



“I met my husband when he played guitar on a demo for a song I’d written. Now married for a year and a half, we call ourselves the Blonde Leading the Blind. Because music brought us together, we’d love to take a trip in the Irish countryside where the pubs come alive nightly with music. You’d be amazed by how a blind man experiences things—it’s all about the sounds, flavors, and scents.”

A Musical Tour of Ireland

Our pub crawl of Ireland begins in Westport, a town in County Mayo on the western coast. JP and I have come to Ireland in search of live music, and Westport, so we’ve read, has some of the best. In fact, one of the pubs in the town is owned by Matt Malloy of The Chieftains, a renowned traditional Irish band.

Excited to finally be here after a long day of travel, we drop our bags at our inn, **McCarthy’s Guesthouse**, and head straight to **Matt Malloy’s**. Outside, the street is quiet, and we wonder if the place is even open. It is a week-night in mid-January, after all. But when we open the door, a swell of music and conversation overwhelms us. Malloy himself is in the pub that night, working the crowd like a regular. After listening to the band play a mix of traditional Celtic songs and contemporary numbers—including Steve Earle’s “The Galway Girl”—we make our way over to Malloy. He knows quite a bit about Nashville, it turns out, and we trade notes on our favorite music venues. I have a little trouble hearing him over the din of the party—the laughter of the people around me and the beating of all the musicians’ feet on the old oak floors.

The next morning, after an Irish breakfast of eggs, bacon, and black pudding, we venture out to explore the countryside, taking a leisurely drive to the village of Leenane. Since I must be driver and navigator, I record myself reading directions before we leave, and

JP plays them back on a tape recorder as I drive. Once we figure out where we’re going, JP surfs the stations on the radio, stopping at one point to listen to a reading of the local death notices of all things! We drive through a stunning valley filled with abbey ruins, thatch-roofed cottages, and ancient cemeteries. As we start back toward Westport, I spot our first Irish rainbow. I describe it all for JP, who says he has to adjust to hearing my voice come from the right side of the car instead of the left.

WE JAM UNTIL 2 A.M. WHEN THE MANAGER SHUSHES US

JP takes the stage the following night at McCarthy’s Bar, a gig he booked before our trip. The pub is owned by the same people who run our guesthouse and is right next door—a convenient setup. The crowd loves JP’s music, giving him a rousing reception, and I spend half the evening scribbling jpwilliams.net on cocktail napkins. Throughout the musical *seisiún* (Gaelic for “session”), JP trades the mic with local musician Gerry Carroll, who plays acoustic guitar and sings his own songs. When Gerry ends the night with a Gaelic rendition of Ireland’s national anthem, everyone puts down their pints, stands, and joins in—including the only two Yanks in the crowd.

Our next stop down the coast is Galway, Ireland’s third-largest city and home to a major university. The drive only takes about an hour and a half. We tackle road trips in bite-size portions since I’m the sole driver and JP can’t enjoy the scenery. After checking

About the Authors

JP Williams, 32, is a singer and guitarist who has performed at the Kennedy Center and at colleges all over the U.S. He lost his vision when he was 10 years old. His wife, Irene, 37, is a public relations executive (and a background singer at some of JP’s shows). The couple lives in Nashville.

Courtesy, JP and Irene Williams

in at **Almara House**, a B&B owned by an engaging and helpful couple named Marie and Matthew Kiernan, JP and I take a stroll around the city. JP finds the pace of life invigorating, and I enjoy the shopping and people watching. I'm keeping such a keen eye on everyone, I even spot a celebrity—Will Ferrell! JP is floored by the chance encounter with one of his favorite actors. He can't stop talking about it for the rest of the day.

That night, at a small bar called **Tig Coili**, we catch a show of rollicking Gaelic tunes played by a group of musicians on accordion, fiddle, squeezebox, banjo, and bouzouki (a guitar-like instrument shaped like a halved avocado). The pub is packed with students back from holiday break, and a gracious man offers his seat to JP. We thank him with a pint of Guinness, and he says the gratitude is unnecessary, as "such actions are common in Ireland." The Irish generally are quick to make note of JP's blindness and offer subtle accommodations. We find it refreshing.

We decide to follow the recommendation of a fiddler we met in Westport and head to Limerick to check out a pub called **Dolan's**. Next to the fireplace in the band's corner, JP and I dine on delicious chowder and enjoy several sets of the band's improvised Irish melodies—one song segueing seamlessly into the

next. The musicians then ask us to join in, and we instantly grab everyone's attention. When the pub closes, a Delta flight crew on a layover invites all the musicians to continue the show back at their hotel. We jam in a conference room just off the lobby until 2 A.M., when the manager shushes us like a schoolmarm. JP and I quietly trade e-mail addresses and hugs with our new friends before turning in.

Our trip winding down, we make our way to Shannon, just outside Limerick, and stop at the **Bunratty Castle and Folk Park**. JP is completely fascinated by the tour of the 15th-century castle. He experiences it in a very different way, feeling the cold stone walls with his hands, maneuvering along narrow stairwells, and calling out so he can hear his voice echo in the grand halls. We nearly bypass **Durty Nelly's**, a pub beside the castle, because some of the musicians we'd met said it's touristy. But we stop in anyway—and I'm thrilled. The tight quarters are bursting with big-band and Irish ditties, and the locals (and a few tourists) are singing at the top of their lungs.

After the barkeep announces last call, the piano player, who's played at Durty Nelly's for 46 years, lingers to tell jokes and laugh with the crowd. Out of nowhere, an a cappella seisiún begins. A young woman sings a mournful tune about a lover lost at sea, followed by an older man who contributes a melodic tribute to County Donegal in a baritone voice. The crowd invites JP and me to share a few of our own songs, backed only by the sound of the barkeep sweeping the floor—a sweet decrescendo to our trip.

LODGING

McCarthy's
Quay St.,
Westport, 011-353/98-27-050,
mccarthyslodge.com, from \$110

Almara House
2 Merlin Gate,
Dublin Rd.,
Galway, 011-353/91-755-345,
almarahouse.com,
from \$124

NIGHTLIFE

Matt Malloy's
Bridge St.,
Westport, 011-353/98-26-655,
mattmalloy.com

Tig Coili

Mainguard St.,
Galway, 011-353/91-561-294

Dolan's Pub

3-4 Dock Rd.,
Limerick, 011-353/61-314-483,
dolanspub.com

Durty Nelly's

N18 Limerick-Ennis Rd.,
Bunratty, 011-353/61-364-861,
durtynellys.ie

ACTIVITIES

Bunratty Castle
N18 Limerick-Ennis Rd.,
Bunratty, 011-353/61-360-788,
tour \$23

The Cliffs of Moher on the west coast



Will Ferrell and JP in Galway



JP playing at Dolan's pub