

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

WIN! A SIX-NIGHT SAFARI FOR
TWO IN BOTSWANA

TRAVELLER

UK EDITION // APRIL 2020 // £4.95

NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.CO.UK/TRAVEL

I R E L A N D

ART • DESIGN • FOOD • MARKETS • MUSIC • PUBS • SURFING • WHISKEY



KEFALONIA

AUSTRIA

KIGALI

Bologna

From lasagne to
Lambrusco, a taste of
Italy's culinary powerhouse

New Mexico

The weird, wild and
wonderful heartland of
the American Southwest



ALSO: ANGERS // COPENHAGEN // SHETLAND ISLANDS // SINGAPORE // VANCOUVER

THE NEW IRELAND

The cultural heritage of the Emerald Isle stretches back millennia, but what about modern Ireland? We explore the source and raise a glass to Irish culture, whether it's tasting its culinary revolution, exploring the thriving arts movement, tapping our feet to the best new music or diving into the surf scene for a weekend away. The island of Ireland — North and Republic — is alive with stories and experiences

WORDS **PÓL Ó CONGHAILE**

IMAGE: DAVID SCIORA

CULINARY REVOLUTION

LIMERICK

GO TO MARKET

Limerick’s storied food scene is informed by its setting, sandwiched between the River Shannon and pastureland — and now its historic market is the focus of a new food tour

At Limerick’s Milk Market, I’ve eaten a sausage roll, and muesli sourdough bread slathered in homemade marmalade, followed by paprika-battered monkfish fritters, and then somehow made room for some ‘spiralaytos’ — crisps whizzed from potatoes with a hand drill device. I’m glad I skipped breakfast.

“Growing up, this was somewhere we always came on a Saturday morning,” says my guide, Siobhán O’Neill. “For the bit of shopping, or the turkeys for Christmas; there was a little more blood and guts in the market back then. I remember I’d kick and scream about things I couldn’t have.”

Well now, she can have her fill, and then some. Last summer, Siobhán and her partner, Tom Downes, set up food tour company Teacht Linn Tours. Having travelled abroad, tasting their way across the world, the couple realised Limerick’s historic market was crying out for curated tours. ‘Teacht linn’ is Irish for ‘come with us’ — and that’s just what I do, following the pair through what’s both a storied local crossroads and the cutting edge of the city’s evolving food scene.

The Milk Market runs Friday to Sunday, but Saturday morning is when it reaches “boiling point”, as Siobhán puts it. Sausages sizzle, fresh fish is slapped down on ice, hundreds of baps are sold. Produce ranges from farmhouse cheeses to stallholder Sefik Dikyar’s baklava, made to his Turkish granny’s recipe.

Beyond the market’s walls sprawls Ireland’s third-largest city. It’s also the hardest to define; Limerick lacks the touristy glow of places like Galway and Cork. It’s found it tough to shake gritty stereotypes and the aura of *Angela’s Ashes*, but things

are changing. There are festivals like Pigtown Culture & Food Series, an autumn programme of food-related events. There are also casual stops, such as La Cucina Centro (Italian) and Canteen (Asian) serving up zingy eats, while a tasting platter I order at No. 1 Pery Square, a chic Georgian townhouse hotel, is a hymn to local ingredients like Ispíní charcuterie and Castleconnell honey. By King John’s Castle, a bold new mural of local hero Dolores O’Riordan, the late lead singer of The Cranberries, feels like a splash of intent.

“There’s a subculture in Limerick,” says Stephen Cunneen during a chatty tour of his new Treaty City Brewery, on Nicholas Street, just steps from the castle. “This city is a place for the smallholders, and we’re saying: this is who we are and this is what we do, and this is how we’re going to do it.”

Stephen tells me he’s the first new brewer in Limerick in over a century. “Ten years ago, King’s Island in central Limerick would’ve been considered one of toughest areas in southwest Ireland,” he says. “Now there’s a real resurgence. I feel very excited about where this city can be; we haven’t even started yet.”

Back at the Milk Market, Siobhán and Tom are laying out tasters of farmhouse cheese. Limerick may be late to Ireland’s food party, Tom acknowledges, but, he says, it’s catching up quickly. “If you put heart and soul into your food the word will spread and people will come,” he says. “It will happen.”

MORE INFO: Teacht Linn Tours’ tours of Limerick’s Milk Market from €30 (£25) per person. teachtlinntours.com milkmarketlimerick.ie

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Milk Market, one of Ireland’s oldest markets, which now sells a wide variety of foodstuffs, much of which is produced locally; cheese for sale at the Milk Market; Sarsfield Swivel Bridge, one of the three main bridges in Limerick that cross the Shannon River
PREVIOUS PAGE: Surfers walking along a cliff in stormy weather, Co Mayo

IMAGES: SEAN CURTIN/TRUE MEDIA; GETTY



RISING STARS

Since opening in May 2019 at Cliff at Lyons hotel, County Kildare, Aimsir restaurant has already picked up two Michelin stars. Husband and wife owners Jordan Bailey and Majken Bech-Bailey say their 15-course menu aims to ‘put Ireland on a plate’. Local produce ranges from lamb, seafood and cheeses to oysters, garlic and even rare Irish nashi pears

JORDAN: “We spent months on the road before we opened, travelling around Ireland looking for suppliers, craftsmen, fishermen, foragers and whatever else. We started with what we thought was a very extensive list, but once we spoke to one farmer, they’d refer us to another down the road, and it just went crazy after that.”

MAJKEN: “We live in a world where it’s very easy to get everything year-round — you can buy strawberries in Tesco in December. But Jordan, as a chef, gets more creative when he focuses on pure ingredients, instead of having the whole world at his fingertips. It’s also about sustainability; there’s no reason to buy from across the world when you have everything here.”

JORDAN: “One of the main reasons we came here was because it’s so untouched — that excited me. But you saw with last year’s Michelin Guide [18 restaurants on the island have one or two stars] that Irish restaurants are kind of taking over. We have amazing potential; it’s just about getting the right people to do the right thing and put it on a world stage.”

MAJKEN: “Jordan and I looked at over 100 different restaurant names and narrowed it down to three. The first thing about ‘aimsir’ [pronounced am-sheer] was that it looked and sounded beautiful. It means ‘weather’ and ‘time’ in Irish, which chimed with our idea of using seasonal Irish produce.

Seasonal tasting menu €135 (£112). aimsir.ie



LEFT FROM TOP: Majken picking sea beet on a coastal foraging trip; Jordan prepping for service at Aimsir; Jordan Bailey and Majken Bech-Bailey, co-owners of Aimsir restaurant, foraging in a wood in Enniskerry
 RIGHT: Dish of oyster, cucumber and arrow grass at Aniar, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Galway

TOP 4: FOOD EXPERIENCES

BREAD SCHOOL, FIREHOUSE BAKERY, CO CORK
 ‘Where bread is king’. That’s the motto of this bread school on Heir Island, in Roaringwater Bay. Full-day classes include lunch with wine. €125 (£104) per person. thefirehouse.ie

ARMAGH FOOD & CIDER FESTIVAL, CO ARMAGH
 Armagh is Northern Ireland’s apple country. This event is the perfect excuse to explore, with showcases, markets, orchard tours and special dinners. 24-27 September. visitarmagh.com

BLACKSTAIRS ECO TRAILS, CO CARLOW
 Mary White runs foraging tours from her home outside Borris. You’ll be making wild garlic pesto and gorse ice cream in no time, and there are cosy shepherd huts for overnight stays. blackstairsecotrails.ie

ENGLISH MARKET, CORK, CO CORK
 A historic covered market in the city centre selling everything from artisan chocolates to drisheen (a type of blood pudding). Don’t forget Kay Harte’s excellent Farmgate Café, too. englishmarket.ie

IMAGES: SHANE O’NEILL/ASPECT PHOTOGRAPHY



GALWAY

14 HOURS IN...

From gastro stops to great museums and theatre, the European Capital of Culture 2020 is ripe for exploring — and is arguably Ireland’s most delicious city

8AM SNACK AND STROLL
 Grab a warm cinnamon bun and locally roasted Red Eye Coffee from Marmalade Bakery on Middle Street, before walking along the River Corrib and the Long Walk promenade. Or do as Galwegians do and walk the Salthill Prom, kicking your foot against the wall at the end, as tradition dictates. marmaladegalway.com

10AM A DELA-CIOUS BRUNCH
 Dela is a colourful cafe that sources much of its produce from an organic farm near the city. From a Dela Fry, with sizzling Herterich’s sausages, and Kelly’s black pudding to buttermilk pancakes and veggie options, there’s plenty to choose from. dela.ie

12PM TOUR THE LATIN QUARTER
 The beauty of Galway is its ability to squeeze big city buzz into small streets. Soak it up by strolling from the Spanish Arch up Quay Street towards Shop Street, stopping at Hazel Mountain Chocolate (bean-to-bar chocolate made in the Burren region of County Clare) and Charlie Byrne’s Bookshop along the way. If you’d prefer a guide, Brian Nolan’s Galway’s Horrible History tour leaves from Eyre Square at 10.30 and noon. galwaywalks.com

2PM A KILLER LUNCH AT KAI
 Peckish? Plot a course for the city’s Westend, where New Zealand-born chef Jess Murphy is doing magical things with seasonal, Irish ingredients at Kai (the Maori word for ‘food’). Think Clare crab and Irish fine beans served with local leaves and a hen’s egg, or chickpea and goat’s curd filo pies. kairestaurant.ie

4PM GALWAY CITY MUSEUM
 Exhibits at this small museum range from a Galway hooker (a type of sailing boat) to prehistoric finds and a collection of local author Pádraic Ó Conaire’s books and belongings. There’s a super view of the River Corrib and Atlantic Ocean from the top of the building, too. galwaycitymuseum.ie

5PM PEOPLE-WATCH AT TIGH NEACHTAIN
 The corner perches at this cosy pub, bang in the middle of the medieval quarter, are the best places in the city to watch the world go by. Sample a local Soulwater IPA or oatmilk stout while you’re at it. tighneachtain.com

7PM MICHELIN STAR MAGIC
 Galway has two restaurants taking local ingredients to Michelin-starred heights: Aniar and Loam. “We’ve the best ingredients; we just need to present them in the best possible way, and that’s often the simplest way,” says J P McMahon, chef-patron at Aniar, where simple descriptions like ‘brill, sea beet’ and ‘potato, lovage’ belie the sophistication of the creations they refer to. From €89 (£74) per person. aniarrestaurant.ie

11PM ROCK ON AT RÓISÍN DUBH’S
 A gig at this music/comedy venue on Dominic Street could throw up Irish indie acts like Delorentos or La Galaxie, or emerging local acts. Strange Brew is a classic indie night on Thursdays. roisindubh.net

MORE INFO: Food tours available from galwayfoodtours.com galway2020.ie galwaytourism.ie

OUT ON THE TOWN

BELFAST

NORTHERN SOUL

Belfast-based DJ, broadcaster and radio producer David O'Reilly discusses the city's barnstorming live music scene, where to catch the best gigs and which local bands to watch



“The weird thing about Belfast, and all of Northern Ireland, is that there are more bands than there should be,” says David. Better known as Rigsy (“even my mother calls me that”), O'Reilly is an Irish radio personality and presenter of BBC Radio Ulster's *Across the Line*, a show focusing on new Irish music.

“There's absolutely a creative energy happening,” he enthuses. That's down to several factors, from success stories such as Snow Patrol and Two Door Cinema Club to summer festivals like Belsonic and AVA. Belfast is an encouraging environment for young bands and musicians, he tells me — and a great destination for travellers who like their tunes.

So where can visitors go for a taste of the music scene? First up, says Rigsy, a little homework is required.

“The HQ for new bands is probably Voodoo in the city centre,” he explains. “It's the best place to go — you'll meet musicians, it's run by musicians, and there are musicians behind the bar.”

Limelight, meanwhile, is “the absolute heritage venue”. Touring acts have ranged from Oasis to Jeff Buckley and The Strokes. The Belfast Empire Music Hall is another solid stop for concerts, according to Rigsy, while the ‘Sounds of NI’ night at The Pavilion Bar is the place to catch up-and-coming acts.

Belfast's rock and alternative scenes didn't appear overnight, of course. This is a city whose alumni include Van Morrison, Ruby Murray and David Holmes. Led Zeppelin first played *Stairway to Heaven* live at the Ulster Hall in 1971 and, according to the guide of a music bus tour I went on some years ago, “The music was so loud, they couldn't hear a gun battle taking place around the corner.”

I ask Rigsy what acts are breaking through right now. “We're talking about bands based in Belfast rather than *from* Belfast,” he says, going on to describe Ryan McMullan, from Portaferry, as “absolutely massive”. New Pagans, The Wood Burning Savages and Careerist are rock bands to watch, he adds, while solo artists Jealous of the Birds, Roe and Kitt Philippa are all thrilling listens. “Look, I could go on all day.”

MORE INFO: visitbelfast.com. Follow Rigsy on Twitter @Rigsy

ROCKIN' PUBS

Four of the best spots to catch some live music

SPIRIT STORE, DUNDALK, CO LOUTH
Snugs, sash windows, candles and craft beers. This quayside treasure features Sunday trad sessions downstairs, while upstairs is a lovingly curated venue that has drawn local legends like Just Mustard and Jinx Lennon, as well as touring acts like Snow Patrol and The Handsome Family. It's a gorgeous space, and offers an authentic taste of the Irish music scene. spiritstore.ie

TEACH HIÚDAÍ BEAG, BUNBEG, CO DONEGAL
Here's where to combine good music and Gaeilge (the Irish language). Set in Ireland's largest Gaeltacht area, the northwest pub features the best of local trad in Monday night *seisiúns*, with up to a dozen musicians on the go at times. More good news: it's also a B&B. tradcentre.com/hiudabeag

DE BARRA'S FOLK CLUB, CLONAKILTY, CO CORK
Serving up everything from trad and rock 'n' roll to comedy and blues, this gregarious, genre-bending pub is a West Cork legend. Don't miss it. debarra.ie

ANNESLEY HOUSE, NORTH STRAND, DUBLIN
Pubs like Pipers Corner, The Cobblestone and Whelan are better known for live music, but ‘The House Presents’ sessions at Annesley House are one of the Northside's sweetest surprises. A salon-style setup features an eclectic mix of live rock, blues, acoustic and spoken word. facebook.com/thehousepresents

IMAGES: GETTY



A traditional Irish music session at Belfast's The John Hewitt pub.
ABOVE: Lydia Slagel and Laura Rogers, of singing and songwriting duo The Secret Sisters, perform at Belfast's Empire Music Hall



ALL-IRELAND FINALS

If Gaelic football and hurling are the country's religions, Croke Park is the cathedral — an epic Dublin stadium where inter-county sporting rivalries peak on All-Ireland final days. The summertime season-enders see 80,000 fans gather to watch world-class sportsmanship in an event as indescribably Irish as they come. Don't have a ticket? Simply pitch up in a nearby pub. gaa.ie

FROM TOP: A tasting tour at Roe & Co Distillery, in the historic The Liberties neighbourhood; the Jameson Distillery Bow Street in Dublin's Smithfield area

IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER HEANEY

DUBLIN

DRINK TO THAT

After a lost century, Dublin's Golden Triangle glows again, with new distilleries riding high on Ireland's craft spirits boom

The smell makes me smile. It's faint, but as I walk down James Street, it gains strength. Ghosting over the black gates, swilling around old steeples and 21st-century cranes, its toasty, porridge-like pungency nests in my nostrils. Some Dubliners love it; some hate it. But we all know it instantly: it's the smell of barley roasting in Guinness' St James's Gate Brewery.

"That's how The Liberties neighbourhood smells a couple of hours a day, my friends," says tour guide Shane McCann on a tour of the newly opened Roe & Co Distillery. "Tourists wonder what's going on."

The Liberties is home to the Guinness Storehouse, Ireland's most-visited tourist attraction, but the Black Stuff is far from the only drink on offer round these parts — Ireland's craft spirits boom has seen several new whiskey distilleries open up in recent years. A couple of minutes' walk from Roe & Co is Pearse Lyons Distillery in the former St James' Church; copper stills sit in its nave and a glass spire lights up seductively at night. Nearby Newmarket is home to the Teeling Whiskey Distillery, whose bottles can be found in every pub in Dublin.

Dublin has form with whiskey. In the 1800s, a small area of the city known as the 'Golden Triangle' was a global powerhouse, with brands like Jameson, Powers and George Roe (for which Roe & Co is named) known all over the world. But a failure to modernise, the rise of Scottish whisky, war at home and Prohibition abroad combined to create what's often referred to as 'a lost century'.

However, tides are turning. In 1980, just two working distilleries remained on the island; today, there are 30.

Continuing the tour, Shane leads us to a flavour workshop. The aim is to "demystify cocktails a little," he says, encouraging us to blend whiskey and ice with sweet, sour and salty additions. "Bar menus can be confusing. Some guys light their drinks on fire, others throw orange peel all over the place — and it all makes you just want to run out the door."

What's remarkable is the neighbourhood in which this story is unfolding. "The Liberties is a living, breathing village," says Liz Gillis, a historian who takes me on a walking tour of the area. Turning one corner, we see a chunk of medieval city wall. Turning another, we pass Variety Jones, a hip new restaurant with one Michelin star. Meath Street, with its street vendors, feels like a small town where everyone knows one another ("they know your secrets as well!" Liz laughs). But there are new hotels and apartment complexes, too. Cranes hover over a skyline once dominated by church steeples; debates about gentrification are in full swing. I ask Liz how she feels about the development in the area. "There's nothing wrong with change," she muses. "They just don't have to go knocking everything down. It's about an interaction of both."

Back at Roe & Co Distillery, Shane invites us to open a wooden box. It's filled with jars of clove drops and toffee, whose notes we seek out in whiffs of whiskey. Momentarily, the smell of barley slips my mind.

MORE INFO: Distillery tours in The Liberties can be taken at Roe & Co, Pearse Lyons and Teeling. roeandcowhiskey.com pearselyonsdistillery.com teelingdistillery.com visitdublin.com



THE NEW ARTS SCENE

DERRY

PAINT THE TOWN

For years, Derry's art scene was defined by the Bogside murals, famous for their depictions of The Troubles. But now a new, creative vibe is sweeping the city, ushering in a fresh array of murals, festivals and attractions

I'm staring at a giant mural of a boy in a gas mask holding a petrol bomb. He appears to stare back. Painted onto the gable end of a house on Rossville Street, The Petrol Bomber is one of a dozen murals in what's known as 'the People's Gallery' in Derry's Bogside. Around me, local residents go about their lives as tourists photograph their homes.

I'm torn. The murals bring visitors, but they feel divisive in 21st-century Derry. The Bogside Artists — the men who created the gallery — don't align themselves with any political group, but their portrayals of events like Bloody Sunday are jolting. Do they keep community history alive, or old wounds open? Should Derry have new poster boys?

One thing's for sure: while the murals remain, the city around them is changing. In the past decade, it has had a stint as UK Capital of Culture; welcomed the new Peace Bridge; and seen carnivals like Derry Halloween go from strength to strength. Walking around, you'll see recent arrivals like Bishop's Gate Hotel, the Walled City Brewery and a new mural — a joyful, cheeky celebration of *Derry Girls* on Orchard Street.

"That's the most photographed thing in the whole city!" laughs Karl Porter, who painted the mural with Donal O'Doherty. Together,

they run UV Arts, a street art social media enterprise in the city. The piece is testament to the Channel 4 comedy that transformed perceptions of a place locals call Stroke City (as in, Derry-stroke-Londonderry).

"We're not taking away from political art," Karl tells me. "We want to remember the past, but we also want to move on." UV Arts does that by helping young people and disenfranchised groups to cross political divides by painting in places that feel mired in political or social baggage. "It's about changing perceptions of space, educating people about the use of space and showing how a bit of colour can go a long way to revitalising something," he says.

"There's a lot going on that tourists don't tend to see," says Mary Cremin, director of contemporary art space Void. She describes Derry as a place people are moving back to, somewhere smaller and more affordable than Dublin or Belfast. "It's kind of coming into its own now," she says. "We're very interested in making new histories around contemporary Derry — what is it now, rather than constantly looking to the past."

MORE INFO: uv-arts.co derryvoid.com visitderry.com



DESIGN FOCUS

IRISH DESIGN SHOP, DUBLIN

Established by jewellers Clare Grennan and Laura Caffrey, this shop features handpicked Irish craft and design gems, from cashmere shawls to gorgeous prints (you can watch jewellery being made upstairs, too). irishdesignshop.com

NATIONAL DESIGN & CRAFT GALLERY, KILKENNY

Set in Kilkenny Castle's former stable yard, this is a small suite of galleries and studios where you can watch crafts being made by the likes of JMK Goldsmiths or Ray Power's Castle Arch Pottery. ndcg.ie/kilkennydesign.com

BURREN PERFUMERY, CO CLARE

The journey to this scent sanctuary, where Irish perfumes and cosmetics are made and sold, is half the fun — it takes you through the lunar landscape of Burren National Park. burrenperfumery.com

For more on Irish craft, design and classes, see designireland.ie.



THE NEXT CHAPTER

A look inside MoLI, Dublin's new Museum of Literature Ireland

Passing through the warren of galleries straddling three Georgian buildings on St Stephen's Green, my guide and I come to a halt at a doorstopper of a tome in a glass case. "This is probably the most valuable modern literary artefact in the world," says curator, Simon O'Connor, beaming.

It's a copy of *Ulysses* — the first edition handed to Joyce after its printing almost a century ago. The name of the museum itself, pronounced 'Molly', is of course a nod to Molly Bloom, the novel's heroine and the character who speaks its final words.

But MoLI isn't just about Joyce, or even the male mega-stars of the last century like WB Yeats and Seamus Heaney. There's also an overdue focus on female writers and young adult fiction, as well as immersive displays and the odd analogue surprise — such as the stack of blank pages on which visitors are urged to write the first sentence of their own novel. Tickets €8/€6 (£6.60/£5). moli.ie

Q&A: JAMES EARLEY

The Dublin-based street art sensation speaks about the momentum and breadth of Ireland's art scene, and recommends the city's best galleries

IRISH STREET ART IS HAVING A MOMENT. WHY?

There are a few reasons. On a visual level, the large scale of the work helps, and the images can be quickly disseminated through social media, most notably Instagram. But I think the main driving force in Ireland has been the use of street art to promote awareness of political and social issues, such as marriage equality and the abortion referendum. Dublin, Belfast and Waterford all have a great variety of large-scale mural works.

YOU CURATED THE ART AT THE HENDRICK SMITHFIELD HOTEL IN DUBLIN, DESCRIBED AS 'IRELAND'S FIRST STREET ART HOTEL'. TELL US ABOUT THAT.

The project took place over a 10-month period, which is reflected in the 300-plus artworks adorning the hotel's walls. This is a living gallery showcasing the history of urban art (graffiti and street art) right up to the present day, with pieces by the most avant-garde artists working within the field.

HOW DOES YOUR OWN HISTORY RESONATE IN YOUR WORK?

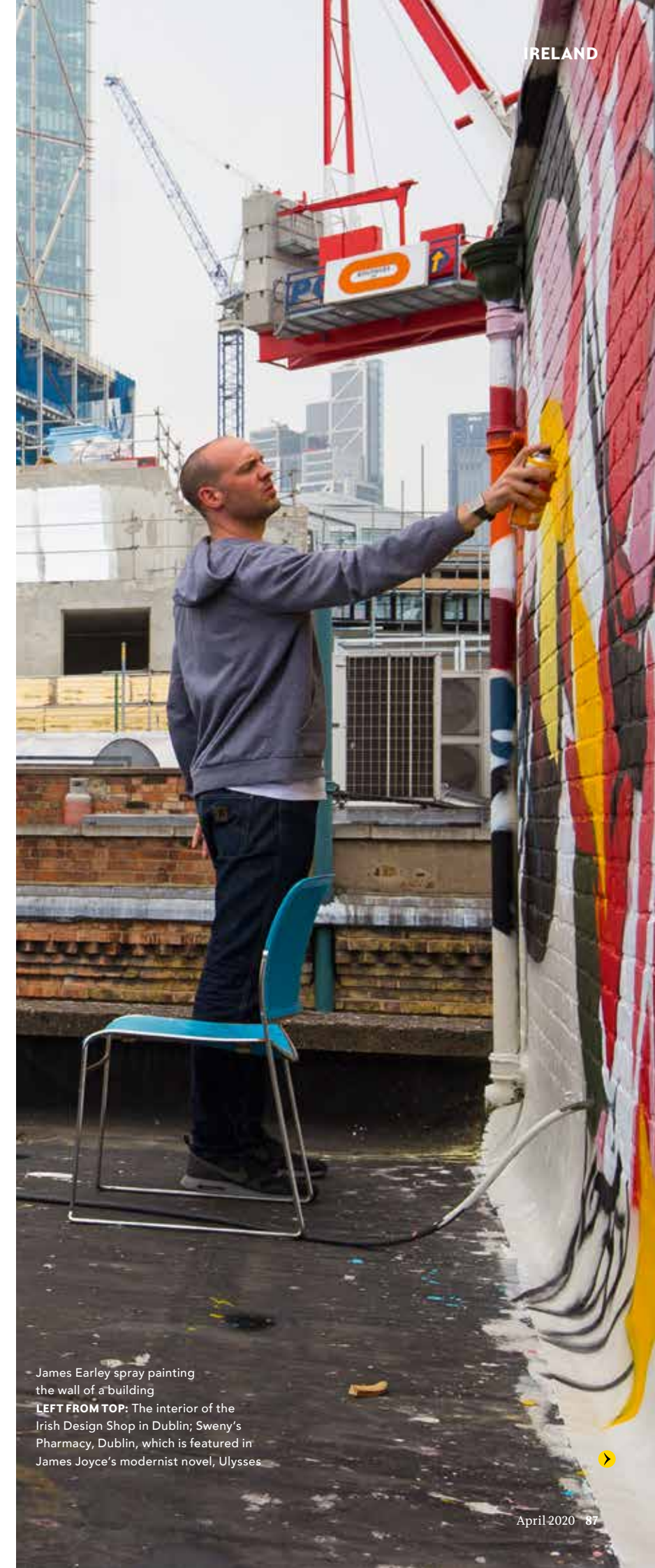
My family ran a famous stained glass studio, Earley & Co., for more than 100 years in Dublin. I'm very proud and honoured to have this artistic heritage. The visual aesthetic of stained glass, as well as the structural fabric of the craft, permeates all the projects I work on — be it fine art prints, canvases or large-scale murals taking over the entire sides of buildings. It's a constant.

WHERE ARE YOUR FAVOURITE PLACES TO SEE AND ENGAGE WITH ART IN IRELAND?

I really like the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin — it's a beautiful space and it's very central. It always has well-curated shows and champions a wide variety of Irish artists. Its Coppa Café on the ground floor is excellent too. The permanent collection at the National Gallery is a sight to behold — Irish painter Mainie Jellett's artworks steal the show for me every time. My last recommendation is a selection of independent art galleries in Dublin: The Kerlin, SO Fine Art, Hang Tough Gallery, Atelier Maser, Stoney Road Press and the Graphic Print Gallery. Look them up on Google and decide which to visit.

jamese.ie. Follow James on Instagram @james_earley.

IMAGES: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE; GETTY



James Earley spray painting the wall of a building

LEFT FROM TOP: The interior of the Irish Design Shop in Dublin; Sweny's Pharmacy, Dublin, which is featured in James Joyce's modernist novel, *Ulysses*



Looking down onto Strandhill Beach as a surfer catches a wave

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

CO SLIGO

THE PULL OF THE OCEAN

Ireland has woken up to its world-class waves and in Strandhill, County Sligo, locals and blow-ins have both found an antidote to city living. The town is making a name for itself not only for surfing, but for outdoor adventures and its seaweed spa, too. A National Surf Centre is set to open this autumn, putting this welcoming town on the map

It's a crisp afternoon in Strandhill. Two surfers are walking towards the water, wrapped head to toe in black neoprene, silhouetted by a low winter sun. I feel cold just looking at them. The onlooker beside me agrees. "They're literally addicted to it. It's like the priesthood or something."

I'm a fair-weather surfer, happy with the odd summer outing. Sometimes I stand; mostly I tumble into the great Atlantic washing machine. But these two are on a whole other level, zipping along the breaks, oblivious to the chill.

"I feel nourished here," says Melanie White, one of the surfers, emerging from the water with her long hair dripping. She gestures around Sligo Bay. "There's just something about the place. I love it."

Melanie runs Rebelle Surf, one of several surf schools in the village. Some of her classes and camps are specifically for women. "It's a different style of surf lesson; it's more about what's stopping you catching the wave. Is it self-doubt? Is it fear?" A generation ago, surfers trickled through,

staying in vans and B&Bs. Today, the sport is sexy, equipment affordable, and Ireland has woken up to its world-class waves. Strandhill is home to just a few thousand souls, but summer days see its car park packed out, and a National Surf Centre is set to open this autumn. At the nearby Strand pub, the Guinness toucan has an adapted slogan: 'Surfing is good for you'.

Adventure tourism companies have sprung up throughout County Sligo, offering everything from kayaking on inland lakes to hiking, biking, sailing and even 'adventure yoga' in this outdoorsy oasis.

Then there's 'the mountain', as everyone calls it. Knocknarea is a 1,072ft-high limestone lump that lords it over Strandhill like a souvenir-sized Table Mountain. To get a sense of the hold it has over locals, I join a short hike to the summit led by Barry Hannigan of Northwest Adventure Tours.

"As far as archaeology goes, I think Ireland's probably one of the biggest unopened boxes on the planet," he says, taking us past deserted villages, pointing

out distant drumlins (low oval mounds) and passage tombs (covered burial chambers), as the incline begins to steepen. I hear the story of Queen Meadhbh, the legendary Irish warrior said to be buried standing up in a hilltop cairn, the better to face her enemies. Sligo was also WB Yeats' 'Land of Heart's Desire', and we can see 'bare Ben Bulbin's head' to the northeast, beneath which the poet lies buried in Drumcliff.

"You can see the specks of surfers from the mountain, and the specks of hikers from the surf," says Barry, smiling at the notion.

Back in Strandhill, we gather for warming cups of coffee in Shells Cafe. The sun drops over the dunes, and we bask in the glow of good exercise under unexpected blue skies.

MORE INFO: Rebelle Surf runs a women's surf camp this summer, from 19-21 June 2020. Prices start at €250 (£210) and includes lessons, lunches and yoga. rebellesurf.com sligosurfexperience.com northwestadventuretours.ie gostrandhill.com sligotourism.ie



The Dark Hedges, an avenue of beech trees along Bregagh Road between Armoy and Stranocum in County Antrim

CO ANTRIM

THE TREES HAVE EYES

Northern Ireland's dramatic Causeway Coast provided the backdrop to *Game of Thrones*. Walk in Arya Stark's footsteps and sample 'mini dragon's eggs' in a local hotel — it's the best way to relive the fantasy series until the new studio tour opens

I'm walking beneath a tangle of beech trees near Ballymoney, County Antrim. It's sunset, and the branches of the trees — planted in the 18th century — seem to beckon me forward, not just down the old estate avenue but into a whole world of fantasy.

They did the same to Arya Stark, when she trundled off down the Kingsroad in HBO's *Game of Thrones*. The Dark Hedges, as this avenue is known, is just one of dozens of filming locations from the show in Northern Ireland. I'm on a driving tour of the Causeway Coast; I've already stopped off at obvious attractions like the Giant's Causeway, but there have also been detours to tiny Ballintoy Harbour (gateway to the Iron Islands), Downhill Beach, where Stannis Baratheon and Melisandre burned their effigies, and to Binevenagh Mountain (Dothraki Grasslands).

"*Game of Thrones* was filmed behind the trees over there," says Paula Canning, when

I stop at Waterfall Caves, a self-catering set-up at the Duncrun Fishing Lakes, beneath Binevenagh. At the reception hut, she keeps a map guests can use as a walking trail.

The appeal of the show is such that visitors have a host of *GoT* experiences to choose from, including bus tours, and medieval banquets and archery at Castle Ward (Winterfell); there's also a location touring app, and later this year, HBO and Linen Mill Studios are set to unveil an official studio tour in Banbridge. Whatever next? Dothraki trifle with mini dragon's eggs? Well, yes. In fact, it's already on the menu at Ballygally Castle hotel.

MORE INFO: A Causeway Coast road trip can be started in Derry or Belfast. Stay at Waterfall Caves from £110 a night. visitcausewaycoastandglens.com waterfallcaves.com discovernorthernireland.com

TOP 5: CULTURE ITINERARIES

WILD DINING

Vagabond Tours' six-day Epic Ireland Food Tour loops from Dublin to the south west and back. It includes seaweed harvesting and oyster shucking, and there are hiking and kayaking options too. From €1,766 (£1,472) per person. vagabondtoursofireland.com

TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

Get your boots on for a seven-day guided itinerary exploring the likes of the Wicklow Mountains, Killarney National Park and Carrauntoohil (Ireland's highest peak). From €1,695 (£1,412) per person. wildernessireland.com

HIGH CULTURE

Many of Ireland's great houses were built in the Georgian era, and some are now visitor attractions. Culture & Heritage Tours Ireland's seven-day Wonderful World of Georgian Living takes in everything from the splendour of Florence Court to the faded grandeur of Dublin's Henrietta Street. From around €2,600 (£2,166) per person cultureheritagetours.ie

GO WEST

Wild Atlantic Music Tours specialises in luxury coach tours of County Clare and the west coast, accompanied by musicians like Grammy Award-winning fiddle-player Eileen Ivers. A six-night summer tour, including private concerts and sightseeing costs €1,869 (£1,556) per person. wildatlanticmusicstours.com

BESPOKE ADVENTURES

Crafted Ireland offers bespoke itineraries — a keen hiker with a penchant for history might be paired with an archaeologist or historian for an off-radar excursion, for instance. Prices from around €600 (£500) per person per day. craftedireland.com



Fanad Head Lighthouse,
County Donegal

TOP 4: WILD WEEKEND BOLTHOLES

CLARE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE, CO MAYO

Perched high on craggy cliffs overlooking Clew Bay, Clare Island Lighthouse and its former keepers' quarters are today a boutique accommodation option. Pick of the rooms is the Tower House — located in the original lighthouse tower — with its circular bedroom and a winding staircase. Another option is the Sauna Suite, an outhouse building with — you guessed it — a sauna. From €250 (£208) per person, including B&B, dinner and ferry collection. clareislandlighthouse.com

FINN LOUGH, CO FERMANAGH

The 'Bubble Domes' at Finn Lough have a transparent roof and walls, allowing you to gaze out at the woods, stars (or, ahem, clouds) from the comfort of a four-poster bed. Space is tight — with just enough room for two people — but decor is chic, with telescopes, Nespresso machines and fluffy robes all provided. From £275, sleeping two people. finnlough.com

LEGAN CASTLE FARMHOUSE, THOMASTOWN, CO KILKENNY

Caroline Sweeney previously worked at London's Grosvenor House, and she brings a gorgeous eye for detail to her cosy set-up in the Kilkenny countryside. Set next to a small ruined castle and a 200-year-old farmhouse, accommodation options include a cottage guesthouse and luxury bell tents; there's also a super cafe that uses homemade, homegrown and locally sourced produce. From €79 (£66) per person per night. legancastle.ie

BREAC.HOUSE, DUNFANAGHY, CO DONEGAL

This sleek hideaway on the remote Horn Head peninsula blurs the boundary between inside and out. Expect locally crafted furniture, native Irish materials like Donegal tweed, a wood-fired garden sauna, craft cocktails served at 5pm and locally-sourced breakfasts to boot. Rooms from €275 (£229). breac.house

IRISH-SPEAKING REGIONS

Irish is taught in schools, appears on signs and is sprinkled into conversation throughout Ireland (*sláinte*, meaning 'cheers', is the word every visitor learns), but full-blown Irish conversations are trickier to find. To immerse yourself in the local lingo, plan a trip to one of the country's *Gaeltachtaí* (Irish-speaking regions) — mainly found on the west coast. ▣