LEAPS & BOUNDS

Join Inishowen’s fun-loving, outdoorsy set who have found Ireland’s most northerly headland to be full of adventure and charm.

WORDS YVONNE GORDON
PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID SCIORDA
Do you want to try and go through that channel again?” asks John. “No,” I think to myself, but I still follow him over to the rock. We’re at Fort Dunree in Co Donegal, on the rugged west side of Inishowen, Ireland’s most northerly peninsula. Inishowen – the name comes from “Eoghan’s Island” in Irish – is also the start of the Wild Atlantic Way’s coastal route and I’m here for a few days to explore this area at the very top of Ireland.

I’ve just been feeling defeated by the ocean’s power but I realise that it was probably more of a human-powered error. Myself and John Harkin, a guide at Inish Adventures (inishadventures.com), set off earlier from a tiny pier under the fort in our kayaks for some gentle paddling around the bay. Dunree is near the mouth of Lough Swilly, the glacial fjord between the Inishowen and Fanad peninsulas.

The water is calm and being right under the cliffs and seeing how the rock is layered is fascinating. Some black guillemots show off with stunt water landings nearby, while a cormorant stands motionless on a rock. When we navigate a small channel between the rocks, that’s where it all goes slightly wrong. I have trouble directing the kayak through the gap and let’s just say that I perform an expert parking job by elevating the front of the kayak onto a rock. However, there’s no damage and I am soon back on the water again. Once I’ve a better handle on steering, I have another go at the channel – this time passing smoothly between the rocks.

Things get interesting when we paddle to some sea caves under the cliffs, which are accessible when the conditions are right. From the outside, the caves look dark but as we go in, the rocks in the walls and roof light up with red and green. It’s an amazing perspective to get on sea cliffs and it’s tempting to float here for a few hours.
but there is so much to explore in the area. I am soon on the road north driving through Mamore Gap, where grazing sheep have scenic views down over the lough. I drive towards Malin Head, Ireland’s most northerly point. Here, guide Brian Whelan (donegalclimbing.ie) takes me through the area’s layers of history and how this is where Ireland’s geological timeline starts. We’re sitting at Banba’s Crown, looking at Inishtrahythm, a small island offshore, where the rocks are estimated to be 1,780 million years old (by comparison, the Giant’s Causeway to the east is just a young pebble at 60 million years old).

From here, we can see sea stacks and a lighthouse. It seems remote but there is a Napoleonic lookout tower and an old telegraph and radio signal station from where Guglielmo Marconi sent some of the first radio messages to ships in 1902. An “Eire” sign on the cliff was a signpost for planes during World War II and, more recently, the area was used as a location for Star Wars: The Last Jedi (this is where the Millennium Falcon was built).

We walk to the end of the trail at Hell’s Hole, seeing oystercatchers, shags and gannets on the rocks, admiring purple sea thrift and ox eye daisies and hearing tales of passing basking sharks and dolphins; the gulls echoing the tales far below in the rocky gorges.

It’s no surprise that Malin Head was a setting for another galaxy, as the area sometimes has an otherworldly feeling. On a road in what seems the middle...
It all seems exotic – surf boards, sun, turquoise waters, golden sands and a barbecue ...

Doagh Famine Village (doaghfaminevillage.com) on Doagh Isle is a fascinating museum telling of the economic and social history of Ireland from the 1800s up to the present day, through a series of clever exhibits. Pat Doherty, who grew up in one of the cottages, explains everything about the landlord/tenant set-up and how Ireland’s recent bank bail-out echoed history. It leaves myself and the Americans on my tour – whose ancestors emigrated from here – lots to think about.

On the east side of Malin Head, I stop to admire Kinnagoe Bay, sheltered between two headlands and, further along, Inishowen Head. The harbour at Greencastle is busy with fishing boats and regular ferries across to Magilligan in Northern Ireland. There are traditional boats from the area in the Inishowen Maritime Museum & Planetarium (inishowenmaritime.com) on the harbour front.

My last stop is Redcastle, which faces Lough Foyle, the waterway between Donegal and Northern Ireland. As the sun sets, the hills on the opposite shore take on a gilded hue and, later that night, I see the glow in the sky from the lights of Derry and it prepares me for a return from a magical few days on the “Island of Eoghan” to urban life.

Cara would like to thank AVIS for their assistance. For the very best car rental deals, visit CARS.AERLINGUSCARS.COM.
TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

EAT

CRAIC Traditional pub The Rusty Nail, not far from Clonmany, is where to tuck into local seafood such as chowder, prawns and seabass - the chef’s brothers are both fishermen. Steaks and burgers also feature on the menu and it’s the type of place where you’ll want to accompany your food with a creamy pint of stout, moving into the front bar afterwards for the live music session. (Crossconnell, Clonmany, Co Donegal, 074 937 6116)

SEASHORE It’s all things kelp at the healthy Wild Strands Cafe in Malin Head - where cakes, brownies, scones and breads have a pinch of local seaweed from West Donegal. Chef/owner William McElhinney serves fresh flatbreads cooked in a wood-fire oven, with toppings such as tasty spiced beef with onion marmalade, or goat’s cheese with beetroot hummus. (Malin Head Community Centre, Co Donegal, 085 105 3893; wildstrands.com)

AWARDS Local man Kieran Doherty bought an old hay barn, took his grandmother’s chowder recipe, added a Spanish twist, went on to win the all-Ireland cookoff and then the 2017 World Seafood Chowder Championship in Rhode Island, USA - and the rest is history. As well as the obligatory chowder to chow down at Nancy’s Barn, there are delicious seafood platters and hot dishes - and you’ll usually get a greeting from Kieran himself. Open until 6pm daily, and late Monday and Friday. (Ballyliffin, Co Donegal, 074 937 6556; nancysbarn.ie)

FARM Another country house, this time set on a working farm outside the town of Carndonagh, Riversdale Country House is a peaceful countryside escape at the end of a long driveway, where you’ll most likely be greeted by donkeys in the front paddock. You can also spot ducks, geese, cows and pet pigs along the way and children can interact with the animals. B&B from €85 per room. (Carndonagh, Co Donegal, 074 937 4017; riversdalecountryhouse.com)

STAY

CHARM You’ll get a warm welcome at Glen House, set in a quiet, country spot outside Clonmany. It dates from the late 18th century but has been charmingly modernised inside. There’s a cute craft shop and ice-cream parlour in the courtyard and afternoon tea is available by appointment. Make time to walk the kilometre to the Glenevin Waterfall, beside the house. B&B from €85 per room. (Strait, Clonmany, Co Donegal, 074 937 6745; glenhouse.ie)

LIVELY The Front Bar at McGrory’s Hotel is where all the action is (the Star Wars crew dropped in here for a sing-song during filming). It’s decorated with timber salvaged from old dock pilings and the open fire gives it a cosy atmosphere; regular live traditional music sessions turn it into a buzzy spot. There’s also a bar menu for casual dining or book in to the Front Room restaurant on the other side of the hotel for something more substantial. (Culdaff, Co Donegal, 074 937 9104; mcgrorys.ie)

STYLISH Popular for its cocktails and bar menu, The Treehouse Bar and Restaurant is a stylish and spacious spot just outside the town of Muff on the southerly end of the peninsula. Tuck into bar food or reserve a table in the separate restaurant section. Don’t miss the Bog Hopper Beer from a local microbrewery – there’s a selection of craft beers served on draft or in bottles. (Ardmore, Muff, Co Donegal, 074 938 4873; treehousebar.ie)

SMART TIPS

Surfing and kayaking locations on Inishowen depend on weather conditions on the day – try horse riding along one of the peninsula’s beaches with Tullagh Bay Equestrian Centre (tullaghybayequesitrian.ie). For more info about what to see and do in the area, visit wildatlanticway.com.

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