

Overflow of the clan

You don't have to be an O'Driscoll to join in the annual clan celebrations in Baltimore, as **Stella Martin** discovers.

'How do I introduce you?" I ask my new acquaintance, Rosaleen. My husband is approaching and I am stumped. What is the correct form of address for the wife of a chieftain?

"Sure, I'm just the one who sleeps with the chieftain," Rosaleen replies with a bellow of laughter.

We are standing, Guinnesses in hand, outside Bushe's Bar, overlooking the harbour of Baltimore. The original Baltimore, that is, in County Cork in south-west Ireland. And the place is crowded out by O'Driscolls.

It is the last weekend in June and time for the traditional gathering of the O'Driscoll clan. This is the 19th get-together and about 150 of the clan have converged here from Australia, America and the far-flung corners of Ireland and Britain. I'm not an O'Driscoll, or even married to one. But it's a great excuse for a party.

"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. He is the only man wearing a shirt and tie, on top of which hangs 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 previously. 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 reunion and he now travels the world once a year visiting other members of his clan. Baltimore has become trendy in recent years. Fastnet Island, focus of the annual yacht race from the Isle of Wight near England, is just offshore. It is a favourite destination for sailors from around Britain and the rest of Europe.

As a result, the town has a cosmopolitan glaze over its essentially Irish character. In 2004, McCarthy's Bar was transformed by its new French owner into The Waterfront. Seafaring visitors were not always so welcome. In 1631, pirates from North Africa sailed into the harbour and captured more than 100 people, who were taken back as slaves. The remaining inhabitants 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 a short distance out of town. This whitewashed cone is one of a series of signal towers erected along the coast by the English in the 19th cen-



Destination Baltimore, Ireland

GETTING THERE

Ryanair (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 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 is the official Irish tourist board site but look at Baltimore's site, www.baltimore-ireland.com, which has a link to the O'Driscoll festival.

Everything is relative ... (clockwise from right) these ancient stones, called Man and Wife, were used in wedding rituals on Cape Clear Island; the Drombeg stone circle; the town of Skibbereen; and three of the Five Fingers have been standing for 5000 years. Photos: Bridget Martin



tury when they feared a European invasion of their country through the "back door" of Ireland.

The scene is dazzling. In bright summer sunshine, sheer cliffs drop down to the Atlantic Ocean. A seal surfaces in the waves below us. Far out to sea, the leading contestants in the Round Ireland yacht race appear. Closer to shore, a fisherman in a small dinghy is trawling for mackerel.

The south-west coast of Ireland is a ragged collection of peninsulas, drowned valleys and numer-

ous islands. Although Baltimore is Ireland's most south-westerly town, Mizen Head, on the next main peninsula, is the most south-westerly point of the island. High fences ensure visitors to the lighthouse on Mizen Head are not blown off the cliffs into the wild Atlantic Ocean below; dramatic views of tortured rock 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 laid-back 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. It's that sort of place. Somehow, here, it would be unthinkable to pass without a chat.

We wander along the road and cross a field to the wedding stones at Cloch

na Geallona. Their origins and meaning are vague, they have been there for thousands of years, but it's known that the hole carved in one used to play a role in marriage ceremonies. Standing stones are thick on the ground around Baltimore. For the most part, they are guarded only by curious bullocks, which use them as scratching posts, leaving the area a bit sticky underfoot for the occasional visitor.

The Drombeg stone circle is one of more than a hundred dotting the countryside of West Cork. The set-

ting midwinter sun is aligned with a large flattened altar stone. A well and pit nearby are believed to have been used in ancient times to cook animals; experiments have shown 300 litres of water can be heated in 18 minutes, using stones from a fire.

Could this have been an ancient venue for O'Driscoll clan get-togethers? Obviously this lonely place was once enlivened with chattering, feasting crowds not much different from those we encountered in Baltimore. Some things never change.