

SUNDAY

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INGEAR

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

Have you got what it takes to be a lighthouse keeper? | p17



FAST FEASTS

Clodhna Prendergast serves up some tasty and wholesome meals that won't take hours to prepare | p12

CARIBBEAN HIDEAWAYS

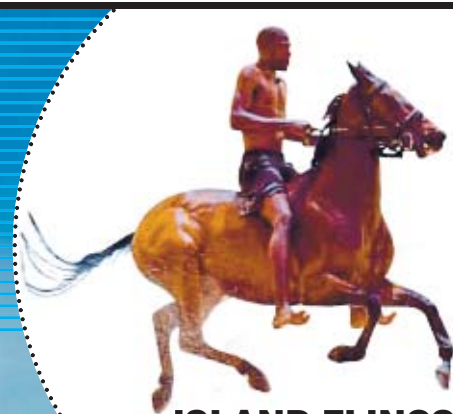
We pick the best places to go for romance, family, glamour and adventure | p26

PLOUGH FACTOR

City-slicker Graeme Lennox tries tractor football at Ireland's biggest festival – the National Ploughing Championships | p31

TRAVEL

Yvonne Gordon



ISLAND FLINGS

From adventure breaks, to family fun, we pick the best of the Caribbean

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Step in the light direction

As lighthouses open to the public, visitors can see if they would take a shine to life as a lightkeeper, writes Yvonne Gordon

We milked the goats once a day, usually in the evening. Milk would only last a couple of days, so it was great to have the goats. They were well looked after."

Former lighthouse keeper Eddie Fitzgerald is telling me about life on Ballycotton Island in east Cork. I have visited the village on the mainland before, but the little green island and its black lighthouse tower always had an air of mystery, as the island had been out of bounds for visitors — until now. Fitzgerald teaches me about the life of a lightkeeper. He tells us about the paraffin oil-powered freezer where they used to store extra meat or milk before the days of electric fridges, and about the 10 goats. "I could be here all day telling you stories about the goats," he laughs.

Ballycotton lighthouse was first lit in 1851 and for the following 141 years, until the lighthouse was automated, lightkeepers lived on the island. For the first 50 years, two families at a time lived on the island — the children were rowed across to school and back — but later it was just the keepers there for a month at a time, with no shore excursions, even though the lighthouse was less than a mile from shore. One used to "chat" with his wife on the mainland every Sunday evening using semaphore signals.

Fitzgerald joined the Commissioners of Irish Lights, which manages lighthouses and their keepers, as a supernumerary assistant keeper in 1966 at the age of 20, and was posted everywhere from the Fastnet rock to Fanad Head in Co Donegal. Life, he says, was never lonely, even at remote stations. "When you'd go to a new station, you'd do so much exploring around the station and the area," he says. "I'd always be checking out the rocks and the



Beam with pride
Fitzgerald was stationed at Ballycotton, above, where 10 goats provided a useful supply of milk



→ caves. Then you'd have your chores, and you'd be learning so much from the keepers."

As a young man stationed at Fanad, he was invited to local dances, but at Ballycotton there was no taking off for the evening. "From the village to the lighthouse is just under a mile. On a fine summer's evening I could sit on the west wall and there'd be music in the hall, the Cliff Palace, and I could hear it, but of course I'd have to stay put," says Eddie.

Ireland has nearly 100 working lighthouses around the coast, some 70 operated by the Commissioners of Irish Lights, the others by local harbour authorities, and it's now possible to visit 12 of them, either for a tour or an overnight stay.

There's something special about visiting a lighthouse, taking a small boat out to an island and climbing the tower, hearing about the unusual and sometimes spartan lifestyle lived by those who kept these beacons alight.

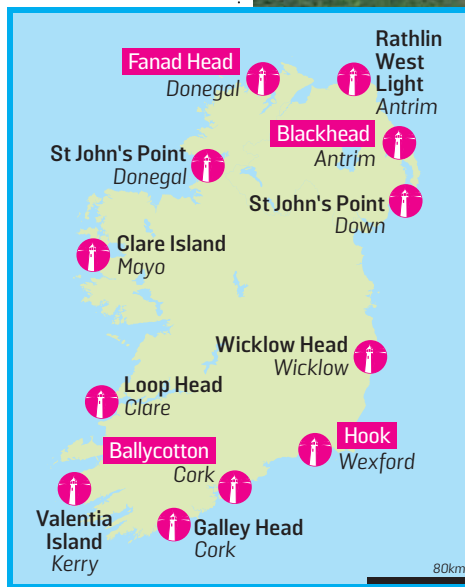
My sense of adventure awakened, next I head for Hook in Co Wexford, where the lighthouse's history dates back 800 years. It's the oldest intact operational lighthouse in the world, but, even before it was built, monks braved the elements to keep a fire burning on the headland.

During a tour of the tower, a hologram of William Marshal, the Earl of Pembroke, who arrived here in the 13th century and had the lighthouse tower built, pops up. Marshal tells us how he married Strongbow's daughter, and is going on about his life when Robbie, our guide, interrupts him. "This fella never stops talking," he laughs. The hologram turns to him, saying, "Excuse me?"

The quirky lighthouse tours are fascinating, but I decide to experience the ultimate escape — staying overnight at one, perched on a cliff, to experience the solitude long after the day visitors have gone home. The sun is setting as I arrive at Fanad Head in Co Donegal. The much-photographed lighthouse has also opened to visitors this year for the first time. Set on a small rocky outcrop, the lighthouse is surrounded by cliffs on three sides, with views of Lough Swilly and the neighbouring Inishowen peninsula as well as the north Atlantic.

The 22-metre-high lighthouse was first lit in 1817 after the HMS Saldanha hit the rocks here in 1811, and 253 lost their lives. My accommodation is in one of three whitewashed cottages at the lighthouse base. As darkness falls, and the tower starts its characteristic pattern of five quick flashes in a row, it's not hard to become absorbed in the surroundings and forget about the

When you'd go to a new station, you'd do so much exploring. I'd always be checking out rocks and caves



Rock on
Fanad Head, with its lighthouse, below left, and Great Pollet arch, below, one of 12 Great Lighthouse locations to visit, left



stresses of daily life. I start planning explorations of the area and the deserted golden beach in the distance. The Northern Lights are sometimes visible here. During my stay, a storm of sheet lightning on the horizon gave a light show just as entertaining as the aurora.

Next morning, on a walk of the Fanad headland, local guide Sean Mullan tells me how Lough Swilly — one of Ireland's few glacial fjords — is called "lake of shadows". Saint Colmcille was said to have killed a monster with 200 eyes here. "This is our cathedral," he adds, pointing to a huge pointed black rock in the centre of a small steep-sided bay.

As we walk towards the sea, Mullan points out tiny rare orchids and bog cotton — fluffs of white cotton at the top of stalks swaying gently in the wind. The air is filled with the cries of seabirds and the clicking of a noisy stonechat as we descend towards the grey cliffs, avoiding the cowpats in the soft boggy ground, as the four-legged perpetrators cast a wary eye on us, the invaders of their field.

At the edge of the cliff, the Great Pollet sea arch comes into view — an immense stone archway just off the shore. Mullan points out a heron flying overhead, and another screaming bird turns out to be a nesting oystercatcher. As we walk down towards the arch, the tide is out, exposing a series of rock pools with piles of brown and vibrant green seaweed.

"This is my sun lounge," says Mullan, indicating the long, flat rocks at the beach. "I come down here for peace and quiet". It's not hard to see why — on a summer's day we see just two other

people on the whole beach. At a glistening sea cave, Mullan often sings for his tours to show off the acoustics.

Back on the road to Fanad Head, there's a hand-painted board beside the road: "Carrageen for sale". The moss seaweed, which forms a jelly when boiled, is popular for desserts, and an elderly local man collects and sells it.

At Ballyhiernan Bay, a few miles southwest of Fanad lighthouse, a stretch of pristine golden sand is empty for miles, but for a single surfer. The sea colours echo the Caribbean, with lines of green and blue on white sand, and I take to the waves to try out the surf. The clear water, though not a match for Caribbean temperatures, isn't cold. There's a flawless sandy bottom and waves break gently against the shore. Luke Daly, who runs Adventure One Surf School here, says that because of its position, the beach has waves nearly every day and is ideal for lessons.

Back indoors at the lighthouse after an exhilarating day outdoors, it's time to check out the contents of the Carnegie box — a wooden library box each lighthouse has in its sitting room, originally provided for the lighthouse keepers. The Commissioners of Irish Lights borrowed books from the Carnegie libraries in Dublin and rotated them between stations. As well as books, there's lighthouse information, puzzles and games.

I discover an even more plentiful supply of books when I arrive at Blackhead lighthouse in Co Antrim, on the edge of Belfast Lough and at the →



➔ Belfast end of the Causeway Coastal Route. Here, in the cosy front room, there are rows of old books on every subject, from needlecraft to politics. There are sea views from the huge sash windows, a fireplace, binoculars and comfy sofas in the sitting room of the property, one of three accommodation options to rent in former lightkeeper houses at Blackhead.

Below the lighthouse it's possible to walk part of a coastal path built towards the end of the 19th century, which passes sea caves and coves and McCartney's cave, named after the "hedge" schoolteacher who came here in 1804 and set up home. His sleeping quarters were in an upper section at the back of the cave, which stayed dry even when high tide flooded the cave twice a day.

When the lighthouse was built in 1902, the cliff path was extended up towards it, and the two have shared their history for 114 years. That's the thing about lighthouses in Ireland — they are all connected to their surrounds, to communities and to each other, in different ways. You can come here to disconnect and enjoy a peaceful break at a remote location, but at each lighthouse I found fascinating nature, history, storytellers and lots to do. Next one I go to, I might just stay long enough to read the books in the Carnegie box.

Tours of Ballycotton lighthouse cost €20



Homely glow
At Blackhead lighthouse there is accommodation in former lightkeepers' housing that is available to rent

for adults and €10 for children; Hook lighthouse are €6/€3.50. Accommodation at Fanad lighthouse costs from €237 for two nights' self-catering (tours cost €8/€5). Blackhead lighthouse costs from €327 for three nights' self-catering. For information on lighthouses to visit, including Wicklow Head where you can stay in the lighthouse tower, see greatlighthouses.com. For surfing at Fanad, see adventureone.net; for walking tours, walktalkireland.com

Ireland's great lighthouses

Ballycotton, Co Cork For power this lighthouse depended on a cable under the water between the island and the pier.

Blackhead, Co Antrim In the houses here are remnants of lighthouse life, including a whistle pipe system that was used to wake up the next man for the watch.

Clare Island, Co Mayo Clare Island's lighthouse had an incandescent light that flashed every 5 seconds (visible for 23 nautical miles) until its closure in 1965.

Fanad Head, Co Donegal In 1917, the British navy ship SS Laurentic hit two mines at Lough Swilly, with the loss of more than 300 lives. Her secret cargo included 3,211 gold bars worth £5m (more than €410m today) — 22 bars are still believed to be down with the wreck.

Galley Head, Co Cork The lightkeepers at Galley Head would have seen the Lusitania go down in 1915, and witnessed British and German vessels pass by during both world wars.

Hook, Co Wexford William Marshal, of the Knights Templar, built the tower here in the 13th century, to protect his interests in the shipping trade.

Loop Head, Co Clare There has been a beacon here since 1670, when the signal would have been the fire of a coal-

burning brazier on top of the roof of a cottage, part of which is still visible.

Rathlin West Light, Co Antrim An "upside-down" lighthouse with its light perched on top of the cliff, it was built between 1912 and 1917, with the help of a specially constructed pier and railway.

St John's Point, Co Down The Titanic did some of its initial sea trials in the waters around St John's, which is referenced by Van Morrison in his song Coney Island. The father of Irish playwright Brendan Behan was contracted to paint lighthouses across Ireland and enlisted his son to paint St John's Point in 1950.

St John's Point, Co Donegal In 1588, storms drove the Spanish Armada off course to the west of Ireland. Up to 24 of its ships were wrecked, including three on nearby Streedagh Strand.

Valentia Island, Co Kerry The fossilised footprints of a dinosaur can be traced in the rock, and on a clear day you'll spot Skellig Michael (now of Star Wars fame) and the Blasket Islands on the horizon.

Wicklow Head, Co Wicklow The twin lighthouses were built so that mariners would no longer confuse Wicklow Head with Howth Head, north Dublin, or Hook Head in Co Wexford.

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