

# HIKING BOOTS & SHAMROCKS

by CHRIS ALLISON

**W**HILE MOST TRAVELERS TO THE WEST of Ireland enjoy golfing, visiting castles or fishing, my wife and I hit the hiking trails. We rewarded ourselves for all the hoofing by staying in two quaint Irish hotels with great food and above average hospitality.

Before leaving, we invested in L.L. Bean hiking gear—boots, pants, socks, rain shells, water bottles and lumbar pack—for reasonable prices. We also made sure to carry full water bottles, energy bars and a cell phone.

After a five-and-a-half-hour Aer Lingus flight from Boston to Shannon and a two-hour drive, we arrived in Cashel in the Connemara region of County Galway. The McEvilly family manages Cashel House, our intimate 50-room hotel. The place feels like home even if it's your first visit. The overnight trans-Atlantic flight amounts to taking a red-eye, so powering through the first day without napping helps beat the jet lag pretty quickly. If you take a long nap, it will take you days to adjust to the five-hour time difference. Suffering during the first day pays off.

**Day 1:** We wanted fresh air and sunshine. So after an Irish breakfast of porridge and brown bread, we hiked seven miles down the narrow winding roads near our hotel, wearing bright colors to be easily visible to drivers. Most of the roads are not much wider than your driveway, and while Irish drivers respect walkers, you have to be on the lookout for places to duck off the road in a pinch. Most Irish pubs serve great food, and our lunch of root vegetable soup, brown bread and a pint of Guinness at O'Dowd's Pub in nearby Round Stone hit the spot. After lunch, we walked for another hour to keep ourselves awake.

**Day 2:** We hit the Connemara National Park near Letterfrack, hiking one of the 12 Bens, the beautiful mountain range. The 6.4-mile trek up Bengooria, which locals call Diamond Hill for its glistening mica rocks, was a good workout. Some of the step formations in the 522-meter climb were 40 degrees or more, and we were glad to have our rain shells, which kept us warm at the windy summit. We lunched on steamed mussels, brown bread and Guinness at Hamilton's pub in Leenane near the Killary Harbor. The small village served as a location for the Richard Harris film, "The Field." That afternoon, we walked an easy three miles in Cashel through an old cemetery to the holy well of St. Conaill.



**Day 3:** We hiked three hours along nearby Gorteen Bay and Dog's Bay Beach, combing the hilly beach among the rocks and dunes. In the afternoon, we took a short two-mile uphill hike on the Upper Sky Road near Clifden viewing the entire coastline from the narrow road. We ended the day with a light three-mile walk down the back roads of Cashel, entertained along the way by a farmer feeding his huge, pet sow from his kitchen window.

**Day 4:** We started with a brisk six-mile morning walk, including a moderately challenging push up the panoramic Black Haven View and a repeat of the steep climb up Cashel Hill to the old cemetery. After a two-hour-and-20-minute drive, we reached our elegantly yet informally appointed hotel, Moy House in Lehinch in County Clare. Known for its famed links golf course and, ironically, its surfer culture, Lehinch presents beautiful vistas of the Atlantic Ocean. Caroline Enright and Margaret Kennedy oversee the nine-room, 250-year-old manor house with modern décor, full access to the kitchen and a cozy "honor" bar in the library. Dinner always includes a five-course tasting menu by Chef Alan McArdle, with each serving resembling a Salvador Dali sculpture.

**Day 5:** The trip's most challenging hike was in the Burren. Known in Irish Gaelic as the Boireann, or rocky place, the limestone, sandstone, siltstone and shale fields look almost lunar. We chose the eight-mile Blue Route in the Burren National Park, also known as the Mullaghmor Loop. Listed as the most challenging of the park's seven trails, the well-marked route was more of a rock climb than a hike.

**Day 6:** We ended our trip with a 10-mile hike on a newly created Cliffs of Moher Coastal Walk from its visitor's center to Hag's Head, and we returned via part of the trail to Doolin. It took a while to get used to the sheer drops to the sea right next to the trail, especially on the Doolin side.

In all, we hiked about 50 miles in six days, but we felt neither tired nor bored. The friendly Irish, magnificent scenery and great food made it a walk in the park. **P.G.**

*Chris Allison, former CEO of Tollgrade Communications Inc., is the author of "Snowflakes and Other Stories," which will be available from Amazon this Christmas.*

trail signs: Chris Allison; boots image courtesy of Ballyfin

