

MS Roald Amundsen
Silent sailing ... for
science's sake

Porthole **Cruise**

12.2022

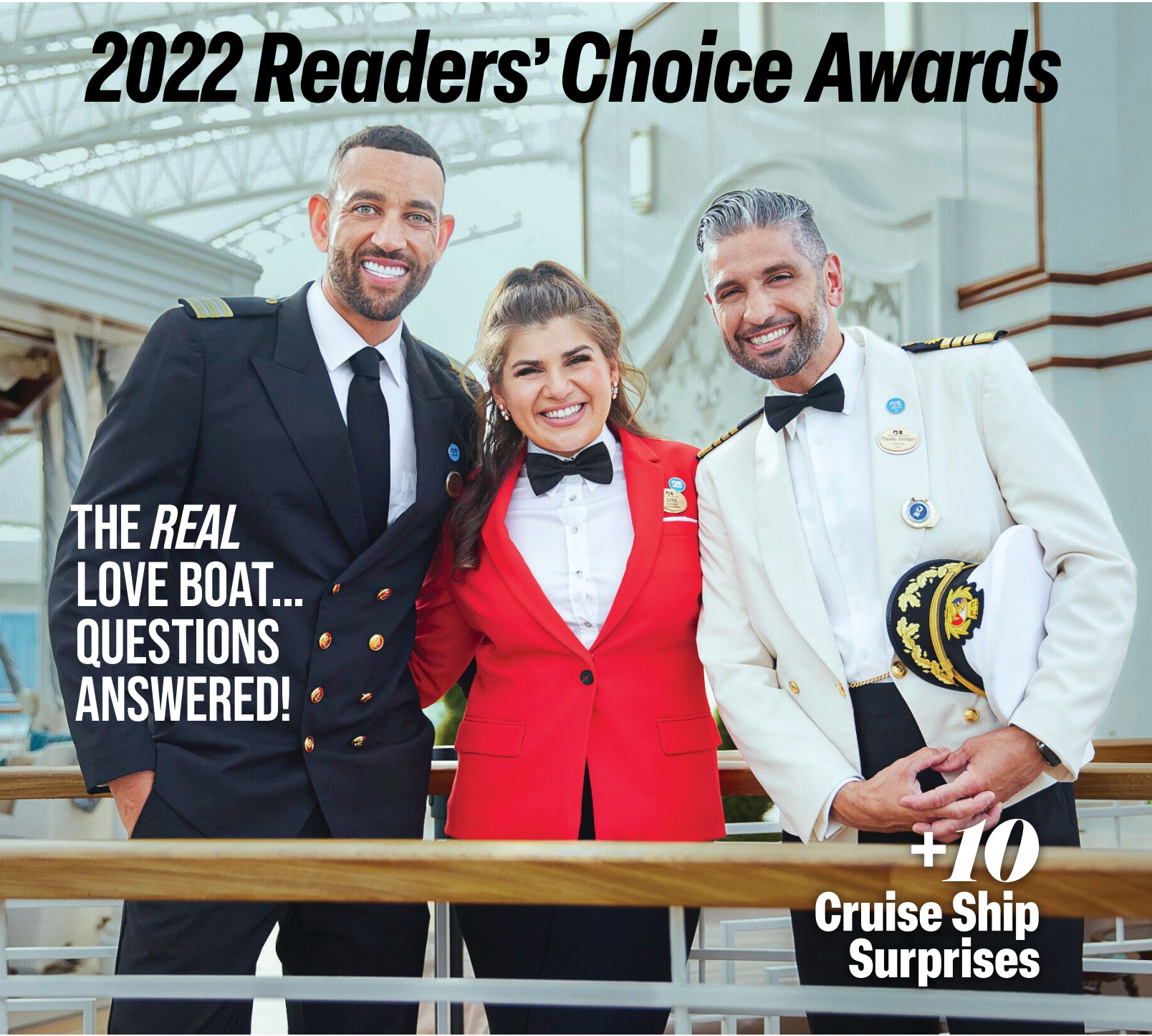
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The Wild Atlantic Way

Ireland's cliffs, rugged shoreline, and awe

by Richard Varr



Cliffs of Moher

Sunlight slowly pokes through the morning haze, casting wispy shadows on the steep cliffs curving in front of me. They're rock-chipped and craggy, but at the same time majestic and breathtaking. Yet what stuns me the most are what look like tiny specks seemingly crawling along the flattened cliff tops — hikers, actually, putting the enormity of the mighty Cliffs of Moher into perspective.

That's because the cliffs, one of Ireland's most-visited and most dramatic seaside landmarks, tower 702 feet at their highest point and stretch for 5 miles along the Atlantic coast below, receding into the horizon. They're just one stop on my motorcoach day tour of County Clare, where some of Ireland's most rugged landscapes along the country's

so-called Wild Atlantic Way thrill visitors every day.

"Ireland's whole west coast is magical and the cliffs are just a highlight," says driver Dermot Holmes, a guide with Paddywagon Tours. "In the west are glacial deposits from the Ice Age. The land underneath it is sheer rock, so there's very little soil. So what the Irish did was clear the land as best they could and realized the best crop to grow in poor soil is the potato."

And sheer rock it is, outcropping from grassy patches within County Clare's Burren, a region known for its karst landscape. So harsh, in fact, that a 17th-century surveyor with British General Oliver Cromwell's conquest campaign once called the area "a savage land yielding neither enough water to drown a man, nor tree to hang him, nor soil enough to bury him."



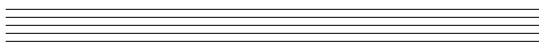
Burren National Park

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ROADS & RAILS

Yet amid the roughness, a subtle and gentle beauty abounds with the blooming, surprisingly, of Mediterranean and alpine flowers including white-petalled mountain avens and brown and red-streaked dense-flowered orchids. “Plants grow there that shouldn’t grow in Ireland, but they do,” explains Brian Nolan with Galway Walking Tours, in the nearby college town that’s often used as a base for exploring the area. “The limestone retains heat and creates a unique atmosphere.”

Our motorcoach tour follows scenic route R477, hugging the Burren’s Atlantic coast. In the distance, I see silhouettes of the three Aran Islands, also a popular day trip. “There’s a saying here about the Aran Islands,” quips Holmes. “If you can see the islands, it’s going to rain. And if you can’t see them, it’s raining already.” At 8 miles long and 2 miles wide, Inishmore is the largest island, with its own cliffs and ancient forts. Residents there, like many in western Ireland communities, treasure their Celtic culture.



The 25-mile Dingle Peninsula drive features sand dunes at Ventry Bay and the Gallarus Oratory, a well-preserved 6th-to-9th century Christian church.



Dunluce Castle, a filming location for *Game of Thrones*



Gallarus Oratory

The Whole Way

My day trip to County Clare brought us to only a small area along the often dramatic coasts of the 1,500-mile-long Wild Atlantic Way. Itineraries traversing the entire route can run one to two weeks, stretching from County Cork to northernmost County Donegal and even beyond into Northern Ireland.

From south to north, highlights include the 112-mile Ring of Kerry loop, passing through mountainous and boggy terrain along the Moll’s Gap mountain pass, by the Lakes of Killarney, and along ocean views of the rocky Skellig Islands. (These were recently made famous in *Star Wars* movies as the filming location for Luke Skywalker’s Jedi Temple.) Across Dingle Bay, the 25-mile Dingle Peninsula drive features sand dunes at Ventry Bay and the Gallarus Oratory, a well-preserved 6th-to-9th century Christian church.

North of the Cliffs of Moher, Galway is noted for its red-sailed traditional fishing boats known as “hookers.” Christopher Columbus is said to have

Left to right: Nadine/Adobe Stock; Dawid/Adobe Stock; Milan/Adobe Stock; Henrique Craveiro/Unsplash



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White-bellied Atlantic puffin



Cliffs of Moher

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visited here in 1477. Mountainous Achill Island, Ireland’s largest, can be reached by a road bridge. The peaks of the “Twelve Bens” dot the Connemara area along with the Maumturks range, some within Connemara National Park.

County Donegal’s Slieve League seaside cliffs — some of Europe’s highest — soar to 1,972 feet, and on Tory Island, the Anvil Ridge slices 1,300 feet out into the North Atlantic. A must-see is Northern Ireland’s Giant’s Causeway, with its hexagonal basalt columns clustered along the shoreline.

Throughout their journeys, travelers can visit castles and see the narrow stone fences crisscrossing grassy pastures and farmlands. Many were built during the mid-19th century when residents cleared rocks from fields as the Potato Famine gripped the country. “Landlords decided to give a penny to build a wall a mile long and three feet high,” explains Holmes. “The people built the walls anywhere to get as many pennies as they could to feed their families.”

Edge of the Sea

Atop the Cliffs of Moher, meanwhile, I stop in the Visitor Centre to learn how flocks of birds nest within crevices of the cliffs, in particular on the stratified rock island below known as the Branaunmore Sea Stack. White-bellied Atlantic puffins with orange-tinted beaks and feet swoop around the stone, as do varieties of seagulls and brown-backed guillemots.

“I’m blown away by the fresh air and by the amount of bird life in the cliffs down below you,” says Nolan. “The views from the cliffs are stunning right across to the Aran Islands, six miles to the west.

“The islands are spectacular and beautiful, and,” he adds, “they have the last vestiges of the ancient Celtic culture and language. The people there speak Irish as their first language. There’s stunning scenery, beautiful beaches and gorgeous cliffs as tall as the Cliffs of Moher.” ●