



Photo courtesy of The K Club

“K” Club

Golfing Ireland

By Jason Deegan

It's hard to tell who's more excited as the 2006 Ryder Cup prepares to visit Ireland for the first time this September.

Is it the Irish? They're certainly a golf-happy bunch

who are legendary for their ability to throw a good party.

Or could it be the U.S. and European golf fans traveling to attend the event? Many will likely be first-timers to one of the world's greatest golf destinations.

It's a winning proposition for both parties. The

Ryder Cup, held at the lavish K-Club just outside of Dublin, will be the biggest sporting event ever held in the Emerald Isle. Many visitors will tee it up at several of Ireland's 400-plus courses, pumping a wealth of cash into an already booming economy.

For golfers, Ireland is

the game's version of Disneyland, an amusement park of courses from the legendary links of Waterville and Tralee to the unheralded inland layouts of Mullingar and Rathsalagh.

You've probably heard horror stories from friends

who have made the trip to Ireland, moaning about the pelting rain, the blistering cold and the tractors that can slow traffic on back roads to a crawl. Don't let them scare you away. It's a once-in-a-lifetime adventure to tee it up here.

If you're considering a

pre- or post-Ryder Cup romp through Ireland, an itinerary to consider might be the new Emerald Triangle, an alliance between three of the country's most elegant accommodations. A half-day's drive separates the Rathsalagh House Golf & Country Club in Wicklow, just



"K" Club Clubhouse

Photo courtesy of The K Club



Tralee Golf Club

south of Dublin; the Sandhouse Hotel in Rossnowlagh in the northwest tip of Ireland and Glenlo Abbey Hotel in Galway, a vibrant college town along the west coast. All three are family-owned and distinctly different, yet also among the finest properties on the island.

There's some tricky driving on the wrong side of the road involved to follow the Emerald Triangle (www.emerald3.com), but what a better excuse to travel a majestic countryside and discover some great golf along the way. The trip will also help steer you away from the crowds of golfers around Dublin proper.

A flight to Dublin on the

Irish airline, Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com), takes under eight hours from Chicago, the nearest portal for Michiganders. From Dublin, it's less than an hour's drive to Rathsalagh (www.rathsallagh.com), a large country house set on 530 acres in the rolling pastures of Dunlavin County.

The country house was converted from Queen Anne stables in 1798 and is the pride and joy of the O'Flynn family. The Rathsalagh dining hall serves country cooking, with specialties in fresh fish and game.

Staying here feels like miles from civilization. I was awakened by a crowing roos-

ter, a surprising alarm clock for my early tee time at the 7,200-yard course on the property. Designed by Christy O'Connor Jr. and Peter McEvoy, Rathsalagh Golf Club rambles around trees and over creeks. It's a good warm up for the tougher tracks that lie ahead. Two other championship venues, the K-Club, also home to the Smurfit European Open, and Mount Juliet, the site of the 2002 American Express Championship, are both within an hour's drive.

If you've got time, head to downtown Dublin, where the original Guinness Storehouse factory (www.guinnessstorehouse.com) draws the

thirsty from around the world for tours. Even if you're not a fan of the thick brew, you'll find the rumors are true: it does taste better here.

To break up the longest journey of the Emerald Triangle, golfers are welcome to stop at Mullingar Golf Club (www.mullingargc.com), a private club that boasts one of countryman James Braid's best designs. Founded in 1894, the 6,478-yard Mullingar moved five times before finding its home among the hills of Belvedere.

If your score suffers on what looks like a docile course, don't feel bad. It's good enough to host the Mullingar Scratch Trophy, a tournament with a history of identifying Ireland's greatest players. Former winners include Darren Clarke in 1989, Paul McGinley in 1991 and Pdraig Harrington in 1994 - three names the U.S. Ryder Cup team knows all too well.

The commute after the round will be rewarded by the understated luxury of the Sandhouse (www.sandhouse-hotel.ie), a pink landmark that abuts the beautiful Rossnowlagh beach on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The Britton family has

transformed the Sandhouse from a fishing lodge built in the 1830s to a modern country house with an award-winning restaurant, the Seashell, and The Marine Spa. The Sandhouse pub is home to a tribute of surfing, a sport many Brittons have mastered. Family trophies and surf boards cover the walls. Just a few miles from the hotel, massive waves offer some of the best surfing in Europe.

The same could be said for the golf. The 60-room Sandhouse is within an hour's drive of six of the Ireland's top links, all served by the travel agency West Coast Links (<http://www.-northandwest-coastlinks.com>). Closest is the Donegal Golf Club (<http://www.donegalgolfclub.ie>), called Murvagh by the locals. The par-73 Donegal plays long and demanding at 7,160 yards. The course,

designed by Irish icon Eddie Hackett, encompasses a windswept peninsula that juts into Donegal Bay, weaving through subtle duneland and providing soul-stirring views of the ocean.

Another must-play on the trip, the 27-hole Enniscrone Golf Club, rests 50 miles away in a small seaside hamlet known for its seaweed baths. English architect Donald Steel's nine-hole addition and redesign from 1999-2001 helped Enniscrone evolve into one of Ireland's most thrilling golf experiences. The dunes rise sometimes 130 feet above sea level, looking more like skyscrapers than hills of sand and grass. Both Enniscrone and Murvagh have been ranked among the top 100 in the British Isles by Golf World.

The final destination of the Emerald Triangle, Glenlo

Photo courtesy of Sandhouse Hotel



Sandhouse Hotel

Golf in Ireland...



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Abbey (www.glenlo.com) in Galway, isn't positioned as well as the others when it comes to nearby courses, but its five-star elegance and soft beds will allow you a chance to recharge and become a regular tourist for a day.

The private estate on 138 acres opened as a 20-bedroom hotel in 1992. Owners Peggy and John Bourke have renovated the castle-like estate to include 46 bedrooms, nine meeting room and two restau-

rants. The Pullman Restaurant is one of Ireland's most unique dining experiences. Patrons eat tasty meals in dining carriages, one an original car from the Orient Express that carried the rich throughout Europe during its heyday.

A simple 9-hole, double-green course resides on the Glenlo Abbey property, but skip it to spend a day in Galway, home to a lively downtown center with shopping and some rowdy pubs.

From Galway, you've got two choices - make the cross-country trek back to Dublin to fly home or extend your trip to head south to the country's most popular golf destination and fly home through the regional airport in Shannon.

On my visit, I couldn't find time to visit Ireland's premier golf headliners in the southwest, Lahinch and Ballybunion. Still, I couldn't be happier with my choices.



Sandhouse Hotel

Photo courtesy of Sandhouse Hotel



Rathsallagh House Golf & Country Club

The trio of Doonbeg, Tralee and Waterville all proved memorable.

At Doonbeg Golf Club (www.doonbeggolfclub.com) in County Claire, Greg Norman found what some people consider to be among the last great sites for a modern links design. The Lodge at Doonbeg, offering luxury suites and a new clubhouse, is set to open this spring. I played this 6,885-yard track in

winds gusting up to 50 miles-an-hour. Two members of my foursome quit in what became a three-club wind. It was a rude welcome to the famously fickle weather of Ireland's southwest coastline.

Conversely, the following day at Tralee Golf Club, my foursome basked in sunshine. A recent redesign has elevated the stature of Tralee (www.traleegolfclub.com). The playability of the course, the

first Arnold Palmer design in Europe, no longer takes a back seat to its stunning setting. Several holes follow cliffs that plummet to Barrow Beach along the Tralee Bay. Ruins of a stone tower sit beside the third tee box. More ruins, a 12th-century medieval castle on nearby Fenit Island, dominate the horizon.

The next day, two hours south in County Kerry, Waterville unfortunately lived



Photo by Steve Uzzell

Doonbeg Golf Club, Hole No. 6

up to its name. Rain drenched us all 18 holes, again forcing several players to retire to the warmth of the clubhouse for a pint. But I refused to relent, considering the praise bestowed upon the course since its revamping by Tom Fazio. Golf Monthly, a European publication, ranks

the 7,309-yard course No. 5 among the top 120 courses in the world.

Waterville (www.watervillegolflinks.ie) doesn't have the dunes of Enniscrone or the awe-inspiring vistas of Tralee, although its three finishing holes do hug the coastline. It is lauded as a true test of golf, a

rarity for a links. Less than five percent of the world's 144 links courses are considered good enough (and long enough) to be of championship caliber. Tiger Woods and Mark O'Meara have made it a regular stop in their preparation for the British Open. The late Payne Stewart visited so often,

Waterville officials honored his legacy with a statue, much like Pinehurst Resort in North Carolina.

The ride back to the airport offers one last chance to soak up Ireland at its core -- the thatch roofs on quaint homes, the rolling pastures

divided by old-world stone walls, the flocks of sheep. They're images to cherish. Even if you can't find time in 2006 for the Ryder Cup, Ireland must surely be on your list of

dream destinations. For more information, visit <http://www.tourismireland.com>. **MG**

Video: Golfing in Ireland with Jack Berry
<http://michigangolfer.tv/2005shows/golfireland/>



Photo by Steve Uzzell

Doonbeg Hotel as seen from the 5th tee