

From a Galway gal..

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI writes about the wild times in Galway, a youthful city in the west of Ireland, and why the subject of weather unfailingly punctuates all conversations...



FRESH SIGHTS (From top) The cliffs of Moher, one of Ireland's most popular natural attractions; a harp player by the cliffs; Claddagh, where River Corrib meets the Galway Bay. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

I spent my first evening at Galway going on a long walk to kick a wall. Not that I was particularly angry or frustrated; I was just following local tradition by marking my presence at the end of Prom, the promenade that runs right along the sea at Salthill suburb.

On that leisurely amble, I realised what the Irish mean when they say, "If you don't like the weather in Ireland, don't fret. Just wait for a minute and it will change." Sure enough, it was bright and sunny when I set out from my hotel in the centre of town and cut through Eyre Square. Couples stretched out languidly on the grass reading or soaking in the mild summer sun. Mothers watched over their playing kids as tourists stood in groups gawking at the rusting fountain modeled after the Galway hooker (nothing improper about it; it is just the name for the traditional fishing boat of the area).

Mapping places

I was clutching at a map, strictly unnecessary since Galway is a small town in which it is tough to get lost. The weather gods continued to smile on me as I walked through the imaginatively named High Street and Shop Street, open only to pedestrians. The narrow shopping lanes suddenly opened up on to the Corrib river, another hotspot for the locals who were out in full force, feeding the swans which cannily stayed close to the banks.

"They are enjoying one of the six sunny days that Ireland gets in a year," said Mark, who fell in step with me as I headed towards the Claddagh and then the promenade. By the time I got to the wall (which I duly kicked), the sky had turned an ominous grey and the rain came down as fierce, fat drops.

Mark was a music teacher at the local college; music is the soul of Galway, a town whose rhythm is set by a young population. Of these, over a quarter are students. Seeing my interest in traditional music, he pointed me to the Tig C6ilil pub, the perfect place to listen to good Irish music (and seek shelter from the persistent, annoying rain). My first time alone in a pub, I was immediately embraced by the warmth of the locals and the pulse of the music.

Lonely Planet calls it a gem (as I discovered much later, after I had returned home), "Two live *c6ilidh* (musical performances) a day draw the crowds to this authentic fire-engine-red pub, just off High Street. It's where musicians go to get drunk or drunks go to become musicians..." If Galway is called the most Irish of all Ireland's cities, then I would call Tig C6ilil my most Irish experience in that country.

The next morning, I set off on a walking tour with Fiona Brennan, a Londoner married to a local and living there for many years now. Through Fiona's stories, the medieval walls and buildings of Galway, so far hidden behind the shops and pubs, suddenly became visible. I also found out that several common English expressions such as 'lynch mob' and 'not giving the time of day' have their origins in this city.



Fact file

- **Getting there:** The nearest airport is Dublin, from where Galway is roughly three hours away by bus (this is available at the airport and can be booked online).
- **Other places to visit:** Limerick is the other big city close to Galway, and Ireland's first Capital of Culture for 2014, with fun events scheduled throughout the year. For more details: www.limerickcityofculture.ie
The Wild Atlantic Way drive is a stunning route of 2,500 km on Ireland's West Coast, perfect for a self-drive. For more details: www.discoverireland.ie/Wild-Atlantic-Way

Galway, now one of the fastest growing towns in Europe, has a history dating back to 1124. The name is believed to derive from the Gaelic word *Gaillimh*, which literally translates to 'fort at the mouth of the stony river'. Today, it is also the heart of Ireland's cultural activities, hosting the Arts Festival, the Comedy Festival, the Jazz Festival and the Oyster Festival, among others every year. And at the entrance of the main shopping district, there is a statue dedicated to one of Ireland's favourite sons, Oscar Wilde, in conversation with Estonian writer Eduard Vilde.

After the guided walk, I explored Galway on my own some more, revisiting the places Fiona had pointed out. My favourite part was the Latin Quarter, the neighbourhood with the liveliest boutiques, pubs and hostels. Most of the buildings on this stretch had brightly painted facades and even at that time of the morning, there were a few buskers strumming on their guitars. The meandering cobblestoned streets had a laid back European feel about them, enhanced by the al fresco caf6s lining the sides.

World's sexiest city?

When I went to Galway, I was intrigued by the fact that it had been voted among the world's sexiest cities a few years ago. Locals, including Fiona Brennan, had not heard about it and were surprised when I

brought it up. After a couple of days of wandering its lanes, I found my answer in Galway's youthful Bohemian vibe, its pulsating music scene and undeniably cheeky Irish sense of humour.

Another day, I headed towards the Cliffs of Moher on the Wild Atlantic Way, counted among Ireland's most popular tourist attractions. Over a million people visit the cliffs every year, and it was easy to see why this is one of the 'Signature Experiences' on this 2,500-kilometre route along the Atlantic Ocean. The cliffs rise to over 700 feet at their highest point and stretch for eight kilometres. At several places, it is a straight vertical drop to the raging ocean below; a few daredevils stood on tiny ledges posing for photographs, imagining themselves on *Titanic* film posters.

I spent a couple of hours walking on the narrow path, trying to locate the three Aran Islands in the distance. Nothing could spoil the tranquility of that experience: not the cacophony of the seagulls, not the rush of the tourists with their mobile phones. As I made my way back down towards the Visitor Centre, local musician Tina had just started her session with her harp. As her clear voice soared to the skies, I closed my eyes to savour that moment.

And on that lovely, sunny morning (in Ireland, it is difficult not to talk about the weather), I knew that there was nowhere else in the world I would rather be.

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FOR KICKS & MUSIC Tig C6ilil is one of the best pubs in Galway that features traditional Irish music. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR