

# TRAVEL



## A Ride on the Wild Side: Horse-Trekking in Ireland

By Eric Minton  
Newsday Special Correspondent

**I**RELAND'S wildness, mysteries and brilliant shades of green make this land stand alone among earth's natural wonders, as Ireland itself stands alone on the edge of Europe.

In such a land did a horse named Misty wing me away on a tour of fancy, riding over Ireland's earthbound heavens like a conquistador claiming hitherto unseen land. With six other tourists and a guide, I rode around Killarney's Lough Leane, down the Iveragh Peninsula and across the Ring of Kerry, traipsing through terrain only the hardest hikers could tackle, seeing scenery denied buses and cars. Then we did what one can exper-

ience only on horseback: gallop on the beach.

It is an experience available to anyone, even those who have never set foot in a stirrup before.

Misty belongs to the Killarney Riding Stables in County Kerry, Ireland's southwesternmost region. The town of Killarney thrives because of its proximity to three brilliant lakes at the edge of Macgillicuddy's Reeks, Ireland's tallest mountain range. Yet the town's population extends hospitality unmatched by most other cities whose sole commodity is tourism silver.

Donal O'Sullivan, 42, owner of the Killarney Riding Stables, exemplifies such "Irish charm" in both his presence and his trail-ride operation. After a dozen years renting out horses for short

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Taking the reins on a Kerry beach.

# A Ride on the Wild Side: Ireland by Horseback

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afternoon treks, O'Sullivan started running his seven-day, 100-mile Killarney Reeks Trail holidays in 1982. He also offers three-day mini-trails covering any part of the week-long route. Both packages include lodging, meals and transfer of luggage.

The Killarney Reeks Trail is open to all comers, not just tour groups; O'Sullivan runs the trek even if only one person signs up. A tour often consists of complete strangers from Europe, South and North America who do not meet until they collect at the barn.

Yet riding horses of legendary Irish stock past exhilarating scenery herds strangers into a close camaraderie, and treks end with tearful partings. Many riders follow up their new friendships with letters and an exchange of photos.

Aside from the variety in ages and nationalities, the Killarney Reeks Trail caters to all levels of riding experience. By the end of the second day, O'Sullivan says, first-time riders settle into the necessary procedures, with the guide giving lessons along the way. Nevertheless, riders may skip any leg they feel might be too taxing.

People of "reasonable physical fitness" can take the complete trail, O'Sullivan says. Everybody gets sore, experienced and novice alike, but muscles rarely groan loud enough to incapacitate, and the scenery soon subdues the physical senses. The only preparation needed is to buy riding boots and jodhpurs, though jeans will do fine. O'Sullivan supplies the riding hat.

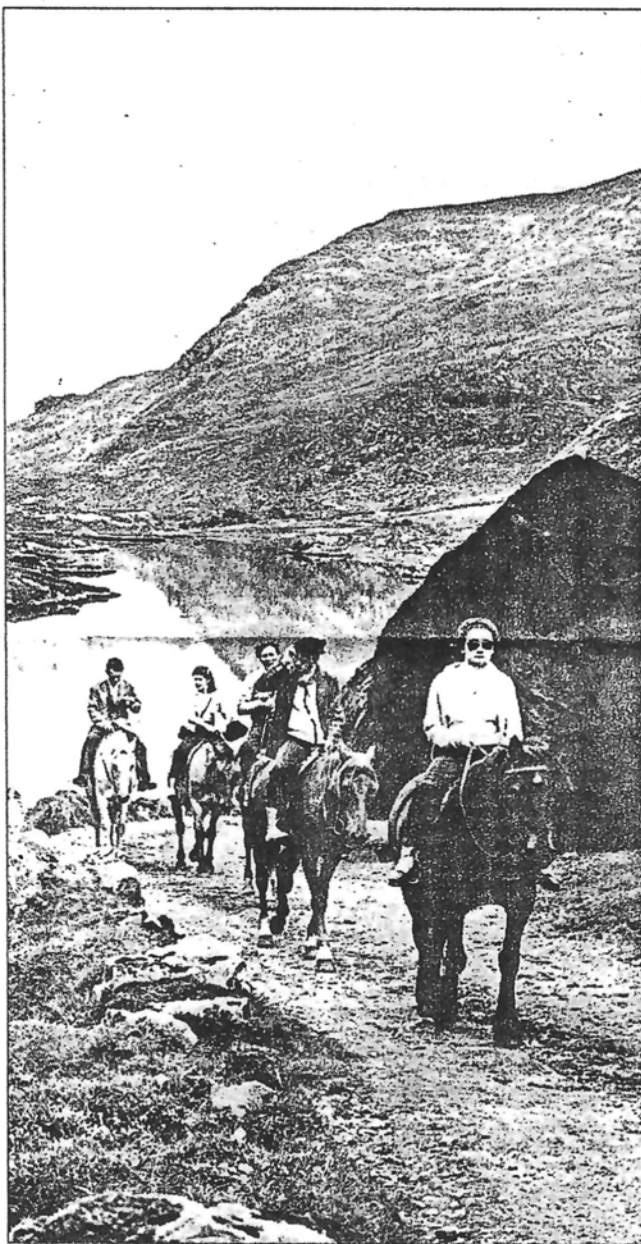
He also supplies the horses. O'Sullivan matches the horse to the personality and skill level of each rider. These horses become more than just a means of transportation; like our human companions on the trail, Misty and her colleagues became our buddies.

At the end of each day's ride, O'Sullivan joins groups over pints of stout and pots of tea to discuss the trek and cater to his charges' comfort. The after-trail drinking, in fact, took more out of the riders in our group than the 17 miles a day on horseback did. O'Sullivan's hospitality proved to be only subtle supplements to the trail's overriding attraction: the sights and sounds of Ireland.

The first day's trekking was intended to get us used to our horses and vice versa while exploring the lush, lake-endowed land around Killarney. We rode around the shores of Killarney's Lough Leane, part of which is known as Lower Lake.

**A**FTER first stopping for long looks at Innisfallen, an evergreen-covered island containing the remains of an 11th Century monastery, we rode past Ross Castle, a stone fortress in ruins dating from the early 15th Century. Though not a grand structure along the order of romantic Welsh, feudal English or eccentric German castles, Ross Castle does add a dose of Irish mystery to the lake's natural attributes.

Ross was once home to an O'Donoghue chieftan, whose misguided attempts at attaining eternal youth by magic resulted in his jumping from the castle tower into the lake. The chieftan drowned, but he did defeat old age. He now has a kingdom below the waters of Lough Leane, they say, and on some



Trekkers proceed leisurely through the Gap of Dunloe in County Kerry.

days his golden city can be seen from a boat. One look at the rainbows rising from the lake adds credence to the tale.

After a pack lunch of sandwiches, scones, apples and soda on the lake shores, we rode into the Knockreer Estate, a park laced with bridle paths rising on a hill overlooking the lake. Each turn up the hill offered an ever-expanding view of Lough Leane and its crown of mountains. These bare-domed mountains literally appeared purple under the misty skies, while all around us lay emerald pastureland, with grazing horses that must have

had legs shorter on one side to be able to stand on the steep hills.

The second day we started our trek to the Ring of Kerry and up the mountains. Heading for our first destination, Lake Caragh, we rode through a landscape in constant change, with cloud formations roaming overhead bathing a hillside on our right in a splash of sunlight and forming a halo over a valley to our left. Crayola Crayons, in their box of 500 colors, has yet to capture all the shades of green featured in Ireland's countryside.

The trail first followed the main

highway along Lake Caragh to the Devil's Elbow, a dangerous curve (in a car) with a scenic overlook of the lake, Dingle Bay and the mountains of the Dingle Peninsula in the background. Farther up the road, we turned onto a lane of pavement battered more by time and elements than by heavy use. This meandered through rocky pastureland where tiny, timid rams and annoyed cattle shared the tundra.

We now were in the Ring of Kerry. The normal scenic route for cars and coaches is a highway that runs along the Dingle Bay shore, then cuts across the Iveragh Peninsula at the end of the mountain range. Most drive around the Ring of Kerry; we were surrounded by it. The only tourists who drive where we rode are the ones who get lost trying to make some sense out of Ireland's road signs.

**T**HE MOST heart-seizing view of the day, though, came that afternoon after picnicking in a stand of trees by the Caragh River. Our guide then led us onto a road we could see stretch out before us, disappearing up a mountain.

The mountain's name is Seefin, and it rounds off at 1,621 feet, almost 1,600 feet higher than the picnic area we had just left. From the valley this dome appeared rich brown, but as we ascended, we rode through a landscape of Picasso colors: dabs of white in the sheep, gray in the boulders on a field of green brush with specks of yellow and purple flowers.

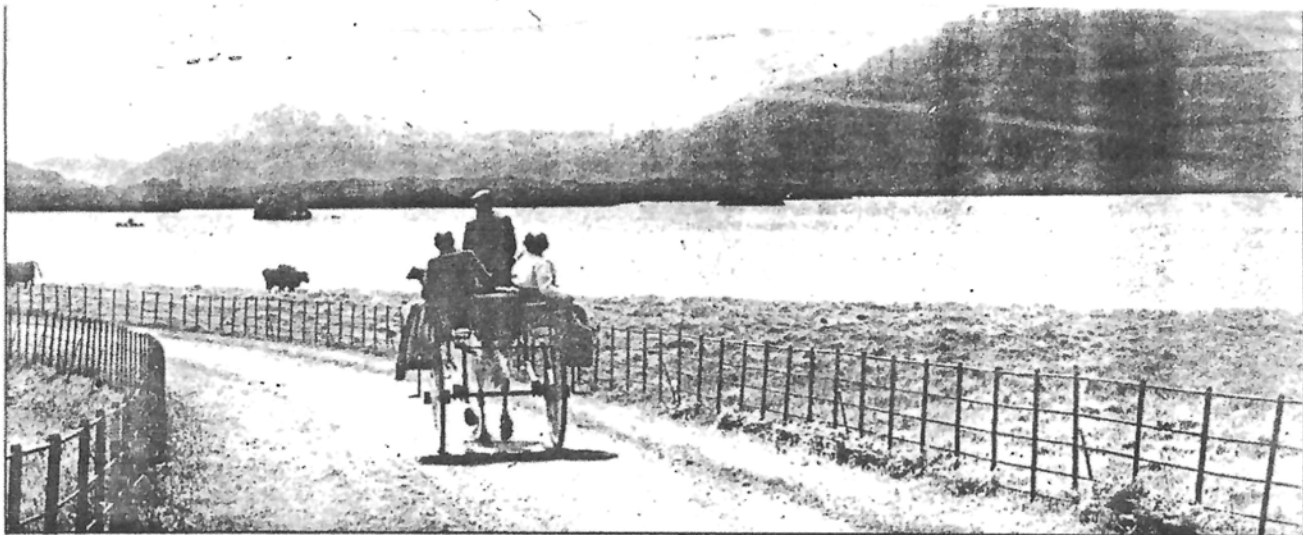
The road soon became a rutted farm lane, and after passing through a gate we rode a stony grass track on up the mountain to a bouldered alleyway known as Windy Gap, near Seefin's summit. The horses did all the stress and straining, leaving us free to merely stare as we passed through the gap.

It was like the technological trick in "The Wizard of Oz," as Dorothy opened the door of her house after the tornado had blown it to Munchkin Land and the film turned from black-and-white to color. Seefin's Windy Gap opened onto a cinematic view of Glenbeigh and its narrow valley, a slice of varying green wedged into a ring of golden mountains. Beyond, Dingle Bay lay like a sequined fabric of blue glittering in the sun, with sandy beaches forming a tan felt-tip pen outline. More gold was heaped in the row of Slieve Mish Mountains across the bay, the backdrop to this brilliant moment.

The ancient gods would have made this pass their home so that they could while away the ages staring at the mortals' domain below, way down there where the scenic route takes motoring tourists around the Ring of Kerry.

The three-mile gallop on Rossbeigh Beach came the third morning, outstripping all the glories of the previous two days. Roaring into free flight for the first time like that — my world encased in the sound of rushing wind and four hooves pounding through tide-swept sand — goes beyond fantasy, affecting a dozen more senses in the body than the five that science knows about.

The rider shares the horse's muscular motion, a motion so gracefully powerful it has enthralled painters since cave walls were canvas; yet the ride is as smooth as the back seat of a



For those trekkers who need or desire a change of conveyance, a traditional "jaunting car" can be an ideal way to tour the picturesque Lakes of Killarney region.

Rolls Royce. It seemed we were floating down the beach at Mach 2.5 when we actually were flying at 25 mph, all the while surrounded by Ireland's primitive landscape.

Afterward we rode to Coomasaharn Lake for lunch, where the sun shone from above and below, its intensity reflecting in the glare off the water. The name for this body of water is Irish for Horseshoe Lake, situ-

ated as it is at the foot of Coomacarra, a horseshoe-shaped mountain that is 2,000 feet of angled cliff from lake surface to sky.

The lake has only one access point, a road-cum-lane-cum-path from Glenbeigh. Its isolation from work-a-day humanity made Coomasaharn ideal for a lunchtime repast, a setting where one could still bask in recollection of the morning gallop.

This was the end of my mini-trail; the rest of the group were continuing on the seven-day trail. Even with what I had experienced, our guide told me I was missing the most interesting scenery of the trail farther down the Iveragh Peninsula to the beaches of the Atlantic.

I found that hard to believe. I couldn't fathom how anything could surpass the ever-changing views of Lough Leane, the scene from Devil's

Elbow, the ride through Seefin's Windy Gap, the gallop on Glenbeigh Beach or lunch at Coomacarra.

Yet each day's experience had surpassed the previous enchantments of the trip.

I took my farewells of the rest of the group, our guide, O'Sullivan and my good buddy Misty. I embraced them all, just as I had embraced the land of Ireland, if only briefly. ■■■



Visitors also may take in the beauty of the Dingle Peninsula by auto and on foot.

## The Horse Knows the Way

The Killarney Reeks Trail can be booked through travel agents or through Donal O'Sullivan, Killarney Riding Stables, Ballydowney, Killarney, County Kerry, Ireland; phone (064) 31686. The seven-day ride costs 550 Irish pounds (about \$800) per person, double, the three-day ride 290 pounds (about \$421). Prices include accommodations, all meals and luggage transfer.

Aer Lingus' midweek \$399 rate is sold out; its cheapest New York-Shannon rate is 7-120-day Apex, \$599 round trip through Sept. 15, \$499 after (buy 21 days ahead). Most charters are sold out to mid-August, but O'Connors Fairways Travel in Manhattan, (212) 661-0550, with flights Thursdays on American Trans Air, has seats Aug. 20-Sept. 18, \$419 August, \$399 September.

A trail rider may be picked up at Cork or Shannon Airports for 60 pounds (about \$87), plus 20 pounds (about \$29) each extra person. The rides operate year-round.

First-time riders need not shy away. All riders are in good hands

with trail guides and Irish horses with good hooves. Stamina should not be a factor. Trail guide Les Little says soreness and fatigue diminish with each day's ride—except for the gallop on the beach, which tires everybody but the horses, it seems.

Killarney Riding Stables is the only operator on the Killarney Reeks Trail, but is one of a half-dozen such operations in the Irish Tourist Board's "Equestrian Guide" booklet. Another trail covers Kerry's Dingle Peninsula and others, Sligo, Galway, Waterford and Tipperary Counties. Most treks last a week, though mini-rides are also offered. The week-long rides cost about 400-600 pounds (about \$581-\$872) per person. Some rides are offered only April-October.

For a free copy of "Equestrian Guide," which covers all aspects of horses in Ireland in addition to the trail rides, write Bord Failte, P.O. Box 273, Dublin 8, Ireland. Or call the Irish Tourist Board in Manhattan, (212) 418-0800, for its equestrian information sheet or brochures on Killarney Reeks and other trails.

