

## Dublin



I wonder if there is a city on the planet that has produced more literary geniuses per capita than Dublin. Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was born here. So was famous writer and satirist Oscar Wilde. Bram Stoker, who wrote *Dracula*, was a Dubliner. Then there are the renowned dramatists George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett. And let's not forget James Joyce, one of the most celebrated writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Joyce is inextricably linked to Dublin because he used it as the setting for all his short stories and novels. He boasted that if Dublin were to suddenly disappear, it could be rebuilt from the pages of his works. In truth, he didn't write much about the architecture of his city; rather, what he meticulously described were the lives of its people.

This underlines something that still holds true about Dublin: rather than its buildings, what makes this city unforgettable is its atmosphere, created by the warmth and creativity of its people. This will be a special tour which, with the aid of some famous films, will not only examine the landmarks of the city, but also explore its history and customs. So, let's go!

As the plane approaches Dublin Airport, I look out of the window. The view from up here is breathtaking. I'm reminded that Ireland is known as the Emerald Isle, and that filmmakers have found its lush forests and meadows to be irresistible. The Irish countryside became Normandy in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, Scotland in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, and even the imaginary land of Westeros in the acclaimed TV series *Game of Thrones*. But I'm here to explore Dublin, guided by the movies that were filmed there.

I board a coach that takes me to the city centre. For centuries Ireland was under British rule. It finally gained its independence in 1922, but only after a bloody, revolutionary period. My first destination is a building that embodies those dramatic years more than any other: an imposing, neoclassical structure, constructed some two hundred years ago on O'Connell Street, one of Dublin's main thoroughfares. It's the General Post Office, or GPO.

In 1916, armed nationalists seized the GPO and proclaimed the Irish Republic. It was the beginning of what became known as the Easter Rising. The British Army intervened, and

fighting broke out in the streets of Dublin. The GPO served as the insurgents' headquarters and was eventually put under siege and attacked by the British. This dramatic episode opens one of the many films that chronicle the Irish struggle for independence: *Michael Collins*. It's a dramatic scene, with the GPO on fire, engulfed in black smoke, ravaged by the artillery of the British troops. The Irish insurgents eventually surrender, and many of them are executed.

The building in front of me still bears the memory of those fateful hours. The surfaces of the façade and the columns are dented and scarred. As I close in, it becomes clearer: those are bullet holes.

Irish independence was achieved a few years later, but an unpleasant reminder of the past remained: a short distance from the GPO stood Nelson's Pillar, a giant column topped by the statue of the British navy officer Lord Nelson. After independence, many Irish wanted this monument removed. In 1966, 50 years on from the Easter Rising, the ongoing debate was interrupted when a group of unknowns took the matter into their own hands and blew up the Pillar.

The population of Dublin didn't take it too badly. A satirical song was written about the event called "Up Went Nelson". It spent eight consecutive weeks at the top of the Irish charts!

A competition was launched to explore ideas for a new landmark. Curiously, it was won by a British firm. Their creation, the Spire of Dublin, is a pin-shaped, 120-metre-tall steel monument. It is intended to exemplify the Irish spirit and point to a bright and prosperous future. Don't worry if this sounds pretentious; just as Dubliners mocked Nelson's Column, they made fun of this new landmark as well with nicknames such as "the pin in the bin", "the pole in the hole" and the "rod to god".

It's impressive yet odd, smooth and shiny, a colossal alien needle in the middle of a historical street. Fittingly, in 2015 for the premiere of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the Spire was lit up to look like a Jedi lightsaber.

The next building I want to visit also has something to do with Star Wars, even though it was built hundreds of years ago. But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

I make my way down to O'Connell Bridge and across the River Liffey, which divides the city in half. I walk up Westmoreland Street and reach the entrance of Trinity College, Dublin's prestigious university.

I pause before entering. I'm currently on a busy street, filled with the noise of cars, busses and trams. There's a sense of urgency in the air and you can feel the city's bustling energy. But as I cross the university's gate, I enter a different world.

Solemn, old buildings enclose a large, cobbled square. There are no vehicles here, just students and teachers walking around. There's a sense of gravitas in the air that tells one that this is a place intended to elevate the mind and the spirit.

I make my way to the building that I feel best captures the essence of Trinity: the old university library. Its main chamber is the Long Room, a wonderful 65-metre hall constructed from dark wood, with bookshelves that reach all the way up to the barrel-vaulted ceiling. You can smell the musty scent of wood and paper.

Not everyone is aware that in a galaxy far, far away, there is another library that looks almost identical to this one. I'm referring to the Jedi Archives in the fictional Star Wars universe, as depicted in the film *Attack of the Clones*. The Archives' striking resemblance to Trinity's Long Room proved controversial. The filmmakers had not asked permission to use the building's likeness in the film. When pressed, they denied the Long Room was the basis for the Jedi Archives, but the similarity was suspicious. Eventually, the Trinity authorities decided not to take legal action against the filmmakers.

Still, this location's intergalactic reputation doesn't end here. In the TV series *Foundation*, inspired by Isaac Asimov's celebrated series of science fiction novels, the Long Room serves as a library on the planet Trantor.

The Long Room is truly a stellar place!

I leave Trinity College and walk a short distance to one of Dublin's most celebrated locations: Temple Bar. It's not an actual bar, but a neighborhood that is today synonymous with culture and entertainment. There are several art galleries and studios. There's a film institute and an acting school. It's also packed with pubs, restaurants and bars.

There's a wonderful, laidback vibe here. I love the little shops, the colourful buildings, the people going about their daily lives or relaxing inside and outside pubs. Maybe Temple Bar is a bit touristy nowadays, but I like it all the same. I pass by a few buskers and I stop to listen to one.

As I listen, I'm reminded of a scene from a great Irish film: *The Commitments*. It tells the story of a group of working-class youngsters who form a music band. It's a hilarious, extravagant film about aspiration, friendship and music. It was mostly filmed in the working-class neighborhood of North Dublin, but one scene was filmed here – the one where some band members visit a pawn shop. They're interested in a set of drums displayed in the shop window. The band's drummer can't help himself, and he plays them, loudly, infuriating the shop owner. It's an amusing scene, also because the band members are trying to pay for the drums with a stuffed bird.

As my visit to Dublin is coming to an end, I decide to stop at a pub. "Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without passing a pub," wrote James Joyce.

Indeed, there are so many! Irish pubs are more than just venues to drink in; they are small, urban havens where people go to socialize. Most have an air of familiarity about them, as if they were a friend's living room. Their windows are frequently made of stained glass, as if to protect the warm, cozy atmosphere inside from the elements outside. In some traditional pubs, people even bring their instruments and improvise lively jam sessions.

My pub of choice is Toner's, on Lower Baggot Street.

Toner's was established in 1734. It holds the charm of a true Dublin pub, with its worn-out tables, simple furniture and odd collection of paraphernalia. Famously, Toner's is the only pub where poet and Nobel Prize winner William Butler Yeats had a drink. A sign over one of the

pub's benches records his reaction: "I have seen a pub now," he told the friend that took him there. "Can I go home?"

But I'm not here because of Yeats' inexplicable dislike of pubs, but because this place served as a set for – as odd as it may seem – a spaghetti western. The film is *A Fistful of Dynamite*, by legendary director Sergio Leone. Set in the 1910s, it tells the story of Sean, an Irish republican on the run who ends up in America where he joins the Mexican revolution. Underlined by Ennio Morricone's poignant score, a touching flashback of Sean's past in Dublin takes place in this pub.

I walk up to the bar, just where Sean stood in the film. It's a fitting place to end my Dublin trip. I order a drink and raise my glass for a toast, in Irish, with the locals: "Sláinte!"

Until next time!