



Great Irish Road Trips



Great Irish Road Trips

- ST PATRICK'S TRAIL
- CAUSEWAY COASTAL ROUTE
- WILD ATLANTIC WAY
- MEDIEVAL IRELAND

↑ 
An Mór Chuard
RING OF KERRY



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Molls Gap, Co. Kerry

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The Giant's Causeway, Co. Antrim

Ireland



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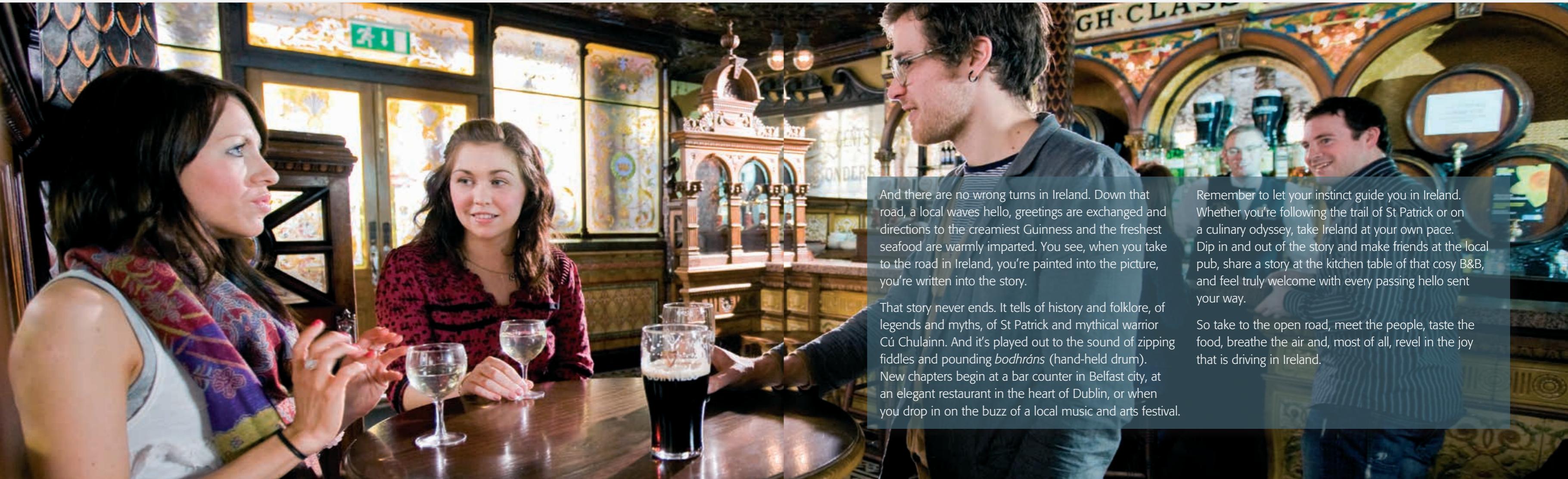
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There are no wrong turns in Ireland

Driving on the island of Ireland's gently winding roads, you could be forgiven for thinking you've strayed into a breathtaking watercolour. The roads of the island dip and weave through a fantasy landscape where valleys, hills and coastal enclaves come blanketed in beauty: picture the royal purple heather of the Sally Gap as it straddles a bright blue Wicklow sky; the glimmering emerald greens of the Glens of Antrim as they hug the Causeway Coast; and the shimmering Fermanagh lakes as they twist and turn and glisten with idyllic tranquillity.

Keep your eyes – and your heart – open as you may well fall in love with what you discover around the next corner. The wind-whipped Atlantic view from the towering Cliffs of Moher in County Clare; that elegant turn in the River Shannon; or the mist that settles at the foot of the Mourne Mountains in County Down all crackle with the first glimpse of an Ireland love affair.



And there are no wrong turns in Ireland. Down that road, a local waves hello, greetings are exchanged and directions to the creamiest Guinness and the freshest seafood are warmly imparted. You see, when you take to the road in Ireland, you're painted into the picture, you're written into the story.

That story never ends. It tells of history and folklore, of legends and myths, of St Patrick and mythical warrior Cú Chulainn. And it's played out to the sound of zipping fiddles and pounding *bodhráns* (hand-held drum). New chapters begin at a bar counter in Belfast city, at an elegant restaurant in the heart of Dublin, or when you drop in on the buzz of a local music and arts festival.

Remember to let your instinct guide you in Ireland. Whether you're following the trail of St Patrick or on a culinary odyssey, take Ireland at your own pace. Dip in and out of the story and make friends at the local pub, share a story at the kitchen table of that cosy B&B, and feel truly welcome with every passing hello sent your way.

So take to the open road, meet the people, taste the food, breathe the air and, most of all, revel in the joy that is driving in Ireland.



Ring of Kerry



The Ring of Kerry scenic drive in the southwest of Ireland traces the coastline of the stunning Iveragh peninsula, and covers some 170 kilometres peppered with pristine beaches, medieval ruins, mountains and loughs. Blissfully lush, by four or two wheels or even on foot, this magnificent area is the stuff that movies are made of.

The typical Ring of Kerry experience resembles a night at the drive-in movies; scenes of raw rural beauty flicker non-stop across your windscreen as you circumnavigate the peninsula's coastline – running anti-clockwise from Killarney, through Killorglin, Cahersiveen, Waterville and Kenmare. Every so often, the drama builds to a crescendo, and the simply stunning elevates to the awe inspiring: Skellig Michael's iconic cone rises majestically from the Atlantic west of Waterville; shards of sunlight rain down on the saw-tooth peaks of the Macgillycuddy's Reeks; the glens and lakes of

Killarney National Park beckon you towards them. As good as this is, the best way to experience the Ring of Kerry is to pause the film, leave the car behind and explore on foot to just breathe in the scenery.

John Hickey tours these areas every day. He's dotted the trail with places to while away the hours, or as John describes 'think about nothing' time.

Killarney to Killorglin

A bustling little town that trips off the first leg of the Ring of Kerry, Killarney cannot be raced through. Traditional jarveys (operators of jaunting cars) will regale you with tales of the Ring while pulling you and their jaunting car and horse through the pretty streets. The neo-gothic Pugin creation of St Mary's Cathedral dominates the town's skyline: take a peek indoors and the stained glass windows will radiate a rainbow of colour. Then stop for a while at the cedar tree opposite its entrance – it marks a massed grave for famine victims, and is a sober reminder of Ireland's tragic past.

Head northwest on the road to Killorglin where you cross the shores of Lough Leane. The Macgillycuddy's Reeks rise up above you as you pass through Fossa (depending on the weather, Carrauntoohil, Ireland's highest peak at 1039m, will spire towards the heavens in full view). Another few rounding bends and you're side by side with the River Luane – famous for its wild salmon – before you hit Killorglin. Best known for its rather unique Puck Fair in August, the worlds of horse traders, cattle drovers and wheeler-dealers collide in Killorglin, culminating in the crowning of Puck – yes, a goat – perched high above the cheering crowds in all its regal glory.

Killorglin to Cahersiveen

Leave Killorglin in your rear view, and take the road southwest to Cahersiveen. This stretch of ring road is bound by scattered blanket bog (wetland) and pricked every now and then by ancient coach roads. Look out for signs to Fox's Bog Village and the Bog Village Museum: an assortment of thatched cottages that steps you back in time where rural life once lived off the land in this awe-inspiring isolation. The winding road from here takes you through Glenbeigh, possessing an almost alpine character, so massive in its scale and so contrasting to the bogland just left behind.

By now, you'll be about half way between Killorglin and Cahersiveen, and one of those aforementioned coach roads lifts easily up to a crest on the shoulder of Drung Hill, a brooding presence on the northern coast. At its feet lies Dingle Bay, the massive beaches of Inch and Rossbeigh battling back the waves like two big sandy pinball flippers. Just above the crest you'll find a wonderfully mysterious and seldom visited Ogham stone. You'll also see the Basket Islands trailing in the distance off the tip of the Dingle Peninsula.

Leave the bleak landscape of highland moors behind, descend into a cleft in the ground and wind seaward through lush, deciduous woodlands until you pop out into the sleepy fishing village of Kells. The safe and secluded beach here makes an idyllic spot for a quiet swim in the lovely waters of Dingle Bay. John Milington Synge (Irish playwright and co-founder of Dublin's Abbey Theatre) introduced this quiet spot to the world in his plays when he spent time here developing his Irish language skills.





Skellig Michael

This UNESCO World Heritage Site is a conical mass of rock that rests a mere 12km offshore from Valentia. It offers a wonderful look at the living conditions of the hardy monks who once worshipped here. Eagle-eyed visitors can also spot seals and some 27,000 pairs of gannets! Numbers of visitors are restricted, so book well in advance.

Cahersiveen to Waterville

Southwest again to Cahersiveen and don't make the same mistake John Hickey did, once telling his driver to drop him at the top of the village and arranging to meet at the other end. "This is one very, very long street," says John, "and its centre is dominated by the imposing edifice of Daniel O'Connell (Ireland's Great Liberator) Memorial Church – it leaves the impression that the builder initially wanted to construct a trail-blazing cathedral, but ran out of money and so settled for something in between. But it's adorable nonetheless."

From here, John suggests a little detour to the spectacular rock island of Skellig Michael. For many, Skellig Michael is the absolute-must-take detour on the Ring of Kerry. You can take the ferry from The Skelligs Interpretive Centre while you're in Portmagee, or from Valentia and Ballinskelligs, for that matter.

Once back on the mainland, if hunger pangs are making themselves heard, head back onto the Ring of Kerry route to Waterville and a little spot called Butler's Hotel. Definitely not the only place in town, but here you can pause at photos of Charlie Chaplin and family enjoying themselves during summers spent in Waterville. His daughter loved the place so much, she settled here permanently.

Wave goodbye to Charlie's statue in town, but before you make a beeline for Derrynane, if you've packed your golf clubs now is the time to take a swing at exquisite Waterville, proud home to not one but two amazing 18-hole gems.

Waterville to Derrynane

Fifteen minutes uphill from Waterville to Coomakista, get your camera ready for picture perfect shots. In the late afternoon sunlight, no place in Ireland can quite match the beauty of Derrynane, a place fondly referred to as 'Heaven' by Tony O'Callaghan, a native of Tralee. He tells a story of his father taking him and a close friend there as kids. At the sight of Derrynane in sunshine, the friend turned and asked, "Uncle Tony, is this heaven?" If it isn't, it certainly comes close.

The sunlight shimmers turquoise green off the sandy bottom of the shallow waters of Derrynane strand. A maze of paths covers the slopes above historic Derrynane House, the former home of Ireland's Liberator Daniel O'Connell. Walk these paths in springtime and you'll find it carpeted in bluebells; the ever-changing views of the coast framed by the purple rhododendron and the dangling red-earrings of the fuchsia.

After visiting Derrynane House, follow the so-called Mass path out to the ruined chapel and the superb views of Abbey Island. The path passes right in front of Bridie Keating's Bar, making it the perfect place to relax and refuel on your way back.

Another one of those paths is an old butter road, the remnant of a network that once flowed from the tips of the peninsula like golden arteries taking butter from Kerry to the Butter Exchange in nearby Cork. Some of these arteries have since been paved over to become, in places, the Ring of Kerry coast road. Others have hardened in time to the width of a narrow path like this one near Derrynane.



Muckross House and Garden, Killarney, Co. Kerry

Derrynane to Killarney

Sweep on from Derrynane through Caherdaniel and onto Sneem, where the road is split in two by the River. Countless world leaders have descended on this spot in their time, and each has some sort of monument – think Charles de Gaulle, Chaim Herzog and our very own President O'Dálaigh, Ireland's fifth president who served from 1974 to 1976.

Continuing on, you're in eyeshot of the Kenmare River – it's actually more of a bay, to be honest. Kenmare itself translates from its Irish *Neidin*, which means 'Little Nest', an apt moniker for this perfect town as it nestles between river and mountains. Its colourful façades, are laid out in a triangular design with buildings in close proximity to each other, bustling bars, cafés, and arts and craft studios where you could literally spend all day.

Another paradise is next on the Ring of Kerry and is actually made for parking up and discovering on foot or bike – Killarney National Park is 10,000 hectares of mountains, moorlands, woodlands, lakes and waterfalls, with Muckross House and Garden at the heart of it. A new network of signposted trails opens the park up for walkers; and a cycle track along the Kenmare Road makes getting from Killarney to the Muckross Estate a biking breeze. Don't miss fully restored Ross Castle, the 15th century home of the O'Donoghues, or the monastic remains on Innisfallen Island.

At the heart of the National Park is the Gap of Dunloe, sweeping down as a mountain pass beneath the imposing Macgillycuddy's Reeks. Standing here will make the rest of the world dissolve, as if insignificant in light of what surrounds you. Just 10km southwest of Killarney is a place called Ladies' View. The strange name comes from the time Queen Victoria and her friends visited and used to admire the view from on high. So while driving between Kenmare and Killarney, stop at any one of the quaint souvenir shops and they'll kindly point you upwards to a three minute walk, which will offer you the best place for a panoramic 'Ladies' View'.

Feeling the sense of trepidation that your trip around the Ring of Kerry is almost complete, slow down just four kilometres outside Killarney and marvel at the Torc waterfall. The Owengarriff River cascades through the wooded Friar's Glen into Muckcross Lake. A pretty path winds up to the top of this 18m high waterfall, revealing views of Torc Mountain. Take a minute to stop and listen. If it's evening, you might just hear the cuckoos calling out to you from their hiding spots amongst the clumps of brown heather.





A lifetime afoot

With both his parents coming from hillside Kerry farms, Seán Ó Súilleabháin figures he has the contours of the Iveragh Peninsula imprinted in his DNA. What wasn't already there at birth, he certainly has added in well over 60 years of walking Kerry's hill country.

Earlier inhabitants of this part of Kerry, Seán explains, didn't travel along the coast. They took to higher ground and followed more direct lines; and they left behind an intricate maze of prehistoric tracks, old coaching roads, medieval pilgrimage paths, and disused butter roads. "We wanted to preserve these ancient lines of communication and bring them back into use," Seán says. It took him and others 11 years and lots of voluntary labour to achieve their goal of creating the Kerry Way. "I see it as a linear heritage site that opens up access to a tremendous range of natural habitats." In retirement, Seán has been busier than ever as a sought-after walking and local history guide, and can often be seen heading up the slopes of Carrauntoohil with a group in tow. Clearly, it's in the DNA.





Causeway Coastal Route

Embark on the Causeway Coastal Route, and immerse yourself in one of the top driving routes in the world: a meandering coastal and rural trail offering a wealth of visitor sites and attractions, all blended with a rich and diverse cultural heritage.

The enigmatic basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway undoubtedly stand as the smoky gem of Northern Ireland's natural attractions – but they are just one sparkler in a lustrous crown of spectacular, scenic-studded coastline. The Causeway Coastal Route stretches between two spirited cities, Belfast and Londonderry, to make what is officially listed as one of the world's greatest road journeys in some one hundred eventful miles. It's not a great distance, but it's a journey to be savoured.

The road traverses bridges, arches and hairpin turns, passing sheer cliff coves, deserted white strands and otherworldly rock formations. Those rocks have wrecked ships; those cliffs nurture rare fauna; the beaches stretch for miles and those rugged turns are by ancient volcanic design. This route is a lesson in history, heritage, geology and biology, but above all, in the astounding power of nature's creation.

Belfast to Ballycastle

First stop is Belfast where you should prepare yourself for sensory overload in the cosy atmosphere of a traditional pub like Whites Tavern, between the throbbing walls of a music venue, such as the Empire Music Hall on Botanic Avenue, through the gleaming windows of a shopping mall and outwards onto the buzzing cobbled streets themselves. Before bidding goodbye to Belfast, visit the site of Harland and Wolff shipyard where the RMS Titanic was built. Excitement sated, put the iconic silhouette of the shipbuilding cranes in your rear view and take to the hills.

Belfast Lough will glitter to your right as you join the Causeway Coastal Route at Newtownabbey and cruise north towards the seaside town of Carrickfergus. The town's harbour-side Norman 12th century castle has seen over 800 years of action, right up until World War II, with portcullis, ramparts, canons and a chilling dungeon.

Continue northwest of Larne and the Causeway Coastal Route will pass the foot of each of the nine Glens of Antrim – glacier-gouged valleys of charming seaside villages and highlands of coniferous forests, bogland and waterfalls. The same geological forces that created the terrain of the Causeway also created the Glens, the southern-most of which is the charming village of Glenarm: host to Glenarm Castle and its lush parkland and walled garden.

Further north, dramatically sculpted escarpments flank Glenariff, the 'Queen of the Glens', as it runs uphill from the Irish Sea. Here, you'll find the delightful Glenariff Forest Park and the Ess-na-Crub waterfall, the perfect spot for an invigorating walk to stretch the legs.

Track along the Antrim coast making a visit to the pretty village of Cushendall, landmarked by the curiously shaped Curfew Tower. This handsome oddity was built in the 19th century as a garrison and back then served as a lock up for 'idlers and rioters'. The tower is now a residency for artists who have enjoyed a friendly welcome from a community described by the Northern Ireland poet John Hewitt as being heavily steeped in neighbourliness.

Next along the route is the picturesque village of Cushendun, which makes for a sleepy seaside idyll. Perched on a northern inlet the village is neatly outlined with a handful of distinctive black-and-white houses designed by Clough Williams-Ellis. The beach and the green here are managed by the National Trust who recognise it as a true gem-on-the-sea, and tiny Mary McBride's Pub is a landmark in its own right.

The signposted scenic route to Ballycastle sees the trail snake precariously around steep slopes between Torr Head, Murlough Bay and Fair Head. Torr Head was once a strategic signalling and lookout station for transatlantic shipping. Now the old station is a shelter for sheep and a wild sea continues to rage around its headlands. Fair Head propels spectacular views from its 650ft perch above sea level, while the gentler slopes and wild flower meadows of Murlough Bay to the east provide a contrast to the starkness of its neighbour.



View down Glenariff, Co. Antrim





Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge

Some variety of rope bridge has connected the tiny island of Carrick-a-Rede to the mainland for over 250 years, serving commercial fishermen catching salmon off the island until 2002. Hanging gracefully over a 75ft deep chasm of rocky cliffs and blue-green waters, the latest version is sturdy enough to stay up all year round and now serves those who dare to cross to the island for the striking views of the Causeway coast.

Ballycastle to The Giant's Causeway

The next slice of dazzling coastline belongs to the town of Ballycastle; a dainty marina framed by colourful town houses and extensive seaward views, from the slant of Fair Head to the rugged profile of Rathlin Island. Local gems include the banks and knolls of the part-links, part-parkland golf course, the generously sized sandy beach and the annual Oul Lammas Fair. Ireland's oldest fair (that's putting it at early 17th century) assembles sheep and pony sellers, stall-holders, and scores of locals and out-of-towners for two days at the end of August. Expect a charming blend of hustle, bustle and local food specialities like dulse (edible seaweed) and yellowman (a tooth-cracking honeycomb toffee).

Between Ballycastle and the Giant's Causeway arguably lies the most scenic stretch of the trail, with sea cliffs of striped black basalt and white chalk, charming harbours and broad sweeps of beach. The cliff-top trail can be managed on foot, marvel at the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, the singularly stunning little church and harbour at Ballintoy and the sweeping sandy beach of White Park Bay.

Next along the serrated coastline is the UNESCO World Heritage Site itself: the celebrated Giant's Causeway. The curious assembly of 40,000 basalt columns, formed by molten lava cooled into mostly flawless hexagonals of dark stone steps, appear so perfectly artificial it is no surprise that the rock formation has spanned such enduring myths as this one:

The Causeway legend claims the great Celtic warrior Finn MacCool built the basalt highway to Scotland to challenge a rival giant, Benandonner, to a scrap. But Finn's first glimpse of the enormous Scot sent him scurrying back to Ireland, where his quick-witted wife disguised him as an infant. Benandonner arrives, sees the hulking baby, reasons 'If that's the kid, I don't want to meet the father' and turns tail back to Scotland, ripping up the highway behind him.

The Causeway draws huge crowds for its scenic mix of geological marvel and mythical intrigue, but resist just following them straight to the main attraction. Instead, follow the path behind the visitor centre and up round towards the cliffs for wind-whipped views off the beaten track.

From up here, looking down at those iconic dark pillars, you suddenly see the Causeway as one small geological element in a much larger and more elegant pattern that drops down over the entire coastline like a topographic net – it's a truly breathtaking, or should one say a 'gigantic' experience. One thing's for sure, the Causeway Visitor Centre deftly blends the most modern geographical aptitude with some pretty mesmerising mythological intrigue in such a way that you never quite know which you'd prefer as the truth.





Derry~Londonderry

Derry~Londonderry's credentials have not gone unnoticed by the wider world. In 2013 the city was crowned the inaugural UK City of Culture, which included the hosting of the prestigious Turner Prize contemporary art exhibition and Ireland's acclaimed traditional music festival, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

Giant's Causeway to Derry~Londonderry

From those dizzy cliff heights, an inland detour to the village of Bushmills and home of the Old Bushmills Distillery will beckon. This is not just the oldest working distillery in Ireland, it happens to be one of the most beautiful as well – a genteel assemblage of 19th century industrial buildings tucked in a small cleft alongside the River Bush, as if lifted straight off an old postcard. And the whiskey isn't too shabby, either. One of the best places to sample it locally is The Bushmills Inn. This superb hotel does everything right – outstanding service, great rooms, a public area full of cosy snugs and nooks, a pub full of atmosphere and character, and a restaurant using local ingredients to create culinary magic.

Back on the Coast Road and due west, the romantic remains of Dunluce Castle will appear teetering on the rocky headland ahead. The 14th century stronghold was abandoned in 1641 after part of the kitchen collapsed into the sea during a storm. In the adjoining graveyard are more victims of the crashing Atlantic: buried sailors from the wrecked Girona, while treasures recovered from the wreck can be seen at the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

Further west lie the lively seaside resorts of Portrush and Portstewart. While Portrush stands as a mecca for surfing, sandy beaches and championship golf courses, Portstewart is a reserved Victorian town with a glorious stretch of golden strand and a stroll-perfect promenade.

Along the coast from Portstewart is Mussenden Temple. Perched precariously on the edge of a 120ft cliff above Ireland's longest strand, Magilligan Beach, and nearby windswept Downhill Strand, more often than not, walking these fine sands will give you a sense of being completely alone in the world, such is their vastness.

The final miles of the journey sees the peaceful quiet dissipate as the night draws in and the bustling city of Londonderry, also known as Derry, rises from the horizon.

Pass an evening in this UK City of Culture 2013 by taking your pick from the line-up of theatres and concert halls, or streets of pubs throbbing with traditional music and the famously friendly locals. Deserving pitstops include the newly refurbished Waterside Theatre and the new state-of-the-art Irish language arts and cultural centre, Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin. This arts and culture hub is brimming with excitement as it pushes towards the year of cultural celebration, but you'll find tasters even now in the museums, galleries and community arts organisations that flourish in the city.

Although all manner of creative events are held annually, it's the fervour of the Banks of the Foyle Hallowe'en Carnival (October) that swallows the city whole with its five days of parades, fireworks, story-telling and general mischief.

Suitably culture-stocked, take the next morning to tackle the must-do activity: set off on a walk along the remarkably intact 17th century walls, complete with watchtowers and cannons, taking time to get your bearings for a day of exploration.

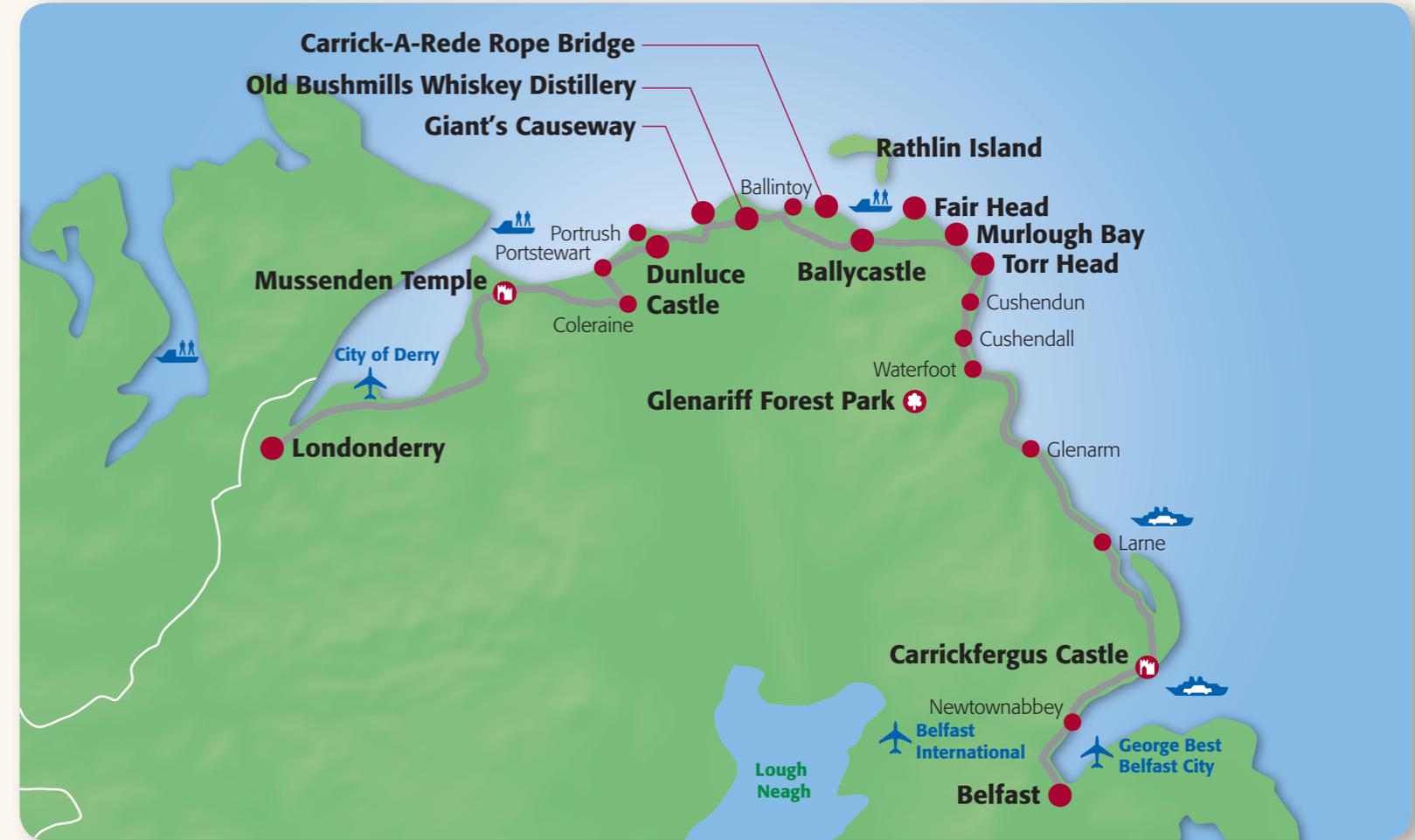
Whatever you choose to see, the locals' sense of pride in their city is palatable – it's their hometown, after all, and they want to welcome you inside their massive stone walls for however long you want to stay.





*Telling Tales in
The Glens of Antrim*

"The Glens are so rich in folklore, every stone has a story to tell," says Liz Weir, one of the few people who can call themselves a professional storyteller. Her tales of the Glens drip with magic and playful fairies, whose music can be heard on the thirteenth moon of the year, and who bestow heapings of misfortune on anyone who cuts down their beloved Hawthorn trees.





The Wild Atlantic Way

At the very edge of Europe, on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, the landscape has been shaped by the sea into something truly epic and unforgettable.



Imagine driving along the absolute edge of western Europe. Imagine exploring a 2,500km/1,500 mile-long coastline dotted with beaches, harbours, headlands and over 150 stunning viewing points, as it nips and tucks from Cork to Donegal. Imagine stopping your car, feeling the salt spray on your face and getting stuck into the Atlantic surf. Imagine peering over the sheerest of cliffs, discovering Ireland's oldest traditions, boarding its only cable car and learning the secrets only the locals know.

You can do it all – and more – on the Wild Atlantic Way.



Limestone formations, the Burren, Co Clare

This is one of the world's great long-distance driving routes, and it can be driven in whole or in part, dipped into for a few hours or a few weeks, enjoyed as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, or revisited again and again. Its scenic highlights are spectacular, but it gets under Ireland's skin, too – bringing you up close and personal with a unique culture and people as it travels through Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas.

West Cork

The route begins (or ends, depending on your direction) in West Cork, weaving its way through lively towns such as Clonakilty and Baltimore. Whale and dolphin watching are popular in these waters from May to November, with plenty of opportunity for trips to the islands of Roaring Water Bay. Seafaring traditions are very much alive along the Mizen, Sheep's Head and Beara Peninsulas. These areas are rich with natural wonders, fishing villages, walking trails and clues to past ways of life such as deserted mining posts and old milk churn collection points. The Beara Peninsula is also where Cork leads into Kerry, with the Ring of Kerry the best-known coastal loop here, combining awesome scenery with ancient heritage, super-fresh seafood and exciting towns and villages as it circles the Iveragh Peninsula.

Kerry

Continuing north, Kerry's Dingle Peninsula was home to the Antarctic explorer, Tom Crean, who retired to run the South Pole Inn in the village of Annascaul after adventuring with Scott and Shackleton. Modern-day explorers can find the same hostelry on a peninsula defined by its mountain ranges, heritage treasures and a famous dolphin named Fungie.

Dingle is the peninsula's biggest town – a cosmopolitan and festival-rich hotspot with acclaimed seafood restaurants and traditional grocery-pubs where you can buy everything from a pair of wellies to a pint. The town is a gateway to the historic Sleat Head Drive to Coumeenole, a fantastic sweep of beach bounded by craggy rocks and overlooking the romantic Blasket Islands, which have been uninhabited since 1953.

From here, the Wild Atlantic Way edges along the north Kerry coast, crossing the River Shannon to enter west Clare. Loop Head is breathtaking, a compilation of cliff-craggy coastline, churning surf, dramatic sea arches and isolated structures – a lighthouse here, a 15th century tower house there. So memorable is it that it ranks as a European Destination of Excellence.

Clare

West Clare's coastline continues past beaches such as Spanish Point, the surfing and golfing hub of Lahinch and the Cliffs of Moher towards the Burren National Park. And as you see the ancient limestone formations of the Burren's Atlantic coast, you may feel that you're looking at a moonscape rather than a landscape.



Eagle Island Lighthouse, Co. Mayo

Galway, Mayo & Sligo

Hugging Galway Bay, the coastline continues into Galway city, a buzzing urban interlude along the Wild Atlantic Way. Why not break your journey here, and enjoy time-out at the Galway Arts Festival (July), the Galway Races (July/August) and the famous Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival (September) before easing out along the Connemara coast?

It's hard to tell where the mainland stops and the islands start along the raw seascapes of Galway and Mayo, but highlights range from Irish-speaking enclaves such as Spiddal to remote beaches like Dog's Bay, the jaw-dropping majesty of Kylemore Abbey and the cone of Croagh Patrick overlooking Clew Bay. It was on this mountain that St Patrick is said to have banished snakes from Ireland, and pilgrims still climb its paths today.

Continuing north, you'll pass through the windswept Mullet Peninsula, before veering back east towards Killala Bay, where General Humbert launched the first French battle of the 1798 Rebellion. Killala is believed to have been where St Patrick first arrived in Ireland, and the local diocese – the highlight of which is a beautiful round tower – dates back to the 5th century.

The next stretch of the Wild Atlantic Way skirts around Sligo Bay, a landscape dominated by Ben Bulbin mountain. The surfing village of Strandhill, the court tomb (megalithic chamber tomb) at Creevykeel and a walk around Mullaghmore Head, are all must-dos in these parts.

Donegal

Donegal is the final (or first!) county on the Wild Atlantic Way. Its long and indented coastline swings around the northwestern corner of the island, throwing up adventures and surprises at every turn. It's an area that has a remote aspect, with edge-of-the-world highlights such as the Slieve League Cliffs (Sliabh Liag in Irish), the highest accessible sea cliffs in Europe. Walks around the peninsula here offer magical views.

Wherever you start, whenever you finish, Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way is an unforgettable long-distance driving route, a thrilling trip along the line where the island of Ireland meets the ocean and the epitome of the waters and the wild.





Take an Island Day Trip

Galway city to the Aran Islands

Base yourself in the bohemian city of Galway, and explore one of the county's most intriguing highlights from here. Using the City of Tribes as your base, you can wind around Galway Bay and visit some pretty seaside towns before taking a ferry to the ancient Aran Islands.

Galway city

Galway city's event calendar lasts all year round; it's the city that never sleeps on Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way. Literary festivals, horse racing festivals and music festivals happen throughout the year making life seem like one long party to locals.

Known as the City of Tribes, Galway was once ruled by 14 tribe families who made the city an industrial and financial success. Their legacy has continued as Galway remains a thriving town with a university, cathedral and plenty of historical attractions.

Galway's location along the Wild Atlantic Way puts it in prime position for some amazing day trips, such as the fascinating Aran Islands. You can see the sights and get back to Quay Street in time for dinner, a pint of local craft beer and a live trad session.

Rossaveal

Driving west around Galway Bay, passing through Salthill and Spiddal, will bring you into the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) area of Galway. Rossaveal is a Gaeltacht village with a strong fishing heritage. Its Irish name "Ros an Mhíl" roughly translates as peninsula of the whale/sea monster.

It's also the main ferry port to access the Aran Islands. Slightly north of the village is a Martello Tower. Built in the 19th century to watch out for potential French invaders, from here you can see the passage you need to take to get to the islands by sea.

Dun Aengus

This is the best example of one of the prehistoric forts on Inis Mór (Inishmore). Though its build date is unknown, experts estimate it was around the 2nd century BC.

The Aran Islands

The three Aran Islands sit in Galway Bay and represent all that is true of the West of Ireland. Aran jumpers are made on Inis Meáin (Inishmaan); Dun Aengus (Dún Aonghasa in Irish) is a prehistoric defensive fort on Inis Mór (Inishmore); and Inis Oírr (Inisheer) has a similar limestone landscape to the Burren – all three are worth a visit in their own right.

Always check the day's forecast with the ferry company as sailings can be affected by the weather. Aer Arann also flies if you're prone to sea-sickness!

Return to Galway city

Stop off in Spiddal where hundreds of students gather every summer to improve their Irish language skills. Walk into a shop and try to speak Irish in this Gaeltacht area. Use hello, "Dia dhuit" (pronounced "dia-gwitch") to start off with. Locals will be very pleased by your efforts!

Cearclann, the craft and design village, is a great spot for authentic Irish-made gifts and the café's cakes are simply mouthwatering.

Then it's back to the bright city lights where any number of exciting events could be taking place – that's the charm of Galway.



Killarney to Sleat Head in 1 day

Experience the raw beauty of the Dingle Peninsula's offshore outpost with a day trip to the Blasket Islands along the Kerry coastline.



Killarney

Killarney is the kind of town that's hard to leave. There are luxury resorts such as Aghadoe Heights Hotel and Spa, great craft shops and lively pubs. That's not to mention the thriving restaurant scene, with fun and tasty spots such as Miss Courtney's Tea Rooms and The Smoke House. But there is so much around and about that it's essential to take at least a day to experience the wild, invigorating surrounds of this special part of the world.

Castlemaine

The town of Castlemaine is the gateway to the Dingle Peninsula, a jut of land defined by sweeping sandy beaches, ancient monuments and craggy mountains. Take time for a quick stretch of the legs at Inch Beach, where your panoramic view is broken only by sweeping sand dunes.

Dingle

Dingle's unique atmosphere is something to be savoured. From traditional grocery pubs (where you can buy everything from a pair of Wellington boots to a pint) to artisan cheese shops, Dingle buzzes right throughout the year with excellent film, culture and arts festivals. Traditional music is celebrated with a passion, too, while the Other Voices (December) music festival draws top artists from around the world to play in small, boutique venues. While in town, make sure to get acquainted with the most famous resident of all. Now an impressive 30 years old, Fungie the Dolphin has made his home in the waters around Dingle and seems to find it a hard place to leave... he's not the only one.

The Blasket Islands

The Blasket Islands speak of Ireland's rich linguistic, literary and cultural heritage, and you can learn all about them at the Great Blasket Centre in Dunquin (Dún Chaoin). Or why not visit the Great Blasket itself for an incredible adventure.



Slea Head

The Slea Head Drive is dotted with incredible historic monuments, such as ancient beehive huts, and blessed with dramatic Atlantic coastal scenes, the drive will take you through small Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking communities) and along some winding cliff-edge roads. One of the most incredible points along the way is the small village of Dunquin (Dún Chaoin), with its scenic pier and friendly local community. The beach of Coumeenole here is well worth a stop-off for a gusty stroll along its white sands. There are wonderful views of the Blasket Islands from here, deserted islands that were once home to a thriving Irish-speaking island community. Continue on along by Clogher Head and the views keep on coming, as you round the village of Ballyferriter. From here, sit back, relax before you head back to Killarney for a Wild Atlantic Way inspired supper at Quinlan's Seafood bar.





St Patrick's Trail

In Ireland, the legacy of Patrick and those who followed him add unique character to the landscape. Soaring round towers and mysterious monastic remains can be found in almost every county and corner of the island.



The legacy of St Patrick is etched in the paths worn smooth by the centuries of people who have followed in his footsteps, like on the slopes of Croagh Patrick in County Mayo or Slemish Mountain in County Antrim; it's embedded in the stones of Ireland's monastic ruins and in the sky-piercing round towers in counties Armagh and Down.

Much more than that, though, it lives and breathes in tradition and folklore, in the thousands of people who gather at Croagh Patrick on 'Reek Sunday' (the last Sunday in July) to brave those scree-covered slopes; in the millions of people the world over who, in the name of St Patrick, celebrate the elusive idea of 'Irishness'.

But what do we truly know of the life of St Patrick? Following him up Croagh Patrick or Slemish opens windows on the experiences that shaped his spirituality. Picking up his trail in County Down allows us to delve just that little bit further.

County Down

Following Patrick's trail, you are struck with the realisation that he was a well-travelled soul. He is said to have baptised converts in a well near the site of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin; at the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary he converted Aengus, the King of Munster (accidentally putting the spiked end of his crozier through the King's foot in the process); but the undisputed heartland of his mission was here, in counties like Down, where you can still find the greatest concentration of sites attesting to his lasting legacy.

Known locally as 'Patrick's country', County Down is generously dotted with saintly sites. We kick off our Christian heritage trail in Bangor Abbey. Built in the 6th century, the Abbey trained many of the missionaries who kept the light of Christianity alive in the darkness of the Middle Ages. Nearby, you'll find North Down Museum, located in Bangor Town Hall, furnished with a cosy atmospheric gallery attesting to Bangor Abbey's period of Patrick-inspired Christianisation between 590–990AD.

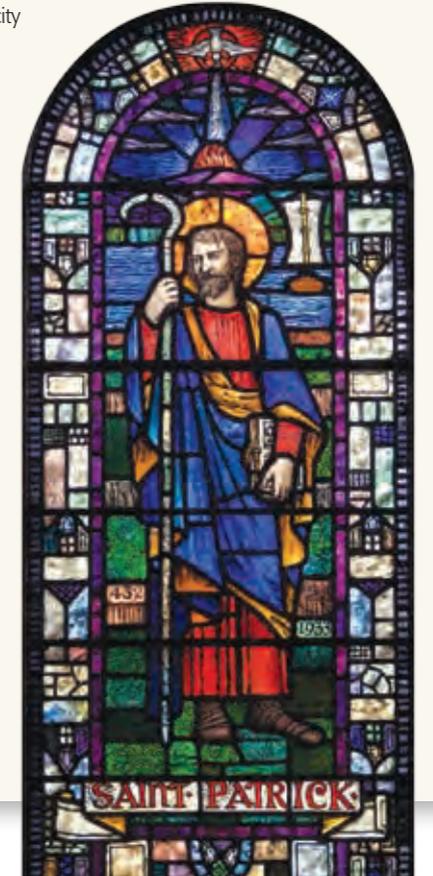
Stretching south from Bangor, enter the majestic Grey Abbey. This is an ideal spot for a leg-stretch and fresh air before the short drive to the ruins of Inch Abbey.

Taking locals' directions, just 'out the road' from Downpatrick's centre, lives the bucolic calm of Inch Abbey; stone-walled proof of Patrick's Christian legacy lives here. The quaintly ruined abbey sits a short distance from the lovingly constructed stone façade of Saul Church, watched over by a statue of the great Saint from nearby Slieve Patrick.

Departing Inch Abbey, curve outwards slightly towards the coast and spend some time viewing the little beehive mounds of Struell Wells. Said to have been blessed by Patrick himself, the wells and chapel ruins here make a very charming picture. After the pastoral repose of Struell Wells it's forth to Downpatrick where the Saint's life is ingrained not only on the history but on the landscape too.

Examples of Patrick's effect and impact are scattered liberally here with iconic sites like Saint Patrick's Cathedral watching proudly over the massive granite stone marking Patrick's Grave in Downpatrick. County Down's affection for Patrick is further channelled through Down County Museum and The Saint Patrick Centre, the world's only permanent exhibition dedicated to Patrick's life and legacy.

Housed in a chiselled 16th century fortified building our next stop, Bagenal's Castle in the city of Newry, breaks up the drive from Downpatrick to Armagh city. Pop in for a peek at some wonderful finds from Newry's Cistercian Abbey and maybe a cup of coffee before making for Armagh city, and yet another page in the life of Ireland's Patron Saint.



Did you know?*St Patrick and the shamrock*

Looking for a simple way to explain the Holy Trinity to potential pagan converts, an inspired Patrick plucked a shamrock (a clover but with only three leaves) from the soil. The druids had always believed that the shamrock had the ability to ward off evil so by choosing the shamrock to explain Christianity, Patrick had found a middle ground. Legend then has it that Patrick went on to use the three leaves on the plant to represent the Holy Trinity of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, just as Roman Catholic's bless themselves today.



St Patrick's RC Cathedral, Armagh city

County Armagh

Patrick's story, his life really, remains well established in Armagh with his saintly hue lingering in places such as Armagh Public Library and Armagh County Museum. A stone's throw from the Museum lies Saint Patrick's Trian Visitor Complex, where visitors can peruse the Saint's writings and sneak a little closer to understanding him before visiting his two Cathedrals sitting atop Armagh's hills.

Perched stoically on the Hill of Armagh, Saint Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral oozes stoic good looks, its handsome exterior matched inch for inch by the vaulted beauty hiding inside. Similarly located on another of Armagh's grassy hills is Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, begun in 1840 but unfinished (due in part to the Great Famine) until 1904. A quick look heavenwards at the intricate detailing goes some way to explaining any tardiness.

Visiting all of these splendid dedications to Patrick's life in Ireland, it's curious to consider that one of the great ironies of St Patrick's story is that he was brought to Ireland against his will by slave traders from the Welsh/English coast. Bonded into shepherding sheep on Slemish Mountain in County Antrim, Patrick is inspired to flee Ireland by a vision of the Angel Victorious.

Patrick escapes his slavery by jumping aboard a boat back to Britain, where he experiences his first conversion. They find themselves shipwrecked and the sailors ask Patrick to pray to his God. He does, and a herd of pigs appear. The sailors are so impressed they convert to Christianity. And so begins the life of one of Christianity's most widely revered icons. Dally in Armagh a while before heading for County Mayo and Croagh Patrick, the site of the Saint's greatest pilgrimage.

County Mayo

Across the island on Ireland's west coast you will find County Mayo and Croagh Patrick, sitting tall and bulky, just waiting to be climbed. Although the breadth of the island is wide, the presence of St Patrick is felt as strongly here as it is in counties Armagh and Down. Ask anyone who has ever climbed Croagh Patrick: they'll tell you the holy mountain's lower slopes are disarmingly deceptive.

You move along with relative ease, soaking up the views of Mayo's Clew Bay, with Achill Island shimmering like an emerald jewel in the distance. At the ridgeline, the majestic views open up to the remote valleys and rugged mountains. From here, the summit seems a mere stone's throw away.

And just when you think the going is that bit too easy, the gradient ramps up a notch and you hit the deep layer of scree that covers the upper third of the conical slopes.

For every step forward you slide two back as the jagged, loose rock gives beneath your feet, and the peak fades into the distance. Don't worry. With a little faith and a dose of perseverance you'll reach it, just like St Patrick did, the experience of the summit all the more memorable for it. No pain, no gain and no pilgrimage without perseverance.



Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly

A Pilgrim's Journey

St Patrick's influences touched many lives in other parts of the island, too. Journey south of the St Patrick Trail and you will be taken to a collection of Ireland's most stunning and sacred Christian sites: Monasterboice in rural County Louth was named for the obscure St Buite, who founded a monastery here in the 5th century. In the remains of that monastery, you'll find two of Ireland's oldest and most important early Christian High Crosses – the West Cross and Muiredach's Cross – still standing on their original sites.

Just a few miles away in County Meath you'll come to the Hill of Slane, the place where St Patrick lit his famous Paschal Fire, to announce the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. From the top, the entire Boyne Valley – Ireland's most historic patch of land – opens beneath your feet.

The remains of the old monastery that once stood in Kells – the town that gives its name to the masterful 'Book of Kells', which is preserved in Trinity College Dublin – include a round tower, three high crosses, and St Columba's House, an ancient stone-roofed church.

Finally, in the sublime setting of the Shannon River plain in County Offaly, you'll find the remains of Clonmacnoise, the 6th century monastery founded by St Ciarán and his followers, and once one of Europe's most important centres of religion, learning, craftsmanship and politics. The magnificence of the artefacts matches the beauty of the setting.





Music to your ears

From bows zipping on fiddles to toes tapping on barstools, traditional music in Ireland is alive and kicking. Listen once and you may be dancing to a different tune ...



From the jigs to the reels, the marches to the aires, traditional Irish music is hip. Don't believe it? Just spend a few days at the next Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, which is Ireland's largest festival of music, song and dance held in August each year. Literally thousands of traditional musicians and their supporters descend upon the event's host town to lose themselves in three days of concentrated music: they come to hear it, play it and talk it; and they come to compete.



Martin Gaffney playing at the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann

Music flows from pubs, cafés, outdoor stages, and impromptu street corner sessions. Smiling children can be seen carrying accordions from venue to venue to show their burgeoning skills. Tin whistles poke out of men's shirt pockets. Ladies dangle concertinas from their wrists. Trendy teenagers sport fiddles, mandolins and *bodhráns* (hand-held drum) as though they were the latest urban fashion accessories.

After the dust clears, a new group of musical aficionados arrive to perform for the crowds, from fiddlers and harpists, lilters and ballad singers, Uilleann pipe and button accordion players to tin whistlers and *céilí* (traditional Irish dancing) bands.

The Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann is the pinnacle of a calendar of traditional music events happening up and down the country, especially along the western stretch between counties Kerry and Donegal, and there are regional *fleadhs* and festivals, impromptu sessions, concerts and dances, courses and lessons across the Island of Ireland.

Martin Gaffney plays a mean tin whistle. As one of the movers and shakers behind the Fleadh, he knows the country's traditional music landscape better than most. The local festivals, he says, are the heart of traditional music. "From April to October, you'll find another one nearly every week. They'll take you to out-of-the-way places with a strong musical heritage, places where people are looking to connect with the music and each other."

Martin knows the gems that make up this melodic expanse like the back of his hand – little places with big musical souls and each with its own traditional fingerprint. Journey from the southernmost point of Dingle in County Kerry, up to Tulla and Feakle in County Clare, and onto Achill Island in County Mayo, and you've got the makings of a music trail through Ireland's western gems. Moving northwest from there, head to Ballaghaderreen and Keadue in County Roscommon, Tubbercurry, Ballintogher and Riverstown in County Sligo, Glenfarne and Drumshanbo in County Leitrim, and then to Glencolmille in County Donegal, and your passion for soul-soaring sessions will be almost sated.

But, adds Martin, as you begin your journey, you'll suddenly realise that to make your journey whole, you must also learn to hear the regional distinctiveness at each port of call. Only then will you really discover parts of Ireland that few visitors ever see: rural, close-knit, and steeped in music.

So how should you go about embracing the harmonies in Ireland? Well, to use that well-known phrase, we're going on a whistlestop tour along the west coast, bringing you to the very heartland of Irish traditional music.





County Kerry

How could we possibly start a journey about music in Ireland without heading straight to Dingle in County Kerry? In fact, there's a well-known phrase down in this lush green *Gaeltacht* (Irish speaking) area that goes some way to explaining how much traditional Irish music is engrained in the Dingle Peninsula's psyche. Apparently, if you want to heap praise on someone around here, you say "*Mo cheol thú*" ("You are my music!")

It's fitting then that musicians far and wide have settled in and around the area, such is the lure of the love of music on the peninsula. It's also why lots of the sessions of song and dance are still held in each other's houses. But don't you worry too much – these supremely talented musicians and singers also love an audience, and bars such as An Droichead Beag, Mac Cárthaigh's and John Benny Moriarty's make the perfect stages for such occasions, especially for singing and set dancing.

County Clare

Veer northwards and straight up to east Clare. In this part of the county, gently rolling hill country extends west of Lough Derg and the River Shannon. This isn't the place to come to if you're in a hurry. As Martin Hayes, the renowned fiddler and east Clare native, once put it, "we take life a little slower here, our music, too".

The hub of east Clare's music scene clusters around two small villages – Tulla and Feakle – and figures like Mary McNamara, the concertina player and teacher, the Tulla Céilí Band, and Hayes, the virtuoso fiddler. But individual figures in traditional music seldom come without a family attached and this holds especially true in east Clare.

The relaxed, lyrical style of east Clare can be heard throughout the year in local pubs, such as Shortts and the Pepper Pot in Feakle, or Minogues in Tulla. But one of the area's musical highlights comes in August with the Feakle Festival. "Feakle has this real folk feel to it," Martin Gaffney says. "The master classes are probably the best in the country." A month later in September, the captivating festival buzz moves just a few kilometres down the road to Tulla.

As County Clare's musical route flows on from Tulla to Ennis with its *Fleadh Nua* (held annually during May), to Miltown Malbay and the Willie Clancy Summer School (held in early July), and finally to Lisdoonvarna's festival (throughout September), which injects traditional music with rock star status, and a wee bit of matchmaking as well, you soon realise that the county is essentially synonymous with traditional music.

Kilfenora has its renowned céilí band, and the corner of the county near Kinvarra has more musicians per square foot than anywhere else in the country. To stand out against this crowded backdrop of contenders says something extraordinary about the depth of musical heritage in east Clare.

Pubs and Music from counties Clare to Donegal

You'll literally find hundreds of pubs where good Trad (traditional) music is played regularly, from the generally well-known like Matt Molloy's in Westport, County Mayo, Anderson's Thatched Cottage in Carrick-on-Shannon, to McGrory's of Culdaff in Donegal. Then you've got the more local gems, such as Cleary's in Miltown Malbay and Ciaran's Bar in Ennis, both in County Clare, and Killorans in Tubbercurry, or Teac Jack in Derrybeg on the Donegal coast. A basic rule of thumb for finding lively pub *seisiúns* (sessions) is to focus on the localities where music festivals and summer schools take place, a sure sign of a vibrant local Trad scene that is also likely to be found playing regularly in the area's pubs.



Pub session. Matt Molloy's, Westport, Co. Mayo

County Galway

The trip so far is only beginning to scratch the surface of the west coast traditional scene, where intimate pubs are packed to the rafters as impromptu sessions are played out amidst the silence of the surrounding countryside. Moving north to Galway, Martin Gaffney says, you'll find "brilliant music every week, all year long in Cnoc Suain," a breathtaking cultural retreat in Spiddal. "At the heart of what's going on there are these amazing musical authorities like Mary Bergin, the tin whistle player, the fiddler, Dearbhaill Standún, and their group, Dordán."

County Mayo

Into Mayo now, and Martin Gaffney calls Scoil Acla, the annual summer school on stunning Achill Island, the Rolls Royce of traditional music with "nearly two weeks of top class traditional royalty attracting some of the best musicians out there." Included on that list in the past are players and teachers, such as the flautist, Hammy Hamilton, the fiddler, Paddy Ryan, Uilleann pipe player, Robbie Hannon, *sean-nós* (old style, unaccompanied) singer, Síle Uí Móngáin, as well as poets like Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney, and the Whitbread winner, Paul Durcan.

County Sligo

With its undulating hills and twisting lanes, south Sligo rarely appears on the radar screen of passing visitors. Often described as 'bouncy and intricate, with so many twists and turns, dips and whirls, it'll remind you of driving on Irish roads but without the sheep'. Be it dancing or just tapping your foot, Sligo fiddling will have you burning a few more calories than its laid-back relative from east Clare.

The south Sligo scene revolves around the activities of several local branches of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, the main body for the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music. "Local branches are generally the best source of information on what's happening anywhere in the country," says Martin Gaffney.

Gurteen is home to *Ceoláras Coleman*, one of *Comhaltas'* new regional resource centres where you'll find everything from music sessions to singing classes. And the south Sligo branch keeps the village of Tubbercurry alive with traditional music and dance. The highlight of the season is the week long South Sligo Summer School (early July), where you'll have plenty of chances to move your feet to local tunes, such as The Killavil Jig.

The beautiful village of Riverstown plays host to the annual James Morrison Traditional Music Festival at the beginning of August. You'll find sessions in the pubs, concerts in the local community hall, *céilís* on the town 'Diamond', and classes in Morrison *Teach Cheoil*, the branch's new Irish cultural centre. In nearby Ballintogher, the Fred Finn Branch commemorates the flute player, John Egan, with an annual festival, as well as organising the annual Ballintogher Traditional Music Festival at the end of October.

Knowing your seisiúns from your céilís

Irish music derives almost entirely from dance music of one form or another – jigs, reels, polkas, hornpipes, waltzes, and strathspeys among them. If you're more of a listener than a dancer, it's the seisiúns you should be on the look out for – informal gatherings of players in pubs and venues where you can tap your feet along with the beat. For those who want to get those feet really moving, céilís are the place to join in the set dancing.

Musical styles and tastes shift from region to region in Ireland. If the polka predominates, you're likely to be in Cork or Kerry. Donegal fiddling is fast paced and rhythmically 'driving', Sligo fiddling still fast paced but more ornamental, while Clare slows everything down a notch and leans towards the lyrical.

The tradition of sean-nós (old style, unaccompanied singing and dancing) also varies in style from Northern Ireland to the South and West of the island, the areas where it is most popular. For anyone who equates Irish dancing with step dancing, the fluid, and often witty, improvisation of a sean-nós dancer is an experience not to be missed.



County Donegal

It used to be said that for every house in County Donegal, there was a fiddle indoors, too! While not all of Donegal's inhabitants keep one on their shelf these days, it's still a tradition that provides this county with its own distinctive style of music, centering around the fiddle, naturally. You'll recognise musicians hailing from these parts by the remarkably rapid pace those fiddlers move their bows. The local pride in their music resonates through the county, especially upon mentioning the name Altan – a local six-piece band that seriously knows its strings and whose hard-hitting jigs and reels are legendary.

With such a close proximity to Scotland, it's also no surprise that Donegal's near neighbours have been influential here, too. Take a trip to Ardara's Cup of Tae Festival (held in April/May), and you'll find Donegal natives mixing with their Scottish counterparts for many a rip-roaring session.

Like what you've heard in Donegal and fancy facing the fiddle? Steer towards *Ceol Sa Ghleann's Scoil Ceoil* (music school) in Glencolmcille, where the people who live and breathe this tradition will help you make your own beautiful music.

Sometimes, though, like with all things in life, the best traditional experience is the one you find by chance. Travel those twisting roads of counties Kerry, east Clare, east Galway, south Sligo, Roscommon, Leitrim, or southwest Donegal and you'll get plenty of chances.





Beaches of the West Coast

Stretching north from counties Cork to Donegal, exploring the beaches along the West Coast of Ireland brings you to coral strands, golden sands and a character as individual as the locals who frequent them ...

Ireland's beaches aren't just incredibly pretty to look at. Yes, they're often found in dramatic locations at the foothills of mountains; captured as if in a fisherman's net at the tail end of green farmland trails; and trimmed by fine golden sands extending as far as the eye can see. But these beaches are also a home away from home for patient anglers casting their lines for trigger fish, red mullet and amberjack; walkers bracing themselves for mouthfuls of salty sea air; swimmers

daring enough to rejuvenate their bodies year-round in the mighty Atlantic; surfers skimming the white breaks from dawn to dusk; and horse riders viewing the seascape from atop their cantering beasts.

You see, there's a lot, lot more to the west coast beaches than just a pretty face – and the Irish are definitely not just fair weather friends.

County Cork

So you've arrived in Cork and want to head out to enjoy its coastal beauties, then head west, my friend, and to Inchydoney, just a few kilometres south of Clonakilty. Here is the first place you'll realise that Ireland's beaches are like pubs: no two are the same. Feel the fine white sand of Inchydoney between your toes and you'll be as bewitched as the legions of local families who take advantage of low tide to build sandcastles in the massive plains of exposed sand.

Here lies the crux when it comes to recommending beaches in County Cork (and for the rest of the west coast, for that matter): you're never more than a few minutes from yet another dream beach. Head southwest, snaking round the coast from Inchydoney to southwest-facing Rosscarbery, where you even get three mighty beaches in a row – Owenahincha, Warren and Long Strand. This wind and wave-swept affair leaves you feeling physically and spiritually reborn, as though you've just visited some tremendous open-air cathedral.

And then, just a few kilometres away comes the exact opposite, the pristine pocket-beach at Tragumna near the village of Bawnlahan. Many of the region's food obsessed have been spotted here stoking their appetite with a brisk evening swim before heading off inland to graze the rich restaurant pickings in Skibbereen.

Jut out towards Ireland's most southwesterly tip once more, and you'll find Barleycove, sitting majestically near the tip of the Mizen Peninsula. The nearest towns are the picturesque fishing villages of Crookhaven and Goleen, and as it's a designated special area of conservation, you can keep an eye out for cormorants, mute swans and herring gulls on a landscape dotted with wild pansy and pale dog violets.

County Kerry

Leaving Cork, traverse the county borders to Kerry where you are flooded with pretty fishing villages from Bantry to Kenmare. Take a little detour from the latter and swing west for a round or two on the stunning Waterville Links Golf course. Okay, you may not be splashing about in the water, but the sandy bunkers of this aptly described 'beautiful monster' are intrinsically linked to its crashing ocean neighbour.

Head north by coast again through Cahersiveen and Killorglin, before veering west onto the Dingle Peninsula where you can tuck your toes into two of Kerry's gems, Inch Strand (the mile-long golden stretch of beach where an illicit love affair wrecked lives in the film 'Ryan's Daughter') and the equally picturesque but rather less well-known Béalbán. A broad, long stretch of fine white sand that glances out towards the Dingle Peninsula, this is where you'll find friendly dog walkers and hardy year-round swimmers.

Follow the coastal roads east then north from Tralee and you'll meet the wonderful people of Ballybunion, who will gladly point the way to Nun's Beach. To get there, follow a gentle cliff-walk from Ballybunion's other two magnificent beaches – known locally as Men's and Ladies', as the genders parted ways left and right, respectively, at the cliff top for a ritual that ceased decades ago – until you find yourself looking out over a sunken horseshoe cove of sand, caves and sea arches. Unlike the rugged nuns who once negotiated the slopes, you're best advised to marvel this wonder from above.

Around this neck of the woods, you'll also find more eye-popping links courses to test the precision of masters. Yes, we're talking about Ballybunion's two grand 18s, where yet again an indecisive sea breeze can alter the scorecard in seconds.



Shore Angling

Ever heard the one about the fisherman in the tackle shop? From the sea of shiny lures hanging on the wall he pulls one pretty little one off and asks the salesman, "What do you catch with this one?" "Fishermen," replies the salesman.

Nothing is as addictive as reeling in a fish, and no place better for it than the beaches and rocks of Ireland's western coastline. Between Culdaff in Donegal and Courtmacsherry in Cork there are literally hundreds of hotspots for landing thornback ray, dogfish, flounder, conger eel, sea bass, gilthead bream, dab, coalfish, pollack, plaice and mackerel. Try it and see if you don't get hooked!

County Clare

Depart Kerry and cross the Shannon to Clare, making a beeline for a little town down by the sea called Kilkee. Ask about a place to swim and the locals will tell you of the Pollock Holes – three natural rock-enclosed pools at the town's west end, with water that is changed by every tide. Generations of locals have waited for the foaming tide to fill the gaps in the rocky reef so they could spring into the chilly pools. Other less hardy souls prefer the Holes when the tide has ebbed to reveal colourful sea anemone carpeting the depths and suckered starfish clinging to the slippery rocks.

Move north again to Quilty and onto the road linking it to Miltown Malbay near Lahinch. Here you'll find another local rendezvous, Spanish Point. This bracing beauty takes its Mediterranean name from the unfortunate Spaniards who died here during the Spanish Armada in 1588, when the sailors' vessels were wrecked against the rocks and any survivors were summarily executed. Despite its bloody history, Spanish Point is a distinctively beautiful strand and offers a far warmer welcome than its early visitors received.

County Galway

Crossing counties again, swing in to Galway around the bay as it passes through Galway city and out once more as if reaching for America, the Atlantic framing your every move. Just past Rossaveel is Carraroe, a well-known friend to the troops of young Irish people sent from the east coast to learn gaelic in a naturally beautiful setting. Irish speakers in Connemara call the strand at Carraroe Trá an Doilín. But if you simply ask for the way to Coral Beach, they'll send you over bog-bumped roads, ending at a place of such singular beauty that the first few minutes are spent gaping at the faded colours and fragmented remains of a coral reef.

The beauty of Galway is that this stretch of coastline is pocketed with gorgeous coves, mainly found at the end of long winding laneways and usually lacking in official signposts, such is the volume. Come across a laneway of this ilk, and the best advice is to take the key from the ignition and walk, otherwise you may submit your car to the perils of untamed wildlife and sand-covered rocks.

Stick to the beaten track and you can beach hop from Carraroe to Roundstone, where you take the north road exiting this vibrant fishing village to sheltered Gurteen and its neighbour, Dog's Bay. Slice through bogland to glorious Ballyconneely, which is just 10 kilometres south of Clifden, the capital of Connemara. Take a while to soak in the delights of the Connemara National Park before hitting the road again for Mayo.



Meet the Brittons – Ireland's First Family of surfers

Sligo surf pioneers, the Brittons, have rightfully taken their place as the first family of surfing in Ireland, with daughter Easkey (named, naturally, after her parents' favourite Sligo surfing spot) the official four-time Irish National Champion.

"My mother was in the States in the mid-60s when she saw someone surfing," Barry Britton says. Thinking that the waves back in Donegal's Rosstown looked no different to those in Southern California, she brought a couple of boards home with her, but the Britton brothers had no idea what to do with them. "We spent hours lying on them in the waves until we saw this guy from Enniskillen actually riding a wave on a homemade plywood board. Suddenly it clicked and we were hooked. My mother really regretted giving us those boards."

Afterwards, the Britton family and other Irish surf pioneers had the waves of the northwest all to themselves. Travelling surfers joined them in the 1970s, bringing with them new equipment and techniques, but when they returned home to regale their buddies with tales of world-class Irish surf, few believed them. "We only allowed the surfing magazine guys to photograph the breaks on nasty, cold, wet days," Barry says, "the people they raved to at home only saw these miserable shots and wondered why ..."



Champion surfer, Easkey Britton

County Mayo

Direct your car to Westport, before steering northwest a little more to County Mayo's Mulranny Beach, a thin, compact strip of sand lined with distinctive auburn-red pebbles (ideal for skimming into the deep blue Atlantic), before turning gear to Achill Island, where Blue Flag beaches literally dot its length and breadth.

Despite its name, Achill Island is accessible by car so you can take your pick of the best beaches: south-facing Trawmore is a favourite of water sports enthusiasts; Doega is a lovely little stone and sand bay with a few rock pools and a pier; and north-facing Dugort overlooks Blacksod Bay and wraps itself around the foot of the Slievemore Mountain.

Real beach adventurers, however, will be pointed in the direction of Achill's Keem Bay, a piece of sandy perfection at the end of the world. The drive alone will have the kids' jaws dropping. Wedged at the bottom of a steep-sloped valley, this magical cove makes the ideal spot for a sheltered family swim and picnic.

County Sligo

Returning through Mulranny take the road to Ballina and onwards to County Sligo. As Ireland's surfing has grown from fringe activity to mass sport, here in Sligo the surf culture has matured with it – and no more so than in Sligo's Easkey/Enniscrone coast. Long gone are the days when small groups of pioneers weathered the winters chasing the next set of waves in their Morris Minors.

But it's not all about the surf in Sligo, farther north along the coast past Sligo town is Mullaghmore, a sweeping arc of gold sand with safe shallow waters that is heaven for swimmers. Strap on the snorkel to get a real kick out of the underwater beauties on display before continuing your seaside frolics in County Donegal.

County Donegal

As you may have noticed, the main problem with beach-going in Ireland is choosing where to pitch your beach towel. Pity the poor County Beach Manager up in Donegal who found out the hard way the futility of counting the beaches under his command. The deeper he dug in the local sands, the more beaches he uncovered.

The big and the bold were easy enough to keep a finger on. Bundoran, for instance, oozes sophisticated skill from its resident surfers and boasts a surf school for novices and upwards. Trail through pretty Donegal town and out past Ardara to descend on Maghera, a lonely sea of sand wedges poking into the wilds of Loughros Beg Bay. The tiny road to Maghera follows the southern bank of the Bracky River estuary, taking you past traditional cottages, cascading waterfalls, and hummocky uninhabited islands.

The road from Maghera through Gweedore and onto Gortahook finds Magheroarty, a long, hooked arm of pristine sand and marram grass reaching to the sea. And the vistas of the Fanad Peninsula's Ballymastocker Strand are legend in this heartland.

But it was the lovely local secrets that brought about the Beach Manager's downfall. Places like Macamish, just south of Ballymastocker. You can locate this beauty by simply turning about face from Fanad and ensuring the shoreline stays to your left. Ask someone in the nearby village of Rathmullan how to find it. Careful, though, some of them know it better as Otway ...

You've probably gathered by now that the key to finding your ideal beach means talking to the real experts, the locals. They're a pretty helpful lot and likely to steer you to the truly hidden gems.



Beach Flags

Many of the beaches around the island of Ireland – the overwhelming majority of them scattered the length of the Atlantic Coast – meet the strict Blue Flag criteria, the highest international standard for beach cleanliness, water quality and natural beauty.

Beach scenes

In the film 'Ryan's Daughter', the telltale footprints betraying Sarah Miles's amorous liaisons with a young English officer were left in the sands of Coumeenole Beach in the shadow of Sleah Head on the Dingle Peninsula; the film's stormy scenes take place on Coumeenole, nearby Inch Strand and a handful of other Dingle beaches. In 'The Quiet Man', six-foot-four-inch John Wayne dons jockey silks to win the Innisfree Cup and a kiss from the Widow Tillane on Connemara's Lettergesh Beach. And despite the flawless appearance of Dingle's Clogher Strand in 'Far and Away', it still couldn't rescue Tom Cruise's anything but flawless attempt at an Irish accent.

Prefer real life to film fiction? Visit big and bold Banna Strand in Kerry where Roger Casement, the Irish Patriot, was put ashore from a German U-Boot and promptly arrested by the British in 1916. Or you could head to Carrowiskey or Lacken Strands in Mayo, where teenage jockeys a fraction the size of John Wayne pilot thoroughbreds over the sands in the annual race meets.



Keem Beach, Achill Island, Co. Mayo





Medieval Ireland

Battlefields in the name of love, ousted kings and a little bit of witchcraft, a journey through medieval Ireland – from the Norman maze of Kilkenny to the walls of Waterford and Cork’s famous castles – unearths tales you couldn’t make up!



Few things trigger our fantasy quite like the glimpse of a medieval castle on the Irish landscape or the experience of walking the medieval lanes that shape the urban fabric of some of our towns and cities. Those stony ramparts and walls still exude an aura of mystique and mystery, and that patchwork of narrow twists and turns still resonates with some long forgotten pattern of life. Of course, it's not the stones and streets per se that set our imaginations running, but the stories embedded in them. And tour guide, Pat Tynan, is more than happy to retell a tale or two.

Kilkenny City

We dive into our historical jaunt in the undisputed heart and soul of medieval Ireland, County Kilkenny. The city is a Norman maze of narrow alleyways, twisting and turning their way around abbeys and cathedrals, restored houses and crumbling city walls.

First port of call has to be the hulking 12th century Kilkenny Castle, which dominates the south side of the city from its perch above the River Nore. The impressive castle was home for nearly five centuries to the Norman landowning family, the Butlers of Ormonde, before it was offered to the city of Kilkenny by Arthur, the 6th Marquess of Ormonde, for the princely sum of £50 in 1967 – a bargain by anyone's standards! A stroll around the castle is a step into the most visually pleasing of time machines – feast your eyes on The Picture Gallery Wing, where even the roof beams feature intricate artwork, and weave your way around the nooks and crannies of the luxurious library, with its psychedelic yellow and pink colour scheme.

Leave behind the eclectic allure of Kilkenny Castle and journey across the River Nore to another highpoint, St Canice's Cathedral, which towers above the city's north side. After marvelling at the exquisite stained glass windows of the 13th century Cathedral, pop into the library before absorbing your mind with thoughts of Kilkenny's ancestors in the manicured graveyard, which is shaded by a splendid Yew tree.

Those willing to climb up the 121 steps on a series of ladders within St Canice's Tower will enjoy an unrivalled rooftop view of the stone-cut good looks of this compact cityscape. Trailing downwards again, pound the winding pavements to the renowned stone-clad medieval hostelry known as Kyteler's Inn. The Cathedral enjoys a fascinating link to the legend of the Inn's namesake, Dame Alice Kyteler – Alice's nephew, William Outlawe, bought himself free of implication in his aunt's sorcery scandal by agreeing to finance the roofing of a part of St Canice's, but there's plenty more about that later – so it's only fitting that our next stop is a chance to eat, drink and ponder the fate of this eponymous and somewhat infamous Kilkenny lady.

With thirst sated and hunger satisfied, it's the stoic grandeur of the Dominican Black Abbey that entices you to its doors. The edifice itself still packs a visual punch and is shrouded in its own, very particular, very medieval atmosphere. The original archways can be found encased in more recent stonework, and Black Freren Gate is still standing, but just barely. In its defence, Black Abbey suffered somewhat of an identity crisis in 1543 when it was converted into a courthouse. Robust legal counsel stalked its corridors until the 17th century, when it was restored to its original religious intent. Remains of the early church include the old nave and aisle, as well as 13th century Norman tombstones.

Just a short distance from Black Abbey is the medieval jewellery box of Rothe House and Garden, a wonderfully restored 16th century Tudor home, where archaeologists recently found the remains of an earlier medieval townhouse (thought to be the 'city pad' of the Abbot of nearby Duiske Abbey). More specifically, they found the Abbot's loo, a very rare and strangely fascinating discovery providing essential insights into what he ate and drank (it turns out he ate, drank, and lived pretty well, dining on swan and T-Bone steaks and washing it down with his favourite Bordeaux).

Medieval Kilkenny doesn't stop at the city limits, so before making for Waterford, Ireland's oldest city, visit the magnificent ruins of Kells Priory just south of Kilkenny city.

Waterford's warriors

Jack Burtchaell is a walking repository of the stories embedded in Waterford's warren of alleyways, and he loves nothing more than to regale an audience by bringing an entire rogues gallery to life. And some of this stuff, like the marriage of Strongbow to Aoife, is so unbelievable you couldn't make it up.

Richard de Clare, the 2nd Earl of Pembroke, better known as Strongbow, came to Ireland at the behest of Dermot MacMurrough, the King of Leinster. Dermot, it seems, had gotten himself in a bit of a pickle by abducting Derbforgaill, the wife of Rory O'Connor, the High King of Ireland (although opinions are divided as some claim Derbforgaill went willingly and even brought her personal possessions with her.)

Rory responded by dispossessing Dermot of his kingdom so Dermot in turn sought help from the Anglo-Normans to get it back. With the blessing of Henry II, Strongbow agreed to send an invasion army, complete with Welsh archers, in exchange for his marriage to Aoife, Dermot's eldest daughter, and the right of succession to Leinster. The marriage took place in 1170 on the site where Waterford's Christ Church Cathedral now stands. And with that, as Jack says, the history of the English in Ireland begins.



Waterford City

Waterford's strategic position at the junction of the three sisters – the Rivers Suir, Barrow and Nore – made it a highly desirable object for Viking and Anglo-Norman invaders, both of which left their mark on the urban fabric of the modern city.

That fabric and that story are wonderfully unwound at Waterford's Museum of Treasures (and the first in our journey of must-sees) where the realities of a medieval city are neatly laid out, interspersed by an impressive collection of swords and scrolls and even Viking boat timbers.

With your mind now firmly focussing on the city's ancestry, set off along the city quays for the nearby Reginald's Tower, which is Ireland's oldest intact building first to use mortar. The Tower itself bookends the adjoining remnants of the medieval city wall, which stands stubbornly sticking to the task of outlining this ancient city.

The life of Lord of Richard de Claire, more commonly known as Strongbow, is tightly bound to Waterford city. It was Strongbow who orchestrated the Norman invasion into Ireland, which included bloody battles in Dublin, Wexford and Waterford. The site of 18th century Christ Church Cathedral that stands there now was once occupied by a 11th century cathedral, and it was also there that Strongbow married his Irish wife, Aoife – the day after his forces had captured the city of Waterford.

As intriguing as all these focal points are, though, it has to be said that the greatest highlight of all has to be the city itself. The centre of Waterford is a warren of alleyways zigzagging in and out like an ancient skeleton, and an exploration of the streets uncovers glimpses of the city's medieval set-up and its historic credentials, from crumbling arches to scattered towers all opening a window into a moment in time and the city's medieval legacy.

Before crossing from Waterford into County Cork make a stop at the substantial castle pile that is King John's Castle. This Anglo-Norman site with its unusual shell Keep guards the mouth of the River Colligan in Dungarvan and will keep your thoughts medieval as you pass into the county next door.



Knowing your Baileys from your Keeps

Castles were a rare sight before the Anglo-Normans swept across the country in the late 12th century. Many more followed over the next few centuries, leaving us with a tremendous array of medieval castles and, along with them, the infamous Baileys and Keeps.

Castles combined several components for protection: defensive earthworks, moats and massive walls with towered gateways and a drawbridge. These gateways were occasionally equipped with a barbican or a murder hole (a passage where unwanted visitors could be trapped and mercilessly attacked with, amongst other niceties, boiling oil.)

Most but not all castles had a Keep – the living quarters and position of last defence – either built into the walls or freestanding within the Bailey – the courtyard enclosed by the outer wall. Keeps came in different shapes, Tower Keeps, Hall Keeps, and very rarely a Round Keep. Paradoxically, some of our best-known castles, such as Bunratty and Blarney, aren't strictly castles at all, but late medieval Tower Houses.



Visitors enjoy the view of Red Abbey, Cork city

Cork City

The River Lee winds its way through Cork city and becomes increasingly narrow as it filters off into a series of more modest waterways. It was on the marshy valley lands of the River Lee that Cork saw its first foundations appear in the 6th century.

The city became flushed with success as a Viking port and was soon valuable enough to be walled in case of the most common of medieval occurrences – attack and plundering. Remnants of the walls that once encircled the city can be seen just inside the entrance of Bishop Lucey Park on the city's Grand Parade. Keep your eye out for the film-set like archway that, in a former life, was the entrance to the Commarket Square in Anglesea Street.

Just a stone's throw from Anglesea Street, you will be faced with the most substantial remnant of Cork's medieval past, Red Abbey. Standing triumphantly on its four sturdy stone legs, Red Abbey is the last remaining chunk of the 14th century Augustinian Abbey that once stood here and is, in fact, the oldest piece of architecture surviving in the city.

Our last port of call, the Church of St Anne, is generally heard before it is seen thanks to its pitch-perfect bells. The Shandon Bells first rang out in 1752 and the site on which they exist now has been devoted to worship since the 6th century. Letters written by Pope Innocent the 3rd in 1199 refer to the medieval church that stood here as 'St Mary on the Mountain' until it was destroyed during the Williamite siege of Cork. Grab a look at the narrowing pepper-pot tower quirkily topped by a salmon weather vane representing the fishing available on the River Lee, but be aware that those looking to tour the tower and enjoy the views from the rooftop will need to book in advance.

The last stop on this medieval odyssey of Cork is Blarney Castle just north of the city. Built nearly six hundred years ago by one of Ireland's greatest chieftains, Cormac MacCarthy, it's located on the site of earlier castles dating back to the 10th century. Legend has it that Cormac MacCarthy supplied men to support Robert the Bruce at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314. In gratitude the Scottish King presented half of the famous 'Stone of Scone' to Cormac. Now known as the Blarney Stone, it was incorporated into the battlements of the castle where today thousands flock to kiss the Stone and have the gift of eloquence bestowed upon them.

Speaking of which, we've generally found our local tour guides have no need to pucker up to assist in their story telling – they're rather proud of the fact that the truth often seems far stranger than fiction to their avid listeners. And so to experience what is best about Medieval Ireland, you really must combine the glory of these impressive city structures with their equally intriguing tales. Just don't say we didn't warn you about the abundance of witchcraft and warriors!





A Taste of Medieval Ireland

Based on the average menu of a medieval banquet – where you'll find no shortage of boiled boars heads, poached eel and pike, or various fowl in sauces spiced with cinnamon and anise – the medieval palate must have been slightly more accustomed to rich, gamey, heavily spiced foods than its modern-day counterpart.

Don't be surprised then if you don't find overly authentic dishes on the 'medieval-themed' banquets at Bunratty, Knappogue, and Dunguaire Castles in County Clare. The authenticity question aside, visitors consistently rank these bawdy evenings of food and entertainment, both of which have been tailored to more refined modern tastes, among the highlights of their trip.

Jousting knights on horseback more your style? Then the Carrigtwohill Medieval Festival and Country Fair in Barryscourt Castle in eastern County Cork is the place to be in July.

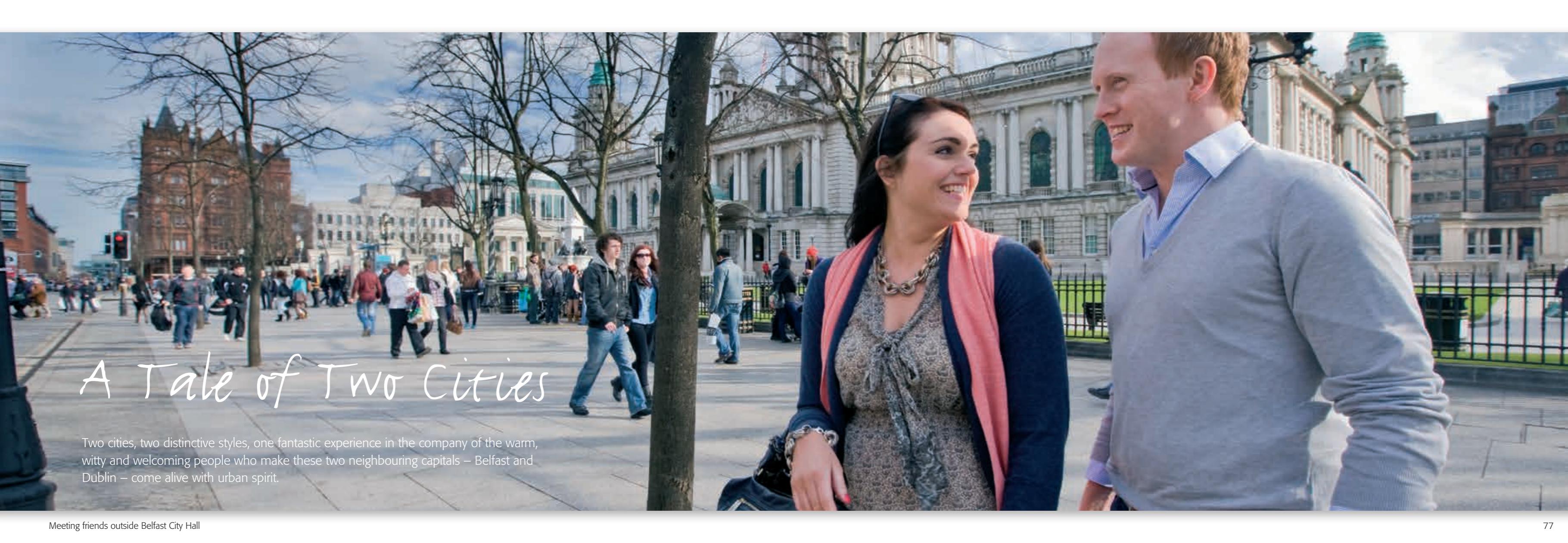
Dame Alice and Petronella

Pat Tynan has spent years introducing visitors and locals alike to the stories hidden deep in the nooks and crannies of medieval Kilkenny, like poor Petronella of Meath who was flogged to elicit a confession for the deeply feared practice of witchcraft. "Sadly for Petronella", Pat says, "the true object of Kilkenny's ire was Dame Alice Kyteler, but she escaped to London, and what became of her afterwards remains shrouded in mystery". Not to be deprived of their sport, the bloodthirsty mob enticed Petronella to confess she 'had denied Christ, called up demons, and performed abominations of the flesh'. Her life ended in a huge bonfire on High Street, in front of where the Tholsel, Kilkenny City Hall, now stands.

Dame Alice's fascinating story began with the inheritance of her father's successful banking business – being a moneylender and female to boot made her doubly suspect in the eyes of the church. Each of her four marriages ended with the mysterious death of yet another well-to-do husband. Despite the corpses she apparently left in her wake, she had a knee-buckling effect on the prosperous men of Kilkenny. Like moths to a flame, they gravitated to Alice's popular Kyteler's Inn to bask in her attention and lavish her with gifts.

The inquisition that found Alice guilty of witchcraft put her in the dungeon of Kilkenny Castle, where she stayed until her powerful connections – possibly demonic but more probably worldly – subdued the guards and spirited her away.





A Tale of Two Cities

Two cities, two distinctive styles, one fantastic experience in the company of the warm, witty and welcoming people who make these two neighbouring capitals – Belfast and Dublin – come alive with urban spirit.



No two cities could appear more alike and yet be more different. Dublin fans out from where the River Liffey spills into the Irish Sea. The Dublin Mountains loom in the background, anchoring the seascape with an earthy counterbalance. A mere 150 kilometres up the coast, at the point where the River Lagan empties into Belfast Lough and that very same Irish Sea, you'll find Belfast spreading into the landscape, the Black Mountain pressing at its back.

Two similar port cities, next-door neighbours in the grand scheme of things, until you scratch the surface of the generalities and discover wonderfully unique cultures. More than anything, though, it's the people who define the unique character of their cities. Behind all their humour and big city bluster, you'll never meet warmer, more humble hosts than the natives of Belfast and Dublin.

Belfast calling

Billy Scott is arguably Belfast's most famous taxi driver. Join him in his black cab and he'll take you to all the hidden nooks and crannies, the hotspots and the highlights of his native city, entertaining you along the way with one colourful Belfast story after another. For many visitors, the favourite place to start is with the murals, dubbed by the English travel writer, Simon Calder, as the world's greatest open-air gallery.

Over the years, each community told its stories through large-scale murals painted on the houses and walls lining the River Lagan. Their presence has now become a symbol of Belfast's vibrant rejuvenation and bright future. "The paintings have become richer," Billy enthuses, "more historical and inclusive."

In fact, Willie Jack, the owner of the Duke of York pub in Belfast, commissioned a new mural showing a veritable who's who of Northern Ireland and Belfast. Actor Liam Neeson stands side-by-side with the musicians Van Morrison, Rory Gallagher, and Derek Bell of the Chieftains, with boxing-legend Barry McGuigan and arguably the best footballer the world has ever seen, George Best. An intense appetite for life, something uniquely Belfast, unites these diverse figures. Spend time with Billy, and you'll experience its infectiousness first hand.

Titanic Belfast

Any story of colourful characters in Belfast naturally leads to Samson and Goliath, the massive yellow cranes hovering above the Harland and Wolff shipyard. When the RMS Titanic departed here in 1912, she was the biggest ship ever built and proof that Belfast could achieve anything it set its industrious mind to.

A far cry from its century-old beginnings, these days The Titanic Trail has gone decidedly hi-tech. You can pick up a hand-held device at the Belfast Welcome Centre in Donegall Square North, and guide yourself on a tour that takes you from Belfast City Hall to Queen's Island, and onto the Titanic Quarter. At the heart of the quarter is the architecturally impressive Titanic Belfast Visitor Experience, which opened in 2012.

Your journey takes you through nine galleries of this state-of-the-art visitor experience telling the story of the Titanic, from her conception in Belfast, through her construction and launch, to her famous maiden voyage and tragic end. The story is brought up to the present with the discovery of the wreck with live links to a contemporary undersea oceanic exploration centre.

As much as Billy knows about Belfast, one of the best ways to experience this city with a village at heart is to walk its streets, taking in the full spectrum of its architectural gems and absorbing the living atmosphere of its maritime heritage. To get your bearings, make your starting point Belfast City Hall in Donegall Square.

From the heart of the city, you can follow your whims in a number of different directions. Heading south leads you to the Victorian grandeur of Queen's University, the restaurants and nightspots of the Queen's Quarter, and the lush Botanic gardens and the wonders of the Ulster Museum. West brings you to West Belfast and the Falls Road, the traditional centre of the Roman Catholic community; northwest to the Shankill Road and the hub of working-class Protestant Belfast. Northeast and east takes you to the heart of Belfast's legendary Titanic Trail, the Odyssey Complex, W5 and a flurry of other new urban renewal projects popping up along the River Lagan.

There are plenty of guided options to choose from, be it by foot, bus, taxi or even by boat on the River Lagan, and there are plenty of people, like Billy, who will be delighted to show you around their home city highlights.



The Ulster Museum

Like an oversized cabinet of curiosities, Belfast's Ulster Museum brings together everything but the kitchen sink within its newly renovated walls. Although, who knows? You may even find an iconic Belfast sink somewhere in this wonderfully eclectic collection that includes an Egyptian mummy, relics from the Spanish Armada, Neolithic axe-heads and modern Irish art and design.

Walking from one gallery gives the feeling of swapping one museum for another. Like when you pass through the Industrial History Gallery, with its fascinating presentation of Belfast's shipbuilding and linen-weaving past, on the way to the equally mesmerising collection of incredibly life-like and impeccably preserved Irish birds. Worlds collide, producing a truly intriguing and entertaining set of contrasts.

And if that isn't enough to keep your brain stimulated for a few hours, tack on a visit to the even more exotic worlds of the nearby Botanic Gardens, or head back into the city to see what's exhibiting at the Ormeau Baths Gallery.

Two exciting cities, one breeze of a journey

Whether by road or rail, travel between Belfast and Dublin has never been easier thanks to the completion of massive upgrades to the M1 Motorway and substantial new investment in the Enterprise Service, the flagship rail link operated jointly by Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann.

By rail: The smooth journey provided by the Enterprise runs eight journeys both directions Monday to Saturday, and five times on Sundays. From Belfast, you leave from Belfast Central Station, and from Dublin, you depart from Connolly Station.

By car: From Belfast take the M1 motorway southbound towards Newry through Dundalk, Drogheda and on into Dublin. Just remember that road signs and speeds are in miles in Northern Ireland and in kilometres in the Republic of Ireland.

By bus: There are plenty of cross-border buses on this route (buses are jointly run by Translink in Northern Ireland and Bus Éireann in the Republic of Ireland.). If you're leaving Belfast for Dublin, head for The Europa Bus Station and if you're in Dublin, you'll depart from Busáras in the city centre.

W5 and the Odyssey Complex

Belfast's riverside and waterfront quarters have been undergoing enormous changes in recent years. One of the first big projects completed is the Odyssey Complex, the huge entertainment emporium on the east side of the River Lagan, where you'll find restaurants, bars, cafés, an IMAX cinema, even a 10,000 seat sports arena.

But the highlight of the Odyssey has to be W5, a world-class interactive discovery centre that will keep kids entertained for hours upon hours doing things like designing and building structures, bringing robots to life, composing music, creating cartoons and animations, and of course learning a thing or two along the way. It nearly goes without saying – if the kids are happy, the parents probably are, as well.





Don't miss in Dublin:

The Guinness Storehouse

The slick, sophisticated world of the Guinness Storehouse couldn't be further from the homey, traditional pub atmosphere most of us associate with a pint of the black stuff. But don't let that stop you working your way through the hugely entertaining exhibitions of this high-concept pint glass, moving ever upward through the history of Guinness and brewing in Dublin, until you metaphorically flow into the creamy head on the top, otherwise known as the Gravity Bar.

The views from up here on the 7th floor are without a doubt the best in Dublin; and some say the complementary pint they'll pour you is the best in the world, but we'll let you be the judge of that. May we suggest enjoying the views and the pint before retiring to one or more of those cosy traditional pubs to compare? Here are a few suggestions to get you started: Mulligan's, The Stag's Head, Neary's, Kehoe's, The Long Haul, Grogan's, The Palace, Slattery's, McDaid's, Smyth's...

And onto Dublin

The pace of modern life in Dublin is so electrifying even the natives have trouble keeping up at times. In a city that seemingly transformed overnight into a metropolitan meteor of culture and commerce, don't be surprised if much of the thrillingly original, new architecture is as fresh on the cityscape to you as it is to some locals.

The Grand Canal Theatre now anchors Grand Canal Square. The Samuel Beckett Bridge hovers over the river like an elegantly winged creature, and the completely refurbished O2 Point Theatre places yet another architectural and entertainment accent at the end of the Quays. Thanks to the LUAS, Dublin's state-of-the-art light rail, all are conveniently close by.

For all the new – the cutting-edge galleries and museums, the creative restaurants and contemporary cafés, the fashionable shops and boutique hotels – the Dubliners have held tightly onto their heart and soul. This is still the home of authentic pubs and Georgian squares, the UNESCO City of Literature that produced the rich genius of Joyce, Beckett and Wilde, and where world-famous theatres such as the Gate and the Abbey continue to push creative bounds of the modern stage.

One of the best ways to find your bearings is with a Hop-on Hop-off bus tour. Just like their colourful taxi-driving counterparts in Belfast, the guides are native wits with an endless supply of yarns to spin about their beloved Fair City and its salt-of-the-earth people. Feel like lingering? Go ahead, hop off the bus; sure another one will be along shortly.

Take time to explore the historical warrens of Dublin Castle. When you finish there, pop over to the warren of twisting laneways of Temple Bar with its funky eateries, hip nightspots, boutique shops and trendy galleries.

Linger for a while amongst the world-class collections of the National Gallery before discovering the surrounding beauty of Merrion Square's stunning Georgian aesthetics. For a one-of-a-kind glimpse at the wondrous world of 19th century zoology, take a look inside the Natural History Museum; for a peek behind the curtains of Irish political power, take a tour of the government buildings next door.

To see Dublin Zoo, you could hop off the bus in the Phoenix Park. Of course, no tour of Dublin would be complete without a visit to the home of the black stuff, the Guinness Storehouse. No worries, the bus stops there too.

Some say that the perfect way to experience Dublin is to wander to your heart's desire 'between the canals'. Discover the narrow streets of artisan cottages in traditional working-class neighbourhoods like Smithfield, The Liberties, and Ringsend; the revitalised Quays and bridges old and new spanning the River Liffey; the new architectural wonders of the Docklands and their elegant predecessors around Merrion Square. People watch in St Stephen's Green or just head out to the quiet, wide-open spaces of Phoenix Park.

For those who prefer to do their walking with a bit more focus, take your pick from the dozens of guided walking tours, such as the ever-popular Literary and Musical Pub Crawls. Follow in the footsteps of St Patrick or set out in search of Dublin's ghosts and goblins; or perhaps avail of the Dublin Bike Sharing Scheme and peddle to the city limits. Let any of these quick-witted and knowledgeable guides weave you through the streets of Dublin and you'll uncover a deep-rooted pride amidst all the tall tales – it's their home turf, after all, and they've got a lot to be proud of!



Visitors to the Dublin Writers Museum

Dublin Writers Museum

In 2010 Dublin was designated UNESCO City of Literature and is only the fourth city to be awarded with this prestigious title. This honour acknowledges Ireland's and Dublin's rich literary heritage which includes such stellar figures as Nobel Prize winners George Bernard Shaw, WB Yeats, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney.

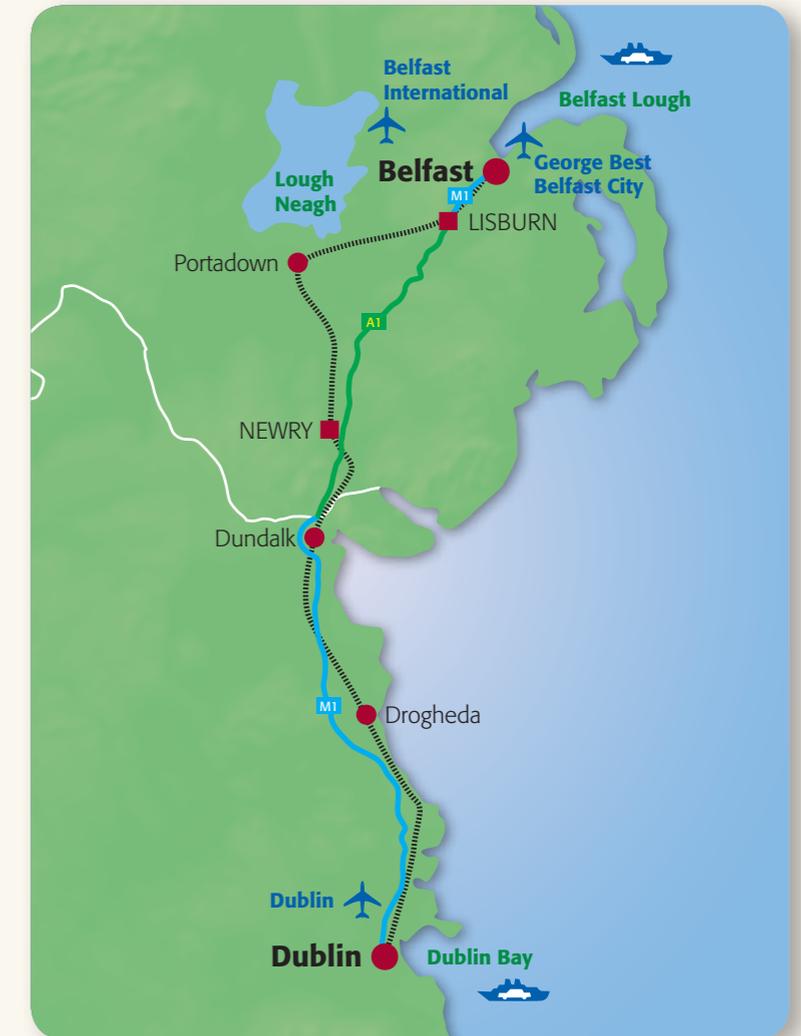
Other literati associated with Dublin include Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Sean O'Casey, Denis Johnston, Flann O'Brien, Brendan Behan and Jennifer Johnston – and of course James Joyce, who's inimitable and iconic Leopold Bloom wandered the streets of Dublin and the pages of Ulysses.

To embark on your own literary odyssey The Dublin Writers Museum is an essential starting point for exploring hundreds of years of literature, letters, portraits and personal memorabilia.

Situated on Parnell Square, the museum presents the history of Irish Literature from its formation through to the present day. As the journey unfolds consider variously the phases, movements and notable names of Dublin's literary past, from Gulliver's Travels to Dracula, from Ulysses to Waiting for Godot.

In the Gorham Library first editions and critical works rest beneath the stunning Stapleton ceiling, while throughout the museum is a treasure trove of portraits and various curios that offer further enlightenment into Ireland's world of Literature.

The Dublin Writers Museum is also one of the only museums in the city where you can experience the collection by digital audio guide. There is also a cafe within the museum and the opportunity to catch a performance at the lunchtime theatre.





*Driving in Ireland
– A Practical Guide*

Driving Laws

Driving in Ireland is on the left and seat belts must be worn at all times in the front and back of the vehicle.

- You'll need a full British driving licence or an international driving permit. UK driving licences are valid in the Republic of Ireland. Let your insurance company know if you're bringing your own car over to Ireland.
- It is illegal to use a mobile phone while driving in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland unless it is a hands free device.
- Motorcyclists and their passengers must wear helmets.
- All children under 3 years of age must use an appropriate child restraint when travelling in any car as must children aged 3 or more years old and up to 135cm (4ft 5in) in height. Rear-facing baby seats must not be used in seats with an active frontal air-bag.



There are strict laws on drinking and driving and those found to be contravening these laws will be heavily penalised. The best advice is don't drink and drive.

Rules of the road



Steer to the centreline. It is difficult to judge distance from the left-hand side, so use the road centre line.



At roundabouts go clockwise, and give way to the traffic on the roundabout.

Signposts

- In the Republic of Ireland, signposts denoting distance and speed limits are in kilometres per hour (km/h).
- Republic of Ireland signposts and place names are displayed bilingually in both Irish (Gaelic) and English.
- In Northern Ireland, all signposts and speeds are in miles per hour (mph) and place names are displayed in English.

Speed Limits

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

The maximum speed limits:

- Towns and Cities 50 km/h
- Regional Areas and local roads 80km/h (Speeds displayed by white signs)
- National Roads 100 km/h (Displayed by green signs)
- Motorways 120 km/h (Displayed by blue signs)
- Special speed limits: 30 km/h and 60 km/h

NORTHERN IRELAND

The maximum speed limits:

- Towns and Cities 30 mph
- Regional/Country roads 60 mph
- Motorway 70 mph

Road signs

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Stop Sign	Yield Sign	Irish Yield Sign	School Warden	Pedestrian Area	Turn Right	Straight Ahead Only	Turn Left	Speed Limit	Weight Restriction	No Left Turn	No Entry	No Right Turn	Keep Left	Parking Permitted
No Parking	Taxi Rank	Clearway	Motorway	End of Motorway	End of Speed Limit	Junction Ahead	Junction Ahead	Sharp Depression	Slippery Road	School/Children	Steep Ascent	Dangerous Corner	Dangerous Bends	Dangerous Corners
				New speed limit (km/h) for Republic of Ireland with approximate equivalent in mph (* = special speed limits)										
Information Signs				=	=	=	=	=	=					
				Towns & Cities	Regional & Local Roads	National Roads	National Roads	Urban Roads	Urban Roads					

NORTHERN IRELAND

Stop Sign	Give Way	School Trip	Pedestrian Area	National Speed Limit	No Left Turn	No Right Turn	No Entry	Speed Limit	Heavy Weight Restriction	Right Turn	Ahead Only	Left Turn	Keep Left	Parking
No Stopping	No Parking	Motorway	End of Motorway	School Children	Junction Ahead	T Junction Ahead	Cross Road Ahead	Uneven Roads	Slippery Road	Steep Hill Upwards	Quayside Ahead	Bend Warning	Series of Bends	Max Headroom
				Speed limit (mph) For Northern Ireland										
Roadworks	Sharp Deviation	Tourist Information	Camping Ahead											
				Towns & Cities	Regional /Country Roads	Motorways								

Car hire

Most major car hire companies have desks at ferry terminals and airports, although you'll often get a better rate by pre-booking (advisable at peak times, especially). Sat Navs and Child seats should also be booked in advance. All drivers must hold valid licences. For insurance reasons tell the car hire company if you're planning to cross between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Always check the terms and conditions with your car rental company before making a booking.

The trade organisations for the car rental industry are:

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Car Rental Council
Email: info@carrentalcouncil.ie or visit
www.carrentalcouncil.ie

NORTHERN IRELAND
British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association
Tel: +44 (0) 1 494 434 747 or visit
www.bvrla.co.uk

Parking

There are numerous car parks in all towns and cities, however, parking charges also apply for on-street parking when a Pay and Display sign appears. Failure to display a valid ticket may result in your car being clamped and heavy fines. Before you park, make sure to check the parking restrictions and also what time the car park closes.

Petrol stations & Tolls

There is a good network of petrol stations throughout the island of Ireland, selling unleaded petrol and diesel. Barrier-free tolling is operational on certain motorways in the Republic of Ireland – visit www.eflow.ie for further information.

Driving Associations

Driving Associations (membership required) within Ireland include:

The Automobile Association (AA)
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Tel: +353 (0) 1 617 9950 or visit www.theaa.ie
NORTHERN IRELAND
Tel: +44 (0) 800 88 7766 or visit www.theaa.com

The RAC Motoring Service
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Tel: +353 (0) 1 800 535 005
NORTHERN IRELAND
Tel: +44 (0) 333 2000 999 or visit www.rac.co.uk

Passports

UK citizens don't need a passport but usually require photo ID, such as a driving licence. Check with your airline, ferry company or tour operator before travel.

Currency

Republic of Ireland uses the euro (€), whilst Northern Ireland uses sterling (£), although the euro is accepted in most major towns in Northern Ireland.

Personal safety

Though the general level of personal safety is high, should you be unfortunate enough to be a victim of crime, contact:

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Irish Tourist Assistance Service (Mon-Fri),
6-7 Hanover Street East
Dublin 2
Tel: +353 (0) 1 661 0562
Email: info@itas.ie or visit
www.itas.ie

Store Street Garda Station
(Weekend & Public Holidays),
Dublin 1
Tel: +353 (0) 1 666 8109

NORTHERN IRELAND
Contact the local police where support will be available.
Tel: +44 (0) 845 600 8000
Email: info@psni.pnn.police.uk or visit
www.psnipolice.uk

Victim Support
Tel: +44 (0) 28 9024 3133
Email: info@victimsupportni.org.uk or visit
www.victimsupportni.co.uk

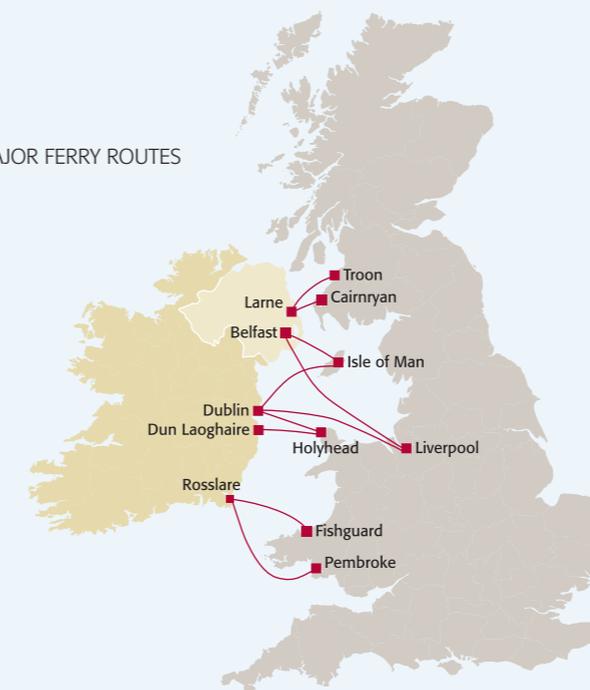




Travel to Ireland

Travel to the island of Ireland has never been easier with an increasing number of air and ferry routes now available. To find your most convenient route visit www.ireland.com

MAJOR FERRY ROUTES



AIR ROUTES



All information correct at time of going to press but may be subject to future changes by operator. Up to date information on access routes can be found at www.ireland.com



Where to stay

In a country where hospitality is second nature, Ireland has a wonderful range of places to stay, from the friendliest Bed and Breakfasts in the world to 5-star hotels.

Visit www.ireland.com/offers for thousands of offers on accommodation in Ireland and to check out a range of attractive inclusive packages available from many tour operators. You can find welcoming Bed and Breakfasts throughout Ireland, even in the most remote areas, with a friendly personal service and delicious full Irish or Ulster Fry breakfasts. To feel part of the countryside, nothing compares with a Farmhouse holiday but book early as they are very popular – it's a great way to get to know local people. Situated in lovely surroundings, Ireland's elegant Country Houses offer a truly unique place to stay and often provide access to a variety of pursuits, from angling to country cooking courses. Book in advance if possible. Inexpensive and comfortable, Ireland's large network of hostels gives budget travellers great independence. Facilities vary so check in advance. Camping and Caravanning in Ireland's 200 sites, usually near the most beautiful scenery, is another way to enjoy the countryside on a budget, while self-catering holidays, in traditional Irish cottages or modern apartments and chalets can be enjoyed in villages, towns and cities.

Hotels & Guesthouses

The Irish Hotels Federation
Tel: +353 (0) 1 293 9170
www.irelandhotels.com

Northern Ireland Hotels Federation
Tel: +44 (0) 28 9077 6635
www.nihf.co.uk

Manor House Hotels and Irish Country Hotels
Tel: +353 (0) 1 295 8900
www.manorhousehotels.com
www.irishcountryhotels.com

Ireland's Blue Book
Tel: +353 (0) 1 676 9914
www.irelands-blue-book.ie

Good Food Ireland
Tel: +353 (0) 53 915 8693
www.goodfoodireland.ie

Bed & Breakfasts

B&B Ireland
Tel: +353 (0) 71 982 2222
www.bandbireland.com

Country Houses

The Hidden Ireland Guide
Tel: +353 (0) 1 662 7166
www.hiddenireland.com

Hostels

An Óige – Irish Youth Hostel Association
Tel: +353 (0) 1 830 4555
www.anoige.ie

Independent Holiday Hostels
Tel: +353 (0) 1 836 4700
www.hostels-ireland.com

Hostelling International Northern Ireland
Tel: +44 (0) 28 9032 4733
www.hini.org.uk

Camping & Caravanning

Irish Caravan and Camping Council
www.camping-ireland.ie

British Holiday and Home Parks Association
Tel: +44 (0) 1452 526 911
www.bhhpa.org.uk

Self-Catering

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Irish Self-Catering Federation
Tel: +353 (0) 818 300 186
www.iscfe.ie

NORTHERN IRELAND
The Northern Ireland Self-Catering Holiday Association
Tel: +44 (0) 28 7082 2779
www.authenticnorthernireland.com

Visit www.ireland.com to find a comprehensive list of all approved accommodation on the island of Ireland, including hotels, B&Bs, guesthouses, hostels, self-catering, camping and caravanning.





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Additional image reference:
Page 15 – Ross Castle, Co. Kerry
Page 25 – Mussenden Temple, Co. Londonderry
Page 71 – Reginald’s Tower, Waterford city

Tourism Ireland is the marketing body for the island of Ireland, covering the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Every care has been taken to ensure accuracy in the compilation of this brochure. Tourism Ireland and its agents cannot, however, accept responsibility for errors and omissions but where such are brought to our attention, future publications will be amended accordingly.

