

News Review

Argue, gush, convince: sample pitches for

We are inviting you to write 500 words on what you think is Ireland's most liveable location. Here's what some people we know wrote about their favourite places

CO MEATH 'Having endured the wind, the frost and the mud, the reward is now'

For all the urbanites who lament their desire to engage with nature, very few actually move to the country. Yes, there are those lavish magazine articles featuring wealthy couples who up sticks to restore some decaying mansion on 500 hectares.

For us ordinary earners, though, having a rural address may not mean we live in the countryside. It may mean living in a badly designed estate on the outskirts of a small rural town, now bypassed by miles of motorways and enough roundabouts to guarantee hours of confusion.

And for every city type who moves to the countryside in pursuit of a

dream, hundreds if not thousands of rural natives announce an intention of moving to the city – and they do. Nothing would induce me to do so.

The "real", ever-shrinking countryside still experiences utter darkness and silence, with no hint of roaring traffic. Nothing compares with the mist slowly lifting off the river or early-morning birdsong ending the night. However crazy it sounds, the only way to fully enjoy the upheaval of a storm is from within a farm outbuilding.

The winters here are harsh: the mud turns to glue, the kitchen smells of damp horse blankets and there seems in late November no end to the darkness that is so appealing on a balmy June night.

Having endured the cold, the wind, the frost and all that mud, the reward

is now: watching the leaves return, the hedges flesh out, the fields recover. No matter how many hares bound across your path, each new sighting remains as exciting as the first. It is the same with the owls. Badgers and foxes make regular guest appearances, as does an otter. It is surprising how much closer you can get, if you are quiet enough, to deer on horseback.

A trio of birds of prey soar high across our fields. My small wooded area is alive, particularly at night. The dogs can bark without upsetting any neighbours, and although country dogs have no more freedom than their city cousins, they have a wider range of activities and sensations and are never bored.

There is a privilege about having my horses with me; this

couldn't be if I lived in the city. Early morning from about mid-March to September is a joy.

Whatever about the ugly modern developments, rural Ireland remains well marked by traces of ancient, far more sophisticated settlement; the archaeology of Co Meath is among the richest inventories in the State. Royal Tara endures despite the idiot planning.

It is the county of Newgrange – my home overlooks it – and Knowth, Loughcrew and Fourknocks and Bective, Trim Castle and the theatre of the Battle of the Boyne.

True, Meath lacks the majesty of a dramatic coastline, and there are no mountains, which I miss as much as I miss the sea. But then few places are completely perfect. Almost is close enough. **Eileen Battersby**



Newgrange: Co Meath's archaeology is among the richest in the State. Royal Tara endures despite the planning. Photograph: Brian Morrison/Tourism Ireland

STONEBATTER, DUBLIN 7 On a sunny day in the Batter, the residents come out to play

Stonebatter is, according to *Redrawing Dublin*, the county's most densely populated area. It has no parks or green spaces; 95 per cent of the ground you walk on is concrete or asphalt. By today's living standards, the homes in Stonebatter – terraced houses or bungalows packed on to labyrinthine streets – would not pass planning muster. They are



On your doorstep: a Batter street festival. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

too close and too small; few have gardens – or even yards in which to store next week's refuse.

But on a sunny day in the Batter, the residents come out to play. Deckchairs appear in front of houses as if from nowhere, and families sit outside smoking, drinking tea or gently admonishing the neighbours' children until the sun goes down.

In summertime, Billy Edwards's rose garden, tucked at the bottom of Oxmantown Road, erupts with multicoloured blooms; Phoenix Park, 10 minutes' walk from any Stonebatter address, is full of Irish and non-Irish, families and non-families, runners, walkers and sun-worshippers.

Then there are the places that are as much a part of

Stonebatter as the red-brick facades of the houses themselves: Maureen's, where its namesake owner sits behind her counter, day in and day out; Lilliput Stores, with its array of fast-selling sandwiches and soups; L. Mulligan Grocer, the gastropub with the plentiful supply of board games; Top to Toe, the beauty salon on Aughrim Street with the neon sign; and Thunders, the bakery on Prussia Street that does Dublin's best iced log, but "only every second week".

Blow-ins like myself might expect the long-time residents – old Dublin folks, the likes of whom empty the contents of their dinner plates on to the road for the birds and think nothing of hammering on your window to check if it's more securely fixed than their own – to be somewhat unhappy about this Stonebatter takeover.

On the contrary: within days of moving in, they knew my name, my origins, my job – it wouldn't be surprising if they had memorised my date of birth and PPS number.

The local newsgent regularly informs me of my presence in the newspaper, in the style of someone who expects a reaction; sometimes, when feeling charitable, I feign ecstatic surprise. Other times, I am in my pyjamas and eager to get home before someone spots me.

Yes, despite the fact that I grew up in Straffan, Co Kildare, I consider Stonebatter home. And it's not the house: it's my

neighbour, who says hello when I cycle up the road at night; it's Freddie, the newsgent, who calls me young lady and is very defensive about the Tesco/newsgent price difference; it's ice creams in the park and cold beers in Mulligan's beer garden and roses in summer and the city on my doorstep. That's home.

Rosemary Mac Cabe

BALLAGHADERREEN, CO ROSCOMMON 'Many neighbours are in their mid-90s. See Ballagh and live forever'

That dreaded question again. "Are you Patsy McGarry?" As I prepared once more to explain that I didn't compile the Ferns, Ryan, Murphy or Cloyne reports, the lady responded to my timid "yes" by saying that her name was Rosemary and that she was a Ward who grew up in Ballaghaderreen. I changed, changed utterly.

Her father was a bank manager in the town, and her late mother used say their move there was the best the family ever made. It was such a great place to raise a family. It was such a great place to grow up. Sing it, Rosemary.

She loved the town. Indeed she hopes to be there later in April for Annie Towey's 96th birthday. Happy birthday, Mrs Towey. Rosemary marvelled that so many neighbours on Main Street were all now in their mid-90s. Con Moynihan, next door to Mrs Towey, Sonny Coen, Mrs Sharkey.

See Ballagh and live forever. On December 7th my own family will be 50 years there. We crossed galaxies from Mullen, a townland 10km to the east, in Co Roscommon, where McGarrys had lived since before there was time. Mullen has almost entirely disappeared beneath battalions of all-conquering conifers.

My parents moved to Ballaghaderreen because of education. Then, as now, it had a reputation for great schools. With six of us and another to come, schools

were a major issue then. For us kids it was also a great place to grow up and, for our parents, a great place to raise the family. Then, as now, that was a community effort. Then, as now, crime was minimal and petty. Safe for families. Safe for everyone. Housing then too was affordable, the quality of life good and the people decent.

Ballagh still ticks all those boxes. Its primary school has an excellent reputation. (Of course! The principal is my sister Sinéad Mangan.) St Nathy's College recently celebrated a tradition of providing 200 years of second-level education, a history with few equals for longevity or quality elsewhere in Ireland.

The town has state-of-the-art Gaelic and soccer pitches, a new rugby club, a very successful cricket club and some of the best coarse fishing in the west. It also has a busy nine-hole golf course. Walks are plentiful and scenic, with no traffic.

It also has a very active traditional music scene, and, for those into history, there's more than 4,000 years of lore locally. And there's Clarke's pub, with some of the best steaks (seriously) in Ireland at Durkin's, on the Square. A friend who retired to Ballaghaderreen in recent years after a lifetime in the UK is so busily involved with local activities she just exudes contentment.

The town is also centrally located, about 50km from Castlebar, Sligo and Carrick-on-Shannon, with their theatres and restaurants. The only drawback is unemployment, meaning many young people have to emigrate.

But, for those who stay, Ballagh is the undiscovered country from which no traveller really wants to return.

Patsy McGarry



Beautiful Ballagh: looking out near the town. Photograph: Frank Miller



In perfect harmony: Philip King overlooking Clogher Strand on the Dingle Peninsula. Photograph: Don MacMonagle

DINGLE, CO KERRY 'Many of the key things that enrich life are present'

I first went to Dingle in 1966, to learn Irish. I stayed under the foot of Mount Eagle, in a little house and I brought a record player and one single: *See Emily Play*, by Pink Floyd. Whatever happened, I fell in love with the place, with the sound of the language, with the physical beauty, with the people; with the convivial welcome. And I kept going there.

At that time, I was heavily influenced by Sean Ó Riordáin, John McGahern, and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Bliain ag Fás*. I did Irish as part of my degree in Cork and to come here, to go west, young man, was for me like discovering the holy grail. I loved that the native language was still on people's lips, and with such

wonderful cadence.

Later, I went on an enforced exile to Dublin for 25 years but I continued to visit and to develop my relationship with Dingle. And then, 15-16 years ago and with a young family, Nuala and I decided we would stay here. It was the best decision of my life. The seeds that had been sown in 1966 blossomed and grew. Intellectually, romantically and personally I had been drawn to this inspirational place.

It has a huge literary tradition, a great musical tradition, the sporting thing, and it has the food. Many of the key things that enrich life are present. And the music and all those other aspects are informed by the place itself. I like that there is just one school there, where everybody goes. And I like the intelligence and quick-wittedness of the people.

The physicality of the Dingle peninsula is breathtaking. It sits at the

edge of the known world. I love the way the light changes. I love the isolation of it. I love the way the seasons change and the population with it. At other times of year, it's a very cosmopolitan place. And at all times it is a microcosm of Ireland in 2012, containing so many of the concerns that affect our cities and towns: the empty houses, the emigration, the fear that you won't be able to field a football team this year.

Yet there is something in the spirit of this place that is very empowering in this age of clamour.

Now lots of artists and musicians come here to perform in [the TV show] *Other Voices*. Many are city dwellers and many don't even know where they are, yet they often stay there is something powerful here.

The best place in Ireland? It's the best place in the world to live.

Philip King



Quay Street: some of the best pubs in the world; and (below) Conor Pope. Main photograph: Joe O'Shaughnessy

GALWAY CITY 'It is a magical combination of urban and rural, artistic and earthy'

Everyone loves Galway. Even as a young child carelessly burrowing into John Joe Melody's carefully constructed haystacks in the field behind our small house on the Dublin road leading into the city I knew I was lucky to come from this place. It was, after all, where other people wanted to come on their holidays to ride bumper cars and play bingo in Salthill.

But Galway was never just for holidays. It is quite possibly the only place outside their home where tribal folk from Cork and Dublin, with all their ridiculously misplaced geographical superiority, would be glad to live, because it is better than everywhere else. And everyone knows it.

It is a magical combination of urban and rural, artistic and earthy. Salmon leap in the clear waters of the Corrib as it rages its way through the city.

Galway is the gateway to the rugged wilderness of Connemara and a short hop across the bay to the Aran Islands. It has a city centre small enough to cross on foot in less than 10

minutes yet busy enough to keep you distracted for days on end. It is just the right size to make the making of definite plans unnecessary because you will inevitably bump into people you know at some point on a night out.

Some of the best pubs in the world are to be found on the Quay Street-Dominic Street axis, whether you're looking for a frenetic trad session or the best pint of stout outside St James's Gate. The city is also home to the best fish and chips in the country, and anyone who places Burdocks or Beshoffs in the top spot has clearly never been to McDonagh's.

A steady stream of tourists lends the city a cosmopolitan air and keeps it buzzing year round while the students who are so much part of the fabric of the city, because of the central location of the university, give the place a uniquely youthful vibe.

It has stamped a much greater cultural footprint on the nation and the world at large than its small size would suggest, with Druid Theatre Company and Macnas finding enormous success on the international stage and the arts festival serving as a template for similar events all over the globe.

The absence of any fee-paying secondary schools means it has sidestepped the educational elitism that bedevils Cork and Dublin, and asking a Galway person where they went to school means just that and is not an inquiry into their social status.

The new motorway, which was completed just minutes before the bubble burst and the troika came to town, brought the capital closer: Galway is now little more than two hours from Dublin. The elephants jostling for position in the room are the woolly jumper, the rain and the sense of inevitable superiority that comes from being the best, but it is still impossible not to love Galway.

Conor Pope



The Best Place to Live in Ireland



The competition 'The Irish Times' is on the hunt for Ireland's nicest town, suburb, city, village or other area

The place the judges deem most liveable will be announced in early summer. 'The Irish Times' will reward the winning neighbourhood with a plaque, a feature in the paper and a film on our website.

