



PHOTOS BY  
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# TRAVEL

## The magical West of Ireland

The miniature memorial chapel at Kylemore Abbey

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**G**ulls dance above the sails of colorful boats while dozens of white swans drift along the banks of the bay. Pastel houses reflect in the water beneath long pillows of sunlit clouds. In the cobblestoned market area, buskers play guitars and violins while university students lounge in the sunlight along the quay.

This is Galway — Gaillimh in the Irish — stony place at the mouth of the River Corrib. The original myth is that the city was named for Galvia, the daughter of a local chief who had drowned in the river. Later nicknamed “City of the Tribes,” Galway was once ruled by a dozen Norman families who did not get on well with the indigenous Irish. Today, Galway is a delightful university and tourist town, known for its traditional music and Irish language. It is also a hub from which to explore the interesting scenery and architecture of Ireland’s west.

If you are wearing a claddagh ring — the iconic Irish ring of hearts, crown and hands, those rings originated right here in the fishing claddagh (or village) just outside the walls of Galway. The story goes that a young man was impressed into naval service by the British, torn away from his beloved fiancée. Over his ten year forced labor, he assumed that she would marry another, but when he returned he discovered that she had waited throughout the years and they were married. In gratitude, he created the ring, in which the hands symbolize friendship, the heart love and the crown



Galway Bay

royalty. The original shop that produced those rings still sells them in the cobblestoned shopping and dining area of Galway.

A mere ninety minutes drive from Galway will bring you to Ashford Castle. Now a stunning hotel (and site of Pierce Brosnan’s wedding reception), the castle was built in the 13th century by the Anglo-Norman deBurgh family and later passed into the hands of the famous Guinness beer family. While the castle has been meticulously refurbished and

contains several restaurants, a spa and cinema, for those who wish to steep in the middle ages, the grounds are also the home to the Irish School of Falconry. Here you can walk through the castle forest while Harris hawks swoop from the trees to your gloved hand in a sport that dates back 4000 years.

Ashford Castle stands at the head of Lough Corrib, the largest inland lake in Ireland. Boat trips are available to take you sightseeing on the lake. Recent archeological expeditions on the Lake have discovered a full

Viking ship and an ancient Irish boat that dates back 4500 years and still has intact markings and carvings on its hull.

A slightly more westerly ninety minute drive will take you to postcard beautiful Kylemore Abbey and Walled Victorian Gardens. This gorgeous house has a tragic history. It was built in the 1860’s by Englishman Mitchell Henry for his beloved wife Margaret and their nine children, but Margaret died quite suddenly while traveling with her husband in Egypt. In her honor, he built the beautiful miniature chapel on the grounds, with pillars made of four types of Irish marble, but after her death, he did not spend much time at Kylemore.

Later, the mansion became the home for an order of Belgian Benedictine nuns from Ypres, who had been displaced in World War I. The nuns ran a school in the mansion until as recently as 2010 and are still in residence on the grounds, which now include a walled Victorian garden, tours of the lower floors of the mansion and the church, beautiful lakeside and forest walks, as well as the presence of students from the University of Notre Dame in America.

The wild green and blue of Ireland’s western counties makes each of these drives a photographic dream and the destinations are well worth the journeys out from Galway and back again.

Juilene Osborne-McKnight is the author of four historical novels from MacMillan and of the newly released *The Story We Carry in Our Bones: Irish History for Americans* available at Barnes & Noble or amazon.com.



Ashford Castle's  
Battlement Towers