

Going the wild way

From the top of the Slieve League Cliffs to the basement of a traditional Galway pub, follow the Wild Atlantic Way to experience the best of Ireland's ruggedly beautiful west coast.

Text and photographs **Arwen Joyce**

Eat your heart out, Cliffs of Moher

Standing at the lookout point, only a flimsy wooden fence, a sheer drop and a sparkling bay separate us from the nearly vertical rock face of Slieve League. We smile, our hair whipping around our faces as a strong wind threatens to knock my camera phone off its selfie stick. Behind us in the frame, waves collide angrily with the base of one of the highest sea cliffs in Europe, rising almost three times higher than their more famous cousins to the south, the Cliffs of Moher.

▲ To fully enjoy the Slieve League Cliffs, it is best to walk the few miles up to them so that you don't miss out on the marvellous views of the Atlantic Ocean, the Sligo Mountains and Donegal Bay.



▲ Clockwise from above: The coastline east of Slieve League; With its tall turrets and tree-strewn environs, Lough Eske Castle in County Donegal is straight out of a fairytale, albeit a modern one—with fine dining, gleaming marble floors and its sheer opulence; The long and winding road of the Wild Atlantic Way.

We manage to click a few photos before the frigid wind drives us back to the warmth of our car, and set off once more down the coast. The next road sign we encounter, though entirely in Irish, signals that we are heading in the right direction. We've been following a bright blue rectangle emblazoned with a thick white squiggly line: the symbol of Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way. Another two hours on this coast-hugging route will bring us out of the hills of Donegal, through a sliver of County Leitrim and on to Rosses Point on Sligo Harbour.

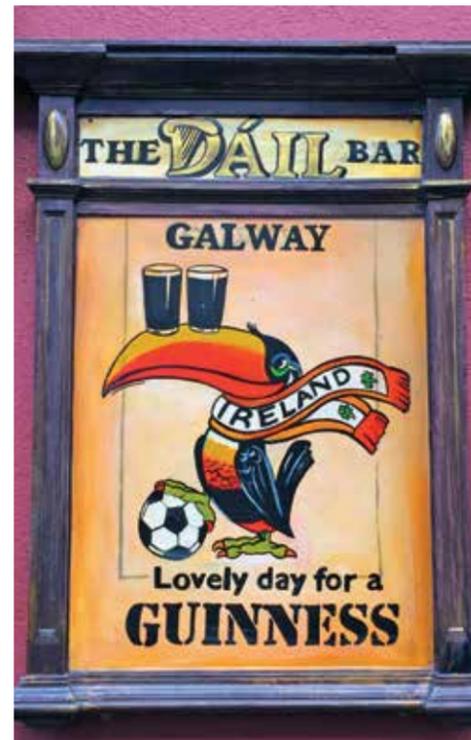
There's an app for that

The Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) is a recently rebranded coastal highway spanning 2,400 km from the island's northernmost point in County Donegal to its southernmost tip in County Cork. Ten times longer than Australia's Great Ocean Road and more than twice as long as California's Pacific Coast Highway (with infinitely less traffic), the WAW is the longest defined coastal drive in the world. All you need is a hired car and a smartphone (or an old-fashioned paper map, if you can still find one) to explore Western Ireland's dramatic coastline and various natural and cultural points of interest at your own pace.

In addition to the bright blue road markers, the Wild Atlantic Way smartphone app

makes finding the west coast's most scenic spots, quiet beaches and historic sites a breeze. If you are not lucky enough to be driving this route with an actual Irish person—in my case, a dear friend who hails from Donegal and spent five years in Galway—the WAW app is the next best thing. Follow the guide to hidden gems, local-approved pubs and historic sites, and tap into insider knowledge about festivals and events taking place along the way.

The route is open all year round but springtime may be the perfect time to visit. Not only is March the month of St Patrick's feast day, it's also the time of year when the Emerald Isle most resembles its name. The locals joke that you can tell the difference between winter and summer in



▲ Clockwise from above: Sign of a Galway pub; Rainbows brighten up the journey; Frosted clover; Salthill Promenade overlooks Galway Bay and is lined with bars, restaurants and hotels.

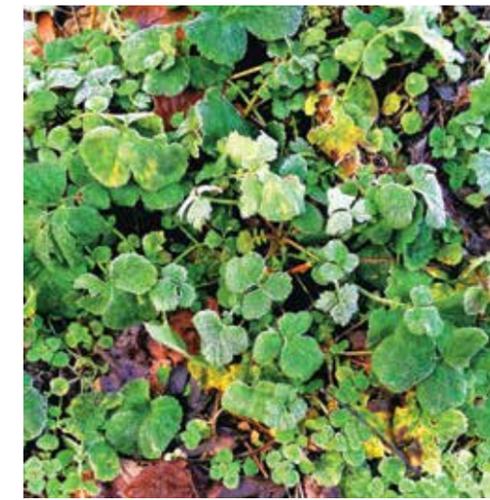
Ireland by the temperature of the rain, but it's the island's colour palette that really gives it away. Spring showers transform subdued frost-tinged fields into vibrant squares on a jewel-tone quilt. From the light yellowish green of fresh grass to the bright, rich green of dense clover to the deep blue-green of moss, the landscape is saturated in variations of a theme. Spring showers also bring forth rushing waterfalls, baby lambs and rainbows—welcome additions to any road trip. Driving along with bright sun above and lush fields ahead, it feels as though we have already found that elusive pot of gold.



Spring showers transform subdued frost-tinged fields into vibrant squares on a jewel-tone quilt. From the light yellowish green of fresh grass to the bright, rich green of dense clover to the deep blue-green of moss, the landscape is saturated in variations of a theme.

Homecoming

From Rosses Point, a blustery stretch of beach in County Sligo, we leave the coastal road for a spell and opt for a shortcut south through Mayo. Soon, we are surrounded by the gently rolling hills and grey cobblestones of County Galway. Through a bit of Irish magic, the Saw Doctors come onto the radio, simultaneously providing the perfect driving tune and summing up our situation: "And I wish I was on that N-17 (Stone walls and the grasses green); Travelling with just my thoughts and dreams; I can still see the twists and turns on the road; From the square to the town of the tribes".





▲ Clockwise from above: Glenlo Abbey Hotel in County Galway is located on a 138-acre lakeside golf estate, and offers its guests several exciting pursuits, including archery, fishing, horse riding, boating, tennis and falconry; The National University of Ireland, Galway, was established in 1845, and amenities now include lecture theatres, seminar rooms, restaurants, a recreation centre and a swimming pool; The spacious grounds of the university; The writer and her mother at Galway Bay, 1983.

Like 33 mn other Americans, I can trace my roots to this rocky isle and specifically to this county. The Joyces were one of 14 original merchant families to settle around Galway Bay in the mid-13th century.

For me, a scenic tour down the coast of Ireland is more than just a road trip; it's a homecoming. Like 33 mn other Americans, I can trace my roots to this rocky isle and specifically to this county. The Joyces were one of 14 original merchant families to settle around Galway Bay in the mid-13th century. Henry Joyce was the mayor of this flourishing port town in the mid-1500s. Richard Joyce designed the Claddagh Ring, that beloved Irish symbol of love, friendship and loyalty. Perhaps the most famous bearer of the name, James Joyce, was a novelist whose brilliant but at times impenetrable prose has been confounding secondary school students for centuries. We can overlook the fact that James was from Dublin—he fell in love with a Galway girl after all.



Halfway pint

Arriving in Galway, approximately the Wild Atlantic Way's halfway point, we head straight for the coast once more. Galway Bay is glistening in the sun as we stretch our legs for 2 km along the Salthill Promenade, the longest seaside walk in Ireland. Brave (or perhaps foolish) men in bathing trunks are jumping off Blackrock Diving Tower at the far end of the path into the frigid, choppy waters. The other walkers and joggers ahead of us participate in another strange ritual—they kick the wall at the end of the prom for

luck before turning back. One gets the impression that Galwegians march to the rhythm of their own drum.

Later that evening, the drums are in full effect on the balconied stage at the Quays, a live music venue that is part cathedral, part traditional pub and part modern nightclub. The outside looks like any other pub in this university town, but inside, a set of stairs leads to a large, many-roomed hall complete with flying buttresses, gothic wooden archways and stained glass. It seems odd to order a drink in such angelic surroundings but my commitment to history and tradition demands it: There has been a bar at this spot serving pints for almost 400 years.

There is still much of Ireland's west coast to see; we will drive on from Galway in the morning. In the most pleasing display of Irish magic yet, we hail a taxi outside of the pub and discover that the driver is none other than William Joyce. The last time I was in Galway, over 20 years ago, I was with my paternal grandfather who shares the same name. William the younger turns up 'Galway Girl' on the stereo and we sing along in a fitting farewell to the town of the tribes. The next morning we will rejoin the Wild Atlantic Way, continuing our road trip in search of rainbows, sea cliffs and even more shades of green.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways flies to Abu Dhabi from several cities across India. From Abu Dhabi, take our codeshare partner Etihad Airways to Dublin, from where Donegal—the start of the Wild Atlantic Way route—is just three hours away.

Accommodation

A range of accommodation is available in Ireland from 5-star renovated castles and historic homes to humble homestays, bed and breakfasts, self-catering holiday homes, caravans and camping options.

For more information

Log on to www.wildatlanticway.com and www.ireland.com

