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GREAT ESCAPES

by BRUCE SHENKER » photos by JOHN SHEILS



LUCK OF THE IRISH

Blessed with a plethora of mountain trails and a vibrant race scene, this small island should be on every runner's to-do list

There are clear, cool days in the Irish hills when you cannot imagine anything more delightful than running from here to there. Then there are days when the mist is down around your ankles and a 30-mile-an-hour wind drives an icy rain and all you can think about is a turf fire and a warm bowl of potato-leek soup. Living in the Irish capital of Dublin and traveling around Ireland for the past seven years, I've experienced its mountains under a vast array of conditions. What the mountains lack in sheer elevation (only a handful are higher than 3000 feet), they make up for in steepness, mud, rocks and bogs. And when you start at sea level, even a 2000-foot mountain can become quite formidable.

THE LAND

About the size of Maine, Ireland has a remarkably diverse landscape—flat in the middle but upturned around the edges. The rounded hills of County Wicklow is known as the garden of Ireland, while the rugged, steep mountains of Kerry in the southwest are a misty fantasy tale. The remote peaks of the Twelve Bens in Connemara in the northwest and the massive sea cliffs at Slieve League in Donegal on the north coast offer a dramatic backdrop for an intense run.

Forget your pre-conceptions of a traditional trail, with blazes, cairns and trees. Irish mountains are open, covered in ferns and heather instead of trees. And interspersed with mud holes and bog hags, which are mini 30- to 50-yard-wide “canyons” whose walls are two- to four-foot soft “cliffs” of eroded peat. Negotiating these features is a tiring exercise requiring a jump or stumble, a few running strides and then a frustrating scramble back up the other side’s collapsing peat. Most popular routes have a rough track, but in many cases these tracks degenerate into intermittent sheep paths. Maps are highly recommended, and, when the clouds roll in, a compass is essential.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Unlike in North America, where numerous clubs form independent communities and races are directed by widely dispersed individuals or organizations, the Irish Mountain Running Association (IMRA) is the running community, bringing together a nation of diverse athletes into a tightly knit group.

Runners from teens to septuagenarians, with backgrounds in hill walking, orienteering, mountain biking, adventure racing or road running and with professions as diverse as physicist, policeman, bus driver, journalist, student, lawyer, soldier and social worker, come together at least once a week to run in the hills.

Dublin is the social heart of the mountain-running scene. During my six years as an active member of IMRA, I saw at least three marriages and many long term relationships develop. It was very rare to do a training run in the Dublin hills and not run into someone I knew. Running the Wicklow Way Ultra, which uses an out-and-back course, as I passed each runner going in the opposite direction, I realized I had shared a pint with nearly every one of them. When I received my Irish citizenship, the larg-

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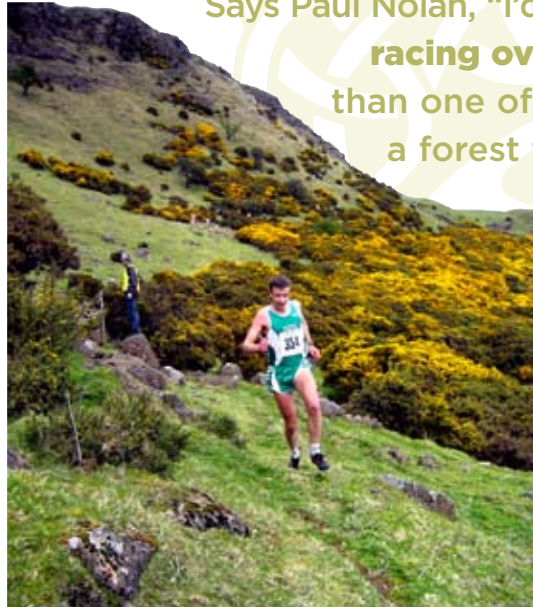
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It is the longer, **unmarked** weekend races that provide the distinctive pleasure of **Irish hill running** ... the locations are wilder and the challenges more **extreme**. Says Paul Nolan, "I'd rather be one of 20 racing over the mountain tops, than one of 200 churning up a forest track."



PREVIOUS PAGE: Alan Ayling heads back along the Cathair Ridge from Carrauntoohill, Ireland's highest mountain. ABOVE (L to R): Graham Porter nears the finish line with the Sugarloaf in the background; Brian Ervine descends from one of the very steep sections of Knockdhu, northern Ireland; Roisin McDonnell heading back from Doujce Mountain.

est group of attendees (and the ones who stayed the latest) at the subsequent party were mountain runners.

RACE FACE

The IMRA organizes nearly 50 races a year throughout the Republic of Ireland, with a majority taking place in the hills just south of the Dublin city center or a bit further south in County Wicklow. The races range from five or six well-marked kilometers on very runnable wide paths to more than 20 kilometers on trackless expanses of open mountain, where navigation skills are critical.

With Ireland's northern latitude providing summer daylight until nearly 11 p.m., the popular Leinster League races, on Wednesday evenings from April through August, routinely attract up to 200 runners. Post-race, the crowd packs into a local pub for the always-amusing prize-giving ceremony. This is where you feel community. This is what the Irish call the Craic. Indefinable on our side of the Atlantic, it is enough to know that Craic encompasses all manners of festive fun—from music to lively conversation. And with the same run-

ners vying and socializing weekly, rivalries develop in every category. As Jane Porter, former IMRA president and frequent victor in the Women's 50 category said, "There would be the big race in the top of the field, but we all have our own little races further down the field."

The mid-summer series classic is the race up and down Brockagh near the 12th-century monastery in Glendalough. Some early tracks lead to a steep worn-in path through a lush sheep pasture and then out onto the rocky east shoulder of Brockagh followed by a narrow, boggy path westward into the sunset (for some reason it is always sunny on that evening) to Brockagh's summit.

Craic is not limited to the pub. One year the course markers had inadvertently lengthened the course, and in the blinding sunshine no one could be sure where we were heading. "We are never coming back," muttered one wag. "They are sending us off a cliff into oblivion." After the race, local resident and former Irish international mountain runner Roisin McDonnell often leads a select few runners into a secret pool in the river behind Lynams Pub in Laragh

to wash off the mud and sooth the invariable midge (a tiny, swarming bug that loves the Irish forests on summer nights) bites.

Wednesday evenings are brim-full of excitement, but it is the longer, unmarked weekend races that provide the distinctive pleasure of Irish hill running. Fields are smaller (usually less than 50 runners), the locations are wilder and the challenges more extreme. Says former Irish international mountain runner and national coach Paul Nolan, "I'd rather be one of 20 racing over the mountain tops, than one of 200 churning up a forest track."

Prominent among these secluded week-

LOOKING FOR A GREATER CHALLENGE?

This year, IMRA added a new race in the form of the Wicklow Round, which involves completing a mountain circuit in a specific amount of time. The best-known example is the Bob Graham Round in England's lake country.

The Wicklow Round requires runners to travel approximately 100 kilometers and visit 27 peaks in order without navigational or pacing support. Completion in 24 hours earns a bronze award, 15 hours a silver and the near-impossible 12 hours a gold award.

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TRAILHEAD // DUBLIN, IRELAND

GETTING THERE »

All flights from the United States to Ireland fly into Dublin, the capital, on the east coast, or Shannon, which is in the middle of nowhere on the west coast. (A good choice is to fly into Dublin and make your way west and return from Shannon.) Aer Lingus offers direct flights from New York, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles; Delta flies from New York and Atlanta and USAir from Philadelphia. Airfares are as low as \$300 in January and February and \$650 and up during the summer.

To access most routes described here, a car is essential; however if you want to travel from Dublin to western Ireland it might be better to take a train or a bus and rent the car when you arrive. There is good train service to Killarney in Kerry and Westport in Mayo.

SEASONS »

Ireland has a very temperate climate. Summer temps rarely exceed 70 and generally run in the low 60s, while winter is typically in the 40s and 50s. During the winter it is dark by 4 p.m., while in the summer daylight lingers past 11. May is an ideal time to visit, as airfares are not up to their summer peaks, the days are long and you have the best chance for clear weather.

The forecast is almost always mixed sun and clouds with a chance of showers. However, never go out for a long mountain run without foul-weather gear.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND FOOD »

Over the past few years Ireland has become one of the more expensive European destinations. Accommodation in a hotel or nice country house run at least \$250 for two with breakfast. A less expensive alternative is a bed-and-breakfast inn, which runs about \$50 to \$75 per person. Even less expensive is a hostel, where a bed is provided in a large dorm room housing five to eight other people.

Irish food has improved greatly over the past 10 years, with an emphasis on fresh local products such as fish and lamb. Pub meals provide an inexpensive alternative to restaurants. The quality varies, so it is best to stick to basics like soup, burgers or fish and chips.

An excellent reference for food and lodging is Georgina Campbell's Ireland guide. (www.ireland-guide.com)

RACE INFO »

For descriptions and starting locations for all routes, go to the Irish Mountain Running

Association website (www.imra.ie) and choose "Events." Some routes are not run every year, so use the drop-down menu to select different years.

Though the events are described as races, the route descriptions and maps will provide enough information to allow you to run on your own. All races are open to the public, and newcomers are welcomed. At your first race, you must join the IMRA annually for 10 euro (about \$13). Fees for individual races are 7 euro, and discounts are given to students and seniors.

For routes and information about events in Northern Ireland go to www.nimra.org/uk.

MAPS »

The standard 1:30,000 map of Wicklow is the Harvey Map (www.harveymaps.co.uk/). There are also Harvey Maps of the mountains of Kerry (which includes Carrauntoohill) and Connemera, a wild and beautiful mountainous area in northwest Ireland. All areas of Ireland are covered by the Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 maps, which can be ordered at <http://www.osi.ie>. Most maps can be obtained at various locations, but the Great Outdoors on Chatham Street in Dublin stands out as an excellent outdoor shop, with a large selection of mountain-running products.

WAYMARKED TRAILS »

These trails are a combination of small country roads, forest roads (called green roads) and singletrack trail, and are marked by signposts featuring the yellow walking man. While these trails do not go over the mountain tops, they pass through very beautiful areas. Prominent among these trails in western Ireland are the Kerry Way in County Kerry and the Western Way in County Mayo. The best known waymarked trail is the Wicklow Way, which heads south from Dublin and provides the venue for a very popular IMRA-organized relay that covers 120 kilometers in mid-June. For more information, see www.12travel.ie/ie/walking/index1.html.

SHOES »

On most routes with a worn, rocky track, standard trail shoes work fine. However, for runs over open mountain terrain with slippery mud, a rubber-studded fell-running shoe is recommended. The leading shoe in Ireland is the distinctive blue-and-gold Walsh PB, available online through several sites. Another excellent option available in the United States is Inov-8's Mudclaw (www.inov-8.com).



Roisin Kelleher heads up Lugnacoille, the highest mountain in Wicklow.

end routes is the Ballybraid run, which encompasses an out-and-back on the beautifully exposed Derrybawn Ridge, providing a constant view to the surrounding bare mountaintops as well as Glendalough—or “Glen of the Lakes.” Looking into the flat, green valley between two beautiful lakes surrounded by steep mountain walls, you can understand how the area got its name.

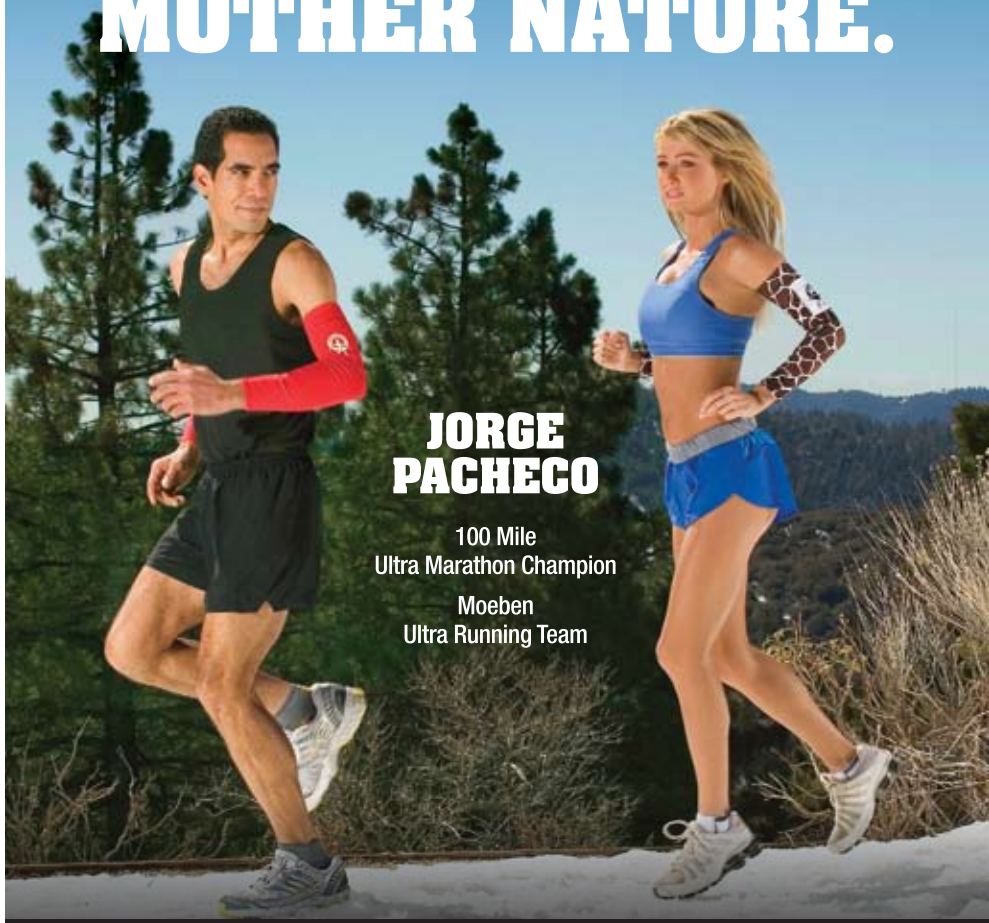
After the race, runners uphold the tradition of proudly staring back up at the just-conquered mountain from the Glenmalure Lodge. Graham Porter, who with his wife, Jane, oversaw the rapid growth in Irish mountain running in the past few years and is a well-known connoisseur of stout, has said there is not a better place to enjoy a pint of Guinness.

THE WILD WEST

The Irish Championship series takes runners over the most interesting mountains in Ireland. Carrauntoohill, in County Kerry and not far from the tourist center of Killarney, is the country's highest point, and involves an eight-mile roundtrip run with over 3300 feet of climbing. After crossing a large, rising bog, a steep, 1200-foot ascent leads to the summit of Caher, from which a jagged ridge leads to Carrantoohill.

On a misty day reversing the route can be difficult, and at times runners end up on the wrong side of the ridge. If this

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www.cdtrail.org/trailfest



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GREAT ESCAPES



TOP: John MacEnri powers down from the rocky summit of the Sugarloaf, just 15 miles south of Dublin city center. ABOVE: Emily O'Reilly leads the pack with Howth Harbour and the uninhabited Ireland's Eye in the background.

happens, Mick Kellett, a founder of Irish Mountain Rescue and a frequent winner in the men's age 60 group, offers the following advice: "You might as well use your snot rag to make a hang glider—it's the only way down."

Despite the wide variation in terrain and difficulty, the common feature of every run or race is the lively scene at the finish, usually near a pub. Banter most often involves discussion of a personal battle with one's chief racing rival or, more likely, a colorful excuse for failure.

"I'm in bits," "I burst it and got nowhere" or "Too easy, 'twas a road runner's course" mixes in with plans for upcoming runs or the normal Irish pastime of solving the world's problems or at least those of a favorite sports team.

There are many who say the best part about Irish mountain running is the camaraderie, and there is no better way to make friends than conversation over a post-run, restorative pint of Guinness.

A software developer living in Canaan, New York, Bruce Shenker ticked over 140 mountain races during his tenure in Ireland, where he was a member of the IMRA executive committee and the Men's 50 Leinster League Champion in 2004 and 2005.