Quay to success

It’s all biz and buzz in Dublin’s redeveloped docklands. Pamela Newenham gives a guided tour to the haunts of the high-tech crowd. Photographs by Shane Lynam.
home from home for some of the world’s top internet firms, Silicon Docks is Ireland’s tech mecca. Situated south of Dublin’s River Liffey, away from the drinking hub of Temple Bar and the hustle and bustle of Grafton Street, the area houses such notables as Google, Facebook, Airbnb and Twitter.

Its real name might be Grand Canal Dock but, due to the presence of so many tech giants, the moniker Silicon Docks has stuck. Like its American namesake Silicon Valley, Silicon Docks is not really a place you can get a proper sense of from inside a car; the atmosphere is best experienced by a stroll around the area and a visit to the local cafés and restaurants.

A caveat: unless you’re the next Mark Zuckerberg, or know a member of staff, the offices of the high-tech companies are off-limits to the public. And, although, you might not be able to get in to the companies, you can still rub shoulders with the workers, who are some of the most talented minds in the country. The Googlers, Facebookers and other techies can be found wining, dining and coding in the area’s many bars, restaurants and coffee shops. You might even bump into a venture capitalist or two. Don’t expect to see suits or ties. The office attire of the Silicon Docks tech set is jeans, T-shirts and hoodies. In fact, if you do see people in suits, they are probably management consultants, lawyers or Facebook employees partaking in Corporate Friday, a spoof of Casual Fridays, where workers dress up in corporate attire.

It’s not just tech glitterati that hang out in Silicon Docks. The area has hosted Prince Albert of Monaco, who visited Grand Canal Square as part of a three-day State visit in 2011. The trip took place 50 years after the prince’s late father and mother, Prince Rainier III and Hollywood actress Princess Grace, visited Ireland. Some of the world’s biggest recording artists, including Lady Gaga, the Rolling Stones, REM, Sinéad O’Connor and U2, have also made music in the area, at the famous Windmill Lane Recording Studios (20 Ringsend Road, 01 6685567; windmilllanerecording.com). The original studio was on Windmill Lane and it was here that U2 recorded their first albums. That studio is empty now but music fans have covered the building in a psychedelic kaleidoscope of U2-inspired graffiti. The Factory (35A Barrow Street, 01 430 6964; thefactory.ie) was another haunt of the Irish rock band and it was here that U2 performed their pre-tour rehearsals.

Like the tech companies that inhabit it, Silicon Docks has undergone many reinventions over the years. It was once a thriving shipping port, with boat-building,
Rope-making, flour-milling and glass-manufacturing among its main industries. However, the introduction of shipping containers, along with a shift in manufacturing, resulted in a dramatic loss of employment in the area. The establishment of the Dublin Docklands Development Authority in 1997 led to major redevelopment of the area, and Grand Canal Dock is now a lively and vibrant business hub.

While there may not be as great a selection of bars and restaurants here as compared to Dublin’s better-known streets, there are still good ones. For a bird’s-eye view of Silicon Docks the rooftop of the Marker Hotel (Grand Canal Square, Docklands, 01 687 5100; themarkerhoteldublin.com) can’t be beaten. With its panoramic views across the city to the Dublin mountains, and an excellent cocktail list, it’s a popular venue. The Marker Hotel is the ideal place to stay in Grand Canal Dock. Located next to Facebook’s international headquarters, the hotel is a large, white cube overlooking Grand Canal Square – a public space designed by renowned American landscape architect Martha Schwartz and the centrepiece of Silicon Docks.

The 10,000-square-metre public space is overlooked by the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre (Grand Canal Square, Docklands, 01 677 7999; bordgaisenergytheatre.ie), which has hosted TEDx talks, ballets including Swan Lake and Broadway and West End shows including Rock of Ages, The Lion King, Cats and Chicago. (In June, the theatre will host Frozen star Idina Menzel, who sang the film’s Oscar-winning song “Let It Go.”)

Also overlooking the square is Café H (Grand Canal Square, 01 899 2216; cafeh.ie). With a long list of wines, cocktails and summer punches, this is probably the best place for a drink. Stroll across the square, cross the road and walk up Grand Canal Quay past the Waterways Ireland Visitor Centre (Grand Canal Quay, 01 616 7009; waterwaysirelandvisitorcentre.org). Here a lovely Italian restaurant, Osteria Lucio (The Malting Tower, Clanwilliam Terrace, Grand Canal Quay), sits on the left-hand side under the archway. The restaurant is located in an old railway tunnel, which was used as a hideout during the 1916 Rising.

For an excellent cup of coffee, check out 3fe (32 Grand Canal Street Lower; 3fe.com). Last year it was named by BuzzFeed as one of “25 coffee shops you need to see before you die”. It attracts young start-up founders along with aspiring entrepreneurs brainstorming for ideas and hoping the start-up buzz will rub off on them. We can’t name names but some well-known people in the Irish tech world are often found here, discussing everything from funding rounds to coding issues. The Art of Coffee (Unit 1, Alto Vetro, Grand Canal Quay, 086 100 3684; theartofcoffee.info) is another good café and a nice sun trap overlooking the water.

From the Art of Coffee, cross the bridge, and make a right-hand turn onto Barrow Street, with Boland’s Mill on the corner. The historic site is set to undergo a €150 million redevelopment, which would provide almost 30,000 square metres of office space for about 2,300 workers, 42 apartments, shops, cafés, restaurants and an exhibition building. Further up the street, on the right-hand side, is The Warehouse (35A Barrow Street), home to Social Entrepreneurs Ireland. It was also the home of Dogpatch Labs until recent times but the incubator has since moved across the River Liffey to the CHQ Building. Instagram, the photo-sharing service that Facebook bought for $1 billion, graduated from Dogpatch in the US, and Ireland’s next billion-euro start-up may just emerge from the Dublin hub. Irish alumni such as software firms Intercom, Logentries and Boxever have already raised tens of millions of euro in venture capital funding between them. Interesting fact: an email to Twitter co-founder Biz Stone inviting him out for drinks, led to him becoming one of...
happened to new employees who get over enthusiastic about the fabulous fare, or so the legend goes!

If you didn’t take a right onto Barrow Street and kept walking up the Ringsend Road, you’d come across the Watermarque building where Airbnb has its European headquarters. The online accommodation rental service has an Irish bar in its office, which you can see as you walk past.

Out on the water of Grand Canal Basin, you will often see the incongruous sight of paddleboarders, kayakers, windsurfers and wakeboarders moving between the office blocks and apartment buildings. If you want to get some exercise/try any of these, then pop along to Wakedock (South Dock Road, Grand Canal Dockyard, Ringsend, 01 664 3883; wakedock.ie) or its neighbour Surfdock (Grand Canal Dockyard, Ringsend, 01 6683945; surfdock.ie). Just don’t expect the water to be warm!

Docklanders from top left, Petra Remeczki and Vanda Vaczuli; left, Sokari Higgwe, and below, a Google staffer champions the brand. Above, architect Martha Schwartz’s glow sticks.

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Get your bearings  

**Pamela Newenham** sets her sights on the best bites, drinks, beds and activities found at Silicon Docks.