

Easy Does It



Left: Our hard-charging author meanders down the Doo Lough north of Killary Fjord, then (this page) works even harder at going slow in a pub in the little town of Louisburgh.

Photographed by Eric Piasecki



ON A LUSH TOUR OF A SURPRISINGLY RUGGED IRISH COAST, A HAMMERHEAD TRIES TO RIDE

SLOWLY ENOUGH TO LEAVE HIS HIGH-SPEED HABIT BEHIND. **BY BILL GIFFORD**



From left: After riding out of the bustling big city of Galway, Gifford confronted such challenges as the snooker table at the Zetland House (with all-night bar service), Connemara ponies more interested in blackberries than sprints, and the too-savvy trout at Ballynahinch.



I noodled along, with no thoughts of heart-rate zones and sprinted only once, chasing a stray sheep—then I stopped to apologize.



The old rebel's cottage is simple and small, with whitewashed walls and a thatch roof, overlooking a finger of the sea. Inside, the small single bed waits, just as he left it in 1916, never to return.

Paddy Pearse had arrived at his vacation house in Connacht, the westernmost province of Ireland, as an ordinary Dublin schoolteacher. He returned home to become a leader of the rebellion against the British that ultimately led to Irish independence. For his troubles, he was executed in a Dublin prison yard.

This is rebel country, a rugged landscape of rocky coast and waterlogged peatlands that you don't see on the soft, emerald-green wall posters in travel agencies.

When we stopped at Pearse's cottage, I was undergoing a mini-rebellion of my own. I was attempting something I'd never before tried on a bike: touring, which, unlike most cycling I'd ever done, apparently involves going very slowly and stopping a lot. We were, admittedly, about 30 miles into our 40-mile itinerary for the day, but we'd been riding for hours and hours.

We'd started just north of Galway and its fearsome rush-hour traffic, on a single-lane road that disappeared into the hills. I hammered up and over the pass like I'd done for most of my riding career, and particularly the six or so years I spent racing road and mountain bikes. In those days, 39 miles was a two-hour Saturday group ride—maybe briefer, if the bunch was feeling frisky. You got on your bike to train or race, not to stop for a coffee, and certainly not for a beer. Even alone, I rode hard most

of the time; it had become a bad habit.

The first sign that I might be able to topple my own tyranny of speed occurred at lunch. At the Screebe House, a lakeside fishing lodge that had once been a British outpost (raided by an uncle of our guide, Fidelma Ray), I just couldn't turn down an ice-cold, coppery Smithwick's Ale. Properly fueled, I'd managed to dawdle across Connemara, the rugged, peaty heart of Connacht, all the way to Paddy Pearse's cottage with no interest at all in my heart rate, cadence or speed.

Our destination for the night was another former seat of tyranny, which now, 90 years later, has been made into a splendid luxury fishing lodge called the Zetland House. There would be comely maidens, bearing pints of Guinness. Also, said Fidelma, "It has a lovely snooker table." It was time to dig deep; we had 9 miles yet to go, and it would be getting dark in a mere four hours.



At breakfast the next morning, the guy from Denver leaned over and asked, "How far you riding today?"

"I don't know," I said. "37 miles, I think."

"We're doing 52," he said, as his wife beamed. They were on a custom tour, just the two of them, he explained, with someone driving their bags from lodge to lodge.

I looked outside. I couldn't see much, because the rain was beating against the windows, but the palm trees—yes, palm trees—seemed to be swaying in the wind. "Looks like it'll be a tough 50 miles," I said.

"Fifty-two," he corrected me.

Mercifully, the rain had more or less stopped by the time we were ready to leave, which was a good thing because Fidelma had made it clear that riding in her Land Rover was not an option (or at least, not an option she'd respect).

Like many Irish of her generation, 42-year-old Fidelma Ray had emigrated to America in her youth, and ended up working for a bank in Atlanta for two decades. In the U.S. she grew to love cycling, and eight years ago, she started CycleWest Ireland, specializing in bike tours of her native Connemara region. Three years ago, she moved back to Galway to devote herself to the business full-time. A relentlessly optimistic strawberry blonde, Fidelma knows the back roads of County Galway by heart; years ago, her father ran motor rallies across these same little lonely bog roads. When she was establishing her tour routes, she simply cribbed from his old rally routes.

So while other tour groups hewed to the main roads, we turned off onto secret bog roads, hidden single-lane asphalt paths bumping across the land. At road-rally speeds, they must have been terrifying; on a bike, they were magical, though I wished I'd brought something less dainty than a road bike with racing wheels. Untouched by any modern highway engineer, our routes

twitched and turned and dove around sharp bends, like a weathered belt laid across a rumpled bed. Some of them were older than ancient, and you could feel, underneath the thin layer of macadam, the original medieval roadbed of logs laid crosswise across the soft peat. If that didn't make it interesting enough, a sketchy strip of gravel down the middle kept us honest—and slow.

By noon, we'd barely made it past Roundstone, a fishing village where I triumphantly stopped not once, but three times. First I walked the pier, where the local fishing boats struggled to survive against huge Japanese factory trawlers that the European Union had allowed into Irish waters. I stopped again, a block later, for an espresso. Then I couldn't leave the village without checking out the factory that makes bodhrans, traditional Irish drums (like a tambourine without the cymbals). Meanwhile, the Colorado couple had whipped right through town, with a shout and a wave, having completed nearly half of their 50-mile route. Sorry: 52.


Fog drifted in from the sea, shutting off yesterday's panoramic views of mountains and water; now we had to focus on the immediate, the moss-covered stone walls, the rocky fields, the sandy sweep of Dog's Bay beach. I noodled along, my heart rate somewhere in the beach-blanket zone. I sprinted only once, chasing a stray sheep, but then I stopped to apologize. I stopped again to

IRELAND

pick wild blackberries from a roadside bush, and feed them to a grateful Connemara pony. Lunch was silky smoked salmon and gravy-rich Guinness in a small-town pub, while locals played pool and tried to avoid eyeing my Pearl Izumis.

Back on the bike, I turned off the main road to one of Fidelma's secret routes, a narrow lane that shot across a vast bog. For the first time, the wind was actually at my back, and I flew along, spinning easily. A tiny orange car buzzed up behind me, and I let it pass, then thought better of it: It wasn't going that fast. Clicking up a couple of gears, and aided by a strong tailwind and my performance-enhancing Guinness transfusion, I chased it down and passed it, giving the stunned driver a cheery wave.



 The next day I woke up in a castle called Ballynahinch, wondering how I'd gotten there. Lying in my comfortable bed, which overlooked a river, I pieced together snippets from the night before: We'd gone out after dinner and ended up in a pub, well past "closing," which in rural Ireland means simply whatever time the proprietor locks the door to new customers, while the revelry continues inside.

We'd lost track of the hours, and of our Guinness intake, thanks to a brilliant quintet of local musicians, seated around a banquet; in particular, my attention was captured by a raven-haired flute player, with dark skin and a striking nose that hinted

at Spanish ancestry. It wasn't her beauty that got me, but her playing; midway through the evening, she'd launched into a song of her own, a beautiful skirling melody that danced up the paneled walls and across the ceiling. One by one, the other patrons fell silent, lost in their private worlds, until she'd finished.

As I tottered to breakfast the next morning, a Butterfield & Robinson tour group was bustling out the door, which seemed totally senseless because a) we were in a castle, and b) there was fishing to be done. Rather than grab our bikes, we headed for the hotel's fishing center, which doubled as the bar. We were filling out our fishing licenses when a cab driver spotted us and roared, "You feckers!" Apparently we'd woken him late last night, looking for a ride home. He eyed our fishing gear and, quite accurately, predicted, "They'll be harmless."

A half-hour later, following a quick casting lesson, I was whipping my line back and forth across the broad, swift Ballynahinch River, right in front of the hotel. I landed quite a few casts in the water, but a couple more ended up in my hat, much to the delight of the late breakfast crowd watching through the dining-room windows. After a couple of fishless hours, we saddled up and rode into the dramatic peaks of the Twelve Bens, which look like miniature Alps but are only about 2,000 feet tall, rising sharply from sea level. The sky was crystal-bright and sunny, and for the first time, we saw the mountains in all their stark glory. This was technically a pass, with alpine scenery to match—hidden lakes and broad green meadows—but the road didn't climb more than a couple of hundred feet. I felt like I was getting away with something.

After three days, I'd finally gotten the hang of touring. In the old days, I rode as fast as possible to shorten the duration of the suffering. In touring, you prolong the pleasure of the ride. I stopped when I felt like it, snacked frequently, and sat down for long, leisurely, smoke-free pub lunches.

The best part was that I carried nothing, not even a spare tube. If anything went wrong, I'd stop, raise my hand, and Fidelma would come barreling along in the Land Rover. The only thing I had to worry about were

The only thing I had to worry

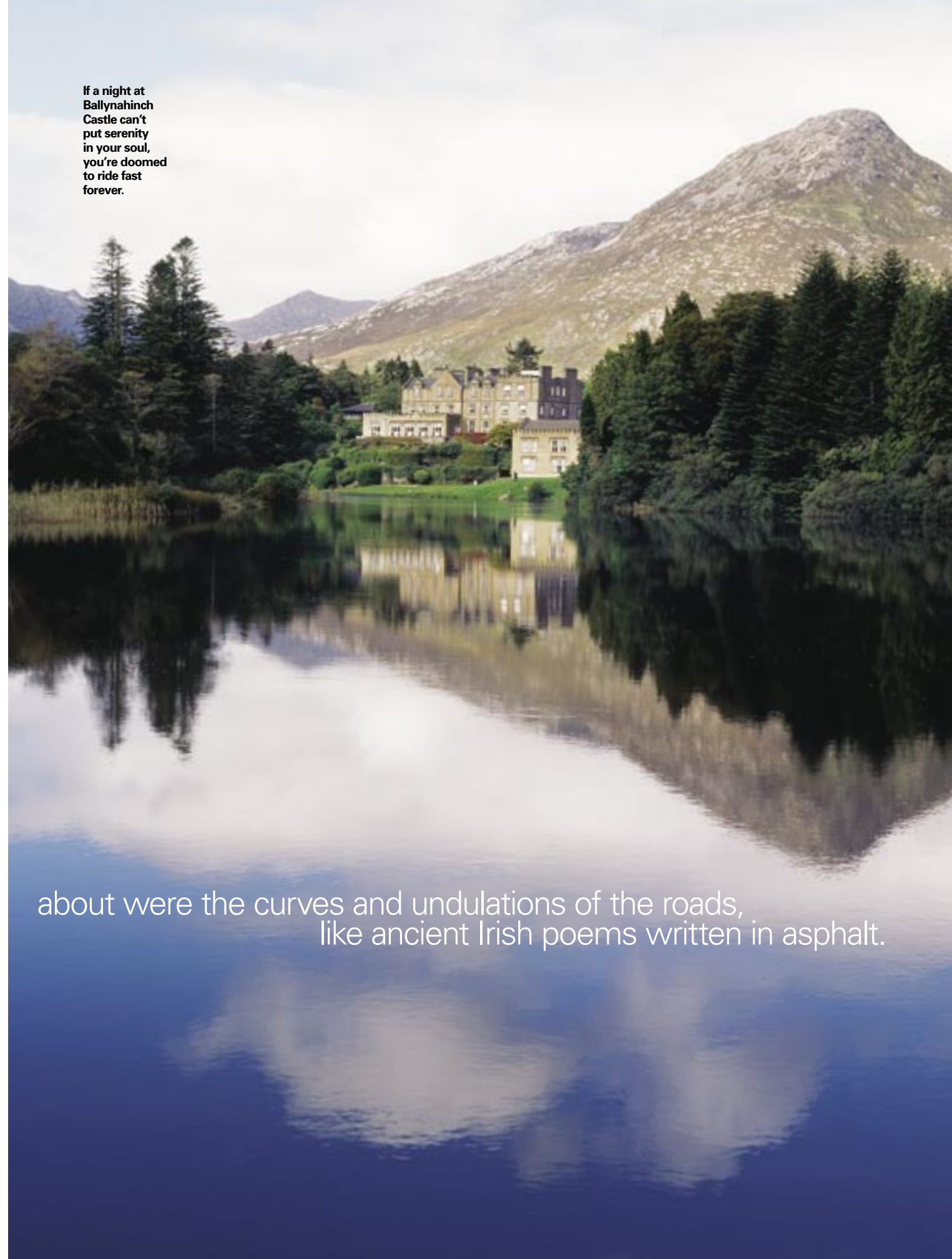
the curves and undulations of the roads, the lovely roads, like ancient Irish poems written in asphalt.

Today our destination was the Delphi Mountain Resort & Spa, tucked into a remote mountain valley above Killary Fjord. A contemporary-style place, all skylights and sleek, blond wood, Delphi is like the Canyon Ranch of Ireland, and offers a full menu of activities, from yoga classes to cold-water surfing (Ireland's fastest-growing adventure sport). Not a fan of ice-cold water, I'd signed up instead for a hot-stone massage, administered by the formidable hands of a therapist named Kate.

"Breathe out the pain," she instructed, as she hammered my sore spots with scalding river stones.

"Mmmph," I replied.

If a night at Ballynahinch Castle can't put serenity in your soul, you're doomed to ride fast forever.



about were the curves and undulations of the roads, like ancient Irish poems written in asphalt.

Connemara seemed huge. After all that riding—OK, slow riding, but still—we were just an hour and a half's drive from high-energy, high-intensity Galway.



On sunny days, Connemara had seemed huge, its vast panoramas stretching for miles. But after all that riding—OK, slow riding, but still—we were only an hour and a half's drive from Galway, with its high-energy, high-intensity Celtic capitalism.

After a reluctant good-bye to Delphi, Fidelma dropped me off in time to catch a ferry to the Aran Islands, a dozen miles off the Connemara coast. Long an isolated realm of fishermen and seaweed-gatherers, lost in the Atlantic mists, the Arans were the setting for John M. Synge's classic *The Playboy of the Western World*. But it was clear their isolation was coming to an end. The 300-passenger ferry was met by a swarm of aggressive minibus-driving "tour guides," who charged 25 Euros for an "island tour" complete with a full-volume monologue about the wonders of island life. ("Over here's our gas station.... there's the football pitch....and here's the airstrip").

I bailed after five minutes, and rented a bike. The next morning I woke up early—to more wind, and more rain. My landlady dismissed it as "just a light mist," so out the door I went, and sure enough, the "mist" stopped within minutes. I pedaled north, through the still-sleepy port town of Kilronan. The day-trip-

pers' ferry had not yet arrived, so the 1,000-plus islanders had the place to themselves. A few of them even said hello, a marked contrast from yesterday's stony glares. Leaving town by the low road along the coast, I dawdled along on my rented bike, a Falcon hybrid, which had cost an outrageous 12 Euros for the day. This bike had absolutely no ambition whatsoever: The wheels wobbled, the plastic pedals were cracked, and only the front brake worked. Eventually, the right pedal broke off completely, leaving just the spindle. But it was good enough.

Although the island of Inishmore is a scant 9 miles long, and 1 to 2 miles wide, it has 14 villages, divided by impossibly tall stone walls whose function is both property division and stone clearance. From the hilltops, the island resembles a gigantic stone maze. But although the island is windswept and rocky, the sheltered coast proved remarkably lush, with trees and vines growing in the shelter of the walls. I stopped to watch a colony of seals—who ceased their fishing and frolicking to regard me, in turn. A trickle of cars and pedestrians came the other way—it was Sunday, and there was a funeral on the island: A local sea captain had recently drowned when his boat ran onto some rocks. The mood on the island was somber; even on Saturday night, the pubs had been empty.

A long, slow climb brought me to a cluster of seven ruined churches, on a site that was already considered sacred and ancient when the oldest was built, in the eighth century. In the distance loomed Dun Aengus, a 3,000-year-old fort built on the edge of a 300-foot cliff above the Atlantic, surrounded by a field of stone spikes—on the far edge of an island, off another island, on the far Western edge of Europe. As an Irish friend of mine had put it, "somebody made a very desperate last stand here."

By the time I reached the far end of the island, the sun had come out, and I could see the Connemara coast across the wind-whipped channel. It looked awfully small, from afar.

The Falcon swooped down to a rocky shore that was bearing the full brunt of spectacular Atlantic storm waves, and there the road ended, in a boat ramp that led to a calm tidal pool. A fisherman's curragh, or rowboat, sat waiting for the tide to come in and the waves to die down, but there was nobody in sight, just me on my bicycle—and another bike, even older and more decrepit, leaning against the fisherman's shack, corroded to hell by all the salt spray.

Unlike their mainland cousins, the islanders still seemed to ride bikes—I'd seen a bunch of them, just this morning—which made a certain kind of sense. One thing the bicycle does very well, I'd learned, is make a small world seem big again. n

As this story of a dream Ireland bike vacation went to press, Bill Gifford was on assignment for us in Italy. The fecker.



Clockwise from top left: Accommodations at inns such as this one in Screeb pushed heart rates to max relaxation. Narrow, little-trafficked lanes custom-picked by guide Fidelma Ray wound beside lakes and through bogs. Although the terrain is uncharacteristically rocky and rugged, by the time the author packed up to return home, he'd come to revel in the softer side of cycling.

IF YOU GO

CycleWest Ireland (800/204-1452; cyclewest.com) runs a variety of trips from May through September in the west of Ireland, in Connemara and in the neighboring Burren, a beautiful region of limestone hills and towering sea cliffs. Some trips also hop over to the Aran Islands. Prices start around \$1,500 for seven days/six nights. A nine-day West Coast Classic trip, with deluxe accommodations, runs about \$2,775. Fidelma Ray also offers custom-designed and self-guided trips from March through October.

Once a jet-set retreat, Ballynahinch Castle (\$125–\$300 per person per night; ballynahinch-castle.com; \$1 = 0.75 Euros) is now a relative bargain. Its cozy bars and sitting rooms with fireplaces are perfect for recovering from a ride in Irish weather. Zetland House (\$125–\$250 per person per night; zetland.com), just down the road in Cashel, is part country hotel and part hunting lodge, if you feel the need to hook a trout or shoot a snipe.

The Delphi Mountain Resort & Spa (\$105–\$315 per person per night; delphiescape.com), near Leenane, is part Outward Bound, part new-age spa. Go surfing, hiking or kayaking—or, if you're really old-school, stay at the nearby Delphi Lodge (\$100–\$200 per person per night; delphilodge.ie) but be sure to eat dinner at the other Delphi's too-good-to-be-Ireland restaurant. There aren't many other choices, since you're surrounded by mountains and wilderness, and Ireland's only fjord, the Killary.—B.G.