

# A pootle through Ireland's poignant past

No journey through this wonderful Ancient East is complete without a pint or two, finds **Robin McKelvie**

Ireland looms large from the decks of the biggest ferry on the Irish Sea, a sturdy leviathan who has never lost a sailing to the weather. *Ulysses* may be named after the novel James Joyce so memorably set on the streets of Dublin, but as soon as her ramp comes down I'm gunning my car south,

away from the capital in search of Ireland's best-kept secret, the "Ancient East".

My three day, self-drive tour is themed around Sacred Places, Grand Estates and Emigrants' Tales, one of the new Ancient East itineraries from Fáilte Ireland, the Irish tourism authority. I unearth a land awash with 5,000 years of history, swirling with ghosts of Vikings and Cistercian monks, through to English lords and Irish rebels. I dip into four of Ireland's counties — Wexford, Carlow, Wicklow and that hotbed of hurling and culture, Kilkenny. En route I venture far enough from the tourist path to meet more locals than trippers. Veering off motorways I pootle down little lanes through wee villages I struggle to read, let alone pronounce.

My first stop provides a deeply dramatic welcome. Lonely Planet has rated Powerscourt one of the top ten grand houses in the world and it is easy to see why: 800 years of history are woven around the architectural drama of the Palladian main house. Its 47-acre garden, with terraces, cascades, grottos and fish pond, is another gem, voted the world's third most beautiful garden by *National Geographic*. The background is remarkable, too, with the famous Sugarloaf mountain the star of the granite peaks that form the Wicklow Mountains.

I push on through the centuries. At Wicklow Gaol I am imprisoned by an affable guide and learn more about the trivial reasons that had children and

90-year-old women locked up, as well as rebels from the 1798 Irish rebellion. At Glendalough, time peels back even further to the 6th century when monks, inspired by St Kevin, eked out a living here by the twin glacial lakes.

My base is trim, medieval Kilkenny, known as the Marble City due to the local black marble. Over two nights I find some of the friendliest people in Ireland in its grand, stone-clad streets and atmospheric historic centre. My evenings are a swirl of hearty Irish stew and pints of the local brew, Smithwicks, but this city of less than 30,000 inhabitants also boasts a Michelin starred restaurant in Campagne.

Kilkenny's star attraction is its Medieval Mile, which runs from Kilkenny Castle to the cathedral. At the castle I explore the renovated rooms, the highlight being the grand picture gallery where portraits of the Butler family reside. They lived in the castle from 1391 to 1935. As a Scot I also spot a familiar face — James III of England and Ireland and James VIII of Scotland.

My last Kilkenny stop is at the award winning Smithwick's Experience. No dull trawl through the brewing process here: this lively attraction sees striking audiovisual trickery backed up by Colm, an enthusiastic guide whose family have worked here for generations.

On my last day I wander with the ghosts of 12th-century Cistercian monks at Jerpoint Abbey, before fast forwarding to the 19th century and New Ross. Here I

## Sail away with these special deals

UK ferry operators are marking National Ferry Fortnight with a series of special offers, which must be booked from today until March 19. Full details and more information about ferry travel is available at: [www.discoverferries.com](http://www.discoverferries.com)

### Kids packages to France

On all its daytime sailings to France until May 30 (except the Portsmouth - Cherbourg route) Brittany Ferries offers free travel for two children aged under 16, travelling by car with adults. A free inside four-berth cabin and bike carrier are included. 0330 159 7000, [brittanyferries.com/kidsfreeplus](http://brittanyferries.com/kidsfreeplus)

### Island giveaways

Caledonian MacBrayne has tickets to give away on its routes to and from the islands off Scotland's west coast. The first 1,000 foot passengers to book for travel by September 30 will be offered one free foot passenger ticket. Quote code NFF16. 0800 066 5000, [calmac.co.uk/NFF2016](http://calmac.co.uk/NFF2016)

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Book a return trip with DFDS from Dover to Calais or Dunkirk, or from Newcastle to Amsterdam, and celebrate by collecting six free bottles of French wine on board. Offer available on selected dates until December 16. 0871 521 5522, [dfds.co.uk/ferryfortnight](http://dfds.co.uk/ferryfortnight)

### Save £60 on the Irish Sea

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### Ferry ride into the past

Two passengers and a car can travel to the Isle of Man (pictured left) with the Steam Packet Company from £59 each way and receive two Manx National Heritage Holiday passes. Sail from a choice of ports for any length of time but travel from May 20 to September 5 is excluded. Quote code: FIRST. 0872 299 2992, [steam-packet.com](http://steam-packet.com)

### Scilly offer

Buy two adult tickets for the *Scillonian III* ferry from Penzance to St Mary's and, until May 30, two children will travel free. Quote NFF16 for this offer with the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company. 0173 633 4220, [islesofscilly-travel.co.uk](http://islesofscilly-travel.co.uk)



uncover the Dunbrody Famine Ship and learn of the horrors of the Great Famine. I am particularly intrigued by one emigrant to America, Patrick Kennedy. He was a cask maker but his great grandson, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, became president. Hook Lighthouse is the world's oldest intact operational lighthouse, warning

seafarers for over 800 years. I gaze out dreaming of Viking longships, Irish rebels and famine ships packed full of hope. I may not have managed to enjoy my traditional pint of Guinness in Dublin, but I have discovered another Ireland. As I watch the waves I vow to return to discover more of Ireland's beguiling Ancient East.

Open all hours: you are never far from a bar in Kilkenny, the best places for a pint and some craic

● Launched in 2000, the *Ulysses* operates twice daily between Dublin and Holyhead, Wales, and is the largest ferry operating in the Irish Sea, standing 167 feet high from keel to mast. She can carry 2,000 passengers and crew, 1,342 cars and 240 lorries. There are 228 passenger berths. Five of her 12 decks are for vehicles.

For a wheely great time, take the bike

With cycling becoming ever more popular, enthusiasts are being increasingly tempted to combine their hobby with a holiday overseas — and nothing could be easier than taking the bike on a ferry. Some choose to hitch their bikes to a car while others prefer to go the whole way on two wheels, strapping luggage directly on to their bikes. Many ferry operators do not charge extra for taking a bike and some do not even require them to be booked in advance.

Whichever sea they cross, miles of cycle routes await. In Ireland, the Mourne Mountains cycle loop and the Wicklow Gap route pass through steep and stunning scenery, while in Northern Ireland the Divis Ridge trail in the Belfast Hills has views over the city and the sea.

Roscoff in Brittany is the gateway to routes through picturesque towns and along river and canal paths and former railway tracks. Less challenging are the many trails in Holland, although cyclists heading into Amsterdam, with its 250 miles of cycle paths, will need to watch their wheels in a city with 1.2 million bikes, twice the number of inhabitants.



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