyr's blood.

From about 600 A.D. onward, one can trace a remarkable number of manuscripts emanating from the scriptoria of early Irish monasteries. They demonstrate such a depth of scholarship on the Bible and other religious texts that it is easily understood why so many students came from Britain and France to study at the feet of Irish scholars.

Two of the most famous masterpieces of the early monasteries are the 7th century Book of Durrow and the early 9th century Book of Kells. Both are preserved in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

Among the most popular sites in Christian Ireland is in the once small and unassuming village of Knock in County Mayo. Now one of the world's leading Marian shrines, Knock came to prominence as a result of a vision experienced by 15 people, old and young, as they knelt praying in the pouring rain on August 21, 1879. The apparition comprised the unusual combination of St. Joseph, Our Lady crowned and St. John the Evangelist.



Some 27 prominent religious and pilgrimage sites dot the countryside of the Irish Republic, whose population of about 3 million is more than 95 percent Roman Catholic. In general, Ireland's holy places are marked not by great cathedrals or elaborate shrines, but by the eloquent ruins of early structures — touching in their simplicity and moving in their association.

The best, least expensive and safest way to visit these sites is by coach (bus) tours. The drivers are very knowledgeable and humorous, and make frequent stops for other attractions, restaurants and shopping.

Detailed information can be obtained by contacting a travel agent or the Irish Tourist Board, 757 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017. Phone: (212) 418-0800.

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