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Cork City, which still retains a sense of rural Ireland and its past, reigned as the European city of culture for 2005. Residents were proud to hold this honorary title for a year after living through several years of incessant infrastructure construction and preparation. Cork does have its tourist attractions, such as St. Finbarrâ€™s cathedral, the double-decker bus tour, the English market with its bounty of breads, cheeses, meats and fish, the Crawford art gallery and Cork Gaol, but the reason to linger in town is to make the most of the popular culture and interactions with the locals. Their warmth and self-deprecating humor, their interest in your views on Ireland and the Irish experience, all make for an extraordinary travel experience.

The Cork pubs continue to be the forum for communal banter. The Irish donâ€™t entertain at home too much, and when they want â€˜a bit of a chatâ€™ they go down to their local for a pint or maybe just a cup of tea. With the non-smoking law in effect in public places, going to a restaurant or pub has become an even more pleasant experience for those who like their air clear. In the Cork environs, some favorites include Barryâ€™s Pub in Douglas, the Overdraft in Carrigaline, and Cronins in CrossHaven. An Cruiscin Lan in Douglas is a popular music spot. It is not difficult to try a different music venue every night and for most visitors, this is the highlight of a trip to Ireland.

And certainly, there are endless opportunities to hear a tall tale or satisfy an insatiable interest in how the Irish are viewed in the world at large. â€œIâ€™m troubled. Iâ€™m dissatisfied. Iâ€™m Irish,â€• sa Moore in Spenserâ€™s Ireland. This translates into a talkative and opinionated nation of people who talk readily and constantly about everything, especially politics and what the Irish have contributed to the world. It might not be the beginning of a lifelong friendship but it will undoubtedly provide that bit of â€˜craicâ€™ or fun that you will remember long after the historical sights and facts are a blur.

The sights of Ireland are centered on its natural beauty, its turbulent history with England, and its mythology. All three provide insights into how Ireland has developed as a country. Cromwellâ€™s excesses in destroying many of the historic sites of Ireland means that much of what you see has been either left ruined or has been restored. Ruined abbeys and castles leave much to the imagination, but the saving grace can be the docent who uses stories and folklore to take you back to Irelandâ€™s historic past. The Heritage Card allows a family to visit most of the historic sites for one year and is well worth the investment if you are in the country for at least a week.

The most well known site in Cork, the Blarney Stone at Blarney castle, is privately owned, expensive and truly not worth a visit. The lack of any interpretive signage at the Castle makes it difficult to understand the history or stories behind the castle, and there are no guided tours. The only reason to visit is to cross it off your checklist. More interesting are the local heritage sites with well-informed docents, such as Barryscourt Castle on the outskirts of Cork City, where the adjacent restaurant also serves wonderful weekend lunches. For history buffs, the nearby town of Cobh offers the Queenstown story, an exhibit detailing the story of Irish emigration to other parts of the globe.

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