

IRELAND'S HIDDEN GEM

Julianne Mooney



IRELAND HAS CAPTURED the hearts and imaginations of artists for many years, enchanting them with its lush green valleys, rugged coastline and an interior littered with glistening lakes, ancient castles, Palladian mansions and hidden treasures. Capturing the beauty and uniqueness of Ireland on canvas and through words, artists like Jack and William Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Patrick Kavanagh and Heinrich Boll have inspired people from around the world to visit our emerald isle. Visitors come in search not only of the tranquil and raw beauty, but of the warm, humorous, earthy people portrayed in the poems, plays and stories of these masters. It was only when I began touring Ireland last year, whilst writing the Time Out Guide to Ireland, I began to question if, through the years, our island has remained true to this image or has time slowly erased the very qualities that made our island so unique?

I have travelled throughout the world and find it intoxicating. The new smells, sounds, sights and particularly meeting new people. No matter what country you are in, travellers are drawn to one another and it is during these moments stories are shared, recommendations are made and a chance encounter with a stranger may change the course of your journey, just like that. Embarking on my journey of Ireland, I decided to take this approach, to research and have my journey mapped out, but to allow myself to be diverted, to explore and find what every traveller is ultimately looking for, the hidden gem.

It was my old boss and friend, Fiona, who steered me towards Leitrim, catching my attention with words like 'eco-destination', 'quirky' and 'vibrant artistic community'. I must admit I was somewhat surprised, as these are not words I would have

thought synonymous with Leitrim. Having lost a significant proportion of its population during the famine, it developed a reputation of having an air of desolation. However, I popped her recommendations into my 'To Visit' folder and went about

Counties Leitrim & Roscommon



Often referred to as 'Lovely Leitrim', County Leitrim has a natural, untouched landscape with rolling green hills and a lot of water: the Shannon-Erne Waterway and lakes including Lough Gill, Lough Allen and Glencar Lough. Most of the county is inland so it tends to be overlooked by tourists sticking to the well-travelled coastal route, but those that do visit, perhaps to sail a houseboat down the River Shannon, benefit from the tranquil scenery. There's also a thriving artistic community, Leitrim long having been a haven for artists, musicians and filmmakers, and more recently, the county has become one of Ireland's more interesting eco-destinations.

County Roscommon has a number of wonderful attractions, mainly located in the green and pastoral north. At the very north of the county, bordering Leitrim, are the Arigna Mountains; most famous for the iron and coal mining that took place here until the 1990s, and now home to the Miners Way and the Arigna Mining Experience. Just south from here is delightful Lough Key Forest Park, followed by a collection of some of Ireland's best preserved archaeological sites, Rathcroghan/Cruachan.

NORTH LEITRIM

The north of the county is dominated by mountain ranges, while the border between Sligo and Leitrim runs through Lough Gill and Glencar Lough. Here are two of Leitrim's must-sees: Parke's Castle (see p62), on the eastern edge of beautiful Lough Gill, and the island of Innisfree, which can be seen from the castle. You can take a boat (071 916 4266, www.roseofinnisfree.com, closed Nov-Easter) from the castle around the lake, and over to the tiny isle of Innisfree, made famous by Yeats' poem: 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made'. The skipper recites Yeats' poetry as he guides you around the lake.

East of Parke's Castle, the road stays close to the lake and the views are worth stopping for. Slightly away from the lapping waters is the small town of Dromahair. A happy hour can be spent here wandering around Creevelea Abbey: the path to it starts from behind the Abbey Manor Hotel, crosses a small bridge and then runs beside the surging River Bonet. It is only five minutes to Creevelea Abbey, the last Franciscan friary to be established in the 16th century, and a peaceful and beautiful spot.

Dromahair is also one of the sites of a summer film festival: a mobile cinema, with room for 100 guests, pulls up in the main square. The festival is organised by Cinema North West (mobile 086 604 9365, www.cinemanorthwest.com) and takes place around Sligo and Leitrim.

A short drive north of Dromahair, on the other side of the N16, is pristine Glencar Lough, at the foot of the Dartry Mountains. Sharp limestone ridges tower



Glencar Waterfall. See p61.



Parkes Castle

PHOTO: BLÁITHÍN GALLAGHER

business as usual. Funnily enough, my first taste of Leitrim was unplanned. I was visiting Sligo, driving around Lough Gill sighing and gasping at the beauty of the lake, when rounding a corner, there perched at the edge of the shore was a fairy princess castle. Standing in the shadow of Parke's Castle, looking across the shimmering water, speckled with tiny islands, I understood why Yeats had wanted to live on Innisfree. Who would not want to inhabit one of those tiny isles floating on a serene lake, fringed with old, majestic trees?

Perhaps, if I had not been researching for a guide book, I would have failed to see the address of the castle as County Leitrim and attributed the magical castle on Lough Gill as Sligo's most beautiful spot. But I did not miss it and I realised there was possibly a reason behind the phrase 'Lovely Leitrim'. Consulting the map I realised if we continued clockwise around the lake we'd reach Dromahair, which was also in Leitrim and would be

my first visit to a Leitrim town.

Casting my eyes around the little bar, I took in the scene. Two old men sitting idly at the bar counter, pints of Guinness in hand, while a man behind the counter animatedly recounted a story. All eyes turned to us as we stepped in, a cold breeze slipping past us brazenly. There was a heart beat or two before the owner stood tall and smiled welcomingly. "That wind would freeze the balls off ya," he said, "Get in by the fire there and I'll get you something warm." Sitting by the crackling fire, sipping hot tea, the Lady of the house bustling over with steaming soup and homemade brown bread for us, I thought, this is what the artists of old captured in their words and canvas. A sincere and unquestioning hospitality to strangers, a way of making someone feel like they've just arrived home.

It did not take me long to email Fiona asking for more details on Leitrim and what ensued was not just a detailed mail from herself, but a flurry of emails from

strangers living in Leitrim, advising me on the places to visit and things to do there. Thus began my discovery of Leitrim — flourishing organic garden centres, alternative and quirky accommodation options in yurts and bell-tents, mobile cinemas and scenery that would rival any other I have seen on my travels. Most importantly I discovered that Ireland's beauty continues to inspire the artists who have created a haven in Leitrim, giving rise to a thriving artistic community. They have thrown their energy into engineering funky festivals, alternative holiday experiences and creating unique works of art.

I travelled through Leitrim in the depths of winter, not a time to visit anywhere for the first time, but regardless the weather, I was entranced by the splendor of Lough Gill and Glencar and aghast at my ignorance to the stunning walks around and activities on Lough Allen. The almost mystical waters of Lough Melvin, abound with salmon in May somehow remains the



Glencar Lake

secret of locals, while the sultry Darty Mountains rising to the north of the county, remains an undiscovered walkers paradise.

Leitrim holds fast to the qualities portrayed by the artists from our past. Here, in Lovely Leitrim, the scintillating lakes, lush valleys and towering mountains are not a figment of some artists imagination. I never thought my hidden gem would be this small county that people drive through on the way to the well

travelled west coast. Nor did I think I would find such warm people with a passion for their land and a knowledge that what they have is special. When asked, and believe I am asked every week, if I found any hidden gems during my travels, I smile and say Leitrim. Every response is the same "Leitrim?" they say disbelievingly and I see them question if I was truly the right person to write a guide book. "Yes," I say, "Lovely Leitrim. It was a wonderful surprise."

PHOTO: JOHNNIE LAWSON

Julianne Mooney is a freelance travel writer and author of the first edition of the Time Out Guide to Ireland, which was published in July 2011. She does a fortnightly world travel slot on Ireland AM, TV3, recommending holiday adventures throughout the world. She continues to travel Ireland, writing about her experiences on her website www.juliannemooney.com and is the Programme Manager for the Dublin Book Festival.

Below: Tullaghan Seascape **Opposite Page: Glencar Waterfall** PHOTOS: BLÁITHÍN GALLAGHER



