





# The world's best GOLF trail

Four buddies follow the exalted fairways and transcendent coastline of Ireland's southwest corner

By DAVID OWEN • Photographs by STEPHEN SZURLEJ

**T**HE BAGGAGE CAROUSEL was still revolving, but several minutes had passed since the last suitcase had tumbled onto the conveyor. Suddenly, a young woman in a green Aer Lingus uniform was standing at my side. "Is your bag missing?" she asked, her eyes radiating concern. I looked around. The other passengers had departed. The truth sank in. "My g-golf clubs," I said.

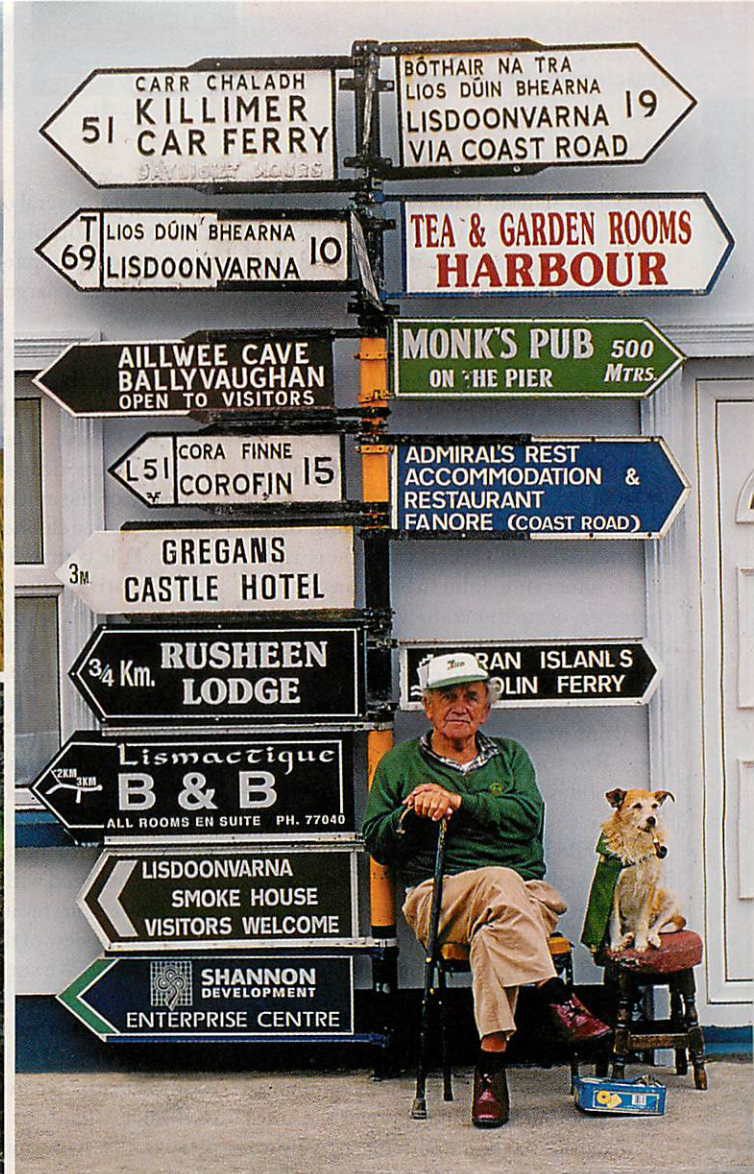
It's the traveling golfer's nightmare. I had come to Ireland to take a weeklong tour of southwestern seaside courses, and now, I thought with horror, I was going to have to play Ballyunion with rented equipment—with battered, mismatched irons and woods contaminated by the bad-swing juju of who-knew-how-many anonymous



choppers, shankers and honeymooning beginners. *How could I face Waterville without my very own Banzai-shafted 10.5-degree jumbo driver, not to mention my humiliateingly extensive but indispensable collection of hybrid woods?* I followed her into her office, where she helped me file a claim.

Fifteen minutes later, I was sitting numbly in a taxi, on my way to the tiny seaside resort town of Lahinch (famous in Ireland not only for golf but also for surfing, of all things), where three colleagues would be joining me the next afternoon, along with two rental cars. I was trying hard to appreciate the lush landscape on either side of the road, but I couldn't stop thinking about my clubs. Why couldn't the airline have lost Jodie Foster's daughter instead? Then the driver's cell phone rang.

"Right," he said, after a brief conversation. "You'll have your golf clubs by noon tomorrow. I'll probably deliver them my-



self." The young woman in the lost-baggage office, it turned out, had located my bag, in London, and had then taken the time to locate me, by telephoning the taxi dispatcher and asking if a Mr. Owen had been sent to Lahinch. I leaned back against the seat and smiled, finally able to relax.

#### FIRST STOP: LAHINCH

**E**VERY SERIOUS GOLFER dreams of making a pilgrimage to Scotland—and for good reason. Now that I've (twice) paid my respects to the Old Course at St. Andrews, though, I'm pretty sure I'd choose Ireland and Northern Ireland if offered my choice of any golf destination in the world. Irish linksland is at least as undulating as Scottish, the best courses are at least as memorable, the people are at least as welcoming, and the on-course ratio of

british Americans to affable natives often seems to be somewhat lower. Ireland is No. 2, but it tries harder.

I arrived in Lahinch in early evening, dropped my suitcase at the (spare but pleasant) Sancta Maria Hotel, just around the corner from the clubhouse, and walked to the course, which I hadn't seen in 10 years, and which, at that hour, was being played by a handful of regulars, mostly in ones and twos. I climbed to the top of a bluff at the edge of Liscannor Bay and watched an elderly woman with a pullcart patiently chipping her ball around a significant topographic obstacle, rather than trying to hit over it. She waved; I waved. She was playing Klondyke, a legendary par 5, whose dune-flanked fairway is the width of your forearm, and whose second shot, for golfers disinclined to chip their way home, is blind. Lahinch's layout is mostly the work of Alister Mackenzie (and was extensively re-

stored in the early 2000s), although much of the course is so engagingly quirky as to seem almost undesigned. Old Tom Morris, who tinkered with an early routing in 1892, called Lahinch the best natural golf ground he'd ever seen.

The next morning, I borrowed a set of clubs from Robert McCavery, who is just the fourth head professional in Lahinch's 114-year history—he succeeded his father, Bill, who got the job in 1927—and played 18 holes with two middle-age women from Switzerland, who were traveling without their husbands. My golf bag arrived just as we finished. An hour or so later, my traveling companions arrived, too: Bob Carney and Mike O'Malley, from the home office, and John Barton, who lives in London. The four of us teed off at 3:30, with a solid five hours of daylight still before us—this was mid-May—and the tee shots I hit with my own driver were only marginally worse than

the ones I had hit with McCavery's. That night, we walked into town and had dinner at a restaurant called the Seafarer, where I had dined the night before, on the recommendation of the owner of the Sancta Maria. I had an appetizer made with local goat cheese, followed by rack of local lamb, followed by apple pie bathed in local cream—all exceptional. Then we set out for Doonbeg.

Driving the sadistically narrow roads of Ireland, for those unused to shifting gears with their left hand while evading death and the Atlantic Ocean with their right, can be unnerving. John (who is British and, therefore, accustomed to wrong-way steering) and Bob (who has many close Irish ancestors) volunteered to pilot our rental cars, while Mike and I took care of the gasping, phantom braking and door-handle grabbing. Two somewhat undersize European automobiles turned out to be a good choice for four somewhat oversize golfers: We never could have crammed everything into a single sedan, or even into a European-scale minivan (as several friends and I discovered on a previous golf trip to Ireland). John and I wedged our suitcases into the trunk of our Renault Laguna, then stacked our golf bags, laptops, golf-shop purchases and sodden raingear on the backseat.

Doonbeg Golf Club, which opened in 2002, is about 45 minutes down the coast from Lahinch. (A useful rule of thumb, when estimating travel times on older Irish roads, is to think of the kilometers as miles, and multiply by two.) Now that I've played the course twice, I take back nearly every unkind thought I've ever had about Greg Norman, who designed it. Doonbeg is laid out on a 1.5-mile crescent of wind-swept dunesland, and Norman let the terrain suggest most of the holes, with a minimum of

bulldozing. Several of the holes are permanently memorable, including the teensy but murderous par-3 14th, which has a green scarcely large enough to contain a foursome.

The golf club, in contrast to the course, feels distinctly overdetermined. Doonbeg is owned by Kiawah Development Partners, of Kiawah Island, S.C., and there's a powerful American-style screw-you quality to many of the amenities, both in the massive sandstone clubhouse and on the grounds beyond the course. The walls bordering the endless private drive are draped with sod that appears to have been cut on Savile Row, and the Pro V1s in the golf shop sell for a little over \$8 each. Doonbeg describes itself, on its website, as "Ireland's premier luxury destination." It has 520 (mostly non-Irish) members, almost four dozen of whom have also purchased apartments in the lodge or in the adjacent faux-village of condominiums. Green fees for nonmembers are roughly \$250 (compared with \$185 at Lahinch), and a prime-season stay in a one-bedroom apartment with a view of the ocean goes for about \$625 a night. We stayed a few miles away, in the town of Kilkee, for less than the cost of the balls that Barton lost on the first nine.

To get from Doonbeg to Ballybunion, our next stop, we drove down the coast to Killimer, then took a barge-like car ferry across the wide mouth of the Shannon River, eliminating a lengthy loop back through Shannon itself. We arrived just as the town's restaurants were closing for the night, but our innkeeper—at the charming and very reasonably priced 19th Lodge, a few hundred yards down the road from the Ballybunion clubhouse—called ahead and secured us a reprieve.

American golfers often speak of Ballybunion's Old Course as if it were the only course in Ireland, so I was predisposed to be underwhelmed; having finally played there, though, I can't think of anything negative to say. Ballybunion belongs right where it's always listed, with Royal County Down and Royal Portrush and, therefore, with the greatest courses not only in Ireland but in the world. At least half the holes would stand as the best hole on any number of very good golf courses. I could have played Ballybunion happily until immigration officials (or my wife) came to drag me away.

Even better, all four of us played eerily

well. Here's why: We had four rooms at the 19th Lodge for our first night in town, but just three rooms for the second, so we held a Stableford side match to determine who would be forced to endure whose snoring. We had already tricked Carney into taking the room that had to be vacated, so the match was really between Barton, O'Malley, and me. We called our competition the Carney Imperative. O'Malley was the loser by a couple of points, although that evening Carney heroically made the issue moot by moving to the hotel next door.

#### TRALEE: SWINGING IN THE RAIN

**Y**OU COULD HAVE A reasonably successful career as a meteorologist in Ireland by predicting nothing but showers with occasional periods of rain, or vice versa. We got wet every day of our trip—but never wetter than at Tralee, our stop after Ballybunion.

Tralee opened in 1984. It is seldom ranked among the very best courses in Ireland, although it's plenty nice and it's almost certainly the best golf course that Arnold Palmer ever designed. As we approached the middle of the (terrific) second nine, the wind reached the velocity necessary to propel water through the fabric of my previously reliable Sunderland of Scotland rainsuit, and I stopped trying to clean my glasses between shots. It wasn't just the worst weather I'd ever played golf in; it was the worst weather I'd ever been outside in.

Nevertheless, we all enjoyed ourselves immensely, and we played far better than you might think—perhaps because over-swinging and over-thinking are impossible when simply remaining upright requires most of your concentration. Playing the wind was like solving complex geometry problems: On the 159-yard, uphill 13th hole, whose green is a shallow shelf carved high on the face of a precipitous dune, and where I might have hit a 7-iron if the weather had been calm, I aimed my No. 5 hybrid club 30 yards to the right of the rightmost edge of the putting surface, choked down, swung hard and watched the wind bring my ball all the way back to the hole, which was cut on the far left.

A rainsuit is obviously necessary on any

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# THE SOUTHWEST

David Owen's foursome flew into Shannon, headed for Lahinch, then traveled counterclockwise around the coast. These are the courses they visited:

- 1 Lahinch Golf Club
- 2 Doonbeg Golf Club
- 3 Ballybunion Golf Club
- 4 Tralee Golf Club
- 5 Waterville Golf Links
- 6 Old Head Golf Links

## GENERAL INFORMATION

- OVERVIEW:** The southwest corner of Ireland consists of Counties Clare, Kerry, Cork and Limerick. The 111-mile Ring of Kerry around the Iveragh Peninsula, passing some great golf courses, is highly recommended. Every town and village in this region is bursting with B&Bs, hotels, lively pubs and restaurants. Killarney, Kinsale and Cork are among the best places to stay that would appeal to nongolfers.
- AIRPORT:** The area is served by direct flights from the U.S. mainland to Shannon Airport ([shannonairport.com](http://shannonairport.com)).
- FERRY:** If you're driving along the coast, taking the 20-minute Killimer-Tarbert ferry ([shannonferries.com](http://shannonferries.com)) will save you an 85-mile detour.
- CURRENCY:** €1 was roughly equal to \$1.30 at press time.
- TELEPHONE:** For all phone numbers, when calling from within Ireland, replace 011-353 with 0.
- TOURIST INFO:** For more information, go to [tourismireland.com](http://tourismireland.com) and [golf.ireland.ie](http://golf.ireland.ie).

ATLANTIC OCEAN



**1 Lahinch Golf Club**  
 Green fee: €145 (\$185)  
[lahinchgolf.com](http://lahinchgolf.com)  
 011-353-65-708-1003  
[info@lahinchgolf.com](mailto:info@lahinchgolf.com)

**2 Doonbeg Golf Club**  
 Green fee: €195 (\$250)  
[doonbeggolfclub.com](http://doonbeggolfclub.com)  
 011-353-65-905-5602  
[reservations@doonbeggolfclub.com](mailto:reservations@doonbeggolfclub.com)

**3 Ballybunion Golf Club**  
 Green fee: €150 (\$195)  
[ballybuniongolfclub.ie](http://ballybuniongolfclub.ie)  
 011-353-68-27146  
[bbgolfc@iol.ie](mailto:bbgolfc@iol.ie)

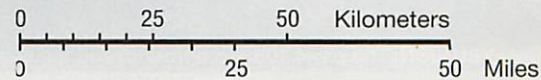
**4 Tralee Golf Club**  
 Green fee: €160 (\$205)  
[traleegolfclub.com](http://traleegolfclub.com)  
 011-353-66-713-6379  
[info@traleegolfclub.com](mailto:info@traleegolfclub.com)

**5 Waterville Golf Links**  
 Green fee: €150 (\$195)  
[watervilliegolfclub.ie](http://watervilliegolfclub.ie)  
 011-353-66-947-4102  
[wvgolf@iol.ie](mailto:wvgolf@iol.ie)

**Adare G.C.:** [adaregolfclub.com](http://adaregolfclub.com); 011-353-61-605-274; [golf@adaremanor.com](mailto:golf@adaremanor.com)  
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**Dromoland Castle G. & C.C.:** [dromolandgolf.com](http://dromolandgolf.com); 011-353-61-368-444; [golf@dromoland.ie](mailto:golf@dromoland.ie).  
**Fota Island G.C.:** [fotaisland.com](http://fotaisland.com); 011-353-21-488-3710; [reservations@fotaisland.ie](mailto:reservations@fotaisland.ie).  
**Killarney G. & Fishing Club:** [killarney-golf.com](http://killarney-golf.com); 011-353-64-31034; [reservations@killarney-golf.com](mailto:reservations@killarney-golf.com).  
**Ring of Kerry G. & C.C.:** [ringofkerrygolf.com](http://ringofkerrygolf.com); 011-353-64-42000  
**Shannon G.C.:** [shannongolfclub.ie](http://shannongolfclub.ie); 011-353-61-471-849; [info@shannongolfclub.ie](mailto:info@shannongolfclub.ie)

**6 Old Head Golf Links**  
 Green fee: €275 (\$350)  
[oldhead.com](http://oldhead.com)  
 011-353-21-477-8444  
[reservations@oldhead.com](mailto:reservations@oldhead.com)

Golf Digest Trail





BALLYBUNION: The par-4 10th (*foreground*) and the classic par-4 11th on the Old Course.

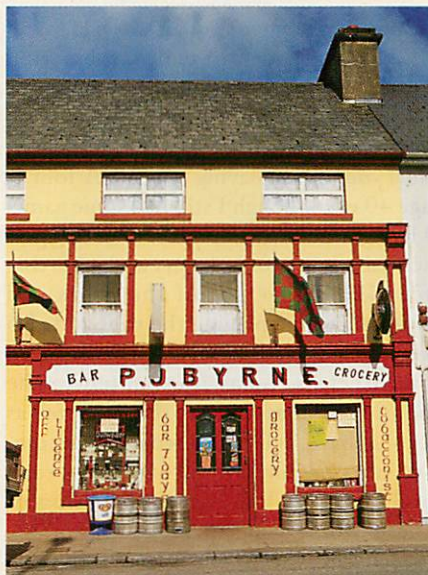


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golf trip to Ireland or the British Isles. Almost as useful are rain gloves (which are beginning to catch on in Ireland but are still less widely available there than they are at home), wool socks or their high-tech equivalent (to keep your wet feet warm as you search for missing balls in wet fescue up to your knees), and at least one spare pair of waterproof golf shoes. I also depended heavily on my excellent rain hat, which is manufactured by Outdoor Research, is intended mainly for backpackers and kayakers, and is called a Seattle Sombrero.

That evening, at the Brehon Hotel, in Killarney, Barton, Carney, O'Malley and I applied ourselves mainly to drying our equipment. I sandwiched my rainsuit between bath towels and stomped on it, to blot the worst of the water, then used a hair dryer to dry the legs and sleeves from within. I dried my golf towel with the iron (producing cumulus clouds of steam) and the heated pants press (less successful). I left my shoes overnight on a radiator in the hallway and finished drying them the next morning by holding them against heater vents in the car as we drove down the coast to Waterville.

Waterville Golf Links is on a toe-shape peninsula defined by Ballinskelligs Bay and the meandering, sand-filled estuary of the River Inny. The property was purchased in the 1970s by an Irish-American golfer and businessman named John A. Mulcahy, and the course was designed soon afterward by the Irish golf architect Eddie Hackett, with help from Claude Harmon and Mulcahy. Today, the course is owned by a small group of American rich guys, who bought



it in the late 1980s, and is listed on Golf Digest's ranking of the 100 greatest courses outside the United States.

We got a late start leaving the Brehon, so we phoned Waterville's golf shop from the car to ask if we could miss our tee time by a few minutes. We were told that, because of the weather, we could be as late as we liked, because there were "only a few golfers milling about the clubhouse." (Later that day, at Carton House, west of Dublin, the first round of the Irish Open was suspended because of high winds.) A little driving rain was nothing to us by that point, however, and we made a very nice day of it. We were unimpeded by other golfers until our second pass through the second nine, when we were blocked by a foursome of cigar-smoking Americans in golf carts. Golf carts are still rare in Ireland, though not as rare as

they used to be; Waterville, at least, mildly discourages their use by charging roughly \$65 for each one. (A senior caddie, in contrast, is about \$45, plus tip.)

Several years ago, Waterville's owners hired the justly celebrated American golf architect Tom Fazio to undertake what eventually grew into a major renovation, including the addition of a "tour-quality practice facility." Waterville was Fazio's first project outside the United States, and the major work was completed this past spring. I had never played the course and therefore have no basis for judging the results. However, all four of us thought that the new sixth and seventh holes, which Fazio essentially created from scratch, somehow felt more like Fazio than like Ireland. What you think about that will depend partly on what you think about the trans-Atlantic cross-pollination of course-design ideas, which never alarms anyone when it operates in the other direction. One possibly ominous note, however: The owners have announced their ambition to make Waterville Ireland's "premiere golfing destination."

Tralee and Waterville are outposts on the storied Ring of Kerry, a roughly circular travel route that winds through some of the most ruggedly beautiful terrain in the country, much of it along the coast. The pavement is so narrow that tour buses, to keep from colliding like particles in a cyclotron, travel in one direction only (counterclockwise). We were stuck for a long time behind an enormous truck, which slowed way down as it came to a bridge that looked almost too low for it to squeeze under. Then—pow!—right into the bridge. The driver was unharmed, although when he

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jumped out to inspect his truck he said a bad word that a non-lip-reader could easily lip-read.

The final course on our itinerary was Old Head Golf Links, about 15 miles south of Cork. It opened in 1997, and it's laid out on a 220-acre promontory that's shaped a little like an overturned skillet. Old Head pretty much has to be seen to be believed. (You can take a video flyover at [oldheadgolflinks.com](http://oldheadgolflinks.com).) It is the dream project of John and Patrick O'Connor, wealthy Irish brothers, who bought the land in the late 1980s (for less than \$2,000 an acre) and began construction of the course in 1993. Nine of the holes play along the tops of the cliffs, which rise more than 300 feet above the water in some places. From the second tee you can look down (or, if the wind is right, launch your drive) into a cove within which a German U-boat lurked before torpedoing the Lusitania, in 1915. The third (a par 3) and the 12th (a par 5) look almost like holes in those fantasy prints by Loyal H. (Bud) Chapman—the ones in which the tees and greens are perched on top of Machu Picchu or at the edge of the Grand Canyon.

Playing Old Head was exciting, and so was creeping along the edges of the precipices. The whole experience made me uneasy, though: Old Head should be a national park, not a private golf course. The whole place feels like the triumph of ego over reason. Much of the topsoil had to be imported, several of the most exposed greens have to be rebuilt almost every spring because of salt damage inflicted by winter storms, the club's horticulturist introduced ice plant (among other

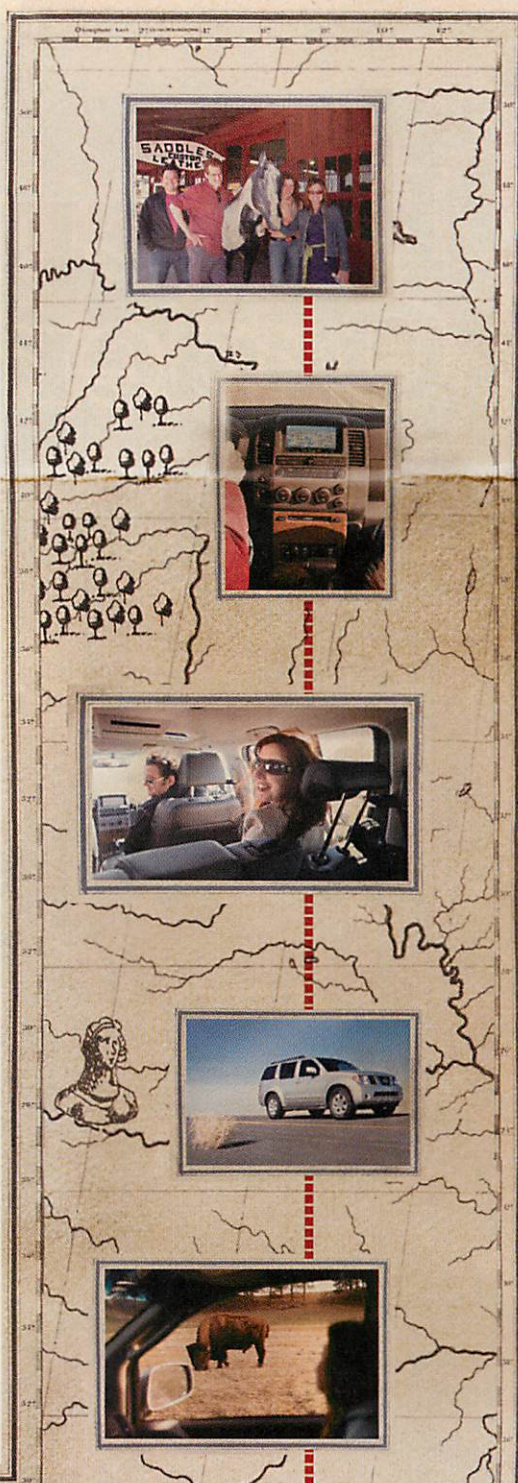
non-indigenous species) after seeing it at Pebble Beach, and approach shots to the par-5 10th are played over a 5,000-year-old Druid burial ground. A round at Old Head costs roughly \$350, and the vast majority of the rounds are played by Americans. Old Head used to be a beloved destination for local hikers, fishermen, picnickers and whale-watchers; now nongolfers are brusquely turned away at the gate, and the club's website suggests that golfers consider arriving by helicopter.

Old Head, nevertheless, usefully provided a spectacular setting for the final round of the All-Week Irish Championship of the World, which was contested by Barton, Carney, O'Malley and me. We had decided to keep the same partners for the entire trip, playing a four-ball close-out format too complicated to describe fully in a monthly magazine. The entire thing came down—as it somehow always does—to the final hole. Each of the four of us had a putt to win; only O'Malley (my partner!) sank his. We then played a second 18, a victory lap, before returning to our hotel in Kinsale.

The next day, back at Shannon Airport, I was killing time before my flight home when I spotted the young woman from the lost-baggage office—the woman who, a week before, had tracked me down in my taxi to let me know my clubs were on the way. I rushed over and thanked her for her kindness.

She looked startled for a moment, then smiled. "Mr. Owen," she said.

We have a responsibility, as golfers and as Americans, not to abuse the hospitality of this gracious, enchanting country. 🍀



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