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Travel



Taking a sip of the history of Ireland

DUBLIN, Ireland - In town for a few days, and not looking for roots or relatives, I'm here for the whiskey and beer. I am, however, accompanied by an intellectually curious and well-bred woman who is my wife, along with our college-age kids.



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Music both traditional and modern is key to pub activity. And pubs are integral to the history of Ireland. So it's a good fit. (Peter Morrison / AP)

by By Robert Carden, For The Inquirer
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DUBLIN, Ireland - In town for a few days, and not looking for roots or relatives, I'm here for the whiskey and beer. I am, however, accompanied by an intellectually curious and well-bred woman who is my wife, along with our college-age kids.

And while she's a pretty good sport, having indulged most of my bad habits for more than 20 years, asking her to spend her only time in Dublin holed up in saloons is a bit much. So to make the trip work, I had to steel up and at least try to generate a healthy interest in museums, churches, and the like.

Nevertheless, lots of people visit solely to experience such legendary Irish libations as Guinness beer and Jameson whiskey on the native soil, in the native joints. France conjures up images of Paris and the Riviera; Italy, the Coliseum and Florence. But tell people you're going to Ireland, and an inevitable response is, "Whoa, those pubs." This week, I was determined to become a pub crawling Irish bloke, er, laddie, while working in the occasional cultural jaunt.

Pubs are integral to the history of Ireland. The fertile, rainy land produces great barley, and brewing can be traced to the Bronze Age 5,000 years ago. Monks dominated production of ale for centuries and even drank their "liquid bread" during Lenten fasting.

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Historically, pubs have acted as community centers, post offices, gathering places. *Pub* is short for Public House. But in recent years, tough drunken-driving laws and a ban on smoking have hurt business. And, a severe recession in the

last decade didn't help. Many pubs, particularly in rural areas, have shut down. Pubs may be down, but not out.

"Pub culture will never die out because we Irish can't bloody plan anything with the Irish weather. Imagine trying to plan a family barbecue or any outdoor outing - and not having the luxury of four seasons but four in one day," says Michael Frawley, owner of the White House Pub in the port city of Kinsale.

Irish tourism pros acknowledge the lure of its pub culture but say the country has lots more to offer than swilling spirits in marble topped bars.

"I do want to get away from the stereotype of Ireland as a bunch of drinking palaces," says Dairine Nuttall, a guide with Collins tours. "I hear other tour guides promoting that and I cringe. There is so much else to see here."

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OK, OK. We'll get to that later because right now we're in the middle of Dublin and it's jumping. In summer, darkness does not come until 10:30 or 11 p.m. and it seems as if much of the city is on a never-ending, full-on happy hour.

First stop: the popular, trendy Bank on College Green. A relatively new place, it has high ceilings, chandeliers, live piano music, and an elegant bar. And it's near Dublin's renowned Trinity College. Skylights keep the place bright and airy, and it's won best-bar awards and such. The fish and chips and beer are great, but the place doesn't have the feel of an Irish pub. It's a renovated bank and looks it. You could probably find something like this at an upscale shopping mall in, say, Houston.

A pretty good contrast to it is the Ha' Penny Bridge Inn: Dark, a bit musty, but warm and welcoming. Ha' Penny is in the appropriately named Temple Bar area - the hub of pub nightlife in Dublin. Walking through its narrow streets recalls Bourbon Street in New Orleans or Sixth Street in Austin. Bars lining the streets, doors standing wide open, patrons spilling out to the sidewalks, music blaring.

The River Liffey divides Dublin. The Ha' Penny, on the south bank, is family owned, reasonably priced, delightfully not renovated, and a favorite of locals, who say the place makes the best toasties (a bar food staple, toasties are toasted cheese sandwiches with other foods thrown in) in town. Across the way is Merchants Arch, another authentic pub with a great live band but, like so many pubs, overcrowded. Which is why we ended up at Old Storehouse Inn. It's larger than most pubs and can accommodate raucous crowds. The food was good. One note about the food: The Potato Famine is over - really, really over. Most fish dishes came resting on a bed of mashed potatoes with french fries (big fat ones) on the side.

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Initially, we were a little put off upon entering the Old Storehouse. On stage was a duo doing a John Denver song. Listening to John Denver is never easy, but hearing a cover band wail "Country Road" with an Irish brogue is enough to make you ditch the Guinness and run straight to the Jameson. Fortunately, an Irish folk duo soon replaced the John Denver wannabes and within minutes hands were clapping to robust Irish folk songs. After a few we walked back to our flat. It was about 10:15, still light outside, and bars still packed.

Ireland's grand literary tradition is celebrated in pubs. We walked by Davy Byrne's pub on the way home, where James Joyce hung out and apparently wrote part of *Ulysses*. I enjoy reading Joyce about as much as listening to John Denver, so we stayed away.

The first full day of the trip is actually a good time to bank some culture chits. Flights from the States are overnights. Arriving in late morning bleary eyed and jet lagged, a pint or four levels you in pretty short order. Given that, when my wife suggested visiting a couple of older churches, I went along.

Going to the churches was actually not a tough sell. While not Irish, I am Catholic and feel a kinship with this vastly Catholic nation because of our shared faith.

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We headed to Dublin's two best-known churches, Christ Church Cathedral and St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was Sunday. St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, the original uber Catholic of the Northern Hemisphere. It's said he baptized people on these grounds around 450 AD. I hadn't been to Mass for a while so going to St. Patrick's was like hitting the social/spiritual exacta; satisfying a cultural imperative and giving my soul a much needed cleansing.

But we arrived to find that St. Patrick's is an Anglican church, as in Protestant, so is Christ Church. How's that? "Well, that's all about Henry the VIII," says the tour guide.

Isn't it always. It seems that most seismic events in Europe during the 16th century can be traced to the gluttonous

British monarch trying to make an honest woman of Anne Boleyn.

When the Pope refused to grant Henry a divorce to marry Anne, he did what only kings could do. He broke with Rome and formed the Church of England. Churches, including St. Patrick's and Christ Church, were converted from Catholic to the new Anglican faith - even though the population remained Catholic. For good measure, he looted lots of Catholic monasteries along the way. So, you have the anomaly that the largest and most visited churches in this overwhelmingly Catholic country are Protestant.

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All this religious angst was starting to trigger a mighty thirst. Mercifully, the Guinness brewery was a short walk away.

Guinness in America is great anytime; with dinner, before bed, when you wake up, on the job. But it's better in Dublin. It seems creamier, has less of a bite.

"I hear that a lot," says Lucy Kross, a young guide on the Guinness Brewery tour. "We are pretty particular about our Guinness here. For instance, it has to be served at 6 Celsius, and I suppose it's just fresher."

Ah, 'tis that. The tour, sort of a beer Disney World, is six floors of Guinness history in Ireland, and you learn the proper way to pour and drink. The tour wraps at the Gravity Bar on the top floor, a glass-enclosed pub overlooking the city. It was the perfect ending, sipping a fresh 6-degree Celsius draft with my son, gazing out over the city.

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Officials said the reopening could take effect within days of final approval, which is expected this week or next and is not in doubt after ambassadors agreed to the plan Wednesday.

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