

Killarney Reeks Trail, May

In early May 2011, I needed a break from the Central European 'high summer' and headed off to Ireland's pleasant island climate to ride the Killarney Reeks Trail for Pegasus. Our long-standing local partner has been organising the 7-day trail in County Kerry for many years. I travelled first to Killarney, where the stables are located. The town itself is a starting point for many tourists travelling the Ring of Kerry scenic route, and it charmed me straight away with its lovely, pretty town centre full of traditional pubs and the beautiful cathedral.



I'm warmly welcomed at the stables by Aoife and get a chance to take in my first impressions. Aoife and her family are true-blue Irish and horse experts through and through, having built up the family business over the decades. They currently own around 160 horses, of which about 60 are used as trail horses. Most of them spend their free time in the surrounding paddocks, but we can already spot a few horses in the stables. It's a colourful, mixed herd consisting mainly of Irish breeds such as Cobs, Connemaras, Irish Draughts and Clydesdales. At first glance of some of the more powerful specimens, a few of my fellow riders begin to wonder whether they'll be spirited enough for a few brisk gallops. However, these concerns are soon to vanish. After a tour and a brief chat about my riding experience and my choice of horse, I check into the hotel – a very

comfortable city hotel in the centre with a large room and a jacuzzi bath, which I try out straight away.

The next morning at breakfast, I meet my fellow riders – easily recognisable by their riding gear! We're a colourful mix of people from Germany, Canada, the USA and France. I'm particularly delighted to see some familiar faces again, whom I met on a previous riding tour in Africa. After a hearty Full Irish Breakfast, we're driven to the starting point of the riding tour, where our horses are already waiting for us. I'm assigned Ben, a big black horse, who I take an instant liking to. Before we set off, the whisky bottle is passed round once more and we ride eagerly into the green hills.

Everything looks exactly as you'd expect from a Butter advert. Lush green hills, blue lakes and sheep everywhere. As everyone knows, it rains quite often in Ireland, but that's precisely why the island is so green – more so than anywhere else I've ever seen.



We ride through very mountainous countryside. This area is home to Ireland's highest mountains (up to 1,000 metres). After a steep climb, we find ourselves in the middle of 'Windy Gap', where the wind literally whips round our ears. Every day at lunchtime, we're greeted by the boss, Donie, in person, driving the picnic van.

There's everything you need to make your own sandwich to your heart's content – plus fruit, cake and biscuits. Some of us seem to have already fully adapted to Irish customs and ask for a dash of whisky in our tea or coffee. Well fortified, we and the horses enjoy a few quiet minutes whilst Donie proudly shows us the latest addition to his horse family. A newborn colt is playing with the other foals and their mothers in the paddock next door. We are the first people he has ever seen.

In the afternoon, we ride past Lake Coomasaharn and through the Irish bog. Along the way, piles of freshly cut peat are stacked high.

After a lovely first day's ride, we reach the stables, where we leave our horses and are driven to our hotel. After just one day, we're all absolutely thrilled with our four-legged companions and are looking forward to the rides ahead.

We spend the next two nights in the tranquil fishing village of Glenbeigh. In the pub, our (predominantly) female riding group quickly becomes the centre of attention, and we enjoy a thoroughly entertaining evening with the locals, getting to know some interesting pub characters.

The very next day, an absolute highlight is on the programme: the beach ride! After a short ride, we reach Glenbeigh beach – a long stretch of firm sand with not a soul in sight. Every rider's dream. The sun is also on our side, spoiling us with its rays. We enjoy plenty of gallops, and one of my fellow riders even has a little involuntary dip, thanks to her horse's love of a swim.



The week flies by in the blink of an eye. We get to know Kerry from every angle – riding over hills, past lakes, through vast fields and woods, along the coast and through small villages. It's not uncommon for us to become the attraction ourselves and be photographed by other enthusiastic tourists.

Our guide Lena keeps telling us fascinating facts about the land and its history. We often see the ruins of old houses, some of which date back to the Great Famine of the mid-19th century, when 1 million Irish people died and 2 million emigrated. But countless medieval castles and Celtic structures can also be found all over Ireland. After our first few days' riding in the mountains around Killarney and the Glenbeigh area, we spend our final stages of the ride exploring the surroundings of the coastal village of Waterville, where Charlie Chaplin used to spend his holidays regularly.

The weather in Ireland is just as varied as the landscape. Although it is unusually chilly for May, we are still lucky and spared from heavy rain. It only pours on our final day of riding, but this does nothing to dampen our spirits, as we get soaked from head to toe anyway during our final gallop through the waves. At full speed through the waves – what a magnificent finale! Happy and content, we bring our riding tour to a close and, with a heavy heart, say goodbye to the horses we've grown so fond of, who can now look forward to a lush green meadow. We drive back to Killarney, where we round off this wonderful week in the pub with a Guinness and some live Irish music.

On the day of my departure, I'm treated to a special highlight that's unfortunately not usually included in the standard itinerary: the Queen herself happens to be at Cork Airport at the same time as me, providing the opportunity for a few extra unforgettable photos!

Denise

For full details on the Killarney Reeks Trail, visit:
<http://www.equitour.com/kil008.htm>