

## Irelands Hidden Gems



This ebook is your free insiders guide to the best visitor attractions in Ireland. A 'taster' if you like of the very best that Ireland has to offer in terms of landscapes, culture, history, food & drink, music and fun. Having researched and revisited over a 100 different sites the following Top Ten are what I consider to be the cream of the crop!

Each is unique in its own category and all are excellent value for money or free and guarantee a good day out. The Hidden Gems are those 10 Other Interesting Things to Do and See in the area that you will not find in any of the guidebooks. I hope it inspires you to visit some of these sites in Ireland and whets your appetite for more which you can find at [www.irelands-hidden-gems.com](http://www.irelands-hidden-gems.com)

**Go n'eiri an t'adh leat.....Good Luck.....Susan Byron**

# The Cream of the Crop.....

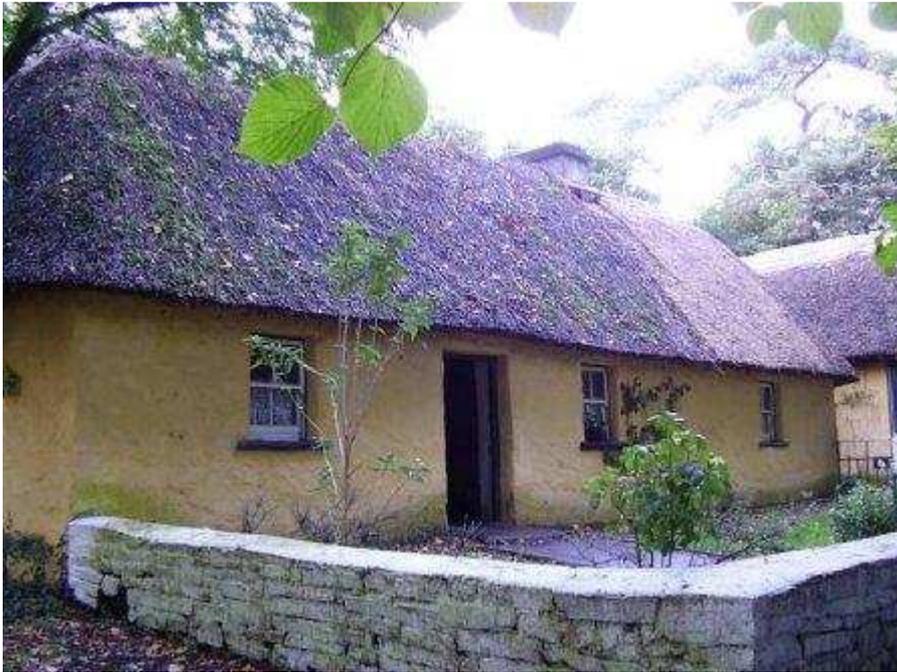


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This ebook is also available as an iPhone app which can be downloaded for free here : <http://itunes.apple.com/ie/app/irealnd-hidden-gems/id359979701?mt=8>

## Bunratty Castle and Folk Park



Bunratty castle is a fine example of a fortified Norman Castle situated close to Shannon airport, one American visitor even remarked how fortunate it was to be built beside the motorway? Visitors can enjoy a medieval style banquet each night during the summer or simply wander around the keep and ramparts during the day as part of the folk park complex. The Folk Park itself will keep you occupied all day long as you visit the various cottages and homesteads.

These are the 'real' deal not knocked up copies, either transported here stone by stone or faithfully built in the vernacular materials of the day which included local stone, and river reeds for thatching. Check out the huge roof slates quarried in nearby Liscannor. You can see fruit scones being made, sit in on a school lesson or enjoy the craic in the pub. It was said 'that a yard of a counter was as good as a farm of land' in the old days and most shops included a bar, some still do.

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area are....**

- 1 Limerick City, home of Lyric FM and Munster rugby.
- 2 King Johns Castle, large norman castle on the banks of the Shannon.
- 3 St Marys Cathedral, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century impressive well preserved Romanesque architecture.
- 4 Angela's Ashes Walk, free guided walk of featured landmarks in Frank McCourt (rip)'s book, leaves the Limerick tourist office daily at 2.30pm.
- 5 Hunt Museum, the best in Ireland, small but very good collection of national and international treasures and artifacts.
- 6 Limerick City Gallery of Art, free admission to well curated exhibition of contemporary and historic works of art.
- 7 Cragganowen another faithful reconstruction of early celtic life with lake dwellings, ringforts, dolmens and standing stones etched with Ogham inscriptions.
- 8 Adare village and Manor Hotel, very pretty village with thatched cottages, nice restaurants and shops, famous golf course & hotel.
- 9 Foynes Flyingboat Museum, celebrates the heady days of luxury international travel by flying boats and where Irish Coffee was invented.
- 10 Glenstal Abbey, visit one of the oldest working abbeys in Ireland run by the Benedictine monks, beautiful church and grounds.

## The Cliffs of Moher



What is it about these 300ft high folded shale cliffs, a remnant of the last ice age, that sets them apart from the rest? Having now become the premier attraction in Ireland, with almost a million visitors annually.

Perhaps, it is their very 'edginess' on the western most tip of Europe the next landfall, or as they say here, the next parish, being all the way across the Atlantic ocean in Boston or New York.

A new state of the art visitor centre 'The Atlantic Edge Experience' not only explains the geological background, flora and fauna using interactive media, but also local history, music and folklore. It is an excellent good value addition, in that it keeps children and adults informed amused and entertained, animated bird eye view of the cliffs very funny, to what could otherwise be a disappointing experience as often the cliffs are shrouded in mists, fog and rain or as a recent visitor described it 'flying weather'.

## **10 Other Things to do and see in the area are.....**

- 1 Take a cliff top walk south to Hags head, to try and spot or hear the bells of Irelands own lost city of Atlantis.
- 2 St Brigid's Well, about 2 miles south of the cliffs on the right handside of the road beside is a very famous holy well and a revered place of pilgrimage every Spring on Feb 1st.
- 3 Vaughans Restaurant stop for something to eat in Liscannor, superb food served all day in a traditional pub atmosphere.
- 4 Lahinch Seaworld, great rainy day alternative, aquarium, indoor pool and leisure centre.
- 5 Atlantic Hotel, a truly elegant throwback to the days of seaside holidays, fine dining, white linen tablecloths, silver candlesticks.
- 6 Lahinch Surf School run by the guys who made THAT video? Learn how to do it for yourselves, all ages, all stages, be bold, be brave, be careful....
- 7 Cliffs of Moher Cruise take a scenic boat tour along the base of the cliffs out of Doolin to see the puffin colonies, this is really great and fun to do with plenty of excellent photo opportunities.
- 8 O'Connors Pub in Doolin, on the go since 1832, famous throughout Ireland and even the world for traditional Irish music sessions or seisuins as they are known as Gaelige.
- 9 Doolin Ferries, take a trip out to the Aran Islands, then you can tell your grandchildren you have been for a ride on the Happy Hooker !
- 10 Ballinalackem Castle Hotel, have a posh dinner, or stay in this homely hotel which serves the best breakfast sausages in Ireland.

## Guinness Storehouse



Cobbled streets dissected by tram tracks lead up to the Guinness Storehouse in one of the oldest parts of Dublin. A heady mix of yeast and hops is in the air. By contrast you enter a high-tech exhibition space, the centrepiece of which is a giant atrium in the shape of a pint glass. This is where you assemble for a short orientation speech and then you are free to wander around on your own.

Spread over seven floors there is plenty to see and do. The ground floor displays the raw ingredients barley, hops, yeast and water, spectacularly as in an indoor sheet waterfall. Follow the winding staircases, through out the process to the tasting bar, very popular. After that, just about anything connected with the Guinness name throughout the world has been included. You can learn how to pull your own pint, also popular or relax in the restaurant, the Guinness stew is highly recommended.

To claim your free pint, part of the admission ticket, head up to the Gravity bar on the top floor which has 360 degree views of Dublin. If too crowded drop down a floor to the Source bar, just as good views. Finally there is a well stocked shop with plenty of good present options.

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area.....**

- 1 St Audeons Church, drop in and see one of the earliest medieval churches in Dublin.
- 2 The Liberties, medieval tax free zone, enjoy the banter with the street traders in Thomas Street.
- 3 Dublinia Viking Exhibition see what life was like for Dubliners at during medieval times, not pretty.....
- 4 Christchurch Cathedral has seen many changes in the 800 years it has dominated Dublins skyline.
- 5 IMMA, Irish Museum of Modern Art, housed in the old hospital Kilmainham, excellent space, good cafe, lovely grounds and free!
- 6 Kilmainham Gaol, excellent and compelling rebel history, the Dublin tourism guides favourite.
- 7 Hueston Staation all go... good bar and carvery lunch, close to some great old Dublin pubs on Parkgate Street.
- 8 Pheonix Park, the largest city park in Europe, home to Aras an Uachtaran, Farmleigh House (free access) and Dublin Zoo, another old Dublin favourite.
- 9 Brazen Head Pub have a pint in one of the cities oldest coaching inns, a short roll down the hill from Christchurch.
- 10 Halfpenny Bridge cross the Liffey here (Irelands first toll bridge) stroll along the boardwalk.

## Newgrange



Newgrange occupies a unique place in the landscape and imagination of not only Irish people but others, particularly those of Celtic origin who travel from all over Europe and the world to visit this ancient monument. Pre dating the pyramids this megalithic structure is precisely aligned to the winter solstice on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December. The rising sun gradually illuminates the carved standing stones of the passage eventually reaching the innermost chamber.

I was lucky enough to witness this once in 1995. Time seemed to stand still, it was like seeing and breathing liquid gold, not something you would ever forget and a great privilege. Nowadays to be present on the solstice, you have to apply to the national lottery to be in with a chance. Daily public access to the monument is through the excellent Bru na Boinne centre on the far side of the river. It also has a very good restaurant, shop and facilities.

## **Other things to do and see in the area are.....**

- 1 Knowth passage grave complex, decorated curbed stones, aligned to the equinoxes.
- 2 Mellifont Abbey 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian abbey with octagonal lavabo, retrace the footsteps of 800 years as you cross the threshold stone.
- 3 Slane village, check out the four large house opposite each other at the crossroads, they originally belonged to four sisters.
- 4 Slane Castle peep over the green gates to see the site of the legendary open air rock concerts run by Lord Henry Mountcharles.
- 5 Cross the bridge below the town, park into the right where you can enjoy a walk or a picnic on the banks of the river Boyne.
- 6 Francis Ledwidge's cottage road to Drogheda, famous Irish poet who was killed in action in Ypres 1917.
- 7 Drogheda town, former Viking settlement, check out St Laurence's gate one of four original fortified tolled entrances to the town.
- 8 See the mummified head of Sir Oliver Plunkett in St Peters church in the centre of town.
- 9 Termonfeckin delightful small village and golf links on the estuary just north of the town.
- 10 Beaulieu House, a very fine and unusual country house (in that it was the first unfortified house in Ireland and still has all its original furniture and paintings) on the banks of the river Boyne which has been in the same family since 1640, highly recommended.

## Powerscourt Demesne



Powerscourt in Enniskerry, is one of the most well known and much loved landscapes in Ireland. That famous view south from the terraced gardens, over the Triton pond, towards the Sugarloaf Mountain has been photographed many a time on a day trip out from Dublin.

The house itself is a very large Palladian mansion, which was designed by Richard Castle and built by the Sir Richard Wingfield, who was given the land by King James in 1603 and later conferred with the title of Viscount Powerscourt. Who along with his successors transformed an already beautiful natural landscape into a Victorian Elysian retreat, fit for a king. Who apparently never got to visit? a specially made throne still waits for him at Powerscourt.

Nevermind, today the estate on is owned and run by the Slazenger family who bought the run down 14,000 acre estate in the 1960's having made their fortune from tennis racquets. Unfortunately the house and its contents were badly damaged by a fire in 1974. However it has since being restored and is now open to the public. There is also a well stocked garden centre, delightful Terrace cafe (great hot chocolate and that view). A bespoke design centre upstairs or you can lose yourself in the Avoca Handweavers shop downstairs.

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area....**

- 1 Powerscourt waterfall, a famous tourist attraction and popular picnic spot since 1721.
- 2 The Ritz Carlton for either an overnight stay, spa treatment or Gordon Ramsey signature meal.
- 3 Enniskerry wonderful little village with great craftshops, restaurants and genuine village atmosphere
- 4 Killruddery House see the tiara shaped conservatory designed to mimic the diamond one her ladyship sold to finance it.
- 5 Climb the Sugarloaf Mountain for great views and fresh air of course...
- 6 Johnnie Foxes visit the highest and oldest pub in Ireland just over the road and up the mountain in Glencullen.
- 7 Glendalough visit the lake and 6<sup>th</sup> century monastic site founded by St Kevin, great picnic stops.
- 8 Drive through the Scalp (Indian Country) and down in the Glen of the Downs, or garden of Ireland at strawberry time.
- 9 Hike up to the infamous Hellfire club which the devil is supposed to have burned down after being cheated in a poker game.
- 10 Fernhill Gardens, dreamy Victorian cottage style flower and woodland garden with amazing blue poppies in Springtime.

## Kylemore Abbey



Kylemore Abbey is a large 19<sup>th</sup> century turreted castle in a beautiful lakeside setting surrounded by tall mountains in the heart of Connemara. It must have seemed like a Shangri la in the middle of the untamed wilderness that is Connemara when it was built by Mitchell Henry in 1867 for himself, his wife Margaret, and their nine children. Unfortunately, the fairytale didn't last and it was sold on to the Duke & Duchess of Manchester, who enjoyed this rural idyll under the patronage of her rich father Henry Zimmerman.

It eventually passed into the hands of the nuns of the Benedictine order who had been displaced during WW2 for the sum of £48,000 in 1920. The nuns opened a boarding school for girls and a guesthouse, and far from an imagined mood of austerity, the girls and indeed the nuns revelled in the beauty, tranquillity and opportunity to work and pray. Sister Benedict in particular, who took over the garden in 1958 singlehandedly, revelled in her 'secret haven of peace and tranquillity' which is very much the feeling you get there today not only in the magnificent restored Victorian gardens but in the Abbey itself which is now open to the public, craft shop and tearooms selling homemade produce by the nuns, highly recommended.

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area.....**

- 1 Leenane very pretty seaside village and film location of 'The Field' which starred Richard Harris.
- 2 Killary Fjord take a cruise down the 9 mile long fjord to the Atlantic, kids go free fri/sat/sundays.
- 3 Connemara National Park small exhibition centre, hiking trails up Diamond Hill, tearooms and playground for little tykes.
- 4 Avoca Handweavers, Letterfrack probably the prettiest location ever for a shop and perfect picnic spot overlooking Tully mountain.
- 5 Inishboffin Island, this is our Treasure Ireland complete with turquoise seas, white beaches, pristine landscapes, take the ferry from Cleggan.
- 6 Or if you are a landlubber cross over to Omney Island at lowtide for stunning views of the wind and wave lashed High Island.
- 7 Clifden is very well known and well loved, the Sky road has stunning Atlantic views, traipse across the bog to where airmen Alcock and Brown landed having made the first transatlantic crossing.
- 8 Lough Inagh Lodge very beautiful country house hotel, magnificent setting, fantastic food, four poster beds and the warmest of welcomes.
- 9 Ballyconneely is the wild west, with little cottages tucked in under stone outcrops with nets and lobster pots piled up against turf stacked gables.
- 10 Roundstone very popular weekend retreat with the city set? But gloriously normal the rest of the year, lots of high quality restaurants and old fashioned sailing regattas during the summer.

## Museum of Country Life



The museum of country life is housed in an award winning modern design space, beautifully reflected in its lakeside setting close to Castlebar. Admission is free to this treasure trove of folk life spanning 100 years from 1850-1950. The exhibitions are themed to reflect the closeness and interdependence between families and the land or sea.

Not just in the objects they designed and often made by hand to fit the task required ie fish traps and animal feeders, but also in the wealth of folklore and customs that surrounded the changing of the seasons, including both pagan and Christian rituals. Some of which survive today and many which have been forgotten....

What is unique about this collection is that all of you can get up close and personal with most of the objects on display, as they are not housed typically in hands off glass cabinets giving a real insight into the texture, relevance and authenticity of the objects. While many of the items are originals, kindly donated to the Museum of Ireland, quite a few are modern recreations ensuring that these crafts will survive into the 21st century and beyond.

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area area....**

- 1 Castlebar interesting old country market town enjoying a vibrant renewal, some nice old pubs arranged around a square.
- 2 Ashford Castle, Cong formerly belonged to the Guinnesses and now a luxury hotel with lovely grounds and a falconry school on the banks of Lough Corrib.
- 3 Cong Village itself is very quaint and interesting, visit the Abbey and the Hungry Monk cafe opposite for coffee or hot chocolate.
- 4 Westport House legend has it, that the owners fed local starving people during the famine on fish stew.
- 5 Eat at the Asgard a fantastic old pub right on the harbour, great food and atmosphere always, I love it.
- 6 Climb Croagh Patrick to the top for absolution from your sins or to enjoy the incredible views out over Clew bay.
- 7 Take a ferry from Roonagh Point out to Clare Island, caught in a time warp, fantastic for hiking or biking another favourite.
- 8 Go for a swim at Old Head in Louisburgh or Carrowmore beach, fantastic for picnics or long, long walks....
- 9 Foxford Woollen Mills genuine handwoven treasures made on the premises, a great place to buy presents. Cafe with scrumptious cakes and brown bread to buy and takeaway.
- 10 Visit Knock Shrine where Our Lady is reputed to have appeared in 1879. Pope John Paul and Mother Theresa have both visited.

## Irelands Islands



You will probably already have noticed the more laid back pace of life here in Ireland, wait till you reach the islands? Life slows down to a standstill, allowing for a proper appreciation of the good things in life, nature and community. Born of a long tradition of fishing and farming these once isolated communities were self sufficient and oblivious to life on the mainland. Most are Irish speaking and pockets of culture which lend an unspoiled insight into the past. You wont get closer to nature then on the islands yet it is which is leading a revival and return to the islands that suffered a huge exodus in the past.

Access is by passenger ferry or light aircraft so there is easy, getting about is by 'shanks mare' ie walking or hiring bikes. You can forget about time and quickly adjust to the natural rhythms of nature, daylight and darkness hours. You can do a day trip but try and stay overnight as this is the closest you will get to 'real' Ireland. Avoid high summer and the bank holidays if you can, as they get quite crowded. Winter is magical with wild Atlantic gales lashing the westerly coasts, whereas on a good summers day you can laze on white sandy beaches and swim in turquoise seas. Followed by fresh crab, mackerel, brown bread and butter, a cold beer or a pint of Guinness, heaven on earth.....

**The following are the 10 best Irish Islands to visit....**

1-3 The Aran Islands Inis Mor, Inis Meain, Inis Oir accessible by ferry from Doolin and Galway or by Aer Arann from Inverin airport.

4-5 Achill Island accessible by road via bridge and Omney Island across the sand at low tide.

6 Clare Island accessible by ferry from Roonagh Point, Louisburgh in Mayo.

7 Inishbofin, by ferry from Cleggan outside Clifden.

8 The Blaskets by ferry or eco tour trip from the small pier at Dun Chaoin.

9 Skelligs limited access due to preservation and conservation restrictions, dangerous too, ask locally.

10 Tory Island off the north coast of Donegal.



## Lockes Distillery



Where you ever in a place that you just love, that even smells right well Lockes Distillery is one of those, especially now that Kilbeggan has been bypassed and its now on a quiet back road to Dublin. Reputedly the oldest licensed distillery in the world, if you could bottle tradition this is it. There is a delicious smell in the air, a heady concoction of 'uisce beatha' Irish for the 'water of life'.

The guide tour takes you back in time as the buildings and machinery are all the original, having been lovingly restored by a local initiative which no doubt explains why the staff here are so nice and friendly? Either that or as they say in Ireland its something in the water? The Brosna river turns the wooden water wheel which powers the machinery inside. Each part of the distilling process is explained on a walk through which includes the stills, watermill and cooperage.

The tour finishes up with a very convivial tasting in the whiskey bar, one of the nicest in Ireland, and a regular pitstop of old on journeys West with my father. There is a shop of course, which sells an excellent whiskey fruit cake, if you are driving? And a small restaurant which boasts a whisked laced bread and butter pudding.....

## **10 Other things to do and see in the area are.....**

- 1 Clonmacnoise an ancient monastic settlement on the banks of the river Shannon, ruined churches, high crosses and round towers.
- 2 Belvedere House & Gardens, peculiar history, beautiful grounds and lakeside walks, walled garden, restaurant and exhibition centre.
- 3 Tullyally Castle & Gardens, gothic splendour, fairytale turrets and romantic gardens.
- 4 Loughcrew complex of burial mounds, passage graves, solar and lunar allignment. Great legend of the Hag witch....
- 5 Fore Abbey also famous for motorbike racing.
- 6 The Lakes, Loughs Derrevaragh, Ennell, Coole fabled home of many Irish fairytales, children of Lir.
- 7 Mullaghmeen Forest, the largest beech forest in Europe, a delight in spring when it is carpeted in bluebells.
- 8 Johnathan Swift Park at Lilliput, yes you read that correctly there is such a place on the shores of Lough Ennell. The dean of St Patricks is believed to have gotten his inspiration for the tale of the little people, Gullivers Travels 1726 from watching people at a distance across the lake in Belvedere.
- 9 The Hill of Uisneach, believed to be the 'other' centre of Celtic Ireland, Tara being the most well known and celebrated seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Dedicated to Lugh and famous for its 6metre high 'Cat Stone' which doesn't look like a cat at all.
- 10 Corlea Bog Trackway, ancient oak timbered bog road that has been excavated and is now on display, good exhibition centre.

## Dublin Castle



Dublin Castle is quite the fairytale inside and out. A massive medieval fortress walls protected an inner sanctum of majestic staterooms, filled with enough fabulous artwork, furniture and crystal to please any King or Queen ? The only thing is we Irish don't do royalty, we even managed to mislay the crown jewels! The nearest we got to a truly noble figurehead was Michael Collins who received the keys of the castle in 1922 ending some 800 years of British rule and tenancy.

The question then was, what would we do with it? Apart from being used as a centre of intelligence, Garda headquarters is still there. It is now mainly used for elaborate state occasions, the last visiting dignitary to stay there was Dame Thatcher. One can only assume that she enjoyed the hospitality....

Very reasonably price with excellent informative guided tours its a great place to visit. The royal chapel has recently been reopened which has a very special and ornate interior. There is also an enclosed medieval knot garden on the site of the original Dubh Linn or black pool at the epicentre of the original city where the castle cat resides and is being spoiled rotten by soft tourists.

## **10 other things to do and see in the area are....**

1 Chester Beatty Library free museum of Oriental Art and ancient manuscripts, another favourite.

2 Silk Road Cafe inspired by the fabled silk route, cooked by Arabian chefs, absolutely excellent.

3 Chapel Royal recently re-opened the jewel in Dublin castles crown.

4 City Hall history of Dublin exhibition, haven't seen it yet but have heard very good reports.

5 Olympia Theatre try and catch a show here in the grand old dame of Dublin theatres.

6 Bewleys Cafe the original and best, fantastic coffee and sticky buns.

7 Jenny Vanders Vintage Boutique the Irish super models secret.

8 Stags Head or International Bar for great pints and atmosphere.

9 The Dolls Hospital should Teddy have a broken arm or Dolly need an eye?

10 U2's Clarence Hotell if you want to catch Bono and the boys.....



## Summary



So there you have it, my personal Top 10 favourite days out in Ireland. But that's only an appetiser there are dozens more on the website under which will lead you to even more hidden gems. Perhaps you will even find some of your own, if you do please let me know. I am constantly adding to and updating the site and am always open to suggestions.

For up to date news on my travels and the very latest on what is happening in Ireland in terms of festivals and special insider events you can subscribe to [my blog](#) or join me on [facebook](#). And of course if you would like to email me with your comments, suggestions or travel queries about Ireland please feel free to do so at [ihgems@gmail.com](mailto:ihgems@gmail.com)

**Slán agus Beannacht – Good Bye and God Bless – Susan Byron**

