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Ireland's Wild West: Why Connemara has such a hold on the Irish imagination (and our holidays)

Connemara is one of those special Irish landscapes that takes hold of the imagination. Prepare for any weather, and its pace will find you, says Pól Ó Conghaile

“That’s the first monastery built in Ireland in over 400 years,” a lady in Kylemore Abbey’s ticket office tells me. “The nuns just moved in last week.”

It’s a busy summer’s day at Connemara’s anchor attraction, and builders are finishing up on a new base for its Benedictine nuns. Nearby, the car parks are chock-a-block with cars, campervans and coaches. A steady stream of visitors is filing through the 150-year-old castle’s exhibition rooms, catching shuttle buses to and from its rejuvenated walled gardens, browsing the gift shop and queuing for snacks at its cafe and tearooms.

Last year, I learn, the Abbey served up some 25,560 slices of its famous apple pie.

“A pale granite dream, afloat on its own reflection.” That’s how writer and cartographer Tim Robinson described the Victorian pile that now draws over half a million visitors a year (kylemoreabbey.com; €17/€13.50pp). Our visit is a snapshot of peak season purring along, with Irish, US, European and Asian tourists milling around, wrapped up in colourful raingear and fleeces — almost all pausing to take that same iconic photo.



Kylemore Abbey

Over a century since they first arrived, nuns are occasionally visible in their new monastery, driving a Skoda down the forest road to the walled gardens, or emerging from Sr Genevieve's chocolate kitchen. And when you see one, despite your best intentions, you will say it.

"Nun!" It's impossible not to.

In 1867, Mitchell Henry built Kylemore as a gift for his wife, Margaret, after they fell for the local landscapes on honeymoon. Today, it's a picture of how Connemara is changing. But also, somehow, not.

Like many families, ours has been travelling out west this way for generations. My grandparents honeymooned in Connemara, pulling in to peer at Kylemore when it was a school. I have childhood memories of holidays in Renvyle, and regularly return west of Galway. But still, when I pass through Oughterard, cross that kink of a bridge over the Owenriff River and head out towards Clifden, a spell is cast all over again.

The N59 threads perilously past lakes and bogs. Clouds shapeshift and reflections cross-fade, and grass and montbretia on the roadsides bob and bend in over the dashing yellow lines. It's a transition. A transformation. A slip road from the real world to... well, to something else.



'Pine Island' at Derryclare on the N59. Photo: Getty

Connemara is not a county, or an administrative area. People have tried to place order and logic on it, from Nimmo's piers to Kylemore's neo-Gothic architecture, but it still seems wild, indescribable. Where exactly does it begin or end?

It's a landscape loaded with hardship, sadness and struggle. It can be damp as a dishcloth. But it also feels raw, romantic, a "savage beauty", as Oscar Wilde had it, spotted with stone walls, squelchy fields and paintgunned sheep — a place where compass jellyfish float like cartoons, lamb tastes faintly of the mountain heather it munches on, hills are denuded of once-awesome wildlife, and a Great Greyness can switch-flick to Caribbean sparkle over the course of a cup of tea.

On Diamond Hill, a rainbow unspools itself into the mix. Local lore has it that this 442m cone got its name from kids selling nibs of its quartzite to tourists as "Irish diamonds". It's the centrepiece of Connemara National Park in Letterfrack (nationalparks.ie; free), where a series of trails range from pottering nature walks to the strenuous 3.7km loop taking in its peak.

The visitor centre and cafe feel dated here, but the trails are in super nick and well marked, leading to jaw-dropping vistas over the Atlantic Coast, Twelve Bens and Kylemore. But don't underestimate the huffing, puffing and proper footwear needed to gain these heights.

"We're going to the top. We're stubborn," says one Dutch couple I meet, kitted out with raingear, boots, poles and gaiters. It's a miserable morning, with sideways rain knifing into the slope, and I've satisfied myself with that rainbow just below the summit. The top is buried in cloud, so I turn back, looping through fields of pinging meadow pipits and Connemara ponies, towards a summer car park filling up by 10.30am.

"The sun is a bonus," as one hotelier tells me. That could be Connemara's tagline. Sandcastles in the rain, soggy sambos, quips about "no such thing as bad weather, just bad preparation" — all are part and parcel of a holiday here (a gift-shop T-shirt in Clifden shows sheep in all seasons, wearing sunglasses and sheltering from hail). On another evening, nosing down the breen to Dog's Bay, we park by a couple of continental campervans, their occupants brewing coffee and cleaning sand from their toes. But a walk and swim are gorgeous, despite the spitting rain.

Connemara's beaches do quality, not quantity. Think of the snorkelling in Glassilaun, swims in Renvyle or Lettergesh, the coral sands of Mannin Bay or Trá an Dóilín (the "coral" is actually maerl — the remains of a type of seaweed in the waters offshore). On the Ballyconneely peninsula, I see the sandy curve of Doonloughan for the first time, coasteering with Real Adventures Connemara (realadventures.ie; €65/€50pp).

What's coasteering? It's a brilliant, makey-uppy activity that involves squeezing into a wetsuit, old trainers, helmet and buoyancy vest before scrambling, leaping and swimming along the coast for a couple of hours. The sun appears for our adventure, elevating everything from the greens and blues of the ocean to the white froth of the breakers, the dark fringes of granite, the painterly clouds and rash of one-off houses.



Coasteering with Real Adventures

The first obstacles are easy, involving small scrambles and belly-crawling through rock pools. But as confidence grows, the cannonballs and climbs get more thrilling, the jumps several metres high. Hozier, Gordon Ramsay and Ian Bishop have all been coasteering in Connemara this year, we learn. I bet the sheep were as unbothered by them as the rest of us.

"Why are they painted red and blue?" an Austrian tourist asks.

"They're punk rockers," our guide replies.

I've told my son that Connemara's sheep often wander on to roads, and he wants to see that, so later on we drive by Lough Inagh. Sure enough, there they are. It's like an Irish safari. Several rental cars have pulled in for photos by the choppy water and bare backs of the Twelve Bens, an undulating screen for the shifting spotlight of that fleeting sun.

Between activities, I've pinned several places for holiday eats. Some well-known old favourites disappoint (frustrating, given what it costs a family to eat out these days). But there are plenty of tasty discoveries too — from a Connemara pasty oozing with butter chicken (€6.50) at the Misunderstood Heron, the always-busy food truck overlooking Killary Fjord, to smoothie bowls (€8.50) at the cheerful Coffee Cottage in Roundstone, scoops of Jimmy's local ice cream, or a falafel salad (€11.95) and plant-based smoked-sausage baguette (€10.95) at Sweet Nothings, a veggie and vegan cafe tipped by our coastering guide in Ballyconneely.

The best meal of our trip comes at the Connemara Sands Hotel (connemarasands-hotel.com; rooms from €220) — all the sweeter because it's a complete surprise, following dashes to the sea from its barrel sauna. We sit down expecting a bog-standard hotel dinner, but ooh and aah our way through a delicate salad complementing Graham Roberts' Connemara Smokehouse salmon (€13.50), succulent Dooncastle Oysters (six for €18), a petit lobster pie with a bisque and tarragon cream sauce that elevate rather than overwhelm the crustacean (€18), and zingy fish 'n' chips with a drizzle of truffle honey oil (€22).

It's a spread that lets Connemara's ingredients sing, with lovely service from young staff, and a sense of care and pride (bonus points for excellent coeliac options, too). It makes some more famous local names look like they're coasting.

"You're eating the land of Connemara," owner Dean Gibson says of scoops of ice cream flavoured with local honey. The weather is all about the attitude, he adds. "Other countries in Europe are baking."



Oysters from Connemara Sands Hotel

Our second base is Within the Village, a series of five refurbished townhouses in Roundstone (withinthevillage.ie; from €430 for two nights). It's one of the most tasteful and thought-through self-catering stays I've seen on this island, with a pared-back, Scandi-inflected feel infused with natural materials and detailing that honours Connemara's tapestried heritage of sea, landscape and small crafts.

Our house, called 'Kelp', has gently glowing images of jellyfish by Dorothy Cross, an ornamental nest by Joe Hogan and Calendar Coffee from Oughterard, for example — alongside excellent rainshowers, a wood-burning stove and smart touches like big beach towels and a booklet with tips ranging from hikes to shops and local intel like 'The Wall', the harbour wall opposite Kings' pub. No visit to Roundstone is complete without a sunset pint there.



Inside 'Within the Village'. Photo: Clíodhna Prendergast

I set out early one morning to follow a suggested trail. Walking up Fuschia Lane, next to O'Dowd's bar, the dark hump of Errisbeg rises in the distance, its top completely obscured by a slumberdown of cloud.

I'm not aiming to get that far, as there's no waymarking, but I navigate the spaghetti of sheep trails through the boggy squelch of its shoulders towards views over Dog's Bay and Gurteen on the tombolo below. There, I pull out a few hunks of soda bread, lather them with marmalade and tuck in with the wet mountain and Atlantic panorama all to myself.

Nearby, a pair of choughs duck and dive in the wind – their pee-aws cutting through the drizzle. Choughs look exactly like crows, save for their red beaks and feet, and for some reason the colours stand out more in the gloom. I started my walk annoyed at another day of annual leave drenched in rain, but little details like this have a soothing effect. A darting wren. Splats of lichen on stone. Fingers of honeysuckle reaching over the road. A grey-white Connemara pony like it's stepped from a storybook.



Dog's bay and Gurteen, seen from Errisbeg. Photo: Getty

It's not the first time this Connemara drift comes over me. It's a kind of patience and peace that descends when you slow down and start to go with the pace of this place, rather than force it. And typically, I'm realising this too late in the day, as our holiday starts winding to a close.

From Kylemore to Errisbeg, I've brought Tim Robinson's books on Connemara with me, and dip in and out of them during the trip. Robinson lived in a cottage on Roundstone Bay — you can see it from the harbour, though sadly it's been deteriorating since his death in 2020. I'm delighted to see one of his original maps in *Within the Village*, with an attention to detail that is swoonsome.

Andy Nally of the townhouses here remembers the author out on the roads with a measuring wheel, an image that fits perfectly with his exhaustive and exquisite musing on every inch of this wild, unknowable place: "Sometimes I come back from a walk with my head so empty it seems not a single thought or observation has passed through it all day," he writes at one point. "And I feel I have truly seen things as they are when I'm not there to see them."

Clifden is of course Connemara's hub town, and we stop by several times for moseys, meals and messages. A few clicks north is Omev Island, connected to the mainland by a causeway a few hours aside of low tide. After triple-checking the tide times, and dipping into Sweeney's in Claddaghduff to be quadruply sure, we edge the car over the ribbed sands and park on the island side. A looped walk here swings around the coast, past the sunken remains of St Feichin's Church (use Google Maps to find it relative to your location, as it is hidden in a grassy bowl).



Omev Island, Claddaghduff, Connemara, Co Galway

Again, all four seasons are flung at us in the space of a few hours. The sun illuminates swirling seaweeds and mussel smithereens my son identifies as smashed with stones by seagulls. Wintry cloud soon casts High Island and Inishbofin in silhouette, a stingy rain whips our faces on the walk back, and then it's jackets off again as a hot sun greets our arrival back at the car.

Almost 400 souls used to live on this island. Now there are just a few ruins and holiday homes with seasonal occupants.

Years ago, walking here, I remember passing a mobile home in which one of its last residents, former stuntman Pascal Whelan, used to live (he died in 2017). The same man, it turns out, was Robinson's boatman on a visit to Omey, which he calls "the Sometime Island". Pascal, he writes, was sometimes seen "wading through the inswilling water on his way home from Sweeney's, holding a final pint above the splashes".

Driving back on the N59, over that kink of a bridge into Oughterard, I feel like I'm clutching Connemara in the same way.



Ballynahinch Castle was built in 1754 , and hosted Daniel O'Connell in 1843

Connemara must-sees

Derrigimlagh

The bog where Alcock and Brown crash-landed following their non-stop transatlantic flight in 1919 is now a Wild Atlantic Way attraction, with signage and display panels. Look out for the scattered remains of a Marconi station, too.

The Sky Road

Short and sweet, this 16km loop just north-west of Clifden takes drivers (or cyclists) to panoramas over Clifden Bay and islands like Inishturk and Omey.

Ballynahinch Castle

Repeat guests love the homely luxury of Denis O'Brien's hotel, but its walking trails and storied Fisherman's Pub are also open to non-residents. *ballynahinch-castle.com*; rooms from €380 B&B

DK Oyster Farm

A tour of this oyster farm in Ballinakill Bay tells the story from sea to plate, including a chance to shuck your own oyster. *dkconnemaraoysters.com*; €35/€16.50pp

Island life

If you're staying more than a few days, island trips are another option. Aran Island Ferries sails from Rossaveal to Inis Mór, Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr, while the Inishbofin Ferry sails from Cleggan. *aranislandferries.com*; *inishbofinferry.ie*

Counting sheep

Take your sheep encounters up a notch with a sheepdog demonstration at Joyce Country Sheepdogs on Lough Nafoeey. *joycecountrysheepdogs.ie*; €15/€5pp

Don't miss

Omey, by James Morrissey, is a beautifully designed collection of stories by former residents, with notes on wildlife, heritage and culture. It's a lovely Connemara companion. Crannóg Books; €20

Three tasty pitstops in Connemara



A falafel salad at Sweet Nothings

Sweet Nothings

A bright and cheery cafe in Ballyconneely. Expect lovely, creative veggie and vegan fare like falafel bowls and local salads. [@sweetnothingsconnemara](https://www.instagram.com/sweetnothingsconnemara)



The Willow Tree

The Willow Tree

Add this to your Clifden checklist, along with Guys and Mitchell's. Friendly service, and cooking that lets local lamb and seafood sing. [@thewillowtreeclifden](#)



Pasty from the Misunderstood Heron

Misunderstood Heron

A stop at this food truck above Killary Fjord is essential. Highlights include mussels from the fjord and 'Connemara pasties'. [misunderstoodheron.com](#)

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