

Let's get CRAIC*ing!

Is 10am too early to start drinking? Not if you're in Dublin and it's St Patrick's Day.

I've barely finished breakfast and already a few hardy souls outside my hotel are cracking into the creamy black stuff – and competing to see who has the healthiest vocal chords.

Although I don't want what they're having (Guinness gives me a headache), I can't begrudge them. Ireland is, after all, the spiritual home of drinking and every 17 March, thousands converge upon the capital to honour its patron saint, St Patrick, a man credited with not only spreading Christianity throughout Ireland but also driving out snakes.

The fact that he did so more than 1,500 years ago – and that Ireland is probably a little too cold for snakes – matters little. Paddy's Day, as the locals fondly refer to it, is one of the most celebrated holidays on Ireland's calendar. And even if most can barely remember who

St Patrick is, this public holiday is still a great excuse to 'get your green on' and let loose.

According to the taxi driver who drove us from the airport the previous day, a few decades ago we wouldn't have been making the pilgrimage across the globe.

"Rewind the clock and you'll find that Paddy's Day used to be a religious holiday and the pubs were closed," he says. "People would have attended mass, shared a meal and had a wee snooze. Sometimes they would have gone to a hotel to watch the American tourists sing Irish songs and congratulate themselves on finding their Irish roots."

The story goes that in the mid-'90s, some bright spark in the Irish Government realised there was gold in them thar hills, and so began the green dream that has turned the saint's day into a major money spinner.

By Sharon Stephenson



*craic
noun, /kræk/
enjoyable time spent with other people



If Paris has its cafés, then Dublin has its pubs – close to 1,000 of them in this city of about half a million. Although the famous Temple Bar district will relieve you of many hours (and euros), with a few exceptions it's mainly for tourists, students and raucous hen and stag nights.

Instead we head for the real thing on Merrion Row. We start at O'Donoghue's Pub, which, we're told, hasn't been repainted in 50 years, apparently the sign of an authentic Irish pub. Next up is the Brazen Head, the oldest pub in the city. The building itself, smack bang in the heart of Viking Dublin, dates from the 1750s, but some believe there has been a tavern of some description on this site since before the Norman invasion of 1172. At some stage we also make it to Kehoe's, just off the city's central artery, Grafton Street, which has been around since 1803. Dublin is rightly famous for its 'craic' and there's no doubt this city, which stretches like a contented fat cat across eastern Ireland, knows how to let down her hair.

The following morning is too bright, too shiny, too loud. It seems like a good time to test the theory that the best cure for a sore head is a 'full Irish': eggs, sausage, bacon, blood pudding, beans and, this being Ireland, carbs three ways (chips, potato bread and soda bread).



The biggest celebrations are in Dublin, where Paddy's Day has stretched into a 6-day festival that includes everything from film, comedy, music and debates to fun fairs and treasure hunts, as well as the incomprehensible (to me, at least) sports of hurling and camogie.

This being the Emerald Isle, it also includes oceans of alcohol.

"In Ireland, we say you should never have just one drink. After all, a bird never flew with only one wing," says the doorman at our inner-city hotel. Which could explain why, when we set out to the start of the parade on a freezing but sunny Saturday morning, every pub seems to be packed.

The parade's theme of 'How? What? Why?' seems to be pretty liberally interpreted – basically, it's a great excuse for street performers and theatre companies to indulge in extravagant displays of colour and dance. I'm particularly taken with the performers dressed as raindrops and different colours who, via their dance moves, illustrate how a rainbow is made, as well as the giant dragons, metallic rhinoceros and 6-metre-high flowers.

We're kept entertained by marching bands from Ireland, the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States, who soon have the crowds tapping their toes and trying to remember all the words to songs such as 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.



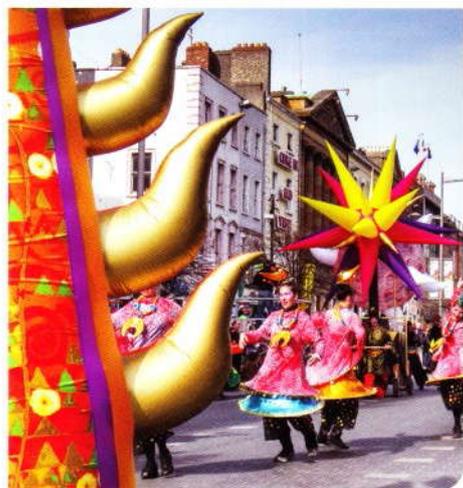
Then it's time to explore this magical city, set around the curve of Dublin Bay. Intersected by the River Liffey, Dublin has two distinct hemispheres, each with its own charm: the north is grittier, a tangle of working-class streets and pubs where many green-clad, red-eyed revellers are still on their way home from the night before.

If, however, you wear more black than green, you'll probably be drawn to Dublin's more affluent Southside, where the famous Trinity College is our first stop. We're two months too early for the student-led tours of Ireland's most prestigious university, but the courtyard is open to the public and we manage to talk our way into the library's impressive 200-foot Long Room, where 200,000 antique books, busts of scholars and a 3-storey wooden ceiling evoke a certain book and movie series about young wizards.

We also inveigle our way into a 1916 Easter Rising walking tour, which focuses on the long Irish struggle for freedom and the



rebellion that kick-started Irish independence. We trace the footsteps of the rebels around the streets and alleys of inner Dublin, laughing at tour guide Lorcan Collins's politically incorrect take on religion and the British monarchy, and his liberal use of Irish curse words. It's a good way to circle the city centre, including O'Connell Street, where monuments – most famously, the post office, which was occupied by the hopelessly outnumbered insurgents – still bear the bullet holes of the rebellion.



A stroll across the River Liffey on the Ha'penny Bridge, named for the one-time toll, brings us to coffee and pastries at Bewley's Café, a Dublin institution. Had the weather gods been kinder, we would have sat on the second level in the James Joyce Room, which overlooks the busy pedestrian strip of Grafton Street and was a favourite haunt of not only Joyce, who mentioned Bewley's in his novel *Dubliners*, but also fellow writers Samuel Beckett and Sean O'Casey.

No surprises that those canny Dubliners have managed to intertwine a rich drinking culture with a world-class literary pedigree. We join the Dublin Literary Pub Crawl, which takes in pubs and other landmarks associated with the astonishingly large body of Irish literature, and includes entertaining tour guides who recite from famous books and letters and sing traditional drinking tunes.

Dublin has been designated a UNESCO City of Literature, and a lot of Irish writing originated in these pubs. Playwright and dedicated pub-dweller Brendan Behan, for instance, once dubbed himself "a drinker with a writing problem". The tour begins in The Duke pub, just off Grafton Street, which features in *Ulysses*. It ends in a pleasant fog some unknown time later depending, as one of the tour guides put it, on how quickly you walk or how slowly you drink!

We hardly need any more yeasty beverages but our guide tells us a visit to Dublin is incomplete without a trip to the historic Guinness Storehouse where Arthur Guinness gave his name to Ireland's national drink in 1759. These days, the 55-acre site at St James' Gate houses the largest brewery in Europe and it's estimated that around 10 million glasses of Guinness are swallowed in 151 countries around the world each day. The tour is a 101 of brewing and is all manner of interesting, but the real fun is to be had at the Gravity Bar, where everyone gets a complimentary Guinness. High atop the 7-storey building, it also comes with the best views of Dublin.

The next day we just have time to check out Dublin Castle, which served as a controversial symbol of British rule for 700 years until it was formally handed over to Michael Collins and the Irish Free State in 1922. Dating from the 13th century, the castle has evolved from a medieval fortress into a vice-regal court. A highlight is the subterranean excavations of the 'old' castle, which was virtually destroyed by fire in the 15th century, and accidentally discovered in 1986. Particularly interesting are the foundations, built by the Vikings using a combination of ox blood, eggshells and horse hair for mortar.

It's with a heavy heart that we make our way to the airport. I'm reminded of something else our friend from St Paddy's Day said: "If you come to Dublin for a weekend, you'll stay a year". Not, I imagine, because it takes that long to recover from the Guinness hangover (although that may well be the case), but because the capital is so charming, you'll never want to leave. 🍀



Food glorious food

There's a saying that the Irish are more interested in liquids than in solids, and while boiled cabbage and potatoes have for years earned Ireland scorn in culinary circles, the roaring Celtic Tiger brought with it kitchens full of new talent and creative approaches to the maligned native cuisine. Dublin lies at the centre of the renaissance and, despite the Global Financial Crisis which brought an abrupt end to the party, good food is still the drug of choice for many Dubliners.

As with any city, new bars and restaurants come and go faster than the average hangover. But some places remain a constant for good reason. If you have deep pockets, don't go past Bentley's Oyster Bar at St Stephen's Green. A version of the London original, the theme is Modern Irish and the fresh oysters from Galway are worth blowing the budget for. And their fish pie is the best I've ever tasted.

If, however, budget is more of a consideration, check out The Winding Stair, near the River Liffey, which offers great value and Irish classics such as corned beef and cabbage, done with a modern twist. Just make sure you leave room for the classic bread and butter pudding.

Selected photos courtesy of Martin Haughey.

View of Dublin Castle from its distinctive lawn.