

TWO FOR THE ROAD

Blame the music, or the whiskey, or the leprechauns, but when **David Leser** and a friend organise a boys' own tour of the Emerald Isle, they have the time of the middle of their lives.

"In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a dark wood where the true way was wholly lost."

– Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*

A MAN MIGHT FIND HIMSELF IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS LIFE – AS the Italian poet Dante did – lost in his metaphorical dark forest, assailed by leopards and she-wolves, having no idea which way to turn, needing his "Virgil" to guide him home. Or he might find himself on the west coast of Ireland with his close friend from Australia, "Seamus", drinking malt whiskey in the middle of the day, looking for the craic, and spending inordinate amounts of time talking about sex, women, God and the offside rule in soccer.

That's what Seamus and I did. We ignored the forest and headed straight for the mists and emerald valleys of Ireland, with one simple ambition in mind: delve deep into the subjects that interest us, but find the music.

Oh sure, we had other quests in mind. We wanted to explore the lunar landscape of the Burren in north-west County Clare and walk to the top of the Atlantic-battered Cliffs of Moher, among the tallest cliffs in Europe. We wanted to take a ferry to the Aran Islands – Inisheer, Inishmaan, Inishmore – to see what it felt like being, as Irish poet Seamus Heaney once put it, "three stepping stones out of Europe".

We wanted to drive the precipitous mountain passes and descend into the deep ravines and green gorse-filled meadows of the famed west coast and, of course, visit towns like Doolin, Dingle and Killarney, as well as stumble across quaint villages we'd never heard of – places such as Lahinch, known for its surfing, or Lisdoonvarna, home to possibly the largest matchmaking festival in Europe. (And yes, we'll come to that.)

We wanted all this and more, but really what we wanted was the music. We both loved many of the Irish musicians like Van Morrison, U2, Sinéad O'Connor, the Chieftains, Luka Bloom and the Corrs (well, okay, maybe not the Corrs for their music!), and we loved the idea that in the face of

Facebook, Twitter, Hollywood and the deadening effects of economic rationalism, there was still a Western society where true things of value – music, singing, dancing and storytelling – could not be bought and sold. They flourished in their own right.

That was our hunch, we didn't know for sure. Fifteen years ago, I'd lived in County Cork for two months with my wife and two daughters, and on a cool, fogged-over morning we'd met a young man from the Ministry of Culture visiting a small island off the very southern tip of the country. This man had come to the island (population 200) with one purpose in mind – to see whether the library had enough books and the playground swings worked properly.

"You know," he declared passionately to us, his softened vowels and sharpened consonants singing their own delightful melody, "as the minister says, 'If you colonise the imagination you have nothing left.'"

Those words had stayed with me ever since, partly because I knew I'd be waiting a long time to hear an Australian politician say something similar, but also because they told you a good deal about a people who were (to borrow a phrase from another famous Irish writer, William Butler Yeats) "one of the great stocks of Europe ... the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell".

Both Seamus and I knew fragments of Ireland's long, sad history, a history marred by centuries-old political and religious persecution, catastrophic famine, poverty and mass migration. We'd both investigated the so-called "Troubles"

of the North: the 30 years of IRA terrorism, kneecappings, hunger strikes, state-sponsored murders and internment without trial – the deaths of thousands that had finally ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement.

But it was the other story of Ireland we wanted to absorb into our mid-life bones – the one about hope and imagination that American president John F. Kennedy had referred to in his historic address to the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) in June 1963, five months before his assassination in Dallas, Texas. During that famous speech, he'd summoned the words of Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw in assessing the Irish character: "Other people see things and say, 'Why?' but I dream things that never were and I say, 'Why not?'"

And that's exactly what Seamus and I had said to ourselves on the eve of Seamus's 50th birthday. "Why not?" Why not do a boys' own tour of Ireland for 10 days? The wives were working, the children were at school and, God knows, Seamus needed a break. What better time to journey to the land of scholars and saints, priests and poets, minstrels and troubadours than this?

IT CERTAINLY WASN'T GOING TO BE FOR THE food, judging from our first night in Dublin, where the restaurant was called The Gruel and the motto declared, "We gruel, you drool." The chicken was unrelated to anything we'd ever encountered before.

On our second night in Dublin, we got the flavour of what was to come when we took our seats in the "listening area" of the Cobblestone pub in

We loved the idea that there was still a Western society where true things of value – music, singing, dancing and storytelling – could not be bought and sold.

north Dublin as three fiddlers and a flautist began their long night jamming session. They barely acknowledged our existence, so absorbed were they in the pleasure and business of music, but at one stage the young fiddler turned to the old fiddler and said, "Gerry, did I tell you about my guitarist friend from Tipperary with the white guitar case?"

"No," said the old fiddler. "You didn't." "Well, he absolutely loved his white guitar case because it was strong and it kept his guitar in tune wherever he travelled."

"Did he now?" said the old fiddler. "Yes, he did, but one day my friend was so tanked that as we were crossing one of the [Dublin] bridges he suddenly said, 'Oh, feck it', and threw the guitar case [with his guitar inside] over the edge."

"Is that right?" said the old fiddler. "Yes, and we watched the white guitar case float down the river for a long time until it washed up on the opposite bank and my friend looked at it for a while and then said, 'Oh, feck it', and ran down and got it back."

Seamus and I took that image of a white case floating down a gunmetal river into the west of Ireland the next morning as we headed for the small seaside village of Doolin, known far and wide for its lively jig and reel sessions.

On our way to Doolin we discovered Lisdoonvarna – as noted, the matchmaking capital of Europe, where every September up to 40,000 people come in search of love. Most of them pin their hopes on Willie Daly, son of a matchmaker, grandson of a matchmaker, and who today is

himself regarded as the “last matchmaker” of Ireland, although he hadn’t been very successful with Barbara, the Polish receptionist at one of the “matchmaking” hotels in town.

“He keeps trying to match me every year,” Barbara told us, “but they’re all old Irish farmers, and, even though I love the countryside, I think that’s going too far. Besides, I think even the Irish would agree they are not the best-looking people in the world.” (It has to be said that Barbara was no Rose of Tralee, either!)

Unfortunately, Willie Daly wasn’t in town the day we arrived – for 11 months of the year he trains ponies on his farm in Ballingaddy – but we were able to glean a little of his character via word of mouth and from the book he wrote, *The Last Matchmaker: The Heartwarming True Story of the Man Who Brought Love to Ireland*.

We found that, as with many of the good people of this largely Gaelic-speaking region, Willie was superstitious. He believed in fairies, ghosts, leprechauns and screaming banshees. He blessed himself whenever he saw two magpies together. He knew of secret love potions that would guarantee a person’s affections were returned.

“I am a great believer in the magic of romance,” he has said, “in that wonderful moment when, often out of nowhere (or so it seems), the first hint of love emerges. What keeps me busy match-making is the hope of watching that magical process happen yet one more time.”

The following night, in Doolin’s famed O’Connor’s pub, Seamus and I met Noel and Oonagh, a young Irish couple possessed of the love potion but disillusioned with the Ireland that has emerged from the “Celtic Tiger” boom of a few years ago. Property prices have collapsed



The jam: (above) musicians fight for space in a pub in rural Ireland.

Ireland’s songs and stories reveal a people’s enduring capacity for celebration in the face of extreme hardship.

disastrously, the country’s debt has soared and young people like Noel and Oonagh are dreaming once more of migrating to countries such as the United States and Australia.

“People are desperate to leave,” Oonagh said between sips of Guinness, the music building around us – first, the flautist and the fiddler, then the button accordion player, now the guitarist and the bodhrán player – all jamming in a space no bigger than a walk-in wardrobe.

“Yes, it’s small,” Noel agreed, nodding towards the musicians’ playing area. “I’ve got a good fiddler friend who wanted to play in pubs but was so used to playing alone in his bedroom that whenever he played in a pub, he kept bumping into the other musicians. So he went home and put himself inside his closet and played there until he got comfortable.”

THE IRISH HAVE BEEN TELLING STORIES since ancient times. There are probably few people in the world – certainly none in the English-speaking world – who draw so heavily on the oral traditions of their ancient past as do the Irish.

Rebel stories. Stories for weddings. Stories for the eve of battle. Stories for the beginning of spring and the warming of a new home. Stories that draw on the dreams of humankind. Stories for strangers. Stories dressed in riddles.

Winston Churchill once said, “We have always found the Irish a bit odd. They refuse to be English.” Little wonder. They’ve been telling Irish stories and singing Irish songs for centuries. Sad love songs. Happy war songs. Songs and stories that reveal a people’s enduring capacity for celebration in the face of extreme hardship.

After Saint Patrick arrived in the fifth century to drive the snakes away, the filiads took over from the Druids as the sacred poets and bards of this ancient Celtic land. They committed everything to memory. They knew all the myths and legends. They knew about the ancient warriors and the spirit folk who lived under the waters of the lake.

From the 17th century on, when Oliver Cromwell and his successors made it almost illegal to be Catholic in Ireland, the role of education in general – and stories and song in particular – assumed even greater importance, as Frank McCourt was to describe in his international best-seller *Angela’s Ashes*: “The English wouldn’t let the Catholics have schools because they wanted to keep the people ignorant,” he wrote, and so “the Catholic children met in hedge schools in the depths of the country and learnt English, Irish, Latin and Greek.

“The people loved learning. They loved stories and poetry even if none of this was any good for getting a job. Men, women and children would gather in ditches to hear those great masters and everyone wondered at how much a man could carry in his head.”

For 10 days Seamus and I wondered, too, at the lyricism of the Irish as we dawdled our way from Doolin to Dingle, then on to Killarney via the Ring of Kerry. In every village an accordion player, tin whistler and folk singer. In practically every pub a live-music session, and at the Celtic T-shirt shop in Lahinch an aural encounter with Shane MacGowan himself from the Irish band the Pogues.

“What’s he singing?” I asked Josie behind the counter of the T-shirt shop, as the Pogues’ song

PREVIOUS PAGES AND THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

uncool

(Standard ducted air conditioning system*)

- Can be noisy inside
- Big greenhouse impact
- Expensive to run
- High energy consumption
- Little or no fresh air
- Carbon polluting refrigerants

cool

(Coolerado ducted air conditioning system)

- Retains the air’s natural moisture content
- Super quiet indoors
- Keep your doors open in Summer
- Uses water as refrigerant
- Uses up to 80% less energy
- Cheap to run
- Ingenious engineering: only two moving parts
- Uses 100% fresh air from outside
- \$12,970* Stocks are limited

Cool fresh air in your home for \$12,970 (7 outlets fully installed)† Only 250 available this summer.

When you turn on a Coolerado air conditioner you can sit back and relax in the knowledge that you’re turning on one of the world’s most energy efficient air conditioning units made. It’s so efficient that, based on our projections‡, you could save up to \$24,500 in electricity costs and reduce 88,500kg of power station carbon emissions over the next 10 years when compared with a standard refrigerative ducted system. The unique Coolerado system can replace inside air with outside air seven times an hour, helping to keep your home smelling fresh whilst keeping it cool. And what’s equally cool is that you can run the Coolerado air conditioning system on solar power and save even more.



To find out how to cool your home the fresh and efficient way call us on **1300 302 030** or visit clearsolar.com.au/coolerado. Stocks are limited, so call today and beat the summer rush.



*2010 costs: 20,000 kWh of white goods run on, whichever occurs first, unless terminated sooner by Clear Solar. Stocks are limited. Only available for Melbourne metro households. Includes: 1 x M50 Coolerado air conditioner, 1 x wall controller and up to 7 supply outlets, and installation. Conditional upon sufficient ducting access in ceiling space or under floor, an existing way to duct supply air into house, an existing and suitable space to install the M50 unit, outside, a single story house with tile or tile roof, no outside noise restrictions that exceed 70dB, no building works required. Not to be used in conjunction with any other Clear Solar offer. For full Terms of Offer see www.clearsolar.com.au/coolerado. †Assumptions: 1. Savings are of Coolerado M50 compared with ducted air conditioning system cooling a 120SQM space; 2. Victoria government Resource Smart website says a ducted reverse cycle AC cooling 60SQM to 26degC in a house in Victoria costs on average 770kWh (\$1,540) to operate; 3. A ducted Coolerado M50 costs 0.11cWh to cool a 120 SQM space to 26 deg C. This is 7.4% of the average cost cooling a home using conventional technology; 4. Electricity prices will double over the next 10 years; 5. Water prices will double over the next ten years; 6. The Coolerado uses 24kWh on average when running at full capacity; 7. Conservative estimates have been used. Coolerado may use less electricity and water. A traditional AC may use more electricity; 8. A Coolerado M50 can supply sufficient air at 22degC 65% of the time in Melbourne conditions, rising to 26degC in house; 9. Carbon offset purchased electricity created by burning brown coal at 1.34kg of carbon dioxide per kWh of electricity saved; 10. Presumes 900 hours use per year. ††This is not a direct evaporative cooler.

Fairytale of New York blared from the stereo.

Josie blushed, paused, and then broke into song herself:

*You scumbag, you maggot
You cheap lousy faggot
Happy Christmas your arse
I pray God it's our last.*

In Dingle, we were soaked to the bones with more music – from the two flautists playing Bach in the ceramic shop on our first morning, to the Cork blues/soul band playing in the town square that afternoon, to the symphony orchestra's performance that evening of *The Brendan Voyage*, a musical re-enactment – and musical meeting between symphony orchestra and uilleann pipes – of the sixth-century solo voyage of an Irish monk.

The next day, in the Celtic and Prehistoric Museum on the Dingle Peninsula, the manager, Harris Moore, revealed himself as not just a museum guide but a guitar, harp, mandolin, mandocello and hammered dulcimer player.

Moore was also a singer-songwriter who'd just penned a song called *Where the Feck Is Dingle?*, and as we headed out the door his rhyming couplets followed:

*Flew into Kerry, got myself a car rental
Within half an hour I was going frickin' mental
Twenty-four miles and I ain't seen a sign
of Dingle
Dingle, where the feck is Dingle?*

NEARLY EVERYONE WE MET DURING OUR 10 DAYS in Ireland wanted to talk (or sing) and it got



The craic: (above) the author during his travels around Ireland.

This then led us to the unexpected pleasures of poetry and what it was in mid-life that brought one alive: travel, music, good conversation, our children.

Seamus and I doing the same. In a Doolin pub over successive Jamesons we agreed that sex was eternally fascinating and ingeniously constructed, that a work-life balance was essential but that a career in mid-life required strategising more carefully than ever, that getting older was almost certainly a future of declining fortunes, and that if one couldn't find God, one could at least understand another great mystery of the universe – the offside rule in soccer.

On the beach at Inch, where they filmed the 1970 movie *Ryan's Daughter*, we talked more about God (still no answers there) and about "greatness" and what it was that qualified a person for such a title.

We agreed that Nelson Mandela, because of his capacity to forgive, was truly great and that Kevin Rudd probably wasn't. We agreed that John Lennon was great, but so, too, Paul McCartney, although McCartney suffered in the public imagination from not having died.

We argued about whether Bob Hawke was greater than Paul Keating – Seamus said yes, I said no – but then somehow we digressed to the subject of children and marriage and what it was that made some marriages stick and others fall apart. (Keeping alive a desire – if not for sex, then just for the same dream – seemed crucial to both of us.)

This then led us to the unexpected pleasures of poetry and what it was in mid-life that brought one alive: travel, music, good conversation, our children.

We were in happy agreement on all that. The conversation lurched and drifted. We were on the beach at Inch.

We felt entitled to take a mile.

TEN DAYS CAME AND WENT IN A BLUR OF ring forts and castles, wild coastline, whiskey and song, and on the way back to Dublin airport, our taxi driver told us about a friend of his who had gone to Lindosvarna 10 years ago and for whom Willie Daly had found a wife. "Oh, yes, they're still happily married," he said.

We expressed our delight to the taxi driver about all the music we'd heard since landing in his country and we asked him if he, too, happened to be a musician.

"Oh, no," he said, "but when I go away I like to do karaoke."

What do you sing? we asked.

"Oh, I do Frank Sinatra's *My Way*, but you have to warm up for that to get the high note."

What's been your best karaoke moment?

"I think doing Elvis's *Jailhouse Rock* in Malta."

Did the place go off?

"Oh, it did, yes."

We asked him whether he was still reliving the moment.

"That I am, yes."

And who else do you like performing?

"Well, I love doing Roy Orbison's *Pretty Woman*," he said, and as we were lifting our bags from the car, Seamus, the taxi driver and I suddenly began a three-part harmony of *Pretty Woman* right there in the Dublin airport car park.

George Bernard Shaw wrote that Ireland was like "no other place under heaven". "No man," he wrote, "can touch its sod or breathe its air without becoming better or worse."

Seamus and I touched its sod, breathed its air, and in the middle of our lives we came away richer for it. **GW**

IT'S ALL ABOUT DESIGNER EYECARE

DESIGNER
PRESCRIPTION
SUNGLASSES

FROM ONLY
\$269*

MICHAEL KORS GUESS ck DANT NIKEVISION NAUTICA

At Blink Optical, we don't just look after your eyes. *we do it in style!*

Take advantage of our amazing pre-summer offer of designer prescription sunglasses from only \$269*. This is your chance to try a hot new look while being kind to your eyes.

Our great range of high quality designer brands offers something for everyone, so come on in to your nearest Blink Optical where our experts will make sure you find that perfect pair of sunglasses just in time for summer.

Chadstone Shopping Centre
Tel: 9568 6422

Highpoint Shopping Centre
Tel: 9318 4222

Westfield Doncaster
Tel: 9648 8066

Knox City Shopping Centre
Tel: 9800 0566

Visit www.blinkoptical.com.au/promotion to get more information

* Conditions apply full details in-store. Model sunglasses are an indication only of the available brands. Actual style shown not available. Availability is while stocks last.

BLINK
OPTICAL