

DUBLIN, THE LIVELY AND HISTORIC IRISH CITY, IS THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR A FESTIVE WEEKEND BREAK. **AFSHEEN SHAIKH** HAS A 'CRAIC' IN THE EMERALD ISLE

The Magic of Dublin



Ireland has forever been affectionately known as the Emerald Isle and unlike the lucky leprechaun with a pot of gold this is no myth, for the sight of this tiny island is like a lush green carpet of natural beauty. I catch a glimpse just before my plane swoops down onto the tarmac of Dublin International Airport, now the 17th busiest international airport in the world and with Dublin itself emerging as one of Europe's hottest capitals I wanted to be wowed beyond my expectations.

However, I was a little apprehensive about what Dublin would have to offer. It has lured many stag and hen parties to fuzzy heights of hedonism and debauchery namely the Brits, so for someone who doesn't drink and who was alone, would the loveable Irish city cater for my needs? My preconceptions were quickly banished for Dublin is teeming with things to see and do without the inclusion of alcohol.

Quirky and lively, Dublin is the largest city in Ireland with an approximate population of 1.6 million and the Republic of Ireland in total has four million. The river Liffey is the pivotal point, dividing Dublin into the Northside and Southside. Locals like to refer to the Northside as working-class while the Southside veers towards middle and upper class, though this division is by no means noticeable.

What is wondrous about Dublin is that it boasts a rich history of literature having produced some of the most prominent literary names including Dracula's Bram Stoker and it is also the birthplace and home of Samuel Beckett, Oscar Wilde and Jonathan Swift. Like many writers who flock to this city for inspiration, I feel connected and could imagine myself fitting in but as a tourist, I'm aware of little else other than Dublin is home to the mighty Guinness.

Stuffed toy leprechauns line the souvenir shop windows and to my amusement, the post boxes are shaped exactly like the red pillar ones in the UK but are painted green. Dublin is spotless and Ireland itself is smoke-free since they enforced the smoking ban in March 2004 – the first country in Europe to do so in fact. It's amazing to think Ireland was once considered a 'disadvantaged region' but since it joined the EEC (now the EU) in 1973, Ireland has come leaps and bounds to become the thriving country that it is today. Rock stars, film-makers and celebrities adore Dublin and I had a feeling I would too.

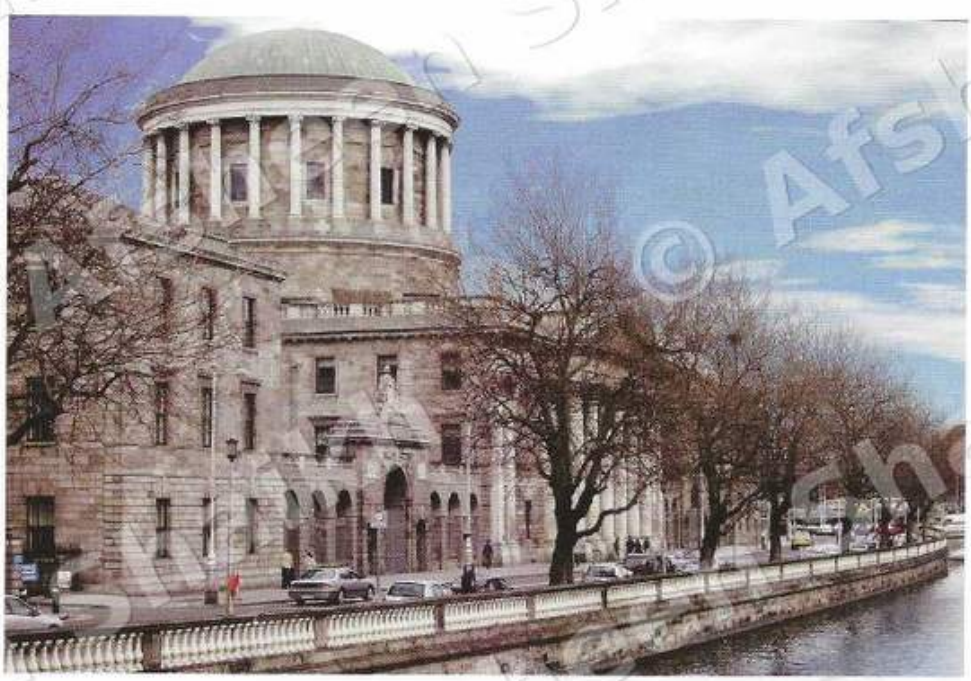
I decided to jump on an open-top city tour bus to familiarise myself with the major sights and surroundings. Many are within a stone's throw away of one another so essentially you can explore the city by foot but to get your bearings, a 90-minute journey on the tourist trail is just the ticket with live commentary on board as well. At around 14 Euros (less than £10) and valid for 24 hours, it gives you the freedom to explore the city's history and culture at your leisure. Moreover, bus companies have the facility for you to book online with the advantage of a 20% discount.



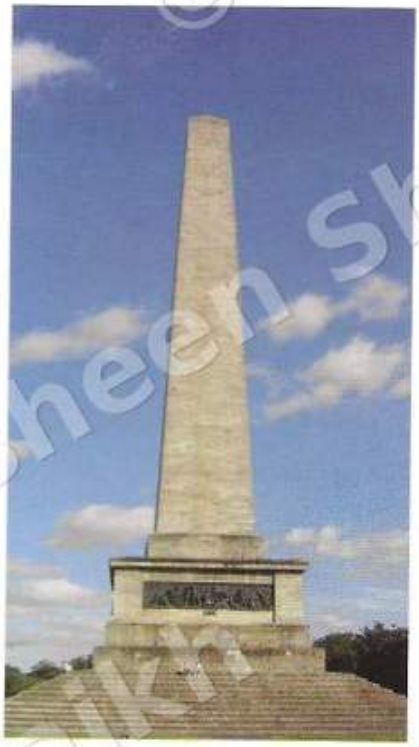
The route itself takes you to such places as the Bank of Ireland (formerly the Irish Houses of Parliament) and Trinity College founded in 1592 by Elizabeth I. Together with the University of Dublin Trinity, it forms Ireland's oldest university. The Georgian architecture of the college is remarkable with the grounds open to the public daily.

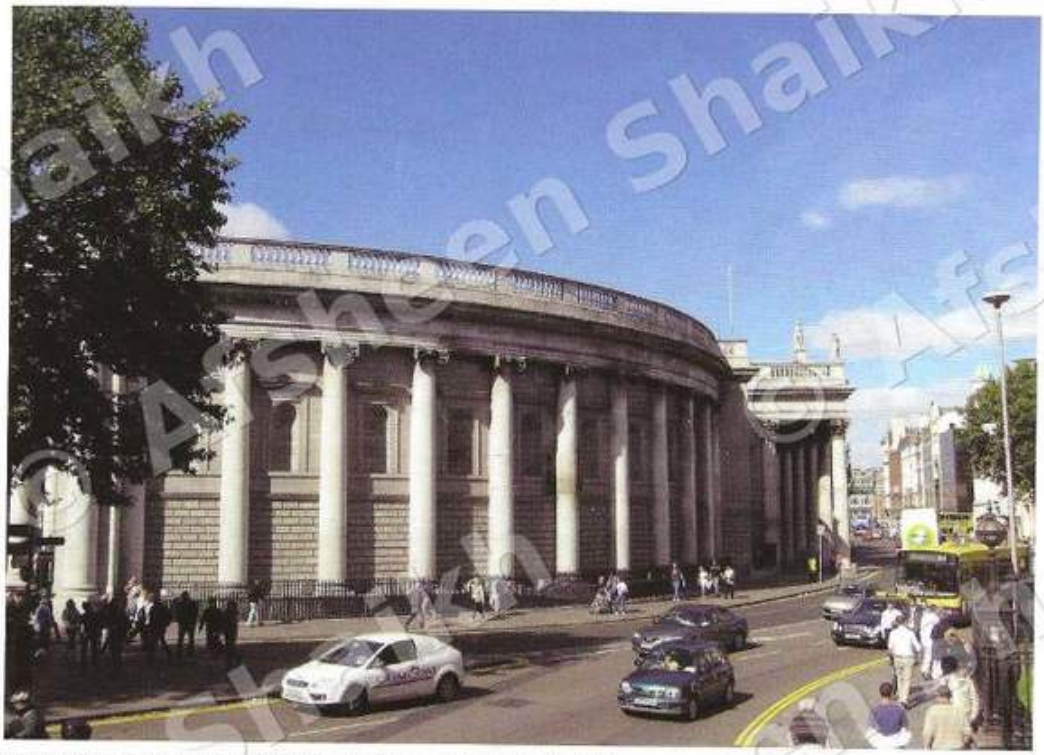
Other major attractions close by are the various national museums and galleries, which are free but closed on Mondays (as I had the misfortune to discover) as well as Dublin Castle, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin City Hall and Phoenix Park. Five times bigger than London's Hyde Park and twice the size of New York's Central Park early birds can see herds of wild Fallow deer grazing, which live in the park. If you can spare an hour, it's beautiful to walk through and admire.

Phoenix Park is also where Dublin Zoo is located, as is the American Embassy and the Irish President's residence. Provided you ▶



The city offers excellent views for those exploring on foot



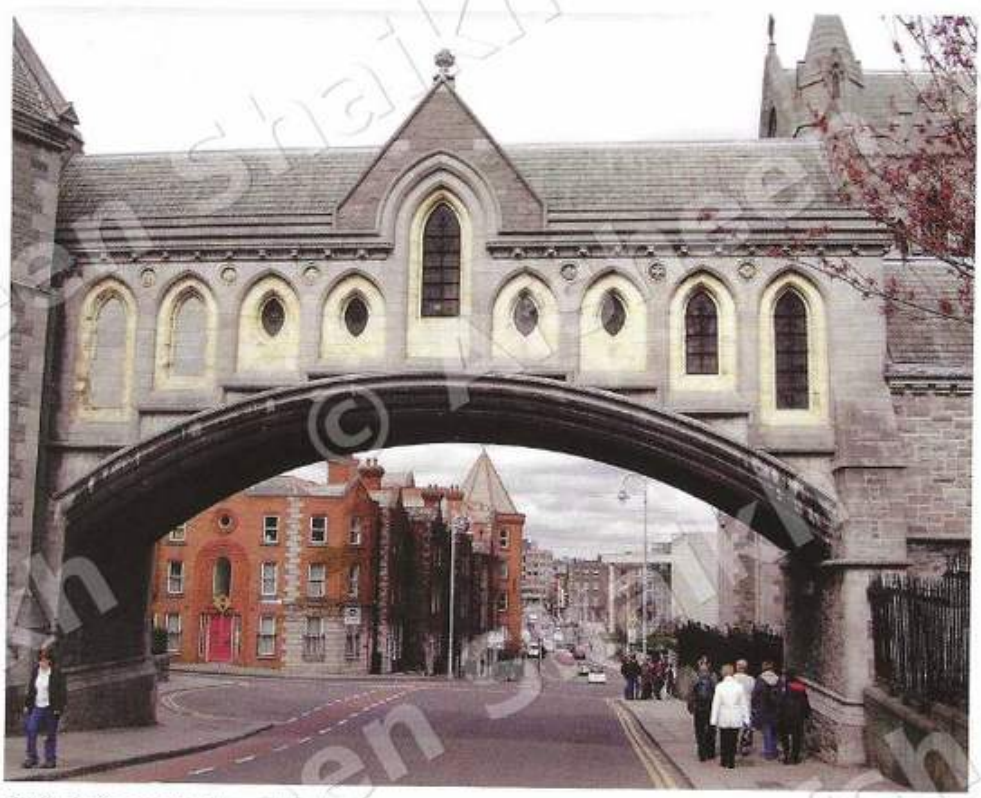


The Bank of Ireland and Duke of Wellington memorial are just two of Dublin's plethora of historical buildings

can dodge past the overzealous cyclists and runners, you can make a stop at the memorial of the Duke of Wellington (a 62 metre tall obelisk) and the Papal Cross which was erected for the visit of the late Pope John Paul II in September 1979 where over one million people attended mass. Phoenix is that big!

Packing in the historical and cultural sights of Dublin is no easy task so it was a blessing to stumble across St Stephen's Green bang in the middle of these pressure points. Europe's biggest square, St. Stephen's Green, is a picturesque park and perfect to catch up on a few chapters from your book or have a sandwich. It's hard to believe you've been transported to a tranquil spot that is literally on the doorstep of oncoming traffic.

Having fully recharged the batteries it's time to cross the road and head towards Grafton Street, where every girl can fantasise, idolise and possibly do some serious damage to her credit card. Grafton Street is the premier upmarket shopping street in Dublin with shops at the top end of the retail market including Brown Thomas, the equivalent of Harvey Nichols in London. It is fun just strolling along the street, watching the street entertainers and soaking up the atmosphere. Once you reach the end, you'll be greeted by the statue of Molly Malone, colloquially known as 'the tart with the cart', and the subject of an unofficial Irish anthem, sung by Dubliners and rugby supporters alike. Whether there is any truth in the urban legend that Molly sold from her cart in the day and sold herself by night is another matter although Dubliners aren't particularly keen on the attention Molly and her ample bosoms attract, believing the statue 'dumbs' Dublin down.



Dublin is famous for its architecture

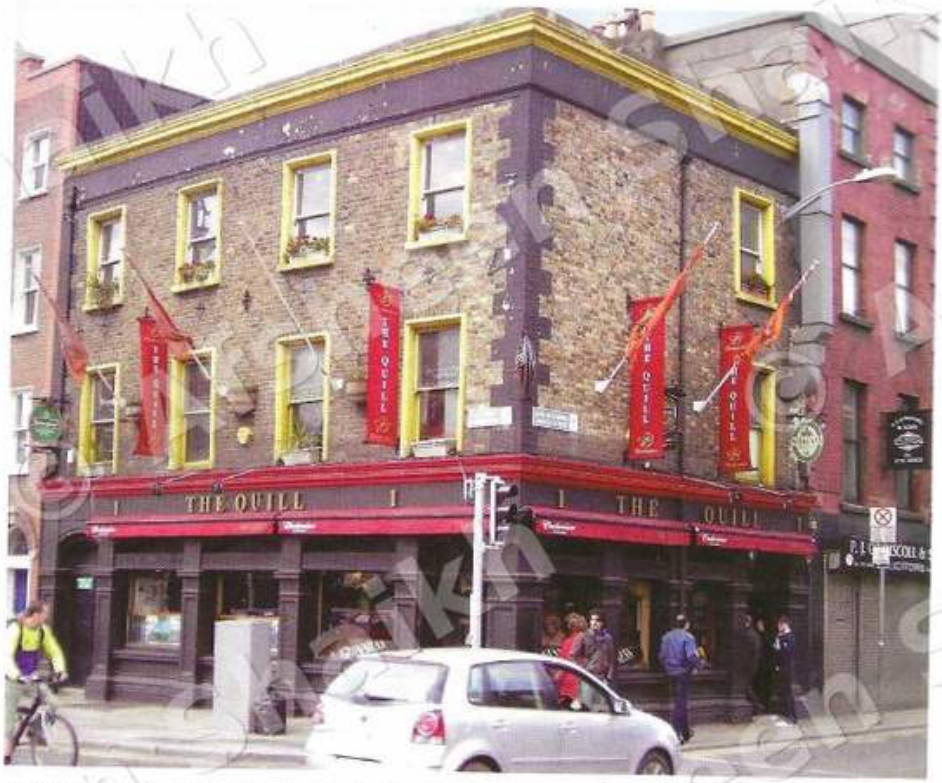
For more affordable and recognisable high street shops, in the opposite direction is Henry's Street but why waste time when you can find the same shops back home at matching prices? Instead, amble along the narrow cobbled streets of the notorious Temple Bar on the south bank of Liffey. Situated in Dublin's cultural quarter, this is where you'll find the pubs, bars, nightclubs, live music and restaurants. Full of character and charm and where classic intertwines with contemporary, the beauty of Temple Bar is not to be missed be it in the day or at night.

It is possible to take in the pleasures of Dublin without stepping foot inside a pub but you can't leave without paying a visit to the colossal Guinness brewery and it is a sight

to behold – all 65 acres. Based at St James's Gate and known as the Guinness Storehouse, the world-famous beer has been brewed since 1759 and is now produced around the world at a rate of over 10 million glasses each day including in Nigeria and Indonesia. If you can stomach the black stuff, you get a pint of it at the end of a tour around the storehouse plus a panoramic view of Dublin to enjoy from the top floor of the Guinness tower.

Having tackled the main attractions of the town centre, I had some extra time to venture outside of the city walls to the south coast of Dublin. I urge you to put aside a day for this because once you set eyes on the enchanting little village of Enniskerry, you'll wish you could stay here for longer. Leading towards the beautiful Wicklow mountains Enniskerry is where the Powerscourt House and Gardens are. The estate is likely to be recognised by movie buffs since the breathtaking mountain setting has been featured in many films including *Braveheart*.

But the real gem without a doubt is the spectacular Powerscourt waterfall. Falling 121 metres, it is the highest waterfall in Ireland, situated in a valley surrounded by Djouce Mountain and the Great Sugar Loaf. Entry to the waterfall is 5 Euros for adults and 3.50 Euros for the under 16s and every cent is ploughed back into preserving this stunning attraction. It's a popular haunt for hikers and climbers alike though many are simply satisfied with splashing about in the little rock pools and streams below the fall. It really is a magnificent scene.



Dublin has many pubs and restaurants to keep people entertained

Finally I rounded off my visit to the south coast with nothing less than watching the tides of the Irish Sea crashing onto Bray beach. Known as the Gateway to the Garden of Ireland, Bray is an unspoilt pebbled and sandy beach, and the place to escape to for peace and quiet.

I've come away from Dublin having only scratched the surface. Fobbed off as a place just full of pubs, I realise those who believe that's all there is to Dublin never saw it through my eyes. This exciting city enticed me and at the core of its appeal, has me wanting to come back and rediscover its great charm. I just can't quite put my finger on what that is.



Tourists can take in the sights of O'Connell Street

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