

# HAVING A CRAIC

THERE'S NEVER ANY SHORTAGE OF PINTS OF GUINNESS AND SING-ALONGS ON A GOLFING TRIP TO IRELAND. OUR CORRESPONDENT DOES HIS BEST TO KICK START THE IRISH ECONOMY IN BAR TABS AND GREEN FEES.

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*Ballybunion's Old Course is one of the great layouts in the world, with the par-4 17th one of its best holes.*

There are a thousand reasons you should visit Ireland with your golf clubs, most of them involving delicious black Guinness, friendly locals with sing-song accents and salty, windswept, pure links golf. Along with Scotland, the long curling scimitar of sand-belted goodness south-east of Melbourne, and a small corner of north-eastern Tasmania, Ireland is up there with the world's great golf-touring destinations.

These days you can add another reason: money. Ireland's economy is – to put it mildly, bluntly and in the local dialect – “up da shite”. Irish banks lent stupid money for dud projects no-one wanted to buy, and dotted the country with “ghost estates”; sad shambling brick boulevards of broken dreams. The once “Celtic Tiger” economy is now a mangy cur, more is definitely the pity.

But the Irish are nothing if not resilient types, and there's still an optimistic glint in many an eye (though this may be because of the Guinness). Whatever, the local charmers are still highly capable of selling you pots of gold dotted along a golf-trip rainbow.

It's an easy sell. At superb courses like Ballybunion, Doonbeg, Adare Manor and Druid's Glen – among many others – one can find excellent play-and-stay packages. While other industries are battling, Irish golf tourism is making hay on the back of tourists cavorting about with valuable foreign currency. And that means you, Southern Hemispherian, have muscular spending power. They want you.

Add that many of us are related to these friendly potato-eating piss-pots and it would seem remiss that we not visit their green and thirsty







LEFT: Ballybunion's Old and Cashen courses from the air. Both are a great test of skill, especially when the wind howls in off the Atlantic. ABOVE: Doesn't matter how you play during the day, a pint of Guinness (or two ... or three) always tastes good post-round.



LEFT: Adare Manor is a wonderful place to play and stay. Take some time to explore the gardens and tackle the course during a visit. ABOVE: Druid's Glen has often been described as the Augusta National of Europe. RIGHT: With a few pints and a good feed under the belt, be prepared to join in on the craic with a sing-along.



land, and spend our top-quality roubles taking advantage of brilliant golf bargains and propping up the local economy by playing golf and drinking beer. Who doesn't win?

Bargains? Five years ago Druid's Glen – described as the “Augusta of Europe” because of the flowers and because it's a catchy tagline – was selling 18-hole social rounds for €150 a head, a nudge over A\$200 then. Throw in hire clubs and a dozen balls and that's a decent chunk of change. Today for €150 Druid's Glen will host you and three others – in carts. And you'll have the joint to yourself.

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Our particular odyssey begins in Shannon, a town that's largely just a way-station for planes and boats. We hire an old buzz-box and drive an hour to Mallow for the Cork races. There we drink fat cans of Guinness while hairy thoroughbreds run remarkably long distances and local girls in very short dresses giggle in the wind. It is fine “craic”, as they say, particularly when our 20-strong buck's party all back the winner of the fifth.

We head on down to Cork town and crawl around the pubs, of which there are several thousand. My brother Tim gets in a conversation with a local bloke, the Irishman's end sounding like “Garba gorga dar! Alf? Home & Away! Gorba blan! Alf! Harga-harga!” Tim's nodding is enough to hold up his end.

And so we drink fine black stout in the world's best pubs. Warm, hearth-like places, many with a little room called a “Snug”, all of which have draught Guinness pouring like slow liquid love from long-draw pumps. The punters are good fun and love a yarn, and the pub grub is hot and hearty. The girls like your accent and if your arms have anything approaching a tan they may stroke them. You have been warned.

Next day, sporting hangovers that could slaughter a hill-tribe of native Peruvians, we eat a huge breakfast of fried black pudding and fat pork sausages and drive two hours north-west to the town of Ballybunion and the magnificent links of the same name. And the fun begins anew.

Straight to the desk and we're straight onto the 105-year-old Old Course (the Robert Trent Jones Snr-designed Cashen Course, est. 1984, has a junior tournament on). And so we tee off and whack the ball around the rolling tundra, hoick it to places unknown on the wind, and greatly enjoy the undulations and theatre of this gnarly jewel of Irish golf. Like the Old Course at St Andrews, designers realised that prevailing winds, rain and terrain meant the course has needed little adjustment.

It also seems perfect for spectators – the course has hosted an Irish Open, in 2000 – with fine mounds and bumps and all-natural amphitheatres. Certainly you'll only get a flat lie on the tee. How much you shape the ball can determine your round. And you'll want to study your

putts from both ends, as Tim found out when a 30-footer on the 7th green rolled off the putting surface and into a round bowl of sin.

Weather-wise it's relatively benign the day we play – indeed our entire week is mild and often sunny – though a fresh westerly from Iceland still sends little licks of salt-spume in from the Irish Sea. It's invigorating and good. Certainly the madmen surfing far below are not wearing Billabong boardies.

Innocuously for such a grand piece of golfing real estate, the houses surrounding Ballybunion are unprepossessing. Old stone shacks and the world's windiest caravan park about the course while situated by the 1st fairway are the town's long-term residents, those laying at rest in Ballybunion Cemetery.

My favourite hole (and just about everyone else's) is the par-4 11th called “Watson's” after adopted son Tom. Running south along the coast, with steep cliffs right and plenty of hairy danger elsewhere, your tee shot might need to start well over the cliffs to draw back in on the prevailing westerly. From a multi-tiered fairway, approach shots have to fly a basin and a narrow neck to a green surrounded by dips and tussocks and furry pain. It's regarded by golf course architecture types as one of the world's best par-4s. People often paint it.

On the tee of the long par-3 3rd hole is a plaque put there by Tiger Woods and Mark O'Meara, honouring their mate Payne Stewart, who had

a hole-in-one there in 1998. On another par-3, the 12th which they call “Citadel”, I conjure nine shots and instantly put our money-game back on level terms. It's that sort of track – beautiful, giving, windswept and wild, with the occasional donkey-kick in the arse.

After the round we head into town, stopping at the first pub we come to, Harty Costello's, where we meet 20-year-old bar girl Colleen, whose dozen or so school-mates have all headed to Coogee Beach in Sydney (where I live) because the local economy is shot. She plies us with Guinness and questions because “normally all we get in here is Yanks”.

“They're good folk, like,” explains Colleen, “but not so much up for da craic.”

“Probably think you want to sell them crack,” offers brother Tim, and Colleen agrees. “I think they do. But they're already well gone in da head.” And we laugh like fiends.

And so we drink some more Guinness and eat some delicious haddock chowder, a thick soup we soak up with warm black bread and dobs of butter. They certainly know comfort food in this part of the world. And then we have another Guinness instead of visiting the statue of Bill Clinton playing golf, which welcomes you into the centre of town.

If you find yourself in this part of the world and looking for another round, the highly-acclaimed Greg Norman-designed Doonbeg course is well worth the hour drive north, via the River Shannon Ferry.

Soon enough we're up the road again to the postcard-pretty village of Adare where sits the amazing Adare Golf Course, host of several Irish Opens. Now, in the country we come from, people have never lived in castles. In Adare though, in the case of Adare Manor, there's a palace fit for Don King.

It's a huge spread, with a massive old Lebanese Cedar and a fantastic



FAR LEFT: Looking for more on the West Coast? Try the exciting Doonbeg layout. LEFT: There is no shortage of great pubs to find some good craic. BELOW: Druid's Heath is a fine course, designed by Pat Ruddy, and is just a leisurely one-hour drive from downtown Dublin.



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES X 3; FAULTE IRELAND X 4





CLOCKWISE L-R: A pint of Guinness by the fire after a day's golf ... it doesn't get much better; Bunkers are plentiful on the Druid's Heath layout; Druid's Glen is one of the best-manicured layouts in Ireland; the closing hole at Druid's Glen features bunkers and a treacherous stream, complete with waterfalls.



golf course that runs around it like Donald Trump's dream. Oliver Cromwell lorded over the joint when he was plundering Ireland while the Earl of Dunraven's family have had the run of it for generations.

Today, it's a five-star resort and conference centre with swords and the heads of boar and deer on the walls, winding staircases with maroon carpets and tall rooms you could imagine once held fine medieval feasts. And possibly still do.

Golf-wise, it's like playing among the gardens at the Palace of Versailles. True story – honestly. Google it right now and check it out; it will rock your socks. Sweeping fairways run through lakes and rivers and ancient forests. And always the vista of the grand old house. It's almost ridiculous. Particularly as our fourball is the only group playing.

And so we're up the road again to the great old town of Dublin where a mate's to be married to a local girl. (Now, just as an aside, if you want to know what a party is, get yourself to an Irish wedding. However you do it, whatever it takes, perhaps ask to be invited, crash, whatever. Better party than the mob who ran for self-government in Canberra years ago, the Party Party Party.)

Anyway. As golf features heavily in the buck's week celebrations (unusual given the buck does not play golf), we drive 20 minutes south

into County Wicklow to Druid's Glen, the said Augusta of Europe. There we meet up with some lads from Belfast we'd befriended (you tend to befriend the locals) and play this special piece of heathland.

Like Augusta? As Marge Simpson would say: Hmmmm. Are you sure, Homer? On a couple of holes, perhaps, taken with a pinch of prime Rhodesian rock salt. There are flowers in lovely arrangements and fairways cross-cut like greenkeeper art. There's a couple of breathtaking par-3s. But it's a heathland track otherwise, albeit one that's thickly-forested with lantana and established oaks. But it's super-fun and challenging and you'll play it again given the chance.

There's an island green 180 metres away from the 17th tee. There's an "Irish Amen Corner" running from 12 to 14. There's theatre and acorns and fine bunkering surrounding tight-mown greens. It's a very fine golf course. And when you've played it you can play adjacent Druid's Heath too. And again, our two four-balls are the only ones playing.

And then you can drink some Guinness, as we do. Into the ornate clubhouse, itself another manor-house-looking "old" joint, though the course was built in 1995. And there we feast on sandwiches filled with melted cheese and pork bits. There are yarns and lies and laughing. The Belfast boys have to head up the road at some stage but only one will be driving so we give the Guinness something of a shellacking. Kiwi Henry does the haka. Brother Tim sings *Click Go The Shears* and the Irish boys sing a maudlin song about seafood. There is river dancing. And it's better *craic* than crack.

Haven't been to Ireland? Friend, bring it in tight. Now listen: GO TO IRELAND! Take your golf clubs and spend as brilliant a week or two in your golfing life as you will anywhere outside St Andrews, the course that we, not coincidentally, also played because it's not far away and because we didn't want engraved on our tombstone "Never Played St Andrews". You could add Ireland to the (bucket) list. You should. 🍀



## WHERE TO PLAY & STAY

### BALLYBUNION GOLF CLUB

**Location:** Ballybunion, Co. Kerry (West Coast of Ireland).  
**Green fees:** A\$230 (Old course). Play both Old and Cashen course for same price.  
**Contact:** [www.ballybuniongolfclub.ie](http://www.ballybuniongolfclub.ie); +353 68 27146.

### DOONBEG GOLF CLUB

**Location:** Doonbeg, Co. Clare (West Coast).  
**Green fees:** A\$240 inc. one night accommodation, breakfast and round of golf.  
**Contact:** [www.doonbeglodge.com](http://www.doonbeglodge.com); +353 65 90 55600.



### ADARE GOLF CLUB

**Location:** Adare Village, Co. Limerick.  
**Green fees:** A\$500 inc. two nights' accommodation in The Manor House (pictured), breakfast each morning, round of golf with a caddie (per person twin share).  
**Contact:** [www.adaremanor.com/golf-resort-ireland](http://www.adaremanor.com/golf-resort-ireland); +353 61 605 200.

### DRUID'S GLEN RESORT

**Location:** Newtownmountkennedy, Co. Wicklow (south of Dublin).  
**Green fees:** From A\$100 (Glen), \$58 (Heath) in high season. Bed and breakfast and other play and stay

packages available.

**Contact:** [www.druidsglenresort.com](http://www.druidsglenresort.com); +353 1 287 0800.

### USEFUL CONTACTS

**Discover Ireland** – [www.discoverireland.ie](http://www.discoverireland.ie)  
**Golf Ireland** – [www.golf.discoverireland.ie](http://www.golf.discoverireland.ie)  
**Ireland Car Hire** – [www.irelandcarhire.com](http://www.irelandcarhire.com)

### HOW TO GET THERE

There are more than 30 flight options from Australia with Qantas, Singapore Airlines, Etihad Airways and Emirates. Most airlines will have you change at Heathrow to enter Ireland in Dublin, Shannon or Cork airports. Emirates began direct flights to Dublin from Australia earlier this year.