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Haven Report



Kilkenny, Ireland:
Escape To The Old World...



Graiguenamanagh And St. Mullins— Escape To The Old World In Southeast Ireland

By Lynn Mulvihill

“There is history, there’s hurling, there is passion and these beautiful rivers—it’s incredible.”

Dublin-born singer-songwriter Liam O’Maonlaí gave this tribute to the town of Kilkenny in a recent newspaper article. But these wonders don’t end when you step beyond the walls of the medieval city.

For beyond the town proper, the history stretches back further, the rivers are more dramatic, and passion and pride run deep in the villages. As for the hurling, it’s pure obsession no matter where you wander within Kilkenny’s county boundaries. More about the

national sport later. For now, consider yourself warned...

Why This Area?

To find one single place to call home—whether part- or full-time—in any country of the world is a challenge. I’ve written several articles over the last few years on Ireland, including Waterford’s Copper Coast and the Iveragh Peninsula and Tralee Town, both in County Kerry. I carefully chose these locations at the time and believe that they still hold appeal

...continued on page 6

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for the would-be retiree. Each time I wrote about these places, though, I wondered about many more. Was I writing about the right place? Could there be somewhere more appealing?

This year, it's different. Having tipped over the county border from my home in Waterford City into Kilkenny almost every weekend this summer, I have absolutely no doubt in my choice—no worries that I'm passing over somewhere better. If there's something else out there, it can wait. This special place deserves its story to be told.

While I would have no hesitation recommending Kilkenny Town itself as a retirement spot (and, by all means, I urge you to visit and spend time around town), the retiree seeking a piece of quintessential Ireland would probably feel more at home farther into the county...yet still enjoy all Kilkenny has to offer for shopping, entertainment, festivals, and pure change of scenery.

That's why, for this issue, I've chosen to focus on an area in the southeast of the county—an area that is, for the most part, undressed for the tourists. Where, for every freshly painted cottage, you'll find a dusty, downtrodden building that, on first glance, makes you wonder if it's shut forever... or just for lunch.

It's an area our family first visited two years ago, and since then, we look for any opportunity to take a day-trip there, especially when we want to escape suburban life in a modern Irish city.



Closed for business. A biz opp perhaps?



Hanging baskets add color all around town

Double The Charm

In truth, this is a tale of two villages. The first is Graiguenamanagh (pronounced Graig-na-MAN-ah), a happening little village on the west bank of the River Barrow, where, during the summer months, colorful barges moor along the shores, families come to swim and coax each other down from the landmark diving boards, while the annual regatta attracts rowing enthusiasts.

The tranquil village of St. Mullins is our second stop. Without the quayside facilities and mooring of Graig, from the eastern banks of the Barrow here, the river life here is dominated more by fishermen and the occasional kayaker than by rows of pleasure boats.

Getting Your Bearings

Graiguenamanagh is in County Kilkenny, St. Mullins in County Carlow. They are separated by the Barrow River, and it's this river that is the life and soul of the area. (At times, I will refer to the "Barrow area," to include Graiguenamanagh, St. Mullins, and their surroundings.)

Faced with the choice of these two outposts, you may find yourself torn. Each has its assets. And, if you live in one village, you'll inevitably find yourself drawn to the other—



Living in this area, you're just under an hour from Kilkenny town, 25 minutes from the town of New Ross in County Wexford—the closest “big town” for amenities—and just over two hours from Dublin City.

In terms of getting here, Kilkenny Town is connected to Dublin by direct motorway. The M9 runs from Dublin to Waterford City and, since its completion in 2010, has cut journey time to the capital in half. The fastest way to Graigenamanagh, coming from Dublin, is to travel along the M9 until Exit 7 (Thomastown). From there, it's just under 30 minutes to Graigenamanagh. Generally, trying to find directions anywhere in Ireland, the [AA Route Planner](#) is your best friend. The drive to St. Mullins (though just 4 miles directly along the river) takes 15 minutes.

Property Update

Before we start our official tour of this area, let's first catch up on the volatile Irish property scene. At my last writing, just over a year ago, property prices were at their lowest since the collapse of the Celtic Tiger—representing drops of up to 50%, and sometimes more, from the boom years.

This year, the market is moving again. And, for the first time in seven years, that movement is in an upward direction. Prices in Dublin, since summer 2013, have risen as much as 20%. In the rest of the country, growth is slower, between 5% and 10%, but is expected to continue over the next couple of years.

More on the property market later. For now, just keep in mind that if Ireland is high on your list of options, it would be better to investigate sooner rather than later, while prices are more affordable.

Village Of The Monks

Graigenamanagh (sometimes spelled Gaignamanagh)—and just “Graig” to the locals—comes from the Gaelic “Gráig na Manach,” meaning “village of the monks.” Founded in 1204 at the point where the Douskey tributary joins with the greater Barrow River, Duiske Abbey, in the middle of the village, is today a buried treasure. Behind its basic exterior, you'll find a vast, bright, and uplifting space where the light bounces off the white stone walls and radiates through the stained glass windows, drawing your eyes gradually to the high vaulted ceiling.

maybe by foot or bicycle, along the 4-mile-long riverside towpath that joins both.

We'll look beyond the villages, too. Traveling just a minute or two outside of civilization, you'll find some of the most stunning Irish landscapes that appear untouched by time.



© Lynn Mulvihill

Village green in St. Mullins



A Cistercian monks guards the local bank

One of the largest and grandest of the 34 Cistercian abbeys in Ireland, it was the home of the Cistercian monks until its suppression by Henry VIII in 1536. Monks continued to live on the site, but, sadly, the monastery itself gradually fell into ruin. The abbey, however, continued to serve as a local place of worship.

From Church of Ireland patronage, it passed back into the hands of the Catholic Church in 1812, was completely renovated in 1980, and is today a fully functional parish church that, thanks to its acoustics, has hosted greats like the Vienna Boys Choir in concert.



Its strong acoustics make Duiske Abbey a perfect concert hall

Inside its mixed Gothic and Romanesque style walls, you'll see some medieval remains, including elaborate nave windows and a 13th-century effigy of a knight.

Outside, in the churchyard, are two eighth-century granite high crosses. These were re-erected on the site of the monastery, brought from other areas in the Barrow valley. Their primitive designs include scenes from the Book of Genesis, the Crucifixion of Christ, along with the Celtic geometric designs that were common in that era.



Don't be fooled by the modest exterior



An eighth-century cross in Duiske Abbey graveyard

The graveyard at Duiske Abbey is peaceful to walk around, and, amid the crumbling, sloping headstones, are other high crosses to explore. Though the abbey is used as a Catholic Church today, on a Saturday afternoon in early September, I was surprised to find myself alone inside its walls. In fact, I'd earlier walked past, believing the church to be closed. Only by returning to read the opening times above the door did I venture to turn the handle and admit myself to its inner peace. It's open to the public (free entry) from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in summer and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during winter. The effigy of the knight (which I almost missed) is through a separate doorway to the right of the altar.



A 13th-century effigy of a knight

It's hard not to be drawn to places with such history. The monks are still remembered around town by two prominent statues—one outside the abbey, the other outside the Bank of Ireland branch. The cartoon-style painted wall just before the boat club follows the journey of the village from the monks through to the modern diving boards.

The present town is more defined by its remarkable stretch of river than its monastic past. Approaching from the Carlow side of the Barrow, through the village of Tinnahinch—really an extension of Graiguenamanagh—provides an extraordinary view of the quayside with its stone buildings, cottages, and line-up of pleasure boats and barges.

To the left, a row of mallards glides toward the bridge away from the weir. To the right, locals and the small number of lucky visitors passing through, bask on the steps outside the rowing club or bathe in the water, giving way to the occasional kayak or rowboat.



The Tinnahinch skyline beyond the weir

Graig is an outpost—one of Ireland's well-kept secrets that's not on the radar of either local or international visitors. Most of the people who make it here do so by boat—or by foot along the towpath (more on that in a moment)—lucky to find themselves in a place of natural beauty and tranquility.



Graig is a popular swimming and diving spot

The Barrow Boatmen

The River Barrow, the second-longest river in the country (the River Shannon is the longest), was a commercial canalized waterway from the 18th century up until the 1950s when the

railways took over as a more efficient way of moving goods. The Barrow canal started in Athy, where it joined with the Grand Canal, and had important ports at Carlow, Graiguenamanagh, and New Ross. (North of Athy, the Barrow passes through Portarlinton and Monasterevin, though these were never canalized.)

Most of the employees of the Barrow Navigation Company came from the Graiguenamanagh area. The boatmen were classed as skilled workers because of the skills they needed to navigate the waters. As noted by T.P. Hayden, who documented the history of the Barrow canal in a 1953 article in the *Old Carlow Society*, a boatman was a respected member of Graig society:

“In Graignamanagh the business of the boatman has been held in peculiar respect, almost like a medieval guild. Generations of boat people have intermarried, a feature of seafaring communities in different parts of Ireland and elsewhere. A further remarkable fact that for as long back as I can trace—that is 150 years—nearly all the boatmen have hailed from the western bank of the river and none from the pale bank.”

“Whoso lives by west of the Barrow, lives west of the law” wrote English politician and poet John Davies around the 17th century. The boatmen, it seems, were not of a lawless nature. Hayden, however, wrote in their defense, “Bargees and men around waterfronts do not as a rule bear too good a reputation in all countries. Barrow boatmen were an outstanding exception. They were highly respected and there was never any river crime on the river.”

Through the series of waterways and locks, the boatmen carried malting barley to Dublin for brewing by Guinness and, later, transported the finished ale back downstream. Beet was also commonly moved along the waters to the sugar factory in Carlow.

Activity on the Barrow canal is purely recreational these days. And, on a summer’s day, if you’re not in the water yourself, it’s entertaining to take a seat on the shore (at either side) and watch the swimmers, divers, and kayakers, while fishing boats and small cruisers drift slowly by, finally disappearing under an arch of the bridge.

A river adventure



Paddling is popular everywhere on the Barrow and made more fun with the series of locks and weirs that were installed as part of the canal navigation system. A number of companies lead tours around the area. This summer, my husband and I, along with our two older children (ages 7 and 5), took a “Splash n Dash” canoeing trip with our two instructors Charlie (the owner) and Rachel from [Go With The Flow River Adventures](#).

We started out at Clashganny Lock, less than 2 miles upriver from Graiguenamanagh, and spent two hours on the water, learning basic skills to help us down over the weirs and navigate the river rapids.

Along the way, we had a few chances to rest as our instructors managed the lock gates. The boys were fascinated as much by Charlie’s version of Alibaba and the 40 Thieves (encouraging them to shout “open sesame” to get the lock gates to open) as I was by the peace on the river. On our two-hour trip, the only soul we met was a low-flying heron.

This was our family’s second outing with Go With The Flow and I highly recommend them. (I paid full rate, by the way, so am under no obligation to say this.) They deal with absolute beginners, cater to all ages (we took our son when he was just 3), and no experience at all is required. All equipment is provided, though if you have a wetsuit, bring it along for your own comfort. A “Splash n Dash” adventure costs 45 euros for an adult and 30 euros for a child. Family rates are available.

The Barrow Way

Today’s modern engine-powered barges are a welcome sight along the Graig quay. But the original barges to pass through town did not make their way by water. Alongside the Barrow River runs a towpath once used to convey horse-drawn barges and other goods for transport.

From around the 1920s, with the arrival of the Bolinder engine, steam-powered barges took over the work. Between transport taking to the water and the later construction of the railway lines, the towpath fell out of use...commercially, at least. Today, it’s an unspoiled trail for walkers, bikers, and nature enthusiasts. The Barrow Way runs for 114 kilometers, starting in the village of Lowtown, County Kildare, and ending in unassuming little St. Mullins. I’ve seen it documented in a number of places that

the final 4-mile stretch from Graiguenamanagh to St. Mullins is the most beautiful of the entire route.



Start and end point for the Barrow Way in St. Mullins

You can take The Barrow Way in a number of stages. The longest stretch is from Bagenalstown, County Carlow, to Graiguenamanagh (16 miles [see map on page 7](#)). You'll find accommodation options along the way to break up the journey. Though you could complete it in a good day's cycling, it's worth stopping to explore the attractions along the route—the pretty lock houses, the arched bridges, the weirs, the natural flora and fauna of the area.

Wildlife you can expect to see along the route includes otters, kingfishers, and herons. On the day we took our canoe trip, buzzards had been sighted near Clashganny Lock. You can hire bikes in Graiguenamanagh from the [Waterside Guesthouse](#). Cost is 15 euros per bicycle per day.

Home On The Water?

This way of life is not for everyone. I visit this area for its natural tranquility and that feeling of escaping into the past. I should remind you, though, that I'm coming from a relatively small Irish town just an hour away. If you were moving here from New York or Los Angeles, the lifestyle could be a shock...or just the change you're looking for.

Yes, it's relaxing. But there is also enough scope for activity that you couldn't easily find yourself at a loose end. If you love fishing or spending time on boats, this is the perfect place to keep a small craft. Look out for properties that come with river frontage and you'll have easy access when the urge comes to hit the water.



A pirate's life for you?

A number of companies hire barges and cruisers (see Rolodex for details), and prices start around 800 to 900 euros for a two-berth barge in low season. On its website, [Waterways Ireland](#) states that mooring for "reasonable" stopovers along the Barrow line is free. You'll need a lock key—or somebody local with a key—to get through any locks. The company you hire your boat with should be able to advise you on fees and locks.

Another option, if you were only planning to spend a few weeks or months in Ireland (around the summer), would be to buy your own houseboat. Keep an eye on the [Donedeal](#) website for boat sales. I spotted a [Dutch barge](#) based in County Cavan on offer for a little over 50,000 euros (US\$64,114). And, at time of writing, there's a complete fixer-upper for 3,950 euros (US\$5,065) on [Adverts.ie](#). Waterways Ireland quotes an annual rate of 126 euros (US\$161) for mooring and unlimited lockage along the Barrow.

A further advantage to establishing a home on the water would be complete avoidance of Irish taxes, which would normally kick in should you decide to stay 183 days in the country. (Whether you could even last this long on a boat in Irish weather is, of course, questionable.)

Despite its popularity in this area, barging in Ireland is enjoyed by relatively few. It's a way of life far removed from day-to-day Irish life, and most of us would know little about it only for the national television series "Waterways" that started in 1992 when environmentalist and writer Dick Warner took the nation on a discovery tour of Ireland's canals. As a teenager, I was fascinated by this man with the beard who navigated his barge effortlessly along these idyllic ripple-free waters, observing wildlife that was foreign to us town-dwellers, and swapping stories with fellow bargers along the way. Unfortunately, Warner's books on the Irish waterways seem to be out of print (used copies command high prices on Amazon), but you can still buy a DVD version of the Waterways television series.

Fishing On The Barrow

When planning to fish anywhere in Ireland, you need to check regarding the local regulations. While some spots, including areas along the Barrow, are considered "free" fishing spots, others are regulated by the local fisheries boards. This may mean that a permit is required or that you cannot fish during certain times of the year or that you may be in a "catch and release" zone. [Fishing Ireland](#) reports that you won't find many salmon along the Barrow, but your prospects for catching brown trout are good. Graiguenamanagh has its own angling club which can advise you on the best local spots—along with the dos and don'ts. Inquire at the Boat Club for details. (I'll come back to the fishing scene during our St. Mullins tour.)

On-Land Activities

Of course, there's plenty more to do out of the water. Golfers have a number of attractive options within the locality. Just 2 kilometers outside Graig, on the Carlow side of the river, is 18-hole [Carrigleade Golf Course](#). (It's just five minutes to St. Mullins, too.) Other notable courses in the county are [Kilkenny Golf Club](#), [Callan Golf Club](#), and the prestigious Jack Nicklaus-designed [Mount Juliet Golf Course](#) that has twice hosted the WGC-American Express Championship. Even if you're not a golfer, the Mount Juliet resort is ideal for a leisurely stroll and a treat of afternoon tea.

If you enjoy pottery—or would like a shot at it—the classes at [Mount Brandon Cottages & Pottery School](#) cater to beginners and the more experienced. Both adult and children's classes run every week, and you can arrange for private classes.

If you're musical, you may be interested in taking up with the talented Graiguenamanagh Brass Band. Housed across the road from the town library, it claims roots as far back as 1760, making it the oldest brass band in Ireland. It has a strong following in the county and beyond, performing at official events and festivals.

The library across the road is a good source to check out other clubs and find out what's happening in the area. It has its own reading club that meets here on the first Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m.



Stop in for a pint and a lively trad session

Not For The Mobility Impaired

Unfortunately, Ireland is not the best for wheelchair access. Things are constantly improving, but as it stands now, what is billed as handicapped-friendly is not always so friendly. A friend of mine is wheelchair-bound and I've seen him navigate some truly awkward paths that were supposed to be wheelchair accessible.

Of course, this all really comes down to your own personal priorities. If you love the outdoor life, then there is plenty to enjoy regardless of ability. A mobility scooter would certainly help in getting out and appreciating the river and towpath. If getting easily from A to B is top priority, then you'd be better checking out the bigger towns and cities before coming to a smaller town like Kilkenny.

Houses, Gardens, And Kennedys

The southeast region is rich with old estates and gardens, castles, and period homes to satisfy the history aficionado. [Kilkenny Castle](#) and its gardens are an obvious attraction, but [Rothe House](#), also in Kilkenny town, is a lesser-known treasure. It's the only surviving merchant's townhouse from the 17th century. It houses a museum, and its recently opened gardens are a reconstruction of landscaping in the 17th century. From Graig, it's just under 20 minutes to [Woodstock House and Gardens](#) in Inistioge (see sidebar).

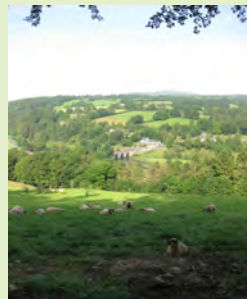
New Ross, 25 minutes away, has the [Dunbrody Famine Ship](#) (yes, Ireland has somehow managed to make a tourist industry out of a national disaster), a reconstruction of the coffin ships that crossed the Atlantic during these hard times. If you're a Kennedy fan, you'll appreciate a trip to Dunganstown, New Ross, where you'll find the [Kennedy Homestead](#). Here you can trace the Kennedy family's fortunes from humble beginnings in New Ross to the big names they became across the pond. The Kennedy family is revered around these parts. In his 1963 presidential visit to Ireland, JFK came back to the old farm in Dunganstown where his relations continue to live today. In 2013, 50 years after her father's visit, Caroline Kennedy officially opened the visitor center here.

The Fastest Game In Ireland

You won't go far around County Kilkenny without spotting the signature black and amber county colors for hurling. "The Cats" as the local county team is known probably has more support behind it than any other county in Ireland. Kilkenny people are passionate about hurling. The Gaelic Athletic Association's hurling championship season starts in May—when you'll see more and more flags emerge—and ends with the All-Ireland Hurling Final in September. And, it's not just simple flags, bunting, and teddy bears adorned in the county colors that take pride of place in Kilkenny front gardens. Entire houses and cars will sometimes get a lick of black and amber paint in time for the championships.

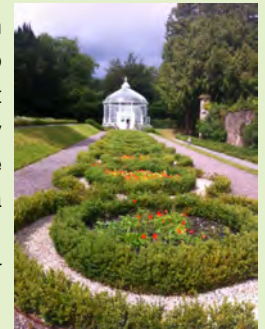
Ah, Inistioge!

Pronounced "Inish-TEEG," the prettier sister of Graiguenamanagh resides on the River Nore that flows down from Kilkenny. Postcard-perfect, it was the setting for the 1995 movie, "Circle Of Friends," based on the novel (set in Ireland in the 1950s) by much-adored Irish writer Maeve Binchy, starring Chris O'Donnell and Minnie Driver.



The Circle Of Friends cafe in the village is the only reminder that anything more than a tractor chugging up the hill happened here. (We were impressed with the food at Circle of Friends—the kids' Hawaiian pizza came with real chunks of ham. My husband and I chose to go with the specials board rather than the standard menu, and we devoured goat's cheese bruschetta and garlic prawns. Unfortunately, we had no room for the delicious selection of homemade desserts, including lemon-meringue pie, coffee cake, lemon drizzle cake, rocky road, and fruit crumble. Next time...)

Inistioge is less than 20 minutes from Graiguenamanagh and is another fine spot to come and spend an easy day by the river. A visit to [Woodstock Gardens](#), with its noble firs, monkey puzzles, and rose garden, is a must—set aside a whole day for this pursuit alone. And bring a picnic—the tearoom, open in the summer months, stocks just basic snacks, scones, and cakes—or stop by Circle of Friends on your way home.



To be honest, this issue could just as easily have featured Inistioge. But after I'd spent more time around both villages, I feel Graiguenamanagh has a bit more life around town and more opportunity for activities around its river. If you are drawn to this area, though, I couldn't fault it at all. Some attractive opportunities on the market here right now include [this little townhouse](#) for 95,000 euros and a [period house](#) overlooking the Nore (with plenty of options in between).

Kilkenny holds the record for winning the most hurling championships in Ireland—the county took home the Liam McCarthy cup no less than 34 times (out of 126 championships). At time of writing, The Cats have drawn with Tipperary (another strong hurling team) in the 2014



The black and amber flaps on the eve of the All-Ireland Hurling Final

All-Ireland Hurling Final, leading to a rematch at the end of the month. No golden goals or extra time for the Gaelic Athletic Association. Replays are common—in one year, three “finals” were been played to secure the cup.

Despite what its name may suggest, only 13 counties currently compete in the All-Ireland Hurling Championships. The other big leg of the GAA is Gaelic football. Most counties in the south of the country compete in both football and hurling. Kilkenny is the only one that is focused purely on hurling—maybe the key to its long-running success. [This map](#) neatly depicts the GAA scene by county.

On the day of an All-Ireland Hurling Final involving The Cats, you can expect village streets to be quiet. Those who haven't joined the exodus to Croke Park for the final showdown will be gathered in the local pubs or with their families to watch what's deemed the world's fastest game on grass.

Social Calendar

Quiet as the area is, it's not without its festival highlights. The Graiguenamanagh-Tinnahinch Regatta and Rowing Festival happens over the first weekend in August and the line-up of activities includes rowing, swimming, diving, cot (traditional fishing boat) racing, iron man competition, and other novelty events. Competitions are open to everybody.

Begrudgers Of The Cats

Rivalry among GAA contenders all over the country is high. And, since Kilkenny is bordered by five other hurling counties, the county has its fair share of begrudgers. This is not helped either by Kilkenny's continued success or its apparent lack of humility. When Kilkenny wins, locals will rub their neighbors' noses in it...for months after. This doesn't win them any favors on the national scene.

Consider the following quote from an interview by Satellite News Channel during Euro 2004 in Lisbon. The reporter asked one man if he was disappointed that England had lost...

The man replied, “Not at all, I'm Irish, I'm from Waterford.”

The reporter then asked, “But would you not support England when Ireland is not in the competition?”

The man replied “Jaysus, no way.”

Reporter: “Why not?”

Man: “800 years of oppression!”

Reporter: “Is there ever any time you would support England?”

Man: “Maybe if they were playing Kilkenny!”

Twelve years running, the [Town Of Books](#) festival has just wrapped up in Graiguenamanagh until September 2015. This event is earning itself nationwide recognition for the stalls around town of used, new, bargain, and rare books—as well as readings and author workshops. Books sell from as little as 1 euro up to thousands of euros.

Less than 10 minutes from Graiguenamanagh is the town of Borris, County Carlow. In June, Borris House becomes the setting for the [Festival of Writing and Ideas](#).

A little farther afield but within an hour's drive, other dates worth noting on the event calendar include the hugely popular [Cat Laughs Comedy Festival](#) in Kilkenny (first weekend in June, this is a big event that attracts national and international comedy greats), [Kilkenny Arts Festival](#) (August), [New Ross Piano Festival](#) (September), Kilkenomics in Kilkenny (November—a relatively new festival bringing together comedy and economics), [Wexford Festival of Opera](#)

(October and November), [Winterval Christmas Festival](#) in Waterford City (December).

Spotlight On St. Mullins

Named after St. Moling, I could describe the village of St. Mullins as the best of Graigenamanagh on a smaller scale. But that would not do it justice. It's on the River Barrow, so you can enjoy the same water activities in a peaceful setting. It also lies at the end of the Barrow towpath, so you have the same safe and tranquil walking facility and nature reserve. Life here, though, is significantly quieter...



Still waters of the Barrow at St. Mullins

On entering the village, you may wonder where everybody is. The centerpiece is the remains of a Norman motte and bailey. The motte, a manmade mound, dates from the 12th century when the Normans built their wooden defense on top. The bailey below would have housed the castle's garrison and household. This bailey at St. Mullins is noted as unusually narrow and long—which makes it a good tent-pitching spot. The grassy remains of former dwellings can be found onsite.

Spread at opposite ends of this once Norman settlement are the village's single pub, Blanchfield's Bar, and the old monastery. (Yes, another one.) This one dates from the seventh century. It was built by St. Moling, a native of Kerry, who studied as a monk in Ferns, County Wexford, and Glendalough, County Wicklow, and later served as archbishop of Ferns. He is believed to have been buried on the site of his church in nearby Templenaboe.



Climb to the top of the Norman motte for the view

The ruins of the monastery can be accessed via the entrance to the old Church of Ireland church that now serves as the heritage center. The graveyard is also worth exploring. Some of the insurgents involved in the 1798 Rebellion in Wexford are buried here.

St. Moling's Well, guarded over by a statue of the tonsured monk, is another landmark in the village. Traditionally, the waters of the well were believed to cure sore throats—St. Moling himself was afflicted with throat ulcers.

Overflowing With History

Remember, again, that this time you're in County Carlow. You've left the black and amber far behind. It's also on the eastern side of the Barrow, the law-abiding side of yesteryear.

For its size, it's hard to believe the list of historical features in St. Mullins. All of these sites can be appreciated at once by climbing to the top of the motte. The surrounding trees, many ash and hazel, with their gnarled roots and branches, add even more intrigue. Watching a flock of birds swoop above the church in the fading light of a fall evening, I was struck by the gothic beauty of it all.

Another site linked to St. Moling is the nearby site of Templenaboe. Here, a church (Templenaboe translates as "church of the cows") was built in thanksgiving to the saint from freeing the people of Leinster (Carlow and Kilkenny are but two of the 12 counties belonging to this province) from the crippling "Borumean Tribute."



Character in the local trees



Entrance to the site of St. Moling's church at Templenaboe

This was a tax the locals were bound to pay to the High Kings of Leinster and consisted of precious metals, cattle, goats, and other goods.

The old store has been renovated as the [Old Grain Store Cottages](#) with the adjoining Mullicháin ("Mull-i-CAWN") Café, serving as accommodation to today's visitors.



The light fades on the ruins of St. Moling's abbey

Located 1.5 kilometers outside St. Mullins, on the road to Graiguenamanagh, there is little left of the former church. The site was also the burial place for unbaptized children, and mass is celebrated to remember these children, every year on St. Moling's feast day, June 17.

St. Mullins also played an important part in the movement of goods along the canal from the late 18th century. The old grain store here was used to store goods that came up the river from the port of New Ross. These were then pulled farther upstream, along the towpath, by the horse-drawn barges. This practice continued until the 1920s when the steam-powered barges made the towpath obsolete in the commercial sense.



The former grain store now serves as a top meeting place

You may hear faint laughter from a few locals or visitors enjoying a pint at the tables outside Blanchfield's. Otherwise, the main life of St. Mullins is to be found downhill, past the church, at the Mullicháin Café on the riverfront. This is the endpoint for walkers and cyclists of the Barrow Way, so it gets a good footfall. It's also, a coffee oasis in this ever so rural townland.

On a fine day, the benches outside the cafe are full and the air is alive with excited banter of those who have stumbled upon another surprising treasure.



Half-door at the Old Grain Store cottages in St. Mullins

As we drank coffee and tucked into warm mango upside-down cake (highly recommended) from the cafe, we watched learner kayakers trying to turn themselves over (and back) in the water.

It's a perfect fishing spot, of course. And your chances of reeling in a catch in St. Mullins are strong. Including salmon and trout, bream, pike, roach, and twaite shad inhabit this stretch of the Barrow at certain times. For 10 euros, you can join the local angling club, gaining access to island fishing in St. Mullins.

Regarding clubs and other activities, New Ross is 15 minutes away and has most of the amenities and facilities you could possibly want—from tennis and soccer to fitness classes and night courses.

Where To Shop?

If you don't mind not being within walking distance of amenities, and love the outdoor rural life, then St. Mullins is hard to beat in terms of stunning landscapes and easy outdoor leisure activities. You would have to travel to either Graiguenamanagh or New Ross for your full shopping list.

In good news, on my most recent visit in early September, An Siopa Glas ("The Green Shop"), with its freshly painted green half-doors, was preparing for opening. The window sign promises day-to-day necessities, fresh fruit and vegetables, home baking, free-range eggs, local juices, handmade chocolates, tea and coffee—as well as wood-turning products, candles, painting, and textiles. These crafts are obviously to appeal to visitors. But for somebody settling here, this could

be another welcoming drop-in for a cup of coffee and chat with the friendly locals.



"The Green Shop" preparing to open its doors in St. Mullins

Irish Property Update

Before we look at the local market, let's catch up on the state of the Irish property market in general. As I mentioned earlier, prices are on the rise again, following dramatic decreases over the five-year period between 2008 and 2013.

The capital shows the most dramatic growth in the last 12 months. Prices in Dublin have increased as much as 15% to 20%, and the average house price in the city is 242,600 euros, up almost 44,000 euros since 2013.

Elsewhere in the country, figures are more conservative—the national average for the first three months of the year was 7.8%. You could say there are two markets: Dublin and the rest of the country.

Driving the prices at the moment is the growing demand for residential—and particularly family-suitable—housing. In the years since 2008, the residential building sector has been almost at a standstill. The few cranes that I see in my own hometown are working on commercial projects and new schools. Out in the countryside, you see one-off houses under construction. But the big housing projects that contributed to the property bubble (many of them dropped halfway through construction, leaving "ghost estates" in their wake) have yet to be resurrected on a large scale. Meanwhile, the young population continues to grow. The average Irish family has three children, and these families need a decent-sized house.

The Builders Are Back

But ground is starting to be broken once again. Earlier this year, three big developers in Dublin announced their plans to build new homes in the outskirts of the city. This came shortly after the government reported that, in the next five years, 80,000 homes would need to be built nationally to meet with demand. Half of these are required in Dublin alone. Recent articles also suggest less of the standard three-bed semidetached homes that were churned out on a massive scale in the boom years, with a higher concentration this time on upward building in the form of duplexes and apartments. All of the upcoming developments announced for Dublin included a mix of houses, duplexes, and apartments.

This is the general picture country-wide, and it's a relief for many (particularly those first-time buyers of 2007—your author included—who found themselves in negative equity a year later) that there's a sign of life in the market again.

The area of the country we're talking about here on the Barrow, though, is far removed from such construction binges. You'll find some small developments, yes, but not the type of 600 to 1,000 cookie-cutter home projects rolled out around the bigger towns and cities during the years of the Celtic Tiger. I can't, of course, guarantee that a local farmer—in any part of the country—wouldn't be tempted to sell off a few hundred acres for development. But, because you're nowhere on the commuter belt to Dublin, you're pretty safe.

The Local Market

For further reassurance that this area is not going to explode into a major metropolis, you only have to look at the most recent figures reported for the county of Kilkenny.

In 2013, Kilkenny was one of the worst counties in terms of growth. Property sales fell by 19%, while property prices fell by 28%—the biggest percentage decrease of any county in 2013. I was unable to find growth figures for 2014 for Kilkenny, but you can safely assume they are well below the national average of 7.8%. While this is bad news for existing homeowners who want to sell, it is of course good for property hunters in the region.

I've written in previous *Overseas Retirement Letter* articles about the challenges faced in acquiring planning permission

in Ireland and recommended that a foreign buyer would be better off looking to buy an existing residence. This is even more the case today thanks to recent changes to the building codes...

The 2014 Building Code Regulations, introduced March 1, require extra documentation for any new dwelling house, for an extension of more than 400 square feet to an existing house, and for any works requiring a fire safety certificate. The reason for the introduction of the new codes is to prevent against poor building standards that were widespread during the building boom. The additional cost to the applicant wishing to build his dream home could be as much as 50,000 euros. Enough said...

Starting Your Search

As you may be aware, in most places outside the United States, an official multiple listing service doesn't exist, and the property shopping experience can be a shock. In Ireland, a home may be listed with three different agents...and at a different price with each one. The Internet is a good start for doing price comparisons. And one of the best resources out there—the closest you'll get to MLS in Ireland—is the [Daft website](#).



For Sale: The Bargeman's Cottage, 70,000 euros

Though it doesn't list every property in Ireland, it has most of them there. And, since one property may pop up a number of times with its different agents, you're less likely to be faced with a number of different price tags for the same address. Also helpful while viewing properties on Daft is the transparency of a property's market history. This is a recent thing in the Irish property market.

Scroll down past a property's description and you can see when it entered the market and any subsequent price changes. You can also see a list of what's sold recently in the same area. This is all helpful for your own research and to prepare you for determining an offer price.

To get an idea of prices and what's available on the local market around Graiguenamanagh and St. Mullins, check out my [Sample Properties](#).

Rent First

In the last year or two of the Celtic Tiger, rent prices around the country had started to drop thanks to a glut of rental properties. This continued up until the last couple of years as immigrant families, especially Polish laborers who had come to find work on construction sites here, started to return home for work when the Irish economy (and construction extravaganza) collapsed. Even though construction had halted, there was enough in rental property to go around.

But mortgages are no longer so easy for young singles and couples to acquire. And, since building has been more or less nonexistent, the rental market is thriving. Landlords, who dropped their prices in the post-Celtic Tiger years, have started competing again.

That said, tenants in rural Ireland typically pay lower rents. Current offerings on Daft start at 700 euros (US\$897) a month for a [three-bedroom townhouse](#) in Graiguenamanagh proper. Meanwhile, 2 miles outside the village, for the same monthly rent, you can have a [four-bedroom house](#) of 2,500 square feet on half an acre. On [MyHome.ie](#), a three-bedroom semidetached home is also listed for 700 euros a month.

If you're disappointed that your Web search throws up just a handful of properties, don't despair. This is the kind of place where properties for rent are often dealt by word of mouth. It may be worth organizing a short-term lodging until you have time to make further enquiries around town. I couldn't find any rental properties listed online for St. Mullins. Your best bet here is to ask at the local shop, pub, cafe, or library.

Unless stated otherwise, rental properties in Ireland are furnished as standard. Rent is paid a month in advance with a month's rent required as a booking deposit when entering a contract. Contracts are typically for a minimum of one year, but,

What's this BER?

Most properties you see listed for sale—and particularly those on the Daft website—will reveal their Building Energy Rating (BER). Since 2007, all newly built properties are issued a BER on completion. And since that date, properties being resold or rented out must also have a BER report on the property.

Ratings go from A1 (the highest) to G. Most standard new-build homes stand somewhere around a C or B rating. For example, my home completed in 2007 was classified as C1. After we had our cavity walls and attic floor insulated last fall, we were promoted to a B3. A C1 or B3 is a well-insulated, warm home. We usually don't have need for our central heating from early April to early October, which helps keep our energy bills lower.

Unfortunately, the energy rating doesn't have any bearing on property tax. You could go to the trouble and hefty expense of installing the most energy-efficient boiler, solar panels, and underfloor heating and, even producing a lower carbon footprint, still pay the same as the F-rated building down the street. If you do decide to rent your property, a BER (if it doesn't exist) will cost you in the region of 150 euros (US\$192) from a qualified assessor. More information from [Building Energy Rating Ireland](#).

if you're looking for something shorter, don't be discouraged by properties that advertise themselves as a minimum of one year. A landlord might just accommodate you.

As we always advise at Live and Invest Overseas, rent before you buy. And renting for one year is a good idea (though you don't have to lock yourself into a single property for one year), so you can live through all seasons, get a feel for everyday life, and, importantly, get to explore the area fully, so you know you're buying a property in an area that will suit your lifestyle and longer-term plans. Of course, while you're in Ireland, you may find another part of the country that appeals to you more—but I can honestly say you won't regret a single day spent in this part of the southeast.

Cost Of Living

It's no secret that Ireland is one of the most expensive places in the world to live. A 2014 mid-year Cost of Living Survey by [numbeo.com](#) ranks Ireland in 10th place of 119 countries. (The United States stands at number 30.)

While supermarkets constantly compete against each other and advertise their falling prices, grocery items are more expensive than in the United States. The growth of the German discount chains (Lidl and Aldi), however, has made it easier for Irish families to lower their food bills—and has helped lower grocery prices across the board. Despite this, the disposable income of the average Irish household is still 10% to 15% lower than the boom years. This is mostly thanks to utility costs...

The prices for electricity and gas have been on the rise annually. From Oct. 1, 2014, the PSO (public service obligation) levy on electricity, rised 54% to 42.87 euros per household per year. Meanwhile, the cost of health care and insurance has been rising over the past five years—more information on health shortly.

Putting a further dent in Irish household budgets the past two years is the property tax. Since 2013, all homes in Ireland (with a few exceptions) are subject to this annual levy. How much you pay depends on the bracket your property value falls within. There are 20 brackets on the table, with fixed corresponding charges. To give you an idea, a property valued at 200,000 euros (US\$256,253) would fall into band 04 and, at current rates, pay an annual charge of 405 euros (US\$519). The market value is decided by the local authority and, in practice, seems to reflect what properties are selling for at the moment. (See more in "[Your Irish Taxes.](#)")

Also from Oct. 1 this year, the long-awaited water charges kick in, and households will start receiving their water bills on a quarterly basis from January 2015. A certain amount of "free" water will be allocated for basic needs. Needless to say, in this time of austerity, the imminent water charges are a cause of much bitterness. "No water charges here" signs hang hopelessly in some streets of my hometown.

While you cannot ignore these costs, the fact remains that, like anywhere in the world, you are responsible for your own budget and can live as modestly or as extravagantly as you wish. Obviously, in Ireland, you'll likely run out of funds quicker.

But living in the country, you'll have more opportunity to enjoy free activities and be less distracted by costly ones. It comes down to lifestyle choice—and, of course, shopping around sensibly. While meat, fruit and vegetables, etc. can be bought relatively cheaply locally in Graiguenamanagh, you'll need to

The Water Charge Saga

The original deadline outlined in the Troika bailout program for the introduction of Irish water charges was January 2014. The Irish government has been unable to cope with this deadline and the project of rolling out meters by Irish Water—the state body responsible for metering and billing—around the country continues to run behind schedule.

As of mid-September 2014, no meter has been installed in my home (or anybody else I know in my locality) in Waterford City. Yet, we will be billed from the beginning of next month. The best information I can get from [Irish Water](#) (the body responsible for billing) is: "Customers will receive an unmetered bill if a meter has not been installed for their property. The cost of an unmetered bill will be defined by the regulator."

Adding fuel to the fire are recent reports that Irish water charges will be among the highest in Europe. An [Irish Times article](#) claims that while the government promises to keep the average charge per household to 238 euros (US\$305) a year, it's more likely to cost in the region of 500 euros (US\$641). This is not helped by the fact that the allowance per child is one shower and one toilet flush per day. The article goes on to say "An unmetered household with one adult will be charged €176 a year for drinking water and wastewater services, with each additional person older than 18 paying €102 extra."

It should be noted that unoccupied properties are susceptible to water charges, too, as there is a cost associated with running a water supply to the address.

travel a little farther for better prices on grocery items. (On that note, a car is essential living in this part of the world. Public transport is minimal. See "[Monthly Budget](#)" for a breakdown of car costs.)

While there is a SuperValu in town, it's worth paying a trip to New Ross (25 minutes) where you'll find Lidl, Aldi, and Tesco branches. Thomastown (also about a 25-minute drive) has a Lidl branch and a good-sized SuperValu. Living in St. Mullins, you're just 15 minutes from New Ross, where you'll find everything you need grocery-wise.

Both [Supervalu](#) and [Tesco](#) run a home-delivery service (charges start from 4 euros), so it may be worth enquiring and figuring out whether you'd ultimately save on your own car fuel costs.



Local Supervalue in Graiguenamanagh

The same in-store offers can be availed of through online shopping, and, once you register, you'll get offered special online deals such as 20 euros off once you spend over 80 euros, or free delivery charge (see "[Sample Shopping Cart](#)" for an idea of local grocery prices, as well as the "[Monthly Budget](#)").

Staying Healthy

The Irish health care scene remains unchanged since my last writing on the subject. Anywhere you go in Ireland, doctors and specialists are trained to a high standard. For major surgery and management of more serious diseases and conditions, you would need to travel to the larger towns and cities. The standard of care in the public system is high, but the waiting lists are long (at the moment, you could wait up to three years to see a specialist for a minor condition). Obviously, for something more serious, you would need to go the private route.

Private health care is expensive and, for the last few years, premiums continued to rise annually. Over the last year, according to recent news reports, 41,000 people in Ireland dropped their health insurance. Responding to this continuing trend, [GloHealth](#), a recent entrant to the health insurance market, is the first to offer a pay-as-you-go option to consumers. The other main contenders in the market are [Laya](#), [VHI](#), and [Aviva](#). BUPA pulled its local service out of Ireland some years back, but you can still get a policy with [BUPA International](#)

which provides international coverage. This is often the most cost-effective route for expats, especially if they divide their time between countries—and to ensure coverage during any trips back home to the States.

In Graiguenamanagh, you have a number of local surgery and health centers, so you won't have to go far for nonemergency consultations. And you'll be able to pick up a prescription from the local pharmacy. Across the bridge in Tinnahinch there's a Health Service Executive-run community health center.

Where hospital care is required, you're not too far from both public and private options. St. Luke's General Hospital (public) and Aut Even Hospital (private) are just under an hour away in Kilkenny. St. Luke's covers the Kilkenny-Carlow region and covers almost every medical area from maternity to radiology, cardiology to occupational therapy and has an emergency department. You can see the full list [here](#). [Aut Even](#), the oldest private hospital in Ireland, is a small (71 beds) hospital committed to the highest standard of care. It operates a day surgery unit for minor problems as well as an outpatient service. (I had minor surgery here as a child and distinctly remember a hotel, rather than hospital, atmosphere.)

As in most of Western Europe, the cost of medical services is high. A consultation with your family doctor, or general practitioner, averages 50 euros (US\$64); a visit to the emergency room costs 100 euros (US\$128); an overnight stay in hospital can cost upward of 1,000 euros (US\$1,282). Once you develop a relationship with a general practitioner, though, you may find they charge you less for repeat visits.

Full- Or Part-Time?

Is this a place you could live year-round? That really depends on your personal agenda.

If you want to spend time in Ireland but don't want to have to endure too many rainy winter days, then you'd be better off planning a part-year stint. May through September is usually the best period for weather. These are, of course, the popular tourist season months, too, so short-term accommodation will cost more. On the other hand, you'll have more entertainment and cultural opportunities. (Even the cafe in St. Mullins closes its doors at the end of October and stays shut right through till February.)

As a tourist or business visitor, U.S. citizens can stay in Ireland, visa free, for up to 90 days a year. If you wish to remain longer, then you'll need to seek permission to remain. You apply for this at an official immigration office and permission is given in the form of a stamp on your passport. In order to get this stamp, you'll need to have the following with you:

- valid passport
- evidence that you have sufficient funds with which to support yourself and any dependents
- any information requested in connection with the purpose of your arrival in the state

If you're planning to enter as a student or worker, you'll also need to have the required documentation to support your case. A good starting point for your own research is the [section for retirees](#) on the Citizens Information site.

Certainly, if you want to avoid having to pay tax in Ireland, then you'll want to keep your stay to 182 days or less. (You will, though, have to pay property tax on any Irish property that you own.) If you would like a coveted Irish passport, then you'll have to take the taxes head on. The road to Irish residency is slow, but worth the wait. To get there, you will need to stick around most of the year.

Gateway, No More...

Ireland used to be the "gateway to Europe." It was relatively easy to get a passport here...and then you were free to roam the rest of Europe. Not so anymore. Unless you already hold an Irish passport (for example, through descent of Irish parents), acquiring Irish citizenship is a long (though pretty straightforward) process.

If you do have your heart set on a more permanent stay in the country, the best starting place for information on both residency and citizenship is the website of the [Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service](#). Qualification criteria for the various visas are always under review, so check the website regularly for up-to-date information.

[See our full report on Ireland's current residency situation here.](#)

What's Not To Like?

Apart from the obvious higher cost of living when compared to havens in Latin America or Asia, what sort of things might make it difficult to live here? As a parent of four young children, I'd have to point straight to **the education system**. This is not an issue for the Barrow area alone, but a countrywide issue. And, it's not so much to do with the standard of education (which is generally high) but with the lack of schooling choice.

As it stands here in 2014, 96% of primary (elementary) schools in Ireland are under the patronage of religious denominations: 90% are Catholic-run schools. This leaves little-to-no choice for parents who would like more nondenominational or multid denominational options. We live in Waterford City where my two children of school-going age attend the local Educate Together National School. [Educate Together](#), whose motto is "learn together to live together," has 74 schools around the country (mostly in the Dublin area) that are multid denominational, coeducational, child-centered, and democratically run. The first three second-level Educate Together schools opened this September.

Unfortunately, there is no Educate Together school within a commutable distance of the Graiguenamanagh area. But many children from other religious backgrounds—or without a religious background at all—attend the local Catholic schools without problems. And a lot of the schools will find ways to accommodate the children of parents who rather they do not participate in religious education, prayers, etc.

LGBT Living

County Kilkenny (or even neighboring County Carlow, for that matter) is not somewhere to come looking for any type of nightlife. There are no gay bars or clubs to be found here, but there is also no discrimination. Any gay person would fit in fine here or most anywhere in Ireland.

Coming from its Catholic background, the nation, in general, isn't entirely comfortable with homosexuality, but there is no concerted or organized activism—either pro or con.

Homosexuality has become more socially acceptable in the last decade particularly, and I think it will continue along this positive course. In May 2015, Ireland will be the first country to

hold a referendum on allowing gay marriage. It's believed that the majority of Irish voters will say yes.

For a gay person considering this part of the world, I recommend checking out [this site](#) for local connections.

Not An Industry Hub

Another challenge of living here, if you're not planning to completely "retire," would be lack of work prospects. Unless you're running your own business online or hoping to operate a tourist or service business in town, this is not a good area for job opportunities. Although the jobs market is picking up on the national front, this is an agricultural stronghold where you won't find big industry and office blocks. If you're hoping to find employment in Ireland, you'd do better to stick to areas around the cities of Dublin, Cork, and Galway.

I've mentioned the dilapidated and/or abandoned state of some of the local buildings. For the most part, they blend in with the old feel of the place. And, I imagine, as the country leaves austerity behind, these places will come alive and be used as homes, as guesthouses, as cafes, and boutiques

once again. (Since Graig is home to the Town of Books festival, it would be lovely to see its Antiquarian Book Shop restored to life.) If you prefer a more "finished," prettier, and cleaner feel, then St. Mullins is flawless—or, if you'd like to have more life around town, look toward Inistioge (for a small but vibrant village feel) or Kilkenny town itself where you'll never run out of entertainment options.

Finally, I have one personal peeve that I can't possibly ignore here...though it won't affect everybody (if you're a devout tea-drinker or can stomach instant coffee, then feel free to skip this paragraph). If you like coffee...I mean, real coffee... then I'm afraid the news is not so great. I've written before that Ireland has a severe lack of good coffee, though things have been improving in recent years. Even when you know there are good beans in the machine, that's not to say a shop assistant or waiter knows how to brew them correctly. This, again, is a countrywide problem, probably stemming from the fact that Ireland is traditionally a nation of tea-drinkers. Though Nespresso has its fans, for the majority of Irish people who stock coffee at home, it's instant. In good news, you'll see a prominent "Illy" sign on the Tinnahinch side of the bridge, indicating the presence of drinkable coffee.



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And, I can attest that the flat white served at the Mullicháin Café in St. Mullins is palatable—as was my latte in the tearoom at Woodstock Gardens, Inistioge.

The Barrow's Future


These banks of the Barrow have admirably held on to their natural beauty. Around the villages, it feels more like the 1950s than the 21st century. Go a little beyond civilization and you could imagine yourself in any past century.

I'd like to think this area will avoid the “path of progress,” and hold on to its stunning, unspoiled landscapes. The only threat right now is [Waterways Ireland's](#) proposal to upgrade the towpath from its mostly grassy state to a harder surface. The idea, of course, is to make the path more passable and attractive to walkers and cyclists. It does function well as it is, though, and it's part of the special appeal. Meetings have been held to prevent this move that would have an impact on the local wildlife. You can read more information—and sign a petition to support the campaigners—on the [Save The Barrow Line page](#).

Is It For You?

As I come to the end of my report, I honestly feel like I haven't done full justice to this area. It's difficult, even with the combination of written word, photo, and video, to showcase the marvels of this special place. In conclusion, though, I will say that it's worth exploring further—and taking a trip to

soak in the serenity—if you would appreciate any or all of the following:

- A traditional, rural life
- A small, friendly community feel
- An area steeped in history with many antiquities to explore
- A place where you can truly enjoy the great outdoors
- Fishing, boating, kayaking, and other river activities
- An English-speaking haven (all those unpronounceable village names aside). 

Country Retirement Report Online Resources

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[Sample Properties](#)
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[Monthly Budget](#)
[Importing Your Pet](#)
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Video Resources

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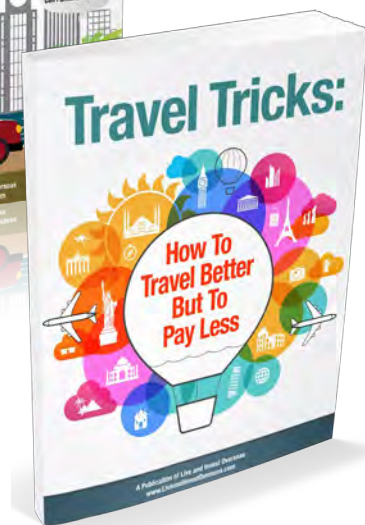


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Kathleen Peddicord
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