

Quiet Isles Off Southwest Ireland

Sherkin, Clear, Hare and Garinish offer beaches, a serious restaurant and a fine formal garden



Sherkin Island, rich in history, is the most accessible of the larger islands off County Cork.



Hare Island, with a permanent population of 20, is home to a remarkable restaurant.

By NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

IT is hard to believe that any place in the world could be quieter and gentler than the villages and farmland of the southwest coast of Ireland's County Cork. But the islands that dot its coast can make the mainland seem like hustle and bustle. Close-knit communities isolated by the sea — their landscape offering gentle farmland and sandy beaches as well as barren rocks and formidable cliffs — each is a tranquil world of its own.

There are over a hundred islands off Cork alone. They range from rocks inhabited only by seals and islands with single houses to islands with several villages. If you have a boat or find a willing fisherman, you can visit almost anywhere the coast and tides allow; there are few private beaches, and rarely a "No Trespassing" sign. And especially in the summer, Sherkin, Clear, Bere and Garinish (also known as Inacullin, to distinguish it from the Garinish Island off the coast of Kerry) are geared to visitors; boat service to them is meant to bring in outsiders, who will be welcomed warmly.

Sherkin Island, three miles long and one mile wide, is the most accessible of the larger islands. It attracts up to several hundred day-trippers daily, in part because it offers some of the warmest, calmest swimming waters in Ireland — be they somewhat bracing by most American standards. Much of the year-round population of about 90 consists of "blow-ins," an island term for non-natives. There are still a few Irish farmers who can be seen cutting grass with wooden-handled scythes, but there is also a handful of émigré families from England, the Netherlands, France and America. A few years ago the number of children attending the island school was four; now it is often as high as 12.

Visitors take the boat to Sherkin Island from the coastal village of Baltimore — in Irish Baile am Tighe Moir, or Place of the Big House, so named for the castle of the O'Driscolls, the clan that ruled Baltimore and its many nearby islands five centuries ago. After the 15-minute crossing one arrives at the ruins of a Franciscan friary built there by the O'Driscolls around 1460, and realizes the rich history of this rural outpost.

In 1537 O'Driscoll pirates plundered a ship, laden with a cargo of wine, that had taken shelter in Baltimore harbor en route from Lisbon to Waterford. In revenge, the people of Waterford dispatched a naval expe-

mains of the ruins, currently being restored, to evoke its character. On a sheltered slope overlooking the sea, they have an architectural simplicity that suggests the calm that pervades the entire island.

Beyond the friary there is a crossroad from which a few winding roads, in summer lined with flowering fuchsia, lead over most of Sherkin, the name of which derives from Inis Oircin — translated either as island of the little pig or of the whale. There is one other substantial ruin — of an ivy-covered castle called Dun-na-long (fortress of the ships) on a promontory near the ferry landing. Built by Fineen O'Driscoll at about the same time as the friary, it was also essentially destroyed by the Waterford troops. Beyond these two monuments there are only a few simple buildings scattered across the island. Some areas are entirely barren expanses of rock sloping toward the sea, dusted with grass and dirt.

The east side of the island faces back to the houses and hills of Baltimore and its adjacent coast, as well as to a point of land with

the Baltimore beacon, bizarrely shaped like a pointed honeycomb. The southeast, along the rocky stretches where the landscapes seem practically lunar except for the stone ruins of small cottages, faces the open Atlantic. Off to the southwest lie numerous large rocks and Clear Island, where the windmills that generate some of Clear's electricity are in plain view. There is also a view of Fastnet Rock and its gray granite lighthouse, where the light 160 feet above the high water mark is visible for 19 miles and is the first landfall in view to ships coming from the west. Westerly lies Roaringwater Bay, on which Sherkin offers some fine beaches.

The year-round community pulls together with considerable neighborhood spirit. A knitting co-op produces wonderful sweaters made with wool from a village in Donegal, where the rugged landscape is similar to that of Sherkin. In the winter, groups study almost every aspect of the island and its resources; one recent effort led to a brochure illustrating a number of indigenous plants and providing suitable recipes for dandelion wine, sea fennel pickle and nettle soup.

There is one small hotel, several B&B's, a few houses to rent, a shop and a post office. The Jolly Roger Pub and Garrison House Hotel, across a lane from one another a short walk from the ferry landing, are the island's tourist center, but there are generally fewer

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Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Italian gardens on Garinish.

Irish Islands

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than a dozen people at the two places. The menu at the Jolly Roger reflects both Sherkin's feeling for its local riches and its awareness of the larger world; dishes range from fish and chips made with cod from nearby waters, fish chowder with homemade brown cake and fresh salmon salad to veggieburger and spaghetti bolognese.

THERE is an occasional rivalry between Sherkin and nearby Clear Island that resembles that between Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. One is nearer to the mainland, the other farther at sea; visitors embark for both from a common port (although boats leave for Clear from the village of Schull as well as from Baltimore). But to the foreign visitor they offer far more similarities than differences, although the ferry ride to Clear takes about 45 minutes.

Like Sherkin, Clear is about three miles long, although it is wider than Sherkin in parts, bulging at one point to two miles. Clear is a bit hillier; its coastline facing the open sea is wild and precipitous, with clusters of pink wildflowers; its interior and the side facing Roaringwater Bay is gentler and more pastoral. The few roads are delineated by hedges of fuchsia and escallonia.

Near the ferry landing in North Harbor are the remains of the 12th-century St. Kieran's Church, a Holy Well and a rounded stone inscribed with three large crucifixes said to have been carved by Kieran. Kieran was born on Clear in 352. One of Ireland's first saints, he was a missionary credited with having brought his country the new faith shortly before the era of St. Patrick.

Alone on a rock at sea, originally linked to the land by a causeway that has since eroded, stand the ruins of another O'Driscoll castle, Dun an Oir (the fortress of gold), a dramatic sight from the Clear mainland. There are also a number of Stone Age ruins.

Here, as on Sherkin, there is a mix of old farming culture and modern sophistication. Perhaps nowhere is that more striking than the spot where, climbing a path from the ferry landing, one sees a sign offering various goat's milk products for sale. This is Ed Harper's house. With nothing but the milk of his British Alpine goats and a bit of salt added in the aging process, Mr. Harper makes a semisoft goat cheese — Cais Cleire — that is also available at some of the finest

restaurants and food shops on the mainland. But what can be obtained only on Clear are his goat's milk ice creams, the chocolate a particularly surprising success. A pleasant glazed earthenware country-style pottery is also made on the island and can be bought in a local gift shop.

Clear Island, however, is not having the same sort of renaissance as Sherkin. Its population has been consistently decreasing; while in 1956 there were 451 people, the most recent tally is between 150 and 160. Many are elderly and still speak Irish. For that reason an Irish College was established there in 1966, when

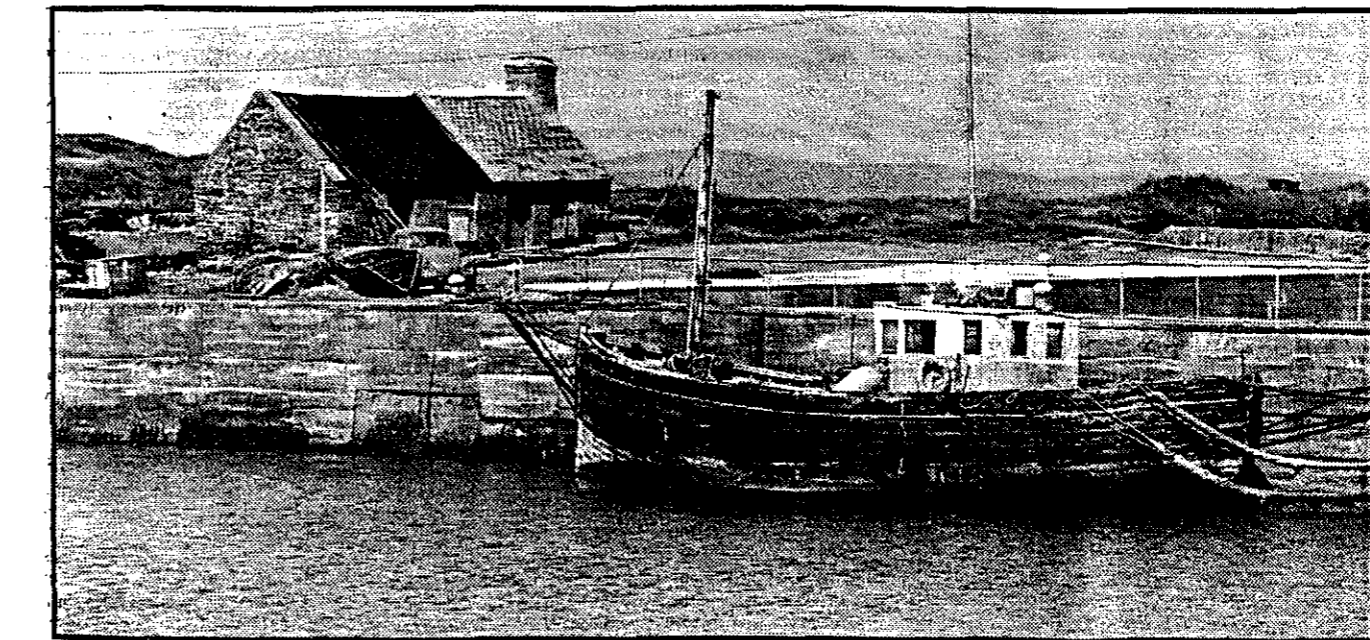
President Eamon De Valera flew in by helicopter and proclaimed Clear as a Gaeltacht, or Irish-speaking area. Language students increase the island's population each summer, as do day tourists and visitors to the bird observatory set up by Bristol University. Clear is a magnet for naturalists interested in seabirds or in whales and dolphins.

IN the region of Sherkin and Clear Islands there are many other small islands that can be reached by boat if not by public ferry. Hare Island, although lacking ferry service, is among the more accessible, especially to travelers who make arrangements to dine at an extraordinary restaurant there.

Hare was originally Heir, because its 381 acres belonged, in the middle of the 10th century, to an heir of the O'Driscolls. Its year-round population, once over 300, is now about 20. Unlike Sherkin and Clear, it offers no pubs or guesthouses; the only shop is the size of a walk-in closet.

The island has about 30 houses, all straightforward cottages of similar design, their main distinction being the colorful floats sunk into the tops of concrete gate posts. One of these cottages stands out because of its small sign and the two goats tethered in front. It belongs to John Desmond and his wife, Ellmary Fenton, both Irish born. Having cooked in Paris at Taillevent and taught at La Varenne, John decided he wanted to open a restaurant where he could avail himself of the freshest possible food supplies. From May to October he and Ellmary serve up to 15 people an evening. With Irish country furniture and Shanagarry pottery as the accouterments, one eats as well as in a fine French restaurant, for \$19.50 per person. The starter might be a soup with a rich stock based on prawns caught only hours earlier, or salmon John has smoked over a turf fire. The main course could be three types of local fish (hake, cod and plaice) wrapped around each other, on a beurre blanc with a julienne of vegetables, or squid stuffed with mushrooms picked on the island. There is no menu; you eat what you are served. A small selection of French wines is available from \$10.50 to \$30 a bottle.

But the experience requires considerable flexibility; not only do you have to be willing to pay a fisherman \$35 for the short crossings back and forth between Hare and the mainland and to walk the five minutes between the pier and the restaurant whatever the weather, but you also have to eat



Photographs by Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Baltimore harbor is the boarding point for boats to Sherkin Island, a 15-minute journey.

according to the chef's schedule, which may mean starting at 9 P.M. and finishing at midnight. And you have to be sure to plan well in advance, phoning for a reservation and asking John or Ellmary to find a fisherman who will take you out there, and sending a deposit.

A visit to Garinish, though far easier to organize, offers a similar sense of the unexpected. Rather than the usual untamed Irish coastal landscape, its 37 acres offer up meticulously maintained lawns with flowered borders, formal gardens, carefully orchestrated jungles and woods, and elegant "ruins" in various styles of architecture. A rare profusion of plants from all over the world flower in vibrant blossom. And in lieu of the expected Irish cottages and stone foundation ruins there are immaculate limestone temples, their archways and columns a late Italian Renaissance style, their curving roofs a type more usually seen atop Japanese pagodas.

Garinish is a small island off Glengarriff in Bantry Bay. This vast horseshoe of water is set in a sprawling landscape of both craggy, desolate mountains and tourist-packed villages thick with B&B's and Victorian hotels. It is the bay that gives Garinish its sheltered situation in which the Gulf Stream and nearby subtropical climate — with a mean annual rainfall of 73 inches (the record is 100) — nurtures its fantastic plant growth.

GARINISH began its transformation to its current state about 70 years ago through the efforts of its former owner, Annan Bryce, and his architect and landscape designer, Harold Peto. In 1953

Mr. Bryce bequeathed it to the Irish people, and it is now managed as a public monument. Especially in high season, the main sound here is of cameras clicking. But the flawlessly manicured flower beds and richly bordered lawns amply compensate. The pathway starts alongside a garden with over 50 flowering species, among them acacia native to New South Wales, various camellias and clematis. The building materials are as exotic as the plants: Bath stone, and marble from Carrara as well as from the island of Skyros and from Connemara.

The surprises continue. Not far away a small, circular "Grecian temple," approached by an avenue of Italian cypress, overlooks a dark bit of sea and the Caha mountains. Beyond the temple one reaches the long glade known as Happy Valley, where exotic trees and shrubs from South America, Japan and Tasmania coexist happily with the indigenous rocks covered in lichen. Then comes the Jungle with its tree ferns from New Zealand, dawn redwoods and golden larch. Finally the Walled Garden offers an herbaceous walk in which asters and delphinium create a profusion of riches in front of the assorted clematis and roses climbing the walls behind them.

George Bernard Shaw is said to have worked on "Saint Joan" on this island when staying here as Mr. Bryce's guest in 1923. That such creativity — botanical or literary — could thrive on these few acres is just one of the miracles of the fertile islands off the coast of Cork. ■

On the road to the isles

Getting There

Information on the Sherkin Island and Cape Clear Island ferries, which run frequently from Baltimore harbor, can be obtained from the Bushes Bar Public House, (28) 20125. Fares from Baltimore to Sherkin Island are \$4.50 round trip, children \$1.50. Fares from Baltimore to Cape Clear Island are \$10.50, children \$5.25. On the Cape Clear ferry there is a family fare for two adults and two children under 14 of \$24.

However, when my wife, Katharine, and two young children and I arrived at the pier to take the ferry to Sherkin, Katharine took one look at the crammed boat and said, "No way!" Looking like a packed lifeboat, with people pushed against one another, seated or standing, it was not a boat we felt comfortable boarding. The captain insisted there were sufficient life preservers on board, but I could not see how they could be given out if needed. I located the ferry master, who found someone who would take the four of us across on our own in a boat almost the size of the ferry, and at a round-trip price not substantially different from the cost of tickets for the family on the scheduled boat. In the case of Clear Island, we took the ferry from Schull, and this was a larger — and far less densely packed — boat.

The Pubs

On these islands themselves, almost anyone will guide you anywhere. On Sherkin, the Jolly Roger Pub, (28)

20379, is open all year for food and drink and advice on accommodation in the area. Garrison House, (28) 20185, is open Easter, St. Patrick's Day weekend and from mid-May to the end of September.

On Clear, Paddy Burke's, (28) 39115, is open all year, with the peak months June, July and August. Cotter's, (28) 39102, which is open all year, offers bed and breakfast at \$15 a night. Club Chleire, (28) 39184, is open from May to the end of August and weekends only in the winter.

Hare Island

The phone number for John Desmond and Ellmary Fenton is (28) 38102. They are open from the beginning of May to the end of October. Dinner, consisting of a starter, main course, salad, homemade brown bread, dessert and filter coffee is \$19.50 per person; local farmhouse cheese is \$3.75 extra.

Boats can be arranged from Cunnamore, which is a landing slip a few miles from Skibbereen, or from Baltimore. Whether two or 15 people rent a boat, the cost both ways is about \$35. Dinner supposedly starts at 8 P.M., but don't be in any hurry, either to begin your meal or to get back to the mainland.

Garinish

Between March 1 and Oct. 31, ferries from Glengarriff run every 10 or 20 minutes from 9:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. The round-trip cost is \$6, \$3.50 for children, plus \$2 admission to the island. N. F. W