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The Magical Kingdom of Killarney

Indulge in the Emerald Isle's Irish hospitality, rich history and lush environs.

BY GIGI RAGLAND

Leprechauns, shamrocks and pots of gold. That's what you expect to find in County Kerry, Killarney, Ireland. While you might indeed obtain a few of these aforementioned Irish icons in various forms, it's a magical kingdom that has nothing to do with entertainment park rides and themed, costumed characters. The magic can be discovered within the enchanting environment surrounding the ancient town of Cill Airne, also known as Killarney or "the church of the sloes." The town and Killarney National Park's fairytale landscape have been captivating tourists and travelers in the emerald green mountains, forested woodlands and misty lakes for centuries.

Besides such literary celebrities as Lord Alfred Tennyson, Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, perhaps the most heralded visitor was Queen Victoria during the mid-19th century when she and the royal family spent a

holiday at the grandest estate in Killarney, the Muckross House. Days were spent in quietude enjoying the grounds, lake views and inviting hospitality of the elaborate Victorian mansion's owners. The serenity of being "unplugged" was as much a luxury then as it is now for those in need of relaxation and rejuvenation.

When the mansion was donated in 1932 to the Irish state, the sprawling lands, gardens and Elizabethan-style mansion were designated as Ireland's first national park, Killarney National Park. Visitors can still get a sense of the "Upstairs/Downstairs" lifestyle of the landed gentry when touring the estate. Killarney National Park has expanded to roughly 25,000 acres and supports a diverse habitat with the three lakes of Killarney, native forest and vast woodlands, mountain peaks and wildlife as well as Ireland's only native herd of red deer.

A few manmade structures still remain within the pristine parklands surrounding the lakes, including a number of hunting lodges transformed into tea cottages; the ruins of a medieval castle, monastery and ab-

bey; the massive Muckross Estate; crumbling mossy stone walls; and a lovely historic hotel which also hosted Queen Victoria during her holiday. The mystical landscape fires the imagination with legends, lore and Celtic tales. For visitors who want to make the most out of their visit to explore the wondrous beauty of Killarney National Park they would be hard-pressed to find a more idyllic location than The Lake Hotel, the only luxury, four-star property overlooking the Lower Lake, otherwise known as Lough Lein.

A stay at The Lake Hotel gives a sense of the landscape's storied past, as massive windows from the restaurant, terrace and guest rooms offer breathtaking views of Lough Lein and the stoic remains of the 12th-century McCarthy Mor-Ross Castle. Oh, if the castle could tell tales, what Celtic lore you would hear. And, as luck would have it, as it often does in Ireland, the hotel staff can provide plenty of information



The rugged, mountainous lands of Killarney National Park are home to world-famous lakes and McGillycuddy's Reeks, the highest mountain range in Ireland. Photo courtesy of Skellig Islands Tourists



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Above: The picturesque grounds of The Lake Hotel are carefully maintained by the Huggard family and staff, who celebrated the hotel's centennial in 2012, marking 100 years of Irish hospitality. Right: The Lake Hotel's Four Poster Deluxe Lake View rooms include cozy fireplaces, enclosed balcony seating and unparalleled views of the lake, mountains and National Park, all from the hotel's top floor.



on the area and lengthy lore of the feudal past of the lands, castle and Killarney.

But it is not just the allure of the view and access to Killarney National Park that attracts guests to The Lake Hotel. The fine bones of the historic structure remain as elegant and beautifully maintained as the day it opened in 1820. When the hotel was purchased in 1940 by Irish hotelier, the Huggard family, their mission was to restore the property to its regal grandeur. The

Huggards have been actively involved in managing the hotel ever since, ensuring that the architectural elements are carefully preserved, showcasing the elegance of the historic building while allowing for more modern facilities and conveniences for the comfort of guests.

A guest favorite is the Piano Lounge which is part of the original 1820 hotel building, where grand balls of bygone days were held. Now it is an inviting, restored space for guests to relax,

read, play cards or simply admire the ambience and while away the hours. The antique chandeliers, intricate stucco work, soaring ceilings and grand piano remain, providing a gracious atmosphere reflecting the splendor of its historic past. Guest rooms reflect the elegant history of the hotel with luxurious furnishings, fabrics and linens to complement the refined, vintage décor. Most of the rooms have lake views and a large number offer balconies.

Guests are delighted when they meet Niall Huggard, who with his two brothers Colman and Tony, now own the hotel. Niall is the General Manager of the hotel and can be found at his desk by Reception for at least a few hours a day. Pick his brain for suggestions on what to do in the area; he loves to share suggestions based on his experience growing up in the region. As an avid outdoorsman, Niall has plenty of tips on kayaking, hiking, cycling and mountain climbing. And, of course, there are numerous world-class golf courses nearby that he can recommend.

Customized private activities can be easily arranged such as a guided climb of 3,406-foot-tall Carrauntuohill, Ireland's highest mountain; a private carriage cart ride pulled by an Irish draft horse; or even a moonlit, guided kayak trip on the lakes. For those interested in exploring the Ring of Kerry, the hotel is right on the road, offering a great starting or ending point. And the town of Killarney is only one mile away, within walking and biking distance.

Some guests don't venture too far from the hotel, lakes and national park even though they made great plans to do so much beyond Killarney. But that is the beauty of the location. The warmth of true Irish hospitality is everywhere. As one hotel staff member said, "We realize how lucky we are to live here, whereas our tourists are only passing through, so we want them to enjoy it as much as possible." lakehotel.com

NIALL HUGGARD'S FAVORITE GOLF COURSE HOLES

Killarney Golf & Fishing Club's Mahonys Point

"The 18th hole is truly special with the backdrop of the Devil's Punch Bowl, Torc Mountain, the lakes of Killarney and the ancient Scots Pine trees surrounding the course, with water down one side, making it a real challenge. This Par 3 hole—200 yards off the back tee with the tee shot into predominant southerlies—makes it one you won't forget!" Fun fact: Mahonys Point has hosted the Irish Open.

Waterville Golf Club (at the end of the Ring of Kerry Peninsula)

"The 12th hole in particular has a real history to it. Back in olden times, when practicing religion was a crime punishable by death, the Irish Catholics used to come here—to this dip in the landscape—to say mass, and this hole is sometimes referred to as the 'Mass Hole'."

ADD ON TO YOUR TRIP

Walk the Ring of Kerry

Plan a week-long walking tour of The Ring of Kerry before or after your hotel stay to enjoy a more immersive, off-the-beaten path Irish experience with The Wayfarers Walking Vacations. The company is an expert provider of knowledgeable guided tours in the UK, Ireland and select locations. thewayfarers.com

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The Ring of Kerry is a circular route through County Kerry, highlighting many natural and man-made landmarks.

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