



It's a special trip indeed when you first visit your ancestral roots, and find that you feel right at home

IRISH ENTRANCE

Old Head Lighthouse on the southern coast serves as a guide to the entrance of Kinsale Harbour.

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My surname is **M** [REDACTED] the same as my original Irish ancestors, who departed the Emerald Isle from County Roscommon in the mid-1800s and traveled by sea to Newport, Rhode Island. Like Roger and Bridget [REDACTED] well before me, I now call Newport home. But that's not all we have in common: As a veteran offshore sailor and marine journalist, much of my very existence has been defined by long passages across open waters.



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During a career literally wandering the globe, I'd always hoped to explore my roots and visit Ireland. But, for many reasons, I'd never made it. In fact, my very tenuous connection to my Celtic heritage was my well-known mastery of the so-called "Irish exit," the back-door departure of a social gathering without bidding adieu. Then, last spring, my long-time wish was granted, appropriately enough through boats and boating, a common denominator for so many of us to meet like-minded souls, experience new adventures, and make lifelong memories. I scored a slot to join the crew

Above: Kinsale town is famous for its colorful streetscapes and rich history. Below left: The inauspicious Wicklow Sailing Club. Below right: We engage in a tacking duel off the deep-green coast.

of a rugged Beneteau 44.7 sloop called *Black Magic* for the biennial SSE Renewables Round Ireland Race, a non-stop 720-nautical-mile spin around the island nation. But it turned out to be so much more than a yacht race, even though it proved to be an epic one. For me, on multiple levels, it was my "Irish entrance."

The tale begins a year earlier on the opposite shore of the Atlantic through a happenstance connection: a sassy, whip-smart Irish kid named Jack Cummins on a summer break before his senior year in college, teaching sailing at the local com-

munity sailing center called Sail Newport. We're always looking for good crew on the J/24 that I've raced with pals for decades, and Jack was an excellent one. At season's end, making small talk at the awards dinner, I casually mentioned I'd love to visit Ireland sometime and wondered if he might show me around if I did?

His answer, to my amazement: "Well, you should come do the Round Ireland Race. It's hosted by the Wicklow Sailing Club where my mom used to be commodore. I can get you aboard the boat I'm doing the race on."

I thought it might've been the Dark 'n' Stormys talking, but Jack was as good as his word. Months later, last June, the next surprise was getting picked up

at the Dublin Airport by *Black Magic*'s owner, Barry O'Donovan, who graciously offered me the guest room at his home in Malahide for a couple of nights.

Later, as we strolled downtown to grab a Guinness, a small fleet of J/24s bobbed on their moorings in the picturesque harbor. This was all starting to feel a little like kismet, reinforced by Barry's next comment.

"Tomorrow is June 16," he said. "Bloomsday. You're a writer. You'll want to experience that, right?"

Honestly, I had no idea what he was talking about. But I was about to find out.

Bloomsday, it turns out, is the annual celebration of the life of Irish writer James Joyce, whose epic 1922 novel, *Ulysses*, takes place in Dublin on the 16th of June in 1904 (the modern holiday is

named after the book's protagonist, Leopold Bloom). The 2024 celebration was sensational. It was the city's first sunny day in weeks, the streets were crammed, and hundreds of celebrants were decked out in the brimmed straw hats and Edwardian fashions of the day. We toured the grounds of the prestigious Trinity College, strolled through

the lush park of St. Stephen's Green, and even sampled the wares of several packed pubs on Grafton Street. But my favorite moment was getting my picture snapped alongside the statue of legendary Irish rock-and-roller Phil Lynott, the front man for the band Thin Lizzy, whose tune



Above: My mates enjoying a sunny, choppy sail. Right: Yours truly in Dublin next to a statue of legendary Irish rocker Phil Lynott. Below left: *Black Magic* creams along at 8 knots. Below right: Irish breakfast was served 24/7 until every boat was in.

"The Boys are Back in Town" was part of the soundtrack of my youth.

It was a fine Irish introduction. But soon it was time to get down to business. After all, we had a yacht race to tackle. Soon after, we hopped aboard *Black Magic* for the short 30-mile deliv-

ery south from Dublin to the fetching port town of Wicklow and the extremely unassuming race headquarters – another revelation.

There are many glorious Irish yachting establishments like the Royal Cork Yacht Club, which was established in 1720 and is one of the world's oldest and grandest. And then there's the Wicklow Sailing Club, a funky little grassroots club that will celebrate its 75th anniversary this year, and that conducted the first Round Ireland Race back in 1980. The race – the country's premier offshore sailing contest – is always the town's biggest undertaking and attraction, and one that's coveted by more prestigious organizations like the Royal Cork.

But WSC's current commodore, Karen Kissane, said the race isn't going anywhere. Like many members, she joined after her preteen daughter got involved with the club's junior sailing program and her husband took sailing lessons there.

"I really love it," she told me.





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"Everybody knows each other. It's very welcoming. Sometimes you get sailing clubs that can be kind of snooty. There's none of that here. We're all just like one big family."

"Everything is volunteer-led," Kissane explained. "The only paid staff is the barmaid. And they're amazing because when the boats start coming back in, it's 24 hours a day. We don't close during the race. We track them on the race tracker and know within an hour when they're going to be here."

The coastline south of the colorful village, with a rolling golf course to one side, steep cliffs and basking seals in the clear shallows below to the other, was a lovely place to take a hike. The rocky promontory of Wicklow Head is the country's easternmost point, dotted with the ruins of an ancient castle. St. Patrick

Above: To "kiss the Blarney Stone" at the top turret of Blarney Castle (1446 AD), lay on your back, shimmy out to the stone, and upside down kiss the stone. Hair-raising, but high reward for the gift of eloquence. Below: The jaw-dropping Cliffs of Moher

himself, Ireland's premier patron saint, is said to have landed on its shores upon his return to the land he loved. But my favorite Wicklow encounter was with a retired postman-turned-artist named Pat Davis, whose paintings of ships and boats lined the long breakwater where we docked *Black Magic* alongside the other competitors.

"My goal is to make this pier a better place," he told me. "This wall is my canvas."

I could've gladly lingered in Wicklow for many a day. However, on the blustery afternoon of June 22, it was time to set sail. Our crew of 10 of course included my young benefactor, Jack; skipper Barry; the team's sole woman, his very experienced daughter, Labhaoise; and a

fine collection of wild Irish lads, a talented group who'd clearly sailed many a rugged mile together. They hand-rolled their smokes; their wisecracks were ceaseless.

We were split into two five-person shifts, or watches, that alternated around the clock, a few hours on, a few off. On my watch, I was one of two dedicated helmsmen, or drivers, the other being a professional sailor named Conor Fogerty, who'd amassed 35 trans-Atlantic voyages, one a solo heavy-weather race across "the pond" in 2017 for which he was named Irish Sailor of the Year. Daunting. It was clear I'd need to bring my A-game.

With that, along with 51 other contenders, we were off. The clockwise course is challenging – with long stretches in both the wide-open Atlantic and the relatively narrow Irish Sea, and plenty of strong currents to negotiate – but with a quite simple premise: just leave the entire bloody country, all its islands, rocks, and hard bits, to starboard. The race can basically be broken into four parts. Almost none of it went according to plan.

The start, on a gorgeous sunny day with hordes of spectators perched upon the headlands above Wicklow, was spectacular.

But the wind was fickle, and the first 150 nautical miles or so was slow-going. The scenery off the southern coast of County Kerry, including the legendary waypoint of Fastnet Rock with its notorious lighthouse, is reputedly sensational. I was so eager to see this spot, so iconic it has its own famous race

named after it. Alas, shrouded in deep fog, we passed within a half mile and never saw a thing. "Just the sound of the sea breaking upon it," said O'Donovan, an Irish poet at heart.

Into the Atlantic we sailed, with large, rolling seas announcing our arrival. This leg up Ireland's distinctive west coast is generally known for strong southerly winds and fast, epic downwind sailing under spinnaker. The weather gods smirked. After a few hours with our kite up, we fell into a windless hole, literally parked. But at least the skies had cleared, revealing Johnny Cash's "Forty Shades of Green" along the dramatic coastline. And now I can say I've seen the breathtaking 700-foot Cliffs of Moher from seaward.

With Scotland on the horizon, we slipped past the northern shores, passed Thor Rock, then rounded Rathlin Island off the northeast coast. We'd caught the converging currents of the Atlantic and Irish Sea at just the right moment, riding the swept waters as if on an escalator. At one stage we were creaming along at better than 12 knots of boat speed – the most thrilling sailing of the entire voyage.

"It's a race of Chutes and Ladders," said Cummins. "The door can get slammed shut here if you don't hit the current right. We got lucky, we rode a chute."

But we paid the piper for it. The final 75 miles were a slog, hard on the breeze with short, steep waves providing a cold, jarring ride. We finished just before mid-



The Irish are as welcoming, full of life, and colorful as their villages

night, some five days, 10 hours after we'd started. Our results were middling: fifth in our class and 21st overall. But more than a dozen boats had retired, and just finishing the race, for me, was a major victory. In the WSC clubhouse, the frothy Guinness was flowing to go along with a fresh, hot, full Irish breakfast of eggs, sausages, tomatoes, and soda bread. It was one of the best meals of my life.

Plus, I had one more surprise in store. Prior to the race, the wonderful Cummins family had basically adopted

Chartering In Ireland

Ireland offers many boating options and fantastic fishing. If sailing appeals to you, consider chartering a sailboat out of Kinsale (not far from the Cork Airport) from Sovereign Sailing (sovereignsailing.com).

If powercruising is more your cup of tea, one of the most popular ways to combine boating with peaceful Irish exploration of the beautiful countryside is to charter an easy-to-drive barge on the River Shannon-Erne with LeBoat (leboat.com).

me, and Jack's parents, Jim and Denise, treated me to a road trip back down the southern coast, to see from land where we'd passed by sea. (Jim's a longtime sales executive for Jameson Whiskey, and an added benefit from the entire experience was a graduate-level course in that golden Irish nectar.)

We stopped in Cobh, the *Titanic*'s last port of call, and paid a visit to Blarney Castle, where I kissed the Blarney Stone and was supposedly given the "gift of gab." We just had to make a detour to the salty town of Kinsale, the sister city of my Rhode Island hometown. We chowed down on fish and chips at the 5th Ward Bar, named for the close-knit Newport neighborhood where, in the 1820s, Irish immigrants came to build Fort Adams, then developed a tight Irish Catholic community. I had to smile at the Rhode Island license plates on the wall and the Bellevue Avenue sign outside the pub.

But the best part was driving up to the proud Kinsale Heads, outside the city. Just a few days before, I'd been on the wheel of *Black Magic* while we engaged in a tacking duel with another race boat in the wild, open waters down below. I could see how and where it had all unfolded, tack for tack, some of the best, purest sailing of my life. Taking it all in, it was the perfect exclamation point to my entire Irish adventure. I felt like a boy who'd come back to town.

