

# Southern Ireland: 40 Shades of Green

by Lisa Codianne Fowler

**G**reen is the color of nature; it soothes, refreshes, and heals. A strong energy that attracts positive power, green represents honesty and truth. How fitting that Southern Ireland is blanketed in green, and according to a song by Johnny Cash – 40 shades of it. Verdant valleys look like patchwork quilts laced with shrubs delineating farmland. Even sheep are dotted with green spray paint, as well as pink, blue, yellow, and purple, a humane form of branding. Farmers raise mussels in emerald seas that host dolphin, seals, and fish. Palm trees, hibiscus, heather, and hydrangea flourish.

We imagined Ireland to be cold, wet, and rocky – a far cry from our sunny, Sarasota home. But in the south, we discovered a pot of gold at the end of the Gulf Stream. The warm ocean current flows from Southwest Florida, bringing with it the balmy temperatures that cause this coast to flower and its fauna to flourish.

We arrived in County Cork at “Rush Hour.” One by one, the cows ambled across the

narrow country road; the sun was setting, and a farmer is leading his cattle back from the fields. We stopped our car (we had no choice) and waited, literally, ‘til the cows came home.

Our destination, Glengarriff, is a bayside village of flower-lined shops and cafés sheltered by the Caha Mountains. Houses are painted in bright colors, and the streets are immaculate. It’s not a movie set... all of the villages vie for bronze, silver, and gold designations as an official “Tidy Town.”

When in Glengarriff, a stay at Casey’s Hotel is a must, with its en-suite rooms, various dining venues, and southern hospitality with a Celtic twist. The living room has comfy couches, a large-screen TV, a gorgeous 18th-century piano and other antiques, including paintings from the early 1920s. That night, everyone gathered ‘round the piano to sing, children played, and joke-telling began. (“What’s the best way ta get ta Dublin? Are ya walkin’ or drivin’? Drivin’.. That’s the best way.” Barrumpum.) It’s where friends and families gather, kind of like being at Grandma’s.

We were, in fact, at Grandma’s. Casey’s was opened in 1884 by owner Donal Deasy’s great-grandmother and has been in the family ever since. The register, which dates from 1903, reveals a particularly moving sentiment: “Love is anywhere grand but is mostly divine when we love with the fiddbits of Earth, Air, and Sea – all about in a cordon of sweet sympathy.”

Donal, a good man himself, helped us plan an itinerary that included:

A ferry ride to the island of Garinish, renowned for its Italian and Japanese gardens, De Medici house, Napoleonic Martello tower, and Greek Sun temple. En route, we glided past Seal Island, a sunbathing spot for seals.

Gougane Barra, Ireland’s first national park and home of a lake-front monastery dating back to the 6th century. We toured the tranquil grounds, visited the chapel, silently read headstone inscriptions, and watched swans and fishermen on the lake.

Market Day in the town of Kenmare. The streets were bustling with merchants proffering horses, donkeys, chickens, and ducks. Cathedral spires mark the end of the street, a popular subject of local artists. Weaving through the crowds, we found galleries, cashmere boutiques,

gift shops, pubs, and cafés.

Healy’s Pass, a hair-raising but stunningly scenic route through the mountains to County Kerry. We saw sheep, cows, and horses graze as we navigated tree-canopied roads through rolling hills, green meadows, and misty-topped mountains.

Baltimore, a seaside town resembling Chesapeake Bay. To get here, we drove through Bantry, famous for its mussel farms (restaurants serve the mollusks every style from marieniere to cordon blue).

Clear Island. Dolphins leapt alongside the crowded ferry from Baltimore Harbor to this anachronistic island village. It’s not a luxury cruise; in fact, it’s just short of having livestock on board. But the destination is well worth the journey. An invigorating hike up purple-heathered mountains leads to a small heritage museum and a tiny, centuries-old Gaelic church.

The Ring of Beara, a road that loops around the Beara Peninsula, presenting ever-changing, astonishing views, earning our designation as a life highlight.

The pace was non-stop, but coming “home” to Casey’s was always comforting. A late afternoon pub repast became a family affair as folks filed in to watch a soccer match. Besides pub food, which is neither fried nor fast and may include salmon pate, haute cuisine is prevalent. Classically trained chefs gravitate here for the bounty of superior raw products from this largely green land.

Our final night found us dining on poached native lobster in champagne sauce at Dromoland Castle, a 16th-century castle-turned-resort near Shannon Airport. We stopped in the lounge, where a pretty lass sat near the fireplace singing Irish folksongs. Through her romantic, sometimes political lyrics, we overheard one couple speak to another, “We live in Clearwater, Florida.” Their response, “We’re from Sarasota!” Then from across the room, “We live in Bradenton!”

All from Florida’s West Coast, we were the only couples there. And like a rainbow connection, we met “in a cordon of sweet sympathy” on the Gulf Stream’s Emerald Isle. For more information, visit Counties Cork and Kerry at [www.corkkerry.ie](http://www.corkkerry.ie) and Casey’s Hotel at [www.caseyshotelglengarriff.ie](http://www.caseyshotelglengarriff.ie).

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