



5 of the best... Islands in Ireland

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RUGGED, WILD AND BEAUTIFUL, IRELAND'S ISLANDS ARE DIVERSE AND READY TO BE EXPLORED, WRITES *YVONNE GORDON*

01 INISHBOFIN

Inishbofin Island, or Inis Bó Finne, means the 'Island of the White Cow' and the island is said to be named after a legendary white cow seen centuries ago by fisherman who landed on the island in thick fog. Five miles off the Galway coast and situated north of the Aran Islands, Inishbofin is a tranquil island with stunning scenery, pristine sandy beaches and plenty

of rare flora and fauna. There are crystal clear waters for swimming and diving. The island also has two seal colonies. Walking, diving and angling are very popular on the island as well as birdwatching. On the island's west side, the rocks known as The Stags have sea stacks and a blow-hole. Inishbofin has been populated for over 6,000 years and there are many historical sights to be explored, including ancient forts and monastic ruins.

There are also legends and stories about pirates such as Granuaile – Grace O'Malley – Ireland's pirate queen, who is said to have used the fort at Dún Gráinne. The fort dates back around 2,000 years. There is a small heritage museum near the pier and Inishbofin also has a lively traditional Irish culture with regular music sessions and its own Céili band.

GET THERE: There are ferries from Cleggan, Co Galway. Tel: (0)95 45819; inishbofinislanddiscovery.com

02 INIS MÓR, ARAN ISLANDS

The Aran Islands in Galway Bay are another great preserve of traditional Irish language, culture and music, as well as having spectacular and dramatic scenery. Inis Mór is the largest of the three islands, with a population of around 800. The island is criss-crossed with a network of stone walls surrounding hundreds of tiny fields and there are lots of limestone fissures, making it an interesting landscape to

explore. Hiring a bicycle is one of the nicest ways to see the island as you can go at your own pace and explore the narrow roads and laneways. One of the most interesting places to visit on the island is the fort Dún Aonghus, a semi-circular Bronze Age stone fort which is set in a dramatic location on the edge of a 300-foot sea cliff. The fort is enclosed with massive stone walls and a defence made with jagged rocks. It has great views over Galway Bay. There are also some remains of medieval churches and 12th century high crosses on the island. Kiltonan is the island's main village and here you'll find Ionaid Árann, the visitor centre which introduces the island's culture and history. There are regular traditional Irish music sessions, dances and storytelling sessions on the island.

GET THERE: Ferries go from Rossaveal (Ros an Mhíl) in Galway. Tel: (0)91 568 903; aranislandferries.com, and also from Doolin in Co Clare. Tel: (0)65 707 4455; doolinferries.com or (0)65 707 5555; doolinferry.com. Aer Arann Islands flies to the Aran Islands from Connemara. Tel: (0)91 593 034; aerarannislands.ie

03 BERE ISLAND

Just a short distance from the harbour town of Castletownbere on the Beara peninsula in West Cork, and lying at the entrance to Bantry Bay is Bere Island. At seven miles long, the island almost guards the town of Castletownbere and has stunning views of the Beara Peninsula itself and over Bantry Bay. Bere has a population of over 200 people and thanks to its strategic location, it has an interesting military history. It was once a British naval base and there are remains of a military barracks, a signal tower, a military fortification and two Martello towers (there were once four towers on the island). Walking or cycling are great ways to get around, and there are great views from Ardnakinna Lighthouse, which you can reach by walking track. There are plenty of historical and archaeological sites to explore, including a wedge tomb which dates from the early Bronze Age and standing stones such as the Gallan stone right at the centre of the island, as well as ring forts and a



holy well. The Bere Island Heritage centre has lots of information on the island's culture and heritage as well as a café and craft shop. There are plenty of outdoor activities from walking, fishing and diving. It is often possible to see Orca whales, basking sharks and

bottle-nose dolphins in the waters around the island. **GET THERE:** Bere Island Ferries go to Bere Island from Castletownbere. Tel: (0)27 75009; bereislandferries.com and Murphy's Ferry service runs from the Pontoon on the Glengarriff road. Tel: (0)27 75014; murphysferry.com



04 TORY ISLAND

A visit to Tory Island is like a journey back through time. Some of the magic is due to the island's remoteness – it is eight miles off the northwest coast of Donegal – which has allowed much of the island's traditional Irish culture, such as music, song, dance and storytelling, to be preserved. Although it is frequently subjected to Atlantic storms and sometimes cut off from the mainland, Tory (Oileán Thoraigh) has been inhabited for more than 4,000 years and around 130 people currently live there year-round. Many of its ancient traditions are still practised by the islanders and when you arrive on Tory you might be welcomed by Ri Thoraí – the King of Tory. There are also regular music sessions and the island is a haven for artists. As well as its rich cultural heritage, it is Tory's rugged beauty that draws visitors, with

spectacular coastal scenery and stunning views over to the Donegal coastline. The island is also rich in archaeological and historical sights, which include the remains of an Iron Age fort at Dún Bhaloir, the ruins of a 6th century Christian monastery, a round tower and the Tau Cross on the pier at An Baile Thiar. Birdwatchers will marvel at the many colonies of cliff-nesting seabirds including puffins, razorbills and kittiwakes and the island's birdlife also includes the globally threatened corncrake. Tory is also a popular location for diving, snorkelling and angling.

GET THERE: There are ferries to Tory Island from Bunbeg and from Magheroarty (Machaire Rabhartaigh). Tel: (0)74 953 1320 or see toryislandferry.com. Toraigh na dTonn operates from Magheroarty from April to October. Tel: (0)74 913 5920 or see toryislandferry.ie



05 THE SKELLIGS

These two dramatic pointed rocky outcrops, situated nine miles off the South Kerry coast, are some of the most dramatic islands in Western Europe. They are uninhabited and have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The main island, Skellig Michael (Sceilig Mhichil) looks like a small pointed volcano, its sharp peak reaching nearly 218m. A 1000-year-old

stone stairway with over five hundred steps leads up to a spectacular monastic site near the peak. This is where, centuries ago, early Christian monks lived and prayed in spartan conditions, living in stone beehive huts (clocháns) built on cliff-edges. As well as the huts, there are also the remains of oratories, stone crosses, holy wells, a church and a graveyard on the island. After repeated Viking raids, the monks abandoned the island in the thirteenth century, however it remained a place of pilgrimage.

The smaller Little Skellig (Sceilig Bheag) is home to thousands of seabirds including more than 30,000 pairs of gannets who use it as a breeding ground. The underwater sea cliffs around the islands are a popular diving location. It's possible to visit Skellig Michael by boat for a daytrip and to pass the rocky nature reserve of Little Skellig, which is closed to the public.

GET THERE: A number of private operators run boats to the Skelligs. From Derrynane contact John O'Shea on 087 6898431 or log on to discoverireland.ie for a list of other boat operators in the area. It is also possible to take a trip around the islands with the Skellig Experience. Tel: (0)66 9476306; skelligexperience.com

