

Boston Herald

Irish adventures

Exploring New England's rich Celtic heritage

THE TRAVEL GUY By BILL BURKE | Published: March 15, 2012

Green beer in great quantities is strictly for amateurs. So escape the clichéd routines, embrace your inner Celt and gas up for a road trip to a few alternative Irish locations around New England.

The Irish came to Maine in the early 1800s, leaving their mark on the state's largest city — a story told through the 58 stops on the Maine Irish Heritage Trail. The tour winds through Portland, stopping at such sites as the grave of notable 19th century local entrepreneur Tom O'Neil (118 Center St.) and the boyhood home of celebrated director and six-time Academy Award winner John Ford (21 Sheridan St.).

The heart of Portland's Irish community is St. Dominic's Roman Catholic Church, which has stood at the corner of Gray and State streets for 170 years. When the Portland Diocese decided to close the church in 1998, Maine's Irish-American Club purchased the building and restored it. It now stands as the Irish Heritage Center, where visitors and members can take part in ceilis, Irish instrument lessons and language classes (207-780-0118 or maineirish.com).

Also included on the Maine Irish Heritage Trail is the Brian Boru Public House (57-59 Center St., Portland) — named for the last high king of Ireland. St. Patrick's Day festivities at the Brian Boru will kick off at 6 a.m. with a traditional Irish breakfast and, if you're feeling up to it, a pint of plain. Traditional music starts at 7:30 a.m., followed by poetry readings at 9:30 a.m. Pipers and traditional dancers will appear throughout the day and live music plays until closing.

The menu ranges from standard pub fare to slightly Boru-ized pub fare: Sure, there are nachos and wings, but consider the Boru chickpea veggie burger (spiced chickpeas with veggies, parmesan and bread crumbs for \$10), fish and chips (\$14), bangers and mash with Guinness-onion gravy (\$10).

The restaurant's distinctive red exterior is emblazoned with its name in black, and a giant image of the Guinness toucan on one side — making it hard to miss. Portland is just shy of a two-hour drive north of Boston, most of it straight up I-95 and the Maine Turnpike.

The Museum of Newport Irish History Interpretive Center in Newport, R.I., (648 Lower Thames St.) is a bit like Ireland itself — not exactly big, but it packs a wallop. Newport has deep Irish roots, especially in the 5th Ward, where the museum is located.

Mayor Patrick Boyle, who took office in 1895, is honored, as is the memorable visit of Irish political figure Eamon de Valera in 1919. If guests need any information about the wedding day of John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier at St. Mary's Catholic Church (12 William St., Newport), look no further than the archives of this small but historically packed museum (admission is by donation, newportirishhistory.org).

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More commonly associated with its French-Canadian roots, Celtic culture runs through the Northeast Kingdom. After all, it is the Green Mountain State. And it's home to RiRa (Gaelic for "fun and excitement"), an Irish restaurant/pub (123 Church St., Burlington, Vt.) built from materials salvaged in Ireland.

St. Patrick's Day fun at RiRa starts at 8 a.m. Saturday with music from the Vermont traditional Irish band Longford Row. The Six Nations Rugby Championship will be shown — and know that this match is no run-of-the-mill rugger. It's Ireland vs. England at 1 p.m. Live music from the X-Rays and Giants of Science will round out the evening.

RiRa describes its cuisine as "Irish Bistro." The dinner menu features fare with an Irish influence, including Kilbeggan salmon with crab, shrimp and brie stuffing, light lobster sherry sauce and winter squash saute (\$18.95), Jameson Roast Chicken (\$13.95) and Beef and Guinness Stew (\$13.95). Appetizers range from \$7.95 to \$11.95 (802-860-9401 or rira.com). Burlington is a 3A hour drive from Boston using I-93 to I-89.

Of course, Boston has an Irish community the rest of the country can envy, so if gas prices are keeping you close to home, look no further than a short drive to indulge in St. Patrick's Day observances.

The Irish Heritage Trail (Irishheritagetrail.com) explores the city and its surrounding neighborhoods and stretches across 300 years of Irish history. It kicks off at the Rose Kennedy Greenway near the waterfront and ends at Fenway Park, which was built by Irish immigrant Charles E. Logue. The trail is comprised of more than 70 landmarks, including the Irish Famine Memorial, which is visited annually by more than 3 million guests.

Several stops stretch out to neighborhoods known for their Irish lineage. Charlestown is home to several stops on the Heritage Trail, including Winthrop Square, which houses the Bunker Hill Tablets — containing the names of the Irish-born soldiers who fought at the 1775 battle. South Boston, in addition to its parade of note, is home to the Dorchester Heights Memorial (Thomas Park, G Street.) On St. Patrick's Day 1776, colonists fired their cannons from Dorchester Heights down at the unsuspecting British fleet, forcing it to evacuate. The trail is a self-guided tour, with maps available at the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau on Boston Common and at the Prudential Center.

Scituate was home to three men who made their fortunes from Irish mossing. The stories of Daniel Ward, the father of Irish mossing, Thomas Dwyer, the moss innovator and the last Irish moss king of Scituate, and Lucien Rousseau (a name that sounds suspiciously less than Celtic) can be heard and experienced at the Maritime and Irish Mossing Museum (301 Driftway, Scituate).

Irish moss is commonly used as a thickening agent in food items around the world and is found on the rocky coast of Europe and North America. The museum, housed in the 1739 residence of Capt. Benjamin James, allows guests to get up close to the hand tools that aided these men in harvesting the red algae just off the Massachusetts coast. Wooden dories, creels and rakes illustrate the manual labor that went into working the rocky sea floor. (Admission: \$4 for adults, \$3 for seniors and free for anyone under 18; 781-545-1083 or scituatehistoricalsociety.com.)

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GREEN SCENE: Vermont's RiRa, above, was built with material salvaged from Ireland. Union Park statues honor Mayor James Michael Curley.

GRAND SLAM: Irish immigrant Charles E. Logue built Fenway Park.