



# Guiding Lights

*For a remote getaway with a difference, follow the beautiful gaze of Ireland's historic lighthouses.*

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Chasing rainbows at the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), opposite. This page Gareth McCaughey of The Muddlers Club.





**T**he light from the full moon shines across the bay, reflecting on the water. It's not long after sunset and both sea and sky have taken on a rich blue, the land and the water interrupted only by a thin strip of twinkling yellow lights on the horizon. There are stars in the sky and a small green beacon flashes out in the bay – but the real star is the lighthouse beam from the white tower. Every three seconds, a silent, slow, flash, flash, flash.

From the horizon, other lighthouses send bursts of light back across the water to my lighthouse, as if in response. I say “my lighthouse” because I’m staying at **Blackhead Lighthouse** in Co Antrim, in the former lightkeeper’s house. There are uninterrupted views across the open sea and to Belfast Lough. The only sounds are the lapping of water from far below the cliff, the cries of seabirds and a hum from a distant road.

Opening the shutters in the morning, the view is of a clear blue sea and sky and, in the front garden, a

Bright isles  
– Blackhead  
Lighthouse keeps  
watch over the  
Antrim coastline.

beautiful white lighthouse tower with its ornate glass lantern divided into curved diamond panes. This lighthouse has been guiding ships in and out of Belfast Lough since 1902. Inside, the house is cosy, with an open fireplace, book shelves, old lamps and furniture, similar to how it would have been when the lighthouse keepers lived here with their families until 1975.

It’s tempting to take a book and sit in the long grass of the cliff for the day in the sunshine, but there’s too much to explore. Two white walls line the cliff path leading down to the sea, where there’s a rocky shore, caves and busy seabirds. Dolphins and minke whales are often spotted here.

Nearby, **The Gobbins** cliff path opened in 1902 – a series of bridges and steps allowing early railway visitors to experience the sea stacks and caves. Once more popular than the Giant’s Causeway, the path fell into disrepair in the 1950s but reopened last year. Further south on **Islandmagee**, the tiny Portmuck Harbour is popular with swimmers, kayakers and anglers. ➔



Top, Libby Carton of Kinnegar Brewing in Co Donegal and, right, a mouth-watering Billy Andys platter.

Clockwise from top left, essential reading in St John's Point Lighthouse; binoculars at the ready; lightkeeper Henry Henvey checking the fog machine at St John's Point; watchdog at Wicklow

Lighthouse; Hannah Sweeney of Fanad Lighthouse; Henry's tools at St John's Point Lighthouse; Luke Daly enjoying the waves with Adventure One; maritime paraphernalia at Blackhead Lighthouse.



## EAT AT ...

**TRADITIONAL PUB** If you're staying at Blackhead, check out **Billy Andys**, a 19th-century pub near Glenoe, between Larne and Carrickfergus in Co Antrim. It has a tiny snug, peat fire and a 100-seat restaurant with locally sourced meat and seafood. Try the braised beef or a platter of rare-breed pork. (Glenoe, Co Antrim, +44 28 2827 0648; [billyandys.com](http://billyandys.com))

**CRAFT BEER** On the Fanad peninsula, the award-winning microbrewery Kinnegar Brewing and Sacarpello & Co have combined forces at **The Tap Room**, which serves delicious stone-baked pizzas from an outdoor wood-fired oven, accompanied by Kinnegar's craft beer on tap. Outdoor or indoor dining is relaxed here, in the stunning setting of Rathmullan House. (Rathmullan, Co Donegal, 074 915 8188; [rathmullanhouse.com/the-tap-room](http://rathmullanhouse.com/the-tap-room))

**FINE DINING** After a visit to Hook Head, drop over to **Dunbrody Country House**, run by well-known TV chef Kevin Dundon and his wife Catherine. Dinner is €65 per person. Or tuck into fish 'n' chips at on-site The Local pub from €12.50 with Dunbrody's own craft beer. B&B also available. (Arthurstown, Co Wexford, 051 389 600; [dunbrodyhouse.com](http://dunbrodyhouse.com))





## SMART TIPS

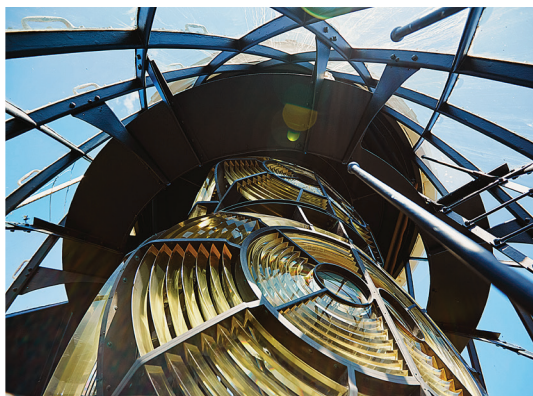
- ✓ If you're looking to explore Co Wexford, **Hook Head B&B** makes for a warmly-welcoming base thanks to its hostess with the mostess, Anne. B&B from €30 per person per night. (Broomhill, Fethard-on-Sea, Co Wexford, 086 0897915; email [hookheadbandb@gmail.com](mailto:hookheadbandb@gmail.com))
- ✓ Ireland has some of the best waves in the world. Luke Daly of **Adventure One Surf** on Fanad Head, gives surfing lessons for all levels. (Fanad, Co Donegal, 087 628 5565; [adventureone.net](http://adventureone.net))



GRAHAM CORCORAN



Above, The Gobbins tour guide Ginny Murray. St John's Lighthouse is a stunner both inside and out, right.



✈ “William McClelland, a well-known smuggler, lived here in the 1700s,” says Gobbins guide Ginny Murray. “The coastguard built their cottages next door – to keep an eye on him.”

I leave the tales of smugglers and go south, to **St John's Point** in Co Down, where the lighthouse is a striking yellow and black striped 40-metre tower – Ireland's tallest onshore lighthouse. Former lightkeeper Henry Henvey, 82, still lives in a house here. He travelled the world as a ship's carpenter before dropping anchor.

“We used to go up the tower in four-hour watches. We logged the weather, cloud formation, wind direction, barometer and thermometer readings,” he says, telling how they also used to wind up the lighthouse's clockwork mechanism every hour. Henry keeps the compressed air fog signal in pristine condition, proudly running it once a month, though I later learn the foghorn's nickname – Moaning Minnie.

The area around St John's has everything for nature lovers: beaches, the Mourne Mountains and forest parks



Wicklow Head Lighthouse tucked into the cliffs, above, and Fanad from afar, right. Top right, Hook Head tour guide Liam Colfer and bottom right, walking and talking guide, Sean Mullan.



with walking, mountain biking and horse-riding trails. It's also a golfer's paradise with Royal County Down among the top courses in the area.

Heading northwest to Co Donegal, the Fanad peninsula is one of Ireland's most northerly headlands. At **Fanad Head Lighthouse**, I stay in one of the former lightkeeper's houses to get a taste of what life was like here. The houses and tower are set on a rocky outcrop, with panoramic views across the sea and a remote but cosy feeling. Although it's calm when I visit, a lightning storm out to sea is a reminder that this exposed headland is at the mercy of the powerful Atlantic.

Local walking guide Sean Mullan ([walktalkireland.com](http://walktalkireland.com)) shows me where the sea created the magnificent Great Pollet Sea Arch. “Lough Swilly is called ✈



## 4 BEST LIGHTHOUSE VISITOR CENTRES

**1 Hook Lighthouse** in Co Wexford is the world's oldest lighthouse – find out about its 800-year history on a tour of the impressive tower and watchroom, including ghostly holograms, plus a café and picnic areas. (Adults €6, child €3.50, 051 397 055; [hookheritage.ie](http://hookheritage.ie))

**2 On a tour of Ballycotton Lighthouse** in Co Cork, travel out to the tiny island by boat, to see the black lighthouse tower as well as where the lightkeepers lived and worked – ask about the goats that the lightkeepers kept on the island. (Tour, adults €20, child €10, 021 464 6875; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))

**3 Valentia Lighthouse** in Co Kerry is another lighthouse with an interesting history, built on the site of a 17th-century fort and warding off many invaders, as well as the powerful Atlantic Ocean forces. (Adults €5, children €2.50, 066 947 6985; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))

**4 Loop Head Lighthouse** in Co Clare is at the end of the stunning Loop peninsula, with plenty of opportunities for spotting whales and seals, as well as lots of seabirds. You can either tour the lighthouse. (Adults €5, children €2) or stay overnight: three days from €437. (01 670 4733; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))





Anticlockwise from top right, an airy Wicklow Lighthouse bedroom; a windswept Hook Head; strong currents at Ballyhiernan Bay beach; Barry Phelan has a lightbulb moment at St John's Point Lighthouse.



✈️ 'the lake of shadows,'" he adds, telling how St Colmcille once killed a monster in the sea lough, which runs between here and Inishowen.

**Wicklow Head Lighthouse** on the east coast is one of the few towers you can stay in, with each room on a different floor. During my stay, I walk to a quiet cove and spot a seal with her pups. Down at the working lighthouse, there are seagulls, cormorants and a pair of nesting peregrine falcons. Locals often spot basking sharks.

My final visit is a tour of **Hook Lighthouse** in Co Wexford, the world's oldest intact operational lighthouse. The lighthouse beam has lit the way for passing sailors for 800 years; there are holograms of earls and tales of monks keeping the beacon alight, plus paraphernalia, such as a compass and Morse code lamp, in the watchroom.

Exploring or staying in lighthouses is not only the ultimate getaway, but a chance to connect with the sea and sea life, learn about a different way of life for those who worked beside the sea and, literally, get a new perspective on the island of Ireland. 🍀



## SLEEP AT ...

**MARITIME** At the start of the Causeway Coastal Route and just a half hour from Belfast, **Blackhead Lighthouse** is a great setting for coastal walks. The old-style furnishings of the lightkeepers' houses add plenty of character. There are three different houses, sleeping up to seven people. Three nights self-catering from €432. (Whitehead, Co Antrim, 01 670 4733; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))

**NATURE** The **St John's Point Lighthouse** in Co Down has two lightkeepers' cottages to stay in (each sleeps four) and is great for exploring Strangford Lough, the Mourne Mountains or the early Christian church in Killough. Nearby beaches include Rossglass and blue flag Tyrella beach. Three nights from €538. (Killough, Co Down, 01 670 4733; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))

**REMOTE** **Fanad Head Lighthouse** on the Fanad peninsula is on the Wild Atlantic Way and in the Gaeltacht area. It has three cottages, sleeping from two up to four people. Self-catering, from €237 for a two-night stay. You can also tour the lighthouse (adults €8, children €5). (Fanad peninsula, 087 647 0917; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))

**ROMANTIC** Built in 1781, the octagonal stone tower at **Wicklow Head Lighthouse** has sea views on three sides, with plenty of window seats to enjoy the views. There's a cosy sitting room and there are 109 steps up to the kitchen on the top floor. Sleeps four, three nights from €614. (Dunbur Head, Co Wicklow, 01 670 4733; [greatlighthouses.com](http://greatlighthouses.com))