
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
TRAVELLER
DONEGAL
2017
DRIVE THE
Wild Atlantic Way
MEET LOCAL ARTISANS
SLEEP IN A LIGHTHOUSE
EXPLORE ANCIENT CASTLES
GO
SURFING, HIKING & SEA CAVING

Fanad Head

Hire a pedalo at Portsalon beach

Golden sandy beaches and rolling farmland threaded by narrow roads set the scene in the secluded Fanad peninsula squeezed between Lough Swilly and Mulroy Bay, and leading to remote Fanad Lighthouse. Families can enjoy a day of watersports at picture-postcard resorts such as Rathmullan or Portsalon. Take your pick from spinning for mackerel off a pier, learning to fly-fish for rainbow trout, hire a pedalo or paddle a kayak. If you are feeling energetic, why not saddle up and gallop along the shores of Lough Swilly on the pristine Rathmullan Strand. As you drive around this thrilling peninsula be prepared for delays on single-track roads; your path may be blocked by a herd of heifers and you will be reduced to cow-speed. Don't forget you are in north Donegal where the motto 'festina lente' meaning 'hurry slowly' applies and where life moves at an easy pace.

Donegal Tourism

www.govisitdonegal.com

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

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Editor's letter

Wild is the word that best describes Donegal. Geographically all but cut off from the rest of the Republic by Northern Ireland, the northwesterly county is marked by dramatic landscapes carved out by heavy Atlantic swells and fierce winds — a place where you don't have to travel very far to be completely alone.

Donegal holds enormous appeal for intrepid travellers, so it was no surprise it took the top spot in our Cool List 2017. With a sea stack-dotted coast, Blue Flag beaches and rugged offshore islands, it begs to be explored — so we sent writer Zoë McIntyre and photographer Alecsandra Raluca Dragoi there to do just that. They drove the twisting ribbon of road that is the Wild Atlantic Way (p.6), hiked the Blue Stack Mountains (p.12) and surfed the breakers at Bundoran (p.16). The result is this definitive guide to one of Europe's great wildernesses.

STEPHANIE CAVAGNARO, EDITOR

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Contents

ILLUSTRATION: NIK NEVES

AS FEATURED IN THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER Cool LIST 2017

Donegal

KEEPING IT COOL

WORDS: Zoë McIntyre
PHOTOGRAPHS: Alecsandra Raluca Dragoi

It's no surprise Donegal topped *National Geographic Traveller*'s Cool List 2017 — it's a region rich in culture, activities and legend. The Wild Atlantic Way and sites set to feature in the next *Star Wars* film are among its main draws, alongside miles of epic coastline and idyllic trails to explore. Bed down in a lighthouse as waves lull you to sleep, step into the county's quirky past at Glenveagh Castle — replete with tartan upholstery and Japanese gardens — and meet artisans who draw inspiration from the beguiling landscape

Aer Lingus flies from Glasgow to Donegal Airport from £26. The best way to get around is by hire car — Enterprise Car Rental based at Donegal Airport has cars from £18 per day.
aerlingus.com enterprise.ie govisitdonegal.com

Road TRIPPING

Driving Donegal's stretch of the Wild Atlantic Way reveals dramatic landscapes filled with mystery and legend

My wheel-clenching drive along Donegal's coastline is life on the edge. Narrow tarmac snakes its way around precipitous cliffs, whose ragged stacks have been chiselled over aeons by the relentless onslaught of the Atlantic. Stealing glances through the window affords sights of gunmetal seas, punctuated by the inky fins of basking sharks and pods of playful dolphins. Perhaps it's the perpetual fear of meeting another motorist or the effect of the mercurial skies brooding overhead, but clinging to this brink is pure exhilaration.

When Irish minister Michael Ring launched the Wild Atlantic Way in 2014, he promised motorists the 'journey of a lifetime'. He wasn't exaggerating. Extending 1,600 miles, it's one of the longest defined coastal routes in the world, encompassing breathtaking scenery as it shadows Ireland's entire western littoral. I'm tackling a part of the route that winds its way across Donegal's ravishing maritime landscapes, journeying from where surfers ride the point break down south to the remotest northern headland.

After speeding past the beaches of Bundoran, I offer a quick wave to bobble-hatted fisherman anchored at Teelin Bay before I reach Sliabh Liag as sunlight is breaking through a wreath of mist, highlighting Ireland's highest sea cliffs in iridescent ochre hues. Turning briefly inland, I negotiate looping turns to climb the high gorge of Glengesh Pass where an obstacle course of belligerent sheep sprawl across the tarmac. They provide an excuse to slow down and swoon over my surroundings; the steep tawny slopes of the Glengesh and Mulmosog mountains that frame Loughros Beg Bay, where the sea shimmers like polished steel.

My journey northwest continues along sleepy roads that curve through the Gaeltacht, the area where the Irish dialect still flourishes. This pastoral backcountry remains little affected by the passage of time, with its scattered hamlets, mossy dry-stone walls and remote blanket bogs providing peat for turf fires. With local songstress Enya cranked on the stereo, I let the Atlantic lead the way when the phone signal and GPS cut out.

Great outdoors

You don't have to travel far in Donegal to be entirely alone. It can be eerie to be so far from another human being.
Iain Miller, guide

At Fanad Head, a solitary lighthouse stands stark white against a darkened sky and the elemental onslaught of wind and water. The lighthouse was built after the British frigate *Saldanha* was wrecked here in 1811; the ship's parrot was the only survivor. Inside, black-and-white photos tell other tragic tales of sunken treasure and lost souls swept out to sea. "In famine times, the lighthouse would be one of the last sightings of home for passengers aboard boats destined for America," resident guide, John Scott, tells me.

My wild drive reaches its climax at Malin Head, the northernmost extremity of Ireland and a familiar namecheck on gale-warning shipping forecasts. The gnarled headland tip is named Banba's Crown after a Celtic goddess, though its true cosmic spirit is best revealed when winter skies swirl with Northern Lights. "Being annihilated by the wind, there's nothing like it," shouts Bren, a local guide, who gesticulates to follow him on a blustery walk along a westerly footpath.

Along a colossal rockscape, the sense of other-worldliness is almost overwhelming. I'm not the only one to feel the force; recently, camera crews chose this site for filming the next *Star Wars*. The idea of Donegal's coastline becoming a place of fan pilgrimage stirs in me a sense of unease. This spectacular land of mystery and legend has been long overlooked, and that's the way I like it.

Sliabh Liag
Europe's loftiest sea cliffs (pictured) rise nearly 2,000ft and extend for several miles. A viewing area takes in the mighty rocks stained in a splendid array of roseate streaks by metallic salts.

Donegal Islands
There's an ethereal remoteness to the area's offshore islets — most are uninhabited and off the electricity grid. One of the most unique is Tory Island, the only place in Ireland to still have its own king.

Fanad Head
Jutting out over heaving tides is the Fanad Head peninsula. Tours of its lighthouse unveil a tumultuous past with rollicking tempests and shipwrecks, while balcony views are far-reaching.

Malin Head
A crumbling watchtower marks Banba's Crown, Ireland's farthest-flung northerly point. Venture along a footpath past Hell's Hole, where raging tides surge through a narrow rock-cleft, and you'll feel the force of this unearthly headland.

Mamore Gap
It's a steep drive over this mountain pass followed by a clutch-burning hairpin descent past wayside shrines as views of Lough Swilly's weathered shores unfold.

12
The number of Donegal's Blue Flag beaches

1,972ft
The height of Sliabh Liag, supposedly the highest accessible sea cliffs in Europe

2014
The year the Wild Atlantic Way was launched as a 1,600-mile coastal touring route from Donegal to County Cork

704 miles
Donegal has the longest coastline of all 32 Irish counties

On GUARD

Whoever claimed a man's home is his castle clearly never laid eyes on the forbidding fortress in Donegal Town

There's nothing homely about this austere pile, standing guard over a bend in the Eske River. Its stout buttresses soar upward, piercing the sky with sharply pointed gables and protruding bartizan turrets. If walls could talk, these menacing stones would surely cry: 'KEEP OUT!'

Undeterred by the inhospitable facade, I step inside the tower house's gloomy basement but receive no better welcome. Three-metre-thick walls enclose around bare cobblestones that spike underfoot. Only a narrow shaft of light creeps in through slit windows where, before the advent of glass, pigs' bladders were stretched to keep out the draft. By the time I reach the spiral staircase, I swear I hear the clash of swords echoing from above. "This is the Trip Stairwell," my guide Anne explains. "The steps are intentionally uneven to make invaders stumble and fall. Mind how you go now!"

Such a defensive character comes as no surprise when considering Donegal Castle's beleaguered past. Back in the 10th century, it's thought rampaging Vikings established a garrison here, a handy base for pillage and plunder. Though their fortifications left little trace, their legacy lives on; Donegal is said to derive from the Irish *Dún na nGall* meaning 'Fort of Foreigners'.

In 1497, new fortifications were erected by the powerful O'Donnell clan and Donegal Castle became one of the greatest in Ireland. My head spins as Anne recounts the clan's lengthy rule, fraught with warfare and rebellion, and ending with defeat against the English, letting the castle fall to English soldier, Captain Brooke, by the 1600s.

Evidence of the Englishman's taste lies upstairs in the banqueting hall, a far more gracious sight with its rich wall tapestries, taxidermy and ornately carved fireplace inscribed with the coat of arms of the English monarchy. "After Brooke, the castle was left in ruins for 300 years," Anne explains. Only more recently have efforts been made to restore its former glory, in keeping with the period style. "It's reproduced furniture here. Irish history is one war after another. Heritage pays the price," she laments.

This may be true but, with careful restoration and passionate storytelling, I've certainly surrendered to the derring-do of this castle's riveting past. Through the upper windows, I spy Donegal's quiet streets below and I'm ready to return to their shops, pubs, teahouses and more peaceful ways of the present.

Rock steady

Ireland's oldest rock on Inishtrahull island is formed of gneiss estimated to be 1.78 billion years old. Geologists believe it was part of Greenland but broke away due to tectonic shifts. Gnarled and crooked, the island certainly looks its age

TOP FOUR FOR *culture vultures*

1. DONEGAL CRAFT VILLAGE
Forget naff gift shops and mosey around this vibrant jumble of open-door studios where local craftsmen flaunt their traditional wares. While souvenir aficionados are well served by bespoke lines, the village is a cultural eye-opener, allowing visitors to meet and greet sculptors, glassblowers, jewellery makers, weavers and painters in mid-creative flow. Many are eager to share their stories or offer hands-on workshops, while an onsite cafe makes a lovely pit stop for a homemade lunch. *donegalcraftvillage.com*

2. GRIANÁN OF AILEACH
This imposing ring fort encircles an Inishowen hillock and commands views of loughs and three counties. Built upon a pre-Celtic sacred site, it became the regal residence of northern Irish kings from the sixth to the 12th century.

3. GLENVEAGH CASTLE
This castellated manor was the summer bolthole for an eccentric socialite and his glitterati friends. Furnishings are suitably flamboyant: mounted antlers, tartan upholstery and exotic Japanese shrubbery. *glenveaghnationalpark.ie*

Market on the grounds of Donegal Castle
BELOW: Michelle McKee hand felting, Donegal Craft Village; Glencolmcille Folk Village cottage

4. GLENCOLMCILLE FOLK VILLAGE
Deep in Donegal's south-west Gaeltacht, its Irish-language enclave, this community project was established 50 years ago to safeguard local culture against rural poverty and emigration. Today, a sprinkling of quaint, whitewashed and thatch-roofed cottages make up the village featuring original artifacts that retell three centuries of local heritage. Explore the schoolhouse, pub-grocer and fisherman's hut before stopping at the craft shop to try traditional artisanships like rope-twisting and fishing net-mending. *glenfolkvillage.com*

IMAGES: ALECSANDRA RALUCA DRAGOI; ALAMY

BIG PICTURE

Fanad Lighthouse

I've always been attracted to the most northerly point of a landmass, which is why I was so taken by Fanad Lighthouse — situated on the northern coast of Donegal. This place feels mysterious, especially when the weather is dramatic (high waves often crash into the rocky coast), but I found a sunny day proved just as atmospheric. There was great light, with clouds sweeping across the sky, and as soon as people entered the frame, I knew they'd make an ideal anchor for the shot.

I used a Nikon 16-35mm wide-angle lens for a good depth of field, with a slightly wide aperture of f7.1. Meanwhile, a fast shutter speed at 1/160 was a priority as I aimed to freeze my subjects — anything slower would've created camera shake and let in too much light. When composing the shot, I also liked the juxtaposition between the dark rocks towards the bottom of the frame and the bright, blue sky above.

With a rugged topography that's bitten into by the sea and crowned with a lighthouse, this signature point along the Wild Atlantic Way perfectly encapsulates Donegal's epic coastline. I love this shot for the energy, colours, maritime heritage and wild beauty it captures from this part of the world.

ALECSANDRA RALUCA DRAGOI // PHOTOGRAPHER

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ON THE TRAIL

From coastal walks to mountain hikes, the best way to discover Donegal's most scenic side is by foot

GLEN WALK, GLENVEAGH NATIONAL PARK

DISTANCE: 14 miles (7 miles each way)
DIFFICULTY: Beginner

Overlooked by the Derryveagh Mountains, this spectacular protected wilderness is every walker's dream with its tumbling waterfalls and mossy woodlands that cast reflections in the shimmering Lough Veagh. From the visitor's centre, follow a lakeside footpath to reach the turrets of Glenveagh Castle before joining a dirt track into rock-ruptured bogland enswathed in purple moor grass to the glen summit. Keep your eyes peeled for golden eagles and red deer, both elusive residents of the parkland. The return journey can be cut short by hopping on the shuttle bus between the castle and car park or extended by following signposts to an upper viewpoint.
glenveaghnationalpark.ie

Gorse, Glenveagh National Park
ABOVE: Hiking with a view of Mount Errigal; chowder at Nancy's Barn

INISHOWEN HEAD WALK

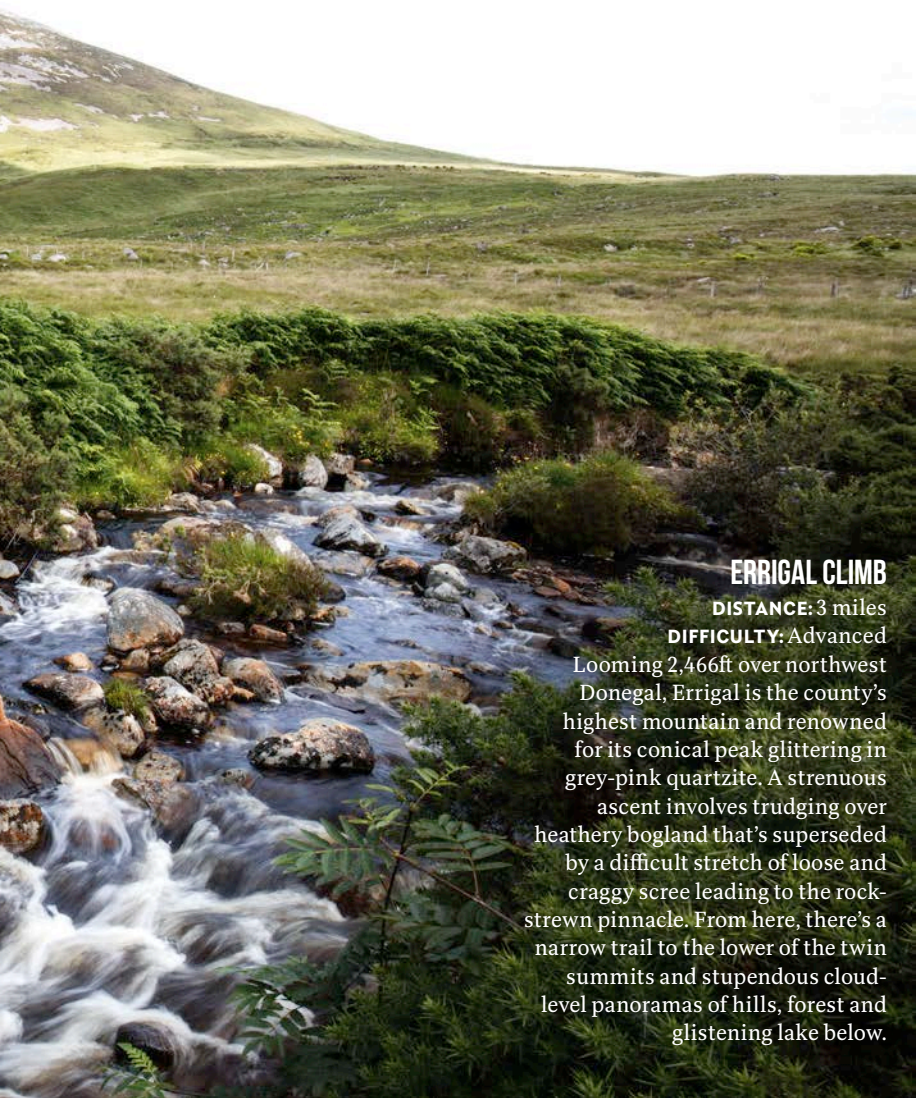
DISTANCE: 5 miles
DIFFICULTY: Intermediate

Expect sweeping panoramas across Causeway Coast. A looped walk starts from its wartime watchtower and passes Stroove Beach where bathers are often sprinkled across velvet sands. Cutting inland, bog roads skirt the shoulder of the Crocknasmug mountains before returning via a cliff path to Portkill.

BLUESTACK WAY

DISTANCE: 40 miles
DIFFICULTY: Intermediate

It takes several days to skirt the foothills of the Bluestack Mountains. Beginning in Donegal Town, a trail passes the bewildering beauty of Banagher Hill and Eglish Valley. Expect high moorland terrain between Binbane and Cloghmeen Hill then a stretch along the Owenroe riverbanks before reaching Ardara.



ERRIGAL CLIMB

DISTANCE: 3 miles
DIFFICULTY: Advanced

Looming 2,466ft over northwest Donegal, Errigal is the county's highest mountain and renowned for its conical peak glittering in grey-pink quartzite. A strenuous ascent involves trudging over heathery bogland that's superseded by a difficult stretch of loose and craggy scree leading to the rock-strewn pinnacle. From here, there's a narrow trail to the lower of the twin summits and stupendous cloud-level panoramas of hills, forest and glistening lake below.

ARRANMORE WAY

DISTANCE: 9 miles
DIFFICULTY: Intermediate

Hop on the ferry to reach Arranmore, Donegal's largest offshore island (only measuring 8sq miles) that's been inhabited since the early Iron Age (800BC). A walking trail circles its ragged northerly coastline, indented by dramatic sea stacks, hollowed-out caves and sandy spits before it cuts through wild and uninhabited interiors. Keep watch as corncrakes, snipes and storm petrels soar overhead as you hike. Don't miss remnants of a prehistoric fort that can be spied on the southeastern corner, while the sheltered eastern side brings an opportunity to interact with the friendly locals — many of them Irish-speaking — and there are overnight stays available for anyone keen to linger longer.

BUNGLAS TO GLENTIES

DISTANCE: 42 miles
DIFFICULTY: Advanced

This waymarked route is the first leg of the International Appalachian Trail, which starts in the Ulster province of West Donegal and finishes in Antrim, Northern Ireland. From Bunglass Point, which packs a punch with its audacious vistas of the soaring Sliabh Liag cliffs, watch your footing along an exposed and tricky trail towards the crescent beach at Malin Beg and the impressive megaliths of Malinmore. Further on, the pretty Gaeltacht hamlet of Glencolmcille makes a good resting spot before striding onwards to Ardara where you can sample the *craic* in fire-warmed pubs alive with the melodious strains of *bodhrán* and fiddle. The finish is 7.5 miles away in Glenties set against a superb mountain backdrop.

STOPS FOR *weary feet*

NANCY'S BARN, BALLYLIFFIN
This converted cottage on the Inishowen Peninsula, run by local lad Kieran Duey, was proudly titled World Chowder Champion at 2017's Chowder Cook Off. Slurp a bowl of the seafood showstopper or opt for a moreish sarnie. *facebook.com/nancysbarn*

BIDDY'S O'BARNES, BARNESMORE GAP
Tucked into the foothills of the Bluestack Mountains, this roadside pub has welcomed weary travellers for 200-odd years. Interiors are timeless: think wooden beams, flagstone floors and a flickering fire. *biddysobarnes.com*

MCGRORY'S, CULDAFF
A gastropub, music venue and guesthouse, McGrory's is an all-around good *craic*. Crowd-pulling talents perform while the bar offers craft beer, hearty grub and space for local fiddlers. *mcgrorys.ie*

BRENNAN'S CRITERION BAR, BUNDORAN
Octogenarian sister act Patricia and Nan Brennan rule this legendary drinking hole that their grandfather opened in 1900. Peruse the shelves of old-world oddities before pulling up a stool at the wood-top bar.

LEO'S TAVERN, MEENALECK
Framed gold discs cram the walls of this renowned music pub and family home of Enya, Moya Brennan and sibling folk group Clannad. Many of Ireland's best talents perform here so expect pints served with toe-tapping balladry. *leostavern.com*

IMAGES: ALECSANDRA RALUCA DRAGOI; GETTY

MADE IN Donegal

From landscape to larder, Donegal's natural resources have long inspired artisans. Meet some of the producers who are preserving traditions by hand

BRENDAN O'REILLY
Owner, Donegal Brewing Company
As Donegal's first microbrewer, Brendan O'Reilly has a pioneering streak and worthy credentials. The son of a publican, he grew up around the casks and kegs of Dicey Reilly's, a homely pub in the quaint riverside town of Ballyshannon. Since 2011, the shiny stainless-steel tanks of his microbrewery have occupied the old coach house overlooking the pub's beer garden, where Brendan concocts a core range of five craft brews swigged across the county and beyond. His Donegal Blonde has an easy-to-drink crispness, while local surfers lap up Mullys, a red ale he named after the waves that crash on nearby Mullaghmore. *Sláinte*! *donegalbrewingcompany.com*

Sampling the beer at Donegal Brewing Company with owner Brendan O'Reilly

Q&A

MICHAEL GRIFFIN
Bogwood sculptor, Raw Studio

WHAT'S BOGWOOD AND WHERE DO YOU SOURCE IT?
Bogwood is tree material that has been preserved under peat for anything between two to 9,000 years. I collect it mostly along Donegal's shores and in the local hills. It's unusual because of the abundance of shapes that are preserved within the wood.

HOW DID YOU START WORKING WITH IT?
I began nearly 20 years ago, when I found a piece while fishing. It looked interesting and I just started gathering pieces. I had no training but I liked working with my hands. My first sculpture was a seagull, inspired by the book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

WHAT'S THE PROCESS?
I work mostly with local bog oak, which is black, and bog pine, which is red. The wood needs to be dried for at least two to three years, although larger pieces can be up to 15 years. I love finding different shapes within the wood — these natural forms guide how I shape and smooth the wood.

WHAT INSPIRES YOUR SCULPTURES?
My sculptures are mostly inspired by the Donegal landscape. But by people too — landscapes are part of our personality. Those from flatlands are mostly level-headed. Us Donegal people, we're a bit wild. Up and down, always a storm brewing. That's reflected in my work — it's full of movement.
donegalcraftvillage.com

ELEANOR HANNA
General manager, Hanna Hats

A tweed flat cap often conjures up images of country walks and a day at the races, but for Eleanor Hanna it's hand-me-down family history. "My grandfather began as a tailor in 1924," she explains. "When demand for custom-made suits declined, he started Hanna Hats. My father inherited the business and now it's my turn, with my uncle, brother and sister by my side."

Eleanor adds that quality is paramount. "We use the finest Donegal tweed, woven exclusively for us." Inside, ceiling-high shelves are stacked with teetering piles of headwear: there are stud-fastened flat caps, feathered deerstalkers and wide-brimmed walking hats in herringbone and patchwork tweeds. The earthy shades are redolent of the local landscape — mossy greens blend with rich golds and browns to match Donegal's moors and mountains.

Cranking up behind us is the pressing machine that bears an uncanny resemblance to a *Doctor Who* Dalek. "This irons out the final product," Eleanor explains. "But the real magic happens next door." I follow her to the production room, where some dozen-or-so craftswomen sit at sewing machines using swift movements to bind and stitch the final shape. "When I began we foot-peddled these machines," remarks Tony, a 79-year-old employee who was trained by Eleanor's grandfather. "We began in a hut with room for just me and him."

After trying on many shapes and sizes, I settle on a dapper brow-sweeper in dun and beige colours of the countryside, fittingly named Donegal Touring. When I ask how long my hat will last, Eleanor retorts, "Too long! Yesterday, a customer came in with one he bought here 42 years ago." I look forward to donning my new statement piece for decades to come.
hannahats.com

MUST TRY

4 tastes of Donegal

DONEGAL DULSE
Hand-plucked from Donegal's shores, these deep-red seaweed tendrils are best nibbled straight from the bag as a salty nutrient-rich snack.

WHEATEN SCONE
Nothing compares to a crumbly wheaten scone served fresh from the oven. Recipes often combine coarse wholemeal flour with buttermilk, eggs and a touch of brown sugar.

SMOKED SALMON
The Haven Smokehouse in Sheephaven Bay uses 10,000-year-old turf cut from the hillsides to smoke its organic salmon so it's robust in taste and muscular in texture.

MOUNTAIN LAMB
Donegal's free-roaming sheep graze on green, untamed headlands — no wonder the local lamb is renowned for being rich and juicy.

How swell

The biggest wave ever ridden off the coast of Donegal was caught in winter 2007 by local surfer Richie Fitzgerald, Gabe Davies, Al Meenie and Duncan Scott at Mullaghmore Head. The storm-driven wave rose to 50ft

Surfing masterclass, Bundoran
RIGHT: Fanad Head Lighthouse

Surf's UP

Bundoran may have a sleepy vibe, but along its shores the pace picks up — with novice-friendly waves, it's the ideal place to learn the thrill of the chase

I lie flat, body clamped to my board like a barnacle. Stealing glances over my shoulder, I scan the horizon for an approaching breaker. When one hits my feet, it's time to paddle, frantically, windmill arms smashing at the ocean. It's now or never so I scramble to my knees, ready to leap up, shimmy sideways and ride the curving whitecap like a pro. It's a flop. I wobble in suspended slo-mo before my disobedient board surges sideways to catapult me into an inglorious face-plant fiasco. As I slam into the seabed, a realisation hits home: surfing is much trickier than it looks.

Spluttering water, I resurface to find Anthony shaking his wind-tousled beach curls in dismay. "You won't balance if you don't look up," he admonishes. Behind his happy-go-lucky grin and flawless tan, my surf instructor means business, no doubt an attitudinal throwback to his pre-surfing suit-and-tie days.

I'm in Bundoran, a nostalgic seaside town on Donegal's southernmost point, for a surfing masterclass. Once the preserve of grey-haired bus-trippers arriving for sea-view cream teas, in recent years the town has upped its cool quotient by luring in an international surfing gaggle with the promise of awesome swell courtesy of a wind-whipped coastline punctuated by reef and point breakers. I'm testing my nerve at Tullan Strand, a dune-backed sweep of golden sand known for its consistent and novice-friendly waves.

An hour earlier, I had wriggled into a clammy wetsuit, followed a set of warm-up stretches and did hilarious dry-run surfing exercises on the beach. Following Anthony's lead, we practised feet positions, balancing techniques and that all-important straddle-to-standing manoeuvre, impossible to master even when stationary. "It's like you're learning to walk all over again," Anthony consoled before demonstrating the distress signal. His final word was on local marine life: "If you see a fin, it's just a dolphin," he assured, before marching us out to sea.

After my initial wipe out, I line up my board for another bash. This time, Anthony offers a helping hand. As he pushes me forward, I gain enough momentum to veer up onto the face of the breaker. Instructions swirl in and out of focus; I say a silent Hail Mary and clamber clumsily to my feet. For at least three gloriously unsteady seconds I charge shoreward, punching hands out in victory, feeling euphoric.

Many more attempts and a few salty glugs later, to my chagrin, the session is over. We stagger out of the water, exhausted and elated, to regroup on the beach. It's late afternoon's golden hour and a wash of iridescent sunshine is beckoning more surfers down to the shore.

Surfing, I realise, is a fickle passion. There's the thrill of the chase, the dizzying highs and heart-jolting lows with wipe out an ever-present possibility. I ask Anthony if he ever tires of pursuing the perfect wave. "Sometimes," he tells me. "But then I close my eyes and think of being on the London tube." As we climb the cliffs to return for hot chocolate at the surf school, I look back to see tiny figures rising and dropping through cerulean-blue rollers and feel a jolt of envy. *bundoransurfco.com*

BED DOWN

where to sleep in Donegal

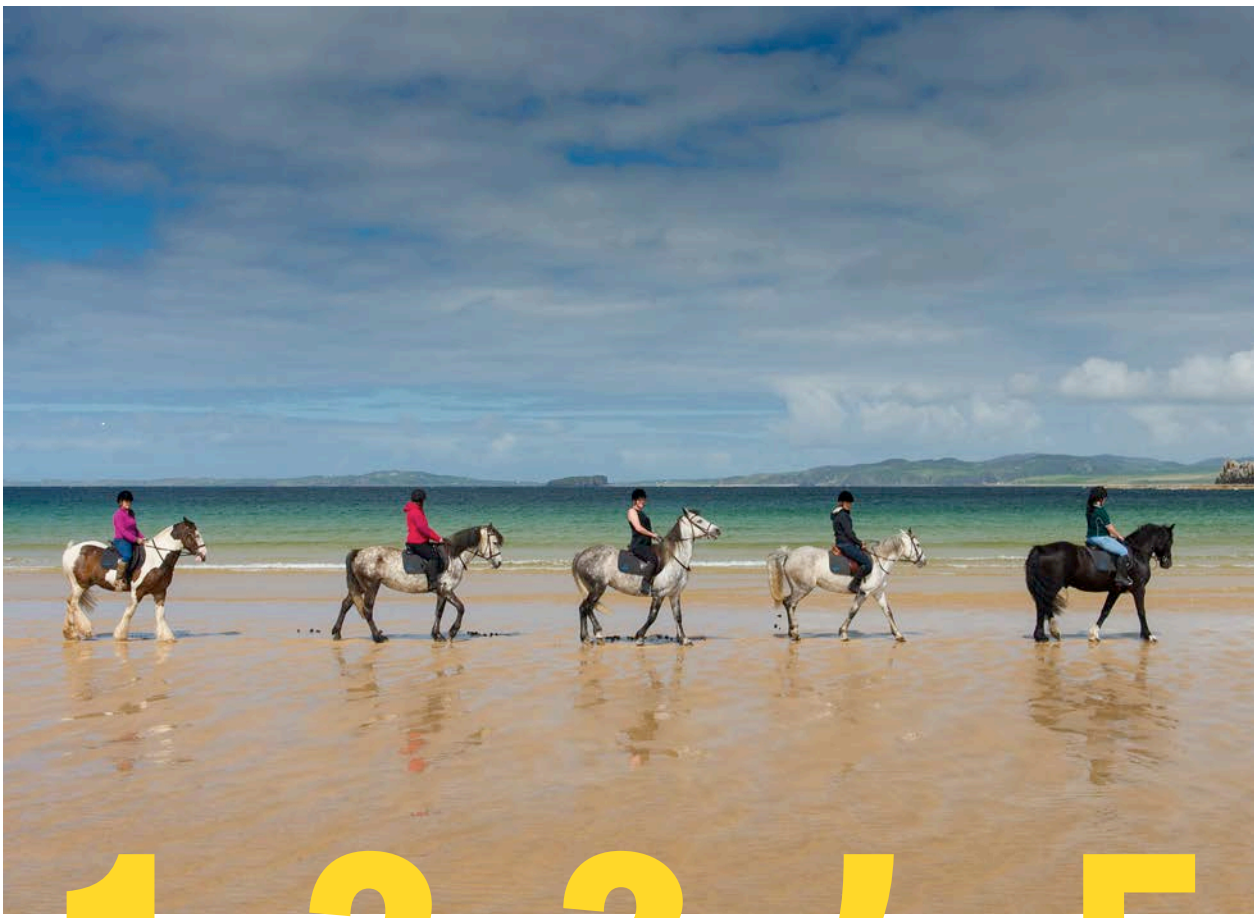
FANAD LIGHTHOUSE, FANAD HEAD
Sleep in epic seclusion in one of three self-catered apartments occupying the base of Fanad Lighthouse. Furnished with wood floors in serene cream-and-marine tones, these former lightkeepers' cottages promise mesmeric sunsets and a wake-up call of crashing rollers and squawking gulls. *fanadlighthouse.com*

WATERFRONT HOTEL, DUNGLOE
Sweeping ocean views are the heart and soul of this recently opened hotel sitting bang on the Wild Atlantic Way. Sun pours into its bistro-bar that attracts a steady stream of sociable locals who whip up a cheery buzz. Comfy beds and heroic-sized breakfasts help fuel windswept day trips to the nearby islands. *waterfronthoteldungloe.ie*

RATHMULLAN HOUSE, RATHMULLAN
This country retreat boasts antique-draped bedrooms, fire-warmed drawing rooms and a restaurant serving homegrown fare. Resist wallowing too long in the indoor pool as outside there are flower-filled gardens and a pathway to the beach on the edge of Lough Swilly. *rathmullanhouse.com*

HARVEY'S POINT, DONEGAL TOWN
Sprawled across the shores of Lough Eske, this family-run bolthole charms you silly with its blissful scenery and heartfelt hospitality. Enormous suites are glammed up with pillow-swelled four-posters and whirlpool-fitted bathrooms while the dining room offers fish feasts and lake views. The bar is invitingly sociable after a day in the remote outdoors. *harveyspoint.com*

Top 5 ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES



1

HORSEBACK RIDING, TULLAGH BAY

Gallop across Tullagh Bay, an unspoilt beach set along Inishowen's northern coast. The affable Devlin family welcome riders with hard hats, leather boots and strong cups of Irish tea. Astride a Connemara steed, it's a liberating clip-clop along bridleways and over pillows of grass-streaked dunes to reach the foaming ocean. *tullaghbayequestrian.ie*

2

SCALING SEA STACKS, PORT VILLAGE

Port Village appears a misnomer — it has no port or village, only ruins of an abandoned settlement. Follow local guide Iain Miller down scree-strewn slopes to find a hidden cove ringed by sea stacks. Daring the vertiginous ascent involves a harness and gripping to craggy ledges. It's worth the risk as views from the top are fantastic. *uniqueascent.ie*

3

ANGLING, LOUGH ESKE

Cast a line into deep waters leaping with spring salmon, char and sea trout. During the fishing season, Lough Eske Castle can organise permits and boat trips to explore the lake, the River Eske and its tributaries, with the Bluestack summits serving as a scintillating backdrop. Afterwards, head to the hotel's Solís Spa for a restorative hot-stone massage. *solishotels.com*

4

CRUISING, DONEGAL BAY

No need to break a sweat: the 75-minute Donegal Waterbus chugs around the islets of Donegal Bay to take in monastic ruins, oyster farms and hidden coves before the aptly-named Seal Island comes into view. The crew are a knowledgeable bunch bursting with titbits of local lore and even the odd singalong. *donegalbaywaterbus.com*

5

SEA CAVING, INISHOWEN

Head to Inishowen Head, where instructor Bren Whelan leads you along a knife-edge ridge to a hidden beach. After abseiling 100ft down the cliff face, the real buzz begins: hopping between rapid-licked boulders and clawing along walls to reach Pigeon Cove. From here, it's a little coasteering then a cliff climb back to safety. *donegalclimbing.ie*

Malin Head

Ireland's Most Northerly Point

As you make your way around the 100-mile circuit of the scenic Inishowen peninsula, you will find many attractions and distractions on the journey to Ireland's most northerly point, Malin Head. Catch a cloudless evening and you may be enchanted by a night sky display of the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis). The celestial light show, with its ghostly, wispy rays of dancing colours has been seen hanging like a fluorescent curtain over Malin Head — what better reason to go than to witness this astonishing sight. Those with an interest in military history will want to visit Fort Dunree Military Museum near Buncrana. Further along, Doagh Famine Village, an outdoor museum, provides a thought-provoking look at the area's history from the tragedic famine in the 1840s up until the present day.

Donegal Tourism
www.govisitdonegal.com

Sliabh Liag

Drink in some of the best views in Europe

A narrow road twists steeply up from Teelin to the dramatic Sliabh Liag cliffs and mountains. From the viewing platform, you can look across one of the finest panoramas in Europe that will set your heart racing. An information panel, part of the Donegal Interpretative Project, sets out the details of what you see. This area of Donegal is also part of the famed Appalachian Trail that leads eastwards along the Bluestack Way, and joins up with the Ulster Way and the Causeway Coast.

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