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pot o' gold

bespoke ireland golf tour delights as cultural and culinary sophistication pair with world-class golf

by michael j. solender

images courtesy Bushmills Inn, Carr Golf, Mel MacLaine, PMGC, Michael J. Solender

“**A**lways order the seafood chowder in Ireland,” one of my playing partners said on day one of a recent eight-day golfing tour of Ireland’s northeast and the north and west of Northern Ireland.

Mere hours after arriving in Dublin, we were fueling up in the clubhouse grill at Portmarnock Golf Club. Site of numerous Irish Open Championships and rated one of the top 100 courses in the world by *Golf Digest*, Portmarnock’s golf links is legendary.

In choosing Ireland, I knew I was in for the golf experience of a lifetime, though five-star dining throughout the Emerald Isle was not on my radar. Ordering the chowder that first day provided only a hint of the culinary delights to come.

Chock-full of Atlantic cod, North Sea salmon, whitefish, and scallops, the creamy chowder was flecked with fresh thyme, parsley, flavorful new potatoes, and just a hint of sherry. A slice (or two) of fabled Irish brown bread, grainy and toothsome with a yeasty nose and a lovely crust, was all I needed as fortification for the awaiting round.

Hosted by Carr Golf, Ireland's top custom golf tour operator for more than 27 years, our group of seven was set to enjoy a week's worth of the best golf, dining, and cultural experiences this enchanted land has to offer.

After starting in Dublin at Portmarnock, we next headed north and west into Northern Ireland, beyond Belfast.

Counties Down, Donegal, Sligo, and Mayo lined an itinerary that saw us play at the storied Royal County Down, Royal Portrush (site of the 2019 British Open Championship), Portstewart, Rosapenna, and Enniscrone.

My favorite was Portstewart, with its high ridges and jutting dunes interrupted by ribbons of green fairway, all framed by the Atlantic and its unceasing surf. Together with a club member who doubled as a caddy, I found an elusive October sunny day, and, while not exactly taming the

course, finished respectably.

As my host Marty Carr, executive chair of Carr Golf remarked, "Irish links golf is an experience unlike any other." I now have first-hand knowledge of that fact and heartily concur.

royal county down

Even the most focused golfing buddy-trip in Ireland however, does not subsist on golf alone.

Case in point: Slieve Donard Resort and Spa in Newcastle embodied the gold standard of hospitality, accommodations, and fine dining.

In the shadow of the magnificent Mourne Mountains and abutting the sea only steps from its doors, the Slieve Donard has a history extending back to 1897. It was then the Belfast and County Down Railway decided to build a hotel that was worthy of its magnificent setting creating the "most imposing structure of its kind in Ireland."

Today, the stunning Victorian hotel rests on six acres, boasts a world-class spa, fitness center, and luxurious bedrooms. The Slieve's public space encourages lingering in quiet conversation nooks, and the property's walking proximity to both the straw-colored beachfront and the famed Royal County Down Golf Links make it an ideal choice.





portrush



slieve donard resort & spa



portsmouth



royal county down



To dine here is to know both service and inspired nouvelle Irish cuisine. Menus are crafted with a great deal of forethought as they embrace farm to fork dining—without shouting it like most in America do—with proteins, produce, and dairy.

Tired from a day on the links, our group took golfer's spa treatments (note: foot exfoliation is the bomb), cleaned up, and set off to the Slieve's Oak Restaurant. Shared starters included an ethereal Cannelloni of Killkeel Crab and Cucumber served with watermelon salad and a piquant basil aioli and Tian of Spiced Portavogie Prawns and Avocado topped by a light chili infused oil, sweet mango, and coconut foam. The appetizer set the senses a buzz in anticipation of the mains.

For the main, I went with the Herb Crusted Rump of Mourne Lamb. Buttery tender, the lamb was a perfect mid-rare and served with a medley of root vegetables, green pea mint purée, shallot tartartin, and a red wine jus.

Service is subtle and unobtrusive yet appears just as you require it with servers filling water glasses, whisking away bread plates, and making gentle inquiries as to the overall experience.

After a stunning drive along the Causeway Coast, a warming peat fire welcomed us at the historic Bushmills Inn, its origins extending back to the 17th century.

The tiny welcoming village of Bushmills was next on our agenda, where nearby Royal Portrush, the site of the 2019 British Open, awaited us.

After a stunning drive along the Causeway Coast, a warming peat fire welcomed us at the historic Bushmills Inn, its origins extending back to the 17th century. A charming country style inn, Bushmills takes particular pride and care in showcasing the best of Ulster hospitality and cuisine.

Local dishes featured on their menu (called 'scrans,' a local expression for a good meal) include Dalriada Cullen Skink, which is a traditional Ulster Scots dish of smoked haddock, local potatoes, scallions and poached egg; Brotchan, an old name for a thick soup; toasted soda farls; and potato bread 'chips'.

Bushmills excels in all facets of the kitchen, though breakfast is the true standout. This is the place to enjoy a traditional Irish breakfast with slab bacon, rashers and blood pudding, broiled tomatoes, sautéed mushrooms, eggs as you like them, and freshly-baked Irish soda bread.

giant's causeway

Nearby was one of my favorite diversions beyond the golf course, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Giant's Causeway. An expansive geological wonder situated alongside Northern Ireland's shores, this massive jigsaw puzzle of 40,000 interlocking basalt columns and jagged rock formations was formed over 60 million years of volcanic activity. Legend has the mythical Celtic warrior Finn McCool constructing a



irish breakfast at bushmills inn



dining at the slieve's oak restaurant



bushmills



giant's causeway



jumbled stone walking path all the way to Scotland to reach his beloved.

Allow at least three hours to experience the exhibitions, hike the walking trails, and simply wonder at the crashing surf of this natural marvel.

hawk walks

Highlighting our sojourn was an overnight stay at Mt. Falcon Estate in County Mayo. This stunning country manor home rests along the famed River Moy and boasts some of the best salmon fishing in the country.

Take a “Hawk Walk” along the forested grounds with onsite falconer, Jason Deasey. Deasey is thrilled to introduce you to his “harem” of Harris hawks, owls, and assorted raptors, who, together with an incredibly well-trained Hungarian Vizsla, put on a spell-binding display of this exhilarating ancient hunting technique.

Proprietor Alan Maloney has spent years restoring this baronial lodge into one of the most sought-after countryside retreats in the country. No detail is too small in ensuring guests’ comfort, from the moist heat of the ever burning peat fires, comfy public rooms, an inviting bar with the finest Irish spirits, and first rate dining.

With incredible countryside, warm hospitality, and the best golf on the planet, it’s easy to see why Irish eyes are smiling. ☘

For more information on Carr Golf, visit www.carrgolf.com, or call 1.855.617.5701 (U.S. toll free).



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