

IRELAND

OF THE WELCOMES

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OUR HISTORY
THROUGH THE AGES

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IRISH Culture

The verdant landscape makes County Roscommon one of Ireland's hidden gems, but it's the people who ensure that the region sparkles writes **Domhnall O'Donoghue**

Ireland's hidden Gem



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Swans by a lake

"And now I must show you the paintings on our walls – they're by a fantastic artist called Rita Oates who's based here in Roscommon!"

So says Mary Gleeson, who, along with her husband, Eamonn, owns Gleeson's Townhouse – a boutique hotel nestled in the heart of Roscommon town. Rather than focusing on their own achievements; instead, my delightful hosts prefer to sing the praises of the local entrepreneurs, artists and suppliers who have been collaborating with this family-run business since it first flung open its doors almost 30 years ago.

Another example of the couple's refreshing altruism is the dinner they arrange for me with Roscommon brewers, Richard and Michaela Siberry. In addition to making the delicious Black Donkey ale in Ballinlough, it later emerges that this husband-and-wife team also makes lovely company!

Then, on my second night, Eamonn's brother joins us for dinner. James – a charming, certified organic farmer – supplies the hotel with the most succulent lamb imaginable. So delicious, I order it for dinner on both nights of my stay!

Gleeson's Townhouse Mary, Eamonn and Cáit

Eamonn and Mary – along with their daughter, Cáit, who now runs the business – might be reluctant to discuss their success, but their journey is a story worth telling.

Abandoning their teaching positions in the early 90s to pursue their lifelong dream of running their own hotel – and "to feed people", as Mary jokes – they've since grown the business to a point where it recently received the coveted Hotels Combined Recognition of Excellence Award and the TripAdvisor Travellers' Choice Award. One step through the doors and you'll understand why.

Aside from the listed building itself along with picture-book interiors; the service, atmosphere and food – especially James' lamb – are all first-rate.

Best of all, no matter the time of day, Gleeson's is always a hub of activity – underlying the importance of these establishments in Ireland's smaller communities (the town's population is fewer than 6,000 inhabitants). For instance, when I check-in, a weight-loss group occupies the function room while members of a political party debate passionately in the adjacent café.

Wonderfully, the family's finely tuned public spirit is evident in everybody I encounter throughout my three-day tour of County Roscommon. Yes, it may be one of the Emerald Isle's least populated regions but the welcome it offers visitors is limitless.

IRISH Culture

*Gleeson's Townhouse
slow braised organic
shoulder of lamb
roulade*



Bay Sports Waterpark



*Potatoes from the Great
Famine Museum*



Roscommon Castle



SMALL TOWN, BIG HEART

"Roscommon is a very liberal town," says Gerry Shannon, a volunteer in the local tourist office. "It's very safe and crime-free."

He mentions that many Brazilians now call the community home, having travelled here to work in the local meat factories.

"There are 16 nationalities in one of the schools," he proudly reveals.

Once a Garda, the retired Dubliner now spends his spare time pursuing his other passion – history.

Gerry takes me on a tour of some of the town's highlights including the former Presbyterian Church, which now doubles as the tourist office and county museum – both run by volunteers. This space is a treasure chest of nods to the past, including a Sheela-na-Gig carving from the 12th century, said to ward off evil spirits.

Other landmarks in the town include the Norman castle and the surrounding Loughnaneane Park (Lake of the Birds) – not to mention the central courthouse and jail whose most infamous resident was Lady Betty (at least if legends are to be believed!).

According to Gerry, in the 18th century, Betty – in desperate need of money – killed a man who turned out to be her son. Fortuitously, on the day of her execution, the dreaded hangman was ill, so in return for being spared, she volunteered to assume the unpopular

role. Unsurprisingly, it emerged that the villain was so good in the position that she was made permanent!

"William Wilde – Oscar's father – often mentioned this story," Gerry adds, indicating the lady's notoriety in society circles.

But before I start doubting my high opinion of the locals, I discover that, in fact, Lady Betty originally hailed from County Kerry!

DIPPING A TOE IN THE WATER

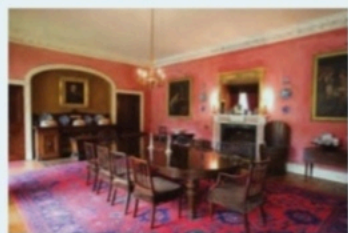
In need of cooling down after hearing such grisly tales, I venture to Baysport – Ireland's largest inflatable waterpark, which impressively claims the Guinness World Record for the tallest inflatable waterslide.

Located on Lough Ree, Baysport is the perfect day out – rain or shine – and not just for our younger brethren.

"The feedback from older people is particularly satisfying," reveals Richie O'Hara, who first opened the business a decade ago. "People who might be weak swimmers leave feeling elated!"

Some 60 minutes later – followed by an additional 10 to calm my pulsating heart – I can firmly agree that climbing these inflatable castles, before hurling myself off them again, is ridiculously good fun!

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OUR DARKEST HOUR

The pace and mood change dramatically on my arrival at Strokestown House and Walled Gardens. First owned by Member of Parliament, Thomas Mahon, this 18th-century Palladian mansion is now open to the public where many original furnishings - including a galleried kitchen - await.

However, there's an unmistakable melancholy in the air - unsurprising, given the estate's turbulent past.

"Here, Major Denis Mahon became the first landlord to be assassinated during the height of the Famine in 1847 after forcing his tenants to emigrate," general manager John O'Driscoll explains to me.

This Great Irish Famine - when over two million people, or one-quarter of our entire population, either died or emigrated - is poignantly documented in the estate's National Famine Museum. The gun that fatally shot Mahon is on display here.

As a reminder of the cyclical nature of life, the museum deftly highlights the parallels between Ireland's darkest hour and today's global crises with hunger and mass emigration.

A JOURNEY INTO ANCIENT IRELAND

The next morning, the first stop in the itinerary also takes me on a journey into Ireland's past: Rathcroghan - Europe's oldest and largest unexcavated royal site. Known as the Sacred Capital of Connaught, this area is where the festival of Samhain - or Hallowe'en - is said to have originated.

Most thrilling of all is its connection to Queen Medb - the great warrior, who ruled Connaught from her home here at Rathcroghan. The epic tale, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley) - often referred to as Ireland's *Iliad* - features a host of legendary heroes. Their names and deeds are inextricably linked to the area.

Archaeologist Daniel Curly guides me through the excellent Rathcroghan Visitor Centre before inviting me to visit some of the sites. As we explore Rathcroghan Mound - which, in the Iron Age, was topped with wooden ramparts and ceremonial henges - Daniel concedes that the site isn't as well known as the likes of the Hill of Tara. This fact suits him perfectly.

"We're a local, non-profit organisation - our focus is sustainability," he explains. "We aim to safeguard the land for the next generation so that its integrity can be retained."

Spanning a staggering 5,500 years, the 240 identified archaeological sites here include burial mounds, ringforts, standing stones, and a ritual sanctuary. And that's saying nothing of the terrifying Cave of the Cats (Oweynagat), often referred to by Christian scribes as Ireland's Gate to Hell!

As we part ways, Daniel reveals that they have a short-term goal to create a 13-kilometre walking trail, linking the various sites.

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Sunset over a Lake



Arigna Mines



Boyle Abbey



FOLLOW THE TRAIL

Having sown the seeds in my mind, that afternoon, I enjoy a hike around Sliabh Bawn Loop Walk – one of the many existing trails dotted across the Roscommon countryside. Here, in stark contrast to the surrounding natural vistas are the modern, man-made additions – a forest of wind turbines, so tall that they kiss the skies above.

Although if there were prizes for the county's premier windmill, it would surely be given to the one found in Elphin. Dating back to the 18th century, this Insta-friendly tourist attraction is the only fully restored windmill in the west of Ireland.

Better yet is the story behind this restoration – another example of the extraordinary community spirit alive in County Roscommon. Local volunteer Barry Byrne describes the years of research, development, fundraising and grant applications needed to return this round, three-stage structure to its original glory.

"Gabriel Byrne launched it for us," Barry fondly recalls, showing me the footage of the grand opening from almost 25 years ago. "His mother is local."

THE HOLLYWOOD OF ROSCOMMON

While Elphin enjoys connections to Hollywood thanks to The Usual Suspects star, Boyle goes one better – it was the birthplace of Maureen O'Sullivan, mother to Mia Farrow. Full of Irish spirit, Maureen played Jane in six Tarzan films between 1932 and 1942.

In King House – which, along with the nearby Cistercian abbey, is a prominent landmark in the town – there are four museums with one dedicated to the film star. Incidentally, the castle's guide, Mary Lavin, is deserving of an Oscar, such is the sheer entertainment of her tour of the sprawling premises.

Elsewhere in King House, there's a tribute to the Connaught Rangers – the Irish line infantry regiment. The Mary McAleese

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Elphin Windmill

Collection comprises of gifts presented by Heads of State, including Barack Obama and Yasser Arafat, to our former president during her 14-year tenure. Mary's father, Paddy, grew up in the village of Croghan.

Nearby is Lough Key, the beautiful forest and activity park. Owing to the extensive damage caused by the temperamental Storm Ellen – a force nearly as destructive as Lady Betty – plans for zip-lining, electric cycling and a tree canopy walk are put on hold until my next visit.

A MINE OF INFORMATION

My Roscommon adventures end on a high note – despite the location being underground! Arigna Mining Experience provides an insight into what coal mining life was like in this dramatic valley between the 1700s and 1990 when it finally closed. What's unique about the tours is that the guides are former miners – in my case, Gerard Cullen.

As we enter one of the many tunnels, Gerard points to a portrait of Jesus, before which miners used to say prayers as they started their shift. He jokes that it was their most effective 'health & safety' policy, but it emphasises the challenging conditions workers faced here over the centuries.

"There were diseases, unfortunately, particularly in the lungs – there's even a blue hue still on my skin," Gerard acknowledges, "but the mines were – and are – thought of affectionately."

He adds that coal mining provided much-needed work in a region of poor agricultural land, especially during the famine years. Simply put, there was money in Arigna when there wasn't money elsewhere.

"When I first started working here as a teenager, I felt like I was Superman!"

The perfect reference to end my stay – considering the number of supermen and superwomen I had the privilege of meeting across the hidden gem of Roscommon. 🍀