

TRAVEL



You can make your trip to the Ross Castle in Killarney National Park even more charming by hiring a horse-drawn jaunting cart.



PHOTOS BY JUILENE OSBORNE-MCKNIGHT
Performers in the Knappogue Castle Medieval Banquet

Kept in an Irish keep

Castle tours in Ireland abound, from private homes to banquet halls to historical preservation.

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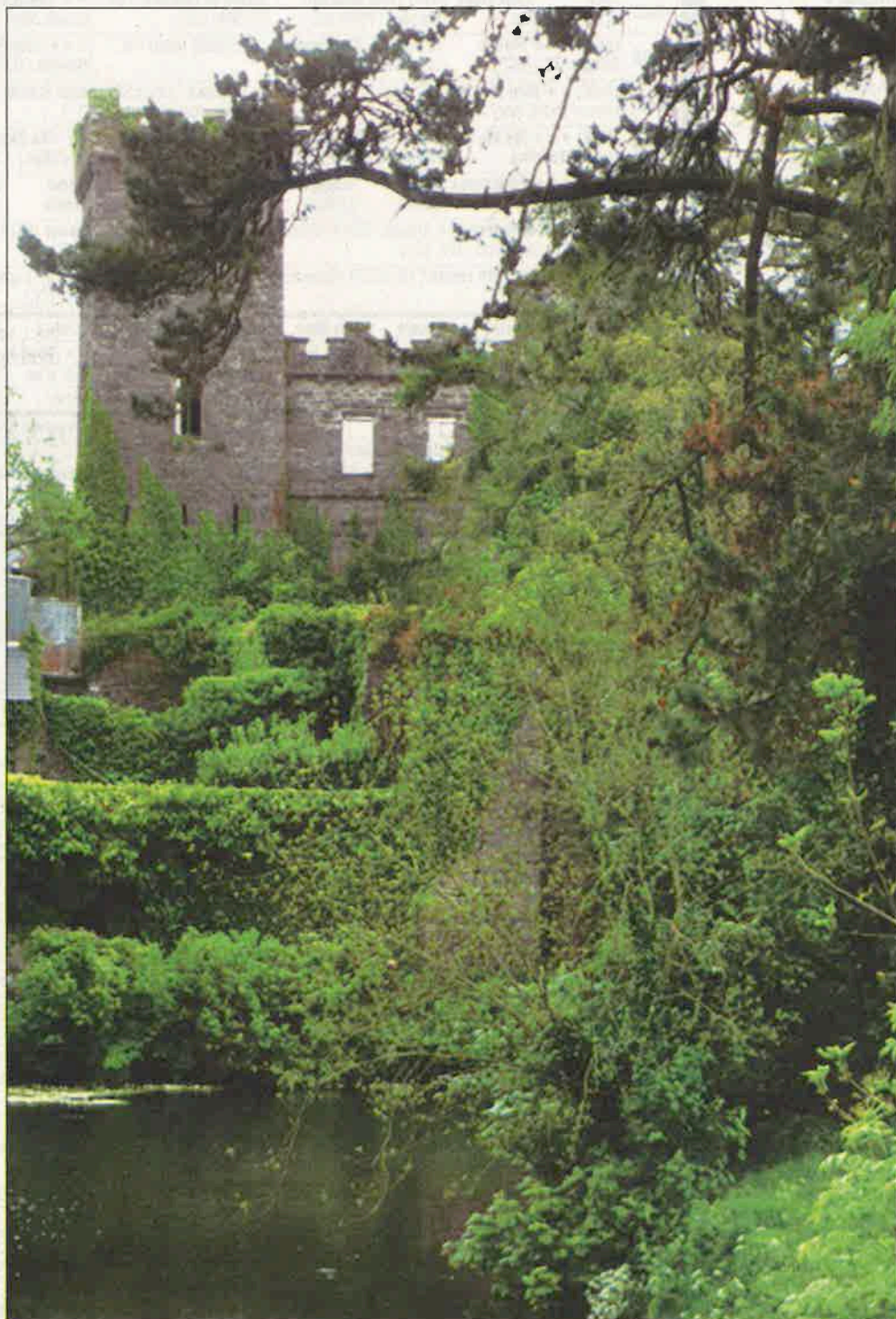
The Normans of France invaded Ireland in the 12th century and left behind more than 2,500 Norman keeps (stone castles). You can visit almost all of them! A few are privately owned by celebrities like Michael Flatley, but most come in one of three varieties: un-restored on an empty hillside, restored and available to tour, restored and available for banquets, weddings or as hotels.

How the Normans brought these keeps to Ireland is one of the craziest stories of history. A chief named Dermot MacMurrough was at war with one-eyed Tiernan O'Rourke, who was married to the beautiful Dervogilla. MacMurrough kidnapped Dervogilla and held her for ransom. Eventually, he lost. He was forced to give up both his lands and O'Rourke's kidnapped wife. This did not sit well with MacMurrough who decided to ask the Normans for help. Norman King Henry II agreed to lend him an army under the leadership of a fellow named Strongbow, who came to Ireland, took a look around and decided that the whole place should be Norman. That was in 1167 and by 1300 thousands of Norman keeps had blossomed in Ireland.

To start your keep quest in Ireland, one of the best restored examples is Ross Castle in Killarney National Park in Kerry. You can make your trip to the castle even more charming by hiring a horse-drawn jaunting cart to take you into the park, where the clip-clop of hooves will relax you and your driver (or jarvey) will keep you laughing along the way.

Ross Castle is a keep — a square tower of four stories, usually surrounded by a wall, creating an enclosed space called a bailey. The Normans were obsessed with safety. In the lowest story of the keep, they stored weapons, food and treasure; that level had no outside door and could only be entered from inside the castle. The next story at ground level was entirely staffed by soldiers, ready to stream from the castle to fight or to seal the castle up and shoot arrows from the slits in the wall. Each level above the ground also had a murder hole, through which the Normans could pour down boiling oil.

The third floor contained the banqueting hall, the warlord's "office" where he conducted local business, a gallery for musicians when he entertained and one or more huge fireplaces, because cooking was also done in that room.



PHOTOS BY JUILENE OSBORNE-MCKNIGHT
Macroom Castle with its classic Norman keep was once the home of our own William Penn.

The sleeping room was on the fourth floor and narrow staircases would lead from that floor up to the battlements, where guards were always posted. Circular staircases, which led from floor to floor, were constructed so that the soldiers in the castle could draw their swords and stab downward, but invaders could not draw their swords, because the wall of the staircase impeded their sword arm.

Of course, no visit to Ireland would be complete without a stop at Blarney Castle, where you will climb the stone steps to the top, hang upside-down and kiss the Blarney Stone, all to receive the "gift of gab" — the ability to speak as charmingly as an Irish politician. Blarney is a perfect example of a keep that blossomed into a castle, with four towers; whole cities eventually grew up inside the bailey walls, with stables, food establishments, apothecaries, churches and more; the grounds here also boast elaborate and beautiful gardens and waterfalls.

A third option is the medieval keep banquet. These are raucous and delightful experiences, especially if you are traveling in a group. Kings and Queens are selected and eat at the high dais, while all their subjects eat at trestle tables stretched throughout the great hall. Food and drink are convincingly medieval and include the Irish specialty of mead — fermented honey wine. Entertainers sing, dance and play the harp; two of the best choices for this experience are Bunratty Castle or Knappogue Castle.

Finally, you can stay in a castle in Ireland and websites such as Ireland.com, celticcastles.com or irishtourism.com will give you lists, locations and a range of prices from exorbitant all the way down to fairly reasonable.

A keep quest is the perfect trip for history-hungry American travelers.

Juilene Osborne-McKnight's forthcoming book is *The Story We Carry in Our Bones: Irish History for Americans* from Pelican Publishing. It is now available for pre-order from amazon.com.