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# Game of Thrones

## Ultimate location guide

With season five of the HBO hit underway, YVONNE GORDON travels in search of real-life locations from the Seven Kingdoms... and beyond

### SEVILLE & OSUNA, SPAIN

I'm standing in a square room. The walls are covered from top to bottom with blue and green ceramic tiles and ornate plasterwork. Looking up two levels, there's a wooden dome covered in intricate gold star patterns, said to symbolise the universe. Four balconies look down into the room, while a warm breeze blows through from the open courtyards.

I'm in the Hall of The Ambassadors in the Real Alcázar or royal fortress ([alcazar-sevilla.org](http://alcazar-sevilla.org); €9.50) in Seville, Spain. It's soon to feature in *Game of Thrones* season five, as the Water Gardens of Dorne, residence of House Martell. No doubt it will look smashing on screen (it makes its first appearance on Monday, April 20), but it will also prove difficult to capture this real-life beauty on TV.

The Hall of the Ambassadors was the main hall of the palace, the throne room where King Don Pedro I received important personalities of his time. Pedro I had the royal residence built in 1364, within the original Moorish fort which was first created in 913, and the current Spanish

royal family still has quarters there. This throne room is open on all four sides, with each doorway leading to another beautiful space, such as the Maiden's Courtyard, a large patio with trees, flowers and a water channel, or the Doll's Courtyard, with more intricate plasterwork on the pillars. Stepping down into the Gardens

of the Galley, the air is filled with the smell of orange blossoms. There are sounds of birds, of voices laughing and — in the distance — the noise of rushing water from the Mercury Pond, a large square pool with a statue of Neptune in the centre.

*Game of Thrones* used a number of locations in the Alcázar. In fact, Spanish-based

producer Peter Welter Soler said that when they first saw it, they knew it was precisely what they wanted.

"The Alcázar was so beautiful, and it was just the right location for the Kingdom of Dorne, they hardly had to do anything in order to complement it," he says. "It was more than they had ever expected for a location to be."

Next to the Alcázar is the beautiful Cathedral of Seville ([catedraldesevilla.es](http://catedraldesevilla.es); €9), the third-largest in the world, and home to an ornate gold altar, artworks by Murillo and Goya, and the remains of Christopher Columbus. You can climb the Giralda bell tower for views of the city and the Alcázar.

Over in the town of Osuna, an hour from Seville, I am served a glass with a piece of meat skewered across the top. Underneath is a pear poached in red wine, accompanied by mushrooms. There's something about it that looks like blood and innards — and, I realise the name of the dish is "Joffrey".

This is Casa Curro restaurant, where you can order "*Game of Thrones* tapas".

Ballintoy Harbour in Co. Antrim featured as the Iron Islands



Nearly 1,000 cast and crew members were based in the town of Osuna last October, shooting in the town's bullring. It will feature in scenes from Mereen later in the series — the producers chose this bullring as the yellow sandstone most resembles Croatia, where the rest of Mereen is filmed.

As we enter the bullring, local TV producer Jesus Cansino, tells me that I am about to step into the "pit" — anyone who has read the books knows the dramatic scenes that take place here — but I am more worried about where real-life bulls might enter the ring. Jesus points out a wooden panel that toreadors can hide behind if a bull is attacking.

The bullring was built in 1904 and, seating 5,000 spectators, it comes to life for three days each May during the town festival. No doubt the *Game of Thrones* association will attract lots of fans to this beautiful Andalusian town, with long, quiet streets of white-washed houses and ornate balconies.

### TRAVEL INFO:

Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies from Dublin to Seville from €37.99 each way. Yvonne stayed at Hotel Inglaterra ([hotellinglaterra.es](http://hotellinglaterra.es)) on the centrally located Plaza Nueva.



Opposite: The Maiden's Courtyard in Seville's Real Alcázar, where filming took place. Below: Daenerys Targaryen wed Khal Drogo beside Gozo's Azure Window; the Dark Hedges in Co. Antrim



Doubles start at €120 per night. In Seville, you can learn about Flamenco and see a live performance at the Flamenco Dance Museum ([museoflamenco.com](http://museoflamenco.com); from €10). For more see [visitsevilla.es](http://visitsevilla.es), [turismosuna.org](http://turismosuna.org) and [Spain.info](http://Spain.info).

### NORTHERN IRELAND

Season five of *Game of Thrones* will treat us to stunning locations in Northern Ireland, including Glenariff in Co. Antrim, one of the nine Glens of Antrim. Glenariff, known as the Queen of the Glens, is home to Glenariff Forest Park which has scenic paths, forest trails and riverside

walks, as well as a three-mile waterfall walkway and mountain viewpoints to the sea.

Most of *Game of Thrones* is filmed in Northern Ireland, either outdoors in the rugged landscapes, glacial valleys, sea caves and golden beaches, or in the Paint Hall Studios in Belfast, where the indoor scenes are filmed. The first scene of season five is an outdoor scene filmed in Northern Ireland — a flashback scene, set in a lush forest, where the young Cersei Lannister and a pal walk along a forest trail and cross a river.

Many of Northern Ireland's long, sandy beaches will feature this season too, with coastal locations including

the beach near Portaferry, Co. Down, the bay near Quintin Castle in Co. Down and Portstewart Strand, a two-mile stretch of golden sand along the north coast.

The best locations from previous seasons include the spooky tree-lined avenue near Ballymoney, Co. Antrim known as the Dark Hedges, where the branches of the beech trees have twisted together to almost form an arch. This is where in season two, Arya Stark escaped King's Landing, and in real life it's said to be haunted by a ghost called the Grey Lady.

Don't miss the peaceful Ballintoy Harbour — a small fishing harbour on the north coast of Co. Antrim, not far from the Giant's Causeway. This was the setting for the Iron Islands, where Theon Greyjoy returned home to Pyke. The harbour is surrounded by rocks which have been sculpted into unusual shapes and caves by the Atlantic sea water and you'll hear the cries of the many seabirds in the area.

A great place to spend the day with the family is the beautiful 820-acre Castle Ward estate, on Strangford Lough, the setting for Winterfell,

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home of the Starks. As well as seeing where filming took place, you can also learn archery or take a self-guided *Game of Thrones* cycling tour (hire bikes on site), passing Audley's Field and Castle, where Robb Stark took up camp in season one. The real life stories of the estate are just as interesting as the fictional ones — it has a unique 18th century mansion which has two completely different sides, one Gothic and one classical, and on a free guided tour, you can hear the story of the disagreeing couple that designed it.

**MORE INFO:** [discovernorthernireland.com/gameofthrones](http://discovernorthernireland.com/gameofthrones)

## MALTA

Parts of season one were filmed on the islands of Malta and Gozo in the Mediterranean, with Gozo's famous Azure Window in Dwejra forming the backdrop for Daenerys Targaryen's wedding to Khal Drogo. The huge limestone rock arch gets its name from the colour of the sea beneath it, and it's also home to a popular diving spot, The Blue Hole, and the small Inland Sea, a unique salt-water lake connected to the sea by tunnel.

The beautiful former capital of Malta, Mdina, a walled medieval town, was the setting for King's Landing in season one. Access is via the impressive Mdina Gate (King's Gate in *Game of Thrones*), where even in real life, there's a long narrow bridge over a moat. Less than 300 people live inside the city walls, and the narrow streets are crooked and curvy, said to be designed that way in medieval times to deflect the path of a shot or arrow from an enemy.

The beautiful public gardens at San Anton Palace were another *Game of Thrones* filming location, used for parts of the Red Keep. The palace is home to the President of Malta and the formal gardens, which are open to the public and date back to the time of the Grand Master of Malta in 1623, have lots of walkways, benches, fountains, sculptures and bird life, with all sorts of colourful trees and flowers set in neat beds. It's a peaceful place to spend an hour or two.

**TRAVEL INFO:** Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies to Malta from €42.99 each way. See also [visitmalta.com](http://visitmalta.com).

## CROATIA

Croatia has some of the most beautiful *Game of Thrones* locations, with the beautiful Diocletian's Palace in Split one of the newest to appear last season.

This season, the external street shots in Mereen, the city in Slaver's Bay, have once again been filmed here. The massive palace (31,000sq m) was built from white stone by Roman Emperor Diocletian in the year 305. Wander the tiny streets, getting lost and discovering the cosy bars, shops and restaurants and don't miss the underground cellars.

The city of Dubrovnik, further south, has featured in previous seasons and fans

**Croatia's Dubrovnik featured as King's Landing; Thingvellir National Park in Iceland was used in season four; actors Sophie Turner and Aidan Gillen share a scene**



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will recognise many of the locations just from wandering the streets.

Although it is King's Landing in the fictional HBO series, Dubrovnik's real history is just as fascinating. The former maritime republic, once one of the richest in the Mediterranean, was founded in the 7th century. To protect its riches, nearly 1.2 miles of thick walls were built around the city, up to 20 feet thick in places, and 82-feet high. These walls are still intact (a drawbridge and a moat even remain) and walking the walls is a great way to get perspective in the city and its setting on the Adriatic Sea. You'll pass familiar towers and fortresses — Fort Bokar is where Joffrey prepared the canons for battle and the Minceta tower is where the House of the Undying scenes with Daenerys Targaryen took place.

Just outside the walled city in Dubrovnik is Fort Lovrijenac, St Lawrence's Fort, which you'll also recognise. There are hundreds of steps up to the fort, but it's worth it for the clear views out over the Adriatic and also over the red roofs of the walled city of Dubrovnik. The island of Lokrum, a short ferry ride from Dubrovnik Harbour by boat, was the fictional city of Qarth where Daenerys had her party and is well worth a visit — the island is uninhabited, but has gardens (complete with peacocks), rocky coves and a lake with an underwater passage to the sea.

**MORE INFO:** Aer Lingus ([aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)) flies from Dublin to Dubrovnik and Pula; Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies to Zadar. See [croatia.hr](http://croatia.hr) for more.

## ICELAND

Although Icelandic filming locations won't be featuring in this season of *Game of Thrones* (the scenes at the wall are filmed in studio in Belfast), the land of fire and ice has been the setting for some memorable scenes north of the wall, with White Walkers and Wildings providing some spine-chilling moments.

In season four, Thingvellir National Park, north-west of Reykjavík, was used for the first time as a filming location. The landscape here is barren, a field of volcanic lava covered in a thin layer of mud

or of snow. In real life, this is where the Mid-Atlantic ridge is pulling the Eurasian and North American continents apart and it's possible to snorkel between the ridges, in the Silfra Fissure. Thingvellir is also far from any towns, so it's a good place to see the aurora borealis.

Another filming location in Iceland was Grjótagjá, near Lake Myvatn in the north-east. This is where Jon Snow and Ygritte got cosy in the cave in season four. Filming for the Wildling camp also took place near here, while scenes were also filmed on the glacier Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Iceland.

**MORE INFO:** At Independent Travel, we've got flights plus three nights in Reykjavik from just €259pp ([independent.ie/travel/iceland](http://independent.ie/travel/iceland)). See also [visiticeland.com](http://visiticeland.com).