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When Irish 'Oys' Are Smiling ...

Dublin's rich tradition includes whiskeys that Tevye would tip his cap to
November 01, 2007

Elyse Glickman

Jewish Exponent Feature

More than any other European capital, Ireland's Dublin has plunged headfirst into the 21st century. Though the city has a famously dramatic past with more than its fair share of politics, conflicts and religious struggles, today's Dublin is more about thriving than surviving, thanks to its booming economy and growing reputation as a center of style, innovation and global culture.

Whether you choose a gorgeously refurbished grand hotel (the Shelbourne) at the foot of the lush St. Stephen's Green, a snazzy boutique hotel/spa with an Asian sensibility (La Stampa) or a dreamy modern oasis of fine living tucked away in a luxurious residential neighborhood (the Dylan), one thing you will notice (in addition to their trendy restaurants and elaborate cocktail menus) is that they are all staffed with young, energetic people from around the world (especially Eastern Europe, Spain, Italy and Southeast Asia).

These folks are as service-driven as they are sharp, and reflect how image-conscious the city has become.

The theme flows right into the city center, and even into the highly publicized Grafton Street and Temple Bar areas, where you are almost more likely to find superb foodie-concept and ethnic restaurants (such as the stylish Thai-Vietnamese eatery Saba and the sleek Clarendon, recommendations of top Irish fashion designer Nicky Wallace) than "typical" Irish fare, like corned beef and cabbage, or fish and chips.

Interestingly enough, there are loads of bagel shops around the city center as well, revealing the fact that Jewish



inside the Jewish Museum

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culture has a presence in Dublin's current ethnic makeup, as does the memory of Ben and father Robert Briscoe -- Jews who both served as Lord Mayor of Dublin and resided during their terms at the Mansion House, across Dawson Street from La Stampa and around the corner from the Shelbourne.

Bagels at Bretzel

However, ask any Dubliner in the know, and he or she will point you toward the Bretzel (1a Lennox St.; www.thebretzel.ie) in the Portobello neighborhood, once the center of Dublin's Jewish community. Since 1870, the Bretzel's certified kosher kitchens have produced bagels, ryes, challahs and simple sweet pastries that have not only drawn loyal patrons back from their suburban homes and urban offices, but also food-lovers from all over the city.

My savvy local Dubliner guide Vivian Igoe (a noted academic who has written about the life of James Joyce, in addition to a literary guide to Dublin and a book on Dublin's historic cemeteries, including the Jewish plot) spirited me to the most perfect of bagels, as well as to the "birthplace" of Joyce's legendary Leopold Bloom character.

However, the most inspired living person she introduced me to was Raphael Siev, curator of the Irish Jewish Museum (3/4 Walworth Road), who is not only the keeper of this cultural institution but also a steadfast keeper of the Jewish community's flame.

While the Jewish population of Dublin has decreased in recent decades, Siev points out that the community is very much alive and well, as he hands me recent snapshots of children from the local Jewish elementary school.

Opened in June 1985 -- with former Dubliner and Israeli President Chaim Herzog presiding -- the museum in its current state is a humble presence occupying the community's former synagogue (built in 1917, the services stopped in 1999).

The first floor, once the community room for meetings and youth-group gatherings, is filled to the brim with display cases with artifacts documenting Dublin's chief rabbis, key political and literary figures, and other institutions important to the city's and Irish nation's history. To the side of the display cases is a full-scale rendering of a traditional Irish/Jewish kitchen.

Upstairs, the synagogue's main room still rings of spirituality and history, thanks in part to the contributions of American businessman Harold Smerling. In the late 1980s, Smerling -- inspired by the museum and Siev's efforts -- donated the money and resources to transform the former Ladies' Gallery into a continuation of the exhibit. The space is now filled with artifacts donated by Holocaust survivors and also incorporates a variety of items used on various Jewish holidays, during key life events such as birth and marriage, and as part of everyday Jewish living.



A Dublin castle



A taste of Bretzel

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It is the narration of Raphael Siev, however, that brings the objects, and the stories behind them, to life. And once all there is to say has been said about what's on display, Siev will keep the discussion going with his current passion and project -- the expansion of the museum that will fill out the rest of its city block.

"We in Ireland have always been small, never wealthy, but we have contributed to world Jewry, helping the State of Israel, keeping the Jewish flag flying, and it would be negligence on our part, if we just allowed this small but important piece of legacy to be forgotten," stresses Siev.

While the verdant countryside is Ireland's other big draw, the good news is you do not have to travel far from Dublin's city center to enjoy a lavish country/spa/golf getaway at the K Club in County Kildare. Connoisseurs, meanwhile, owe it to themselves to add the John Locke Distillery in Kilbeggan, County Westmeath, to their list of spirit-based tours (the other hot spots being Guinness Brewery and the Old Jamison Distillery), owned and operated by Cooley Distillery PLC.

While this distillery (originally established in 1757) is the oldest working whiskey facility in Ireland, it is also the only one producing kosher whiskeys, and has a restaurant serving some of the best fish and chips you could sink your teeth into.

While the city has famously become more expensive -- perhaps a natural part of the new booming economy -- the warmth of the people, the quality of the food, the vast assortment of museums (many of them free or with low admission prices), the theater scene and even the shopping (Fran & Jane, up the road from Saba, is a sure bet for truly local style), Dublin is one of the best travel "bargains" there is.

For information on Dublin and the rest of Ireland, call 1-800-223-6470 or visit: www.discoverireland.com.

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