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PHOTOS: KALPANA SUNDER

In Dublin, Kalpana Sunder finds that there's no creaking body part or fearful, aching heart that a pint of Guinness and a soft Irish ballad can't soothe

# PUB-LIN CHRONICLES



Clockwise from left: the Ha'penny Bridge across the Liffey, Stephen's Green clothed in snow, the iconic Georgian doors of Dublin

They say that there are over 1,000 pubs in Dublin — at least one for every church! Dubliners are fiercely proud of their city and often comment that the only culture outside Dublin is agriculture. History follows you everywhere; there's either a statue or a plaque or an exquisite church. Christ Church Cathedral south of the River Liffey, probably the oldest church in Dublin, was founded in the 11th century. St Patrick's Cathedral another 11th century Protestant Cathedral is where Jonathan Swift of *Gulliver's Travels* fame is buried.

Every walk here turns out to be a lesson in literature. Dublin has produced scribes and scholars: poets, novelists, playwrights. George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney... the list is endless. There are literature-related landmarks everywhere; even bridges are named after writers. You can do the 'literary pub crawl' in Dublin and pick up trivia like the fact that Oscar Wilde once boxed for Trinity College and Oliver Goldsmith wrote the nursery rhyme *Jack and Jill*. Considering the size of the country, its contribution to literature is amazing.

Green spaces abound in this city. We drive through Merrion Square, a green park, clothed in the season's first snow surrounded by fine Georgian homes. There's a statue of Oscar Wilde lounging atop a rock. Merrion Square has been the address of the intelligentsia, the Georgian neighbourhood with manicured terraces, the iconic Technicolor Dublin doors in ink blue, scarlet and canary yellow, screaming cheer and sunshine. I wonder about the origin of the colourful doors. The Irish have many yarns, but the one I like best is that when Ireland was under British rule and Queen Victoria died, citizens were asked to paint their doors black. The Irish rebelled and painted them in cheeky bright colours.

I pose outside my favourite poet's home, W B Yeats, making up for not being able to visit his grave. And then there is Stephen's Green, nine landscaped hectares in the city centre lined with elegant Georgian town houses which even has an area for the visually handicapped with Braille signs and aromatic herbs. Local artists pedal

their art on the wrought iron railings of the park. The crowning glory: Phoenix Park, the greatest green lung in Western Europe sprawling over 700 hectares and home to the Irish President and the American ambassador.

A photo-op that we enjoy is the Ha'penny Bridge, the oldest pedestrian bridge on the Liffey. The origin of the name: there was a half penny toll that had to be paid in days of yore to cross it. Our hotel is in the heart of the pedestrians-only Grafton Street. The most popular photo-op is the buxom statue of the 18th century Molly Malone who is referred to as the 'tart with the cart' and the 'dish with the fish'. James Joyce with a cane is the 'prick with a stick'; a statue of two women sitting on a bench and having a conversation with their shopping bags at their feet is

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called 'the hags with the bags'!

Beneath the angst of a turbulent history, Dublin is well known for its spirit of fun, jokes, conversation and music found in its pubs and cafes. This is where they celebrate their triumphs and drown their sorrows.

We visit the Brazen Head touted to be the oldest pub in Dublin for a pub lunch and live music. This once-coaching inn dates back to 1198. Lunch is a typical Irish spread of bangers and mash, T-bone steak, mussels steamed with garlic and shallots and Irish stew. Inside are peat-smelling fireplaces, red tile floors, old grandfather's clocks, and fire scarred posters, faded etchings and prints. But then we enter the bar at the back and realise why it's popular. There's a trio playing robust music with a lot of singing, clapping, foot tapping thrown in and an amazing atmosphere and appreciation of music. The Irish will do anything for a song!

Come evening, we head to the Temple Bar area, the party central of Dublin. It's hard to believe today that it was in the western part of Temple bar that the Vikings first landed and founded Dublin City in 841. It's harder to believe

that this is a country in the grip of an economic crisis. There are clubs, hip bars, funky boutiques, galleries and a Guinness-inspired population. We see an inebriated young musician play some music standing on a stone pillar and an appreciative audience dancing in the middle of the street.

For a refreshing change we have an afternoon of Gaelic games of hurling and Gaelic football which are a part of the identity of the Irish as much as Guinness or U2. Hurling is an ancient game and Irish mythology is replete with tales of warriors who were expert hurlers! It's a mix of lacrosse and hockey and involves hitting a ball called the sliotar with a curved wooden stick called a Hurley. Gaelic football is a mix of soccer and basketball where the players pass the ball by hand and shoot with their feet. We test our skills at hurling and Gaelic football: we realise that it's not as easy as it seems. The impromptu session turns out to be a lot of fun and inspires a healthy Irish thirst.

Back to an Irish music evening at the Arlington Hotel with a three-member band (playing the tin whistle, guitar and the fiddle) entertaining us with songs and the all familiar Irish humour. There's a stand for their glass of Guinness and they assure us that the more drunk they are, the better they sound. Irish tap dancing has us enthralled. A combination of feet stomping, flashy costumes, pirouettes and rapid leg movements. The accapella (tap dancing without music, just the beat) is particularly entralling. A fitting metaphor for Dublin? There's a beat to this city even without the music.

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PHOTOS: VIJU CHERIAN

## Scenic islands and wild nights

Viju Cherian finds that Pattaya is a popular tourist destination for a good reason, with its sports and nightlife

Kitti, our taxi driver from Bangkok to Pattaya, was very talkative. He seemed to be the goodwill ambassador for Thailand and when he got to know that my friend and I were going to Pattaya for the first time, Kitti took it upon himself to don the role of a guide and for the entire length of the two-hour long journey, he ran a list of places to visit and things to do. In the words of Kitti: "You name it, you find in Pattaya." Though it sounded like the tagline of an advertisement, it summed up our experience in the city.

Pattaya, on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand, is one of the tourist hotspots in Thailand. At first glance, it is hard to believe that this is an 18th century city. This is partly because most of the action happens in and around the Beach Road. There are mainly two things one could do in the mornings. You could choose to visit the places of interest like the Wat Khao Phra Bat temple (which has a magnificent Buddha statue), the Sanctuary of Truth (a temple built mainly of wood), the Million Years Stone Park, the Alangkarn Theatre (for shows depicting the culture and heritage of Thailand) and the Underwater World (an underwater aquarium where one can watch sharks and sting rays up close).

The other option, and this is for adventure lovers, is to hire a boat and visit the many small islands that surround the city. The islands are picturesque. One could go scuba diving, snorkelling, paragliding,

speed boating or just take a swim. Back on the mainland, people could also just while away time soaking up the sun while lying on one of the countless benches that dot the beach. As soon as someone lies on the bench they could be approached by a masseuse, some even promising the 'magical' powers of a Thai massage.

The Beach Road, like some other places in Pattaya, is filled with agents who carry a portfolio of the many attractions in and around the city. A dangerously interesting one is the chance of firing real arms — ranging from a revolver to a shotgun to a semi-automatic.

Pattaya comes to life in the nights. Shops and roads that wear a deserted look in the mornings blare loud music and are packed with people after the sun sets. A place tourists must visit is the Walking Street. The street (between Soi 13 and 16) closes for traffic by 6 pm and has a carnival feel to it, which remains the case till very late into the night, say well past 2 am. The place is filled with go-go bars, live band bars, discos, massage parlours and ethnic restaurants. Other highlights of the nightlife in Pattaya would be the Ripley's Believe It or Not museum and The Tiffany's Show.

To get there, there are straight flights to Bangkok from Chennai and Mumbai. One could fly from Suvarnaboomi Airport in Bangkok to Pattaya, but a taxi would be a better and more economical option.

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Pattaya's picturesque beaches are popular with tourists. Above: Pattaya City Beach, seen during the day, and by the lights at night

# Japan's fantasy dreamland and spots from the past

Brinda Suri visits the Sapporo Snow Festival and finds it an advertising haven, but enjoys the Zen temples Kyoto still harbours



Modernity has rapidly taken over Kyoto, leaving only a few places from the past

As the airplane descends I peep out of the window. The landscape is snow white. Snow is what I've come to see in Sapporo, the capital of Hokkaido, Japan's northern island. Not in its usual form but with an arty twist. February is time for the popular Sapporo Snow Festival and that is what's drawn me.

It is Sapporo's biggest event, annually welcoming more than two million visitors. This year I'm part of the deluge and make my way to Odori Park, the main site of the festival; Tsudome and Susukino being the other venues, the latter known for its crystal ice-sculptures. The park is essentially a strip running through the heart of a busy commercial area and is teeming with Japanese revellers. There are over 250 immense structures, including the Temple of Heaven in Beijing (China's World Heritage site), Disney characters, Japanese toon creations Hello Kitty and Pokemon, and a lot more like Yuki Saito, the Japanese (baseball) pitcher who has a huge fan-following.

PHOTOS: BRINDA SURU



The state machinery gets into focus for the fest and services of the Ground Self-Defence Force are requisitioned to bring in tonnes of pure snow from outer districts. Its professionals also build the life-size structures, the star attractions, on whose periphery are 2x2 mt blocks of snow offered to the public to carve. The snow festival is advertised as a 'fantasy dreamland' but spon-

sor signboards and touristy kitsch had reduced its visual sheen.

As dusk sets in, Odori Park gets illuminated and begins looking like the 'dreamland' it's advertised as. I've been on the snow for a few hours by now and escape to more comfy environs for another typical Japanese experience, a sushi restaurant. Sai Kaku is a place locals flock to. It's cheerful, modestly priced and buzzing with typical calls of orders placed. Chef Morinaga Narihiro truly turns out to be *sensei*, a master, who creates dishes according to my food preferences. Sushi places are known for social interaction and my neighbours, Watanabe and Fukuda, give an example of that, happily answering queries in halting English over Japan's favourite beverage, sake, which flows throughout the meal.

Sapporo is like any other bustling Japanese city, but there's not too much for those into Japanese history. For that Kyoto is the place to be.

While the modern has rapidly overtaken it, the spots from the past, espe-

cially the Zen temples that provide its balance. I ticked-off two: Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) and Ryoanji, the site of Japan's most famous rock garden. It's a small rectangular plot of white pebbles with 15 rocks. The extreme minimalism accentuates its Zen aura.

Talk Kyoto, and stereotypically *Memoirs of a Geisha* comes to mind. I couldn't go down the geisha quarters, but opted for another Kyoto experience: the *ryokan* (inns dressed with tatami mats, sliding doors, and serving traditional cuisine). A heritage property, Ugenta — at Kibune, an uphill hamlet a few miles from the city — was as good as its reviews. Its proprietor Hiroyuki Torii is a picture of poise as he hosted a tea ceremony, explaining its nuances, particularly the element of austere meant to rid the mind of clutter. Later, kaiseki or the conventional multi-course dinner was a sensory feast, a commendable finale to Kyoto savoir-faire.

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**TOP 3 PLACES FOR MARCH**

**Phuket:** Thailand's biggest and most popular island, Phuket is colourful, fun and charms a huge number of visitors every year with its turquoise seas and numerous activities. March is the best time to visit, as it is low-season — you can reap the benefits of less crowds and cheap airfare and accommodation.

**Ireland:** March 17 is St Patrick's Day which has become synonymous the world over with all things Irish. Although the weather may not be the best, the atmosphere and energy is electric with much revelry, Guinness and craic surrounding the annual St Patrick's Day celebrations.

**Queensland:** The 'Sunshine State' is full of warm rays in March after summer rains subside. The state sees a swarm of travellers descending on its shores to enjoy diving off the iconic Great Barrier Reef, surfing the world-class breaks, or heading for its Daintree tropical rainforest.