

# Dazzling spot for the clan to gather

**Bridget Martin visits the remote little town of Baltimore, in Ireland's far southwest, and finds it jam-packed with O'Driscolls**

**'H**OW do I introduce you?" I ask my new acquaintance, Rosaleen. My husband is approaching and I am stumped. What is the correct term of address for the wife of a chieftain? "Sure, I'm just the one who sleeps with the chieftain," Rosaleen replies, and gives out a bellow of laughter.

We are standing, Guinneses in hand, outside Bushe's Bar, overlooking the harbour of Baltimore. The original Baltimore, that is, in County Cork in southwest Ireland. And the place is crowded out with O'Driscolls.

It is the last weekend in June and time for the traditional gathering of the O'Driscoll clan. This is their 19th get-together, and about 150 O'Driscolls have converged here from Australia, America and the far-flung corners of Ireland and the UK.

"So, do you live up there?" I ask, indicating the severe but obviously inhabited 16th century O'Driscoll castle, overlooking the harbour and the festive crowds. The O'Driscoll family has dominated the area for centuries, and left castles dotted all over the landscape.

"No." The answer comes from the chieftain himself. He is the only man wearing a shirt and tie, on top of which lies the ceremonial chain of office. "The McCarthys have that now. And we haven't always got on with the McCarthys." From the look on his face, I can tell this is an understatement.

Apparently the McCarthy family bought the castle a few years ago. To add insult to injury, during the weekend they fly the O'Driscoll flag, but with the McCarthy colours.

Learning that I am from Australia, Rosaleen drags me over to meet an O'Driscoll from Brisbane. This is Neil's third O'Driscoll reunion and he now travels the world once a year visiting other clan members.

Baltimore has become trendy in recent years. Fastnet Island, focus of the annual yacht race from the Isle of Wight in England, is offshore. For sailors from Britain and Europe, it is a favourite destination. As a result, the town has a cosmopolitan glaze over its essentially Irish character. During our stay, McCarthy's Bar was transformed by its new French owner into The Waterfront.

Seafaring visitors were not always so welcome. On June 20, 1631, pirates from north Africa sailed into the harbour and captured more than 100 people who were taken back as slaves. The remaining inhabitants



**FEAST DAY:** The O'Driscoll castle overlooks the O'Driscoll gathering in Baltimore town square; ancient standing stones at Cloch na Gealluna

## BALTIMORE

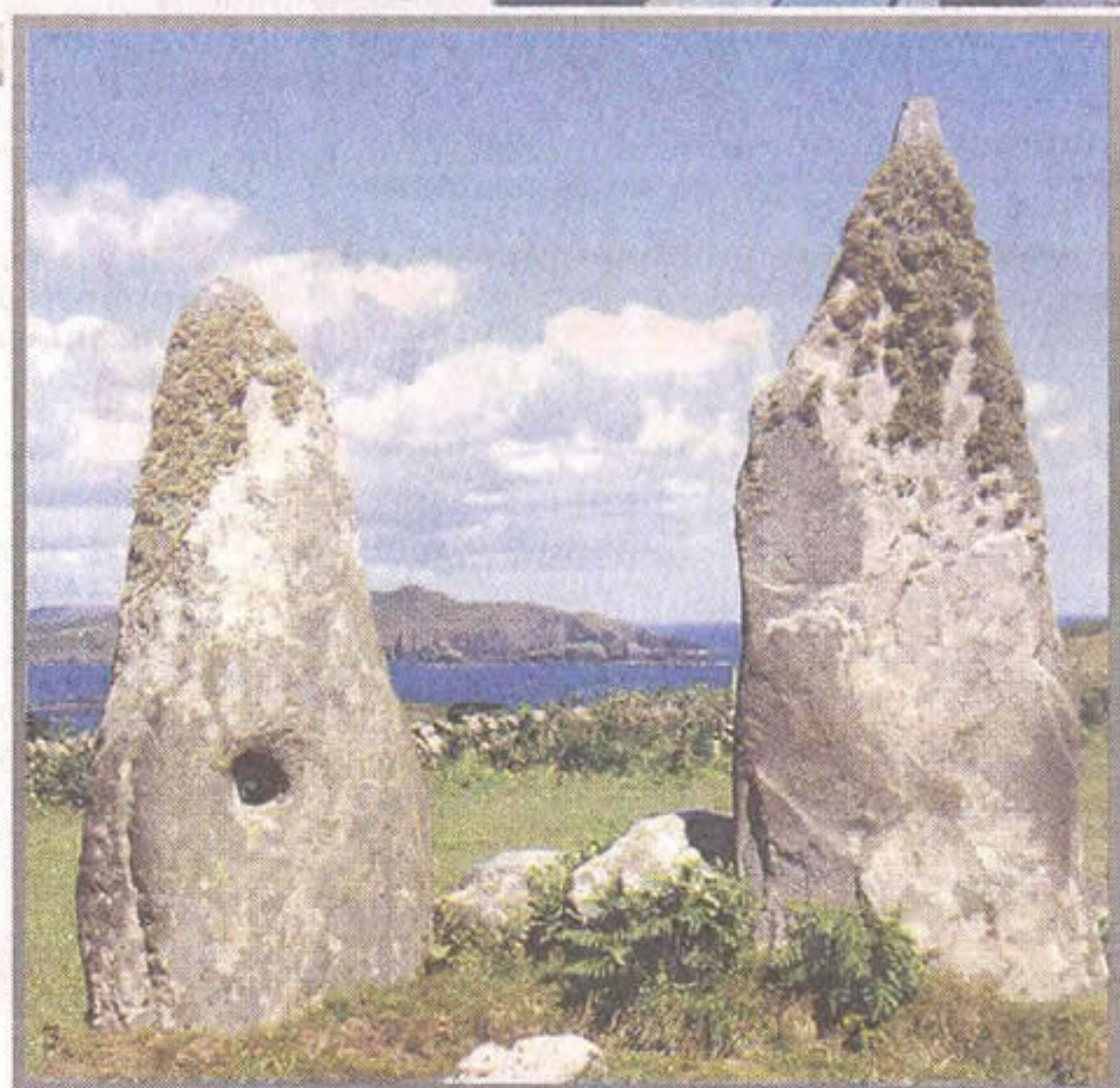


**GETTING THERE:** Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) has regular connections to Cork from London Stanstead. Baltimore is 100km from Cork.

**ACTIVITIES:** Baltimore has sailing clubs and schools and two diving schools. It is also a centre for deep-sea angling as well as shore, lake and river fishing.

**EATING:** Restaurants in the town, frequented by well-heeled yachties and occasional celebrities, rival those in London in standard — and prices.

**MORE INFORMATION:** [www.ireland.travel.ie](http://www.ireland.travel.ie), [www.baltimore-ireland.com](http://www.baltimore-ireland.com)



moved inland, founding the town of Skibbereen as a safe haven.

On a day so windy the clouds are blown clean out of the sky, we climb up to the Baltimore Beacon, just out of town. This white-washed cone is among a series of signal towers erected along the coast by the English in the 19th century, when they feared a European invasion through the "back door" of Ireland.

The scene is dazzling. Sheer cliffs drop to the Atlantic Ocean.

A seal surfaces in the waves below. Far out to sea, the leading boats in the Round-Ireland yacht race appear. Closer to shore, a

fisherman in a small dingy is trawling for mackerel.

The southwest coast of Ireland is a ragged collection of peninsulas, drowned valleys and islands. Although Baltimore is the most southwesterly town, Mizen Head, on the next main peninsula, is the country's most southwesterly point.

High fences ensure that visitors to the lighthouse on Mizen Head are not blown off the cliffs into the wild Atlantic below. Dramatic views of tortured cliffs and crashing surf reward those willing to withstand a wind-blasting.

Ferries leave from Baltimore for the 40-minute trip to Cape

Clear Island. This is a Gaeltacht area, where the locals speak the Irish language in preference to English. School students, keen to brush up on this compulsory subject, come in groups to be billeted with local families.

Cape Clear is a laidback sort of place — "Sure, the only time out here is the ferry times." We have fallen into conversation with a man at the side of the road. Somehow, here, it's unthinkable to pass without a chat.

We wander along the road and cross a field to reach the wedding stones at Cloch na Gealluna.

Their origins and meaning are vague — they have been there for

thousands of years — but it is known that the hole carved in one used to play a role in island marriage ceremonies.

Standing stones, relics of ancient communities, are thick on the ground around Baltimore. The Drombeg stone circle is one of over 100 dotting the countryside of West Cork. A well and pit (fulacht fiadh) nearby are believed to have been used in ancient times to cook animals.

Could it have been a venue for O'Driscoll get-togethers? Clearly, this lonely spot was once host to feasting crowds not so different from those in Baltimore. People of all ages just love a party.