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The beautiful Irish county beloved by A-listers

With its spectacular scenery, delicious seafood and celebrity clientele, this hidden corner of Ireland is waiting to be explored

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Situated in the north-west of Ireland, County Donegal tends to be ignored by tourists, most of whom head south, drawn by the Giant's Causeway and [Dublin](#). And yet, this little corner of [Ireland](#) is well-known to – and beloved by – a crop of Hollywood's A Listers; most notably, the *Sex and the City* star [Sarah Jessica Parker](#), who has taken to spending her winters in the rural outpost.

Parker lives, for at least part of the year, in an unassuming cottage with her husband, the actor Matthew Broderick, whose parents bought the house some 40 years ago. It's nothing extraordinary to look at, but the Cionn Mhucrois headland on which it sits certainly is.



"It's a very quiet spot," I was told by Henry Doohan, who runs a private driving service, Donegal Tour Guide. He regaled me with stories of the pair visiting the local football club – then moved on to tales of the sea god Lobhar, an ancient deity who was said to warn the area of coming storms: a compelling mixture of Hollywood sheen and something more elemental.



Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick have a house in County Donegal | CREDIT: Getty

The headland is part of the Wild Atlantic Way, a self-driving route in its 10th year, which winds through the small towns tourists might not otherwise visit. Kilcar, the nearest to Sarah Jessica Parker's home, is quaint and unassuming. There's a cottage industry in artisanal tweed products, maintained by workshops like Studio Donegal. Privacy is sacrosanct, but so too is a good story: a worker in an upstairs room, his head protruding through threads on a loom, told me the celebrity pair enjoy wearing the local product.

"Americans love these," confirmed Eleaonor Hanna, the third-generation owner of Hanna's Hats, as she guided me around her factory floor, strolling past six women sewing together peaks and buttons, before arming me with a flat cap. Not something I would usually wear, but – if SJP's enthusiastic social media posts are to be believed – an appropriately local sartorial choice.



Writer Sophie at Sliabh Liag Cliffs

But despite its stardom, the real appeal of Donegal – for celebrity and civilian alike – is in the landscape. A detour led me to a hill fort, the Grianán of Aileach, which stands unguarded among yellow-flowered gorse bushes. As with other stone structures, the fort is aligned so that, at the summer solstice, sunbeams cut through an opening and fall on an altar stone. On a rainier day, it was no less commanding; remarkably, one can climb up its stones to look out over the valley.

Similarly imposing is Glenveagh National Park. Founded in 1984, the grounds allow visitors to drive and hike among the Derryveagh Mountains. At the park's entrance, the Old Church of Dunlewey stands far below the road. Built in white marble, it is known as the Taj Mahal of Donegal: a monument, like its Indian namesake, to a doomed love affair.

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Romantic enough on its own, the church sits by the irresistibly-named Poisoned Glen, either a mistranslation of Heavenly Glen or, in a more captivating telling, the site of an incestual battle between demigods in Ulster legend.

This lingering mythology has long captured the imagination of celebrities. Within the park is a baronial hunting lodge, built as an approximation of Balmoral by an American

businessman in 1867, and visited by the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Clark Gable. Greta Garbo apparently adored languishing in the lakeside swimming pool.



Grianán of Aileach is probably the best known monument in Inishowen

The house itself is eccentric, with white, shell-lined corridors and surprisingly glamorous bathrooms. Mysteries abound – after a sojourn to a nearby island, one owner went missing; possibly to see a lover, possibly to start a new life in Paris. Walking through the Italianate gardens and neat orchards, it's hard to see why anyone would want to leave.

That said, if demigods, Hollywood hotshots and bracing outdoor excursions aren't your cup of tea, there are plenty of more low-key ways to spend your time here. Donegal has the longest coastline of any Irish county, making it a flashpoint for naval battles. A thorough museum at Fort Dunree – built on the Inishowen Peninsula to defend against a potential Napoleonic invasion – details its story, from construction through to its protective role in the Second World War, where the British navy anchored before the Battle of Jutland.



Fort Dunree played a protective role in the Second World War | CREDIT: Martin Fleming

For more of this, drive around the peninsula to Fanad Head Lighthouse, a similar wartime sentinel. Basking sharks have been spotted sulking in the bay – enough to make me want to return in the summer, perhaps with a picnic.

And there's plenty in the way of hospitality, too. Harvey's Point, a lakeside hotel near Donegal town, is a beautifully appointed lodging, and the county's exceptional seafood (I suspect an Irish conspiracy to hold back the best stuff – but who could blame them?) is well showcased at Shine's in Killybegs, where the tuna is outrageously fresh.

Likewise, you might while away a few hours at the slick Crolla Distillery (you're in Ireland, after all), where there are tours and tastings, and – never far from a touch of the supernatural in these parts – a ghostly soldier who apparently walks the floorboards at night.



Sophie getting in the spirit at Croll Distillery

If the poitín leaves you needing a blast of fresh air, head next for Sliabh Liag cliffs, an hour down the coast. At their base, a visitor centre gives guests a brief history of the place, then it's a few miles' walk (or a shuttle bus, run in the busier months) to the crest, where – suddenly – the view is upon you.

The day I visited, the paths were remarkably quiet for somewhere so exceptional (and, according to one staff member, three times higher – and better – than its more famous counterpart, the Cliffs of Moher).

“We’re still a secret to most people,” he told me. And yet even here there is a Hollywood connection. Bob Odenkirk, the *Breaking Bad* actor, recently visited to take in the views. Some 40 years ago, he stayed in a now-derelict hostel nearby. “He came here when he was no one,” he added, with a sly smile. “But people always come back. They can’t help it.”

Essentials

Sophie was a guest of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland.

Loganair flies from London Heathrow to Derry/Londonderry daily from £59 one-way.

Harvey’s Point Hotel (00 353 74 972 2208) has rooms from £202 per night. The Waterfront Hotel in Dungloe (00 353 74 952 2444) is another good option, with rooms from £120.

Donegal is difficult to visit without a car. Car hire is available from Avis and Hertz at City of Derry Airport. Alternatively, [Donegal Tour Guide](#) (00 353 (0) 863331031) offers private, driven tours of County Donegal, starting at £450 for groups of up to eight.

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