why we travel

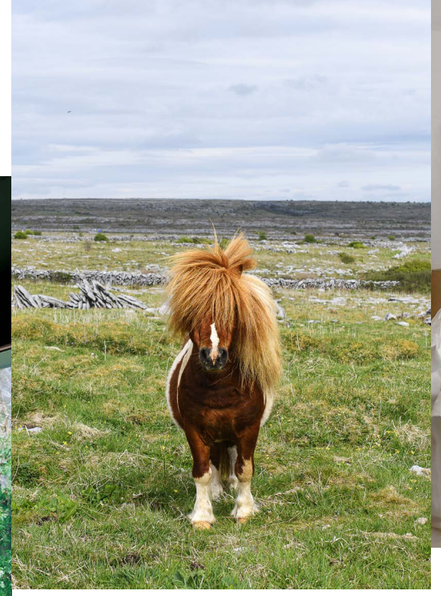
EXPERIENCES THAT CHANGE THE WAY WE SEE THE WORLD

Seeing Green

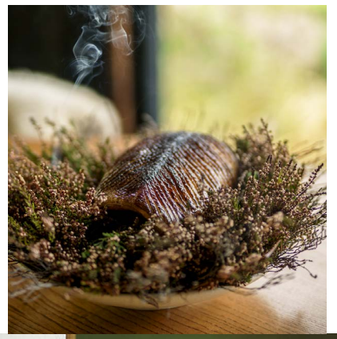
Across remote western Ireland, a new wave of innkeepers and creatives are redefining slow travel. By Grainne McBride

Aoibheann MacNamara and her dog, Puffy, at her home in a 150-year-old building in Galway's West End

PHOTOGRAPH: TARAN WILKHU



From left: A bedroom at Within the Village in Connemara; the Mamean walking trail along the Western Way in Connemara; The Lichen Townhouse, with a traditional stone wall, at Within the Village



Clockwise from bottom left: Hens on the grounds at Fernwood; the tree-shaded Fernwood Sauna House; a sitting area at Summerage in Burren, featuring a mohair blanket and cushions from local brand The Tweed Project; glazed carrots with labneh, za'atar, pistachio, and pomegranate at Ard Bia in Galway; inside one of the cabins at Fernwood; Crunchy the Shetland pony at Summerage; dry-aged duck from sustainably minded Lignum; chef Danny Africano at his restaurant Lignum; the chic interiors of Lignum

PHOTOGRAPHS: WITHIN THE VILLAGE, CLIODHNA PRENDERGAST, TRISTAN HUTCHINSON, TOBY MITCHELL, AOIFE LONG, TARAN WILKHU

"YOU GET THIS FEELING when you enter the Burren's limestone landscape," says Aoibheann MacNamara of the moonlike karst in County Clare. "It has an energy, and a history that permeates." A dynamic entrepreneur, MacNamara champions slow food at her Galway restaurant, Ard Bia, and slow fashion through her homespun label, The Tweed Project. I've made my way through those starkly serene karst fields to her most recent undertaking, Summerage, a reimagined farmhouse set on 32 acres that's the ideal place to reflect on the region's timeless appeal. The Scandi-minimalist interiors and deliberate lack of Wi-Fi mean a stay here is all about reading, picking blackberries, or staring out the window at the shaggy-maned ponies, Crunchy and Holly.

In recent years here in western Ireland, a clutch of openings in counties from Clare to Mayo have become incubators for a modern take on the term "slow travel"—from village pubs turned design-led retreats to pop-up feasts on organic farms. It's why I'm zigzagging along the Atlantic coast to speak to the people who are putting a twist on the region's age-old way of life and reviving dying traditions.

I drive inland and northeast to the more leafy setting of Bullaun in County Galway to find Danny Africano. Working toward self-sustainability at his restaurant, Lignum, the 30-something chef preserves the glut of what's grown in the kitchen garden for the winter months. Arriving for lunch here on a balmy Sunday, I pass the bountiful veggie patch before entering the restaurant, where a dimly lit preservation room is filled with neatly labeled jars of pickles and preserves. Artfully plated courses appear from the sizzle and smoke of the open kitchen: local mussels set in their shell, foam-topped fire-licked pork.

Farther west from Bullaun in Connemara—known for its bleakly beautiful bogs and heather-flecked mountains—a former pub and B&B in the heart of seaside hub Roundstone have been transformed into Within the Village, a collection of four low-key town houses and a cottage that are showcases for regional art and design. Launched in 2023 as a labor of love by three friends, Maria Murphy, Lorna Mayne, and Keith Kissane, it's what happens when the albergo diffuso model meets easygoing Irish charm. A stay here means plugging into the community: listening to the Gaelic Games and rugby chat at local drinking den King's; ordering a creamy pint of Guinness at O'Dowd's pub to drink by the harbor wall, where pieces of slate have been fashioned into makeshift tables; wandering through town to find the bee-buzzing front garden of Roundstone Ceramics, where welcoming potter Séamus Laffan will likely be sitting at his wheel. Back at base, a bag of still-warm scones is left on the door each morning; there's ethereal glow-in-the-dark art by Dorothy Cross on the walls and nests crafted from twigs by Joe Hogan (a traditional weaver who's collaborated with fashion brands such as Loewe) displayed under bell jars like little sculptures.

While village life naturally leads to a connection with people, connection to the land is the focus at Fernwood, a nearly entirely off-grid organic farm a half-hour drive northwest. It's a place to hole up for more than a night, in a cozy cocoon dappled by sunlight and warmed by wood-burning stoves, before striding out on walking trails across bogs and rewilded pastures. At the door of the Stilt House, one of the newer additions, concrete steps have been imprinted with fallen leaves by artist Paddy O'Malley. As I follow the path to the woodland sauna that overlooks Salt Lake, co-owner Anne Ashe tells me how it was painstakingly crafted by builders from County Sligo who lived on-site in their camper van for months. "Every huge pane of glass and piece of wood was carried in by hand," she recalls. "They really fed into the energy at Fernwood."

Equally skilled hands restored a sunken larch- and oak-framed boat that had served as the main ferry to Clare Island, off County Mayo, since 1968. Now *The Dolphin* is safely anchored offshore and harbors former bourbon barrels shipped over from Kentucky, currently filled with aging whiskey. But tasting it involves commitment: Premium-whiskey collectors must get to the island and experience its historic sites, including the 16th-century castle of pirate queen Grace O'Malley. The reason, says Clare Island Whiskey founder Carl O'Grady, is to forge a bond with visitors and to support the island community.

Myths and legends are also part of ambitious plans at Westport Estate, back on the mainland, where Grace O'Malley had a stronghold. Here a nursery full of native seeds is being planted for the Wild Realms gardens. Due to be unveiled in 2028, the gardens are part of a transformation of 430 acres aimed at reconnecting visitors with nature and Ireland's indigenous heritage (the experience will channel the spirit of the Morrigan, the Celtic protector of the land). This spring the first phase of the project will take the form of a luxe hotel, The Grace, reflecting the independent ways of its namesake. Going slow has never looked sharper in the west.