



10 wonderful winter walks

Get out hiking and check into cosy places to stay, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

Explore the Ardmore Cliff Walk in Co Waterford and rent the luxurious Cliff Beach House.

Experience Glengarriff Nature Reserve in Co Cork and check into the Eccles Hotel, left.

The Spinc Loop wraps around Glendalough's glacial valley.



AFTER a few days of hibernation over the festive period, this weekend is a good time to stretch your legs and get out into some fresh air again for a pre-new year walk. It's also a good time to make a resolution to see more of Ireland's most scenic hikes and trails, as part of any quests for new year fitness.

We have put together a selection of some of our favourite hikes for this time of year, with the cosiest places to stay nearby.

As some hikes can be exposed in bad weather, we have included more sheltered options. Remember to always wear proper footwear and rainwear, bring warm layers, and stick to the main trails.

1. Experience Glengarriff Nature Reserve, Co Cork

This sheltered glen is a lovely setting for a winter walk, especially on days when inclement weather means that more exposed mountain trails are off limits. Glengarriff means Gleann Gairbh or rugged glen, and the setting of the oak trees on Glengarriff Harbour, with the backdrop of the Cahah mountains, is just spectacular. For a short brisk winter walk, take the easy 1km River Walk which is less than 30

minutes, or extend this to a longer 3km walk to the wild grassland of Big Meadow, which leads on to a woodland trail and past a small lake. The Waterfall walk is another easy .5km addition, with a 15-minute walk to a waterfall on the Canrooska River.

Stay: In a bay view room at the charming Eccles Hotel and Spa, Glengarriff Harbour, Glengarriff, Co Cork. Rooms from €250; reopens February 14. eccleshotel.com

2. Explore the Ardmore Cliff Walk, Co Waterford

This is a nice, easy, and flat 4km trail with gorgeous views of the Waterford coast along the way. It should take around an hour to walk, and there's flora, fauna, and birdlife to see, as well as interesting features. Near the start of the walk is St Declan's Well, which dates back to the 5th century. Further along near Ardmore Head, you can see the old coastguard station and the shipwreck of the Samson.

There's also a Napoleonic-era look-out post from 1867 and a Second World War watch tower. Finish at the 12th-century round tower in the graveyard in Ardmore.

Stay: Rent the exclusive Cliff Beach House,

Ardmore, Co Waterford. It has six bedrooms for 12 guests and costs from €3,000 per night (minimum two nights). cliffbeachhouse.ie

3. Hike the newly reopened Spinc Trail in Wicklow Mountains National Park, Co Wicklow

The Spinc has just reopened after a long-awaited upgrade, so there's a brand new mountain path to enjoy. The walk starts with a steep ascent past Poulannass Waterfall and then runs across the blanket bog to the Spinc ridge. This is where you can see the iconic views down over the Glendalough Valley and the lakes, plus the surrounding Wicklow uplands. On the descent, a rocky trail leads down through the old Miner's Village and back along the lake shore.

You will need an early start in winter months, as the whole 9.7km loop can take four to five hours (depending on how often you stop), but the views are worth it and it's nice to experience this trail off-season while it's not too crowded. You might also spot a deer or two along the way.

Stay: In a deluxe room at the spacious Powerscourt Hotel, Powerscourt, Co Wicklow. Double rooms from €392. powerscourthotel.com



Dunmore House, Clonakilty, West Cork, and, below, Kildare's tranquil Grand Canal Way.



Well maintained trails in Connemara National Park make Diamond Hill accessible year round.



4. Stroll through Dromore Woods, Kenmare, Co Kerry

This is a lovely walk west of Kenmare town on the shores of Kenmare Bay, with both quiet woodlands and a coastal section to enjoy, plus the ruins of Dromore Castle. Dromore Woods is on the edge of the Iveragh peninsula (Ring of Kerry) and part of the Kerry Way passes through here.

For a 10km round trip, start at the Holy Well near Templenoe, taking in the forest trail and going as far as the water for scenic views across the bay, before turning back.

Another dazzling walk in the Kenmare area is Gleninchaquin Park, which has four looped walks for everything from a gentle stroll to a hike, and reopens for the season in March.

Stay: In a room overlooking the water at the cosy and luxurious Sheen Falls Lodge, Kenmare, Co Kerry. Double rooms from €270. sheenfallslodge.ie

5. Walk the Inchydoney Island loop, Co Cork

This circular 5.3km trail starts on the long dune-backed beach at Inchydoney, before leading around

to the back of Inchydoney Island to Clonakilty Harbour.

The walk takes in beautiful coastal views, with wildlife, birdlife, and an old shipwreck on the water's edge along the way. Make sure to do the walk at low tide. Check times in advance. The walk is all flat but it can get muddy and sandy in parts.

Stay: At comfy Dunmore House, Clonakilty, West Cork. Double rooms from €200; reopens March 7. dunmorehousehotel.ie

6 Stroll some of the Grand Canal Way, Co Kildare

Another flat walk and ideal for times when coastal or mountain trails might not be suitable, a walk along the old towpath of the Grand Canal is a peaceful experience which can soothe the soul. The water is usually like glass, and there's lots of wildlife and birdlife in the trees, plus interesting plants along the way, and you can also see the old canal locks and bridges.

The full canal leads 132km from Dublin to Shannon, but the 12th Lock in Lucan to the 13th Lock at Henry Bridge in Ardclough is a nice 10km section which will take around three hours.

Stay: In a cosy cottage at Cliff at Lyons, Lyons Rd,

Celbridge, Co Kildare. Cottages from €499, double rooms from €249. cliffatlyons.ie

7 Hike to Diamond Hill in Connemara National Park, Co Galway

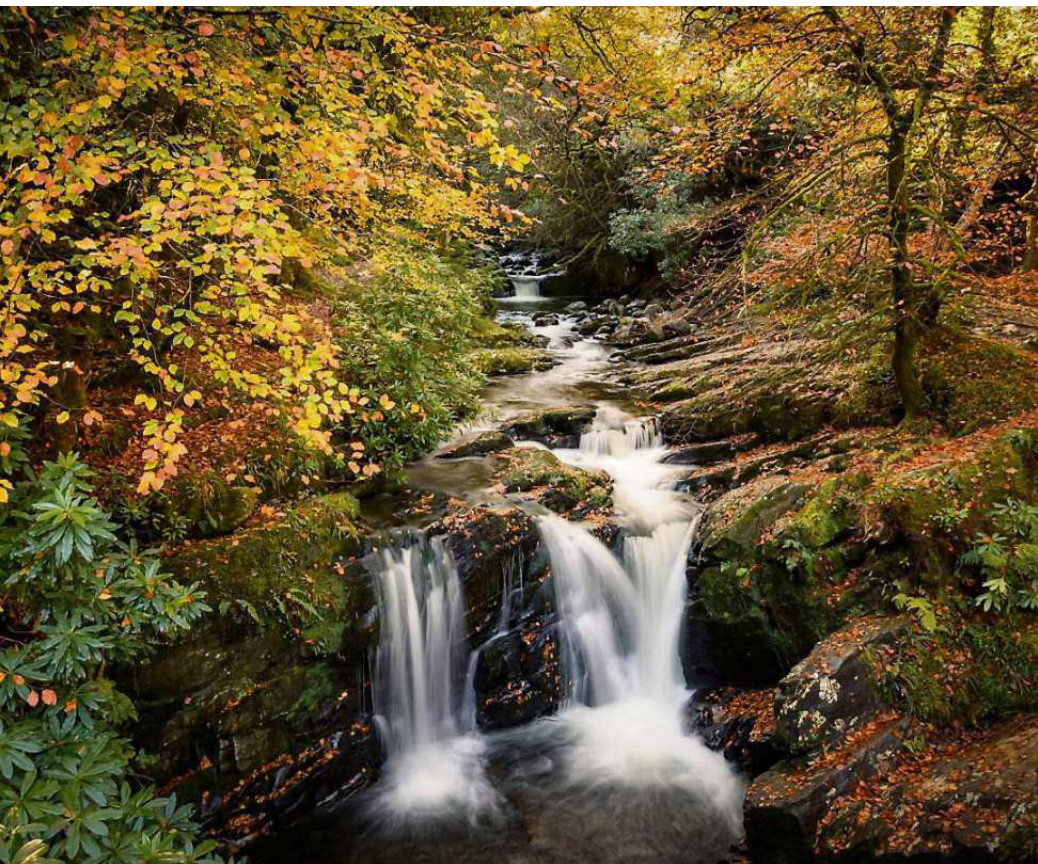
One of the great things about a winter walk in Connemara National Park is that the trails are well maintained and the two Diamond Hill looped walking trails are interlinked, so you can shorten or lengthen your walk on the day.

The Lower Diamond Hill trail is a moderate 3km loop along the old bog road, with great views of the landscape and of Diamond Hill itself. It's worth taking the Upper Diamond Hill loop, another 3.7km, to the summit for the views over Kylemore Abbey, across to the other peaks of the Twelve Bens, and down to the sea and islands.

At the end of your walk, warm up in the Hungry Hiker cafe at the visitors centre — leave time for the exhibition and video to learn about the history of the park and conservation of the peat bog.

Stay: At the historic and welcoming Renvyle House, Renvyle, Connemara, Co Galway. Double rooms from €190; reopens February 21. renvyle.com

Dingle Skellig Hotel, Co Kerry, is a good base for exploring Cosán na Naomh.



Upper Torc Waterfall, Killarney National Park, is one of the sights on the Kerry Way; right, Bushmills Inn, Co Antrim, offers a cosy stay when exploring Downhill Demesne, Co Derry.



8 Take Cosán na Naomh (Saint's Road) from Ventry Beach to Mount Brandon, Co Kerry

Cosán na Naomh is a lovely 17.7km long trail on the old pilgrim's path to Mount Brandon on the Dingle peninsula. Starting at Ventry Beach, the walk goes from the coast to the mountains, with breathtaking views all along the way.

Start out early as this will take the full day, check the forecast, and make sure to bring proper supplies as this is a remote path.

Look out for Ceann Sibéal and the Three Sisters as well as heritage sites such as church ruins, Ogham stones, holy wells, and the Gallarus oratory along the way.

The trail ends at Ballyferriter village, which has three cosy pubs for a post-walk refreshment.

Stay: In a room overlooking Dingle Bay at the lively Dingle Skellig Hotel, Dingle, Co Kerry. Double

rooms from €200; reopens February 21. dingleskellig.com

9 Follow the Old Kenmare Road from Torc to Incheens in Killarney National Park, Co Kerry

The Kerry Way walking trail is more than 200km long and loops around the Iveragh peninsula and Ring of Kerry, so it can take a few days or even weeks to complete.

If you don't have time to do the whole lot, a two-hour walk in the hills along the Old Kenmare Road, from Torc to Incheens, taking in some of the national park's upland regions, the Upper Lake, and crossing the Owengarriff river is one of the most beautiful stretches of the route. Start at the Upper Torc car park and end at Derrycunihy Church.

Stay: In a lake view room at the celebrated Europe Hotel and Resort, Fossa, Killarney, Co Kerry.

Double rooms from €355; reopens February 6. theeurope.com

10 Amble around the Downhill Demesne, Co Derry

You might recognise some of the scenery here from *Game of Thrones*, and the clifftop Mussenden Temple, a small circular building overlooking the coast, is also a popular photo on social media.

There are two walking trails — one leads along the coast, up the Black Glen and past Mussenden Temple, and the tree trail leads through the garden, where there's an arboretum with rare species. The grounds, a National Trust property, are also home to the ruins of the 18th-century mansion Downhill House.

Stay: In a cosy room at the historic Bushmills Inn, 9 Dunluce Rd, Bushmills, Co Antrim, Northern Ireland, BT57 8QG. Double rooms from £170 (around €205). bushmillsinn.com