



TRAVEL

Ireland Indulgence

By **ABBY LUBY**

Go ahead. Be extravagant. Travel to Ireland and stay at some of the most beautiful spots in Europe, including a 12th century castle gracing the verdant countryside, or a sophisticated Dublin hotel right in the heart of the country's capital.

Ireland is a great place to visit because tourism is one of the country's main indus-

special period colors, antiques and 18th century style furniture and fabrics. The décor is part of the mission of the management to veer away from the usual sterile furnishings of hotels – and create a more “homey” atmosphere – in this case it would be a home of the “well heeled.” You can rest in the elegant drawing room for afternoon tea and drinks. There is a spa, a modest size swimming pool, steam room and gym. The hotel's two restaurants are the Patrick Guilbaud and the more casual Cellar Bar set into the building foundation vaults. All the 123 rooms and 19 suites are luxuriously comfortable whether they are two bedroom suites (\$1700/night) or one

A short walk from the Merrion takes you past the National Museum of Ireland, the National Gallery, some beautiful parks including St. Stephen's Green and Merrion Square to the bustling Grafton Street – a pedestrian shopping mall. Of course you can't go to Ireland without checking out the numerous whiskey distilleries, and Dublin's famous Jameson Distillery (<http://www.jamesonwhiskey.com/>). The original distillery is now a restaurant and a bar and museum that offers an impressively detailed tour of life size dioramas walking you through the history of Ireland's famous elixir. Today, the real distillery is out of town in Midleton, closer

the mainstream, international franchises for the small arty boutiques and shops. The street signs are in two languages – Gaelic over English, symbolic of the comeback of Gaelic, the language of Ireland, after centuries of being prohibited by British rule. The Great Famine of 1845 further deprived the country of the Gaelic tongue by those who either died or emigrated out of the country. The Gaelic revival started in the nineteenth century and efforts to preserve the language are still ongoing.

The Samuel Beckett Bridge over the River Liffey is a stunning modern landmark and feat of engineering that is well worth seeing. Built in



Sheep farm in County Mayor, Ireland.



Cruise ferry at Ashford Castle.



Stone walls of Ireland; they are everywhere.



Kilbeggan Distillery in Ireland.

tries – the people are congenial, gracious, hospitable.

Dublin richly integrates the historically quaint with high cosmopolitan energy. The metropolis has very few buildings are over eight stories, which opens the sky and lights up some of the ornate government buildings and museums. Dublin's appeal is diverse and there's something for everyone from Irish history buffs to beer and whiskey connoisseurs to art aficionados. You can walk the entire city in a day checking key historic sites like Trinity College (alma mater of Oscar Wilde), the Custom House, St. Patrick's Cathedral. Housed in Irish Georgian townhouses is the centrally located Merrion Hotel (www.merrionhotel.com) and is the quintessential high end hotel replete with two quiet, 18th century gardens tucked in the courtyard. A unique surprise on the walls of this five-star hotel is an impressive art collection, (mainly Irish artists) of work spanning the last two centuries to the present. The art compliments the hotel's Georgian interior of



Grafton Street in Dublin.



Downtown Dublin.



Ashford Castle interior special dining room.



Ashford Castle in County Mayo in Ireland.



Ashford Castle at sunset.



1924 Jameson whisky barrel at the former Jameson Distillery, now a museum.

2009 by Valencian architect and world famous bridge designer Santiago Calatrava, the bridge is shaped like large white sloop, symbolic of the maritime gateway that graces the city. Teeming with four lanes of traffic, the bridge links Guild Street north of the Quays with Sir John Rogerson's Quay on the south. The walkway makes it pedestrian friendly and there is a cycle path.

Nightlife in Dublin offers a plethora of places to eat, drink and hear good Irish music. Exceptionally pleasing to the palate is Dublin's own

double occupancy bedroom (\$650/night) but well worth it, especially the spacious bathrooms brandishing heated towels at the ready, large bathtubs and separate showers. Room rates vary and the Merrion offers great deals like their “Luxury Breaks” – the “Dine & Dream” which cost about \$250 for a night in a standard Queen Room and includes a full Irish breakfast and a three course dinner for two.

Dublin's main streets are wide but seductively tendril out to narrow, cobblestone alleys, each one entreats, beckoning you to leave

Guinness beer, which tastes completely different than it does here in the U.S. The word is that Guinness has different concoctions of the brew for different countries. In Dublin, it's rich and tasty, less carbonated. You can visit the Guinness Storehouse, get a good dose of Guinness lore topped off with a free pint of the tasty grog.

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Of the many famous pubs, there is O'Donohue's, just across from the Merrion, renowned for hosting the original band, The Dubliners, in the mid 1960's. O'Donohue's has an outside beer garden basked in red light, a haven for smokers. Inside or outside, there's always a friendly hubbub of conversation. If you like Jazz there's Sweeney's Bar or JJ Smyth's; you'll find Rock and Pop at the Button Factory or Whelan's. Classical high brows can hear top orchestra or chamber music performances at NCH John Field Room and George's Hall in Dublin Castle. And what's a trip to Ireland without Irish theater? Dublin's stages include Viking, Abbey and Gates Theatres, to name a few.

Heading southeast towards Ashford Castle, (www.ashford.ie) is the Kilbeggan Distillery, a smaller, but well known Irish whiskey but rare in the U.S. (www.cooleywhiskey.com). Kilbeggan is part of Ireland's popular Whiskey Trail which has 36 stops throughout the country and includes distilleries and well known, historical pubs (www.irelandwhiskeytrail.com). Irish whiskey used to be a popular export to the states until prohibition in the 1930's when suddenly sales plummeted and many distilleries closed down. By the late 20th century many distilleries were revived and re-emerged into the market place. Jameson is leading the way with one of the



Oscar Wilde Statue in Dublin Park.

biggest alcohol marketing budgets worldwide.

One of the better known and well established luxury resorts is the Ashford Castle in Mayo, 45 minutes from Galway. A long time favorite of the rich and famous – from Princess Grace to Tony Blair to John Travolta – you can see over a hundred photographs of celebrities at the castle's mezzanine floor. Built in 1228, Ashford was founded by the Anglo-Normans de Burgo family, who built several castles throughout the province. Set on 450 acres with a spectacular backdrop of forests, lakes and mountains, Ashford Castle dreamily puts you back in time. But not back too much. The



Old Jameson still at Jameson museum in Dublin.

castle boasts 83 rooms, including five suites, a health spa, and a superb restaurant, the George V Dining Room. In the lounge adjacent to the restaurant a pianist serenades folks relaxing in overstuffed couches and chairs with small tables to dine informally. A full Irish breakfast (complimentary) includes smoked salmon, black and white pudding, smoked kippers, freshly baked white soda bread, eggs, sausage, bacon and fresh pastries – a morning meal fit for a king.

The medieval structure has all the nooks and crannies and towers and walls are bedecked

with period art from the 18th and 19th century. The sports facilities include a nine hole golf course, clay target, horse back riding, archery. The castle is on the shores of Lough Corrib and a day cruise takes you to the island of Inchagoill – cocktails are served on board. Ashford is also home to Ireland's Falconry School where you can see and hold incredibly beautiful hawks and owls. If you venture off the grounds, it's walking distance to the small village of Cong where there are restaurants whose fare is moderately priced and whose pubs are friendly and fun. There's also a delightful art gallery, Cong Art (www.congart-gallery.com).

Also, don't miss the incredible Irish crafts which can be found in places like the National Craft Gallery in Kilkenny, several shops in Galway, The Hunt Museum in Limerick, Victory Centre in Dublin. For a full list check www.craftinireland.com.

No matter what time of year, (I traveled in November) Ireland is a “must-see” for those of us with wanderlust and the passion to experience life on the other side of the Atlantic.

Photos by Abby Luby and courtesy of Abby Luby Photo.

Abby Luby is a Westchester based, freelance journalist who writes local news, about environmental issues, art, entertainment and food. Her debut novel, “Nuclear Romance” was recently published. Visit the book's website, <http://nuclearromance.wordpress.com/>.

GovernmentSection

THE ALBANY CORRESPONDENT

Breaking Down the Budget

By **CARLOS GONZALEZ**

ALBANY, NY - Talk about seizing the moment. Gov. Andrew Cuomo presented a \$132.5 billion budget to the legislature last Tuesday afternoon that would increase aid to schools, holds aid to local governments steady, reduces overall state spending by \$225 million, and for the first time, Mr. Cuomo said he was poised to tackle the state's education establishment head-on, announcing that he would appoint a bipartisan commission to recommend reforms in the contentious areas of teacher evaluation and management efficiency.

In delivering the annual budget, Albany's status quo of politics and special interests, which Cuomo says serves itself rather than taxpayers, or even children, were once again put on notice.

“We created a sense of optimism and hope,” Cuomo said, referring to his and the Legislature's first-year accomplishments.

2011 produced an on-time budget that cut spending, including hot-button areas such as school aid; The legalization of gay marriage; An overhaul of the tax code that takes more from the rich and give a small break to the working class.

“New Yorkers believe in government,” continued Cuomo. “They have hope once again for themselves, their state, their families and their communities and that is a great, great gift.”

Some key elements in Gov. Andrew Cuomo's 2012-13 budget proposal are:

- Spending would remain essentially flat.

- There would be no tax increases, fees, or one-shot gimmicks.

- Public school and Medicaid funding would be increased 4 percent, or \$805 million.

- Cuomo wants a new system for evaluating teachers and principals that would take into account student performance. Schools that don't adopt the new system would risk not getting state aid increases in the 2012-13 and 2013-14 budgets.

- The state would create a plan to take over the cost of growth in Medicaid spending from counties over the course of three years, saving them \$1.2 billion over the next five years.

- A less costly pension tier for new public employees would save the state, local and New York City governments \$113 billion over 30 years.

- The New York Works program would be used to drive \$15 billion in public and private funding for infrastructure work in coming years, including \$5 billion for a new Tappan Zee Bridge.

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