

## **Celebrity traveler: John Astin heeds call of Aran Islands** **Hopkins professor and 'Addams Family' actor finds meaning in Ireland**

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



Johns Hopkins University students scramble to sign up for a coveted spot in the acting and directing classes taught by John Astin. After all, who wouldn't want to study theatrical techniques with a famous actor?

Internationally known for his role as Gomez Addams in the 1960s television show "The Addams Family," the Baltimore-born Astin has received Academy Award and Emmy nominations for his work in front of the camera, and also for writing and directing. Perhaps the most meaningful recognition came last December, when it was announced that the university's renovated Merrick Barn theater would now bear his name: The John Astin Theatre.

But even an established talent occasionally feels the need to freshen up his craft; so Astin often ventures out to performing-arts venues to study new approaches. We spoke with him about his most inspirational

destination – and it turns out it's not spooky at all.

**The craft of acting has taken you around the world. Do you have a favorite destination?**

I've loved so many, but perhaps the most memorable and meaningful to me was visiting Inis Meain (pronounced *innish-maan*), one of the Aran Islands in Ireland.

**That's not exactly on the radar for many travelers. How did you find it?**

The city of Galway was the last stop of the Ireland Fringe Festival tour, where I was performing my one-man show, "Edgar Allan Poe, Once Upon a Midnight." Because the performance opened the festival, I was finished early, freeing me up to do something I had long dreamed of; visit Inis Meain, one of the Aran Islands, which are just off the coast of Galway. There are three islands in all: Inis Mor, Inis Meain and Inis Oir. One of my favorite playwrights, John Millington Synge, whom I had studied while a student at Hopkins, did most of his writing in these islands, at the recommendation of W.B. Yeats. He's written what some people say is the greatest one-act play ever written: "Riders to the Sea."



**What was so inspiring about the islands to those writers?**

In Synge's time [the early 20th century], it was one of the least affected by modern civilization. Synge wrote "it was as though you had gone back a hundred years in time" because people still traveled by burro, were mostly agrarian and the island is filled with those gorgeous rock fences. [Natives] had to pick up all of the indigenous rocks to farm, so they made use of them by building fences.

Being in the location added to the authenticity of Synge's work. He was staying in a hotel at first — probably on Inis Mor, the largest — and there was a chink out of the floor of his room, which was above the kitchen. He discovered that he could hear conversation of the peasants working in the kitchen [and] speaking in Gaelic. In this way, Synge picked up the lilt and rhythm to their speech. It was musical to him. He wrote his plays in the voice of those locals. Then he settled on Inis Meain to write. They are very proud of him on that island.

**What was Inis Meain like when you visited?**

One of the wonderful unspoiled places on Earth; it has changed very little in the past 100 years. They still travel by burro in the streets. Otherwise it is mostly on foot. The only sign of modernity was about three motorcycles. When they are fired up, it's a shock because otherwise, all you can hear is a little bit of wind and the ocean. Many of the houses have the old roofs of straw and mud that have existed for centuries. Gaelic is the basic language. They used English only when speaking to pigs and Englishmen.

**What did you do there?**

We spent a great deal of time visiting the house where Synge stayed. The woman who lives there now grew up in the lodging — her mother and grandmother knew him. They were eager to tell someone who



was interested everything they could about the playwright.

We traveled everywhere on foot. There's a spot — one must travel over a great many rocks to get there — that is a natural rock formation like a throne or an enormous wingback chair. That is where Synge sat to meditate about [writing] his plays. It is a great experience to sit in Synge's "chair" and listen to the water lapping against the cliffs.

There is also a shop that sells wonderful Irish linen, where you can get shirts and sheets.

### **Did you stay on the island?**

We had taken a ferry across just to spend the afternoon and became so fascinated we decided to stay; found a little hotel — Ostan Inis Meain Hotel. It had just been converted into a hotel (it may have been a pub). Since we didn't have anything with us, we washed out our clothes and dried them on the rocks.

### **Is there any place to dine?**

We ate at the hotel — got to know the cook. I don't think I was recognized until the next-to-last day, and that was by some tourists from the mainland. It was a great experience because we just got to blend.

### **Do people recognize you when you travel?**

I am not as easily recognized now; my mustache is gray and I have no hair. For over 40 years, I was almost instantly recognized wherever I went. I had a problem with it early on, but after a while, I began see it as a great benefit in my life.

### **What are you working on now?**

I run the theater the program and teach at Johns Hopkins University.



### **And you have a theater named for you!**

I still don't believe it. The theater had been renovated, and I thought that's what the event was about.

Then [friend and fellow actor] Ed Asner, the university's president, Ron Daniels, and the dean of arts and sciences, Katherine Newman, made the dedication speeches, and no one was more surprised than me.

### **Have any favorite destinations to bring friends and family visiting Baltimore?**

We've got some very capable theaters in Everyman and [Center Stage](#). There are also a wonderful variety of restaurants here: Afghan food, Ethiopian, Indian. When my grandkids were here, we went to the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#). There are many wonderful galleries, and now a pinball museum, an incredible comic book museum, probably one of the best in the world. The Babe Ruth house. The two fantastic stadiums. Fort McHenry, for heaven's sake; there's so much American history in and around Baltimore.

### **Yes, so many opportune settings for a film or television series, right?**

Those locations are all over Baltimore. Every block looks like a "period." If I were a locations scout, I would consider Baltimore a gold mine.

### **If you go**

Inis Meain ("middle island"), Aran Islands, is in Galway Bay, off the west coast of Ireland, and is often overlooked by tourists. A single road leads across the island, and along it are most of the sights and shops. Many venues don't have traditional street addresses — just ask, they'll know.

### **Getting there**

Shannon International Airport is the closest international airport to Galway. Fly British Air or American Airlines from BWI-Thurgood Marshall Airport through London into Shannon (about \$1,300 round-trip). From Shannon, CityLink and Bus Éireann operate a daily service to and from the airport, beginning at about \$18 one-way. Aer Arann ([aerarann.ie](#)) provides 10-minute flights from Connemara Airport — 18 miles from Galway — starting at about \$53 round-trip. A ferry ([aranislandferries.com](#)) runs year-round (depending on the weather), a 40-minute ride from Rossaveal; \$23 round-trip.

### **Lodging**

**Ostan Inis Meain**, 353-99-73020, [ostaninismeain.com](#). John Astin's favorite lodging has simple rooms providing a respite from modern-day interruptions. Two nights, with a three-course dinner, begin at about \$125.

**Inis Meain Guest Suites and Restaurant**, 353-86-8266026 [inismeain.com](#). Run by a native chef and his wife from Cork. Accommodations include luxurious suites and complimentary use of bicycles and fish rods. Beginning at about \$800 for two nights.

### **Dining**

**The Inis Meain Suites'** restaurant prepares traditional dishes with local provisions — lobster and crab caught along the coast, and vegetables whose only fertilizer is local seaweed, which are grown in fields sheltered by stone walls. Entrees begin at about \$35.

**Tig Congaile** offers creatively prepared local fare. Entrees from \$25. 353-99-73085

## **Don't miss**

**Dún Chonchúir.** This oval stone fortress, high on a bluff, offers breath-taking views. Nearby is Synge's Chair, a large stone seat on the seacliff's edge.

**Teach Synge** is the thatched-roof cottage where Synge stayed.

**Dún Fearbhaí** is an ancient stone fort notable for its unusual square shape.

**Cill Cheannanach** is a stunningly preserved 8th-century church.

**The Church of Mary Immaculate** is famed for its magnificent stained-glass windows, designed by the Harry Clarke studios.

**Inis Meáin Knitting** produces designer-quality knitwear for the international market, including Liberty of London and Barneys New York, with onsite shop and museum.

## **Information**

Go to [ostaninismeain.com](http://ostaninismeain.com)

—*Stephanie Citron*

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