DESTINATIONS

# Finding Clarity on Cape Clear Island

A writer travels to this tiny Irish enclave to immerse herself in its language and culture.

WORDS BY YVONNE GORDON, PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM CRAIG

I HAVE BUTTERFLIES in my tummy, and they're not from the sea.

I'm on the 45-minute journey by ferry from the village of Baltimore in West Cork on Ireland's southwest coast to Cape Clear Island, 8 miles offshore. The jitters aren't from the boat crossing — the sea is calm and smooth, reflecting the blue of a cloudless sky — but a mix of fear and excitement about the challenge ahead.

Cape Clear Island — *Oileán Chléire* in Irish — is Ireland's most southerly inhabited island. Its population of around 120 swells in summer with tourists, day-trippers, and the student body of an Irish college, which is currently closed. What is special, and the reason I am going there, is that it is one of the country's Gaeltacht, or Irish-speaking areas, and after studying Irish on a language app for 74 days, I somehow have the notion to do a full immersion — to go there and only speak Irish.

Now I feel nervous. Will I be able to speak or understand anything? Did I learn enough? Is being able to name some random fruits and vegetables enough to be able to order food?

**MOST READ TRAVEL**

STAYS
A Night in Paris
The city's finest hotels place guests in conversation with…

GUIDES
Mexico City's Most Striking Boutique Hotels
From elegant private residences in Roma Norte to swanky spots in…

There is no real need to panic of course: Like everywhere else in Ireland, everyone speaks English. Irish is one of our two official languages, and like most kids growing up in Ireland, I learned it in school. Sadly, it was taught as a subject rather than a usable language, and a fear of grammar — like the *modh coinníollach* (conditional tense) and *séimhiús* (don't ask) — meant that after leaving school, I, like many others, hardly used it.

Pádraig Ó Drisceoil is one of the last two living islanders born on Cape Clear Island, Ireland's most southerly inhabited island.

In recent years, there has been a gradual revival of interest in the Irish language, thanks in part to some clever social media accounts, books explaining the beauty of the language in non-grammatical terms, a growth in education through the Irish language, and things like students performing versions of hits from Avicii and Justin Bieber in Irish. There’s a realization of how amazing of a language it really is, how important it is to our culture and identity, and what a shame it would be if the Irish language died out. For the last few years, it has been the most popular language in Ireland to study on the Duolingo app.

It has long been in the back of my mind to relearn Irish, and the pandemic lockdown proved to be the perfect time. When I finally downloaded the app, a lot of words came straight back. Then I hit a wall, things got difficult, and I was confronted by the tricky grammar. I wondered if being in an Irish speaking area and actually speaking to people would help. I’d heard of Cape Clear Island all my life, but it had always seemed to be some mythological

outpost, far off in the sea, never to be reached — a bit like my grasp of Irish. Now I am on my way (well, to at least one of these).

It's warm and sunny when we arrive at the island's North Harbour. The water is so clear you can see the bottom, and the green from a hill reflected in the blue water turns it a magnificent turquoise that you usually only see on paint charts. There are fishing boats tied up on the quay and there's a large Gaeltacht sign. I like the feel of it, the backdrop of hills, nobody rushing, the sound of gulls instead of traffic.

There's a small van on the pier waiting to shuttle ferry passengers around the island. It's €2. Having just arrived, I can't imagine getting into a crowded van rather than taking in the fresh air, so I decide to walk to my Airbnb. I pay the €2 and put my bag into the van in my place. They agree to drop it outside Bríd's, where I am staying. I have no idea where that is, but I have directions. I pass a grotto with a statue of the Virgin Mary and follow the road up the hill, turning right at the crossroads, and passing a grassy cliff with an amazing view over the island's South Harbour. Further along, I spot my bag outside a gate.

The Irish language pervades island life. At Cléire Goats dairy farm, even goats bear Irish names such as Eibhear (granite) and Méaróg (pebble)

Ó Drisceoil gives driving lessons to a fellow islander on a restored vintage tractor.

At the house, Bríd, the *bean an tí* (woman of the house) greets me in Irish. I had asked her in advance to speak to me only in Irish, just to see what would happen. She talks me through the instructions and I am amazed that I can understand what she says — where to recycle a *buidéal* (bottle) or *páipéar nuachta* (newspaper) and about the *doras* (door) and *staighre* (stairs). I even manage to say my phone number in Irish. It's a positive sign, although I don't know how to say "okay" when answering. Bríd says it's "ceart go leor" (okay) or "go hiontach" (brilliant or wonderful).

My room has a skylight with a view down to the South Harbour, and a cordyline palm in the garden gives it a tropical feel. There's a lamb in the garden and a cute black-and-white goat in an adjacent field. After unpacking, I walk back to the harbor. There are day-trippers at wooden picnic benches and a blue food truck selling goat-milk ice cream. I've booked a place on a tour to see the Fastnet Lighthouse.

Storms sometimes halt ferry service to the mainland in winter. Come summer, day-trippers fill Cape Clear Island.

The sea is still calm as we journey out to the lonely Fastnet Rock, which is 4 miles from the island and 8 miles from the mainland, a tiny islet in the ocean with nothing around it. At 177 feet high, the Fastnet Lighthouse is impressive up close. We circle the rock and marvel at how lightkeepers lived on it for weeks at a time, often lashed by Atlantic storms, and at its rows of tiny steps. Now feeling confident in my Irish, I say hello to a crew member. He asks me in Irish if I liked the tour, and I marvel at his rich accent, the softness of the consonants, how the vowels run together. I say "bhí sé go hálainn" (it was beautiful).

And then, he asks me a question. And I don't understand.

Stumbling with words, I sheepishly admit in English how rusty my Irish is. Pádraig Ó Drisceoil — whose accent in English is just as beautiful as it is in Irish — smiles and tells me someone he knows relearned the language after many years. He tells me he was born on the island (and, in fact, is one of the last two living islanders born on Cape Clear Island).

Island resident Scarlett McLoughlin holds live lobsters at

the North Harbour.

"I wouldn't live anywhere else. I just love it," Ó Drisceoil says. "When I sit down, I look out the window and can see all around me and nature. You look out at the sea and you look up at the sky." He knows everything about the island and its connections to the rhythms of nature. He tells me that the cows calve at high tide if having a heifer or at low tide if a bull. He talks about how a new moon affects people's mood and how you cut the hooves of a pony during a full moon because they are softer.

The next morning I walk around the South Harbour, where there are yachts moored, and past a stony beach with a pile of orange and red kayaks. The hostel in the old coastguard station is closed. There are gulls screeching, brown horses with shiny coats in a field, and pink roses growing from stone walls. I walk up the hill to a signal tower and old lighthouse. There are views across the island, out to Fastnet Rock, and over other islands in Roaringwater Bay. *Go hiontach*, I think to myself.

At a crossroads I see a postman. People in Ireland often greet each other when they meet on a country road, so this is another chance to speak Irish. "Dia Dhuit," I confidently say. The postman answers, and I realize I can't understand what he has said. But worse, I don't know how to say "excuse me" in Irish, so I don't say anything. I am tongue-tied. As I approach he is looking at me in anticipation, so I hold my hand to my ear, indicating I haven't heard. I feel silly. "Sorry, I thought you were speaking Irish to me," he says in English.

"I was trying to. What did you say?" I ask, now laughing at the entire situation. "Conas atá tú" (how are you?), he says. So I say "Go maith, go raibh maith agat" (good, thank you). He says something about the weather, and I know how to deal with this one. "Ta sé go hálainn" (it is beautiful). I feel thrilled to be involved in a proper small-talk conversation in Irish and also relieved it's not raining — I don't have the vocabulary for that.

Tigh Dinny Burke, a former corner shop and public house.

On my second evening, I notice that by 6 p.m., when the ferry has departed with the last day-trippers, it's just the locals on the island and the pace changes. Families descend to the North Harbour to chat and swim in the golden light of sunset. I go to bed reading "Motherfoclóir: Dispatches from a Not So Dead Language," an amusing take on the Irish language. The Irish app on my phone tells me I've missed two daily practices. If only it knew.

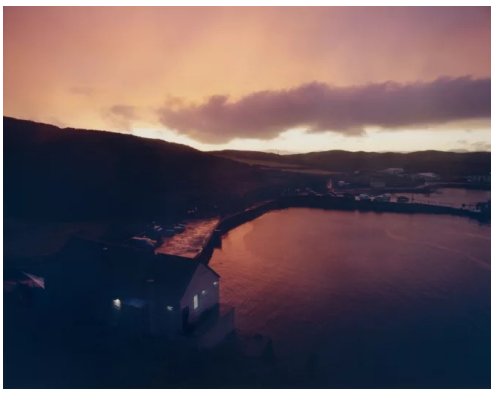
## "There is nobody on the roads, and everything is shrouded in a low mist. It feels ghostly, but there's a touch of magic in the air."

The next day there are sounds of traditional music around the harbor. There's an outdoor farmers' market with a live band. Kids run around in excitement. There are tables with clothing and hats, tasty baked goods, and jars of nectarine jam and lemon curd. A girl is spinning wool on a traditional spinning wheel. Another stall has homemade lemonade and syrups derived from foraged ingredients. Some of the stallholders are from England. I don't hear much Irish, but it's fun to meet some islanders.

Someone introduces me to Niamh Ní Dhrisceoil. She's a ferry captain in summer, a chemistry teacher in winter, *Cathaoirleach Comharchumann Chléire Teo* (chairperson of the island cooperative), and she's involved in the island distillery. I ask if it's true that they use seaweed in the gin. Turns out they do.

Over the next few days, I chat to everyone, sometimes in Irish, sometimes in English. In some ways I feel more like an islander than a tourist. Locals stop to chat when they pass in cars or vans (they all drive around the island). A kid with a dog at the harbor says, "Hi Yvonne." I book more nights with Bríd and then move to a rental cottage when she has another booking.

One morning, I wake up to a sky full of low, gray clouds. It's wet and misty. The food truck at the harbor is closed. A few die-hard visitors who have arrived on the morning ferry are making it up the hill in rain gear. By 2 p.m., they have left again on the boat and the island feels deserted. There is nobody on the roads, and everything is shrouded in a low mist. It feels ghostly, but there's a touch of magic in the air. I walk up the road and turn off onto a walking trail, where I am soon lost among some giant ferns until I find a trail marker leading back to the road. I go to Cléire Goats. It's open for visitors but, not surprisingly, I'm the only one that day. I am offered a cup of tea by goat herder Ed Harper, and Vanessa, an organic farm volunteer on holiday.



The pace changes after the last ferry departs, leaving only locals on the island.

Around sunset, families meet at the North Harbour to chat and swim in the waning golden

Harper, who is blind, agrees that there's something magical about the island. "Cape has a very magical atmosphere of its own that seems almost independent of the people. People have lived here for around 5,000 years and that may have something to do with it," he says. "A lot of it is to do with the weather effects." I meet some of the goats with Irish names like Eibhear (granite) and Méaróg (pebble). The farm produces goat sausages, goat cheese, and ice cream. "Actually, the main product of the farm is happiness," says Harper. "Because we have happy animals."

## 'A lot of the native speakers feel that it is our sense of responsibility to keep the language alive for future generations.'

Another day, I visit the island's Heritage Centre, which has exhibits about local shipwrecks and the Fastnet Lighthouse, plus traditional equipment from island life. Every day I try to speak Irish and I hear it spoken all around me — a mother calling in her kids, locals chatting, kids playing.

I meet Niamh Ní Dhrisceoil again, this time at the distillery. It's right on the sea and low tide has exposed a set of jagged rocks with rock pools and seaweed. To create 3 Sq. Miles Irish Coastal Gin, which was launched in 2019, the islanders cut seaweed from the shore and add wild Irish botanicals such as honeysuckle and fuchsia. They use laminaria digitata, a wide ribbon-like kelp, rinsing it and drying it on racks. The distillery has plans to eventually make whiskey and to build a cask store on the seafront. "We're excited to see what effect our island environment on the Atlantic has on the whiskey," Ní Dhrisceoil says. A native Irish speaker, Ní Dhrisceoil says she uses Irish every day; she has only spoken to her distillery colleagues in English once or twice.

Irish goes deep here; it's ingrained in the land. The island has a handful of place-names in English, but over 2,100 recorded place-names in Irish. It has 85 different terms for features of the land — for high and low ground, for streams, wells, and bogs. There has been an Irish college here for 40 years. It closed at the start of the pandemic, but the hope is to reopen it in 2023. The islanders are patient with my learning. "A lot of the native

speakers feel that it is our sense of responsibility to keep the language alive for future generations," says Ní Dhrisceoil.

There is a feeling of walking on history, too. There are old stone walls, church and cottage ruins, promontory forts from the Iron Age, megalithic standing stones, a Neolithic passage, and tombs and monuments that date to the Bronze Age. The older islanders have an expression: "Maireann na cuaillí críonna ach ní mhaireann na lámha a rinne iad" (The old rafters remain even though the hands that built them don't). Everything here was built to last.

"Cape has a very magical atmosphere," says Cléire Goats' Ed Harper. "People have lived here for around 5,000 years and that may have something to do with it."

I learn about island life. Fishing was once the main economy, followed by agriculture, and now tourism has come to the fore. Initiatives like the distillery help create jobs. In summer, the island is full of day-trippers, visiting yachts, and music sessions in pubs. In winter, gales lash the cliffs and Atlantic storms sometimes stop the ferry from running. "In winter, it's very exciting when the storms hit — if you're not afraid of them," saysHarper. "Sometimes the ferry won't run. The mainland goes on but we get separated from it for three or four days."

Sadly, the time eventually comes for me to rejoin the mainland. When I'm leaving, I see a local on the pier and I say "slán" (goodbye) and he says "go n'éirí an bóthar leat agus tar ar ais" (may you succeed on the road ahead, and come back). I haven't quite yet captured the language, but something

about Cape Clear Island has captured my heart. I know that Irish and the island will be part of my future: they are no longer in the conditional tense. I think of an expression I heard from an islander, "An áit a bhfuil do chroí is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú." Wherever your heart belongs, it's there your feet will carry you. ●

Explore More

IRELAND

Our Contributors

## Yvonne Gordon Writer

Yvonne Gordon is an award-winning writer and photographer from Dublin, Ireland. She specializes in travel and features, and writes for outlets like the Sunday Times, Irish Independent, the Washington Post, BBC Travel, Hemispheres, and AFAR.com.

## Tom Craig Photographer

Tom Craig is a photographer and director whose work has been featured in Vogue, i-D, and Vanity Fair. His work is driven by a desire to tell stories and the urge to travel. His work often blurs the line between fashion photography and straightforward reportage.

Explore More

IRELAND

# TRAVEL

DESTINATIONS GUIDES STAYS OUTDOORS

Explore Rome's Hidden History
There's a world of art and architecture beyond the Forum and the Colosseum.

In the Hive With Guerlain
For the French skincare company, protecting the black bees of Brittany's Ouessant island is truly...

Your Essential Neighborhood Guide to Exploring Mexico City
Follow a CDMX local through the city streets — from trendy eats in Roma Norte to colonial charm...

A Sight to Behold in Big Sur
Post Ranch Inn sits among the country's most otherworldly views, but it never loses its human touch.

A Chef's Guide to Brooklyn
A pastry chef and devoted Brooklynite shares her favorite places to eat, drink, and shop in the...