

SECRET SLIGO

Yeats Country is well-travelled but Co Sligo also offers lesser-spotted nooks and crannies that are at once surprising and eminently beautiful at any time of year.

WORDS YVONNE GORDON PHOTOGRAPHS TRISTAN HUTCHINSON





Walking through the field, I am having one of those “this sort of thing would only happen in Ireland” moments. I am dressed head to toe in a wetsuit, walking past a group of sheep who have stopped grazing to stare intently. Behind me is a Georgian house and ahead, there’s a ruined tower from around 1360 and an ivy-covered ruin of a Knight’s Templar castle that dates back to 1200.

“Good morning,” I say to the sheep – it seems like someone needs to break the ice. Luckily, the greeting is returned by kayaking guide John Barrett from **Wild Wet Adventures** (wildwetadventures.ie), who is at the nearby boathouse preparing the kayaks. We plan to explore the lake and see some ancient crannógs (man-made islands) and a ring fort. All just another typical day in Ireland then ...

We’re in the grounds of **Temple House** (see “Essentials”, page 60), near Ballymote in south Co Sligo. While highlights such as Ben Bulbin, Yeats Country or Strandhill are well known to visitors, I am exploring some of the county’s hidden spots and even this tiny area is full of fascinating secrets. We paddle out into the lake, passing through a patch of lily pads and tall reeds, and come to the first crannóg, which dates back to the Neolithic period. Any

evidence of a dwelling is long gone – the island is overgrown with trees and bushes.

A little further along the lake shore, we land the kayaks and walk through the forest to a ringfort that dates to megalithic times. “There was a souterrain (underground) passage there,” says John, pointing to the fort’s centre. He tells me how the passage would have been used as storage or for refuge in ancient times, though this one was later filled in to stop animals becoming trapped.

Sligo is full of megalithic features and you can hardly throw a rock without hitting a passage grave or a cairn (stone stacks). The **Carrowmore** complex of passage graves, which dates back to 3,700BC, is popular with day trippers (carrowmore.com), however a hike to the lesser known **Carrowkeel** in the Bricklieve mountains with guide Auriel Robinson from [Seatrails](http://seatrails.ie) (seatrails.ie) is a rewarding experience. We drive along a single track and then walk up an old mining trail set in what was once a sea gorge – before the Ice Age, the area was under water – passing mountain sheep and a blackthorn tree. “This would have had magical properties in ancient Celtic times,” says Auriel, adding that such trees were connected with witchcraft and also associated with fairies. ➔



Previous pages, vast and glorious views from the Keash Cave. Top, John Barrett of Wild Wet Adventures kayaking on the grounds of Temple House, and above, fresh produce from the garden at Coopershill.



➔ After a short climb to the hill top, we come to the first cairn – a mound of large stones. Inside is a passage grave with three small burial chambers. We climb in the opening – it’s narrow at the entrance but, further in, we can stand. The graves date to around 3,500BC and when they were opened in 1911, bones, stone tools, beads and pottery were found inside, undisturbed for thousands of years. When we shine a torch, it’s incredible to see how the ancient stonework was put together.

As we walk along the hill’s peat bog to two more cairns (there are 13 in total), I take in views down over Co Sligo and to the sea, across Donegal Bay as far as Slieve League sea cliffs. The hills are also within sight of Carrowmore, the cairn at Knocknarea and the mysterious Knocknashee.

I keep hearing about **Knocknashee**, which means hill of the fairies, so I join John Barrett for a morning hike. Appropriately, it’s misty, the landscape appearing and disappearing underneath the clouds as we get higher. John tells me how the mountain got its flat top when a giant flew into a rage with the fairies, tore off the peak and flung it across the valley. There are two cairns at the top and – when the weather cooperates – panoramic views.

As well as ancient sites, Sligo is popular for surfing too – there are waves to suit all levels and, in winter, the Atlantic swells draw in the big-wave enthusiasts. I’ve booked a surf session with **Perfect Day** (perfectdaysurfing.ie) at one of my favourite spots, Streedagh – a long golden beach on a sandbar – but as there’s no surf on the day, we take to Lough Gill



Opposite, clockwise from top left, the view from the grounds of Coopershill House; Elisha Hickey from Perfect Day Surf; four-legged friends; prickly flora at Coopershill House; the view of Knocknarea Hill from the water; an 18-month-old barrel ale at White Hag Brewery; country chic at Temple House; delicious sandwiches at Pudding Row; The Beach Bar at Aughris makes for the perfect pit stop. This page, top, hiking to the top of Keash Cave reaps rewarding vistas and, above, Patrick Ward of Fox’s Den Pub enjoys a well-earned rest once inside.



for stand-up paddleboarding, instructed by Elisha Hickey, a former surfing champion.

WB Yeats mentioned **Lough Gill** in his poetry and, as we glide the gentle waters, I hear about the legends which had inspired him. One says the lake was formed from tears over the death of a chieftain's daughter, Gile, and that the lake covers the old city of Sligo.

After a day of activity, the perfect place to relax is **Kilcullen's Bath House** at Enniscrone (kilcullenseaweedbaths.net), with hot seawater and rich strands of fresh seaweed, harvested nearby. Seaweed is said to have beneficial health properties and these baths date back to 1912, with original tubs and pipes giving an authentically bygone feel.

My last Sligo adventure is at the **Caves of Keash**, another mysterious spot full of legends. Formed by the sea in ancient times, this is a row of caves along the side of Keshcorran Mountain and the story goes that Irish High King Cormac mac Airt was reared in a cave by a wolf. The caves are also in Fionn MacCumhaill stories – he was said to have been captured by three hags there, and there's another cairn on top of the mountain.

The caves are large, some are interconnected and, as I take in the views down over a lake, which seems to be in the shape of Ireland, I realise I have hardly scratched the surface of this part of the northeast. After a few days of fairy stories, legends, underground passages, castles, sheep and caves, mixed with hiking, paddleboarding and beaches, I get that “only in Ireland” feeling again – and I wouldn't have it any other way. 🍀



Top, Christina and Simon O'Hara run the beautifully bright and welcoming Coopershill House; above, bottle popping at White Hag Brewery and, right, a misty day in Knocknarea.

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SLIGO



EAT

ORGANIC A lively spot in the charming village of Easkey, bread and pastries at **Pudding Row** are baked daily by owner Dervla James, and fruit and veg come from local organic farms. Breakfast dishes include spiced, slow-roast vine tomatoes and cannellini beans on toast with avocado and fried egg, dressed leaves and seeds, or, at lunchtime, try a roast pear, bacon and Hegarty's Irish cheddar sandwich with organic leaves – just make sure to leave room for cake. (Main Street, Easkey, 096 49794; puddingrow.ie)

LIVELY If you have worked up an appetite exploring, **Áit Eile**, a bustling spot near the seafront in Enniscrone, is the place to go. Favourite dishes include The Black Pig of Enniscrone, incorporating a free-range pork fillet, carrots, cider and mustard cream, or seafood linguine with prawns, mussels, crab claws and clams. (The Square, Enniscrone, 096 37222; aitteile.com)

EXPERIENTIAL If foodie adventures are your thing, check out the **Sligo Food Trail** (sligofoodtrail.ie) for everything from jam-making and bread baking classes to foraging workshops and seaweed walks. Or sign up for **Appetite for Adventure** on Lough Talt with a morning of activity followed by lunchtime treats, such as oysters and Guinness bread, smoked salmon, cheeses, pastries and local elderberry cordial at Cawley's in Tubbercurry, who can also provide picnic hampers by order (Emmet Street, Tubbercurry, 071 918 5025; cawleysguesthouse.ie).

SLEEP

HISTORIC At the end of a long driveway, with old trees and sheep in parkland along the way, **Temple House** is a luxury country house with plenty of history. Indoors, rooms are cosy with old family portraits and antiques, while the 400-hectare estate includes castle ruins and a lake. There's a warm welcome

from the Perceval family and dinners are a convivial affair at one large dining table. B&B from €175. (Ballymote, 087 997 6045; templehouse.ie)

COUNTRY HOUSE Another beautiful, luxury country house escape, **Coopershill House** has cosy reception rooms, comfy bedrooms, lots of character with antiques, such as grandfather clocks, and amazing cooking – most of the fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers for the table are grown in the garden. Outdoors, there's 200 hectares of woodlands and deer pastures to explore or, inside, cosy up to an open fire. B&B from €202. (Riverstown, 071 916 5108; coopershill.com)

COSY **Coilldara House** is a well-appointed, modern country house with bright sitting rooms to relax in and plenty of thoughtful touches for guests, such as walk-in closets, TVs and DVD players. Owner Patricia and her husband Roger are also a mine of information on what to

see and do in the area, so leave plenty of time to plan over breakfast. B&B from €90. (Ballina Road, Tubbercurry, 071 918 6095; coilldarahouse.ie)

DRINK

CHARACTER As well as a cosy drinking spot with a bar full of character, **The Fox's Den** in Keash is a good place to try brews from local craft brewery Lough Gill. Pub owner Patrick Ward is abundant with highlights of the area and of the Caves of Keash in particular – the pub has an adjoining visitor centre and runs guided tours of said caves. (Keash, 071 918 3408; thefoxsden.ie)

OLD WORLD A charming thatched pub, **The Beach Bar** at Aughris beach is the perfect refreshment or food stop after a walk around Aughris Head or across Dunmorán Strand. Sit outside or indoors by the fire, while trying out local craft beers on tap, including Poet's Pen and Lost Armada from Lough Gill Brewery. (Aughris Head, Templeboy, 071 917 6465; thebeachbarsligo.com)

CRAFTY The mission of the brewers at the **White Hag Brewery** has been to resurrect ancient Irish ales from 2,000 years ago, when a prominent ingredient in the brewing process was heather tops, rather than hops. Their signature craft brews include Irish Heather Sour ale, which contains peat-smoked barley and heather flowers, or Meabh Rua Irish Bog Ale, a double Irish red ale. Tours and tastings by appointment. (Ballymote, 085 872 2989; thewhitehag.com)

SMART TIP

CEREBRAL Find out more about the area at **South Sligo Tourism** (southsligotourism.ie) and for more on the county's archaeology and history, the **Sligo Field Club** (sligofieldclub.com) runs a programme of lectures and guided field-trips focusing on archaeology, natural history and heritage. There is a lecture on October 26 at Sligo Institute of Technology: "The Arrangement of Space in the Irish Passage Tomb Tradition – Monuments in the West and East".