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Ireland

OLD SPIRITS, NEW TIMES

AS I TRAVELED among the rolling green hills of Ireland dotted with ancient castle ruins, I could feel the spirits of my Irish grandmothers, Eva McCarthy and Gertie McGrath, traveling along with me. It's just that kind of place, Ireland, that stirs the soul and warms the heart. Even if you don't have Irish heritage, when in Ireland, you'll feel as though you do!

It seems that in Ireland, although times change, the spirit of the country stays the same. The charm of the quaint towns and rustic beauty of the countryside, resplendent in 17 shades of green and dotted with castles (over 30,000 including ruins) remains as it has for centuries. Today's tourists, however, will find some new, trendy multi-media exhibits and tourist conveniences where once there were none.

Cleanly paved, yet still narrow, two-lane highways now connect major locations where single lane gravel roads, flanked by low stone walls, existed only a short time ago. It requires a skilled driver to maneuver a motor coach around the tight turns. Many of the original white thatched roof cottages remain, now renovated with more practical doors, windows and hi-tech, weather resistant "faux thatching".



A thatched cottage in Ireland.

The port town of Belfast hosts a "Titanic" exhibit where one can immerse themselves in the history of the famously doomed liner which departed from this port city through multi-media presentations.

Dublin has new developments along the river and warehouse districts with trendy shops, restaurants, and apartments. The once basic tour of the Guinness store house is now a streamlined, multi-faceted event offering several different experiences with tours, tastings, classes, shopping, and various venues for dining and drinking. Dublin is still a city of pubs, with menus and music updated to include buffalo wings and Snoop Dog!

No visit to Ireland is ever complete without a stop at the Cliffs of Moher. These iconic cliffs tower 700 feet above the wild, roiling sea creating a view that takes your breath away. In the "old days", a car could pull up along the roadside, its occupants jump out, have a picnic, sit (or lay) on the cliffs, take



The view from the Cliffs of Moher.

some “daredevil” photos and be off without repercussion. Access to the cliffs is now a more “structured” experience with restrictions and regulations put into place for everyone’s safety. Parking lots are assigned for cars and buses. Pathways lead to a bunker-style welcome center with cafés, a small museum, and of course, a gift shop. Stone walls prevent spectators from getting too close to the cliffs. The views, however, are still just as spectacular.

Traveling through the Midlands, one finds that life in the villages has not drastically changed. It is there that the true feel and spirit of Ireland grabs you. It’s easy to immerse in farm life, stopping often to let a herd of sheep or cows cross the road, mindful of elderly men in wool caps riding bicycles




An Irish traffic jam.



The Cliffs of Moher's visitor center.

along the narrow roadside. Linger in the quaint towns for tea and scones or fresh mussels and a pint. Visiting the town of Killarney is a journey back in time where an old horse-drawn jaunting car takes you into the National Park and past Ross Castle set on Lough Leane, for a picture-perfect Irish landscape. The small towns do not disappoint those looking for an authentic Irish experience. Easy to find are original pubs featuring local musicians, perched on stools near a fireplace, crooning Irish ballads every night of the week.

Perhaps the greatest “feel” of Ireland has always, and still does, come from its people. Even first timers will find that going to Ireland is like going home to visit old family and friends. It’s not uncommon to meet a bed and breakfast owner who knows someone from your hometown back in the States, or a local patron in a pub who remembers exactly which farm your great grandfather was raised on.

Yes, some things have changed with the times, the roads, the cars, and the trappings may be new, but the spiritual feel of the land and the peoples’ love of the simple things in life—like making music with friends, sharing good food, a hearty pint, and good conversation with a stranger—can’t be denied, even if you can’t always understand their English! 

Dee Dee Werner is a travel advisor, former travel agency owner, and travel industry speaker. She has traveled throughout the world and has experienced many ocean and river cruises. Reach Dee Dee at Travelex International, a Virtuoso member agency in Hoffman Estates, Illinois. To learn more, call 847-882-0400 or email: deew@travelexinternational.com.



The Monastery of Clonmacnoise.