

By Yvonne Gordon • April 29, 2024

Why Off Season Is a Magical Time to Travel in Ireland

You'll be rewarded with blissfully empty beaches and unhurried meandering from cafés to craft studios.



Gorteen Bay Beach, in County Galway, is wonderfully quiet in the low season. Photo by Yvonne Gordon

The gray-white pony is standing, almost hidden, beneath bare branches in a frost-covered field. As we drive past, we catch a glimpse of his head, illuminated by the early morning sunlight. As we stop and get out of the car, he approaches the fence slowly but sure-footed on the frozen ground and we gaze admiringly into his huge, gentle face.

The Connemara Pony is Ireland's native pony, a hardy breed well-adapted to the rough bogland and rocky seashores where it plowed the land or pulled carts of seaweed and turf in times past. Seeing one is on my bucket list for an off-season visit to Connemara in County Galway, in the west of Ireland, and this backdrop of a field carpeted with white frost makes for a magical first sighting.

I am spending a few days exploring the area from my home in Dublin and have brought along a pal. He has donkeys and otters on his wish list; I have ponies and mountain hikes on mine. But there's a storm forecast so we've also brought books and games. Like many regions that are popular with tourists, especially on Ireland's coast, Connemara is busy during the high-season months of July and August, when school is out and Irish families flock to holiday homes. But there's a certain magic in the off-season—before the holidaymakers have arrived in June, or after September when they have gone home—and an ethereal, soft light shines on dunes and bogs. While not all of the attractions, restaurants, or accommodations are open out of season (especially from November to March), it's easier and cheaper to book stays in the places that are open, the beauty spots are crowd-free, roads are quieter, and the pace of life is unhurried.

Bays, bogs, a fine home base



The tiny fishing village of Roundstone makes for a central, peaceful travel base. Photo by Yvonne Gordon

We start the trip driving around Galway Bay, where the low sun bathes village harbors in gold, and the roadside gradually reveals the flat, boggy landscape of Connemara. This barren, often tree-less coastline, with its dry stone walls, long beaches, and rocky coves, has long inspired artists and craftspeople. At [Ceardlann An Spidéal](#) (Spiddal Craft Village), we admire kiln-fused glass art, stoneware pottery, woolsens, and everything from coasters to posters with expressions in the Irish language on them.

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When we see a row of clocks saying: *Tá sé in am tae* — Irish for “It’s time for tea,” we don’t need to be told twice. This is a Gaeltacht or Irish-speaking area, so the road signs are in Irish, and down the road in *Caifé Teac na Cúirte* (Courthouse Café), we hear native speakers chatting as I try out my own rusty Irish to order tea and toasted sandwiches.

Our base for the next five days is the fishing village of Roundstone. From here, it’s a 45-minute drive to **Connemara National Park** in Letterfrack where we hike Diamond Hill, a nearly two-hour ascent to a 1,450-foot summit for views over bays, boglands, and pointy peaks. While the park gets up to 3,000 people a day in high season, that drops to somewhere between 100 to 300 in low season.

We also explore the beaches at Gorteen Bay (also known as *Port na Feadóige*, “bank of the plover”) and Dog’s Bay, two miles from the village. Here, over millions of years, the sea has swept the remains of single-celled sea creatures, foraminifera, into the channel between a small island and the shore, forming two horseshoe-shaped beaches linked by a tombolo.

A yellow and red lifeguard hut indicates the beach’s popularity in summer months, when families come here to swim and picnic. In low season, you have expanses like this to yourself. We inspect the sand close up—it’s made of tiny fragments of worn-down seashells—and we marvel at the rich seaweeds that washed ashore with the tide and might wash out with the next one.

Afterwards, we visit **Roundstone Music and Crafts**, the studio and shop of master bodhrán-maker Malachy Kearns, who fashions the traditional handheld Irish drum from goatskin and adds his intricate designs. It’s quiet, so he has time for tea and a chat, and he tells me he stops at a local beach nearly every day on his way to work.

Many attractions, such as the visitor center at Connemara National Park, used to close for off-season months but now, since about 2019, they stay open year-round, creating more than seasonal employment for locals.

Time to get crafty



Basket maker Joe Hogan in his workshop, where you may find him relaxed enough for a chat in the off-season. Photo by Yvonne Gordon

It is with this ethos that [Within the Village](#), five luxury boutique townhouses set in restored houses in Roundstone, which opened last September, remains open all year. Its aim is to make a positive impact on the area, not only environmentally but also socially and economically—by using and recommending local businesses and sponsoring community events like the annual Tour de Bog cycling race. Products used in the accommodations, from toiletries to bedding, are from local suppliers. “We are showcasing small and medium-size businesses in the area, from the bed linen to tweed. Rather than us selling it ourselves, we encourage the visitor to go directly to the website of the supplier, so they are supporting local industry and sustaining businesses in the area,” says Within the Village co-owner Maria Murphy. The proprietors encourage slow tourism and have created maps showing all there is to see and do in the area. They also offer a one-bedroom, a two-bedroom, and a trio of three-bedroom houses, which can be rented for three, four, or seven-night stays. (Low season prices are from \$370 to \$960 per night, depending on house size, until the end of May and from the end of September.)

Another sustainability initiative was to collaborate with local craftspeople and artists to outfit the houses, which showcase their work. One of the most interesting art pieces in each is a replica of a small bird’s nest, placed under a glass dome on a side table, made by basket maker [Joe Hogan](#). Hogan creates pieces to order and his work is sold in [Joyce’s Craft Shop](#) in the village of Recess. To learn more about his work, we drive to his studio, in Loch Na Foey, following the twists and turns of the road as sheets of rain pass sideways across the valley.

Hogan's workshop overlooks the lake, and even in the wet weather, the orange hue of the bog fills the landscape with warmth. Here, Hogan grows willow to make baskets and collects heather for the nests. The nearest main road is five miles away, the nearest shop is eight miles away. Hogan says being able to grow the material for the baskets and make a living in this remote place was the initial draw when he moved from County Cork 45 years ago.

He started making cribs for babies before moving on to Indigenous Irish baskets, a craft that was disappearing. A big basket could take him 70 hours to make, over six days. He says it's about getting the texture of the willow just right to ply it into shape—a challenge in cooler temperatures. "You're not imposing your will on it," he says. "You're learning how to work with it. If you pull it too hard, it will break." His son Ciaran runs [basket-making courses](#), and he says there's lots of interest, particularly from those visiting from other parts of Ireland.

A focused game, a roundabout drive

Back at Roundstone, we hear there's a game of "Twenty-five" in King's Bar. This card game is popular in rural areas, but being a city-dweller in Dublin, I've never seen it, so it feels exciting. We take up some stools at the bar to discreetly observe. A group of nine men are playing. Concentration is so fierce, the barman can't serve us until they have a break. It feels like a special off-season experience—in summer, it's usually so packed here that the crowds spill out onto the road.

As with any trip in Ireland, luck is on our side for much of the trip—but not all of it. We see so many donkeys, James loses count after it gets into double figures, but otters remain elusive. We have calm days with perfect blue skies where the entire village is mirrored in the water and the early morning sun illuminates the upturned currachs (small wood-framed boats) on the pier.

But as the week goes on, Storm Elin closes in and rain pelts the windows. The accommodation manager Andy brings fresh fluffy scones from J Woods grocery shop across the road. I later visit for supplies and am happy to find the tiny shop has a full butcher's counter. I get thick slices of bacon to make "BT" sandwiches—modified BLTs, as there's no lettuce in the village and the next delivery isn't until tomorrow.

On one outing, driving toward Letterfrack, we decide to take the famed scenic lakeside road, past Lough Inagh. We set off, and enjoy an amazing drive, with bog on both sides, silvery ponds, and the Twelve Bens Mountains in the distance. We don't pass another soul—or a lake.

After about 45 minutes, we pass a sign for Roundstone. We've gone in a circle and are back where we started. We've mysteriously taken a road known as the "bog road," which is said to be haunted. It was a road I had wanted to drive and it looked like it decided it wanted to be driven. We never find the road with the lake.

Thankfully, we're in no hurry and we just go with the flow on days when the navigation system decides to tweak our route. Off-season travel in Ireland can be stress-free—there are no lines, no bookings, no crowds. Sometimes you can plan the route or for the weather; other times they decide for you. It's a bit like the willow for the baskets—you have to learn how to work with it rather than imposing your will.

Yvonne Gordon

Yvonne Gordon is an award-winning travel writer whose work has been published in the *Irish Independent*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, *National Geographic*, BBC Travel, the *Boston Globe*, *Wanderlust*, and *Hemispheres* magazine (United Airlines), as well as in guidebooks such as Frommer's Ireland and Lonely Planet. Her awards include Irish Travel Writer of the Year and Travel Extra Travel Journalist of the Year (Ireland features) 2022. Follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) or see yvonnegordon.com.

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