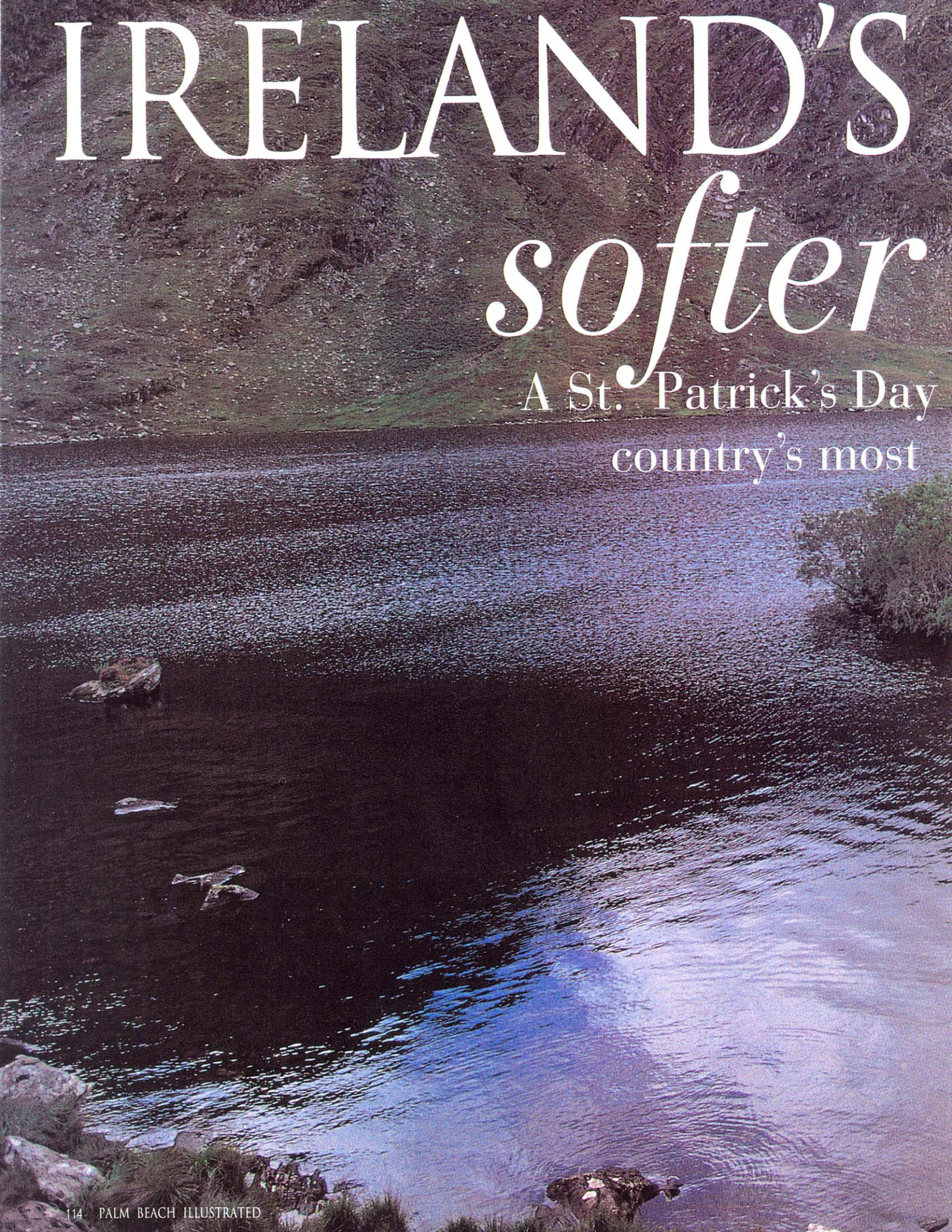
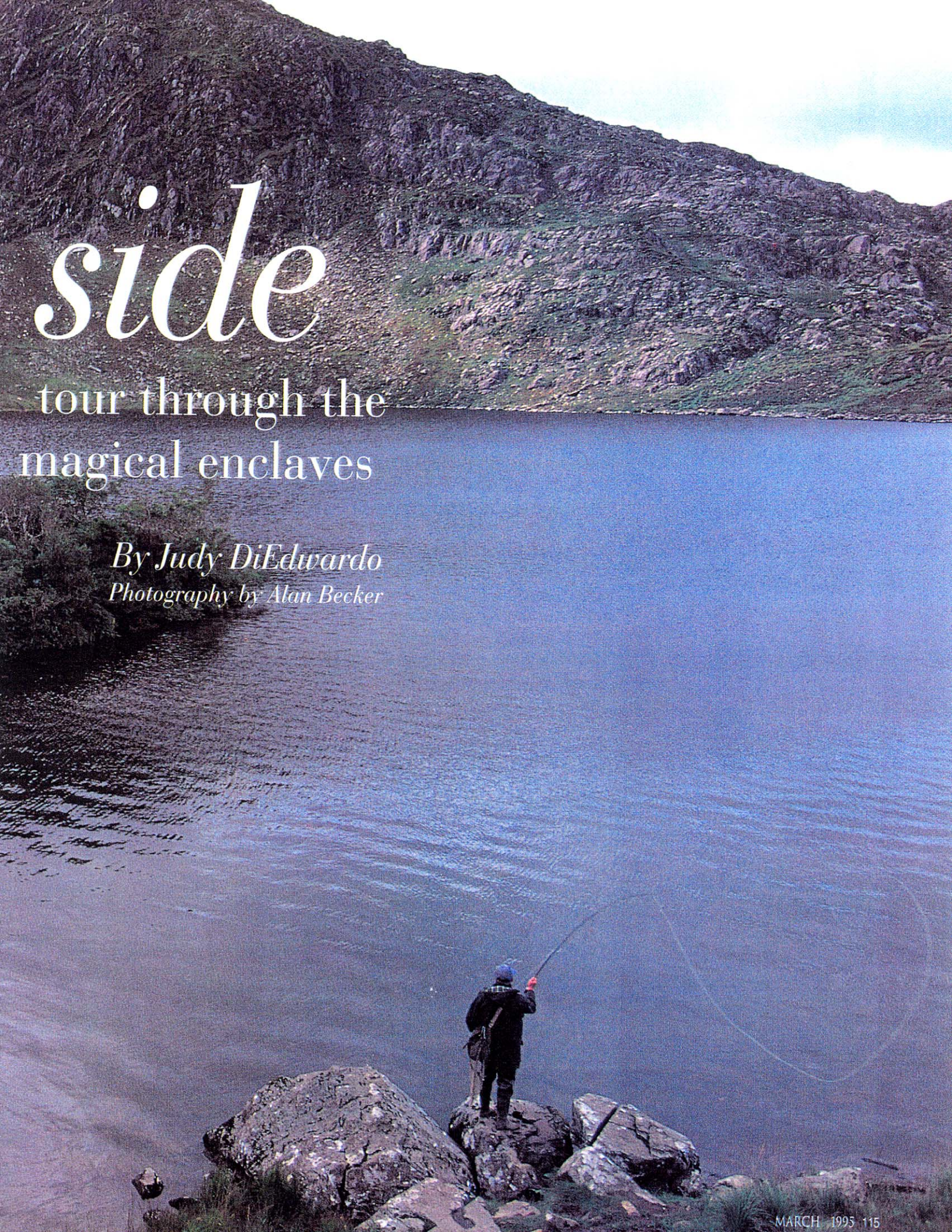


IRELAND'S *softer*

A St. Patrick's Day country's most

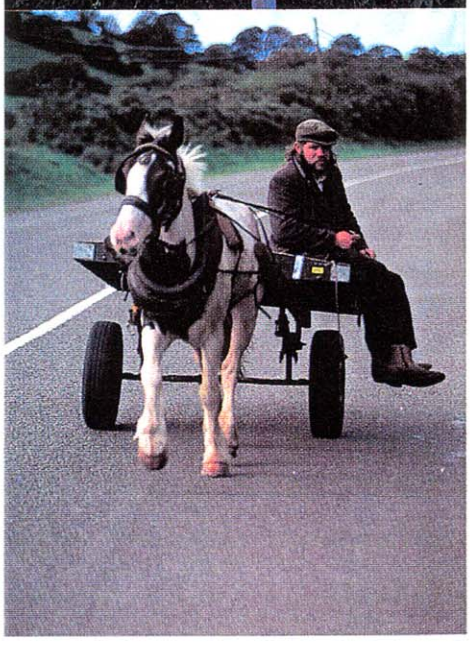


side

tour through the magical enclaves

By Judy DiEdwardo
Photography by Alan Becker

I had thought myself adequately prepared for my maiden voyage to the south of Ireland—studying maps, alternating history books and travelogues. But upon my arrival, I realized that nothing could have prepared me for the majesty of this bucolic paradise.

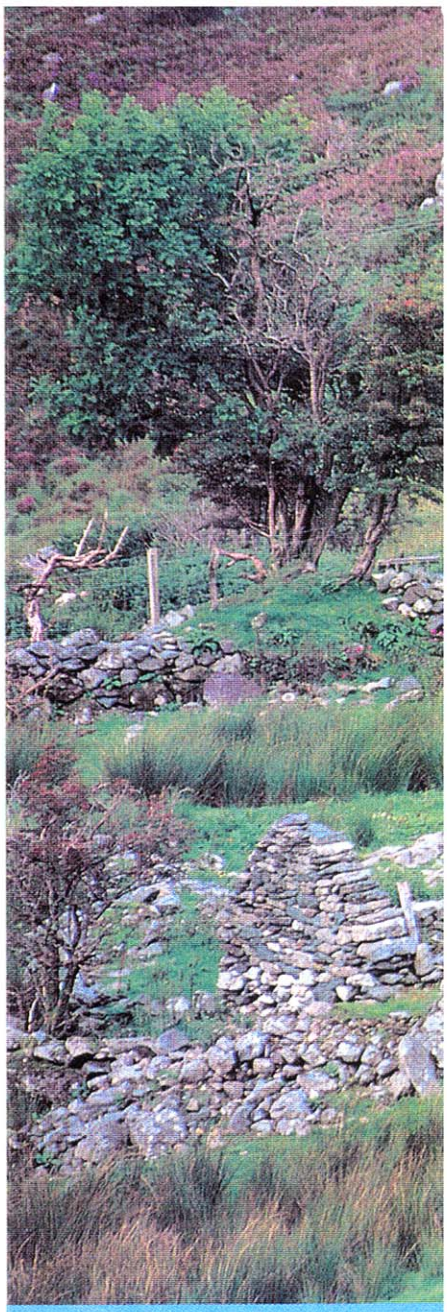


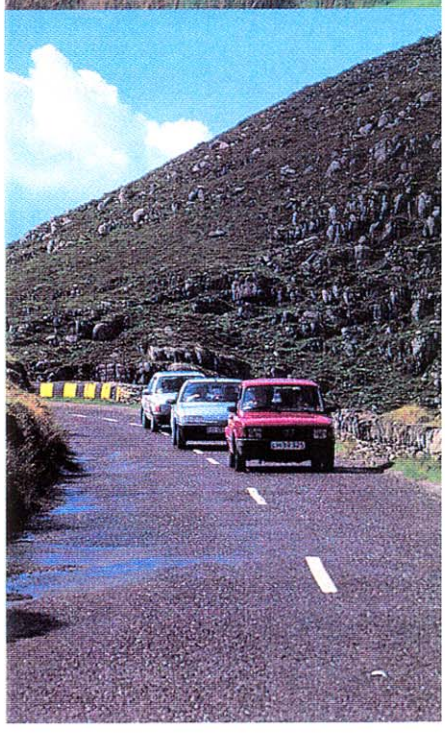
Here, ancient structures predate recorded history, while massive castles, monasteries and towers speak of Christians, Vikings and Normans. Land of breathtaking scenery, heartbreaking tragedy, unforgettable vistas, Ireland etches herself into the heart and mind.

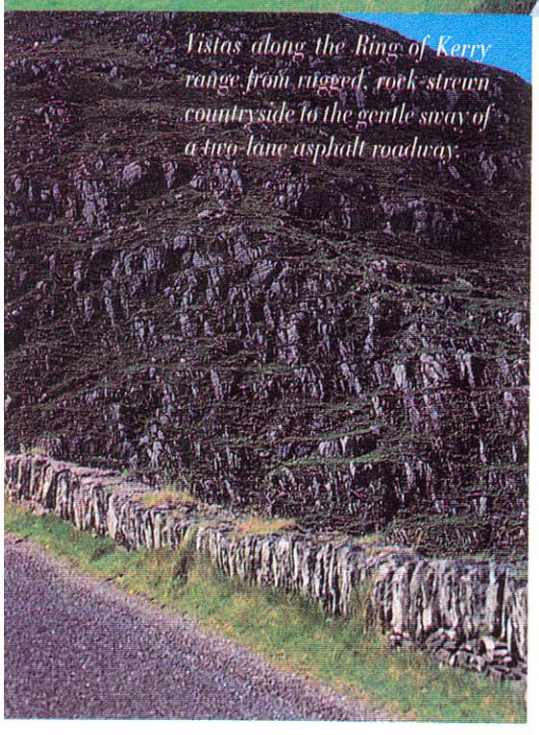
Although the country is relatively tiny (just 300 miles top to bottom and half as wide), don't plan on seeing it all at one time—or setting any land-speed records. There aren't any motorways apart from short stretches to the north and west of Dublin. Loose chippings, wandering livestock and the relaxed attitude of local drivers are the most common road hazards. These difficulties are a blessing, though—nature's way of ensuring that visitors take this magnificent country one town at a time.

My Air Lingus flight set down in the town of Cork (pronounced "cark") in County Kerry, the most picturesque of The Republic of Ireland's 26 counties. This was the chunk of Ireland I had set out to explore, and I was standing on its easternmost edge.

Weary from a restless night aboard an otherwise comfortable passage, I felt buoyed by anticipation as I stepped from the plane. The sky above was a brilliant blue, matched by refreshing 70-degree weather. I was anxious to get my car and be on my way. Destination? Sheen Falls Lodge in Kenmare, a two-hour drive west across this magnificent county toward Ireland's southernmost coast. The Lodge would be my home for five days while I carved out a series of day trips to explore this most magical land.







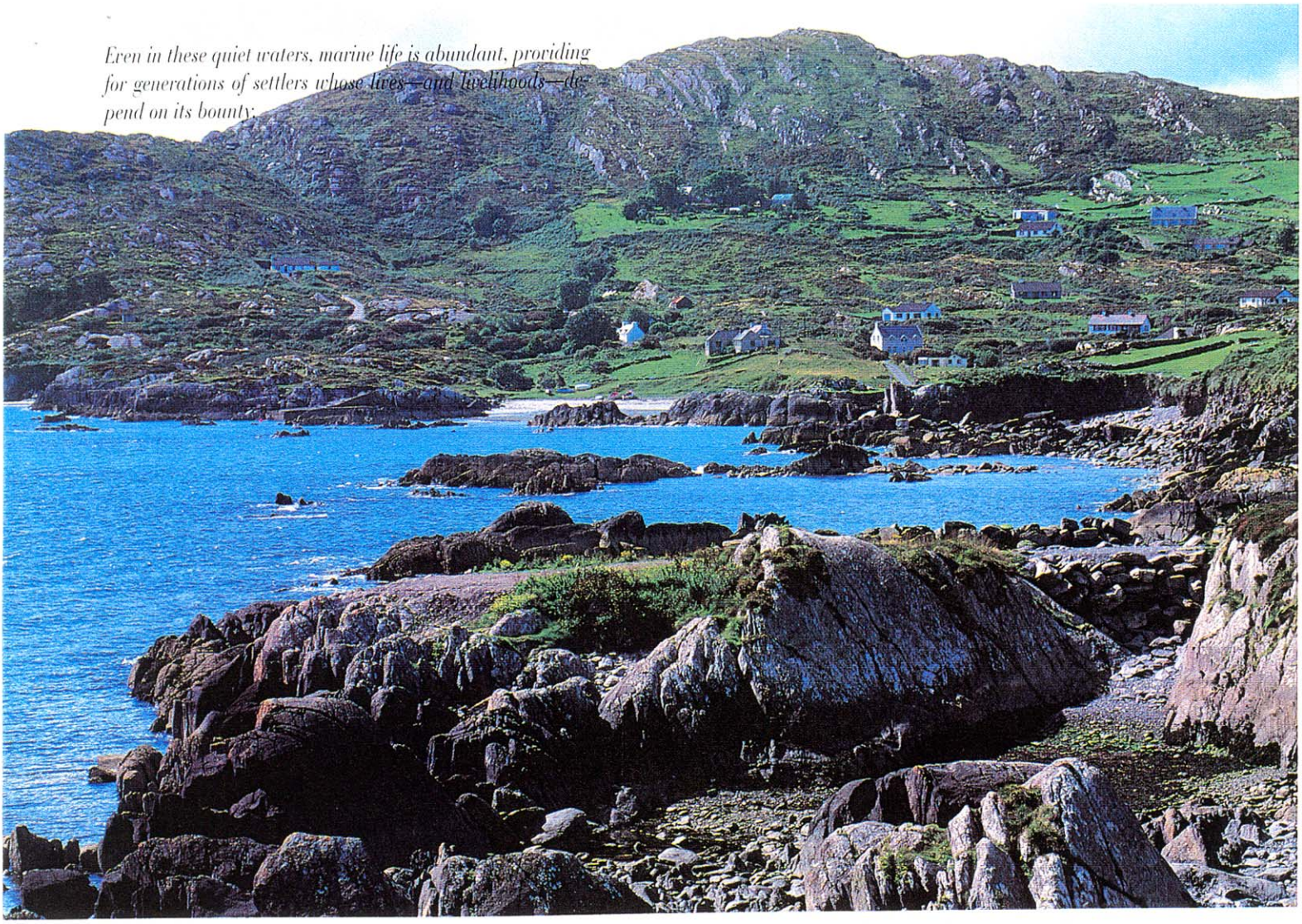
Vistas along the Ring of Kerry range from rugged, rock-strewn countryside to the gentle sway of a two-lane asphalt roadway.

Before long, I was going full speed on the roadway, easily adjusting to left-side driving as I passed miles of open rolling hills carpeted with shades of green the likes of which I had never before seen. Feeling a bit like William Conrad's Marlowe venturing deeper into an uncharted jungle, I raced faster and faster toward Kenmare, intoxicated with expectation.

A common problem with organizing a trip is missing the very things you travel to see. For that reason, I had only one plan: Sheen Falls Lodge. From there I calculated a generous circumference that I could easily navigate each day. I had considered the nomadic option—rustic B&Bs—but wasn't content with the notion of being uprooted each night. Sheen Falls couldn't have been a better choice.

Located on the former site of a hunting lodge dating back to the 1600s (when the region was first explored, mapped and settled by Sir William Petty), the 300-acre Sheen Falls Lodge was purchased in 1988 by Danish businessman Bent Hoyer, who spent $20 million reconstructing this elegant, 40-room country estate. Its ocher-hued walls and cobblestone pavements are in perfect harmony with the lush Irish landscape.

For my purposes, the property's proximity to The Ring of Kerry and the Beara and Dingle peninsulas was ideal for my seven-day, 900-mile auto trek.



Even in these quiet waters, marine life is abundant, providing for generations of settlers whose lives—and livelihoods—depend on its bounty.

If you see nothing else of southwest Ireland than The Ring of Kerry, consider yourself well initiated. This 112-mile circuitous band traverses a breathtaking range of terrain, from the sheer cliffs of Waterville that stand 700 feet above sea level and separate Ballinskelligs Bay from the island-sprinkled Lough Currane, to the stone-strewn valleys and rugged mountain vistas through Molls Gap, to the colorful, quaint market centers that await your arrival in each town. (Bird watchers should plan a day trip to Puffin Island, which, as its name suggests, is populated by puffins. Boat trips can easily be arranged.)

My journey began in the town of Kenmare, known as *Ceann Mara* (Head of the Sea) by the ancients. Founded in 1670 by Petty, who set up iron works, lead mines and other industries, the town today is a thriving marketplace and tourist center. Its famous school of needlepoint and lace-making, founded in 1861, is the Convent of the Poor Clares. Kenmare is also home to one of Ireland's most impressive monuments, the Druid's Circle, which features 15 standing stones around a dolmen of three uprights and a large capstone.

This was the Ireland I had come to see. The enduring spirit of its people, the land of eternal youth.

Next was The Ring of Kerry, exploration of which I planned to cover over the next two days. While in town, a local shopkeeper recommended I listen to Mary Black, the Joan Baez of Ireland.

"She and 'er sistars are quite the family. Thar's far of them, I believe. Mary's the oldest," he smiled as he tucked the tape into a fold of brown paper. "But I think you'll like 'er. Beautiful voice. Beautiful."

Indeed. Music in play, I was ready. The weather had turned by then. The vague strands of clouds had now banded together in a darker overcast while a misty fog began to settle. Then it rained the most gentle mist I had ever seen. "A soft Irish day," the locals call it. Even the weather in Ireland has a magical quality. Testing this notion, I beared my face to the rain. It was so fine I could barely feel it.

Within another hour or two, I found myself in a different Ireland. The sun was shining above a cloudless sky and the temperature had turned a brisk 60 degrees.

"Here, you can experience each of the four seasons in one day," I remembered reading. More magic? Yes and no. Ireland's geography accounts for much of its fickle weather. An island sitting in the Atlantic Ocean and separated from Great Britain by the Irish Sea, it is perpetually being warmed and cooled by the air, wind and surrounding water. But as any good Irishman will tell you, this changeability is all the more reason to live for the moment.

On The Road to Killarney

As I neared the town of Sneem, I passed an old man in a dark grey wool suit marching a narrow roadway at the head of a very obedient group of sheep. A crooked walking stick pointed the way. I braked, put the car in reverse, and gently guided it off the road to meet Patrick Denehy, an 85-year-old shepherd. Ninth in a family of 11 children, Paddy had bid farewell to virtually all of his siblings, most of whom had made their way to Boston. "Never cared ta leave—and I can't leave *them*," he said, gesturing to the now restless group of multicolored sheep. Colored ink pairs livestock with owner. "Besides, this is ma home."

Paddy Denehy standing over his "piece of the rock."

I examined this ancient man dressed in the traditional woolen work suit worn by his father and grandfather. His rough hands proudly displayed the effects of a lifetime of hard work, and he talked easily about everything from the legend of The Druids to his devotion to Catholicism. This was the Ireland I had come to see. The enduring spirit of its people, the *Tir na nOg*, the land of eternal youth.

To The Sea

High above a twisting shoreline, the towns of Waterville, Cahersiveen and Glenbeigh rise up from the rugged coastline like jagged emeralds. Below, fishing villages thrive on the abundant waters that have provided for the generations of people who have lived there.

Interestingly, this region's group of scattered islands has earned a reputation as a seaside resort. Charlie Chaplin spent many holidays here, as did Walt Disney and George Bernard Shaw.

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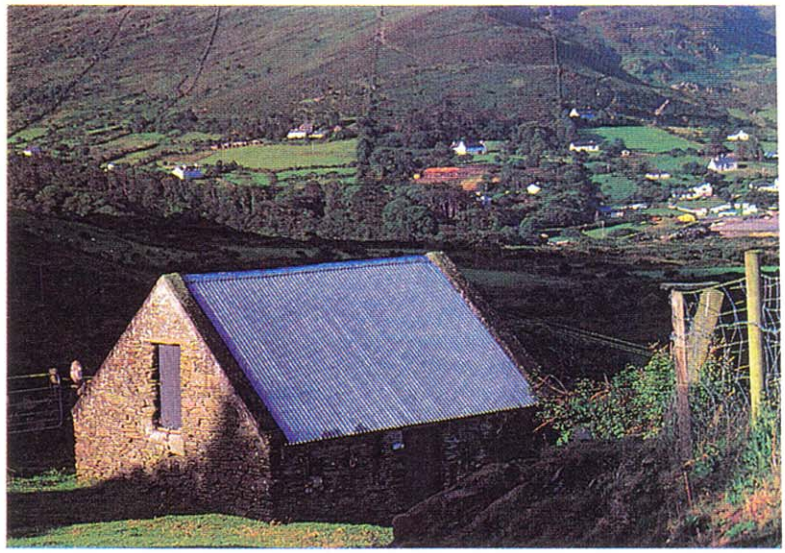

Top and middle, timeworn farmhouses dot the Irish hillside, while just five miles away brightly colored storefronts signal more modern lanes of commerce.

Below, The Ring of Kerry provides spectacular sea vistas.

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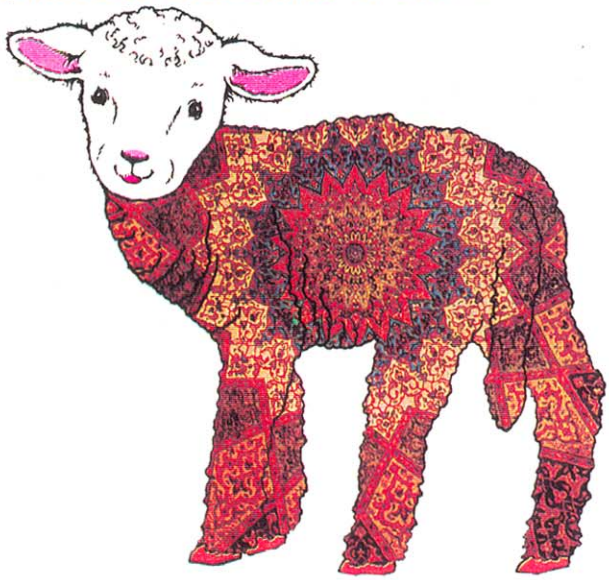

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Ireland continued from page 119

Sheen Falls Lodge in Kenmare.

The "Real" Irish

If your senses haven't gone completely numb, a quick day trip to Dingle is well worth the drive. It's the next peninsula to the north of The Ring of Kerry, and provides even more spectacular vistas. But what draws visitors to this splendid region is its reverence for tradition. The peninsula is a *Gaeltacht*, an area where the Irish language is preserved and spoken. Irish families regularly send their children here to learn and carry on the language and customs.

You won't have any trouble finding your way. From Killarney, head north to Tralee, then go west for 30 miles until English disappears from the road signs. Welcome to the part of Ireland where Gaelic is *the* language.

For an excellent sense of the area's history and geography, the crescent-shaped village of Ballyferriter (*Baile An Fheirtéaraigh*) at Dingle's western tip has a fabulous heritage center.

Be sure to explore Connor Pass. It's worth the extra couple of hours and will leave you talking all the way back to Sheen Falls Lodge. It is the highest mountain pass in Ireland, linking the north and south shores of the Dingle peninsula across the magnificent Brandon range, which features Ireland's second-highest peak, Brandon Mountain (3,127 feet). The coastal views are stupendous and the road extremely steep; I was reminded of a skydiving trip I had taken some years back. Not for the faint of heart—but, like the rest of this country, not to be missed, either. ♦