



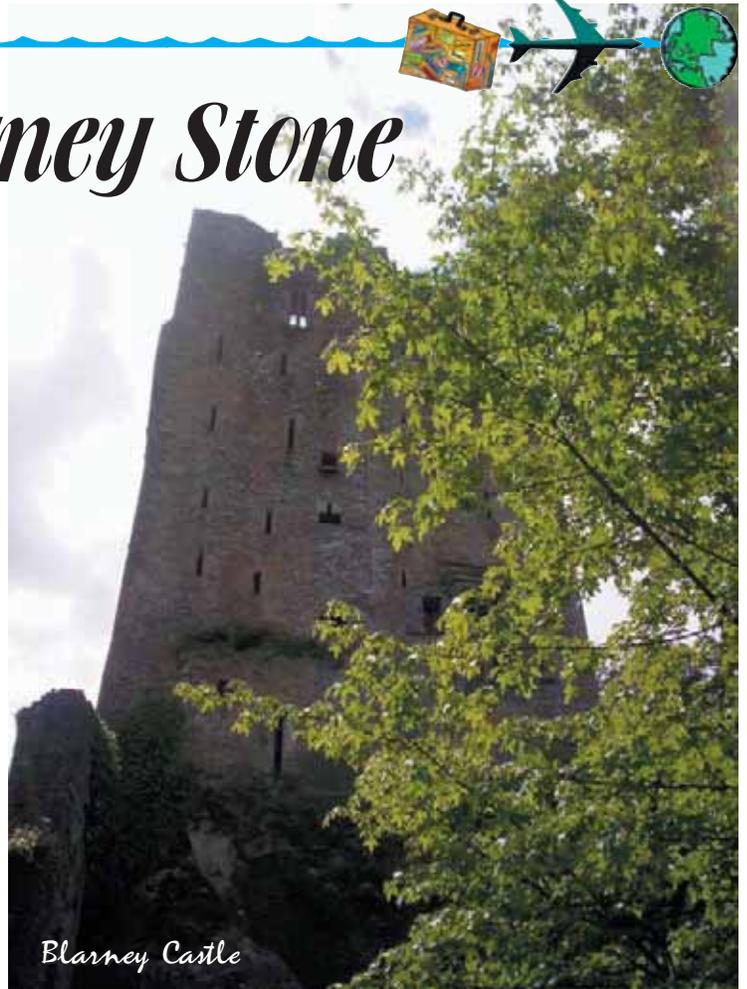
# *Kissing The Blarney Stone*

Story and Photos By Kristin Harmel

Legend traces the origins of the fabled Blarney Stone back to 1314, when King Robert the Bruce of Scotland gave it to Cormac McCarthy, the King of Munster, to thank him for sending an Irish army of four thousand men to help him in battle. The stone was apparently half of a stone brought back from the Crusades; the other half became the Stone of Destiny (also known as the Stone of Scone), which is housed in Scotland's Edinburgh Castle. Some say the stone is mentioned in the Bible as "Jacob's Pillow."

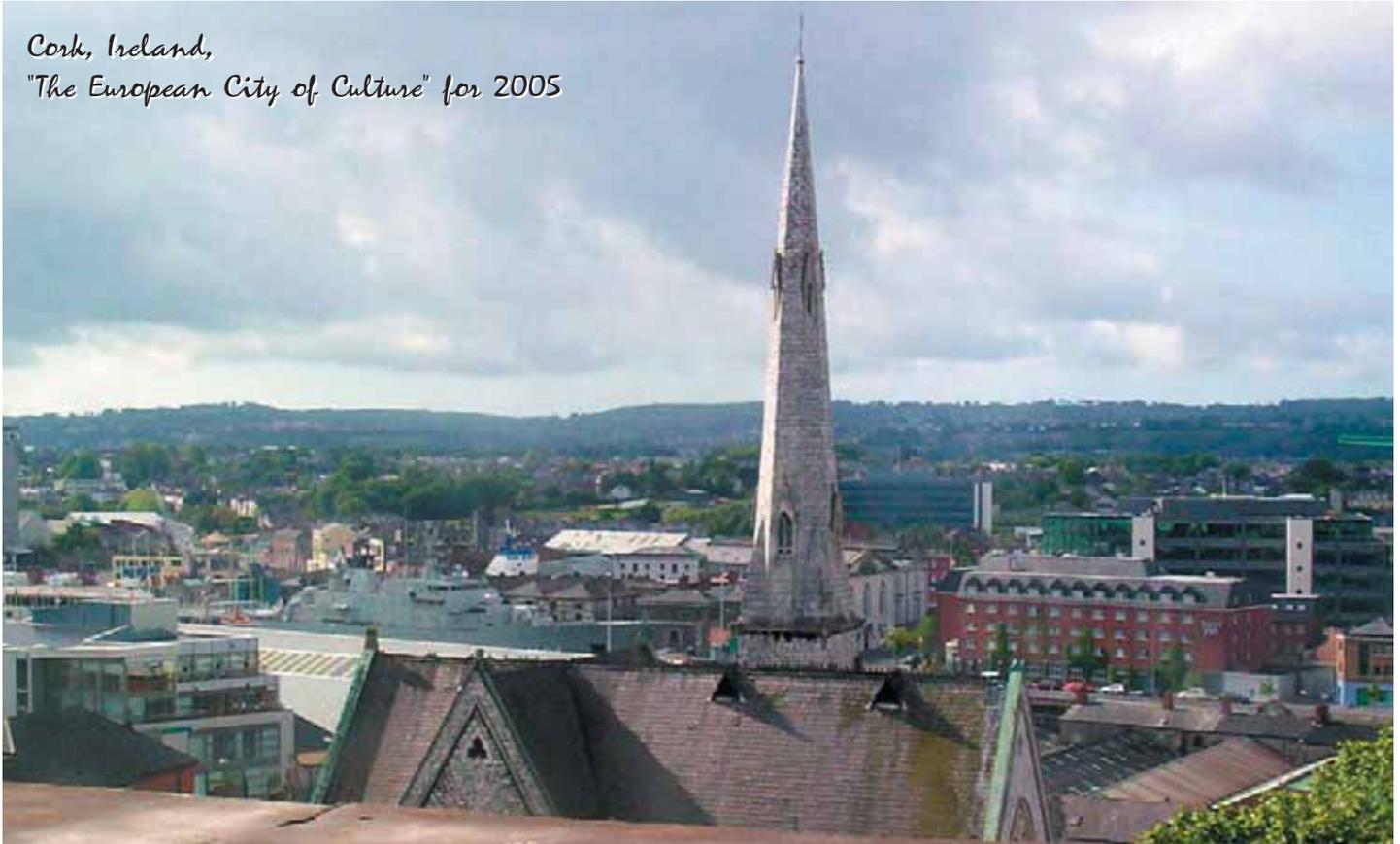
Some time later, King Cormac McCarthy saved a local witch from drowning in the lake behind the castle. In gratitude, she told him the secret of the stone, which was later built into the castle itself. Whoever kisses the stone, she said, would receive the gift of eloquence.

The secret came in handy two and a half centuries later, when Queen Elizabeth I of England tried to send the Earl of Leicester to seize the castle from one of King Cormac McCarthy's descendants, Cormac Dermot McCarthy. He held off the earl and the queen for so long with his silver-tongued explanations that the queen finally exclaimed in exasperation that the earl's reports back from the castle were "all Blarney." Thus, the word "blarney" entered the English language as a synonym for smooth talk.



*Blarney Castle*

*Cork, Ireland,  
"The European City of Culture" for 2005*



More than 400 years later, 200,000 visitors a year from all around the world come to Blarney, in County Cork, Ireland, to see one of the Emerald Isle's oldest and most historic castles – and to kiss its famous stone in hopes of receiving the same gift of gab.

Just five miles outside of Cork, Ireland's second largest city, the castle is situated in the emerald green countryside and surrounded by sprawling gardens filled with flowers in every color of the rainbow.

A visit to the Blarney castle is a trip straight to the heart of old Ireland. The exterior is crumbling, and many of the floors from the various levels of the castle have long since disappeared, but you can still feel the ghosts of old Irish kings, lords and warriors between the castle walls.

Seven euro (about \$8.50 USD) will get you a ticket inside the castle grounds. As you walk across the sprawling, tree-dotted lawn, the castle, 126 feet high, looms ahead of you, dark and mysterious. Moss creeps up its walls as if the emerald countryside itself is trying to inch its way into the historic fortress.

Inside, the main area of the castle is open, and visitors can see where the great hall, the family room and the banqueting hall once stood – all with one glance skyward. That's because over the years, the floors in the main castle space have deteriorated and disappeared, leaving visitors in an enormous entry area where

all the royal festivities of Blarney used to take place centuries ago.

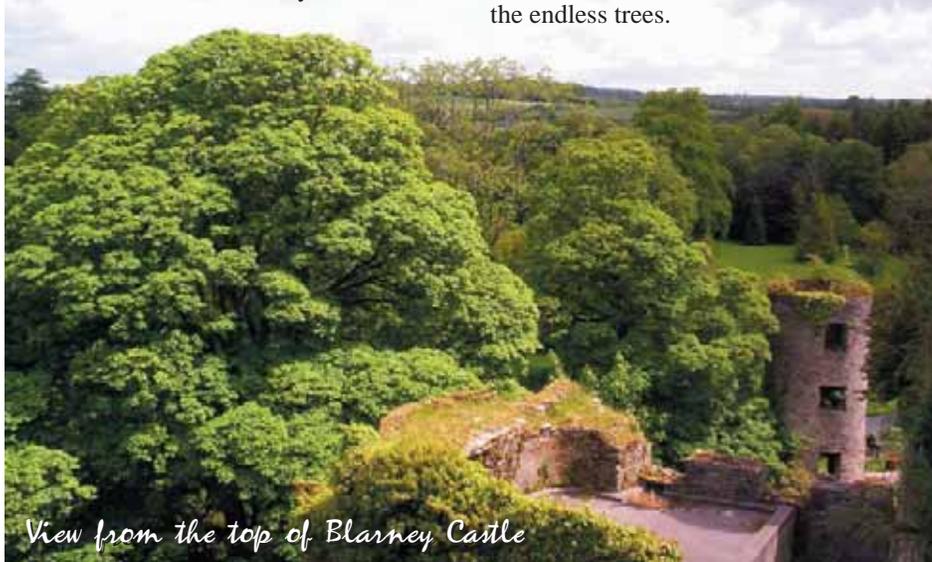
Further into the castle, a narrow spiral staircase will take you up through a series of rooms that have remained more intact. An earl's room, a guard's room, a little girl's room, a priest's room and a kitchen



*Kristin Harmel demonstrates how to kiss the Blarney Stone the correct way—backwards and upside down!*

are all preserved, to some degree. The windows are so narrow that they let in only slender slivers of light, but the view through them is incredible: sprawling vert countryside as far as the eye can see, the horizon dotted with the quaint homes of Blarney and the outer limits of Cork.

At the end of the spiral staircase, you'll find yourself on top of the castle, where an even more spectacular view of Blarney and County Cork spreads out beneath you. On a clear day, you'll see all of Ireland's fabled 40 shades of green sparkling in the light, sunlight filtering down on rolling hills through the leaves of the endless trees.



*View from the top of Blarney Castle*

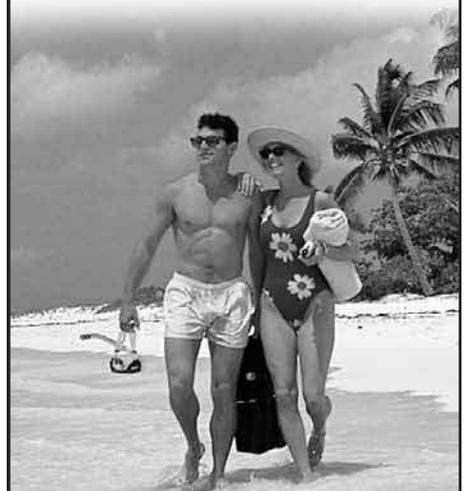
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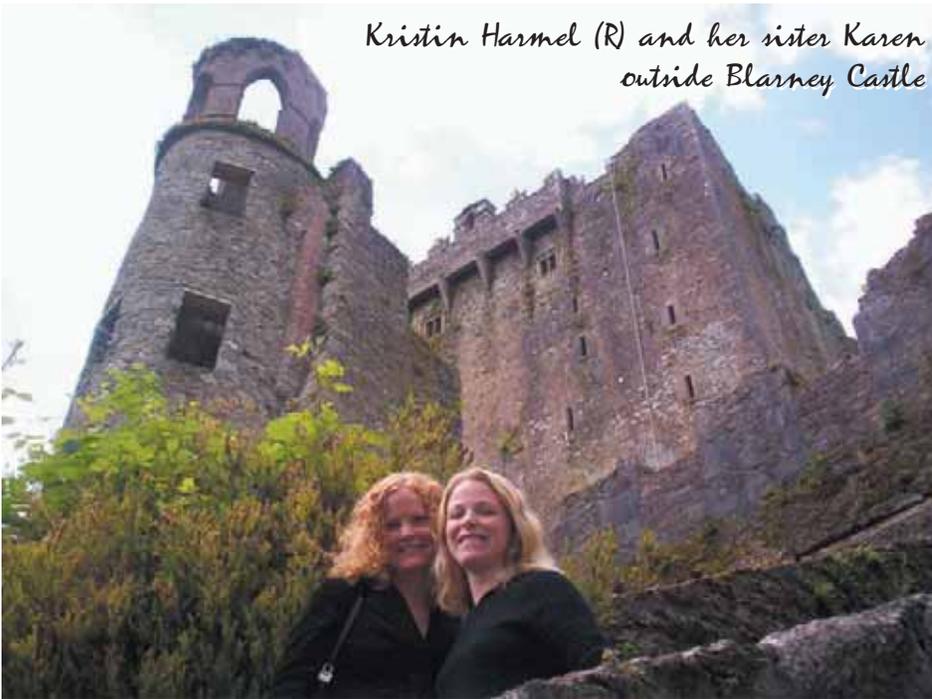
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*Kristin Harmel (R) and her sister Karen  
outside Blarney Castle*

It is here, on the top of the castle, that you'll approach the Blarney Stone for a kiss – if you dare. Instead of a straightforward face-to-face kiss with the stone, tradition has long dictated another kind of salutation. Those wishing to be blessed with the gift of gab courtesy of King Cormac McCarthy must first sit with

their backs facing the stone then lie down, holding on to two bars so as not to slip through a narrow gap (plunging more than 120 feet straight down!) between the walkway and the stone. Then, one must tilt the head backwards and kiss the stone upside down.

After kissing the stone, another

narrow staircase takes you out of the castle and into the gardens, a beautifully maintained expanse of color and light. Presumably, after kissing the stone, you'll have lots to talk about, and a stroll across streams and into emerald meadows might be just the place to have a chat.

The nearby city of Cork is the perfect place to finish up a trip to this part of Ireland. The city's residents speak with a lyrical cadence and are among the friendliest, most welcoming people in the world. Many fine pubs and restaurants off St. Patrick's Street, one of the city's main thoroughfares, offer dining options, and traditional Irish music can be found throughout the city every night. Skip Guinness and instead, have a pint of Murphy's, the local brew. Plan to stay at least another day to explore the largest city in Ireland's largest county – which has also been named the European City of Culture for 2005.

As for whether the Blarney Stone truly imparts the gift of eloquence, that's anyone's guess. But I'll say this; within three weeks of leaving Ireland, I had started and finished my entire third novel. Coincidence? You be the judge. Slán!

For more information, visit [www.blarneycastle.ie](http://www.blarneycastle.ie).

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