



Be enthralled by the wild west

Once seen, never forgotten: prepare to be enchanted
by the rugged landscape, captivating coastline
and warm welcomes of west Ireland



A rainbow stretches over this lough
near Dog's Bay in Connemara, west
Ireland, where plenty of dramatic skies,
landscapes and coastlines await





West Ireland. A landscape of rocky outcrops, hills and granite erratics; of dramatic skies, sudden rain showers and gasp-inducing rainbows; of rippling loughs, rushing streams and deep blue Atlantic seas; and of gorse, grassland and peat bogs formed from thousands of years of decaying plant matter. But most of all, it's a place of warm Irish welcomes.

Touring the area by road, you're fully immersed in this landscape from start to finish. The Wild Atlantic Way coastal route is a great place to start, and is best appreciated driving from south to north so that you're always on the side of the road that's closest to the sea. At 1,550 miles in total length, it traces the coastline from County Cork up to County Donegal, occupying that liminal space where land meets sea.

Join it at Liscannor in County Clare (an hour away from Shannon Airport), heading north towards County Galway, and you'll be on your way to one of Ireland's most-visited attractions: the Cliffs of Moher.

Arrive early or late in the day if possible, so you can enjoy one of the natural wonders of the world in relative quiet – and maybe even watch an awe-inspiring sunset over the sea. Surging up from the Atlantic Ocean to a height of 214 metres and spanning eight kilometres of the western seaboard of County Clare, these majestic cliffs are more than 300 million years old. Once part of a great delta, they're formed of sand, silt and mud that has been deposited by flood waters and compacted over time.

Indeed, the Cliffs of Moher are a geologist's dream; their clear rock layers representing specific events in the area's history. Look closely and you'll spot the fossilised feeding trails and burrows of ancient marine creatures in the local flagstones used to create the pathways, barriers and steps at the site.

Visit the exhibition in the subterranean visitor centre to find out more about the history, geology and wildlife of the cliffs before heading up to the viewing platforms and 19th-century O'Brien's Tower for breathtaking panoramas. From here, you can scan the sea stacks, stumps, caves and banded rock faces of this formidable coastline, with views across to the Aran Islands and Galway Bay on a clear day. It's easy to see why the site has been used as a backdrop for several films, including *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

As a special protected area for birds, supporting one of the largest mainland seabird nesting colonies in Ireland, the cliffs are also of particular interest to birdwatchers and naturalists. Fulmars and peregrines are year-round cliff



Discover a haven for the senses at... *Burren Perfumery*

As you move along the narrow lanes of the Burren region of County Clare, following signs to the Burren Perfumery in Carron, a sublime peace descends, and the only sound to be heard in the landscape is birdsong. It sets the mood for a visit to this small-scale family business, which was established in 1972.

A truly sensory experience, delicate scents fill the air in the manufacturing rooms where the team produces the perfumery's creams, soaps, perfumes and candles by hand, using natural and organic ingredients. Each fragrance

combination is inspired by the magical landscape that surrounds the 200-year-old farmhouse in which the company is based.

During the summer season (and usually into the start of autumn), there are free tours, talks and demonstrations of the production processes. And don't miss the tranquil herb garden, where you can relax, soak up the atmosphere, and see many of the ingredients in their original plant form.

The finished products are available to sample and purchase in the on-site shop. Try, for example, the soothing Borage organic herbal balm; the woody Autumn Harvest eau de toilette; or the Grassland organic body lotion, which evokes the Burren's orchid-flecked summer meadows.





1 The Cliffs of Moher are home to an array of wildlife and support one of the largest mainland seabird nesting colonies in Ireland. **2** Enjoy a warm welcome from Myles and Karen at the StoneCutters Kitchen in Doolin. **3** The rock layers of the cliff faces, sea stacks and stumps at the Cliffs of Moher are a timeline of the area's history. **4** Explore the unique landscape of the Burren, with its limestone pavements and diverse ecosystem.

residents, while puffins, guillemots, kittiwakes and razorbills frequent the nesting sites during spring and summer. Seals, dolphins, basking sharks and whales are also regular visitors to the waters off this coastline, while the land is a rich ecosystem of flora and fauna.

The weather here can change in the blink of an eye, but rain and hail showers are often quick to pass so it's worth waiting them out in the café or returning later in the day.

If you're looking for a sanctuary during inclement weather, or need to recharge your batteries before your onward journey, the award-winning StoneCutters Kitchen in Doolin is situated just two minutes drive north of the cliffs along the coast road. Whether set against clear blue skies or dark, brooding clouds, the brightly painted buttermilk and red exterior of this family restaurant is a welcoming sight.

Inside the stone walls of the converted cottage you'll receive one of those warm-hearted welcomes, courtesy of owners Myles Duffy and Karen Courtney and their team. The relaxed, bistro-style restaurant is now in its 18th year, with an affordable menu of dishes that are essentially

hugs on a plate. If you've space for dessert, the home-made crumble is particularly soul-warming.

It's well worth wending your way east at this point, to move deeper into the Burren – a 96-square-mile region of huge historical, cultural, geological and environmental importance, with a quite otherworldly appearance and atmosphere. At times you'll feel as if you're navigating a lunar landscape, as the soil gives way to solid pavements of limestone, rounded hills and randomly placed boulders – the result of glacial action during the Ice Age.

You may also notice a change in the climate, with the area's temperate conditions creating a dazzlingly diverse ecosystem. In the rock crevices and thin layers of soil, Arctic-alpine plants thrive alongside Mediterranean species, while woodland plants grow out in the open, far from any tree cover. The Burren also provides habitats for a wide range of creatures, including lesser horseshoe bats, pine martens, peregrine falcons, curlews and Ireland's only native reptile, the common (or viviparous) lizard.

Heading onward, over the border into County Galway via the N67 or M18, it's time to experience ►



the urban side of west Ireland with a visit to Galway City. Sitting in a prime position at the mouth of the River Corrib, this bustling harbour city has built on its medieval roots to become the fourth most populous area in the Republic of Ireland. But with 80,000 residents it's still relatively small, with a palpable sense of community.

Connecting the city's rich past with its lively, cosmopolitan present, the streets are a fascinating mix of old and new. Lynch's Castle, a fortified house on Shop Street that was built between the 14th and 16th Centuries, is now home to a bank. Meanwhile, in the Eyre Square Shopping Centre you'll stumble upon the well-preserved remains of the original 13th-century city wall, built by invading Anglo-Normans and now contained inside the time capsule of a modern mall. The towers are even used as small retail outlets for a select number of quaint shops.

Indeed, with a busy calendar of events; a plethora of historical buildings and museums; a key focus on the arts, traditional music and local produce; and close associations with the Irish language, Galway City is widely known as Ireland's Cultural Heart. It's even set to become the European Capital of Culture in 2020.

To get a taste of Galway's passion for food, cross the river and head to Sea Road where a friendly welcome and mouth-watering menu await at the award-winning Kai Café and Restaurant. Recently celebrating its seventh anniversary, the restaurant is owned by New Zealand-born head chef Jess Murphy (hence the name of the restaurant, which means 'food' in Maori) and her husband David.

The rustic, homely interior – complete with fresh flowers, candles and ambient music – creates a laid-back and creative atmosphere; the kind of place that's equally suited to a stimulating catch-up with friend or family, a romantic soirée, or a contemplative moment to yourself. A chalkboard lists the edible delights of each day, while a printed menu makes for a more formal approach in the evenings. Everything is made freshly on-site by Jess and her team, using seasonal, organic, locally sourced produce. Don't miss their ever-popular fish fingers or the heavenly, and home-made, cakes.





1 Sue Donnellan puts the finishing touches to one of her colourful glass lamps at Spiddal Craft Centre. **2** Pine Island in Derrylclare Lough, Connemara – one of many lakes you may pass while driving through the landscape of west Ireland. **3** Try the moreish fish fingers at Kai Café and Restaurant in Galway City, which are a perennial favourite. **4** Galway has a busy calendar of events, including the Oyster Festival, which will take place 28th to 30th September. **5** Ciaran Hogan demonstrates his basket-weaving techniques at Spiddal Craft Centre.

If you're ready to return to rural surroundings, take the Wild Atlantic Way west of Galway City towards Spiddal (An Spidéal), one of the first Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking region) seaside villages on the R336 coast road. Here you'll find the Spiddal Craft Village and Café, which is home to 10 artisans and the renowned Builín Blasta Café and Bakery.

Wander from studio to studio to view the various crafts and artworks on display, speak to the makers and perhaps treat yourself to some souvenirs of your trip. You'll find sculptural and wheel-thrown ceramics made by Rob D'Eath, Martha Williamson and other artists; willow baskets woven by Ciaran Hogan; joyously coloured stained and kiln-fused glass made by Sue Donnellan; and unique jewellery created by Eric Byrne from such materials as silver, copper, Connemara marble and even Irish coins. There are also two artists, a screen-printer and a photographer on site, as well as a handweaver who creates vibrant accessories and interior textiles inspired by the local land- and seascape.

Located at the eastern edge of the Connemara region, Spiddal provides the perfect welcome to this area of untamed beauty and traditional Irish culture. The name 'Connemara' translates as 'inlets of the sea', on account of its coastal fringe of coves, bays and harbours, and perhaps also its rivers and loughs.

When driving inland, you'll be traversing wonderfully wild, wide-open heaths and rugged hills on winding, bumpy roads – their uneven surface invariably caused by the soft peat on which they're laid. Meanwhile, on the coastal roads you'll often find ►



Harbour-side hospitality... at O'Dowds

For a relaxed, lively atmosphere and some of Connemara's finest and freshest seafood (as well as meat and vegetarian dishes), get yourself to O'Dowd's Seafood Bar and Restaurant in Roundstone.

Run by the O'Dowd family for four generations since 1906, the restaurant is a popular haunt for locals and visitors alike. Overlooking the village harbour with panoramic views across the bay, it's the perfect place to spend an evening in good company, reflecting on your day's discoveries.





Explore the estate of... *Kylemore Abbey*

It's easy to spend the best part of a day at Kylemore Abbey and Victorian Walled Garden in Connemara, which is owned and run by the Benedictine community that has resided at this magnificent estate since 1920.

The main building, Kylemore Castle, was built in the late 1800s by wealthy businessman and politician Mitchell Henry, who proved to be an unusually enlightened landlord. Much of it is open to the public, with work ongoing to restore and reveal yet more of the rooms. Outside, you can follow various walks and trails to take in the beautiful lakeside surroundings,

with views of the Connemara National Park (the visitor centre for which is just three miles down the road). There are plenty of discoveries to be made along the way, including the impressive Gothic church built by Henry in memory of his wife, Margaret. But weary legs will no doubt appreciate the shuttle bus that carries visitors to the award-winning six-acre walled gardens.

Refreshments are available at the restaurant and tea house, and be sure to pay a visit to the craft and design shop for gifts and souvenirs before you leave as well. The chocolate handmade on-site by the Benedictine nuns and their trained chocolatiers is particularly good, should you wish to buy some to enjoy back home.



at the hand-filleting, salting, smoking and slicing processes they use. Then, taste the ambrosial results of these traditional production methods, and you'll rue the day you bought mass-produced smoked fish!

Continue north along the R341, join the N59 Galway Road at Clifden (known as the capital of Connemara), and five miles later you'll reach the Connemara Heritage and History Centre in Lettershea. At few places are you likely to get closer to traditional Irish culture or to the history of this enigmatic region, where every stone, hill, bog and tumble-down cottage holds centuries of stories.

Run by Martin and Nora Walsh, it offers several facilities including a farm, a reconstructed crannóg (or ancient fortified lake dwelling), a craft shop and a restaurant. But the highlight of any visit to the centre is surely the restored pre-famine cottage perched on the hill above the centre, which was once the home of Dan O'Hara – one of many Irish tenant farmers forced to emigrate to America during the 1800s, having been evicted from their homes by money-hungry landlords.

Up at the homestead, gazing out across the internationally important peatlands, overlooked by the majestic Twelve Bens mountain range, you'll be taking in a landscape that has been the lifeblood of local farmers, the site of one of Marconi's revolutionary wireless communication stations, and the landing place of the first transatlantic flight. Meanwhile, the bogs conceal the preserved remains of the ancient oak forests that covered the area around 6,000 years ago.

Inside the cottage, with its little knick-knacks, everyday domestic objects and fragrant turf (peat)



yourself close to sea-level, with the white-capped waves just metres away. Be sure to keep an eye out for strategically placed lay-bys to take advantage of photo opportunities.

The R341 will take you past little beaches of white sand and seaweed, deep blue loughs, scattered settlements and fishing communities as you follow the signs to Ballyconneely. Turn off towards the nearby Connemara Smokehouse, where the narrow road skirts around a bay and terminates as a pier just after the car park entrance.

This small family business is the region's longest-established smokehouse, owned and run with passion and integrity by Graham and Saoirse Roberts. Though they specialise in wild and organic salmon, the product list has grown over the years to include mackerel and line-caught Irish tuna – all smoked over beech wood for the best possible flavour. Delicious marinades keep things interesting, with Graham's innovative honey-roast smoked salmon winning the BIM Best New Seafood Product in Ireland award. The succulent smoked tuna has even earned them a place in Rick Stein's Food Heroes book.

Open year-round on weekdays (except public holidays), you can join a guided tour during the summer months for a peek behind the scenes



1 Smoked peppered mackerel, one of the delicious products available from the Connemara Smokehouse. **2-3** Carry on the craic at Durty Nelly's Bar and Restaurant in Bunnahally. **4** A turf fire burns in the hearth of the restored pre-famine cottage at Connemara's Heritage and History Centre.



fire burning in the hearth, the presence of Dan and his family is almost tangible. The experience becomes all the more poignant when you learn of their sad fate – Dan's wife and three of his children died during the long journey across the Atlantic, and he arrived in New York with no money or hope, ending his days on the streets selling matches.

When news of his plight reached home, it became the subject of a traditional Irish ballad, which Martin may be persuaded to give a rendition of during your visit.

If you're heading back to Shannon Airport, where better to conclude your visit to west Ireland than Durty Nelly's Bar and Restaurant in nearby Bunnahally (close to the Bunnahally Castle and Folk Park family attraction).

Here, in the atmospheric, lamp-lit interior of this 17th-century bridge tollhouse, you'll find a colourful history, animated ambience, great service, live music and a clientele of friendly local characters. Plus, you can indulge in such delicacies as steamed Kinvara mussels; prime Irish fillet steak; and sea bass with a Parmesan and pine nut crust, accompanied by the most divine creamy, garlicky sliced potatoes.

One thing's for sure – you'll come away with enough Irish craic to keep the trip alive in your mind for many weeks to come!

To find out more about west Ireland, visit www.ireland.com

WHERE WE WENT.. in West Ireland

