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Cycle by day, craic by night by Richard Tulloch

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There's no shortage of scenic routes around Connemara which used to be one of the poorest parts of Europe but now has some of its most expensive holiday hideaways.

Photo: Richard Mills/Lonely Planet

Richard Tulloch joins a five-star bike tour and imbibes the culture of Connemara on the rugged west coast.

In the Shamrock Hotel, fiddles and uilleann pipes rattle out a reel. A young man, his cap at a rakish angle, jumps to his feet. He grabs a broom and sweeps a couple of drinkers off the tiny stage in the corner. Then he dances, back straight, feet flying across the broomstick, heels and toes beating out the rhythm in a dazzling, virtuoso display.

This is no show for tourists; he's just having fun with his mates and impressing the girl watching from across her pint. Welcome to Connemara, where this sort of thing goes on every night.

I've come here to start a cycling tour tomorrow, so this cultural experience is a bonus. My bike can wait. I'm staying in the lovely Anglers Return B&B by a beautiful trout stream and I've eaten fresh local mussels and lobster before heading to the pub for the "craic", the famed Irish love of music, fun and partying into the wee hours.

At a slightly fuzzy breakfast the next morning (well, later the same morning), I fortify myself with coffee and hostess Lynn's home-made bread and check out my fellow cyclists, who foolishly left the craic hours before I did. They look very fit in their lycra. Kim from Florida has brought her own pedals – the mark of a serious rider. Her friend Lisa and Spanish girls Maria and Cassandra claim not to ride much at all but I'm not sure I believe them.

Fidelma, our guide from Cycle West, arrives to pump up tyres and adjust saddles on our comfortable hybrid bikes. She loads our luggage into the trailer behind her car and gives us directions to the day's first coffee stop. It's a pleasant, sunny ride around the coast on quiet, undulating roads – behind five women. I chivalrously leave the navigation to them and tag along as we roll into Roundstone.

It's an attractive 19th-century harbour village. Its old Franciscan monastery is now an arts workshop making whistles, flutes and the world's best bodhrans (Irish drums). The house on the corner belongs to Michael Flatley, of Riverdance fame.

Then it's back in the saddle, onwards and upwards and downwards and upwards again. The predicted showers are holding off and the countryside is jaw-droppingly beautiful. I shouldn't be surprised. On my touring map of Ireland, every centimetre of Connemara road is marked with green borders, indicating a scenic route.

The grey, domed mountains in the middle of the peninsula are the Twelve Bens, a popular challenge for walkers, but fortunately not on Fidelma's designated cycle route. Below the peaks stretches boggy heath, where white cottages have been dotted about to provide focal points for our photos.

Little bays pit the coast, with moorings for battered fishing boats and gleaming modern yachts. Connemara used to be one of the poorest parts of Europe but now has some of its most expensive holiday hideaways.

We aim to ride a moderate 40 kilometres to 60 kilometres a day and can shorten this if we want to, so there's a long lunch and many camera stops. A stray dog who adopts us is able to keep up for hours, until Fidelma hands him over to an animal refuge, confident they'll find his owner; Radio Connemara is still olde-worldy enough to make lost dog announcements.

In the afternoon there's a solid, steady climb. Kim leads a breakaway and, forget the chivalry, it's game on. Phew, those personalised pedals give her a huge advantage, otherwise I definitely could have won – maybe. At the peak we admire stunning views towards the Bens on one side, the Aran Islands on the other and I can catch my breath on the downhill run into Clifden.

Last night's lodgings set the bar high but Clifden's Quay House clears it. Paddy and Julia have furnished their hotel from Paddy's antique business with eccentric oil paintings,

mahogany bedsteads and totally politically incorrect elephant tusks and tiger skins. Plaques on the wall celebrate their recent wins of Ireland's best accommodation awards.

The place oozes character but what most impresses me is that Julia greets me by name. She knows us all and, boy, that's a trick worth learning if you're in the business of making people feel welcome.

At night it's into Clifden for dinner, then a stroll to yet another bar with yet another music "session". Everyone's encouraged to sing their party piece and I remember just enough words to fudge through Eric Bogle's No Man's Land, once a big hit in Ireland and now a modest success in Lowry's Bar.

The blueprint for the trip has been drawn up; humungous breakfast, gorgeous day's riding, warm welcome in charming B&B, dinner in the best restaurant in town, then craic until very late. Sleep deprivation is an issue but I wouldn't miss a moment of this.

When we have a rest day, with a chance to play golf or ride Connemara ponies, I take option C: more cycling, dodging black-faced sheep on the Bog Road, coffee at the superb Ballynahinch Castle (also an accommodation option on a Cycle West tour), then visiting Kylemore Abbey, glowing by a lake in the late afternoon sun.

I love bike riding. There'll be other tours in beautiful surroundings. But when I'm dragging heavy panniers up hills, dodging traffic, getting lost, living off muesli bars and sleeping in a clammy tent in muddy campgrounds, I'll think wistfully of the luxurious days of cycling and craic in Connemara. And some time I'll do it again.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Ireland, Cycle West and The Anglers Return, and flew courtesy of Aer Lingus.