

IRELAND – CONNEMARA DONEGAL & THE CAUSEWAY COAST

9-days / 8-nights small group guided walking and sightseeing tour of the North and North-west



A fascinating and comprehensive small group fully escorted tour from Galway to Dublin via the wild northwest and northern coast, taking in spectacular scenery, remote and unspoiled nature, centuries of history, and the traditions, folklore and legends that make the Emerald Isle so unique and enchanting.

The pace of the tour is relaxed, and with two to three nights in each stop you have time to fully explore the area. Transport is included so you needn't worry about navigating Ireland's narrow, winding roads. With just sixteen guests on each tour, your experienced tour guide can devote time and energy to ensuring each guest has an unforgettable experience. Guides have a deep love and knowledge of Ireland and they aim to impart this. Accommodation is in carefully chosen guesthouses, and each morning a full cooked Irish breakfast is served to fuel you up for the day ahead – usually including traditional black and white puddings, eggs, fried tomatoes and potatoes all cooked in lashings of Irish butter. Lunch and dinner are not included so you have the freedom and flexibility to choose where to eat, whether you prefer a picnic or pub lunch, a fine restaurant or traditional pub fare. In Ireland a highlight is always the *craic* (fun) to be found in the local pubs, many of which feature traditional Irish music every night, and the warm hospitality and generous nature of the Irish people.

Spend three nights in Connemara, one of the most scenic parts of Ireland, to explore the craggy peaks of the Twelve Bens and walk the '*famine road*'. Travel north past Ben Bulbin in Sligo to Donegal, Ireland's hidden gem. We spend three nights in Donegal and visit the sea cliffs at Slieve League, plunging dramatically 600 metres into the roiling Atlantic Ocean, and Glenveagh National Park, with its lakes, streams, woodland, hills and wildlife. Crossing the border into Northern Ireland, highlights include Derry (Londonderry) city, the ruins of Dunluce Castle, and the charming fishing village of Ballintoy. Walk the Giant's Causeway, the World Heritage-listed site of 40,000 basalt columns formed by volcanic activity 60 million years ago. Our tour finishes with the spectacular coastal drive and a short tour of Belfast enroute to Dublin.

Departs: May, June, July, August, and September

Cost from: \$2540 per person, twin-share Single room supplement from \$635

Starts: Galway **Ends:** Dublin

Grading: Easy to moderate. On most days there is a choice of walking routes and your guide will make the final selection based on weather, local conditions and group preferences. Terrain is often undulating and there is some ascent and descent especially when walking along the coast.

Inclusions: 8 nights in guesthouse accommodation (with en-suite bathroom), Irish breakfast on 8 mornings, services of an experienced local guide, all transport during the tour on private minibus, most entrance fees.

Not included: Lunches, dinners, drinks, personal expenses, travel to start and end of the tour, travel insurance.

Call OUTDOOR TRAVEL on 1800 331 582 for details or reservations



Suggested itinerary:

Day 1 Arrive Galway

Arrive in Galway in the early afternoon to meet your guide and fellow walkers. Galway is a charming, vibrant city and we have time to explore its cobblestoned streets, art gallery and many shops and boutiques. We travel by minibus to Clifden, where we stay for three nights. This picturesque village sits at the mouth of the Owenglin River, with the Twelve Bens Mountains looming behind. For dinner choose one of a number of fine restaurants, with seafood a local speciality, or grab a bite at one of the traditional pubs, many featuring live music.

Day 2 Connemara & Kylemore Abbey

Walking @ 19km (4 hours)

A choice of routes today – the most popular is from Clifden to Kylemore Abbey via Benbaun, at 700 metres the highest of the Twelve Bens. We are rewarded with expansive views of the Connemara lakes and the rugged green countryside. This is part of the Connemara National Park which is home to abundant birdlife, including skylarks, sparrowhawks and kestrels, along with mountain goats and the iconic Connemara pony, a breed possibly descended from Viking ponies. We arrive at Kylemore Abbey on the grounds of a 19th Century castle in an idyllic location on the shores of Lough Pollacapull at the foot of the Twelve Bens. We have a guided tour of the abbey (cost approx. €15, paid locally), its well-kept Victorian walled garden, and the neo-Gothic chapel, a miniature replica of a Gothic cathedral. We return to Clifden by minibus in time for dinner.

Day 3 Killary Harbour

Walking @ 12km (3 hours)

After breakfast we transfer by minibus to Killary Harbour, a glacial fjord slashing through northwest Connemara, forming part of the border between Galway and Mayo counties. This landscape is one of the most dramatically scenic in Ireland, with mountains rising steeply on either side of the glassy waters of the harbour. This area was devastated during the Great Famine of 1845-49. We step into history and walk along the 'famine road' (built as a famine relief project) on the shores of the harbour. We see the ruins of crofters' cottages, famine villages, and remnant 'lazy beds', the ridges and trenches that were formed to cultivate the potato. The harbour today is a centre of aquaculture, with mussels, clams and salmon farmed here, and dolphins are often spotted in the deep waters of the fjord. We finish our walk at a picturesque, isolated beach, where those brave enough may like to have a swim in the refreshing waters of the north Atlantic. We return to Clifden for our final night here.

Day 4 Connemara to Sligo to Donegal

Walking @ 8km (2 hours) + town walk

To Donegal today with stops along the way to break up the drive and take in more of Ireland's remarkable history. Our first stop is the Country Life Museum, where exhibits tell the story of life in rural Ireland in the late 19th Century. We learn about the arts, crafts, folklore and traditions of that time. We continue northward to the grave of WB Yeats, in a village nestled at the foot of dramatic Ben Bulbin, Sligo's 'Table Mountain'. We stretch our legs with an easy, relaxing stroll along the coast at Mullaghmore. The views here are spectacular, both of the wild Atlantic and inland where Mullaghmore Castle is silhouetted against looming Ben Bulbin.

We continue on to Donegal town, a compact, charming town in the shadow of the Blue Stack mountains where the River Eske flows into Donegal Bay. We have time for a walk around the town, including a visit to the recently restored Donegal Castle, the seat of the O'Donnell chieftains from the 15th to 17th Centuries. The central town square, called The Diamond, is noted for its lively pubs and music scene. Afterwards it's just a short drive to the village of Ardara, where we stay three nights.

Day 5 Slieve League Cliffs

Walking @ 1.5km to 8km

The sea cliffs of Slieve League are some of the tallest in Europe, plunging around 600 metres into the Atlantic Ocean. Weather permitting we walk along the top of the cliffs, possibly on the narrow and vertiginous One Man's Pass, arriving at the dramatically situated viewpoint, where far below us the Giants Table and Chair are swept by turbulent waves. If it's too windy or stormy to walk atop the cliffs, we have a fantastic alternative, walking alongside a secluded bay near Glencolmcille, with spectacular views of the cliffs from below.



Day 6 Glenveagh National Park

Walking @ 4km to 8km

We visit the remote and unspoiled Glenveagh National Park with its crystal clear loughs, rugged mountains, cascading streams, glens, forests, peatbogs and moorland. The park is home to herds of Red Deer and Golden Eagle. We walk through the national park to Glenveagh Castle, a late 19th Century hunting lodge with a picturesque tower beside Lough Veagh. We tour the castle and its gardens and return to Donegal for dinner, then back to our accommodation in Ardara.

Day 7 Derry & Dunluce Castle

Walking @ 2km

After breakfast our first stop is the Grianan of Aileach, a circular dry-stone fort atop Greenan Mountain, thought to have been built in the 6th or 7th Century. We take in the views of Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly before crossing the border into Northern Ireland to Derry (Londonderry). We stroll along the 17th Century walls, with perhaps a stop at the Peace Bridge or Cathedral before continuing to one of Ireland's most northerly roads to Dunluce Castle. These ruins sit on a rocky outcrop with steep drops into the wild ocean below and inspired the House of Greyjoy in *Game of Thrones*. Fittingly the castle has a long and bloody history and according to legend is haunted by a banshee. We finish our day in the small fishing village of Ballintoy, where we spend two nights.

Day 8 The Giant's Causeway

Walking @ 16km (4-5 hours)

A wonderful walk today, from Ballintoy harbour to the Giant's Causeway, hugging the coastline and offering truly beautiful scenery. Leaving Ballintoy, we walk past limestone sea stacks and sea-sculpted rocks and along the sweeping curve of Whitepark Bay. We walk below the cliffs of Portbradden (or take an alternate inland route in case of high tide). We pass the smallest church in Ireland, tiny fishing villages, a number of rocky bays and inlets, and then, just past Dunseverick harbour, the ruins of Dun Sobhairce castle. We ascend from water's edge to the headland and walk through isolated countryside with expansive views. We pass Port na Spaniagh, where one of the many shipwrecks along this forbidding coast occurred. In 1588 *La Girona*, a ship of the Spanish Armada carrying sailors who had survived previous shipwrecks, foundered and sank in high seas with the loss of 1200 men. In the 1960s divers recovered a treasure trove of gold and silver jewellery from *La Girona*, which is displayed in the Ulster Museum, Belfast.

Finally we reach the UNESCO World Heritage listed Giant's Causeway. The interlocking polygonal basalt columns were formed 50 to 60 million years ago by intense volcanic activity or, as legend has it, it was built by the Irish giant Finn MacCumhail as a bridge to Scotland. Either way there is a multitude of formations, including Chimney Tops, Giant's Chair, Amphitheatre, Giant's Boot, and Grand Causeway. Time for a walk and to see the visitors centre before returning to Ballintoy and perhaps a pint of Guinness in the local pub.

Day 9 Belfast & Dublin, end of tour

On our way to Dublin we stop in Belfast for a short tour of the city centre to learn more about more recent political history. We continue on through County Meath, where the High Kings of Ireland once ruled from their stronghold at Tara, and we arrive in Dublin in the afternoon where you are free for onward travel arrangements.

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