



YVONNE GORDON: ALAMY

# Cape crusader

Covid rules are pronounced on the southernmost Gaeltacht island, where the locals don't mind if you mangle their language, writes *Yvonne Gordon*

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WAGON ZEAL  
ROLL UP AND  
EXPLORE IRELAND'S  
GREAT OUTDOORS



**T**he Spanish word *sí* escapes my lips before I can catch it – I meant to say “sea” as *Gaeilge*, of course. I’m on Cape Clear Island, eight miles off the coast of Co Cork, and Bríd, the *bean an tí* of my Airbnb, is giving me some instructions in Irish and I am trying to say yes.

This is a bit of an experiment – it’s my first trip after lockdown and, with 74 days of online Irish language learning under my belt, I’m trying to have a conversation with someone. Like many people, I had forgotten all the Irish I learnt in school, so I saw the lockdown as a chance to brush up on my language skills.

Amazingly, I can understand most of Bríd’s instructions about the *bosca bruscair* and what is *suas an staighre*, but

when I try to answer her in Irish, a word from my other language, Spanish, slips from my tongue.

Cape Clear is Ireland’s southernmost inhabited Gaeltacht island, with a population of about 120, and although you often hear the locals speaking Irish, everyone converses in English too, of course. The island is almost 5km long and about 1.5km wide, and there are regular ferries from Baltimore (45 minutes) and Schull (30 minutes).

Looking at a map of the area, I spot a Quarantine Island nearby – aptly named for these times – but thankfully the ferry does not drop us tourists from the mainland there on the way out.

Arriving at Cape Clear’s pier, I feel like I’m in another world. It’s a sunny day and

the water in the north harbour is that blue-green colour you see in photos of tropical islands – so clear, you can see patches of seaweed on the sandy bottom.

Families are having picnics at tables, a small queue is forming outside An Siopa Beag and a few people are waiting – two metres apart – among colourful flowerpots near a blue food truck. After the months of lockdown, it’s great to see people out and about enjoying themselves again.

With plenty of bird life and the chance to spot passing whales, basking sharks, dolphins and seals out at sea, plus several walking trails and hills, Cape Clear is a haven for those who enjoy outdoor pursuits, and it’s easy to observe social

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Cape Clear Island, top, has a picture-postcard harbour



# Sunday Travel

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distancing rules here. Some Irish islands were nervous about reopening to tourists, but those in west Cork have been welcoming visitors back – with caution, of course, and a few new Covid-19 rules.

My first hike on the island is up the steep hill to my accommodation. My room overlooks the south harbour, which has clear turquoise-coloured water, yachts moored in the bay under blue skies, and a backdrop of green hills. Making the scene perfect are two goats, Timmy and Nibbles, in a small field and a bleating lamb called Covi in the garden.

In the afternoon, I take the ferry for the Fastnet Rock Tour of the lighthouse. It is incredible to see the lonely rock looming on the horizon, then the lighthouse details coming into focus as we near the building. An audio recording tells us how the lighthouse was built in 1853 and about the lives of the lightkeepers.

The next day I explore Cape Clear's steep hills, with their rewarding views at the top. Covid-19 restrictions mean many attractions are closed on my trip, including the Heritage Centre, Irish College, Holiday Hostel and two of the three pubs, but initiatives such as the Cape Clear farmers' market are bringing the island back to life.

The outdoor market near the harbour is in full swing one afternoon. Stalls are stocked with tasty home bakes and preserves, homegrown produce, woolly knits, colourful children's clothes and even handmade face masks. Visitors can paint pottery while island musicians add to the atmosphere.

Stall holder Rhiannon McCann, who moved here to be with her parents, says that there have been fewer tourists on the island. "It just felt like an extended winter," she adds. McCann is selling preserves and syrups made from foraged fuchsia, hibiscus and rosehip.

It's probably not that difficult to find fragrant ingredients such as these because the island's roads and trails are lined with colourful wildflowers, and there are rows of wild pink roses along the hedges. Cape Clear Island Distillery also makes good use of local ingredients in its 3 Sq Miles gin, such as honeysuckle and fuchsia, and *laminaria digitata* seaweed harvested from the shore. Although the distillery temporarily stopped production because of the coronavirus, it recently won two awards in London and San Francisco, and there are plans to build a bigger distillery and visitor centre.

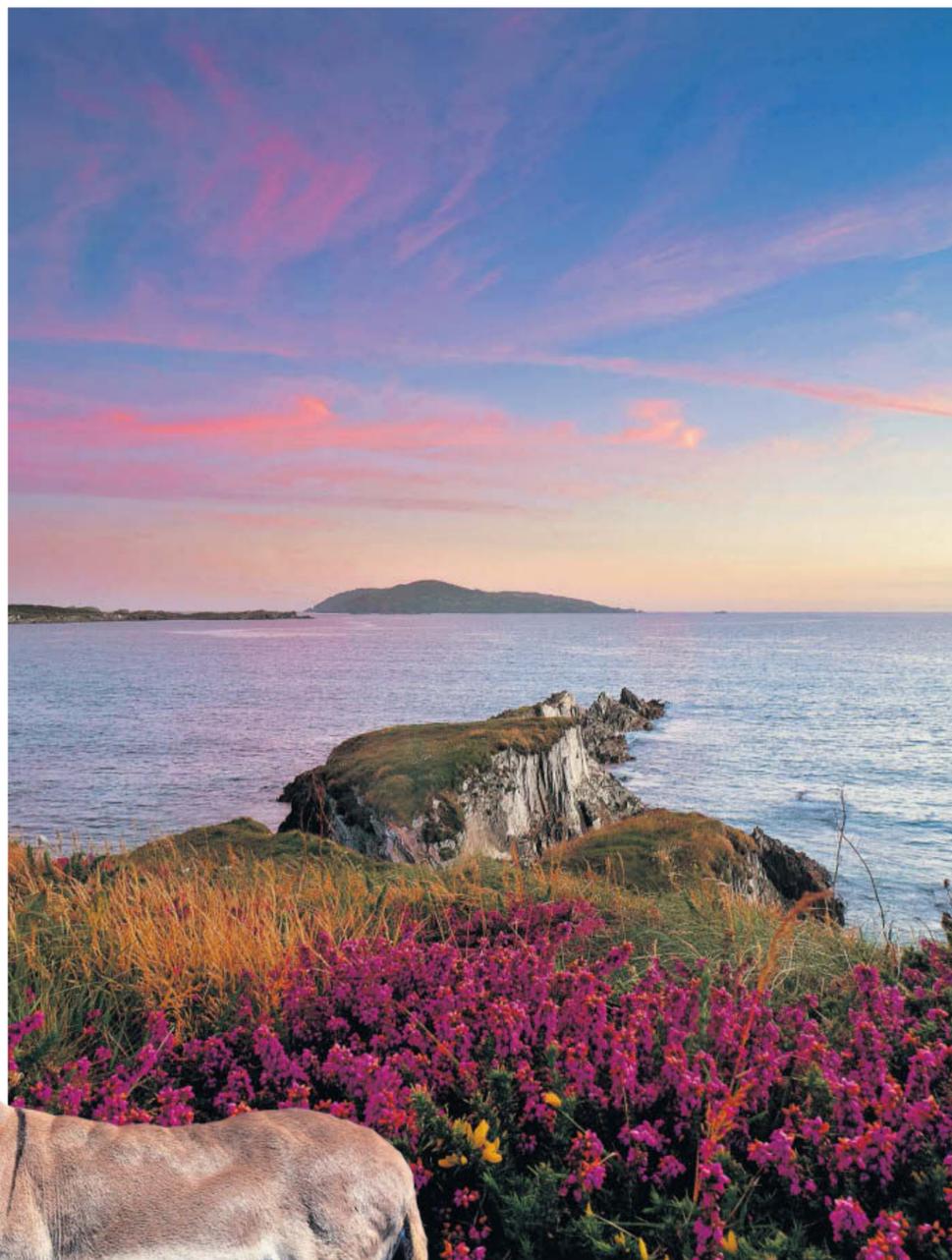
I pop into Cleire Goats farm for some goat's milk ice cream and get to meet some of the herd: Boi, Alannah, herd leader Tulsi, and Hazel, the baby. Back at the harbour, Mary Leonard sells the goat's milk ice cream plus goat's cheese and sausages at her food truck, along with scampi and chips, breakfast baps and burgers. She has lived on Cape Clear all her life. "This year has been strange, but you just go day by day," Leonard says.

"I love what I am doing – meeting and helping people."

Island life is quiet and relaxed. The weather is mostly sunny, but on my last day a low mist and rain descend, giving the island a spooky atmosphere. My attempts to speak in Irish are just as foggy, but I hear some lovely local expressions, such as a favourite from Niamh Ní Dhrisceoil of Cape Clear distillery: "Pé áit a mbíim, bíonn mo chroí i gcónaí i gCléire." (Wherever I am, my heart is always in Cape.)

On Sherkin Island, about 10 minutes from Baltimore, it's another tranquil scene as the ferry arrives at the pier,

**“ Covid-19 restrictions mean many attractions are closed, but initiatives are bringing the island back to life**



**Clockwise from right: Cape Clear can be seen from Sherkin Island; north harbour; islands are home to many animals**



**“ The island's roads and trails are lined with colourful wildflowers**

which is overlooked by the ruins of a friary. The island is home to many artists and it is less hilly than Cape Clear, with an abundance of sandy beaches. Exploring the island, I take up residence on Silver Strand under a hot sun for a few hours, enjoying a refreshing sea dip.

My home for the night is Sherkin North Shore, with a beautiful setting on the water's edge overlooking Roaringwater Bay. Each of the six en suite rooms has its own front door, which is ideal for those who do not want to mix with hotel crowds, and there's a daytime-only cafe in the garden. As we tuck into a family-style dinner in the evening, owner Mike tells me about the island's artists and we watch the sun set from the big windows.

During lockdown, the islanders started gathering for music sessions and, luckily, my visit coincides with one of these gigs. It is a special experience to hear live music, although I move outside after a short while to maintain the two-metre rule, and enjoy the beautiful surrounds and night sky.

My last island stop is Heir (or Hare)

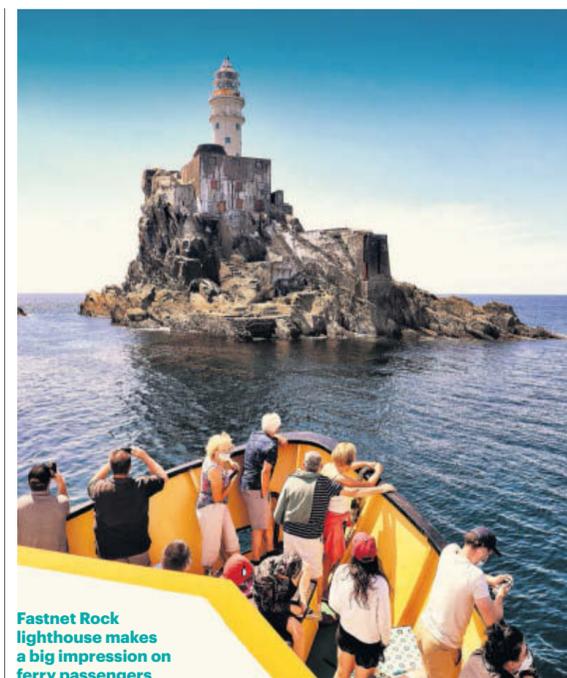
Island, just a four-minute ferry crossing from Cunnamore pier. Its celebrated restaurant, Island Cottage, is closed for the season, but you can drop into the adjacent gallery to admire the artwork of owner and chef John Desmond.

I take a trip around Roaringwater Bay with Heir Island Sailing School. We see castles, ruins, deserted islands and pristine beaches, and I dream of owning a private island – until we pass Horse Island and I find out it recently sold for €5.5m. After sailing, I have worked up an appetite for a mouth-watering pizza at the Pizzeiria restaurant at Roaring Water Lodge, my retreat for the night.

After all this island magic, my final stop on the way home is Atlantic Sea Kayaking, for a starlight trip to see the area's bioluminescence (glow-in-the-dark plankton). As we set off into Castlehaven Bay, our eyes adjust to the darkness.

There's a crescent of a new moon and the sky is filled with stars. Our guide Jim Kennedy tells me that what looks like a firefly darting across the sky in a straight line is the International Space Station. We hear all sorts of birds, too, and pass a ghostly boat graveyard, as we swirl our paddles in the bioluminescent sparkles.

I did not expect to experience so much in the dark. It's a magical end to the trip, and as the locals say on Cape Clear (and I would say myself if I could speak Irish): "An rud is annamh is iontach." The rare thing is a wonderful thing.



**Fastnet Rock lighthouse makes a big impression on ferry passengers**

**THE LOWDOWN**

Cape Clear ferry (€18 return) and Fastnet Rock Tour (€40), capeclearferries.com; Sherkin Island ferry (€12 return), sherkinisland.eu; Heir Island ferry (€6 return), heirislandferry.com; Cape Clear farmer's market (Wednesdays 1.30pm-3.30pm and some weekends); day sail from Heir Island is €70pp, heirisland.ie; starlight kayaking is from €65pp, atlanticseakayaking.com.

**WHERE TO STAY**

Airbnb from €50 single or €70 double (minimum two nights), capeclear-oileanchleire.com; Cape Clear cottages from €325 a week, capeclearisland.com; Sherkin North Shore (€45pps; dinner from €20pp, sherkinnorthshore.com); Roaring Water Lodge double rooms are €65pp (minimum two nights), pizzas from €10, roaringwaterlodge.com.

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