

# A Taste of Magic From The Emerald Isle

Reflections from a Distant Prodigal Irish Son

Brian Luke Seaward



I was born with pitch-black hair, fair skin and crystal blue eyes. Yet it was the myriad of freckles that, by age ten, adorned my face—so much so, in fact, that complete strangers would stop and stare at me long enough to comment on my “Irish looks;” the “map of Ireland,” “Mrs. O’Leary’s pig,” the “spitting image of Uncle Paddy.” By the age of twelve, I had heard more comparisons between my facial features and the Emerald Isle that it was only a matter of time before I found myself on a plane to the Republic of Ireland. I had to see for myself what doors these Celtic genes would open, and what secrets the shamrock covered hills and ancient stones that dot the landscape might be willing to share with this distant prodigal son. On a cool summer’s eve in 2010 I boarded the plane for the Emerald Isle in what was to become a trip of a lifetime.

The first thing you notice as you approach Shannon, Ireland (after a five to six-hour flight across “The Pond”) is how green everything is; forty shades of green to be exact, perhaps more. Departing for this journey from Colorado where we have that many shades of brown through summer, autumn and winter, I found the vibrant colors of green, draped over miles and miles of rolling hills, a welcome sight indeed. I am co-leading a group of friends and colleagues on a tour of sacred sites and authentic Irish music with my dear friend, singer/songwriter, Dan Sebranek for what promises to be a magical solstice tour. On the day of our arrival, sunbeams break through the clouds in mystical fashion. Rainbows, I am told, frequent the Emerald Isle as often as those seen in Hawaii. Before the morning was over, we see several prisms of divine light. The accompanying pots of gold, however, continue to remain elusive...for the moment. If there is one thing I learn about the Irish, metaphors abound everywhere.

When you mention the word, Ireland, what first comes to mind? For most people it’s images of shamrocks, pints of Guinness Ale, Enya, and perhaps a kiss on the Blarney Stone. It would be a shame to limit all that Ireland has to offer in a handful of clichés. There is so much more to this island nation than clichés; more in fact than this ten-day trip promises to reveal. For instance, few

places pleasantly haunt the mind as easily as the countryside of Ireland. The green rolling hills, the Irish brogue and accents that echo in your ears, the music—spanning the spectrum from heart-wrenching ballads to toe-tapping jigs and reels, the stories of hardship and triumph, and the look of familiarity in the eyes of her people, all of which strum an unforgettable chord on your heart strings, a chord that reverberates in the echoes of your mind for quite some time. Like nearly one quarter of Americans who claim Irish heritage (I hail from the McNulty clan on my mother’s side), I arrive on Irish soil to begin a journey with several others, some like myself, looking for clues, if only in spirit, to our ancestry. All of us are here to begin an alchemical adventure of sacred Neolithic sites, early Christian monasteries, and some of the best music on the planet.

Our coach driver is named Paddy (of course), and his accent is so thick, you can cut it with a knife. Our Enchanted Ways tour guide, Stony, hails from Dublin originally, but he makes his home in Shannon now. From the moment he boards our coach, Stony has us in stitches. It is said by many that the Irish have the “gift of gab.” I, for one, am grateful that Stony upholds this reputation. Effortlessly, he weaves an unending tapestry of history, culture, spirituality, and humor into his narrative. He ends his first day with the line, “*Never let a lie get in the way of a good story.*” I lost count of all the great stories. Whether Stony has kissed the Blarney Stone or not before he boards our coach is irrelevant. His eloquence, wit, and humor have cast a spell on us all and we yearn to hear more, and this is only the first day.

### **The Treasures of County Cork**

Our first several nights are spent at the West Cork Inn, in the town of Skibereen, about a two-hour drive south from Shannon. Once people settle into their rooms, I walk the streets of town, quickly becoming smitten with the frames and bright colors of people’s front doors. By now many people are familiar with the popular *Doors of Ireland* posters, but as a budding photographer, I am immediately inspired to try my hand at making my own version. These doors are just begging to be photographed and I oblige quite easily. My wandering through town nearly makes me late for our first dinner celebration. Ireland was never known for its cuisine, but that was before it became a part of the European Union. Over the past few years, chefs have crossed the Irish Sea from Poland and other countries and have brought their culinary savoir-faire with them. Night after night, I am continually surprised by the quality of meals, beginning with the first. After a surprisingly wonderful salmon and saffron rice entry followed by a magnificent private concert by one of Ireland’s renowned folk singers, Don Stiffe, the effects of jet lag have taken their toll on the group. The sandman calls each of us to our respective rooms. We answer without protest.



**Drombeg Stone Circle**

Skibereen holds the dubious distinction of recording the greatest number of deaths attributed to the 1846 potato famine. After our first Irish breakfast we walk across the street to the Skibereen Famine Museum and learn many sobering facts that affected so many of Ireland's population, and most likely many of our relatives. Before the "Great Hunger" in 1846, as it is now called, Ireland's population was estimated to be around 8 million people. By the end of the famine, over 1.5 million people died of starvation and another 1.5 million people immigrated to the US, Australia and Argentina. Today's population in Ireland is still about 5 million people, which gives you an idea of how devastating this ordeal (and several others) was. We learn that the shift in names from the Famine to the Great Hunger came about as historians realized that while people were dying of starvation, the occupying British forces were exporting wheat, barley, and other crops around the world. For this, and many other reasons, the Irish have no love lost for the British.

The afternoon is dedicated to a visit to the Drombeg Stone Circle. Ireland has many stone circles, perhaps even more stone rings, but this one is considered the best. Similar to Stonehenge, though much smaller in size, this stone circle was built as a three dimensional calendar to honor the winter solstice. Given Ireland's northerly latitude, it's not hard to imagine why people back then would celebrate the winter solstice and the coming of spring. Despite the fact that our time on the Emerald Isle coincides with the summer solstice, this stone circle holds great significance with all celestial and terrestrial energies. To understand the Irish culture, it helps to know that Celtic lore and wisdom are very much alive today, though subtle perhaps in their expressions. In a country where people were brutally murdered for their religious beliefs, the Irish give a gentle, tacit nod to Druid (of the earth) philosophies. We would learn this first-hand, days later in the town of Doolin where bonfires lit the night sky honoring the summer solstice in ancient fashion. Neolithic structures such as this stone circle were considered portals to the heavens. Each stone was selected for its harmonic vibration. Together, the positioning of these stones, offers a powerful opportunity to connect in a unique way to the divine. To stand in the center of this Neolithic structure, crafted more than four thousand years ago (estimates suggest perhaps the same time as the pyramids of Giza) gives wonder to the people who walked before us with a deep appreciation of the Earth, and the planetary forces that energize this structure.



**Drombeg Stone Circle at the edge of the Atlantic**

If you quiet your mind, and tune into all of your senses while standing in the stone circle, you can actually feel a pulse that appears to come from the ground, but vibrates equally from stone to stone. Our time there is spent in quiet meditation, as each person finds a comfortable spot and connects to his or her heart space. One of the group members has brought her harp (the symbol of Ireland) into the circle. As the meditation period ends, I motion for her to strum on the strings for a few minutes. The stones begin to hum in a unified harmony. If these stones could speak, I have no doubt they would utter words of gratitude for our best healing intentions. Our informal healing ceremony ends as we form a circle inside the stone circle. Dan, our group troubadour, takes his position in the center and begins to sing a few songs. We join in the choruses. Between our collective voices, our prayers, music and applause, we add our own energy to the stone's collective harmonic. It may be my imagination, but the group, as a whole seems exuberant as we board the bus and head back to the hotel. I would later learn that stone circles offer a unique healing energy, uniting mind, body and spirit. The coach ride back to Skibereen is abuzz with excitement. The night's music in a local pub only adds to it. Many pubs have regular musicians who take center stage each night, but it's customary in Ireland for anybody in the audience to try their hand at a song. Members from our group are not shy about sharing their talent, which makes for a most memorable evening.

## **The Beauty of County Kerry**

The Dingle Peninsula is regarded as one of the prettiest landscapes in all of Ireland. Like a finger that reaches, fully extended into the North Atlantic, the land slopes down toward the shore from all sides, yet the point of land called Slea Head not only steals your attention, it takes your breath away. For some it captures their imagination, others become lost in a mystical daydream. Beyond Slea Head are the coveted Blasket Islands that, like ancient sirens, call out to us. Prized as sacred land by the early Celts, the Dingle Peninsula is home to many stone structures that punctuate the landscape, not the least of which is the Gallarus Oratory, a sixth-century stone church built in the shape of an upside down boat. The stones fit so snugly together, like a jigsaw puzzle, without the slightest hint of mortar. Its architecture is a marvel to behold, even by today's standards. This day is the summer solstice, and in a land known for abundant clouds and drizzle, the rays of this golden star grace us all day long. Our tour guide tells us that magic is in the air and we believe him.

Our day begins once again with an Irish breakfast before we are ushered onto the coach. We are headed for the seaside town of Dingle and a drive along the peninsula of the same name. Even the coach driver smiles in amazement that not a cloud can be seen in the sky. "The luck of the Irish," we say. "The luck of the tourist," he says under his breath. The lush green hills kiss the deep blue heavens; a sight all the more clear from the top of Connor's Pass, one of Ireland's highest elevated roadways. Once in the town of Dingle, our group scatters in all directions; for some sightseeing, some shopping, some snacking. Today the town vibrates in a rainbow of hues. Under a typical overcast sky, the paint used to color the doors calls out to passersby. On this day, under heaven's naked eye, the colors shout at you as you stroll by. I am walking with my camera in hand and find myself stopping in front of each and every doorframe adding more stock to my Doors of Ireland poster collection.

Everyone in the group thinks that the day's highlight is a walk on the sands of Slea Head beach, duly noted as the site where much of director, David Lean's epic movie, *Ryan's Daughter* was filmed (Ron Howard filmed parts of *Far and Away* here too). As stunning as this sight is, I know better, because our tour guide tips me off about the plans where we will end the longest day of the year—the Gallarus Oratory. Before we congregate there, first a dinner awaits us at a nearby village, followed by a private concert with one of Ireland's greatest singers, Pauline Scanlon. The women fall in love with her voice. The men fall in love with her presence. By this time we have all fallen in love with Ireland. By the end of her concert everyone sighs a breath of euphoria. How can the day get any better than this? But it does.



**Gallarus Oratory**

When you first see the Gallarus Oratory, you cannot believe something unguarded for over 1,600 years can possibly look so well preserved; not a stone has been disturbed over the centuries against the harsh winter winds and unforgiving seaside elements. Each of us approaches the stone architecture in silence. Our tour guide motions for us to enter the structure's doorframe. Within moments of entry spontaneously we form a circle against the inside walls. Surprisingly, the one room building comfortably holds all twenty-four of us. As we hold hands and give thanks for a most remarkable day, the last rays of sunshine break through the wandering clouds in a direct line with the doorframe. Inside, the entire stone church becomes gloriously illuminated. Our faces glow with the aura of the summer solstice. Everyone smiles, acknowledging this magical moment, including the tour guide who, by now realizes this is no ordinary group of tourists (He whispers in my ear, "Something magical is happening here." I nod in agreement). I begin a short heartfelt prayer connecting the dots between summer solstice, the healing power of love, the light of our souls, and our responsibility to be beacons of light in the world. By now, everyone realizes that what we have just experienced is nothing less than a divine moment. Pure magic! The spiritual energies that have accompanied us throughout this trip are fully present. I then nod to Dan, who without missing a beat, begins to strum his guitar and sings a rendition of "*In My Life*, by the Beatles. As the song begins, the full force of sunlight breaks into the room. Between the resonance of Dan's voice, the acoustics of his guitar strings, and the last rays of today's sunlight, the experience is nothing less than electric. Paddy obliges my request to end this ceremony by reciting *The Lord's Prayer* in Irish (Gaelic). He is honored. We are humbled.

### **The Magic of County Clare**

Our tour bus drives on to the ferry that crosses the Shannon River, the longest and widest river in Ireland. Everyone is excited because what lies ahead on our journey are the infamous Cliffs of Moher, perhaps Ireland's most famous iconic landscape. It's definitely the country's most popular tourist attraction. Songs and poems have been written about these cliffs. Upon first glance, they don't disappoint. Mist and fog can enshroud the cliffs making them invisible. Our luck, Irish or otherwise, holds out. The sounds of the ocean's waves echo for miles. Our group scatters among the fields and sidewalks for photos and more quiet time. At one end of the path a busker fiddles the tune, *Women of Ireland*. At the other end the wind's hands gently wave the strings of the harp brought by a member of our group. Once again magic fills the air. No doors to photograph here, only the dynamic nexus

where ocean waves crash in rhythm against the sheer face of granite. The salt air, wind and waves magnify an already growing appetite. Paddy points to his watch, a sign that dinner is not far off. Our coach heads for Ballyvaughn, where we unpack for the last of our three nights. Stony suggests that no one take a nap; dinner is in the neighboring town of Doolin, with music to follow and we mustn't be late. Doolin is known as the nation's traditional Irish music capital. Once again the food is excellent, yet the music is even better. On stage is a musical duo named *Cooper O'Neill*. Cooper plays fiddle and banjo. O'Neill plays guitar. Neither one sings. That's okay! Throughout the night various locals get up on stage and croon a song or two. In the style of the bard, one elderly man gets up and recites a poem. Before the night's over, Dan and his sweetheart, Mary grace the stage with several songs. In American pubs, music is considered background ambiance, sometimes even noise. In Irish pubs, music is front and center. All eyes and ears are focused on stage. Music keeps the culture alive. Bonfires outside the pub keep the spirits alive. Not only do the Irish hold a monopoly on the voice gene, they have figured out how to masterfully channel their joys and sorrows into haunting melodies that leave an indelible impression on your own soul. Centuries ago, the British tried in vain to extinguish not only the Irish language but the culture itself, yet they couldn't wipe out the rhythms of the heart, expressed in a colorful spectrum of melodies from heart wrenching ballads to toe-tapping jigs and reels. They could never deny the Irish their music. Begin with a penny whistle or a fiddle solo, add some guitars, perhaps a banjo and don't forget the bodhran (the Irish drum) and you have the makings of an enchanting, authentic musical score. The rhythms of the night swirl around in our heads as the coach winds its way back over hill and dale to Ballyvaughn. Every day becomes an encore to the last. The best, however, is yet to come.



**Poul nabrone Stone Dolmen**

The next day is originally scheduled to include a trip to the Aran Island of Innis Or. Early morning weather looks sketchy. A decision is made to hold off for a day. Excellent choice. In the spirit of Plan B's, we explore the landscape of County Clare known as the Burren; miles and miles of moonscape made up of limestone rock. The barren landscape offers a solitude that begs for a period of quiet meditation. We oblige. Sitting among wild flowers growing among the rock's crevasses, I,

like many others, give silent thanks for this trip. Even with a quiet mind and healing intentions, time flies. Once again Paddy locks eyes with me then silently points at his watch. Time to go. Once on the coach we head to meet PJ Curtis, a local scholar of Celtic history, myths and Irish lore; one of Ireland's national treasures. As we gathered around the cemetery of one of the oldest churches in County Clare, PJ unfurls his wisdom, weaving history and mythology into a spellbinding tutorial of knowledge. Life. Death. Rebirth. The sacred feminine. St. Patrick. St. Brigit and so much more. Everyone agrees that two hours with PJ is just a tease. We all want more. PJ has another group to meet and must leave us. We understand. He bids farewell. We wave goodbye knowing that PJ is one of the brightest stars in the constellation of Irish magic.

One of the oldest Neolithic rock formations in Ireland is so iconic, its likeness is found on Celtic CD covers, book covers and calendars far and wide. It's called the Poulnalbrone Dolmen and Stony strategically ends our day with a stop here. Well over 5,000 years old, the Poulnalbrone Dolmen is thought to be a dimensional portal, a sacred passage to the divine (human remains have been uncovered under the stone table dating back to 4,000 B.C.). It's only fitting to hold one more healing ceremony here. We gather in a circle. I offer my own wisdom connecting the dots of all we have learned and experienced on this trip to date. Our journey mirrors aspects of the sacred circle of life, death and rebirth; what Joseph Campbell calls "the hero's journey." The hero's journey includes what Campbell called the assistance of spiritual aids. I remind everyone that we are spiritual aids on this journey. Our healing intentions are now encoded in these stones. Heads nod in agreement. Dan takes my lead and sings a song. We all hold hands in solidarity of our newfound fellowship. Several tourists from other groups look on, lured by the view. A few make an effort to join in our circle, but respectfully decide to stand outside and observe. By now there is not a cloud in the sky. Stony whispers in my ear, "Something magical is a foot." I nod in agreement. Everyone has a smile on his or her face. Dan sings one more song. I invite members of our group to walk clockwise around the dolmen, consciously offering thanks and gratitude, then spend about a half hour in quiet meditation, again with an open heart filling the dolmen area with love and compassion. In due time Dan strums his guitar and starts singing. We come back together in a circle. "Will the circle be unbroken?" Dan sings. We join in the chorus. A few onlookers join in too. Once again everyone smiles. What can possibly top this, someone asks? Stony whispers in my ear: "*Innis Oir*." After a night of great food and stellar traditional Celtic music our minds and hearts are overflowing.



**Farm house with many stone walls on the Aran island of Innis Or**

In pockets of Ireland people speak both Gaelic (Irish) and English, but in the Aran Islands Gaelic is their first language of choice. Once again the skies are blue and the waters calm. Even the ocean

breeze on the ferry from Doolin feels tropical. As we approach Innis Oir, the colors of the water change from blue to turquoise. Who knew? The Emerald Isle is full of surprises. We stay as a group on this mini tour, as it is the best way to maximize our precious time here. At first glance, Innis Oir appears as one big rock. At second glance, all you see are stonewalls. Stones are piled high everywhere.

All of us are astonished to learn that centuries ago these people pulled the stones out of the earth. They then placed seaweed down year after year until soil formed. Soon grass was planted, and sheep were raised. The women knitted sweaters from the wool (soon to become renowned as Aran Sweaters). The men tended the fields; a very long and patient process, indeed. After our tour, some people stop for a bite to eat. Others walk around and shop. I continue my search for colorfully painted doors. On the ferry ride back to Doolin we are in for a treat. The ferry captain decides the waters are calm enough for another view of the Cliffs of Moher; this time up close and personal. We get so close we can practically touch them. Our captain smiles. Later he tells me that he never gets this close, yet on this day something magical was in the air. I decide right then and there that the Irish don't take "magic" lightly.

### **Toast to a Magical Tour**

In hindsight, I am reminded that our journey begins in earnest with a toast made to a magical alchemy of Celtic history, music, spirituality, and whatever else the tour guides can add to the mix (including lots of great stories, real or otherwise). Our "enchanted" journey ends with a similar toast during our last dinner celebration. Before this blessing, awards are given to the winners of a mini photo contest sponsored by Dan, Mary and myself. Stony and Paddy are the judges and tell me the images were so beautiful, everyone should win. We do our best to honor this request. Then, we honor Stony and Paddy with gifts of appreciation. Tom Pigott, the wonderful alchemist who masterminded our *Enchanted Way* Tour joins our celebration as well. Throughout the night, I am reminded of the many "secrets" shared over these past few days, most importantly to live in the present moment among dear friends, new and old. Indeed, our Irish DNA (however diluted) has delivered. Dan gets up and sings a few more songs. Stony grabs a stool and joins in. Dan croons one last song and we add our voices to the chorus:

*Safe home, safe home, wherever you go  
May the light of the moon, shine down on your road  
Safe home safe home where ever you go  
Until I next see you, safe home will you go.  
Until I next see you, safe home will you go.*



**Live pub music in Doolin with Cooper O'Neill**



**Brian Luke Seaward and Dan Sebranek at the Drombeg Stone Circle**

We hope you can join us in 2011, where the Spirit of Ireland Journey continues June 16-26. Please check this link for more details: <http://www.brianlukeseaward.net/tripstoireland.html>



**Joy plays her harp at the Cliffs of Moher**



PS: Ta da.... I finished the poster!