

# *In Search of the Thatched-Roof Cottages of Ireland* *The Changing Face of Ireland*

By  
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Picture this: You are driving on a winding, backcountry road of Ireland, one which overlooks the brisk, North Atlantic Ocean. As your car makes a turn around a narrow curve, you find yourself surrounded by more than 30 sheep. They quickly pass your car on either side, herded off to pasture. With your car stopped, your eyes glance off to the distance to see a quaint thatched-roof cottage several hundred yards from the ocean. From the cottage chimney a plume of white smoke billows toward the heavens. Within moments an undeniable scent of burning peat reaches your nostrils. You take a slow deep breath and relax. Welcome home to Ireland.... But wait.... Is it real or only a memory inspired by a postcard image?



**Traffic Jam in Glencolmcill, County Donegal**

During a trip to Ireland last summer I ventured past a bookstore in the village of Ennis. On display, in one of the store windows, were two similar books that caught my eye, each titled *Vanishing Ireland*. The cover of each volume featured an elderly man and woman, respectively, with a sad, haunting look of wisdom. Stepping inside, I picked up a copy of each book, made an intuitive (some might call an impulsive) purchase and quickly became engrossed in the contents; first hand accounts of a rural way of life quickly becoming lost in the sands of modern time.

Every year I travel to Ireland with a suitcase full of cameras, several roadmaps and a dream list of digital images to take home as souvenirs; if lucky, get some published. Like many photographers, I try to capture the essence of the landscape, the culture, the

heritage and its people. Many items on my dream list are inspired by postcard images I have seen over the decades. Ireland is a land of undeniable photographic splendor (even on cloudy days). The theme of last year's photography expedition was castles. This year's theme was the ever-elusive thatched-roof cottages. The purchase of these two book titles was an inherent message that I might just be years, if not decades, too late.



**Thatched-roof Cottage, Bunratty Folk Park, County Clare**

For many Irish-Americans, our ancestral land (real or imagined) seems locked into a time capsule slowly inching into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Truth be told, the Emerald Isle crossed the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a rapid pace, on the back of the Celtic Tiger. (Remember that many cottages on the west coast of Ireland didn't get electricity until the mid '50's—Today the whole country has WiFi.) In doing so, many aspects of a culture dissolved in its wake, some that some Irish might wish to leave behind permanently, yet many that Irish-Americans would crave to see, perhaps experience first hand. Thatched-roof cottages come to mind quite easily.

Least we forget that multitudes of immigrants left their destitute homeland under horrible conditions, most notably the Great Famine of 1848, with smaller waves following for many, many decades. True to the nature of building the American dream, most destitute immigrants neither spoke of the past ills of their homeland, nor their reasons for leaving, to their grandchildren and great grandchildren. Instead, they spoke of lush green valleys, mythical stories of the unseen world, and of course, vibrant musical melodies. Yes, the Irish on either shores of the Atlantic were great storytellers. As a result many Irish-Americans, myself included, have romanticized a pastoral lifestyle often with an accompanying glorious musical soundtrack with fiddles, bodhrans and tin whistles. As these melodies play in one's head, the mind never tires of creating visuals; a hybrid perhaps of contemporary images and romanticized creations. Once again, thatched-roof cottages come to mind quite easily.



**Thatched-roof Cottage, Glencolmcill, County Donegal**

### **Vanishing Ireland: A Very Different Land**

Today, WiFi cell phone towers dot the landscape. So do wind turbines. Like the rest of the world, the Republic of Ireland is trying to become energy sustainable with its renewable source energy of wind (note: the use of harvesting peat turf is prohibited in some parts of Ireland due to disappearing peat bogs, now considered endangered). Second (vacation) homes now line the hills that overlook the Atlantic shores from Donegal to the Dingle Peninsula, (though many stand empty with foreclosure signs due to the burst of the housing bubble.) Mules and carts that once used to haul seaweed or peat have been replaced with tractors and trucks. While the quaint, bucolic lifestyle, hasn't vanished completely, only traces of yesteryear remain.

Sadly, Irish accents, like thatched-roof cottages, are a bit harder to come by in the Emerald Isle these days. After exiting passport control in Shannon I am greeted with a foreign accent, but it's not an Irish brogue; far from it. Immigrants from Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Lithuania and several other eastern European countries have arrived in Ireland looking for a better life. As manufacturing jobs appeared, those Irish citizens moved from the service industry to manufacturing. Boris is one such individual who has filled the vacuum. Boris is from Lithuania, but he now lives in Limerick. As he drives me from the airport to my hotel, he shares with me his love for his new country. Boris has no intentions of ever returning to his native Lithuania. He's bought a car, he has an Irish girlfriend (pregnant) and his dream is buy a house in the Doolin area and start a business. Ewa is my waitress that night a dinner. She is from Krakow, Poland. During the course of my dinner I learn that there are so many Poles in Ireland that several Catholic churches now offer mass in Polish. Until the recession hit the Irish economy, the village of Clifden (County Galway) had a Polish community of over 200 people. That number

has been cut in half due to the loss of jobs in the service and tourism industry. The face of Ireland is changing quite literally.



**Thatched-roof Cottage, Inismeer, County Galway**

### **Thatched-Roof Cottages Do Exist**

Postcard images may capture a quaint, thatched-roof cottage by the shores of the North Atlantic, but finding one of these treasures is akin to spotting real teepee in Wyoming. My quest for the quintessential thatched-roof cottage first led me to the town of Adare, where indeed, several houses in the village center are adorned with thatched roofs. Authentic looking and quite impressive, but perhaps a Disneyland version of the real thing. I quickly learned that many, if not all of these houses are tourist gift shops and boutiques. As the expression goes, close but yet so far....

Many aspects of Irish life are indeed, vanishing, the remnants of which can be found today in theme parks and museums. The historical Bunratty Folk Park in Shannon has a couple of thatched-roof cottages (and the tradesmen who know how to replace them), as do several other folk parks that punctuate the Irish countryside—including the Folk Village Museum in Glencolmcill (County Donegal) and the Kerry Bog Village Museum in County Kerry. I was to learn that over the past several decades, thatched-roof cottages (often considered peasant homes) converted to more contemporary roof tiles of slate. Moreover, the craft of actually thatching a roof with straw has become a lost art, with few craftsmen around to pass this down to the younger generations.

If you want to find authentic Ireland, head to the west coast, from County Donegal to Achill Island, County Clare, the Aran Islands off of Galway Bay and the Dingle Peninsula. It's here you are most likely to find an authentic thatched-roof cottage. If you're lucky, you'll hear some real Irish spoken too. No longer are the cottage walls covered in whitewash of lime and water. Rather, white paint is the first choice to battle the elements. Under the thatched straw are sheets of slate, now mandated in the country's building codes as a fire prevention.

Truth be told, one reason why you don't see many thatched-roof cottages these days in Ireland is the lack of marsh reeds. As development has encroached along the

banks of the Shannon River (Ireland's longest river), miles and miles of marshland has disappeared, and with it, the marsh reeds. Another reason is that the work of thatching a cottage roof is becoming a lost art. Today, few people are trained in the craft of thatching. Add to this the fact that thatched-roofs need to be replaced every 10 years, not to mention the potential fire danger, and you begin to realize just how special it is to still spot one anywhere in the Emerald Isle.

As my car turned on to a back country road outside of the village of Doolin, I observed the makings of a rainbow appear over Doonagore Castle tower. Several groups of sheep were grazing in every direction I looked. As I stopped the car to photograph the rainbow, my heart took an extra few beats of excitement. There, off in the distance, was a thatched-roof cottage with the Atlantic coast in the background. Parts of Ireland may be vanishing, yet other aspects are very much present, you just have to look a bit harder. Remember, these are the good old days. Enjoy them while you can.



**Thatched-roof Cottage, Doolin, County Clare**

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