

Donegal

Slieve League cliffs are among the highest cliffs in Europe. Photo: Thomas Volz



Ireland's mysterious northwest corner

Curious to see an undiscovered part of the Emerald Isle? Alannah Eames goes in search of rugged wilderness, deep, melancholic history and Irish traditions in Ireland's often 'forgotten county'.

County Donegal is tucked into a corner in the northwest of Ireland, surrounded almost entirely by Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK) and on the other side by the wild Atlantic Ocean. Sail west and you will end up eventually in the US; veer northwards and you'll come to Iceland.

Even though Donegal is just a four-hour drive from Dublin, psychologically it feels much further away from the Irish capital. However, while the hordes of tourists head for the favourite spots in Connemara and the southwest, few make the journey further north to Donegal.

Partly due to its proximity to Northern Ireland during 'The Troubles' (the turbulent times when car bombings, riots and general unrest were common in Northern Ireland), and partly due to its terrain and climate, Donegal has always had a rugged feel to it.

The county covers over 4,000 square kilometres, making it one of Ireland's largest – and most underpopulated – areas, with a population of just over 160,000.

Surprisingly, even Hollywood royalty like Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo have spent time in Donegal, notably at Glenveagh Castle.

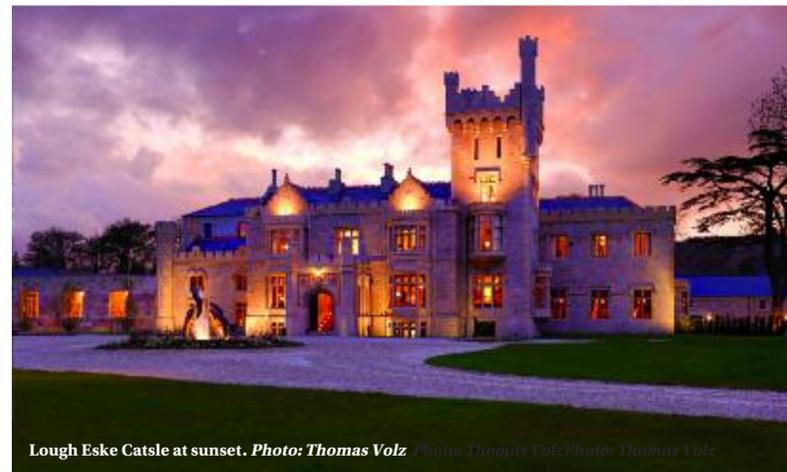
The castle was bought by wealthy Ulster American art collector, world traveller and philanthropist Henry P. McIlhenny in 1937, who used it as a holiday home to entertain his famous friends.

He handed his castle and estate back to the Irish state in 1979; today the estate forms Glenveagh National Park, Ireland's second largest national park, home to a large herd of red deer and the once-extinct golden eagle.

"The walk to the cliffs is breathtaking – think luscious green grass, dark cliffs, crashing waves and birdlife with the odd sheep wandering around"

Donegal was the roost of the once mighty O'Donnell clan which was, until around 1600, one of Ireland's richest and most powerful Gaelic (native Irish) ruling families. For centuries they controlled north-western Ireland, including modern-day Donegal, until they were forced into exile by the English in 1607.

The northwest of Ireland was severely affected by the Great Famine of the late 1840s. Thousands of Donegal people emigrated to England, the US, Canada and Australia to avoid starvation and seek employment, leaving parts of the county depopulated.



Lough Eske Castle at sunset. Photo: Thomas Volz

Today, there are stark reminders of this bleak chapter in Irish history scattered across Donegal. For example, the Famine Pot – used to feed starving families – close to Lough Eske, and tourist attractions such as Doagh Famine Village and the Workhouse Museum in Dunfanaghy.

When Ireland was divided into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (which later became the Republic of Ireland) in the 1920s, this had a massive impact on Donegal. The county was almost entirely cut off from the

Irish Free State. Bordered by Northern Ireland, bar a few miles in the south connecting it by land to the rest of the Republic, Donegal was often labelled the "forgotten county" by its own politicians.

Perhaps, due to its isolated location, Irish culture and handicrafts have thrived and are part of everyday life in Donegal. Not only is it one of the largest Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking areas) in Ireland, it's also famous for its handicrafts, wools and tweeds which have been locally produced for centuries.

In addition, Donegal-bred musical artists like Clannad, Altan and Enya have planted the area firmly on the international music scene. Meanwhile, Donegal's folk singers like popular crooner Daniel O'Donnell and Paul Brady continue to melt many an Irish woman's heart.

But, without a doubt, it's Donegal's spectacular coastal landscape and rugged interior which have captured the hearts and paintbrushes of many a tourist, writer and artist.

Donegal

Touring Donegal

Start off in picturesque Donegal town – once the stronghold of the O'Donnell clan, and their former home, Donegal Castle. Stock up on tweeds, woollen sweaters and wax jackets at Magee's department store.

Head to Lough Eske Castle – often voted one of the world's best luxury castle hotels and the only five-star castle in the region for afternoon tea or to stay overnight. After hiking one of its trails, a spot of Arctic char fishing in the lake (lough) and a whisky by the fireplace, you won't want to leave.

From Donegal town, take the road west towards Killybegs, once one of Ireland's busiest fishing ports. Sadly, today you won't find much fresh 'catch of the day' on the menu. Take lunch – battered haddock and chips smothered in salt and vinegar – at one of the fish and chip vans parked along the quays.

From Killybegs, head along the scenic coast road towards the Slieve League cliffs (one of the highest in Europe). The walk to the cliffs is breathtaking – think luscious green grass, dark cliffs, crashing waves and birdlife with the odd sheep wandering around. Or if the weather is good, take the boat trip.

Once past the cliffs, the landscape starts to change; the

mountains get higher and the landscape becomes more barren. Head to Glencolumbkille and then towards Ardara and Glenties, two of the county's prettiest towns.

Head eastwards towards Mount Errigal and Glenveagh National Park, home to Glenveagh Castle, one of the gems of Donegal. Hike or take the bus to the castle; an afternoon spent touring the castle and gardens followed by lunch at the castle cafe, with home-cooked goodies like sandwiches, vegetable soup and sponge cake, is as popular with locals as the tourists.

Head eastwards to Rathmullan, the town from which the Flight of the Earls took place. Today it is a sleepy seaside village, popular with affluent Northern Irish visitors and a good base to explore the eastern part of Donegal. Stay overnight at Rathmullan House – a charming country house perched on the shores of Lough Swilly, with its quaint gardens, hearty Irish breakfast and sociable guests.

For breathtaking coastal views, drive up Fanad Head to its stunning lighthouse and majestic coastal views. Not only is this one of the most scenic drives in the area, there are also a lot of sandy beaches, art galleries and distractions along the way.



Image: Wikimedia Commons



Rathmullan House. Photo: Thomas Volz



Stunning Glenveagh Castle. Photo: Failte Ireland.



Donegal's breathtaking coastline. Photo: Thomas Volz

All about Donegal

Area: 4,842 square-kilometres.

Population: 161,137.

Home to: Mount Errigal (749 metres), the Slieve League cliffs (one of the highest sea cliffs in Europe), Malin Head (Ireland's most northerly point), Glenveagh National Park (Ireland's second largest national park).

How to get there: Fly to Dublin with Ryanair – or Easyjet to Belfast – and rent a car. Self-drive in Ireland is the best option to get around – it's right-hand drive like Malta and will also give you the freedom you need to stop off along the beaten tourist track. Just watch out for the sheep along the way!

Where to stay: Lough Eske Castle: Treat yourself to an Irish castle experience in this five-star castle, outside Donegal town (www.solishotels.com/lougheskecastle). Rathmullan House: Cosy country-style house with a friendly ambience (www.rathmullanhouse.com).