

Ireland may be within easy reach, but a holiday there – on either side of the border – can



A view of Sligo Bay from
Culleenduff, near Strandhill

So near, yet so far away

feel like a proper adventure. Here's our guide to five of the island's most beguiling cities

Words by Sophie Campbell. Photographs by James Bedford





Sheridans Wine Shop, upstairs from the owners' cheese shop in Galway. Opposite, clockwise from top left: an oyster seller in Galway market; a view of the city's Long Walk waterfront; buskers in the 'Latin Quarter'; a ruined house in the County Galway countryside; walking on Claddagh Quay; the Pink Lounge at The G hotel

GALWAY CITY

The west of Ireland has always had a wild, romantic allure; and Galway, with its soft mists and bay views, is its easygoing capital. A university city, it jetted into the limelight in 2006 with the opening of The G, a hotel styled by hatter and local boy Philip Treacy. Galway was the great trading centre of the west – there’s a strong Spanish influence – and later the embarkation point for thousands fleeing the Famine. Its Old Town, now the ‘Latin Quarter’, is packed with bars, clubs and pubs. The city is a base for jaunts to the Gaelic-speaking Aran Islands, with their Bronze Age remains and towering cliffs. Galway’s powerful merchant clans were delighted when an exasperated Cromwellian called them ‘tribal’; 14 tribal flags flutter over Eyre Square today.



WHERE TO STAY

The G looks like a sleek airport terminal that has landed in a retail park. But inside, the eye is willingly seduced by its theatrical interiors: the bubble-gum Pink Lounge, the oyster-coloured Grand Salon (where the whirlpool mirrors are nicknamed ‘Camilla’s hats’), the low-lit corridors, 12-room ESPA and huge bedrooms. In a former warehouse in the Old Town, **The House Hotel** is a bubbly younger sister – Skipper to The G’s Barbie – with 40 compact rooms, pink sofas and a cheery bar, dining room and lounge. The six-bedroom **Heron’s Rest** is a rare bird indeed: it appears to have ‘Galway’s Only Ocean View’ (this may be remedied when the port is redeveloped). Sorcha Malloy, who opened the light- and flower-filled B&B six years ago, offers great breakfasts, picnics and evening meals straight out of the sea. And yes, there is a heron. He’s called Arthur. *The G, Wellpark (00 353 91 865200; www.theg.ie; doubles from €150). The House Hotel, Spanish Parade (00 353 91 538900; www.thehousehotel.ie; doubles from €119). The Heron’s Rest, 16a Long Walk (00 353 91 539574; www.theheronsrest.com; doubles from €130). Open 1 May–30 September*



WHERE TO EAT

Orla Purdy opened **The Grainstore** last year. Its downstairs deli and upstairs café, all white tongue-and-groove and French grey detailing, serve simple, modern Irish/European food. **Sheridans Wine Shop**, on the upper floor of a cheesemongers, does the perfect light bite: a wooden board of charcuterie and cheese with a glass of wine from its excellent cellar. **Matz at The G** has fine local fish and flesh; but for a more central location, try the **Oyster Grill** at the Hotel Meyrick, which serves Galway oysters,





CORK CITY

Cork is a character. Big enough to be fun, small enough to be easygoing, it's a great blend of *craic* and culture, with a lively food scene and good shops. It's virtually amphibious: smack in the middle of the south coast, where the River Lee empties into an immense natural harbour, it was once an island riven by canals. Although many of the canals are now roads, it's still a city of bridges, quays and water, with a slightly dishevelled air and an unshakeable self-confidence. Its position made it the biggest butter market in Europe, if not the world, and a stopping place for great liners – including the *Titanic* – which may explain its distinctly cosmopolitan feel. The Cork ladies-who-lunch, known as the 'Merchant Princesses', are famously well dressed.

WHERE TO STAY

Ballymaloe House is a County Cork institution, set in a river valley 40 minutes' drive from the city. It's a graceful old house, ablaze with wisteria in spring, and has spawned the Allen family, who between them run the hotel, restaurant, cookery school, farm and new events venue The Grain Store, as well as appearing on TV. The Allens have been into Irish produce – much of it their own – for 40 years. The food is superlative, there are rambling grounds and the rooms have a fresh, country charm. In the city, foodies should book into **Paradiso Rooms**, two spacious rooms above Café Paradiso (see below), and kick back in TV-less calm. Another peaceful option is redbrick **Hayfield Manor**, in generous gardens near the university, with a conservatory bistro; but for an urban feel, the **Clarion Hotel Cork** (part of an Irish chain) has briskly contemporary rooms – blond wood, white linen, cheery cushions – river views and the popular fine-dining restaurant Augustine's. *Ballymaloe House, Shangarry* (00 353 21 465 2531; www.ballymaloe.ie; doubles from €170). *Paradiso Rooms, 16 Lancaster Quay* (00 353 21 427 7939; www.cafe-paradiso.ie/stay; doubles from €200, including dinner and breakfast). *Hayfield Manor, Perrott Avenue* (00 353 21 484 5900; www.hayfieldmanor.ie; doubles from €129). *Clarion Hotel Cork, Lapps Quay* (00 353 21 422 4900; www.clarionhotel-corkcity.com; doubles from €90)



Aran-peat-smoked salmon and Irish steaks in a formal room with a chequerboard floor and large windows overlooking Eyre Square. *The Grainstore, Lower Abbeygate Street* (00 353 91 567833; about €30 for two). *Sheridans Wine Shop, 14–16 Churchyard Street* (00 353 91 564832; www.sheridanscheesemongers.com; about €40). *Matz at The G* (see *The G*, above; about €90). *Oyster Grill at the Hotel Meyrick, Eyre Square* (00 353 91 564041; www.hotelmeyrick.ie; about €100)

WHAT TO DO

Kick the wall: an old Galway habit, this; walk the promenade to Salthill – said to be the longest in the British Isles – give the wall at the end a hefty kick and turn back, admiring the Mutton Island Lighthouse and views of County Clare and the Burren

en route. Visit the tiny **Claddagh Museum** in Thomas Dillon's ring shop on Quay Street. The Claddagh ring – a heart clasped by two hands – has a long and romantic back story originating in the hamlet across the River Corrib, and has come to symbolise Galway (and Ireland). The museum is a moving visual record of peasant life in Galway in the early 20th century, with not a Celtic Tiger in sight. Head to the **Aran Islands** from Ros an Mhíl, 23 miles from the city and served by a shuttle bus (www.aranislandferries.com). **Walk the city** with English blow-in Fiona Brennan (www.galwaywalkingtours.com). And finally, the nightlife: two of the best **live music pubs** in town are **Tigh Chóilí** (pronounced 'Chee Coley'), Mainguard Street, and the **Crane Bar** on Sea Road (with trad music upstairs from 9.30pm).

WHERE TO EAT

Have breakfast at the **Farmgate Café** – strong coffee, fresh pastries and a copy of the *Irish Times* – on the first floor of the English Market. Homemade teas and

Ballymaloe House, County
Cork's celebrated hotel,
restaurant and cookery
school. *Opposite, clockwise
from top left: Sorcha Molloy
in the breakfast room of
her Galway guesthouse,
The Heron's Rest; a table
at Ballymaloe; owners Frank
O'Connell and Paul Lewis
at An Crúibín restaurant
in Cork; the Oyster Grill at
the Hotel Meyrick, Galway*



The Farmgate Café in
Cork's English Market.
Opposite, clockwise from
top left: Café Fellini,
Cork; the city's Crawford
Art Gallery; the exterior
of Kilgraney House, a
small hotel not far from
Kilkenny, and one of
the bedrooms; a corner
tower at Kilkenny Castle



whopping meringues are served at **Café Fellini**, in an old cinema; the other half of the room is a flea market. In 2008, Paul Lewis and Frank O’Connell opened **An Crúibín** (‘The Pig’s Trotter’), in a famous old music venue, The Lobby. The ground floor is a pub and tapas bar. Upstairs, The Silk Purse (open Thursday to Saturday nights) serves eclectic food with Irish ingredients – John Dory with spinach, wild garlic, leek, saffron and ground-elder cream; fried haloumi with pistachio and pomegranate – and continues the live-music tradition. **Ballymaloe’s** five-course dinner is legendary, with such joys as hot Castletownbere oysters on toast and spring lamb with spinach mousse. Denis Cotter’s vegetarian **Café Paradiso**, on a mildly edgy quayside, is also an institution; try the avocado, Knockalara sheep’s cheese and pomegranate salad, or ginger-poached rhubarb with orange shortbread.

Farmgate Café, English Market (00 353 21 427 8134; www.farmgate.ie; about €30 for two). Café Fellini, 4 Carey’s Lane (00 353 21 427 6083; about €20). An Crúibín, 1 Union Quay (00 353 21 431 0071; www.themeatcentre.com; about €30; €50 at The Silk Purse). Ballymaloe Restaurant (see Ballymaloe House, above; about €140). Café Paradiso (see Paradiso Rooms, above; about €80).

WHAT TO DO

Climb up, Quasimodo-like, to ring the **Bells of Shandon** at St Anne’s on Church Street. It’s a Cork tradition (nobody quite knows why), and you can tell if a visitor is doing it by the hesitant bonging. Nearby are the Butter Exchange, the **Butter Museum** – a glimpse into old Cork life – and the Firkin Crane building; the crane once lifted firkins (barrels) of butter. The cast room at the **Crawford Art Gallery** is a marvel of classical statues set off by deep-terracotta walls. The **English Market**, so called because the native Irish were not allowed to trade there, is deservedly loved: shop for wheaten loaves at the Alternative Bread Company, superb cheese at On the Pig’s Back or a picnic from the Sandwich Stall.

KILKENNY CITY

Kilkenny, in the south-east of Ireland, is famous for its craftsmen and their sumptuous products. In the 1970s, the Irish government set up the Kilkenny Design Workshop in the bustling, town-sized city; and although it closed a decade or so later, it established an artistic enclave. The city itself sits among wheatlands and stud farms, dominated by a flamboyantly turreted Victorian castle that was home to the Anglo-Irish Butler family. Near enough to Dublin to be a weekend





WHERE TO EAT

Seek out **Campagne** – low-key and contemporary, with mint-green awnings – tucked away down a steep street. Sit on long, olive-coloured banquettes under bright paintings and prepare to eat well: Garrett Byrne worked at Chapter One in Dublin and has set up with his partner, Bríd Hannon, serving formal French food – using as much Irish produce as possible – in a friendly atmosphere. **Café Sol** is a popular bistro with a cheery, red frontage and a heroic list of local suppliers; dishes include smoked Goatsbridge trout pâté and vegetarian treats such as roast vegetable loaf with pecans and hazelnuts. **The Kilkenny Design Centre Restaurant** is a fine, airy space – once the quarters of the castle coachmen – with whitewashed walls and wooden beams. Kathleen Moran took it over, along with the shop, in 1989. It's the perfect place to eat home-cooked food over a glass of wine, or just dive in for excellent coffee. There's also a pantry-style deli, where oatcakes, breads, soups and specialities such as chicken-and-broccoli crumble with Lavistown cheese are all freshly made. Pick up a picnic at **Blueberry Larder**: Will Fitzgerald has worked with Richard Corrigan, among others, and turns out good takeaway fare, seasonal where possible, including a tasty house terrine, and whiskey, honey and almond trifle. *Campagne*, 5 Gashouse Lane (00 353 56 777 2858; www.campagne.ie; about €80 for two; closed Mon). *Café Sol*, 6 William Street (00 353 56 776 4987; www.restaurantskilkenny.com; about €30). *Kilkenny Design Centre Restaurant*, Castle Yard (00 353 56 772 2118; www.kilkennydesign.com; about €30). *Blueberry Larder*, 2 Market Yard (00 353 56 776 1456; www.blueberrykilkenny.com; about €25)

WHAT TO DO

Visit the light-filled **National Craft Gallery** in the Crescent Building, and pop into **Rudolf Heltzel**, the goldsmith's shop just over the road: Heltzel has now been joined by his son Christopher and they produce pieces of the highest quality; if they're not too busy, they may show you the workshop. Drive the **Made in Kilkenny Craft Trail** (leaflets available from the tourist office). The medieval fortress of **Kilkenny Castle** was given a thorough makeover in the 19th century. The decor is ponderous, but the Long Gallery, stuffed with Butler portraits, and the park, with its romantic vistas, are marvellous. Finally, sample the Gaelic games: peak hurling season is May to September, and **Nowlan Park** is the place to enjoy it.

escape, it has a nascent boutique-hotel and fine-dining scene. It's also a centre for hurling, a ball game played hard, fast and airborne, using what look like squashed golf drivers. You'll see teenagers ambling along absentmindedly bouncing balls on these sticks, called hurleys.

WHERE TO STAY

'Country house B&B' doesn't really do justice to **Kilgraney House**; it's an 18th/19th-century stuccoed demesne with a pretty lime avenue, about 25 minutes from Kilkenny. It's surrounded by outbuildings – including self-catering apartments and a charming spa – and herb gardens (open to the public). Owners Bryan Leech and Martin Marley are designers, and their textiles and artefacts sit well against the plain, elegant decor. They

are also cracking cooks. **Butler House** is the stunning 1780s dower house opposite the castle, drenched in Virginia creeper. Pared-down beds and black-leather sofas sit oddly in such finely proportioned period rooms, but the interiors are glorious, the views over the gardens a joy and the position perfect. The **Pembroke Hotel** has a businesslike air, but rooms are bright and immaculate (some with castle views), the grill is packed at lunch and dinner and it's ideally located. *Kilgraney House*, Bagenalstown, Co Carlow (00 353 59 977 5283; www.kilgraneyhouse.com; doubles from €170; closed November to March). *Butler House*, 16 Patrick Street (00 353 56 772 2828; www.butler.ie; doubles from €99). *Pembroke Hotel*, 11 Patrick Street (00 353 56 778 3500; www.kilkenny-pembrokehotel.com; doubles from €69)



Patrick Street in Kilkenny. Opposite, clockwise from top left: pastries at Kilkenny's Blueberry Larder; the herb garden at Kilgraney House; goldsmiths Christopher and Rudolf Heltzer in their Kilkenny workshop; a table at the city's Campagne restaurant

Peadar O'Donnell's, a pub and music venue in Derry/Londonderry. *Opposite, clockwise from top left: the lounge at the Beech Hill Country House Hotel, on the outskirts of the city; the 'Free Derry' wall in the Bogside; Sandino's bar; an actor in costume on the historic city walls*



DERRY/LONDONDERRY

Derry is the only intact walled city in Ireland, perched on a site that slopes gently to the River Foyle on one side and steeply to the Bogside on the other. Derry-Londonderry is the name this Northern Irish city adopted for its successful bid to become UK City of Culture in 2013; it was christened Londonderry when rebuilt by London livery companies chartered by England's James I and, inevitably, there are political connotations. Not that you'd guess: people are fantastically friendly, there's a busy nightlife and a freshness about the place that comes from relatively low exposure to tourism. Expect charm and enthusiasm rather than edgy interior design and chic menus. A new pedestrian Peace Bridge across the Foyle is due to be completed this summer.



WHERE TO STAY

Back in the 1980s, with the Troubles still in full swing, retired academic Dr Peter Pyne and his wife Joan opened **The Saddler's House**, a B&B in a Victorian house five minutes' walk south of the city walls. It was so successful they opened another, the Georgian **Merchant's House**, just around the corner. Both have fine proportions and views; Merchant's has a sunny courtyard for guests' use. The **Beech Hill Country House Hotel** is a couple of miles outside town; traditional rather than trendy, and the former home of a Plantation family, it sits in glorious grounds full of mature trees and rhododendrons, with a river crossed by Japanese bridges. Shop around for a room; some redecorated junior suites overlook the gardens, as does the conservatory-style restaurant. The **Tower Hotel**, high on the walls above the Bogside, has the best views in town; close your eyes briefly on entering to erase the image of the motel-like exterior and you'll find cheery, modern decor and a bar full of business people.

The Saddler's House, 36 Great James Street and The Merchant's House, 16 Queen Street (028 7126 9691; www.thesaddlershouse.com; doubles from £60). Beech Hill Country House Hotel, Ardmore Road (028 7134 9279; www.beech-hill.com; doubles from £95). Tower Hotel, Butcher Street (028 7137 1000; www.towerhotelderry.com; doubles from £59)

WHERE TO EAT

Derry needed the new **Browns**; the restaurant has been across the Foyle in the Waterside – formerly a Protestant area, now more mixed – for years, but in late 2009 it was taken over by Ian Orr, a Derry native who has worked at London's River



Café and Rathmullan House in Donegal, among others. Orr and his partners have gone for the Art Deco Champagne-bar look, and the food is excellent: light, modern, seasonal – and sensational value for money. **Halo Pantry & Grill**, which occupies a former shirt factory just inside the city walls, opened a couple of years ago with another local chef, Emmet Deane, at the helm. The first floor has a bistro feel, and there's a more sophisticated restaurant two floors above. The food is hearty and modern, using local seafood and produce. **Timber Quay** is in a modern building on the site of the old cooperage warehouses, with views over the Foyle. It has curvy, lime-green banquettes, an oval bar and a modern European menu. Next door, **Mange2** does an interesting mixture of classic Irish food – Donegal

bacon and cabbage, for example – and Asian and Mediterranean dishes. Both restaurants have outdoor tables, or you can sit on the top floor of Mange2 to watch the sun go down over the wooded west bank of the Foyle. *Browns, 1 Bond's Hill (028 7134 5180; www.brownsrestaurant.com; about £70 for two). Halo Pantry & Grill, 2 Market Street (028 7127 1567; www.halopantryandgrill.com; Pantry about £30; Grill about £70). Timber Quay, 100 Strand Road (028 7137 0020; www.timberquay.com; about £35). Mange2, 110–115 Strand Road (028 7136 1222; www.mange2derry.com; about £30)*

WHAT TO DO

Walking the walls is a treat; they're so compact that you're done in about 30 minutes. Admire the ancient cannon still



A view from one of the bedrooms at The Heron's Rest in Galway. *Opposite:* the main stairway at Temple House in County Sligo; The Glasshouse, a modern hotel in Sligo Town

pointing threateningly from what was once a Protestant enclave, and stop off at Bloom's café in the north-east corner for coffee and views over the Fountain (Protestant) and the Bogside (Catholic) estates. The café is in the **Verbal Arts Centre**, which organises great storytelling events. Political themes are evenly covered at the **Tower Museum**, a good prelude to the **Museum of Free Derry** or one of the artists' tours around the Bogside to see the famous murals. City tours take in murals by both communities. The recently refurbished **Playhouse** is a great white space with a busy menu of shows and exhibitions; note the rare wooden cobbles in the entryway, imported from Belfast. There are good gigs at **Peadar O'Donnell's** on Waterloo Street, its cheerfully touristy interior hung with political flags, and at **Sandino's** on Water Street.

SLIGO TOWN

There can't be many more beautiful settings than that of Sligo, which – in characteristically chilled style – calls itself a town but is in fact a city. It hunkers down at the head of a mighty Atlantic inlet, with the abrupt swoop of Ben Bulbin mountain to the north and the loaf-shaped, equally formidable Knocknarea to the west. Behind it is Lough Gill, home to WB Yeats's Isle of Innisfree; Yeats and his Irish Literary Revival drive a lot of tourism to this otherwise under-visited region. Add in surfing, fishing, lively restaurants and a steady supply of live gigs, and the result is a magical north-western town. City, even.

WHERE TO STAY

Twenty minutes' drive from town is **Temple House**, an Anglo-Irish mansion, vastly expanded in the 19th century, with Knights Templar ruins in the garden and a lake full of pike. The Percevals live in part of their ancestral home and are slowly bringing the behemoth back to life – their first music festival was last autumn. Six bedrooms, some the size of squash courts, are elegantly painted, with sweeping curtains, adjoining bathrooms and good showers. Guests can take boats out on the lake or use walking trails. In Sligo Town itself there is a dearth of small, pretty hotels. **The Glasshouse** on Quay Street looks like a giant crystal that has landed next to the River Garavogue, but at least it's fun: the orange/lime colour scheme on alternating floors is alarming, but rooms are clean and jolly, and there is a busy café and bar on the ground floor, with

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blue and white paint and light bouncing off the sea. Its surfer owners, Jane Chambers and Myles Lamberth, turn out delicious fresh food ('We have to wait for eggs while the hens lay them,' says Chambers) and understand carb-cravings. Their alternative to the Full Irish is a breakfast of granola and compote. Two fine pubs: the labyrinthine **Hargadon Bros** combines a gastropub with a wine shop; and **The Beach Bar** at Aughris is a thatched seaside pub that does barbecues in summer and pub food year-round. Ask to see Plunkett's 36lb stuffed salmon.

Coach Lane @ Donaghy's, 1 Lord Edward Street (00 353 71 916 2417; www.coachlane.ie; about €80 for two). Tobergal Lane Cafe, off O'Connell Street (00 353 71 914 6599; www.tobergallanecafe.ie; about €50). Shells Cafe, Strandhill (00 353 71 912 2938; www.shellscafe.com; about €20). Hargadon Bros, 4-5 O'Connell Street (00 353 71 915 3709; www.hargadons.com; about €40). The Beach Bar, Aughris (00 353 71 917 6465; www.thebeachbarsligo.com; about €25)



The Beach Bar, Aughris, County Sligo. Clockwise from above: Hargadon Bros pub in Sligo Town; a farmer on the road to Queen Maeve's Cairn; a surfer at Strandhill

WHAT TO DO

Submerge yourself in silky seaweed at Strandhill's **Voya Seaweed Baths**, preferably after a morning's surfing (surf shops on the promenade offer gear and lessons). Enjoy 360-degree views from **Queen Maeve's Cairn** on Knocknarea and visit the 6,000-year-old tombs at **Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery**. In town, a former school is now **The Model gallery**, with works by Irish artists including Jack Yeats. There are **trad sessions** every night – in the cosy rooms at **Shoot the Crows**, for example, and at **The Harp Tavern**. Visit **Mullaney Bros**, a department store with a gorgeous shopfront and a 'Young Mr Mullaney', selling everything from Donegal tweed to short breaks.

tables outside on sunny days. Alternatively, you can self-cater at **Primrose Grange House**, an 18th-century former school building on Knocknarea, 10 minutes' drive from the city; the views are phenomenal. *Temple House, Ballymote (00 353 71 918 3329; www.templehouse.ie; open April to November; doubles from €150). The Glasshouse, Swan Point (00 353 71 919 4300; www.theglasshouse.ie; doubles from €79). Primrose Grange House, Knocknarea (00 353 87 264 1979; www.luxuryselfcatering.sligo.com; €700 per week; sleeps seven; weekends and short breaks available)*


WHERE TO EAT

Coach Lane @ Donaghy's is a family-run former coaching inn. Its salmon comes straight out of the bay, its mussels from Lissadell, just up the coast; the feel is modern European with a few chunky staples – steak frites, roast lamb – thrown in, plus a well-chosen wine list. Bríd Torrades set up the **Tobergal Lane Cafe** in 2007: all the food is homemade, and the atmosphere is unpretentious, friendly and fun. It opens for breakfast at 10am, tapas at 5pm, and jazz on Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons. **Shells Cafe** is on Strandhill seafront, all

GETTING THERE

Aer Arann (www.aerarann.com) flies to Galway from Edinburgh, London Southend, Luton and Manchester, and to Cork from Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Manchester. To get to Kilkenny, fly to Dublin – with **Aer Lingus** (www.aerlingus.com), **BMI** (www.flybmi.com) or **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) – and drive for two hours. **Ryanair** flies to Derry/Londonderry from Glasgow, Birmingham, Liverpool and Stansted. To get to Sligo, fly to Knock – with **Ryanair** – and drive (45 mins).

WEATHER TO GO

 Go in June for the best chance of sunshine, but it is always sensible to be prepared for rain in Ireland, particularly in the north and west.