



TAKE A DRIVE ON THE WILD SIDE

Ireland's west coast offers a drive through spectacular scenery, castles and monasteries, fine golf courses and an open road all the way to Dublin.

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As you fly over England, its fields are a patchwork of colours, but the island of Ireland is a solid, deep green. Little wonder that it is known as the Emerald Isle. My journey to Ireland was to take me from Belfast, in the north, along the far western shores that face the open Atlantic Ocean – a 2,500km route now known as the Wild Atlantic Way – and ending in Dublin. The Way actually starts from Donegal in the north and finishes in Cork in the south. The route is well-marked and runs through villages, towns and cities, revealing some of the jaw-dropping scenery that frequently brings Hollywood movie makers to Ireland's shores.

The journey begins quickly. Just 10 minutes from the small and efficient Belfast City Airport, you arrive at Culloden Estate, formerly a bishop's residence and now a five-star luxury hotel and spa dating back to 1908. The estate retains a manor house feel, and a full Irish breakfast is the perfect start to the day. Belfast has seen a lot of development in the last 10 years, yet it still retains its sense of history. A museum dedicated to the Titanic is located on the shipyard in which the legendary ship was built. At night, bars that date back to the 1800s serve pints of Guinness amid streets lined with traditional gas lamps.

Filmmakers have loved Ireland for years. Recently the TV superseries *Game of Thrones* featured a spot north of Belfast called the Dark Hedges, a small farmer's road with imposing, intertwining beech trees lined along either side. This extraordinary site serves as The King's Road in the show. Private tours of this and other such locations can be arranged through luxury concierge firm Adams & Butler, which includes big name celebrities among its clientele and can arrange everything from helicopter transfers to genealogy research.

Travelling along the coast road, I head towards Portstewart, passing the Royal Portrush Golf Club, the home course of Northern Irish golfer Darren Clarke and the location of next year's Irish Open. I continue through

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01 A Plassey shipwreck along the shores of Inisheer on the Aran Islands

02 Titanic Museum

03 The Royal Portrush Golf Club

04 The Dark Hedges north of Belfast, where scenes from *Game of Thrones* were filmed



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County Derry in Northern Ireland and over the border into County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland. Little changes as you cross the border – there are no checkpoints or gates, simply a change of speed sign from miles an hour to kilometres an hour, and the first signs of the Wild Atlantic Way. From here, you can explore the many loughs (lakes), bay and glens that make up the desolate but awe-inspiring coast of Donegal, a county worthy of exploration by car (supercar if you can manage it).

I head towards Donegal town and my second castle of the trip – Lough Eske. This castle was originally built in the early 1860s and was brought back to life with a £44 million (HK\$421 million) renovation. The result is a stunning five-star hotel with 96 rooms, two bars, a restaurant and a spa. The presidential rooms inside the castle itself have vast living rooms and king-size mahogany four-poster beds.

At Lough Eske, I'm met by Pat, my driver for the rest of the trip. He's one of the small team at Spirit of Ireland travel, an executive travel company that provides personal tours along the Wild Atlantic Way. From here I can enjoy the scenery from the comfort of a luxurious Mercedes S Class, guided by Pat for off-the-beaten-track sights but free to pick and choose the stopping points as we go.

We begin with a 600-metre cliff face called Slieve League. The coastal sights never fail to impress along western Ireland. At Rosnowlagh, we find golden sand beaches favoured by surfers (in cold weather gear). We find a holy mountain, Croagh Patrick, which stands



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THE TV SUPERSERIES *GAME OF THRONES* FEATURED THE DARK HEDGES, A SMALL FARMER'S ROAD WITH IMPOSING, INTERTWINING BEECH TREES LINED ALONG EITHER SIDE



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PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES (02&04)



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at 764 metres above sea level and is believed to be where Saint Patrick fasted for 40 days in 441AD. Today, pilgrims come to climb the mountain, sometimes in bare feet. Just a handful of walkers pass me on their way to the climb, which takes around three and a half hours to complete and offers stunning views over Clew Bay and the County Mayo countryside along the way.

We later arrive at Ashford Castle, a 13th century fortress that's now a five star hotel. The castle is set in 350 acres of land and also includes a second hotel – the Lodge – within the grounds, there's everything you could hope for, from old knights' armour to chandeliers and narrow wooden hallways, full of old photos. The main restaurant George V was built in honour of the then Prince of Wales' visit in 1905 by the Guinness family, while coal storage bunkers have been turned into wine cellars.

Further south in the larger but very pretty city of Galway, we find great live music, shops and bars. This

**THE COASTAL SIGHTS
NEVER FAIL TO IMPRESS
ALONG WESTERN IRELAND**



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PHOTOGRAPHY BETTY IMAGES (06&07)

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is also the area of the Claddagh fisherman, known for their distinctive symbol that adorns hundreds of Irish rings and jewellery and a small museum to its history stands on Quay Street. As we pass into County Claire, we stop at Poul nabrone Dolmen, an ancient tomb made of giant slabs of limestone that dates back over 5,000 years. We continue south, past islands and cliffs and more dramatic scenery. We also pass golf courses, such as Lahinch, a links course that's home to the South of Ireland Championship.

In the small town of Gort, there is a special night's stay awaiting at Lough Cutra castle, now a private residence for hire. The castle itself can accommodate up to 17 guests in nine bedrooms, and there is space for another 20 in the courtyard homes. Built in the early 1800s, Cutra is extremely private, with vast grounds that include Europe's largest privately owned lough. The castle plays host to celebrities and businessmen alike, including to His Royal Highness

Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall on their recent visit to Ireland. The interior is just as impressive, with log fireplaces, four-poster beds, turrets and spiral staircases, all presided over by the wonderful owner, Suzie Gwyn-Jones and her staff.

From Gort, Pat and I head south into County Limerick, picking up the Wild Atlantic Way once more, then into County Kerry, towards the Dingle peninsula and Ireland's most westerly point. The town of Dingle is a picturesque fishing town with multi-coloured houses and working vessels docked in the harbour. Just outside the town is the workshop of Ken Bolger, an artist who creates pieces from Irish slate and copper. His slate works feature writing in the ancient Irish Ogham language, made up of intersecting lines. Even without deciphering the meaning, these are beautiful pieces and can be made to order.

Standing on the shores by Sleah Head, the wind whips around me and waves crash into the rocks, as

05 Lough Eske Castle's Gallery Bar

06 The holy pilgrimage mountain of Croagh Patrick behind a statue of Saint Patrick

07 The 600-metre Slieve League cliff

I look out towards the Blasket Islands and Tearaght Island in the far distance, the last pieces of Ireland before North America. After this wistful sight, it's on to the town of Killarney. Just on the outskirts of Killarney, there is the Europe Hotel on the shore of Lough Leane. Here, golfers are in paradise, with two championship golf courses adjacent to the hotel and another 10 in the local area. After dinner, it's time to head into town in search of some traditional live music. Most of the local bars feature live music every day of the week. I head to O'Connors on the High Street, where three musicians are playing a set in the front of the bar; the rest of the space is packed with tourists.

The next morning is an early start to reach Portmagee in time for the ferry to Skellig Michael, the dramatic final scene location from the *Star Wars* movie *The Force Awakens*. Skellig Michael was a Christian monastery from perhaps as early as the 6th century until the 12th century, surviving the long period of Viking domination of Ireland and preserving Christianity. Since *Star Wars'* release, this Unesco world heritage site has become a popular destination. The stormy skies combine with bright rays of sunlight, making the scenery all the



08 The Ashford Castle is a 13th century fortress turn five star hotel

09 The picturesque town of Dingle

10 Steps on Skellig Michael lead to a sixth century monastery

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PHOTOGRAPHY BETTY IMAGES



more magical. The wind is hugely powerful but the sun is shining and both Skellig Michael and Little Skellig are clearly defined in the vast waters.

The island is around a 45-minute ferry journey in one of the small boats from Portmagee into the open Atlantic Ocean, which can be very rough at times. Skellig Michael is very exposed and offers no facilities for visitors. The ancient stone steps climb to the summit or the sixth century beehive-style monastery, which is just as stunning in real life as in the movie. Beyond Portmagee, we join the Skellig Ring road, one of the finest drives of the trip, which recently made *Lonely Planet's* top travel destinations of 2017.

From Killarney, it's a three-and-a-half-hour drive north to Athlone, County Westmeath, made all the more pleasant thanks to the recent improvements in Ireland's road network. The Wineport lodge is a cosy wooden lodge hotel, just north of Athlone, on the shore of Lough Ree. Though a modern building – with

large, high-ceiling rooms – the wood burning fires and dark timber make it feel very homely, and the views out over the lake are extremely peaceful. There's even a pair of outdoor hot tubs for you to relax in and enjoy the views, as well as a pavilion lounge.

The next morning, after another large Irish breakfast, we head east towards Dublin, a journey which takes just over an hour and a half, and then it's time to say goodbye to Pat. Dublin itself has a wealth of attractions, and is a great start or finish to a tour of Ireland. There's plenty of live music to be found. I headed for the Chester Beatty Library in the grounds of Dublin Castle. Sir Alfred Chester Beatty was an Irish-American collector of rare books, manuscripts and art, and the collection includes Chinese antiquities from the Yongle Emperor, early copies of the Bible and the Qur'an, and illustrated Indian texts. It's a great touch of civilisation after experiencing the stark beauty of the Wild Atlantic Way. 🍷