

In every Irish pub, you'll meet old-timers with the gift of blarney and local musicians playing magic fiddles



Christchurch Cathedral is just one of the many fascinating sites in Dublin



Everything *Old* Is New Again

Even if you've done programs in Ireland in the past, it's time to revisit this country

By Jacquelin Carnegie

The hills are as green, the Guinness is still flowing and the wind is ever at your back. But there's a lovely new breeze blowing in this ancient land. The pubs are still filled with old-timers, colorful characters and traditional music, but several decades of strong economic growth has added a contemporary, cosmopolitan air to the olden charm.

Corporate clients love Ireland for its natural beauty, castle hotels, fabulous golf and friendly people. Incentive planners love Ireland for its practicality: There's easy access from the United States. The language is English. Customs pre-clearance is done in Ireland. The DMCs are excellent. There's a wide variety of world-class incentive properties. The country is small, so it's



The Old Head Golf Links in County Cork is one of the many spectacular courses your group can play

easy to get around, yet there's amazing diversity within the destination. Plus, there are some 400 superlative golf courses.

According to Caren Bigelow, Atlanta, Ga.-based USMotivation's director of planning & vendor relations, "The DMCs here truly understand the U.S. market as well as the value and rationale of an incentive. That's why Ireland continues to grow as a destination of choice."

Amy Reeber, senior program manager, BCD Meetings & Incentives in Minneapolis, adds, "So many Americans have Irish heritage or an Irish neighbor or have celebrated St. Patrick's Day that an incentive to Ireland is a good motivator."

Tour guide Conor Ellard concurs, "Most

Americans have a natural affinity for Ireland. It's a place they're eager to visit. And, from a business point of view, the Irish are very experienced with tourism in general and with the incentive market in particular, which makes for an excellent program."

Maritz Inc.'s clients from the financial services, automotive, technology, health care and hospitality/retail industries all enjoy incentive travel programs in Ireland. Group sizes range from small and intimate to around 300 people, according to Judy Jackson, director of industry relations for Maritz in St. Louis, Mo. In 2009, USMotivation has programs scheduled for groups of 125 to 150. They are from the telecommunications, pharmaceutical, insurance and financial services industries.

In Ireland, most planners like to offer a program with a city component and a country experience, such as a few nights in

Northern Ireland is an emerging region for incentive travel



Dublin and a sojourn in a wonderful country castle hotel.

San Diego-based planners TBA Global organized a two-night stay in Dublin with five nights at Dromoland Castle in County Clare for one of the U.S.'s largest independent distributors of life insurance, West Coast Life.

"Our incentive programs are for the Top 50, Million Dollar Qualifiers," says Mark Rush, senior vice president at West Coast Life, based in San Francisco. "We look for certain criteria in selecting a destination—security, premier properties such as the Four Seasons, and the 'Wow' factor."

"Coming into Dromoland Castle, we had our coaches accompanied by a 'hunting party.' Irish bagpipers and 50 extra waitstaff in tuxedos offered our participants Champagne from 50 individual silver trays. The clouds parted and a rainbow appeared." (Be sure to get a "rainbow guarantee" from your DMC!)

>> East

In Dublin, there are any number of incentive activities that are fun and enlightening. You can send your group on a literary walking tour, on a pub crawl or to a tasting at the Guinness Storehouse, off to the famed Trinity College or to the infamous Kilmainham

Jail. You can have them do a "sea thrill" adventure in Dublin Bay or a sophisticated hobnob with the Lord Mayor of Dublin in a fancy Georgian mansion.

Excellent incentive hotels include the Four Seasons Hotel Dublin; The Merrion Hotel; The Shelbourne Dublin, A Renaissance Hotel; the Westin Dublin and The Westbury Hotel.

Just outside Dublin, there's the Ritz-Carlton Powerscourt in County Wicklow and The K Club in County Kildare, with its famous golf courses. These two properties provide easy access to the South East—Waterford and Wexford (President John F. Kennedy's ancestral home).

"Ireland was a perfect incentive destination for our recent group of six hundred from a major insurance company," says Kevin Dern, program manager for the Lexington Group in St. Louis, Mo. Paula Ward's Ireland, based in Dublin, was the local organizer for the incentive trip.

"It provides the allure and excitement of Europe in a country where English is spoken and travel is easy. The stories of friendly Irish people are not exaggerations," says Dern. "Everyone we worked with was wonderful, from Paula Ward's team to bus drivers, hotel staff and local guides. It's what made our program such a pleasure."

Planner Resources

- ▶ **Tourism Ireland**
U.S.: (847) 516-0038
www.irelandinspiresus.com

DMCS & FULL-SERVICE PLANNERS

- ▶ **Moloney & Kelly Travel**
www.moloneykelly.com
- ▶ **Ovation Group**
www.ovation.ie
- ▶ **Paula Ward's Ireland**
www.pwi.ie
- ▶ **Taylormade Incentive Travel**
e-mail: taylormadetravel@eircom.net

- ▶ **TBA Global**
www.tbaglobal.com

HOTELS

- ▶ **Four Seasons Hotel Dublin**
www.fourseasons.com/dublin
- ▶ **The Merrion Hotel**
www.merrionhotel.com
- ▶ **Westin Dublin**
www.westin.com/dublin
- ▶ **Dromoland Castle**
www.dromoland.ie
- ▶ **Ashford Castle**
www.ashford.ie
- ▶ **Sheen Falls Lodge**
www.sheenfallslodge.ie
- ▶ **Capella Castlemartyr**
www.capellacastlemartyr.com
- ▶ **Kingsley Hotel**
<http://kingsleyhotel.com>
- ▶ **The Merchant Hotel (Belfast)**
www.themerchanthotel.com

Dromoland Castle in County Clare, a favorite of incentive groups, is known for its excellent service

>> *West*

The West of Ireland is a good place to experience the countryside. A scenic, cross-country trip can be done by motor coach or train in about two-and-a-half to three hours. Onboard entertainers—traditional Irish musicians and seanachai (storytellers)—help pass the time.

Popular properties for a countryside base are the Adare Manor in County Limerick and Dromoland Castle in County Clare. Each of these magnificent properties is a destination unto itself—golf, spas, fine dining and magnificent views. They are also strategically situated for day trips to the stunning Cliffs of Moher or to Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands. And to a range of golf courses.

“Ireland has fantastic links and parkland courses,” says Nancy Reyelt, president of Get Out of Town Travel in Naples, Fla., which sets up golf and ski incentives. “The Irish really know golf, but it’s the friendliness of the people that makes playing here so special.”

Your group can also enjoy: a medieval banquet at Bunratty Castle; lunch at an Irish farm where sheepdogs herd the flock; traditional Irish dance and/or Irish music lessons.

The Piggly Wiggly Corporation, the mega supermarket chain now headquartered in Keene, N.H., did a great program for 90 couples with three nights in Dublin and three nights at Dromoland Castle.

>> *South West and South*

Other good incentive destinations are in the South West: Killarney—The Europe Hotel & Resort, right on the lake, is a planner’s dream location, as is delightful Kenmare, with its Sheen Falls Lodge. Activities include a visit to Muckross House and a day trip to the Gap of Dunloe.

Full-service brokerage firm A.G. Edwards (now Wachovia Securities) in St. Louis, Mo., did two back-to-back, very successful programs for 500 couples at The Europe Hotel.



“Even if you’ve done incentives in this region before,” says Carolyn Costello, managing director, Taylormade Incentive Travel, in Limerick, Ireland, “you can do something new, such as create your own Ring of Kerry itinerary or offer Irish home dinners, which are always a hit.”

These “Irish Evenings” give participants the opportunity to have drinks or dinner with an Irish family in their home. (You need a good DMC to organize these.)

Jackson says Maritz Travel had a group of American automotive dealers dine in the homes of Irish automotive dealers, and it was the highlight of the trip.

“That Irish Welcome that makes you feel at home was what made our program so wonderful,” explains an executive vice president of a financial services company whose trip was planned by Taylormade. “We really feel we made new Irish friends during our pub night and dining with local families.”

In addition to the well-known regions of Ireland, there are two new emerging areas for incentives—Cork in the South and Northern Ireland.

“For years, European companies have used Cork; it’s just waiting to be discovered by American incentive groups,” says Paula Ward, director of Paula Ward’s Ireland.

This lovely area has so much going for it.

Cork City is charming, and groups can stay at the elegant Hayfield Manor or at Kingsley Hotel, with its great river views. Just outside town are the tried-and-true Sheraton Fota Island Hotel & Spa and the new, world-class Capella Castlemartyr, a divine incentive property with a Ron Kirby links-style golf course.

Cork is known for gourmet food and Irish sports—an interesting combo. Groups can do whiskey tastings at the world-renowned Jameson Distillery in Midleton or take a cooking course at Ballymaloe, one of the top “cooking” schools, with a side trip to lovely Kinsale, the “gourmet capital.” Of course, there’s always kissing the stone at Blarney Castle.

The Irish have a passion for sports. Let your participants experience a rugby match and other uniquely Irish sports such as hurling or Gaelic football. Or, hire a “tipster” and take them to the races—horse and/or greyhound dog racing.

Northern Ireland is a different story—its emergence as an incentive (and leisure) travel destination is a direct result of the growing political stability created by what appears to be an end to The Troubles. ■

ONINCENTIVEMAG.COM/IRELAND read about Northern Ireland’s offerings.

