

Unforgettable forgotten county

Donegal has topped the National Geographic Traveller's Cool List for 2017. **Conor Power** takes a road trip to find out why

“WELCOME to the forgotten county!” This is how I was often greeted upon arriving at the coastal fishing town of Burtonport on the western Donegal coast before we set off for an off-shore island.

Wherever you're coming from in Ireland (in my case, from Munster), it takes a very long time to get to Donegal. I often amuse myself by calculating that I could have flown across the Atlantic in the same time that it takes me to drive all the way there.

But when a land that is presented as forgotten, unexplored and untouched by mass tourism, it becomes all the more exciting and when the travel gurus at National Geographic *Traveller* magazine finally got around to going to Donegal, they couldn't help but plonk it right at the top of their Cool List for 2017.

Everywhere needs a leg-up now and again and in Donegal's case, it was the combination of it being on the highly-successful Wild Atlantic Way route and the arrival of the insanely successful Star Wars cult last summer.

My friend who took me out to sample offshore life in Donegal is a typical true Donegal man — born in Wales of a father who came from Innishfree Upper. Not to be confused with the Sligo's Lake Isle of Innishfree (that WB Yeats arose and went to), Innishfree Upper is just off Burtonport, measures just one square kilometre and is barely inhabited. Back in the 1970s and 80s, it was famous as the home of the cult known as The Screamers, who practiced primal screaming as a form of therapy. After their search for Utopia moved on, Innishfree became essentially uninhabited; its one registered voter making front-page pictorial news at every general election. There was no running water or electricity and it was just about the most perfect place to spend a holiday. We spent our days gathering sea-food from the shore or out in the boat and going for walks on a totally unspoilt piece of paradise where cattle and their calves roamed as if wild, often sitting in groups on the sandy beaches.

Today, through community efforts, the island has electricity

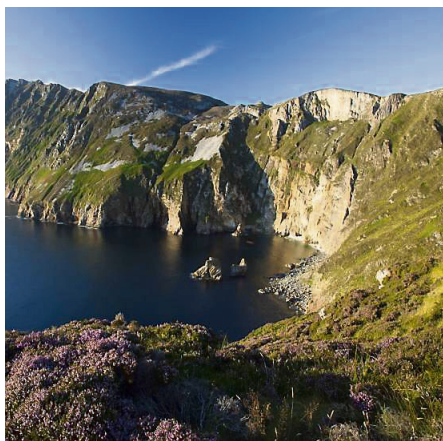
and a rudimentary road network. The main pier has also been improved and strengthened, making access that little bit better. Even though I loved the candlelight and the great excuse not to wash or shave for a week because of the lack of running water, I was delighted to find that the island has lost none of its charm.

A couple of nautical miles to the northwest lies the much larger island of Arranmore. This is connected to the mainland by a regular ferry service from Burtonport so it's a living offshore island, complete with non-NCT-standard cars prowling its quiet roads. It's bursting with traditional music and teeming with nature. During the summer, it's a very lively spot with gangs of Irish college students and tourists who come to sample the freedom of island life. The Ferryboat Bar/Restaurant and Early's Bar are where people tend to congregate and there is a 14km marked walk that takes you all around the island, with stunning views from virtually every point.

One of the most interesting sights to look at through a binoculars' lens is Inniskeeragh (or as one wag put it, “Innish Scary”). This low-lying island is barely above water and during a particularly bad storm some decades ago, it became briefly submerged. All the residents were evacuated, never to return to their homes that now form a collection of ghostly uninhabited silhouettes.

According to the lady on duty at the Fáilte Ireland tourist office in Donegal town, there has been a huge increase in the number of visitors to Donegal over the last year, with a notable surge in people from Cork. The big attraction that most people are looking for, she said, is the Sliabh Liag Cliffs in the south-west of the county. There is some argument about them being the highest sea cliffs in Europe. Wikipedia confidently states that they are “almost three times higher” than the Cliffs of Moher but I noticed that all literature was careful to point out that they are “amongst the highest in Europe”, with the nature of them differing from the sheer drop of the Moher cliffs to the more staggered drop of the Sliabh Liag ones.

In any case, it hardly matters.



Donegal delights: clockwise from main, the coastal fishing town of Burtonport; four-star Harvey's Point, Lough Eske, Donegal Town; and Sliabh Liag (Slieve League) Cliffs. National Geographic's Traveller has put Donegal on its Cool List 2017.

For anyone who hasn't witnessed these stunning wonders of nature, it's high time you got out and travelled to see them. One of the most unique aspects of these cliffs is the unparalleled access that you have to them. The access road just north of Teelin village takes you right up to the main viewing area. Before you, the cliffs align, resplendent in a mesmeric display of colour from the ancient layers of rock formations, topped with wild greenery and over which various waterfalls appear to delicately dribble from a distance. It's difficult not to simply stare and stare.

To get even more intimate with the cliffs, there is a network of walking routes, the best of which is “one man's path” that takes you up over the main show along a narrow ridge. Not for the faint-hearted or to be attempted on a very windy day, this is as dramatic and rewarding a walk as you'll get anywhere in the world.

Continuing around the headland, you discover the well-known beach at Silver Strand. It's a truly magnificent wide sandy cove, accessed by a staircase of 176 steps. Almost next door to it is a very appealing deep cove and pier and along here you can take another walking loop that brings you past the Napoleonic lookout tower that

was built by the British to keep an eye out for French expansionists.

For even more stunning vistas, continue the drive through Glencolumbkille and on to Ardara. This latter town — a Heritage Town — is a real hidden gem that is approached by the eye-popping vista of the road snaking through a glacier valley. We stopped into the irresistibly charming Nancy's Bar where my wife availed of their welcoming free-pint policy for anyone named McHugh.

Then it was back to base at Harvey's Point. Another success story in its own right, this hotel 5km north of Donegal Town has been voted Ireland's top hotel no less than five years in a row by readers of travel community website TripAdvisor.

In many ways, it turns a lot of perceived wisdom on its head. It's a large hotel offering a top-class service, yet it's a family-owned establishment and that is a strength that comes through every single staff member you encounter.

Furthermore, there isn't a spa or a swimming pool and, even though it enjoys a stunning lakeside location, there aren't any watersports facilities. That might look like a lot of missed opportunity in the eyes of a super-duper American chain of hotels, but to find a place that does welcome,

comfort and food so superbly well and without those ancillary distractions is a refreshing find.

So it was without worrying about making use of a pool or a sauna that we could enjoy simply being welcomed, looked after and fed in a uniquely charming and impressive manner. The hotel grew from a holiday cottage that became famous as a local centre of hospitality and it's very possibly the perfect marriage between Swiss-style restoration and warm Irish hospitality.

The forgotten county? Donegal is more like a land of countless unforgettable memories. I can't wait to keep exploring and making more of them.

Staying there:

We stayed at the four-star Harvey's Point, Lough Eske, Donegal Town. (Tel 074 972 2208, www.harveyspoint.com). Multi-award-winning, with enormous bedrooms and exemplary standards of service and food.

Must see:

Apart from the Sliabh Liag (also spelled Slieve League) Cliffs, virtually the entire wild coastline all the way up to Malin Head is worth exploring. Inland, the highlights are the Glenveagh National Park and Mount Errigal.