

# castles, cliffs and craic!

## IRELAND OFF-SEASON

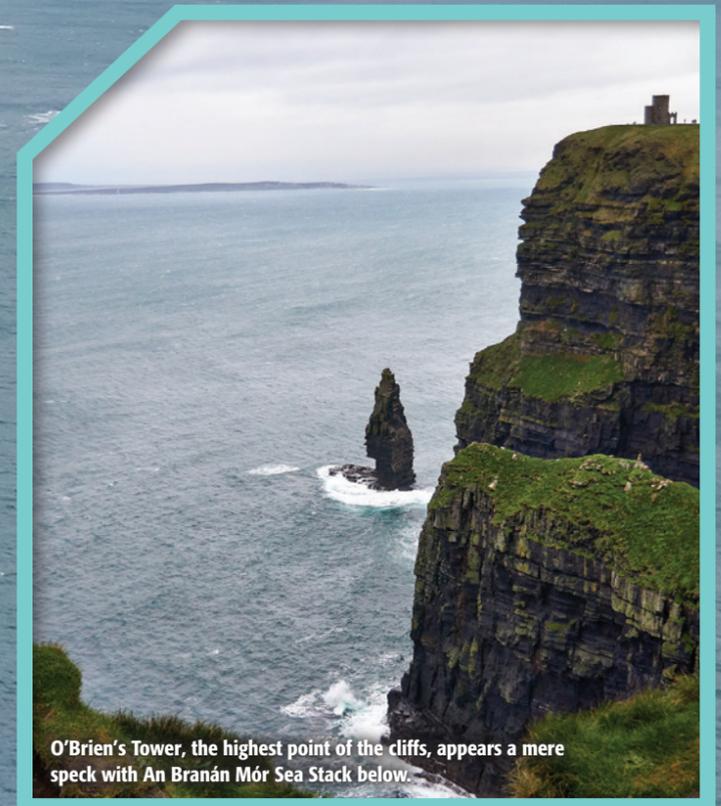
Monica Frim

Diplomatic Connections' travel and photography journalists Monica and John Frim visit Ireland off-season and discover a blustery beauty that's hauntingly appealing even as winds blow and seas pummel the coastlands.

There's something magical about castles that stirs the imagination. Solid, stony and resplendent, they evoke bygone times of tradition and power. More than 30,000 castles dot the Irish countryside, although what really defines a castle is somewhat subject to interpretation. Stately homes and mansions, fortified tower houses, ring forts and even stony ecclesiastical structures have all been known to boast castle status. There's a castle for every taste in Ireland -- from crumbling relics shrouded in mist to show-castles with Disney-esque turrets and crenellations. To actually stay in a real castle is the ultimate dream.

There's no doubt that the Emerald Isle shimmers best in summer, but in the winter, the castles hold a special appeal. The air outside may be nippy, but inside these old ziggurats of bygone power and heritage lies a 21st century warmth and luxury that's as comforting to the modern traveler as triumph in battle must have been to the dynasts of the past.

There is nothing more welcoming than the scent of a roaring fire in a romantic manor house after you've spent a long day trudging over cliffs



O'Brien's Tower, the highest point of the cliffs, appears a mere speck with An Branán Mór Sea Stack below.

Cliffs of Moher



Galway Cathedral

and bogs or touring the urban cathedrals, museums and galleries of Ireland's great cities. The glow alone warms the soul as much as the body. To then drown yourself among goose down comforters and pillows in a king-sized canopy bed surrounded by a mix of antique furnishings and modern conveniences is one of the most authentic and comfortable ways to experience Ireland's rich heritage and culture.

Ireland is foremost a study in contrasts. If we stayed in the lap of luxury at night, we spent our days trudging like vagabonds over some of the wildest and most desolate areas of the island, where bogs and stone-walled fields gave way to striking ruins that poked like stony broomsticks into a brooding sky. It was as if we needed the weather-beaten fortifications to remind us of Ireland's turbulent roots and to balance the lavish lifestyle and rustic charm of the renovated grand buildings with Ireland's somber historical reality.

We picked up our rental vehicle at Dublin Airport then drove straight into one of the least drivable cities in the country. Beset with jaywalkers, one-way streets, cul-de-sacs, inconspicuous signs and general congestion, we soon learned that Dublin can be an insurmountable challenge to explore by car but a delight on foot or by a narrated "hop-on, hop-off" bus. A city of paradox, Dublin is a mix of old and new, with medieval churches, modern sculptures, renovated Georgian buildings and irreverently nicknamed statues (such as the Tart with the Cart and the Floozie in the Jacuzzi) all standing in neighborly accord.

Cobblestone side streets (the trendiest is Grafton Street) crammed with pubs, shops and cafes, might lead to leafy green squares with bird-flecked statues, or areas like the renowned Temple Bar district, overflowing with Guinness and malt. The Temple Bar district offers a somewhat tourist-turned "craic," the Irish catch-all term for great fun, usually of the liquid kind, peppered with bouts of laughter, music, gossip and wit. The pastime is celebrated all over the island but the best spots are usually tucked away in bars outside the usual tourist haunts. Ask a local, "Where's the craic?" and you just might find yourself in some

hideaway nirvana where "the craic is ninety"—the highest rating of Irish romp and happenstance.

If your time in Dublin is limited, as ours was, a narrated open-top bus tour with stops at all the major attractions is your best bet for seeing the city on the fly. History buffs can ride or walk through thousands of years in a single day, stopping at historical buildings, many of which have been turned into first-rate museums, or ambling along the River Liffey with its quayside sculptures, iconic bridges and diverse architectural styles. The most difficult decision will be picking and choosing from dozens of attractions that are all worthy of further exploration. Among the must-sees are the National Museum, an impressive complex of archaeological, decorative and historical artifacts from prehistoric times through mid-twentieth century communities; and Dublin Castle, which metamorphosed from an early Viking fortress to headquarters of British rule in Ireland and then to an Irish government administrative

River Room Restaurant at the Glenlo Abbey Hotel

Glenlo Abbey Chapel and Hotel, Galway



center and venue for stately functions such as the inauguration of Irish Presidents.

Ecclesiastical must-sees include St. Patrick's and Christ Church Cathedrals, which house some eccentric curiosities. Among the medieval sarcophagi in the crypt of Christ Church Cathedral are a mummified cat and rat known locally as "Tom and Jerry," and the embalmed heart of St. Laurence O'Toole, a 12th century archbishop. In St. Patrick's Cathedral, aficionados of Gulliver's Travels can admire mementos from the life of Jonathan Swift who was Dean of the Cathedral from 1713 to 1745. On display are two of his death masks and some of his early writings. Swift is buried in the cathedral and his self-composed Latin epitaph (along with a translation) is on the wall opposite his grave.

Dublin is full of quirks and oddities, which makes it a rewarding destination on its own as well as an inspiring bookend to further travels around the island. As the winter sun casts lambent beams along the River Liffey, mirroring the buildings crammed along Bachelors Walk and the quays, we bid goodbye to the city and, as it turned out, the sun.

Soon the wintery day grew dim and soupy, and the landscape stretched long and empty with only an occasional white farmhouse breaking through the gray-green fields and hillocks. At the end of the road, Galway loomed through the mist like an Irish Brigadoon but with colorful vintage shops lining its quaintly cobbled streets.

Known as the "City of Tribes" after the fourteen

merchant families who dominated the area from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, Galway is now an artsy, Bohemian city that wears its past proudly. Like Dublin, it's a walkable city with most historic attractions situated between the Spanish Arch at the mouth of the River Corrib and Galway Cathedral upstream at the Salmon Weir Bridge. Also like Dublin, it's known for pubs, craic and whimsy. One of Galway's most creative enterprises is a restaurant called Loam, which true to its name, pushes the boundary of farm-to-fork cuisine to palate-boggling sophistication. We shared clever combinations of locally sourced quail eggs, squid biscuits, duck hearts, venison, cod, scallops, mussels and fermented potatoes topped with various flavorings of cabbage powder, lovage, crispy kale, herbs, seeds, bottarga (red mullet roe), and, yes, mussel foam! If this sounds iffy in print, rest assured, every single item was delicious. Who would have guessed that foraged food bereft of spices and citrus fruits—since these are not products of Ireland—could pack such a flavorful punch!

If anything could match this amazing culinary adventure it was our accommodation in the Glenlo Abbey Hotel, once the ancestral home of the Ffrenches, one of the founding fourteen tribes. It is not exactly a castle but a grand country house, stony and grey, with its own chapel and a unique dining facility in two original carriages of the Orient Express. We curled up with a book and a tea in front of one of the many logburning fireplaces that raged in every public room before burying ourselves under a

cloud of soft linens in a canopy bed surrounded by plush furnishings. We could have hibernated here forever, but the Burren to the south and Connemara to the north, a region known as the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht, beckoned.

South of Galway, pretty thatched roof houses lined the streets of quaint villages that followed the curves of the Atlantic coastline to the iconic postcard attraction of the Cliffs of Moher. En route a sign that said "CAUTION DRIVE CAREFULLY, CASTLE AHEAD" alerted us to Dunguaire Castle. Perhaps the warning was simply a bit of Irish humor: standing conspicuously on a rocky outcrop along the roadside at Galway Bay, this 16th century tower house is not known for danger, but for its literary connections and fabulous feasts.

Many more weather-beaten ruins dot the limestone landscape of the Burren and the marshy Gaeltacht. As we trudged atop the windblown cliffs and over bogs, or drove along narrow jagged roads sandwiched between gravity-defying stone fences, I could picture Yeats and Joyce and all the sad scribes of yore finding their muses in the empty bogs and thorny hillocks that stretched north of Galway. Rugged, beautifully bleak and given to fantastical feats by giants and anthropomorphic animals, the shimmering lakes and mist enshrouded mountains feed magic to poetic minds.

Set among nature's brutal components, pretty towns burst forth with color and whimsy. Clifden, the capital of Connemara, lies in the shadow of the majestic mountains

of the Twelve Bens and offers up a parade of quirky shops and restaurants. Its famous Sky Road is one of the most exhilarating drives in Ireland with stunning views over the Atlantic coast and countryside.

Nearby, in an area known for folklore and colorful Irish legends, Kylemore Abbey appears like a fairytale castle set into a forested mountain overlooking a lake. Indeed, tales of a cannibalistic giant and a lake-dwelling white horse offer fantastical explanations for some of the natural phenomena that characterize the area. Kylemore Abbey started out as a luxurious love nest for Margaret and Mitchell Henry, two beloved nineteenth century country landlords during a time of famine, sickness and economic desperation. Their tragic love story gave way to other circumstances of misfortune but also to great spiritual and engineering achievements—all explained during tours of the castle and its glorious grounds of woodlands, walkways and a sixacre walled Victorian Garden. The estate has been in the hands of Benedictine nuns since the 1920s.

North of the Abbey, Killary Harbour, Ireland's only true fjord, cuts a dramatic swath between Counties Galway and Mayo. To the south are the Maumturk Mountains and Twelve Bens, and to the north, Mweelrea, the highest mountain in the province of Connaught (also spelled Connacht). We drove along the southern arm of the fjord in twilight, when the silhouettes of the mountains wove a ribbon of black between the glimmering sea and sky. It was

The colorful village of Roundstone in the Connemara region on the west coast of Ireland has been the inspiration for many artists and crafts people.





**Knockranny House Hotel in Westport**

a hauntingly beautiful setting, but dotted with reminders of Ireland’s dark history. Famine villages, abandoned during the Great Famine of 1845 to 1849, bared roofless grey ruins in testimony of the millions of people who left Ireland never to return. As a result, the villages remained uncolonized and the population of Ireland plunged to less than 5 million—nearly half of what it was before the Famine.

In this stark and severe setting, Ireland’s lovely country homes and manors provide touches of sophistication and solace. Whether they’ve been renovated into museums or luxury hotels, their original ancestral wares and architectural flourishes echo the mindset of their owners.

One of the most captivating chronicles of derring-do involves Grace O’Malley, also known as Gráinne or Granuaile—the “Pirate Queen” turned Irish folk hero, who ruled the southern Clew Bay area and led terrorizing raids against those who fished off the Mayo and Galway coasts. She had control of many castles in western Ireland, including her stronghold, O’Malley Castle, on Clare Island, but it’s her connection to Westport House, that’s been turned to Disney-esque advantage. On the grounds, the Pirate Adventure Park pays homage to the estate’s pirate heritage with the kinds of amusements and rides that thrill children and other lovers of theme parks. But it’s the house itself, built on the foundation of Grace O’Malley’s castle,

that truly evokes the history and character of its owners, who, until recently, were the descendants of the pirate queen herself. In a celebration of fine architecture and design, visitors can wander among original furnishings or visit the “dungeons,” the only remaining foundations of the original castle. A basement exhibition of Gráinne’s life and a bronze sculpture of her in the garden complete the tribute to one of Ireland’s most notorious characters.

We could feel her folkloric presence all along the coastline, and in the nearby town of Murrisk, where piracy and penance make strange bedfellows. The distinctive cone of Croagh Patrick, Ireland’s holiest mountain (named for the country’s patron saint) looms

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**Grounds and historic Westport House**

**Top: Dam on the Carrowbeg River**

**Middle: Bronze statue of the Irish ‘pirate queen,’ Grace O’Malley**

**Bottom: The old stone bridge and lake at Westport House**





[clockwise from top left]  
Kylemore Abbey in Connemara, County Galway  
Dunguaire Castle in Kinvara on Galway Bay  
Christchurch Cathedral in Dublin  
Carton House (rear view)  
Doonagore Castle in County Clare





Sunset over Tulsk Cemetery in County Roscommon



The ruins of Murrisk Abbey and Cemetery in County Mayo



above the town and offers hikers and pilgrims amazing views over Clew Bay. Reputedly, 365 tiny islands, one for each day of the year, dot the bay but in reality, the number is 117. No matter the math, the area is pure magic. It's been drawing pilgrims for more than 5,000 years—from Stone Age pagans to modern Christians—with its tetrad of history, archaeology, religion and art. Between the town and the bay, the National Famine Monument—a sculpture symbolic of a coffin ship with skeletons in the rigging—depicts the 19th century ships overcrowded with destitute emigrants fleeing the famine.

Ten minutes away, the town of Westport is a breath of sophistication in a landscape historically marked by sadness and despair. Streets of pastel-painted store facades add color to its Georgian town center and lead to leafy promenades and low stone walls along the Carrowbeg River. As in Galway and Dublin, a maze of one-way streets and cul-de-sacs make for uneasy driving, but once you've wedged yourself into a parking spot, the town is easily walkable and pretty.

Our base for exploring the town and countryside was Knockranny House, which overlooked the town, the mountain and the islands of Clew Bay. This family owned hotel and spa was a spectacular place to stay, not only for the scenery, but also the comfort. Our penthouse suite was loaded with antique furniture, plush couches and a

bathroom that could hold a small dance party. Pity we could stay for only one night before travelling on to our final destination—another sumptuous mansion — the Palladian Carton House on the outskirts of Dublin.

As the ancestral seat of the Earls of Kildare and Dukes of Leinster, the Carton estate spans more than eight centuries of history, although Carton House itself was built in the 18th century. Since then, this magnificent antique-filled historic manor has hosted a slew of celebrities and royal heads of state such as Queen Victoria, who slept in its "Chinese Boudoir," and Princess Grace and Prince Rainier of Monaco. Marianne Faithful lived in the Shell Cottage on the premises for many years in the 1960s. In such illustrious company, your humble scribe, assigned to the sumptuously comfortable Winter Suite, felt almost fraudulently out of place. The fact that the room was known by its name, not its number, should give some indication of the caliber of the accommodations.

Home again, I pour myself a tea and reminisce about castles, craic, and buffeting winds atop cliffs that drop like mercury on a cold day, and how each day ended with an unpretentious welcome in a grand mansion with a blazing fire in the salon.

Off-season travel may be chilly but the memories are warm. ■

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