

Wild Atlantic Way

Spend a few days exploring the beaches, bays, islands and highlands along this diverse coastal drive down the west of Ireland. Yvonne Gordon gives her insider tips

Wild, rugged headlands that face the full force of the Atlantic's waves. A scatter of offshore islands that are home to forts, lighthouses, pirate castles and holy wells. Stretches of golden sand that curve into wide bays or tuck into secret coves, backed by steep cliffs, rolling dunes or flat slabs of fossil-embedded rock. Welcome to the Wild Atlantic Way, one of the world's great drives, which runs 2,500km along the west coast of Ireland from Kinsale in County Cork to the dramatic cliffs of Inishowen in County Donegal.

If you only have a few days, start at a mid-point such as Galway. You can either drive south to explore the peninsulas of Cork and Kerry or travel north for the raw landscapes of the west and north-west. The five-day trip recommended here will take you from the bays and bogland of Connemara, over mountain passes to County Mayo, into the surfing waves of Sligo and onto the sea cliffs of Donegal.

Leisurely days in these parts start with an Irish fry and pots of tea, before hikes, boat trips and

hill climbs, punctuated with bowls of seafood chowder and homemade brown bread wherever you stop. You can cycle an old railway line, go horseriding on the beach, try kayaking, diving or fishing, or explore an array of castles and stately homes. And you might end a day on the road with a few pints of Guinness in a tiny pub in a village you'd never heard of, while the music takes your feet away on a reel. All along the way you will see how the power of the Atlantic Ocean has shaped the coast and its people.

No two days are the same. There will be times when the sky is bright, the earth is glowing rich green and a warm beach and its sparkling turquoise waters tempt you in for a refreshing dip; later, the same place might be whipped into a fury, with wind, waves and sand blowing into your face as if they're trying to remove a layer of your skin. Sometimes these two extremes might be witnessed within the same hour.

If you're driving, always be ready to stop at a viewpoint. Bring a map to find all those tiny routes around remote headlands. But most of all, bring your sense of adventure.

Ask a local

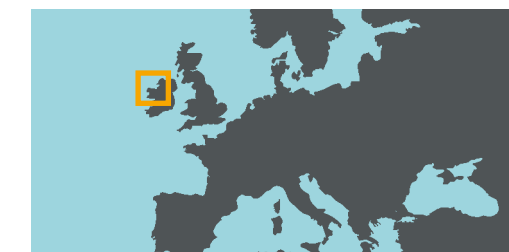
"I recommend seeing Sliabh Liag cliffs from the water on a boat cruise and don't miss the coastal drive from Killybegs to Kilcar. Visit the folk village at Glencolmcille and there's a beach called Silver Strand with about 360 steps down. Don't miss the seafood – squid, scampi, cod and haddock. We get it straight off the boats so you can't get any fresher."

Mairéad Anderson, owner, Killybegs Seafood Shack. Visitors can take a boat tour from Killybegs to the Sliabh Liag cliffs.



Life light (clockwise from this) The building of Fanad Lighthouse was proposed following the wrecking of HMS Saldanha in 1811; Connemara; the Cliffs of Moher

53.2707° N, 9.0568° W



ATLANTIC WAY IN FIVE DAYS...

Day 1: Culture in Galway

Start in this lively city: stroll the alleys around **Quay Street**, take a food tour, eat oysters and listen to live music. Then drive along the coast roads to **Clifden**, stopping at beaches – try Blue Flag-awarded **Trá an Dóilín (Coral Strand)** near Carraroe – and **Derrigimlagh Bog**, where pilots Alcock and Brown crash landed (uninjured) after the first non-stop transatlantic flight in 1919.

Day 2: Westport

From Clifden, travel north to **Killary Harbour**, Ireland's longest fjord, which you can cruise by boat. Travel on to Westport, via **Clew Bay** and **Croagh Patrick** mountain. In **Westport**, tour 18th-century Westport House and visit Matt Molloy's pub for live traditional music.

Day 3: Achill Island

Drive or cycle off-road to Ireland's largest island, connected to the mainland by a bridge. Take the Atlantic Drive to **Keel** and on to sheltered **Keem Strand** for a stroll or swim. Try kite-surfing with Pure Magic Watersports, explore the deserted village at **Sliabh Mór** and visit the ruined tower of **Kildavnet Castle**, once home to pirate queen Grace O'Malley.

Day 4: Sligo surfing

Tackle the waves at **Strandhill** and then pop into Shells Café for mussels and fries or to Voya for a reviving seaweed bath. Hike up **Knocknarea** – its large summit cairn is a Neolithic tomb (and burial place of the mythological Queen Méabh). If the surf's up, head to **Mullaghmore**, to watch big-wave riders in action.

Day 5: Donegal sea cliffs

Drive along Donegal Bay to **Sliabh Liag**, where huge sea cliffs plunge 601m into the sea – hike the Pilgrim's Path for panoramic views. If you're staying on, continue to peninsulas such as **Fanad** and **Inishowen**, where you'll find **Malin Head**, Ireland's northernmost point. ▶



NEED TO KNOW

International dialling code: +353

Currency: Euro (€)

Getting there: Shannon Airport and Ireland West Airport Knock are the main hubs; there are smaller airports at Sligo and Donegal. Alternatively, fly or take a ferry to Dublin; Galway is a two-hour drive. Trains link Dublin to Galway, Westport, Ballina and Sligo.

Getting around: The main towns and cities are well served by buses but you'll need to have your own transport to explore the coast. Some bike hire operators also provide luggage transfer services.

Weather: Conditions can be variable. Bring warm layers and a waterproof no matter what the season.

Food tours: There are plenty of ways to sample local produce. Try Galway Food Tours (www.galwayfoodtours.com), Mayo's Gourmet Greenway (www.mulrannyparkhotel.ie) or a coastal walk and tasting in Connemara (www.mungomurphyseaweed.com). For farmers markets, see www.countrymarkets.ie.

Further information:

www.discoverireland.ie
www.wildatlanticway.com
www.irishrail.ie
www.buseireann.ie



Lake supreme
 Derryclare Lough sits below the Twelve Bens mountain range and the 16km Glencoaghan Horseshoe, one of Ireland's classic hill hikes



Don't miss...

Outdoors

Connemara National Park 2,000 hectares of bogland, grassland, forests and mountains, where wildlife ranges from the Connemara pony to peregrine falcons. Try the 8km Diamond Hill trail for coastal views. www.connemaranationalpark.ie

Clare Island A peaceful spot at the entrance to Clew Bay, once home to 16th-century pirate Grace O'Malley. Stay overnight at Clare Island Lighthouse. www.clareisland.info

Céide Fields and sea stacks See how 6,000-year-old walls, dwellings and tombs were preserved under blanket bog. Don't miss nearby Downpatrick Head to see the 45m-high Dún Briste sea stack. www.ceidefields.com

Sheepdog demonstrations See how skilled dogs round up their charges from the slopes, the cliffs and fields. www.killarysheepfarm.com or www.facebook.com/atlanticsheepdogs

Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery Take a tour to learn about the megalithic standing stones, forts and tombs (pictured left) and what their discovery tells us about Ireland's history. www.heritageireland.ie

Indoors

National Museum of Ireland: Country Life Explore the exhibits, including the huge Folklife collection, which gives insight into the Irish way of life between 1850 and 1950. www.museum.ie

Lissadell House Historic house and gardens overlooking Sligo Bay, the childhood home of politician and revolutionary Countess Markievicz and her sister, the suffragist and poet Eva Gore-Booth. www.lissadellhouse.com

Lough Gill Brewery Discover what goes into Lost Armada IPA or Chocolate Ox stout. Add on a boat tour of Lough Gill, beloved by poet WB Yeats. www.loughgillbrewery.com

Glencolmcille Folk Village Fascinating thatched cottages in a remote Donegal village, with artefacts showing traditional life from the 18th to the 20th century (pictured top right). www.glenfolkvillage.com

Ardara This heritage town is the place to buy traditional Donegal tweed and knitwear – drop into Donegal Designer Makers for beautiful local crafts, jewellery and photography. www.facebook.com/donegaldesignermaker

Shutterstock: Alamy, ValRobus



Stay here...

Luxury

Ashford Castle
 This 800-year-old castle offers the ultimate in five-star pampering. It sits within 350 acres of neat gardens and bird-filled woodland on the shores of Lough Corrib in Cong, County Galway. Walk the grounds with the Irish wolfhounds and take the daily boat trip on the lough from the hotel's pier. www.ashfordcastle.com



Mid-range

Mulranny Park Hotel
 A lovely spot overlooking Clew Bay and a stop on the Great Western Greenway cycle trail. Unwind after your adventures on Mulranny Beach, a few minutes away, or in the hotel's pool and leisure centre. www.mulrannyparkhotel.ie



Value

Ox Mountain Adventure Camp
 This peaceful spot, 10km from the town of Tubbercurry in County Sligo, offers plenty of fresh air and great views of the Ox Mountains. Accommodation options include an old shepherd's hut, a treehouse, an Irish cottage and a barn with bunkbeds for groups. www.oxmountainadventurecamp.com



4 TOP THINGS TO DO

Walk or cycle among ancient stone walls and church ruins on Inis Mór, one of the three Aran Islands; visit the cliff-edge fort at Dún Aonghasa and the rock formation of Poll na bPéist (the Wormhole). Or try Inishbofin Island, further north, for peaceful walks and good diving. www.aranislands.ie, www.inishbofin.com

Climb Croagh Patrick, Ireland's sacred mountain and pilgrimage site. The views from the 764m-high summit stretch over Clew Bay and its hundreds of islands. The climb takes three to four hours and is rocky and steep in places. www.croagh-patrick.com

Cycle the Great Western Greenway, a 42km off-road trail running along an old railway from Westport to Achill island in County Mayo. The trail passes the villages of Newport and Mulranny, and there are super views of Clew Bay and the Nephin Mountains. Bike (and ebike) hire companies can shuttle you back to your start point or accommodation. www.greenway.ie

Hack along a beach on horseback in County Sligo. Sign up for a gentle one-hour ride between the Atlantic surf and the rolling dunes or for a longer trek across a channel to a private island for a picnic and exploring. All levels are catered for. www.islandviewridingstables.com