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By Declan Cashin

CORK, IRELAND

- ✦ **POPULATION** 119,418 (CITY), 361,877 (COUNTY)
- ✦ **FOREIGN VISITORS PER YEAR** 204,300
- ✦ **LANGUAGE** ENGLISH, WITH A STRONG MUSICAL LILT
- ✦ **UNIT OF CURRENCY** EURO (€)
- ✦ **COST INDEX** PINT OF BEER €4.50 (US\$6), MIDRANGE HOTEL DOUBLE €60–100 (US\$80–132), DORM €15–50 (US\$20–66), SHORT TAXI RIDE €8 (US\$11), ADMISSION TO LIVE-MUSIC GIG €10 (US\$13)

FOUR MINUTES TILL BEER O'CLOCK, CORK



RICHARD CUMMINS » LPI

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Ireland's second city has always had an unshakeable self-confidence and innate sense of pride, despite, or perhaps because of its (inaccurate) perception as Dublin's pushy, clothes-borrowing, style-imitating younger sister. The stock of the so-called 'Rebel County' has been on the rise even more since it was named the European Capital of Culture in 2005: modern glass-and-steel offices and apartment buildings adorn the banks of the River Lee; new galleries, arts festivals, bars and shops have added to the city's cache; and restaurants and local food producers have come into their own to make Cork a foodie paradise.

TOWN & COUNTRY

While Cork has some of Ireland's most traditional and historical towns and villages dotted along its vast harbour and throughout its countryside, its city centre crackles with youthful energy. That's thanks in large part to award-winning University College Cork (UCC), which each year pumps out new graduates – and therefore new life, enthusiasm and ideas – into the city. The cumulative effect of all these influences means Cork is at the top of its game right now: sophisticated, vibrant and diverse, while still retaining its friendliness, relaxed charm and quick-fire wit.

DEFINING EXPERIENCES

✦ Eat, drink and be merry! Start the day off with breakfast in the Farmgate Café located in the legendary English Market, picking up lunch to eat outdoors in Bishop Lucey Park across the road. Then make your way over to the Franciscan Well Brewery for a pint of Rebel Red or Shandon Stout, followed by a live gig in Fred Zeppelins on Parliament St and finish with a bag of chips from Lennox's on Bandon Rd.

✦ Embrace tradition by ringing the Shandon Bells in St Anne's Church, then hop in a taxi to Blarney Castle to kiss the Blarney Stone, before ending the day with a trip to the coastal fishing town of Cobh in Cork harbour, the last port of call for the *Titanic* and home to the 'Deck of Cards' – probably the steepest hill in Ireland.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

✦ Corkonians are cock-a-hoop that their county will have a vessel taking part in the 10-month Clipper Round the World Yacht Race, which starts in autumn 2009. The city will also serve as a host port in June 2010 after the final Atlantic crossing. See www.clipperroundtheworld.com.

✦ Gourmands take note that the Taste of Cork Festival is pencilled in for 25–27 June 2010 (as part of the Midsummer Festival) where 15 of the county's most decorated restaurants and chefs will dish up bite-sized signature dishes.

CLASSIC RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE

Irish food critics have long tipped Café Paradiso for an elusive Michelin Star over the past 16 years, but its reputation is already so immense locally and nationally that any further accolades would be akin to nominating Meryl Streep for yet *another* Oscar. It's a vegetarian menu the whole way, but head chef Dennis Cotter infuses each dish with such imagination and flair that carnivores are always more than happy to go native. There's a strong emphasis on locally sourced vegetables and cheeses, with guest rooms available so that you then be conveniently rolled upstairs to your lodgings after an epic three-course dinner.

MOST BIZARRE LOCAL DELICACY

Drisheen: a type of pudding made from sheep's intestines filled with meal and sheep's blood that is often paired with tripe. Not as 'offal' as it sounds, trust me.

BEST SHOPPING

Nothing beats strolling around Grand Parade and Patrick St, wandering off down all its little side streets, alleys and laneways. Independent retailers are finding it tough in this economic climate but there are still plenty of places offering vintage clothes, handmade crafts and jewellery, secondhand music and books (shout out to Vibes and Scribes on hilly Bridge St) and the best hot chocolate in the city in O'Conaills on Church St.

CLASSIC PLACE TO STAY

It may be located in the heart of the swish financial sector of the South Mall, but the Imperial is a grand Georgian building dating back to 1813, famous for being the last place that Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins slept before his death in 1922. Newly refurbished with an Irish-Mediterranean fusion restaurant and the all-important health spa (how did travellers ever make do without them?).



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