



Ireland's geographic separation from the rest of Europe and the 2,000 miles of ocean between its western coast and North America has allowed Ireland to develop a cultural history that is both rich and independent. Its folklore ranges from little leprechauns sitting on their pots of gold at the end of rainbows to the stories of Saint Patrick driving the snakes from the island. Today Ireland is a modern European industrialized state but it has held onto much of its folklore and traditions.

In the year 314, Christianity became the state religion of ancient Rome, and as the Romans spread across Europe so did Christianity. But Christianity in Ireland was different from Christianity in the rest of Europe.



Instead of being centered in a church within a city, the Christian communities in Ireland were located in remote monasteries — monasteries that attracted scholars and artists.

Some of the world's finest illuminated manuscripts were produced in the isolated monasteries of Ireland. And as the Roman Empire began to disintegrate, the Irish monasteries became the keepers of Christian knowledge. Ireland evolved into an "island of saints and scholars".

Christianity, however, did not arrive in Ireland as a new and attractive religion that was quickly accepted. It came in slowly and blended into the ancient beliefs of the Celtic tribes.

THE STORY OF PATRICK

Britain was still under Roman rule when Patrick

was born in the southwest of England sometime around 400AD. He grew up in a large Roman Villa and described himself as a "gentleman" living a comfortable life.

Patrick was growing up at a time when Roman authority was fading and Irish raiders had begun attacking Roman towns along the English coast. When Patrick was 15 he was kidnapped by a raiding party, brought to Ireland as a slave and forced to work as a shepherd.

He lived in an area of isolated mountains and was constantly subjected to the forces of nature. In his autobiography he wrote that it was during this time that he began his daily prayers—often as many as a hundred times a day. In the sixth year of his enslavement he had a dream in which an angel urged him to escape and return to England. Patrick followed the instructions, carefully concealing his movements and traveled nearly 200 miles to the coast where he was given passage back to England by a group of Irish sailors.

Once home and in gratitude for God's help he trained to become a priest and within 10 years was appointed bishop. A second dream implored him to return to Ireland and advance the conversion of the Irish to Christianity. Not an easy task.

Throughout the island, altars, idols and elaborate rituals had been in place for hundreds of years. Patrick's only hope for success was to befriend the chieftains and adapt his message to the structure that had been set up by the Druid priests.



The Celts worshiped the sun which Patrick accepted, but then he pointed out that some days

the sun was around and some days it wasn't and at some point in the future it might disappear forever. On the other hand, Christ was an everlasting sun.

Patrick spent thirty years traveling around Ireland, establishing monasteries and churches. Many of them were constructed on sites that had been sacred to the Druids.

DOWN CATHEDRAL

A few miles away from Saint Patrick's first church is the ancient hill of Down and the Down Cathedral. It was built in the 12th century



and has been a place of pilgrimage for over 1500 years. He is probably buried somewhere beneath the Cathedral. The date of his death is given as the 17th of March and each year during the month of March people come here from all over the world leaving wreaths in his memory.

SAINT PATRICK'S DAY

As is often the case, fame arrives just after your funeral, and so it was with Saint Patrick. As soon as



he died, the legend of his deeds began growing and by the middle of the 600s he was on his way to becoming Ireland's national apostle.

In 807, the Book of Armagh directed all monasteries and churches in Ireland to honor his memory on March 17th in what was a spiritual ceremony.

By 1607, March 17th was marked on the Irish legal calendar and was officially Saint Patrick's Day.

Today it is celebrated throughout the world, though there appears to be a greater emphasis on revelry than religion.

THE CITY OF ARMAGH

The city of Armagh is the spiritual capital of Ireland. In pagan times it was the seat of the High Kings of Ulster which made it the logical place for Saint

Patrick to build his most important church. He built it in 445 on the Hill of Armagh which is now the site of the Cathedral of the Church of Ireland.

Across town is the County Museum with a collection that illustrates Armagh's role in early Christian history and the influence of the Vikings.

Nearby is Navan Fort which was built at the beginning of the first century BC—say 2,100 years ago. It's called a fort but it's actually the remains of a prehistoric sanctuary—some form of sacred space used as a funeral monument and a place for religious rituals.

An aerial photograph is a good way to see



the structure. It's made up of a large circular earth work with two smaller round mounds on top.

That space is enclosed with a bank that has an internal ditch. The fact that the ditch is inside the bank is an indication that the mound was built as a religious center and not a defensive fort.

This area was the ancient seat of the Kings of Ulster and the capital of Ulster from 660BC to 330AD. You can visit the earthworks, the sacred grounds and chat with residents of the ancient settlement who are pleased to share their ancient legends.

An essential part of the story of Saint Patrick is a visit to the Saint Patrick Centre in Downpatrick. It is the world's only permanent exhibition dedicated to telling the story of Saint Patrick. It offers interactive exhibitions, lmax presentations, and guided tours of Saint Patrick country.

PILGRIM'S PACKING LIST

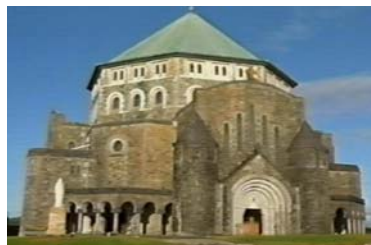
- **WARM AND WATERPROOF CLOTHING**
- **CHANGE OF CLOTHING**
- **INSECT REPELLANT**
- **ROSARY BEADS (IF DESIRED)**
- **READING MATERIAL**
- **ANY PRESCRIBED MEDICATION**
- **WASH KIT AND TOWEL**

PILGRIMAGE

Two of the most famous holy sites in Ireland were not made by man but created by the forces of nature and both are associated with the life of Saint Patrick—Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick.

Lough Derg is the site of Patrick's Purgatory and Croagh Patrick is a mountain peak. Both are difficult to reach and the rituals associated with each are, to say the least, 'stressful'. They are two of the few modern day pilgrimages that are as challenging as the ones that were undertaken during the Middle Ages.

Lough Derg is Irish for "the red lake" or more likely "the lake of the cave" and it is located in the northwest county of Donegal. There are eleven islands in the lake. On the one known as Station Island you'll find the sanctuary of Saint Patrick's Purgatory. The legend of Saint Patrick says that he visited this island, probably because it was a special place for the ancient Celtic people. While in a cave on the island he had a vision of the afterlife, hearing the voices of dead souls coming from the underworld. He believed that he had discovered



the entrance to purgatory — the place where those who have died can be cleansed from their sins and grow into the fullness of

God's love.

For close to 1,000 years, starting in the 12th century, going to Lough Derg has been an important pilgrimage — a place to experience purgatory on this earth and to grow in goodness and love. Pilgrims would spend weeks on the island praying and fasting under the direction of the local monks. They would enter the cave while the monks chanted the Office of the Dead, and spend twenty-four hours without food or water. Many who undertook this experience described supernatural encounters — strange visions, conversations with the dead and an overwhelming desire to change their travel agent.

In 1632, as part of England's effort to suppress Irish Catholicism, the British destroyed the relics on Station Island and banned pilgrimages to Patrick's Purgatory. The faithful could no longer

reach the island so they would stand on the shores of the lake fasting and praying as if they were on the island.

Despite persecution and suppression the pilgrimage survived; the length of time spent on the island became 3 days, including one complete night without sleep, a reminder of the 24 hours Saint Patrick spent in the ancient cave.

Regardless of the hardship of fasting and walking barefooted in all kinds of weather over 25,000 pilgrims come to Lough Derg each year. Many of the pilgrims are in their early 20's, but I think they would be even younger if not for a minimum age requirement of seventeen. Pilgrims recite Station prayers, and circle crosses honoring Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid, Saint Brendan, and Saint Catherine. Their objective is to find a



THE PATH OF ST. PATRICK

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WHAT'S COOKING



Under the theory that the body must be fed as well as the soul, we stopped into the kitchens at Dublin's Four Seasons Hotel for a traditional Irish breakfast: Scrambled Eggs, Irish Bacon, Black & White Puddings, Soda Bread, Irish Oat and Bran Muffins, Buttermilk and Berry Pancakes, Tea.

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peace within and a feeling that they are closer to God.

THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Located on the west coast in County Mayo, Croagh Patrick is Ireland's Holy Mountain. It rises to a height of 2,500 feet. The Celts called it Eagle's Peak and it was sacred to their goddess of fertility. During Lent of the year 441, Saint Patrick retreated



to this mountain, and like Christ, Moses and Mohammad in the desert, spent forty days and nights in solitude, fasting and praying. In Saint

Patrick's case his prayers were for the people of Ireland.

At one point an angel appeared and announced that his prayers had been heard.

And as a result many Irish souls would be free from the pains of purgatory and that seven years before Judgment Day the sea would spread over Ireland and save its people from the temptations and terrors of the Devil. And on that last day, Patrick himself would be the judge of all the people of

Ireland.

During the last Sunday in July some 80,000 people climb to the top of the mountain. Many



are barefoot and the sharp stones of the trail are often marked with blood. They are attempting to atone for their sins through physical pain.

To a certain extent the pilgrimage up Croagh Patrick mirrors the ancient rites of the Celtic tribes. The day used to honor Saint Patrick, the last Sunday in July, was also the day used by the ancient Celts to honor their goddess of fertility.

Saint Patrick had a great talent for blending Christian rituals together with pagan rites. His activities at Croagh Patrick and Lough Dreg are famous examples but he was doing it all the time and the evidence is scattered throughout Ireland.

SACRED WELLS

As Saint Patrick traveled around Ireland, he marked certain wells as sacred and used their water to baptize new converts to Christianity. For thousands of years people have associated wells with magical forces. Each well had its own legend and its own set of powers. Wells were dwelling places for the gods.

The well itself acted as an intermediary between human beings and the spirits. You can still



see a remnant of this idea in a wishing well where people leave an offering along with their wish.

The Celtic tribes that inhabited Ireland thought of their wells as places that were sacred to a mystical goddess who was responsible for longevity, health and fertility. These deities not only dwelled in wells but also inhabited nearby rivers.

In Ireland, both the Shannon and Boyne rivers are named after ancient Celtic water goddesses.

The ancient Romans thought that any point where water came up from inside the earth was a place where an altar should be built, and as they

spread their culture across Ireland their beliefs were blended together with the Celtic rituals that had been in place for hundreds of years.

Both pagan and Roman traditions were incorporated into Christianity and the neighborhood well became an efficient place to preach conversion and to baptize those who converted.



Wells were also places where people came to meet—social centers for the community. In the days before you went down to the local pub to hoist a pint, you went

down to the local well to hoist a bucket. Both pubs and wells are considered to be local watering holes.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The legend of Saint Patrick is the classic story of the hero's journey. Separated from his home and his parents he is held against his will in a strange and dangerous world. But with the help of a supernatural force he overcomes the challenges and returns to save society. It's the chronicle of Saint Patrick but it is also the story of Star Wars and Harry Potter.

From time to time, our love of research can destroy the essential elements in our history. Saint Patrick is credited



with banishing snakes from Ireland. Researchers tell us that there weren't any snakes in Ireland to begin with. Does that diminish the importance of Saint Patrick? Not if you think of the snake as a serpent—a symbol for the power of the devil. And remember that Saint Patrick spent his life fighting the influence of the devil in Ireland. Sometimes we are so busy attacking the historic accuracy of a story that we miss its mythic message.

One of the great things about the Irish is that for over 2000 years they have fought to maintain their cultural heritage and to keep their myths alive. They understand the story behind the story and they make it part of their lives.

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