

EUROPEAN

# TRAVEL

SEPTEMBER

## THE VIBRA NEW FROM THE TOP



The hill towns above  
the Côte d'Azur

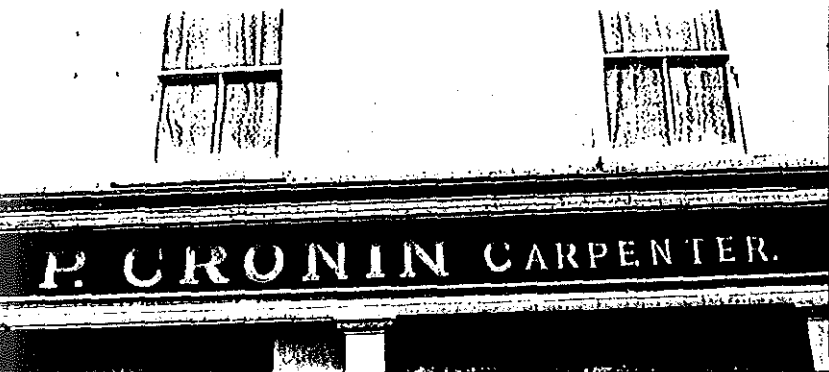
Romantic Inns of Tuscany

Other Germany

Wine in Portugal

Wine in Ireland's County Cork

Wine in the Southwest



# ROUNDABOUT COUNTY CORI

From Ballydehob to Skibbereen,  
the villages of southwest Ireland make for a magical mystery detour

BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

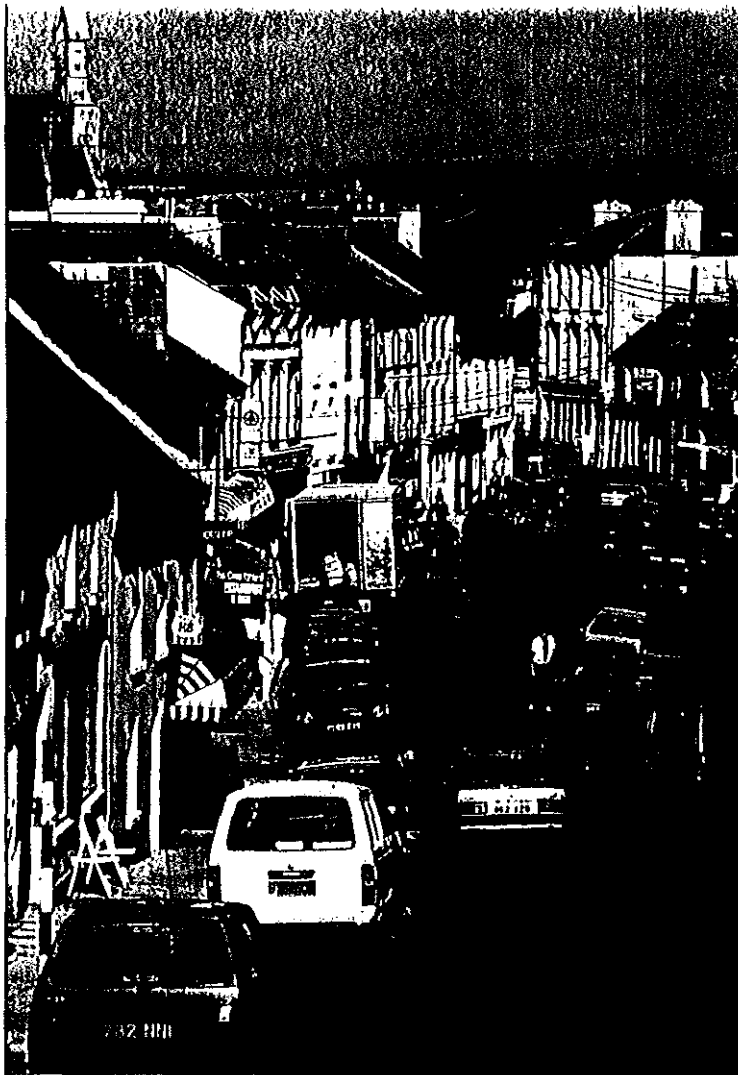
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WALTER PFEIFFER



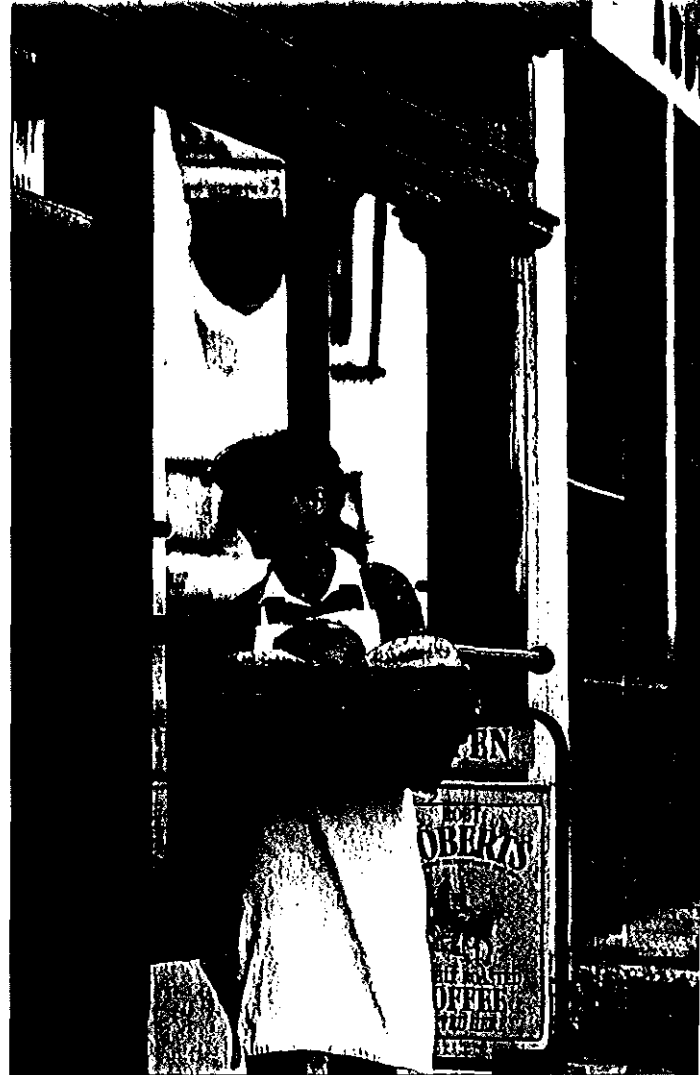
In County Cork, village newcomers and oldtimers are repainting and updating the timeworn face of Ireland. Far left, top to bottom: The traditional hand-painted sign atop a Skibbereen carpenter shop; Rosscarbery's gas dealer (bottled propane is used for cooking and for heating cottages built before central heating); finishing touches for the newly renovated Carbery Arms Hotel in Rosscarbery. Near left: Despite the invasion of a large supermarket chain, the corner grocery is alive and well in Skibbereen.

A place where buying a quart of milk is exhilarating must be a corner of paradise. Such is southwest Cork. I know this part of Ireland because my wife and I own a cottage in farm country not far from there. The villages figure in our lives as part of our daily routine, and as such have transformed our attitude toward everyday experiences. We go to the villages for the same reasons that people have for centuries: to buy food, enjoy grog in the locals, encounter new faces, do errands, and

have the odd bit of friendly conversation. Our outings are not necessarily exotic. If some villages lure us because we are in quest of the perfect local goat cheese, oak-smoked wild salmon, or homemade fresh sage sausages, others attract us because we need a doctor, a repairman for a tire puncture, or a source for laundry soap. What we have discovered in southwest Cork is that such ordinary events can be special. It is as if people have made up their minds that they are not going to waste a single opportunity to extol the simple wonders of life itself.



With the spirit of an old market town adapting to new ways, Schull's harlequin facades mix cheerfully with Flats, Fords, and the occasional delivery van (above left). Above right: Adele's coffee-house in Schull.



Consider an outing to the main square of the town of Rosscarbery. Rosscarbery is where our family usually goes to swim at the flat sandy-beach called The Warren, framed by cliffs and facing a calm inlet off the Atlantic, or to fish off the pier at the estuary. But this time three of us were heading to the doctor's office. Our daughters, ages 5 and 6, and I had ferocious, intractable red spots covering our torsos. As Irish as we try to be in Ireland, we had already called our doctor back in Connecticut to figure out which of the dozen pills and ointments we always travel with might do the trick, but the spots had simply grown wider and angrier looking day after day. We decided we needed local help. In despair I had rung (the word "called" suggests a social visit, not a telephone connection, in Ireland) an acquaintance whose profile typifies the inhabitants of the region: a distinguished London doctor, now retired, who divides his time between Sussex and an elegantly proportioned Georgian farmhouse overlooking an empty bay a mile away from one of the Cork villages. There was a good doctor in Rosscarbery, he explained, and I dialed the necessary five digits. Nothing more is needed for local phone calls. As for mailing addresses, Ireland is the only place I know of in Western Europe where zip codes have yet to rear their awkward heads (although they're beginning to show up in Dublin).

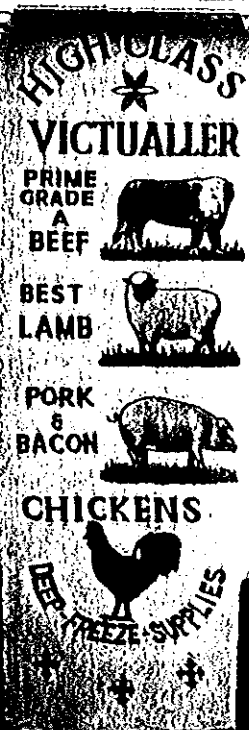
We were covered with those ghastly spots for a very un-Irish reason;

on a chilly day, we had swum in a heated saltwater pool. Set with roses, dahlias, and hyacinths in a hillside garden overlooking a yacht-filled harbor, it belongs to an Irish-American tycoon with a palatial abode and a taste for Los Angeles. After our dip, we spent some time in his Jacuzzi—a word that gains considerable charm when said with a West Cork accent. We didn't know there was a malfunction in the filter system, and some highly unfriendly bacteria were thriving. So here we were spending a vacation morning en route to the doctor's, facing the unknown just when we were craving familiar

On the phone the nurse had said there was no such thing as an appointment. Once the doctor was in after his house call, surgery would be open on a first-come-first-served basis. The word "surgery" had induced a twinge of terror, but then I remembered that it is synonymous with "doctor's office" in the British Isles.) At first I hated the idea of not being able to get a precise time, but then I remembered all those calls to do without back in the States, where one is generally told that two weeks hence is absolutely the earliest possibility. And so I felt that my "no appointments" was a good system after all. You cannot pinpoint a meeting time in rural Cork anyway; the roads are too often blocked by herds of cows being moved from pasture to pasture, brought into the barn for milking. There is also something fairer about a first-come-first-served; we all have our immediate needs and do not want to acknowledge everyone else's by waiting our turn. Ireland has the least hierarchical society I have ever encountered.

The nurse apologized to me for the amount of work she asked me

# C. O' SULLIVAN VICTUALLER



do once my daughters and I arrived. The travail consisted of writing our address and three names on a blank piece of paper. When I told her about the paperwork at doctor visits back home, she was properly amazed. "Doctor" would see us in about an hour, she said; of course, we could go out and then return, now that we were registered.

**O**ff we went. The girls skipped along as we headed through the main square of Ross—locals drop the "carbery" when speaking of the town—and down the hill toward our favorite butcher. We walked past the hand-painted shop signs, picture-book storefronts, and small plaster houses—painted magenta, cream, aqua, and lemon yellow—that are endemic to the region. The few people who passed us gave cheery hellos. We watched the butcher cut us some chops of local mountain lamb. I told him how good our free-range chicken had been a few nights earlier as he filled a bag with peas that had been picked that morning. We discussed the relative merits of "green" (fresh) or smoked rashers and opted for the smoked version of that thick-cut, irresistibly salty, richly flavored bacon. Back on the square we bought handlines for mackerel fishing, knowing that we might fill a bucket with these fish in an hour if we found the right spot in our boat that afternoon. Then we stocked up on healthy wholemeal biscuits, a new type of Cadbury chocolate hazelnut cookie, and some packaged Dutch almond cakes that rival the freshest *financiers* in Paris.

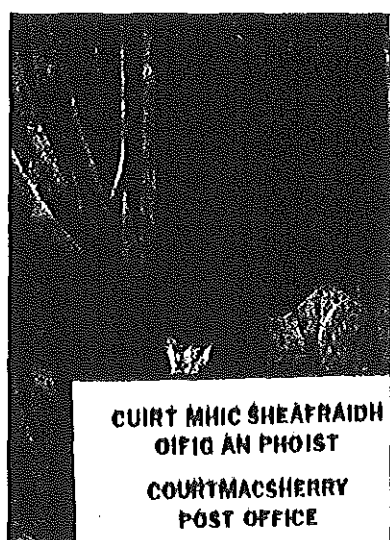
We were doing these errands within just a few miles, in different directions, of two fine stone circles where our predecessors regularly assembled over four millennia ago. The precise reasons they met at

these places remain unknown, but clearly they too sought some of the offerings of a community and the company of some fellow Homo sapiens.

Through the cool fresh air we returned to the doctor's. We had ten minutes to go until the hour would be up. I must admit that in the waiting room my high spirits again gave way to fear. We were packed in tight with mothers with infants in arms, rugged fishermen, and people so old and wizened one wondered how they could walk. The smell of barns and fields that I love in other places began to get to me in this supposedly hygienic setting. Had the medical profession heard of antibiotics here? Would we be flying home on an emergency return two days hence?

Precisely one hour after the nurse had said "an hour," we were summoned in, much to my amazement since I have never in my entire life gone to an American doctor who saw me when his nurse said he would. Once in the examining room I felt great relief at the sight of diplomas from various hospitals and universities in Dublin. And then one of the friendliest, gentlest men I have ever met began to chat with the girls and ask why we were there. He warmly congratulated them on knowing their own birthdays and enunciating them so clearly. He engaged in a profound discussion with Lucy, born on October 28, about the differences between Irish and American Halloweens. When I told Charlotte she should call him "Doctor Burke," he said, "or

**O'Sullivan** have run the butcher shop in Ballydehob village for generations; when the current family head, Cornelius O'Sullivan, inherited the business thirty years ago, he moved it to this former hardware store built in the 1840s.



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POST OFFICE**

Doctor Dan if you prefer." Since at home I grow feverish over doctors who address me by first name and introduce themselves as "Doctor . . ." with their last names, this was a big point in his favor. Charlotte said she would like to call him "Doctor Paul" because he looked like her piano teacher named Paul, and he said that would be fine. In little time he knew a great deal about our lives both in Ireland and America, and we about his. Moreover, he could diagnose a bacterial infection as well as anyone, knew exactly

which antibiotics and antihistamines each of us should take, wrote prescriptions for those and for a salve, and led us back to perfect health.

The "chemist," a two minute walk away and located behind a shop front out of a Dickens novel, apologized that he would need about ten minutes to prepare the prescriptions. Eight minutes later we were on our way. And later that day, as I walked my favorite pastures along the edge of the sea, and viewed an untouched landscape of startling beauty, still looking as it must have two hundred centuries ago, I

realized that it is more than tourist sights that attract me to the harbor towns of the region I have chosen as my second home. Where else might I feel so cheered up by a visit to the doctor? Where else do I adore being sent to buy "kitchen paper" (paper towels), just so that I can breathe in the vanilla smell of Fortune's Shop and talk about changes in the weather? Where else are the roads lined with fuchsia hedges, their blossoms hanging down like gaudy miniature red lanterns all summer long?

These villages are all simple Georgian facades, Gothic abbeys, and miles of farmland rolling behind. Unknown passersby can make you feel like old friends here. And if such qualities pervade the region, each town has merits all its own.

Consider Schull. It is located at the point where the hi mountains in the area sweep into Roaringwater Bay. The vill flagstone alleyways are lined with good pottery and antiques sl The narrow street that winds uphill through the center of tov packed with nice little stores. One small grocery might offer h made lemon curd and apple buns, while another features local h

And then there is the Fortnum & Mason of the region: a shop i center of Schull called The Courtyard. Its farmhouse cheeses from

**Each house on Courtmacsherry's main has a sea view (above). The town's postmistress Bernie Brickley, with her granddaughters Lorraine O'Levy. For the last eleven years, the post office has occupied her front parlour. Opposite, top to bottom: Gaelic can still be heard in the shops and pubs of Courtmacsherry, part of West Cork Gaeltacht, Gaelic-speaking area**



one town alone include the hard and tasty Gabriel and the rich, semisoft Gubbeen. Its bread is made in a brick steam oven fueled by coal. Its organically grown vegetables are supplied by farmers who are members of the Soil Association, which means their ground has been cleared of additives; it even has organic wines, in addition to an array of good French vintages.

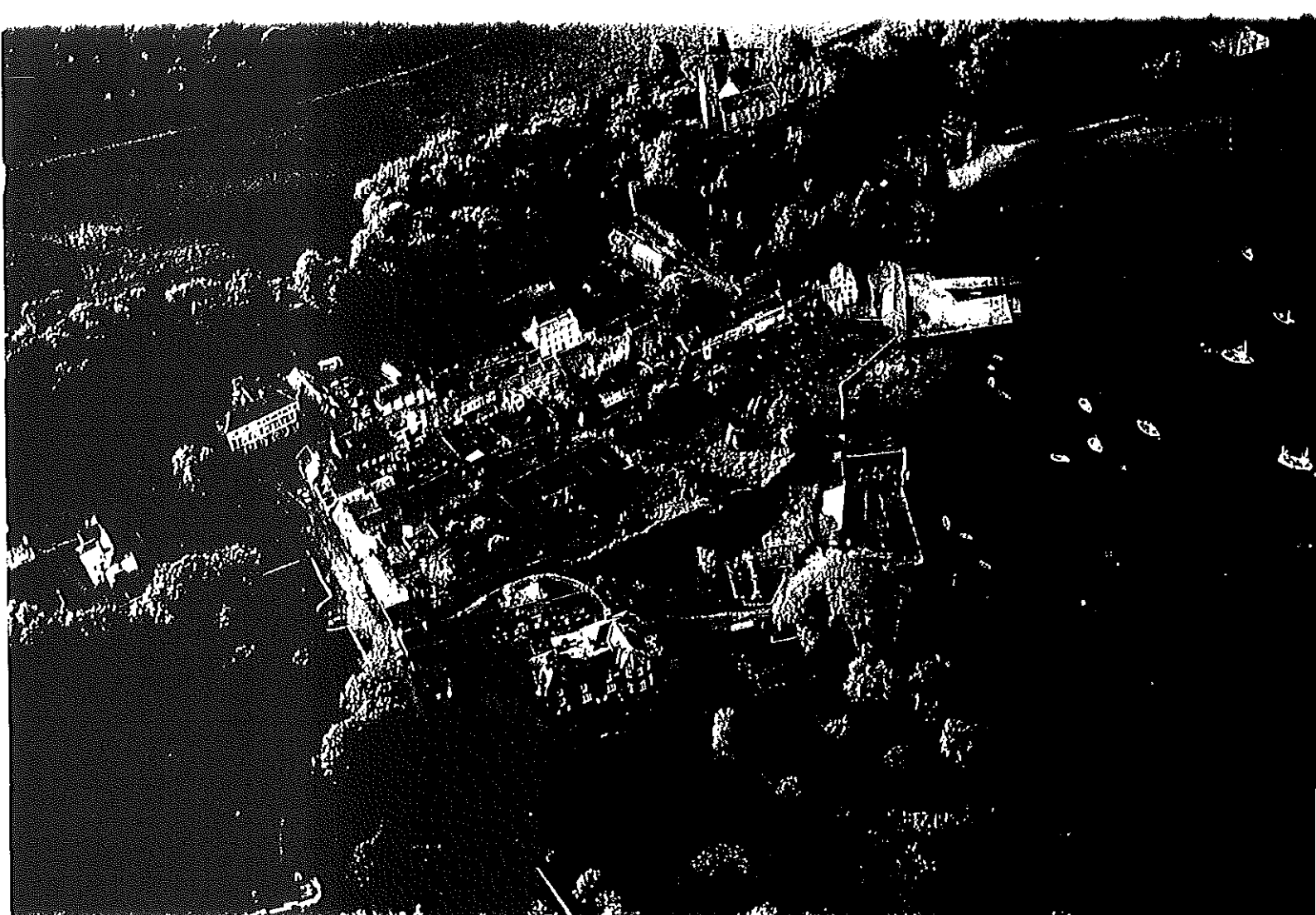
In Schull you can obtain computer services, foot massage and reflexology, and Victorian bric-a-brac. And when you are through, you would do well to stop at Adele's and take your choice of "Devonshire splits; butterfly cakes; cream and jam scones; rhubarb, apple, or gooseberry tart; apple sponge; chester cake; Viennese fingers; Chelsea buns; priory biscuits; or fairy cakes (cupcakes)—iced and sultana." Wash them down with some bracing tea. And if you need the loo, don't miss the chance to use one that has a claw-foot bathtub in it and overlooks a slate-roofed stone barn and the sea at Roaringwater Bay.

Or drop into a pub for a Smithwicks beer and a crab sandwich. That might be the perfect thing if you have just come in from a day on Clear Island. If after a few hours of exploration on Cape Clear or a hike in the mountains it is the advantages of civilization that you want, you could not do much better than in this small village.

A few miles from Schull lies Ballydehob. Once an art center for the region, it no longer has as many potteries and weavers as Schull now has, but the road that slopes through the center of town is still eye-catching, well-defined as it is by two rows of handsome "up-front" plaster houses. These are painted in pale blue with deep-blue trim,







yellow with dark brown, a sea-foam green with white, solid pink, or magenta, and the occasional white. Shop signs are hand painted in traditional lettering; my favorite is at O'Sullivan, HIGH CLASS VICTUAL- IZER, whose sign portrays a fine-looking steer, a lamb, and a pig next to the words advertising their butchered meat.

**F**rom Ballydehob you can reach the rather large harbor town of Baltimore by driving along the ever widening Hen River in the same direction its salmon take to reach the sea. This will take you past rows of purple loosestrife and through the riding-to-the-hounds country of Somerville and Ross, authors of *Some Experiences of an Irish R. M.* Your view will suddenly open to a sweeping bay framed in fertile countryside. Past an ivy-covered stone Gothic ruin is the town pier with old wooden fishing boats docked at it, and some impressive yachts moored not far beyond.

Two busy streets are packed with distractions to humor the visitors off of those yachts. There are pubs, gift shops, and first-rate restaurants. If Schull and Ballydehob are hubs for artisans and their fans, the clientele of the Baltimore establishments looks to be for the most part the English equivalent of the Nantucket set, and the amenities are suitably posh.

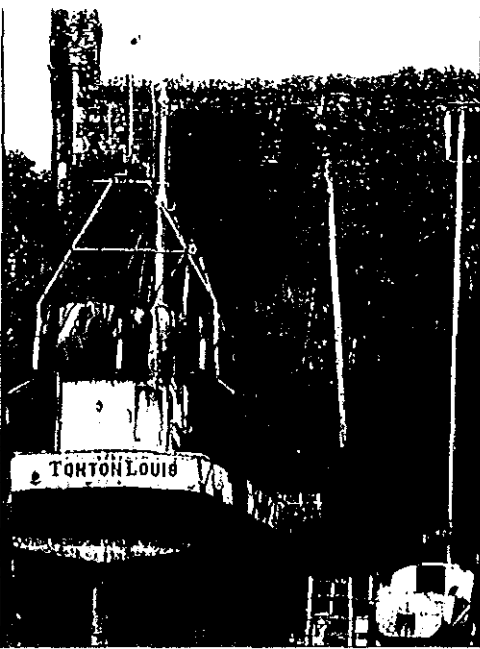
Not far from the pier you will see signs for *Miss Josephine*, the ferry to Sherkin Island. A tiny stone building nearby houses a shop with pottery made on Clea Island and sweaters woven on Sherkin. For all the Irish sweaters we have known, these Sherkin Island ones are without rival. Made in soft, thick Donegal wools, they are richly colored, the deep blues flecked in purple, the greens accented by

hints of crimson. And they are styled handsomely, with a variety of necklines and in some instances charming hand-painted buttons. We learned that they are sold only in this small room, at craft fairs, and in London, where one pictures them in a spiffy Sloane Street boutique, for one would rather try them on in Baltimore, with jeans slightly flared from sea spray.

The commercial center of the region is Skibbereen. More than a village, it offers everything from a new supermarket to a weekly cattle auction, good hardware stores, a bike shop, banks, and hotels. The roads from Schull and Ballydehob, Baltimore, and Rosscarbery all converge there, as does the route to Castletownshend, a village that is used only to permit English people beyond its gates and that remains a hub of English life in the region. Castletownshend is another of these Irish villages that revolve mainly around a single steep hilly street, but here, in addition to the usual plaster buildings, you'll find half-timbered houses that you would more likely expect to see in Oxfordshire, and Georgian fanlights over the doors of redbrick dwellings. The local population often consists of Eton and Harrow types cutting their kayaks from the harbor at the base of the road, or families trailering their sailboats behind Peugeot wagons with British plates. You'll also encounter more men in coat and tie and more women in flowered dresses than in the other towns around. To see a small part of people carrying silver sailing trophies and talking like spectators at Ascot is not unusual on a midsummer afternoon.

In the area surrounding Castletownshend, the gates and lawns may remind you of Greenwich (Connecticut, that is) or Beverly Hills more than rural Ireland. And when the people who live down long driveways

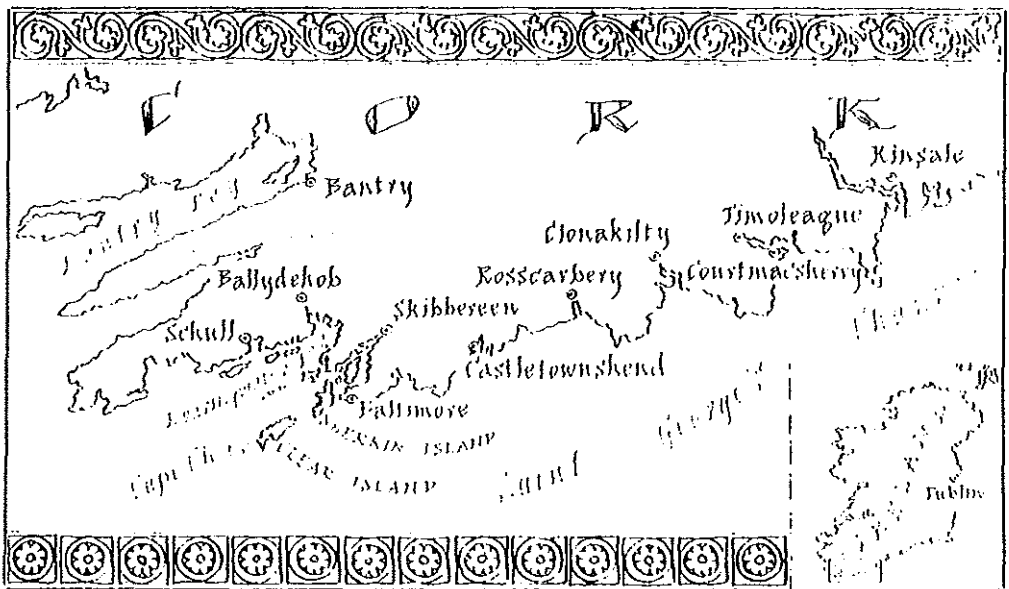




beyond those gates use their titles—be they German Countesses or Russian Princes—they're for real. But go another mile and you'll find a very different form of civilization. Called Knockdrum Fort, it evokes the ancient past as powerfully as the Egyptian pyramids and Inca ruins. You should be sure to stand inside this stone wall—some 8 feet thick and 4 feet high—that makes a circle about 95 feet in diameter. On a clear day it offers a view over the blue-green Atlantic and along the cliffs and islands off the coast, or in the opposite direction over vast expanses of patchworked farmland to the mountains behind Schull.

**B**ack through Skibbereen, you can pick up the road to Rosscarbery. From there you can go through Clonakilty to the peninsula where the villages of Timoleague and Courtmaesherry are located. Timoleague has the spectacular ruins of a Franciscan friary started in 1312 and mainly built in the sixteenth century by the Bishop of Ross. Today the friary is a dramatic series of stone Gothic arches, and the empty forms of narrow pointed windows open to the sky and the surrounding marshes. Curved staircases lead only to air. Look up the shaft of the tower and you will see a circular opening that once supported a dome but today yields sky and a thick growth of grass and ivy. Timoleague also has some renowned castle gardens—quite formal, with beautiful lawns and flower beds. In season, the vegetables and colorful sweet peas nurtured there are for sale.

Follow a winding road along the bay where you might see kingfishers, cormorants, and swans, and you will reach Courtmaesherry. This village feels like the end of the world, but its stucco houses, all in a row facing the sea, have elaborate pediments and quoins and ornate wooden window frames that make them look very urbane. There are everyday shops and the more refined Golden Pheasant, where you might acquire clothing by Ireland's top designers, Donegal tweeds and unusual linen sweaters, and traditional Irish gifts. Most signs are first in Gaelic, then English; *CURT MHC SHEAFRAIDH/OIFIC AN PHOIST* is the Courtmaesherry Post Office. To get your mail here would be to know daily pleasures of rare magic. *de*



English expatriates crowd Castletownshend today, but their new vehicle of choice is the sailboat (opposite), instead of the coach-and-four. Nearly everyone in the now-peaceful port town of Baltimore (above right) claims descent from the villainous seventeenth-century O'Driscoll pirates, whose ruined castle looms behind the busy fishing harbor (above left). Left: Waiting for the ten-minute ferry ride from Baltimore to Sherkin Island, a speck of land populated mainly by cows.