

Castles of Ireland

8-day self-drive itinerary exploring eastern and western Ireland



From undulating green pastures to sheer cliffs and commanding stone castles, Ireland's historical and natural landscapes converge to create a wonderfully atmospheric whole. This 8-day self-drive will see you cross the country from east to west, exploring several of its most beautiful regions along the way, including the bays and coves of the Dingle peninsula, the wild moors of Connemara, and the fascinating karst formations of the Burren. You'll also learn much about Ireland's history as you explore medieval castles and abbeys, tour fabulous country homes, and discover towns & cities including Dublin, Galway, Clifden and Limerick. In keeping with the historical theme, we have planned this itinerary so that each evening will be spent staying in one of Ireland's most luxurious castle hotels!

Day 1 – Arrive Dublin

Collect your hire car – a Ford Focus, or similar – on arrival into Dublin Airport and drive the short distance to Clontarf Castle, your home for the next two nights.

Clontarf Castle

Located just outside Dublin city centre, Clontarf is a Victorian-era manor-cum-castle that has been converted into a 21st-century luxury hotel. Inside, Clontarf is decorated in a rich, luxurious style with ornate ceilings, stained glass windows, sparkling chandeliers, and open fireplaces. The 111 guest rooms come equipped with all the expected modern conveniences, including air conditioning and wi-fi. Meals are served in the Fahrenheit Grill and the Knights Bar, while the comfortable Indigo lounge offers morning coffee and afternoon tea. Clontarf Castle is only 10 minutes from the city centre and a 30-minute drive from Dublin airport.

Your Financial Protection

All monies paid by you for the air holiday package shown [or flights if appropriate] are ATOL protected by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is ATOL 3145.

For more information see our booking terms and conditions.

Day 2 – At leisure in Dublin (B)

Today is free for you to explore Dublin independently.

As the vibrant capital of Ireland, Dublin is a city steeped in history. It has many well-preserved historical buildings and Georgian Squares, alongside atmospheric bars, pubs and fabulous restaurants, making it a pleasure to explore. Below are a few suggestions to make the most of your time in the city:

- **Temple Bar** is positioned at the heart of the city and is filled with a singularly Irish buzz! Wander the cobblestone streets and follow the sound of traditional music wafting from the pubs and restaurants, stopping for a Guinness or Baileys along the way.
- Walk the historic campus of **Trinity College Dublin** and stop to see the famous illuminated **Book of Kells**, created by monks between the 6th and 8th centuries. A different page is opened every day.
- No visit to Dublin is complete without a stop at the **Guinness Storehouse**. This site continues to be one of the most popular tourist attractions in Ireland, and you'll see why as soon as you step foot in the factory. Learn how the popular beer has been brewed for centuries, and have a pint while enjoying a fabulous view of the city from the aptly-named Gravity Bar!
- If the weather is good, you might like to take a stroll around tranquil **St. Stephen's Green**. During the summer months, lunchtime concerts are held here.

Day 3 – Galway and Clifden (B)

Departing Dublin this morning, you'll travel across the rich green pastures of the Irish midlands to arrive at Clifden, on the western coast of Ireland. Today's journey will take you via Galway as well as a number of historical sites of interest, with plenty of time to stop and explore along the way.

We recommend Belvedere House & Gardens as your first stop en route to Clifden. An 18th-century stately home, Belvedere stands in 160 acres of parkland on the shores of Lough Ennell. It is considered one of the finest of Ireland's historic houses, and has in recent years been exquisitely restored together with its gardens.

From Belvedere House, continue west to arrive at the town of Athlone, on the banks of the River Shannon. This is the very heart of Ireland, with the River Shannon demarcating east from west. Athlone centres on a 12th-century castle, which is open to visitors, while a short detour from Athlone will take you to Clonmacnoise, a monastic settlement of seven churches founded by St Ciaran in the 6th-century, and one of Ireland's earliest Christian sites.

Leaving Athlone and continuing along the M6, you'll soon arrive into Galway, an Irish harbour town with a rich and fascinating history. Galway became wealthy in the 16th-century through trade with Europe, principally Spain. Remnants of this period can be seen in the Spanish Arch, a



gateway in the old city walls, and the Spanish Parade, where you can enjoy a stroll along the promenade.



The last leg of today's journey will see you drive north from Galway and into the wild and rugged Connemara region, famous for its lakes and mountains, to arrive in Clifden, where you spend two nights at the wonderful Abbeyglen Castle.

Abbeyglen Castle

Abbeyglen Castle was built in 1832 by John d'Arcy, a member of a wealthy Galway family. Clifden itself developed around the castle, beginning as a small settlement before flourishing into a busy town. The d'Arcy family also built Clifden Castle, where the family lived before moving to Abbeyglen. In the intervening years, the Castle became an orphanage before being bought by a local couple in the late 60s and restored to its former glory.

The Castle has a superb location in private grounds, with views of the ocean to the front and the Twelve Bens Mountain range and forests to the rear. A 6-minute walk from Abbeyglen will take you to Clifden town, with its lively shops, pubs and restaurants. The Castle has 48 rooms with all the expected modern facilities, while an excellent gourmet restaurant serves specialities including lobster and Connemara lamb. Tuesday night is Irish night, when traditional Irish dishes are served accompanied by Irish music and song.



Distances

Clontarf Castle to Belvedere House:	60 miles; approx 1½ hours' drive
Belvedere House to Clonmacnoise:	37 miles; approx 1 hour drive
Clonmacnoise to Abbeyglenn Castle:	100 miles; approx 2½ hours' drive

Day 4 – Connemara (B)

Today can be spent discovering the Connemara region. We recommend starting with Connemara National Park, where wild ponies and Irish red deer roam freely through 5,000 acres of highland terrain. The park can be enjoyed on a scenic drive or via the many well-marked walking routes.

Just north of Connemara National Park is the magnificent Kylemore Castle & Abbey, a late 19th-century mansion & monastery situated at the foot of Mt Druchruach, on the northern shore of Lough Pollacappul. Irish Benedictine nuns, with a tradition of over 300 years, run the Abbey.

In the afternoon, we recommend taking a scenic drive through Leenane, a quiet village situated at the head of Killary fjord. The fjord can be explored on a 90-minute sea cruise, which departs throughout the day and offers a unique perspective on the coastal and mountain scenery of Connemara.



At the end of the day, return to Clifden for another night at Abbeyglenn Castle.

Day 5 – The Burren & the Cliffs of Moher (B)

Depart Clifden this morning and travel south through Galway and into County Clare. We recommend taking a picnic lunch to give you time to enjoy a walk through the fascinating lunar-lesque landscape of the Burren and to visit the Cliffs of Moher, a spectacular 9-mile long series of cliffs which rise almost 200m above sea level at their peak.



Today's route will also take you through the heritage town of Kilrush, where, if time allows, you might like to enjoy a stroll before continuing a further 10kms to Killimer. In Killimer, board the ferry to Tarbert in County Kerry, a 20-minute journey across the Shannon estuary.

After arriving in Tarbert, drive through Listowel and on to Tralee, where you stay two nights at Ballyseede Castle Hotel.

Ballyseede Castle

One of the best-known castle hotels in Ireland, Ballyseede has a history dating back to the 1590s. The house was the ancestral home of the Blennerhassett family, who were active politically in Ireland from the fourteenth century. Set amid thirty acres of native woodland in the heart of Kerry, the castle has been wonderfully transformed into a luxurious hotel with 23 rooms, a library, bar, and three restaurants. The Stonehouse Restaurant serves breakfast, Pappy's Bar has a selection of full and light meals (served all day), while the O'Connell restaurant offers gourmet food and an extensive wine list. The lively town of Tralee is just 5kms away with a choice of restaurants, cafes and shops.

Distances

Abbeyglen Castle to The Burren:	72 miles; approx 2½ hours' drive
The Burren to Cliffs of Moher:	25 miles; approx 1 hour drive
Cliffs of Moher to Killimer:	32 miles; approx 1¼ hours' drive
Tarbert to Ballyseede Castle:	28 miles; approx 1 hour drive

Day 6 – Dingle Peninsula (B)

Today can be spent exploring the magnificent landscapes of the Dingle peninsula, a region which attracts photographers and visitors from all over the world. Old customs and traditions remain alive here, while the impressive landscape has been used as a backdrop to many films.



Weather permitting, you might like to include a 2 to 3-hour boat trip around the largely uninhabited Blasket Islands. The Blaskets are remote, unspoilt, and spectacularly beautiful. They are home to an incredible number of breeding seabirds, while the surrounding seas are inhabited by dolphins, porpoises, Atlantic seals and even the occasional whale or orca.

After a day spent exploring Dingle, return to Ballyseede Castle for overnight.

Day 7 – Medieval Limerick, Rock of Cashel & Kildare (B)

This morning, spend an hour or two in the medieval city of Limerick, exploring its history and architecture, and perhaps shopping for some of the splendid crafts on offer.

Leaving Limerick, travel eastwards towards the village of Straffan in County Kildare. En-route, a small detour will take you to the imposing Rock of Cashel, a collection of medieval structures situated on a high vantage point that rises dramatically from the flat countryside. The rock is crowned by a 13th-century Roman-esque chapel and the beautifully-restored Hall of the Vicar Choral.

Continue through the rich pastures of the Irish midlands and into Co. Kildare, where you stay tonight in Barberstown Castle, a 13th-century castle surrounded by 20 acres of gardens.

Barberstown Castle

Located a short distance from Dublin, Barberstown is a country house hotel & castle with a long history dating back to the middle ages. Since it's founding in the 13th-century, the castle has had no fewer than 37 owners (one of them being Eric Clapton), but has retained much of its character and heritage.

Barberstown offers 50 en-suite guest rooms, all presented with antique furnishings and lots of elegant touches. The Barton Room restaurant offers French-influenced country house dining and is recommended in Michelin guides – pre-booking is usually necessary. There is also a bar serving lighter meals.

Distances

Ballyseede Castle to Limerick City:	60 miles; approx 1½ hours' drive
Limerick City to Rock of Cashel:	40 miles; approx 1½ hours' drive
Rock of Cashel to Barberstown Castle:	90 miles; approx 2 hours' drive

Day 8 – Departure (B)

After breakfast, drive 22 miles east to Dublin Airport, where you return your car rental, bid Ireland farewell, and catch your departing flight.

Price Guide:

*The cost of this itinerary is from **£1,585 per person**, based on two travellers in double/twin accommodation and travelling in shoulder season. For family and high season rates, please [contact us](#).*

Includes:

- 7 nights' accommodation at a selection of historic Irish castle hotels (double/twin basis)
- Daily breakfast
- 8-day car hire with comprehensive insurance and unlimited mileage (Ford Focus, or similar)

Excludes:

- International flights – please ask us for a quote
- Lunch and dinner to own account
- Travel expenses and entrance fees to historic sites
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses and tips