



Hike along the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland with Vagabond Tours.

Food for Thought

A combined food and cultural tour through Ireland provides a tasty view of the country

by GIGI RAGLAND

THERE'S MORE TO IRISH FOOD than potatoes — a fact I quickly discovered during Epic Irish Food Adventure Tour, the newest offering from Vagabond Tours.

Don't get me wrong. I love potatoes in all forms, especially crispy chips heaped alongside a plate of fresh-caught fried fish. But Vagabond's seven-day tour offers an insider's view on the evolving Irish gastronomic scene and, more importantly, a chance to discover how "food tells the story of Ireland," according to our native Irish guide.

Vagabond specializes in two categories of small-group tours: active Vagabond tours and relaxed Driftwood tours, with a maximum of 15 guests each. The operator has won Irish environmental tourism awards for sustainability and innovation, and I was looking forward to an immersive culinary experience that included foraging along cliffs and coasts, meeting local producers and chefs and — of course — tasting, dining and sipping all manner of food and drink.

HOT POTATO

As we set off from Dublin in the comfortable, custom Mercedes-Benz four-wheel drive "Vagatron" tour vehicle, I noticed that our small group of five guests had all taken advice from the itinerary regarding clothing recommendations. We were dressed for action and equipped with sneakers and/or hiking shoes, our *modus operandi* for full days of walking or hiking along cliff trails and on farm pastures, coastal beaches and village streets.

My wind jacket came in handy in the steady ocean breeze from Hag's Head trailhead along the Cliffs of Moher, where our guide, Oonagh O'Dwyer — owner of Wildkitchen in Lahinch, County Clare — led us on a foraging hike for wild foods.

Not familiar with the name "Oonagh," I asked what it meant in Gaelic.

"Lamb," Oonagh replied gently, smiling as her blue eyes twinkled and her red hair whipped in the wind around a wool neck scarf.

Indeed, it did seem like we were little lambs trying to keep pace single-file behind our "mama" on the ribbon of packed dirt.

An ancient rock wall ran parallel to the right of the trail — separating the group from mooing cows munching on lush, hilly pasture — while to the left of us, the mighty cliffs cast downward to the wild Atlantic.

An impressive natural site, and one of the most visited spots in Ireland, the Cliffs of Moher rise to about 700 feet at their highest point and stretch along the Atlantic Ocean on the western seaboard of County Clare. From various points, guests can see the Aran Islands, Galway Bay, Loop Head headland, the Twelve Pins mountains and the Maumturk mountains.

Grassy terrain awash with colorful wildflowers buffered the edges of the trail, and Oonagh pointed out a stinging nettle plant. She informed us that, in old times, the Irish made a porridge from the plant to help cleanse blood. Every step we took seemed to reveal another type of plant or wildflower that could be used for cooking or healing, including yarrow, purple-flowered vetch, plantain, clover, wildpea and blackberry shrubs.

Farther along, as we took in the scenery



The tour includes a stop at a remote water buffalo farm.

and snapped incredible photos, Oonagh exclaimed, “Fairy potatoes!”

At last, we encountered a potato — but not a typical one. We learned that these slender plants produce a tuberous nut and are a member of the carrot family. It has been said that you need to ask the fairies permission to forage the small treasures and, no doubt, Oonagh complied.

Near the end, Oonagh surprised us with a delicious clifftop picnic that included a

pesto crafted from fairy potatoes as well as various other snacks from the surrounding coastal environment, including crunchy seaweed chips. These tangy chips gave us a taste of what was yet to come — another active outing that included time to forage seaweed along the coast.

Each day revealed a closer connection to Ireland’s food and people. Additional itinerary highlights included a visit to Galway-based Flaggly Shore Oysters to learn from the

owners — a father-daughter team — about the sustainable process of growing bivalves as well as shucking and eating them. We also went to County Cork, where we ate lunch at a remote water buffalo farm and tasted Irish mozzarella. Time at West Kerry Brewery, which included sampling beers from Ireland’s first female brewer, was a guest favorite.

Never more than a few hours from our next stop, we passed time in the van listening to Irish songs from a playlist compiled by John, our knowledgeable and cheery guide. He also patiently and tirelessly instructed us on Irish Gaelic pronunciation, which we attempted to master during our week together.

The trip was great *craic* (fun) — as the Irish say — and guaranteed to be popular with clients. **X**

Note: In 2020, Vagabond Tours’ Epic Irish Food Adventure Tours will run once per month from May to September.

The Details: Vagabond Tours (www.vagabondtoursofireland.com)



During one excursion, guests learn how to forage seaweed.