

RING MASTER

The Ring of Kerry embraces the history, tradition and stunning scenery of the Emerald Isle. What better way to experience it than in an Austin-Healey 3000?

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THE 21,699-TON MV JULIA cast off at 8.15pm from Swansea dock, bound for Cork. My 1965 Austin-Healey 3000 was stowed on the top car deck, which was accessed by a steep ramp not unlike those at the start of a roller coaster. My wife Beverley and I decided against watching Oscar winner *The King's Speech* in the cinema, and instead went out on deck to witness a blockbuster of a sunset as we cruised along the 18-mile Gower Peninsula. It cheered the spirits after 260 miles of dull motorway travel from our home in Margate, Kent. Whether it was the anticipation of driving the Ring of Kerry or the pint of Murphy's stout in my hand, I had a wide smile on my face as we turned in to our cosy cabin for the 12-hour voyage.

We were heading west from Cork by 8.30am. Motorways are as rare as Penny Blacks in this part of the world, so 171 YNO was at home at a relaxed pace on narrow rural roads. Road signs in this Irish-speaking region are bilingual, and I soon took note of 'Go mall' (slow) at hairpin bends.

From the yachting harbour of Kinsale the west Cork coastal trail hugs the shoreline, traffic-free and lined with red flowering fuchsia hedges and giant gunnera – a result of the Gulf Stream's effect on the climate. Navigation can be tricky, as the local custom of fixing as many signs as possible to one

post creates a 'tree' effect that is impossible to read without stopping!

We used the superb *Insight Guides* to Cork and south-west Ireland to alert us to the many natural, historical and gastronomic delights en route. We stopped at the highly recommended Pink Elephant restaurant near Kilbrittain but it was closed for lunch, so we pressed on to the Drombeg Stone Circle overlooking Rosscarbery Bay, built between 1200-800 BC. The standing stones have an ancient Bronze Age kitchen that could produce cooked meat in 18 minutes using pre-heated stones plunged into water.

From the colourful town of Skibbereen, we joined the route north to Durrus and the Sheep's Head Peninsula. The limit posted on the N71 was 80kph, but it would've taken all the skill of Pat Moss in a works rally 'Healey to hit such a speed on the narrow, twisty, broken Tarmac. In Durrus we were warned to take care on the bumpy road ahead in the low-slug 'Healey, but years of rallying have made me well aware of the 3000's ride height.

The drive began as a relaxed meander along the bay, before ascending the Goats Path from Kilcrohane on a steep series of hairpin bends cresting the hill. The car creaked and rattled on the broken surface, but the view of Bantry Bay was magnificent.

The brown tourist sign indicated the R574 Healy Pass, which if you're driving a 'Healey



you naturally have to follow. As Beverley donned another layer of clothing, I faced the challenge of eight miles of hairpin bends over the Cahra Mountains. I used all the big six's 150bhp and bags of torque to attack the 1000ft summit and cross into County Kerry, before plunging to the Kenmare River and on to Kenmare's Lansdowne Arms Hotel.

Rich with Georgian elegance, this comfy hotel was once the home of the second Earl of Shelbourne. As Irish traditional music was not being performed in the bar on Thursdays, we dined at the Charcoal Steakhouse in town on rib-eye steak to die for and a Chilean Alto Bajo Merlot.

Local knowledge says to drive the Ring of Kerry anticlockwise, so we passed through Moll's Gap on the N71, our starting point. The Ring is a 120-mile five-star route that boasts a rugged coastline shaped and polished by the Atlantic, expanses of sandy 'strands' hard-packed enough to drive on and panoramic skies indicating changeable weather. From Ladies View, the road descends

Clockwise from top left
Sunset across Irish Sea; Healey at Healy Pass summit; colourful facades of Kenmare; 3000 waiting for Irish refreshment; Cobh Harbour, Titanic's last departing port.

through a *Lord of the Rings* landscape of lakes, moss-covered trees and ruined castles to Killarney. Our first stop: Rossbeigh Strand. It was blowing a gale when we arrived, but taking shelter we were able to watch three horses being exercised on the four-mile deserted beach. Warden of the sands Donald O'Shea, who claims credit for its European blue flag status, posed for a portrait.

The Ring is constantly changing and packed with points of interest. For instance, from Valentia Island the world's largest ship, the *Great Eastern*, laid the telegraph cable to the New World. We had lunch in Waterville, a sleepy town that plays Irish traditional music from speakers mounted on lamp posts which probably weren't working when Charlie Chaplin brought his family here on vacation. Last August, Waterville hosted its first comedy film festival in

tribute to the great little man, to complement the statue on the promenade.

It was then up the Coomakista Pass, both of us enjoying travelling in an open classic, the rasp of the exhaust on the overrun echoing from the granite cliffs and the senses stimulated by the sounds and aromas of the wild coast. It's the reward of taking one's pride and joy on a real road trip. Time for hot drinks and delicious cake at the tearoom in Derrynane House, once home to Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell, which nestles in the trees close to St Finian's Bay. The bay itself looks akin to a Californian beach, with high dunes, white sand and black boulders.

O'Connell was so endeared by the Irish people that 200,000 greeted him on his release from Richmond jail in 1844 and he rode on a vast chariot through the crowd. The road led us back to Killarney, where we wove past County Kerry's answer to green transportation, the 'jaunting car', loaded with tourists returning from visits to Muckross House and Ross Castle.

We parked the 'Healey outside the Randles Court Hotel and were shown to a palatial suite overlooking the Macgillycuddy's Reeks. These Irish hotels really are world-class, especially in their friendly service. 'Randles Court has a rally history,' waitress Angela ➤

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O'Connor told us when we mentioned the Healy Pass. 'I am always at the pass summit for the Rally of the Lakes.' Con Randles drove the first event in 1979 in a Mini, but ended up in a bog five miles from the start. He became a bit of a local star winning many events, yet never his beloved Lakes. The rally is still run every April, a mix of classics and the adrenaline-pumping WRC rocketships that must look mighty impressive storming the pass ten-tenths.

In the morning I dried the car after the obligatory rain shower, and dipped the oil; the big six had deposited and consumed none, and everything was ready for the final day's drive to the Dingle Peninsula. 'An Daingean' read the sign, and the sun made a show as we headed for another fine beach at Inch. While photographing the loan surfer and sand yacht pilot, Beverley and I discussed that name: maybe it's because the beach is an inch long on the map and that's four miles!

Next, we headed for the South Pole Inn in Annascaul because ex-landlord Tom Crean (1877-1938) was an Antarctic explorer who accompanied Shackleton and Scott on three adventures and lived to tell the tale. The pub is crammed with photos and memorabilia to view over a Guinness. Suitably fortified, we drove to Dingle, Europe's most westerly town, and reflected that we'd motored 659 miles from Margate in England's east with the top down through all weathers; about as far east to west as you can go in the British Isles!

The sign pointed on to Sleat Head, the last stop before Newfoundland. The narrow road is cut out of the cliff at various pullouts, and the car attracted many admiring looks from tourists and German motorbike adventurers. With Bronze Age sites and religious shrines along the road, mostly signed in Irish, the place had a highly spiritual atmosphere.

The sun was out in force, which prompted lashings of sunscreen as we were about to

Clockwise from far left
'Healey ascending from *Ryan's Daughter's* Coumeenole Beach; one of many Celtic crosses; Murphy's Pub in Dingle; jaunting car at Muckross Castle; loan surfer at Inch.

make the steep decent to Coumeenole Beach where David Lean filmed *Ryan's Daughter* starring Sarah Miles and Robert Mitchum. I could recall a documentary on the trials and tribulations of shooting the storm scenes, but on this day the beach looked more like St Tropez, with temperatures to match.

We stopped at the Tig Áine café and took a last look west over the Atlantic to the sound of concertina and penny whistle: a fine end to a really memorable road trip.

Our return was via the Conor Pass over the Slieve Mish Mountains towards our hotel in Tralee. At the base of the pass heading east we saw warnings to coaches and motor homes to turn back. We powered up a well-graded ascent to the summit car park, where a 'Healey Club member photographed 171 YNO while we ate an ice cream.

The exit route was among the narrowest we'd discovered, cut out of the rock with low stone walls on the drop side creating a tight conduit. Thank heavens we made it down this serious single-track road without any trick reversing or scrapes.

We cruised into Kerry's capital Tralee past the quayside windmill and on to the Ballygarry House Hotel on the edge of town. Once again the hostelry shone, and we were treated to arguably the best dinner of the trip in Brooks Restaurant: roast leg of Irish lamb with wild mushrooms and sherry-infused jus, and a Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte that tasted like it came from the fatherland.

Over dinner we reflected on driving one of the great roads of Europe, the Ring of Kerry, in our 47-year-old automobile, and in the morning as we departed Tralee and the Emerald Isle we recalled the Irish verse:

*May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
And rain fall soft upon your fields
Until we meet again!*

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