

History, beauty mix in Ireland's Tidy Towns



Rick Steves

When someone asks me about visiting Ireland, I tell them not to miss the southwest coast. This is the place to experience the wonders of the Gaelic language and old Irish civilization, as well as the country's contemporary charms.

It's the most mystical, Celtic, spiritual and rugged region of Ireland — and the towns along the way are just plain cute. There's even a competition for the best-kept town.

Every year, the Irish government holds a Tidy Town contest — and competition is fierce. Dozens of villages are judged for their beauty, charm, and, yes, tidiness.

My own top contenders for the title of tidiest town hug the southwest coast, where each town is more endearing than the last. Beyond their pastel facades and prim potted flowers, Kinsale, Kenmare and Dingle offer rich history, natural beauty and warm Irish hospitality.

About a half hour south of Cork, Kinsale is a pint-sized Tidy Town winner with 5,000 people, 25 pubs and a super-sized history. In its day, this town was home to one of the most strategic forts in the British Empire. It had Ireland's best natural harbor and offered a gateway to both Spain and France — providing a potential base for either of these two powers to cut off English shipping.

In what became 17th-century Britain's version of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Spanish nearly took over Kinsale, almost gaining naval advantage over England. But England won and eventually built two huge, star-shaped fortresses to ensure control of Kinsale's narrow waterway. The town's long and



With colorful houses, clean streets and overflowing flowerboxes, Kinsale is a worthy winner of Ireland's Tidy Town contest. **RICK STEVES' EUROPE**

skinny old center is part modern marina (attracting wealthy yachters) and part pedestrian-friendly medieval town (winning the affection of scalawags like me). On my last visit, my local guide showed me a clever "Tumbler Cart" parked in the center of town. In the 18th century, this service vehicle made the rounds picking up the townsfolk's sewage, then dumping it in nearby fields. Today, it's just a delightful ornamental decoration filled with flowers — one of Kinsale's many quirky surprises.

Northwest of Kinsale is Kenmare, another Tidy Town winner that hooks visitors right away with rows of vividly painted shop fronts and a go-for-a-stroll atmosphere. Then, it keeps those visitors around

with traditional fairs and markets, an ancient stone circle, opportunities for horseback riding and golfing, and the Kenmare Lace and Design Centre, which highlights the trade that put Kenmare on the map. (The town's knack for making exceptionally delicate lace helped it survive the devastating Irish famine of the mid-1800s.)

Quaint Kenmare is the perfect base for tackling the dramatic Ring of Kerry, the road that loops around the deservedly famous western peninsula. Along the way, treat yourself to a stop at the Kissane Sheep Farm to enjoy an up-close look at sheep farming and the expertise of Ireland's competent sheepdogs. Meeting the farmer, his family, and their well-trained dogs is one of the

best hours Ireland offers.

In the evening, I like to stir up a little serendipity just wandering the town. The pub scene changes every couple of years, but locals with the gift of gab are always up for a pint and a good time.

Farther north along the coast, colorful little Dingle — my favorite town in all of Ireland — perches on Ireland's westernmost point. The dramatic scenery of the remote Dingle Peninsula is enough to draw anyone, but the prehistoric wonders that dot this region make it particularly intriguing.

Dingle hasn't won a Tidy Town award yet, but it's only a matter of time. Its few streets, lined with ramshackle but gaily painted shops and pubs, run up from a rain-stung harbor always

sheltering fishing boats and leisure sailboats.

For an English-speaking traveler, the best "sights" in this town are its people. You may not find the proverbial pot of gold, but you'll treasure your encounters with the engaging, feisty people who live here. Most transactions come with an ample side-helping of friendly banter. As an Irishman once joked to me, "How can I know what I think until I hear what I say?"

Dingle feels so traditionally Irish because it's part of the Gaeltacht, a region where the government subsidizes the survival of the Irish language and culture. Despite growing more touristy, Dingle's traditional charms are resilient. As the older generation slows down and fades away, a new

generation of entrepreneurs is giving Dingle fresh vitality.

There's something delightful about small-town Ireland, where the people's connection to their heritage and to their town is so vivid. These tidy little hubs offer a healthy dose of Irish culture, and their locations make them the perfect springboards for experiencing the plush beauty of the Emerald Isle.

When the next Tidy Town competition rolls around, I'll be rooting for Kinsale, Kenmare and Dingle.

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CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Artists squeeze in sights on tour

By Jae-Ha Kim

Tribune Content Agency

As the duo Araki, violinist Jonathan Miron and cellist Philip Sheegog have earned accolades for the album "Brightside." The electro-acoustic string duo vividly remembered how hard they worked for their first professional gig almost eight years ago in front of an audience that included global leaders.

"We had a five-minute slot to perform at the Peace First summit hosted by Barack Obama's sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, in New York City," Sheegog said. "This summit brought together incredible change makers, peace builders and industry leaders from around the globe (that included) Parkland students (and) Gandhi's grandchild. We had never composed a piece of music before, but decided that our first gig ever would be the time to try this out. We had a very tight timeline to execute! We were blissfully ignorant and had no idea what we were doing, but gave it our all and successfully composed our first piece of music. That was the moment where we thought, 'Hmmm, maybe we have something here.'" This interview with Miron and Sheegog has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What trips do you have planned for 2026?
Sheegog: We're headed to Los Angeles for the Grammys, Dubai in April and then some U.S. dates. We're in the process of finalizing our 2026 tour.



The work of Araki's Jonathan Miron and Philip Sheegog is influenced by what they hear on the road. **SHERVIN LAINEZ**

Q: Have you written or worked on any songs while you were on the road?

Miron: Always. Last year, we were on a global tour while creating our album "Brightside." We spent a lot of late nights and early mornings in hotel rooms creating, listening and tweaking tracks. During crunch time, I was listening and giving notes from a hotel lobby in Slovenia and Philip even implemented adjustments while walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain!

Q: What untapped destination should people know about?

S: Ljubljana, Slovenia, is a hidden gem. It's this small medieval city. No cars in the main square, live music everywhere, great food and totally walkable. It's a charming, magical place.

Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?

M: I loved going to Indonesia as a kid. The beaches, the fruits, the monkeys!
S: My family took a few trips up to Yosemite. The first time became belovedly infamous because of a somewhat challenging hike to Vernal Falls. My two sisters and I were running on fumes by the end.

Q: Does the music you hear in a particular city or country inspire your own work?

M: Our music is the product of so many influences — western classical, pop, rock, cinematic, jazz, electronic —

so the things we hear on the road inevitably influence our work. When a musical idea comes to mind, we'll often record voice memos. Our phones are filled with recordings of sounds from around the world and melodies that come to mind wherever we are. When we actually sit down to write, we're bringing our personal music vocabularies, everything we've absorbed along the way, making our music this big melting pot of all the different influences that we love.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

M: Anywhere in the tropics with a beach with some yummy local flavors and a good drink. I grew up in Taiwan and Singapore, two very humid and hot foodie cities in the world.
S: One definite standout is Iceland. It's full of otherworldly natural wonders.

Q: Do you enjoy being a tourist in new places you visit?

S: We do! We try to carve out time to see some of the local wonders when we're not sound checking or performing. Most of the time, we're in a city for such a brief window that we don't get to actually see much of it, but we love getting to experience each place through the energy of its audience and make a point to enjoy the local cuisine.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Air France rejects baggage claim despite passenger's clear receipts

By Christopher Elliott | King Features Syndicate

I need your help with a baggage nightmare that's been going on for months. Last year, I flew from Bangalore to Chicago on Air France. One of my two checked bags went missing. But here's where it gets weird: The Air France representative at the airport asked me about a "third bag" that I never checked.

I have Flying Blue Silver status, which allows me to check three bags, but I only checked two. My bag drop receipt clearly shows two bags. The missing bag contained three duffel bags; two smaller ones were folded inside a larger Jaguar duffel from JCPenney. My Apple AirTag showed that the bag never left Bangalore.

I filed a report immediately at O'Hare and followed up religiously. After three weeks, I got a claim number, and I submitted detailed receipts totaling \$2,084 for the lost items. They were all legitimate purchases from Delsey Paris, JCPenney and Nordstrom Rack with transaction details.

Then came the runaround. Air France rejected all my receipts with the most ridiculous reasons. A representative said they don't accept receipts that are blurred, have transaction details, or are "online receipts, handwritten, credit card receipts, or screenshots."

My receipts weren't blurred; they were crystal-clear PDFs and emails from the retailers. None were handwritten or credit card receipts. They were legitimate purchase confirmations with store names, item descriptions, prices and order numbers. Under the Montreal Convention, Air France owes me up to \$2,080 for my lost baggage. Can you help me get the full compensation that I'm owed? — *Gerardine D'Sa, Willow Springs, Illinois*

A: Air France should have honored your legitimate receipts and paid your claim promptly under the Montreal Convention. International airlines are liable for lost baggage with amounts of up to approximately \$2,080 per passenger, and your documented losses clearly fell within this limit.

The receipt rejection policy that you encountered is troublesome. Modern commerce relies heavily on electronic receipts, and Air France's blanket rejection of "online receipts" and "transaction details" essentially renders most contemporary purchase documentation invalid. This appears to be designed to frustrate people with legitimate claims rather than verify the claims. You handled this

correctly by documenting everything immediately and maintaining a detailed paper trail. You were actually a textbook example of how to file a claim. Few passengers can show original receipts, which foils their claim. Another pro tip: Always photograph your bags with the tags before checking them and keep these bag-drop receipts safe. They are proof of what you actually checked.

You can appeal baggage claim denials to Air France executives through our company contacts directory on my consumer advocacy site, elliott.org. These contacts often have more authority than front-line customer service representatives. (You reached out to two executives, but one sent you a form response, while the other ignored

you. Too bad! They could have avoided having a story written about them.)

When my advocacy team contacted Air France, the airline claimed that European privacy restrictions prevented them from discussing your case. However, after we pressed them, and you filed a complaint with the Department of Transportation, they reconsidered. Air France offered to pay you \$1,793 for your baggage, excluding some items such as electronics. You accepted its offer.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.