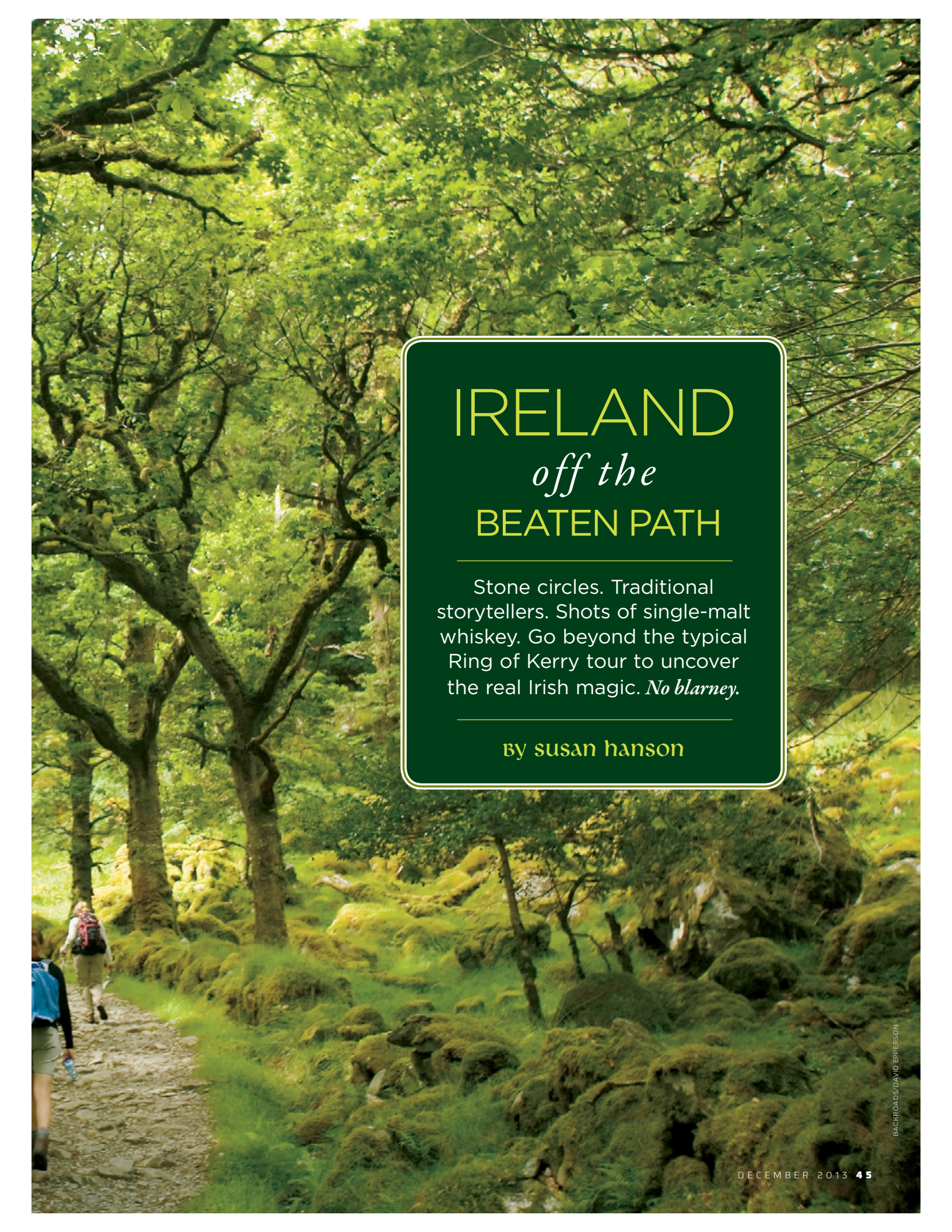




A real walk in the park:
On foot in Killarney's
Derrycunihy Woods.

A full-page photograph of a forest path. The path is made of stones and is covered with moss. Large, mossy rocks line the path. The trees are tall and have dense green foliage. Sunlight filters through the leaves. In the lower left, two hikers are walking away from the camera. One is wearing a blue shirt and the other a white shirt with a backpack.

IRELAND

off the

BEATEN PATH

Stone circles. Traditional storytellers. Shots of single-malt whiskey. Go beyond the typical Ring of Kerry tour to uncover the real Irish magic. *No blarney.*

by susan hanson



“YOU MUST REMEMBER TO STOP AND LOOK BACK,”

implored Franz Noel, one of the leaders on our walking and hiking tour around Ireland’s Ring of Kerry. In the midst of a six-day adventure with Backroads, our small group of 17 had been trekking along the Kerry Way, the longest of the country’s National Waymarked Trails. Circling the Iveragh Peninsula, the 133-mile-long footpath offers an alternative to the typical driving tour of the area. The section we were on runs along the northwest slope of Seefin Mountain up to aptly named Windy Gap, the trail’s highest point at over 1,200 feet.

It’s true that, around each bend, hikers need to stop and catch their breath — not just from the exertion of climbing, but to glimpse the distant MacGillycuddy’s Reeks mountain range, which appears as a warm quilt of emerald green. I stopped to feed apricots to some horses and watch the newly shorn sheep graze along the hillside, although really it was to linger over this

moment as long as possible.

In our breakneck world, we’re constantly looking forward — from the latest smartphone to plans for retirement. But here, high above Lough (Lake) Caragh at the mouth of the peaceful Glencar Valley, the breeze seems to speak, whispering its timeless secrets for any who will stop and listen. It’s a place that forces travelers to slow down and just be present. And that’s where the magic of Ireland truly lies.

AS ITS NAME IMPLIES, BACKROADS

heads off the beaten path to immerse guests in the true nature of a place — allowing them to travel at their own pace and on their own terms. That’s one of the factors that made this particular journey so appealing. A previous visit to Ireland had afforded only an overnight in the Ring of Kerry, one of the nation’s most scenic regions. Meandering along ancient paths, touching centuries-old stone walls, pausing at prehistoric stone circles, and meeting personalities at the local pubs seemed integral to understanding its charm.



From top: A traditional thatched cottage, Ireland forever, and the descent from Torc Mountain.

Our tour group met in Cork at the Hayfield Manor Hotel, which is where my trip actually started — in a stately one-bedroom suite with an oversize Jacuzzi (perfect after a transatlantic flight). The weather, which was unseasonably balmy, called for a light dinner of fresh-caught plaice on the patio at the hotel's bistro, followed by a stroll through the botanic gardens at University College Cork across the street. The next morning, we introduced ourselves — our group proved a mixture of everyone from event planners to estate planners — and bonded immediately as our shuttle set out for the countryside.



The Kerry Way is a place that forces travelers to slow down and just be present. And that's where the magic of Ireland truly lies.



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Our first destination: a restored Victorian hunting lodge, surrounded by manicured lawns and woodland along the shore of Lough Caragh. This was base camp for our seven-mile hike along the Kerry Way and, after soaking in the views that stretch across Dingle Bay, we made our way down to the village of Glenbeigh for a pub lunch and the trip's first pint of Guinness. The tour continued through old-growth forest to Rossbeigh Beach and a swim, but, as always, the Backroads shuttle was waiting, and I decided to head back to our lakefront lodge for some relaxation.



There was no cell reception at the lodge, nor television sets in the rooms — no modern distractions to detract from experiencing the beauty. There was, however, a little path that led down to the stone pier. This was my perch as I sipped a Bulmers cider on ice and watched the lake water dance a lively jig, entertainment aplenty.

DONNING A GREEN FELT CAP AND WIRE-RIM

glasses, Batt Burns declaimed W.B. Yeats' poetry with thespian flair in the lodge's living room. Burns is one of Ireland's last remaining *seanchaithe* (traditional storytellers) and author of the award-winning collection, *The King with Horse's Ears and Other Irish Folktales*. As a child, he lived in the remote Kerry hills with his grandfather, himself a *seanchaí*, who would recite verse and recount fables of Irish history and legend by the fire during the long, winter nights. This evening, Burns carried on the tradition while regaling us with tales of boyhood and banshees, pixies and beloved Irish poets. Such cultural experiences were regular occurrences on the journey, and our party was animated during dinner in the lodge's restaurant overlooking the lake.

The next morning, we headed to Killarney National Park, Ireland's first, established in 1932. There, our group met Michael Murphy (see sidebar on page 50), one of those quintessential Irish personas and true gems of the Emerald Isle. Murphy has been leading Backroads' guests through his home region for more than a decade, and today guided us through the fifteenth-century Muckross Abbey ruins and one of Ireland's largest remaining virgin forests to the Victorian-era Muckross House, its elegant gardens, and, just beyond, the surging Torc Waterfall.

The largest town in County Kerry, Killarney is lined with charming shops, and there was time to browse before visiting the Ross Castle nearby. Afterward, we settled in at the modern Killarney Park Hotel before our evening-long repast at the hotel's upscale Park Restaurant. A couple in the group were avid anglers, so our guides had arranged an afternoon with one of the area's top fly fishermen, and there was many a fish tale over our dinner of prawn bisque and monkfish with truffled leeks.

Clockwise from top left: Oh my Guinness, traditional storyteller Batt Burns, local color in Glenbeigh Village, and Killarney National Park.

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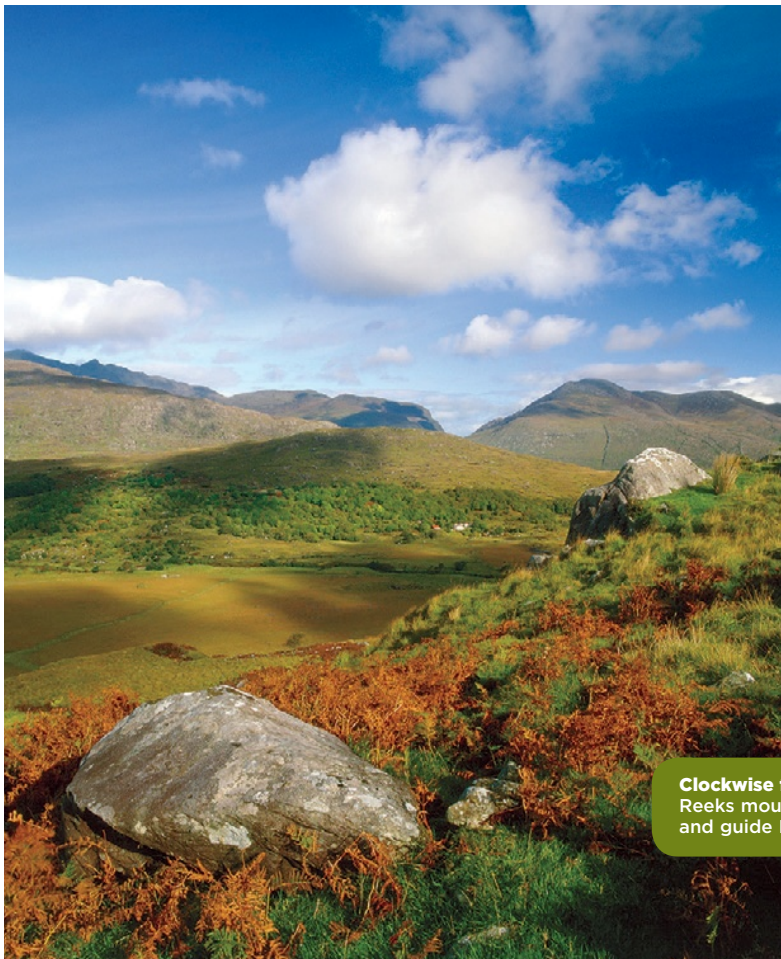
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Clockwise from left: The MacGillycuddy's Reeks mountain range, colorful Kenmare, and guide Michael Murphy hits the trail.

“BY A LONELY PRISON WALL / I HEARD A

young girl call / ‘Michael they are taking you away / For you stole Trevelyan’s corn / So the young might see the morn / Now a prison ship lies waiting in the bay.’”

Halfway during our morning hike up Torc Mountain, Murphy broke out in an a cappella version of “The Fields of Athenry.” The ballad recounts the saga of a man sentenced to prison in Australia for stealing food during the Great Irish Famine. This devastating period between 1845 and 1852 plays a central role in Irish history, and the song is a tribute to both those lost and the endurance of the human spirit. Reaching the summit certainly lifted our spirits, with its 360-degree views of MacGillycuddy’s Reeks, the crystalline Lakes of Killarney, and Muckross Estate below.

This was our longest (about ten miles) and most strenuous hike of

the journey, and we stopped halfway for a picnic lunch at Cores Cascade, a small waterfall and pool that offered relief from the warm temperatures. Later, our arrival in the town of Kenmare left just enough time to wander the weekly street market lined with handmade crafts and secondhand treasures before checking into our home for the next two nights, a Victorian hotel perched at the top of town.

Yet another day of hiking took us along the famous Beara Way. The ancient shepherd’s path up to Mount Knockagarrane, which provided vistas across lakes and glacier-

carved peaks, eventually led to a Bronze Age stone circle. Hundreds of these megalithic monuments are scattered around Ireland, built by the

Meandering along ancient paths, pausing at prehistoric stone circles, and meeting personalities at the local pubs are integral to understanding the Ring of Kerry’s charm.



MASTERFUL TALES

For more than three decades, Michael Murphy taught at the local primary (elementary) school in Kenmare. Children in Ireland spend eight years in primary school and, for his final year as a “Master,” Murphy decided to teach Junior Infants (age four). Here is just one story of his tots that he shared.

“One beautiful September afternoon, a wasp came through an open window in our classroom. There were screams and little bodies diving everywhere, under tables and behind chairs. Having calmed down the troops, I selected my weapon of choice — a copybook — and pursued the invader with assisting cries from my little men: ‘Over here, Master!’ ‘On the door, Master!’”

The culprit eventually flew to one of the roof windows, which could be opened by a winder at the front of the room. As I began to wind, there was a chorus from the boys: ‘Master, Master! He’s opening the window!’”

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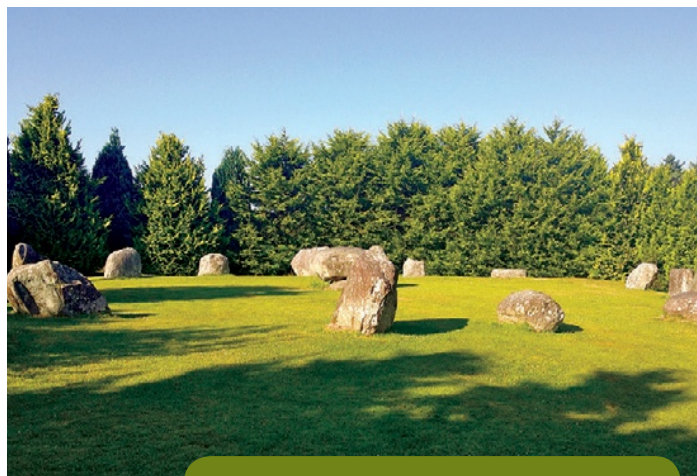
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ancient Druids for religious ceremonies. Treading through surprisingly dry bogs, we then proceeded to a sheep farm, where our guide Murphy grandly donned a sheepskin while showing us the process for shearing the flock.

That evening, the final of our tour, we joined the hotel's whiskey expert, John Moriarty, for a tasting of Ireland's finest spirit. The Irish proudly point out that they first concocted this fiery brew (although the Scots are quick to claim credit for perfecting it). Moriarty took us through the beverage's history while noting the differences between ten-year-old Jameson, 12-year Redbreast, and 16-year Bushmills. There was a touch of sadness during our farewell dinner, and, not wanting the night to end, our group traipsed into town for one last Guinness with the locals, who spilled out of the pubs into the lively streets.

Before departing for Cork the next morning, we embarked on an easy stroll through the hotel's gardens that lead to Kenmare Bay. The tall trees provided welcome shade on the way to a stone circle, one of the largest in



From top: An ancient stone circle in Kenmare, a round of whiskey, and a reflective moment on Kenmare Bay.

southwest Ireland, which centers upon a dolmen (megalithic tomb) topped with a capstone. The circle lies at the edge of Kenmare, and we passed a large posse who had just enough time to snap photos before hopping back on their tour bus. They may have seen the sights of the Ring of Kerry, but our group got to *be* with them. Magic, indeed.



WHISKEY A GO GO

John Moriarty, whiskey expert and manager at The Bar in Kenmare, keeps more than 150 special whiskeys under lock and key. Among his most treasured:

BUSHMILLS BLACK LABEL

"A distinctive, full-bodied aroma with spicy, malty, and nutty sherry notes. Perfect on an everyday basis; the sweetness follows the bite of Guinness so well. For the price, this blended whiskey is one of the world's very best."

CONNEMARA PEATED

"Ireland's only peated single-malt whiskey. Amazing with a very long finish. Its mouthfeel is so complex, with smoke in the back and the sweetness of wild woodbine to the front. Drink a large *taoscán* (measure) slowly over a very long time."

TEELING SILVER RESERVE 21-YEAR-OLD SINGLE MALT

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(STONE CIRCLE) GAYLON MORRIS, (BUSHMILLS) JANET LANDRETH



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After **six days of walking and hiking** around colorful County Kerry with Backroads, you'll exclaim, "Erin go bragh!" (Ireland forever!) The region's gorgeous countryside, genial people, farm-to-fork cuisine, and fine lodging make for lasting memories. *Departures: Multiple dates June 23 through September 21, 2014. From \$3,998.*

Built on a two-mile-long promontory that jets out into the Atlantic, the Old Head in County Cork is just one of **Ireland's best golf courses** featured on a ten-day, round-trip tour from Cork with Elysian Golf Limited. With a private chauffeur and guide, luxury accommodations, greens fees at seven courses, and full Irish breakfast daily included, your worries are limited to which clubs to play. *Available through December 31, 2014. From \$9,090.*

From top: County Cork's Old Head golf course and glorious ruins.

