

## Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands encompasses nine counties that hug the majestic River Shannon and the Beara Breifne Way stretching from Leitrim to Lough Derg. As a destination, the Heartlands have long been a much-loved secret among many local Irish people, who enjoy the natural beauty and expansive panoramic views of its calm lake waters, inland waterways, rolling hills, vibrant green pastures and vast woodlands.

An absolute haven for hikers and walkers, true enthusiasts aim to tackle part of Ireland's newest long-distance walking route, with 500 kms of breath-taking scenery along the Beara Breifne Way. This route is also broken up into easy to navigate trails with looped walks also on offer throughout the Hidden Heartlands. There is also an abundance of golf courses available across the nine counties.

A step into Ireland's Hidden Heartlands represents a step away from busy, crowd filled lives into a place that offers so much to discover where a traditional and restorative way of life continues to thrive.

Duration: 7 Days

Nearest airports: Dublin Airport, Shannon Airport

Total distance: ???km

Day 1 – Killaloe to Portumna (53km)

Morning (16km) Option 1 - West

Morning (49km) Option 2 - East

**Lough Derg**, at the southern end of the River Shannon, is serenity itself. Start your day in the lakeside "twin towns" of **Killaloe**, Co. Clare (western shore) and **Ballina**, Co. Tipperary (eastern shore). The picturesque towns are linked by an 18th century, 13 arch bridge - one of the most photogenic bridges in the country – and overlooked by rolling hills and grazing cattle. The lake can be enjoyed in numerous ways whether it's spotting wildlife, angling, sailing, cruising or simply watching local comings and goings while sipping a cuppa at a lakeside café.

We head north, but it's up to you which side of Lough Derg you take – both the east side (County Tipperary) and the west side (County Clare) have their delights... So, take another sip of your cuppa and decide...

If you opt for the west, be sure to stop in **Tuamgraney** and visit **McKernan Woollen Mills** <https://weaversofireland.com/> where colourful accessories are woven according to age-old techniques. Or at **Wilde Irish Chocolates** <https://wildeirishchocolates.com/> whose artisan chocolatiers produce an array of absolutely delicious delights.

Other options include a sightseeing cruise with **Killaloe River Cruises** <http://www.killaloerivercruises.com/>, a walk in **Ballycuggeran Wood**, or a boat tour to **Inis Cealtra** (Holy Island) from **Mountshannon** with local guide, Gerard Madden.

Have **lunch** in Tuamgraney.

If you decide to explore the east side, from **Ballina**, the **Graves of the Leinstermen** are the starting point of a 6km heather-strewn looped trail that, at the summit of **Tountinna** <https://www.alltrails.com/trail/ireland/north-tipperary/graves-of-the-leinstermen-loop>, rewards walkers with a breath-taking panorama over the entire Lough Derg.

Explore the nearby pretty village of **Dromineer** with its 10th century parish church or the marina in **Garrykennedy**. En route, allow time to get lost and discover the surprise of winding streets, tiny shops, and reminders of Ireland's past including the 13th century **Nenagh Castle** <https://www.nenagh.ie/places-of-interest/details/nenagh-castle>

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Have **lunch** in Terryglass.

Afternoon (37km) Option 1 - West

Afternoon (11km) Option 2 - East

In the afternoon, spend time in the vibrant market town of **Portumna** where the River Shannon enters Lough Derg and whose name derives from the Irish Port Omna, meaning the landing place of the oak tree. **Portumna Forest Park** <https://www.visitportumna.com/sdforestpark.html> boasts 450 hectares of woodland with marked walking trails and its own population of fallow deer and red squirrel. Also in Portumna, walking and cycling enthusiasts can join the scenic 500km **Beara Breifne Way**, Ireland's longest walking and cycling route. Portumna is also a base where you can hire a river cruiser.

For culture and history, a visit to the imposing **Portumna Castle** <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/west/portumnacastleandgardens/> with its formal gardens, walled kitchen gardens and tea rooms is recommended. For a complete contrast visit Portumna's **Irish Workhouse Centre** <http://irishworkhousecentre.ie/>, where the tragic stories of poor families during the Great Famine of 1846-1848 will rend your hearts.

**Overnight** Dine and stay in one of the many bed and breakfasts, guest houses and hotels around Lough Derg.

## Images for Day 1

18<sup>th</sup> Century Arched Bridge Killaloe to Ballina

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=BC52E91A-72A6-4668-826DF04EC9969130>

Beara Breifne Way

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=AB9919F6-A21B-4A7F-A2D70D5B559CFDD4>

Portumna Castle <https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=85E412D3-85F9-4EF7-9255C1331F8BDE38>

## Day 2 (79km/114km) Lough Derg to Athlone and Lough Ree

For many generations, Ireland's bogs were largely seen as a source of fuel for an open turf fire. Today, they are appreciated for their important role in biodiversity and for their fascinating flora and fauna.

**Clara Bog Nature Reserve** <https://www.clarabognaturereserve.ie/>, covering 464 hectares, is one of the best remaining examples of a raised bog in Western Europe. Its boardwalk and viewing point bring you right into nature at its best with butterflies, dragonflies and frogs, and birdsong for company. The visitor centre also offers guided walks and talks.

Afterwards visit **Celtic Roots** <https://www.celtic-roots.com/> studio in the quaint village of **Ballinahown**. The tour includes the fascinating history of bogs and bogwood as a material as well as the opportunity to have a go at crafting your own piece of bogwood sculpture. Discover another aspect (or, rather, 1000s of aspects!) of the Heartlands with a visit to the **Derryglad Folk Museum** <http://www.derrygladfolkmuseum.com/>, a treasure trove of some 6000 artefacts that tell about farm and folk life from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the very recent past.

In the afternoon, travel to **Athlone**, a bustling large town right on the River Shannon and at the heart of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. With its own 'left bank' and a great choice of restaurants to satisfy the taste buds, Athlone offers culture, heritage, activity and nature in equal measure. Tour the 13<sup>th</sup> century **Athlone Castle** <http://www.athlonecastle.ie/> to hear the story of the town and its people from ancient through to modern times. Visit the stunning riverside **Luan Gallery** to view works by local and national artists, while a visit to St Peter and Paul's Church just across the road from the gallery will reward you with gorgeous stained glass windows from the Harry Clarke Studio and by Sarah Purser.

The **Dead Centre Brewery** <http://deadcentrebrewing.com/> in town is one of Ireland's leading craft breweries, while no visit to Athlone would be complete without calling into Ireland's oldest pub, **Sean's Bar**.

On Athlone's doorstep is **Lough Ree** (known as the Lake of Kings), which offers a charming backdrop to a whole host of different water-based activities – from pedal boats for a casual meander to kayaking and stand up paddle boarding, to angling. Or if you're in need of some sheer fun, the lake is home to Ireland's largest inflatable water park at **BaySports!** <https://baysports.ie/>

**Viking Mike** <http://www.vikingtoursireland.ie/> also offers trips downriver, through the Shannon water meadows or 'callows', to the monastic spiritual centre of **Clonmacnoise**, with its intricately-carved stone crosses, two round towers and even a 'whispering' doorway. A voyage for anyone's bucket list!

Lunch and/or dinner can be enjoyed in one of the many quality restaurants in Athlone such as **Thyme** <http://www.thymerestaurant.ie/> and **The Fatted Calf** <http://www.thefattedcalf.ie/>

**Overnight** Athlone has a good choice of hotel and guesthouse accommodation.

Day 2 Images

Athlone <https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=65AC949E-E1DC-4F4B-B1059524E3B9997C>

Lough Ree <https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=95FADC58-6D64-4F57-A1A0152E4A937D95>

Clonmacnoise <https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=1CE15BAE-5FF7-40FB-8F7D19C330CED26B>

## Day 3 – Lough Ree and Longford (28km)

Travel north along the east shore of **Lough Ree**, through the snug village of Glasson, and on to the pretty village of **Keenagh**. In the nearby Corlea bog, a monumental timber trackway was uncovered during turf harvesting in the 1970s. Constructed from massive oak trees that were felled in 148 B.C. this Iron Age trackway is among the longest and most impressive in Europe. The **Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre** <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/midlands-eastcoast/corleatrackwayvisitorcentre/>

houses a section of this highly intriguing remnant of early Ireland civilisation and poses fascinating theories about why the road was constructed and by whom. The Centre is connected via trails to the **Royal Canal Greenway** and, via the pretty harbour at **Clondra**, to the Shannon Blueway. Yet another opportunity to get on your bike or in your boat and explore the peace, tranquility and rewilding landscape of the Heartlands, with birdsong and the sounds of nature accompanying your footsteps – or paddlestrokes!

Believing its physical stature today, the village of **Edgeworthstown** has an illustrious past. It was the home of the famous novelist Maria Edgeworth, whose life and works provide a fascinating insight into cultural, political and social life in rural Ireland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The town also has connections to another of Ireland's most famous literary families – the infamous Wildes. Find out more on a Guided Literary Walk before continuing to the nearby picture-postcard village of **Ardagh**, a 18<sup>th</sup> century estate village with spectacular stone walls and Tudor-Gothic cottages.

**Lunch**      Longford town

## Longford to Roscommon (30km)

A particular highlight of a walk around **Longford** town is the spectacular **St Mel's Cathedral** <http://www.longfordparish.com/>, home to two magnificent 19<sup>th</sup> century Harry Clarke Studios stained glass windows with their vivid, jewel-like colours. Although destroyed by fire from a candle display on Christmas Day in 2009, the Cathedral has been restored to its magnificent former beauty using the best of Irish and international design and craftsmanship.

Back on the Shannon, **Lanesborough** is a good stop for a riverside picnic where you're likely to meet locals and visitors alike out for a stroll or a cycle as you watch the river flow past on its journey through the Heartlands. A liquid of another sort – Slingshot Gin – is being distilled nearby by the Lough Ree Distillery <https://www.lrd.ie/>. As curious as the name may sound, it reveals yet another layer of the Heartlands – the fabulous tapestry of mythological people and events

connected with the landscape. The legendary Queen Medb (about which you will hear more at the visitor centre at Rathcroghan) <https://www.rathcroghan.ie/>

met her demise while bathing on the island of Inchcleraun in Lough Ree, when she was hit by a single slingshot. The rest is history as they say!! A new Distillery Visitor Centre is planned to open late in 2019.

A little further west is the pretty village of **Athleague**, where you can join the **Suck Valley Way**, a tranquil 105-km circular walking route that meanders along the banks of the River Suck, passing through ten pretty villages including **Ballygar** and **Castlecoote** enroute. **Les Petites Tartres** café <https://www.facebook.com/lespetitstartrescafe/> in Athleague is great for a stop off.

**Overnight** Head back to **Roscommon** town which has a good selection of hotel and guesthouse accommodation.

## Day 3 Images

Royal Canal Greenway

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=97CB14E1-3161-4C00-8A3F78EAB0A27624>

Clondra Harbour

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Ardagh

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Day 4 – Roscommon to Carrick-On-Shannon (42km)

### **Morning**

**Roscommon** has a charming mix of nature, activity and heritage, from the imposing ruin of the 13th century **Roscommon Castle** to the adjoining Loughnaneane Park, which is home to a wildlife conservation area. Explore the unique flora and fauna from the viewing point or walk along the wildflower meadow and the bird walk – all well away from the hustle and bustle of modern life.

Roscommon is rightly proud of its agriculture and its good food can be sampled in several local cafés including **Gleeson’s Townhouse** <https://www.gleesonstownhouse.com/> and **Rogue & Co.** <https://www.roqueroscommon.com/>

A little north of Roscommon town enjoy an intimate guided tour of **Strokestown Park** <http://www.strokestownpark.ie/>, a beautifully-preserved Georgian Palladian Mansion. Hear stories of how the family lived as you wander through the rooms still decked out with the original furnishings and fabrics. Make sure you take some time to enjoy the beautiful historic gardens & woodlands. Not to be missed is the **National Famine Museum** <http://www.strokestownpark.ie/>, which draws on a combination of original documents and images from the Strokestown Park archive to explain the circumstances of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s. This collection boasts an extensive range of papers including actual letters written by the tenants on the Strokestown Estate at the time of the famine.

After **lunch** in the café at Strokestown Park, travel on to the medieval village of **Tulsk** and the **Rathcroghan Visitor Centre** <https://www.rathcroghan.ie/>. The centre interprets the rich archaeology and mythology of a prehistoric royal site, which was home to the Iron Age Warrior Queen Medb (Maeve) and the nearby. Starting place for the epic Táin Bó Cuailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley), the oldest vernacular epic in European Literature, Rathcroghan is also the site of entry to, and (one hopes!) exit from, the Otherworld. Take a guided tour from the Centre to uncover the hidden landscape of the Heartlands. Definitely a site not to be missed.

Equally enthralling is the splendid **Clonalis House** <https://clonalis.com/> in Castlerea, home to the family of the last High King of Ireland, Rory O’Conor for over 1,000 years. Take a guided tour or even spend a night or three!

**Overnight** in Carrick-on-Shannon, where there’s a wide choice of accommodation. Dine in the award-winning **Oarsman Pub** <http://theoarsman.com/> or the wonderful **Cottage Restaurant** <http://cottagerestaurant.ie/>, located just a few kilometres from Carrick-on-Shannon.

**Carrick-on-Shannon** is vibrant and bustling with a wonderful calendar of festivals happening over the summer. But options to get off the beaten track are never far away in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and a cruise with **Moon River Cruises** <https://www.moonriver.ie/> delivers panoramic views of the local countryside that simply cannot be accessed through any other form of transport!

Carrick-on-Shannon is also a hub for three, four or seven-day cruise rental with a delectable choice of destination options.

Your visit to **Costello Chapel** won't take long as it's Ireland's smallest church but it's a fascinating little place, sandwiched between two shops on one of the town's main streets. Other places of interest in Carrick-on-Shannon include the **Leitrim Design House** <https://leitrimdesignhouse.ie/>, where the best of original, local crafts and artworks are beautifully displayed and available to buy.

Day 4 Images

Roscommon Castle

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=0880D1BA-085C-498F-8943923F73F1E2AF>

Strokestown Park House

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Carrick-On-Shannon

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Day 5 - Carrick-On-Shannon to North Cavan (64km)

After breakfast, it's a choice between challenging yourself or simply enjoying the views at **Lough Key Forest and Activity Park** <https://loughkey.ie/>. Whether it's a relaxing boat trip or a Zipit high wire forest adventure, how you explore Lough Key will depend on whether you're looking for laid back or thrilling. There's enough to do here to keep you engaged for a whole day.

And if taking time out is your thing, visit **Boyle Abbey** <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/west/boyleabbey/> to learn of a different time when quiet contemplation, prayer and farming were the daily lot of the Cistercian monks who lived there. In the town of Boyle itself is **King House** <http://www.kinghouse.ie/>, the early Georgian home of the King Family who sold the house to the British War Office when they moved residence to Lough Key. Today, King House holds varied collections of furniture, artefacts and art and, every Saturday, hosts the the award-winning **Boyle Farmer's Market** in its walled courtyard. For "food of rare tastiness", wander down the street to the Drumanilra Farm Kitchen, where Liam and Justina Gavin sell produce from their organic farm 10 minutes out the road. If the weather's warm and fine, you can dine in the garden or, if the weather is less clement, stay indoors in the restored old house warmed by a roaring wood fire and read your newspaper. A sandpit and a children's corner with books and games ensure that everyone is kept happy!

After lunch at Lough Key or in Boyle town, we head north via **Keadue**, one of the most musical towns in Ireland. Here, the annual **O'Carolan Harp Festival** <http://www.ocarolanharpfestival.ie/> pays homage to Turlough O'Carolan, the 18th<sup>th</sup> century blind harper whose melodies are still widely played and enjoyed today.

En route north towards **Lough Allen**, the northernmost lake on the Shannon, discover a distinctly different, underground side to the Hidden Heartlands. The nearby **Miner's Way** <https://www.irishtrails.ie/Trail/Miner-s-Way---Historical-Trail/23/> walking trail follows the paths the miners travelled on their journey to work, and hints at an industrial past that is belied by the rural, serene beauty of the landscape. At the **Arigna Mining Experience** <https://www.arignaminingexperience.ie/>, your guide will be a former miner who'll share his unique insights into what coal mining life was like in the area since its beginning in the 1700's until its closure in 1990.

Head to **Drumshanbo** where Ireland's first floating boardwalk at **Acres Lake** is in sharp contrast to the miner's world of toil, din and confined spaces. Around here, it's all about fresh air and wide, open spaces. The **Shannon Blueway** which links Drumshanbo with Carrick-on-Shannon has a range of on-water and land based trails, and guided and unguided paddling, walking and cycling.

**Drumshanbo** is also home to one of Ireland's most popular gins – **Gunpowder Gin** – which is crafted in **The Shed Distillery**. The Visitor Centre is currently under renovation and will reopen later in 2019.

Day 5 Images

Lough Key Forest Park

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<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=359B45F9-8C23-4A18-B23A6908D7A222A3>

Lough Allen

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=6E37AEE6-48BB-499D-B61F7EFB967FE158>

Arigna Mining Experience

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=F5C66EA3-4C7F-45DB-B6B9D1032052B77F>

Shannon Blueway

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**Dinner** and overnight in/near Cavan Town

Day 6 – Cavan Town to Blacklion (59km), Bawnboy (35.5km) or Ballyconnell (29km) in North Cavan

Not only is Cavan the source of two of Ireland's main navigable rivers – the Shannon and the Erne – it is also home to over 350 lakes. So, whether it's to don a wet suit or baiting a fishing hook, you're never too far from the water in Cavan.

**Killykeen Forest Park** <https://www.coillte.ie/site/killykeen-forest-park/>, on the shores of **Lough Oughter**, has wonderful forest walking trails and views of the ruins of **Clough Oughter Castle**, located on its own island in the middle of the lake. Explore the area by bike or on water by renting a bicycle or a kayak from the

**Cavan Adventure Centre** <https://cavanadventure.com/> The area is of international importance for its wildlife and is home to large flocks of Whooping Swans. If you'd like to know even more, book a guided ecology tour with **Blue Damsel Discovery** <http://bluedamseldiscovery.com/> where your guide, Heather Bothwell will invite you to experience the local wildlife including the breathtaking colours and aeronautics of Cavan's dragonflies and damselflies.

If you fancy a unique companion for the rest of your travels in the Heartlands, book onto a fun Teddy Bear Workshop at **Bear Essentials** <https://www.beaessentials.ie/>, which also houses the largest, and definitely the cuddliest, collection of teddy bears in Ireland.

### **Lunch** Bawnboy or Ballyconnell

With your Teddy Bear at your side, make your way to the **Shannon Pot**, the source of Ireland's magnificent River Shannon. Just to the north lies the **Cavan Burren**, part of the Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark <https://www.marblearchcavesgeopark.com/>. A fascinating place – both geologically and archaeologically – it has five walking trails that you can explore at your own pace, or learn about the secrets of the landscape from a knowledgeable Geopark guide. If you wish to venture further afield, engage the services of Marcus and his team at **Rural Adventure** <https://www.ruraladventure.ie/> - whose love of Cavan is matched by their ability to sing about it as you relax over a pint after the day's ramble.

Dinner and overnight in Blacklion (59km), Bawnboy (35.5km) or Ballyconnell (29km) in North Cavan

### Day 6 Images

#### Cloughoughter Castle

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=92E98084-0D8E-41B2-B9F21ACD2DE3509F>

#### Lough Oughter

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#### Cavan Burren

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Day 7 – North Leitrim Ballyconnell to Dromohair (60km), Blacklion to Dromohair (35.5km), Bawnboy to Dromohair (54km)

In a world where everything we do is heavily scheduled, and we are all super-connected, *la dolce far niente* (the Italian custom of doing nothing and enjoying it), is probably more important than ever for our mental and physical wellbeing. Before we leave Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, there's one last day to take stock.

North Leitrim is making a name for itself as a place to discover the essence of life – of yourself, of the world around you. Treat yourself to a yoga retreat at **Ardnahoo** <https://www.ardnahoo.com/>, where you can stay in one of their Ecocabins. Novice or regular yoga practitioner, a visit to Ardnahoo will leave you feeling utterly relaxed and rejuvenated! Described as a little slice of heaven it's a good spot to escape the fast-paced everyday life and bring it back to basics of country living in a comfortable environment ... and all in a WiFi-free zone.

Other options include **Slow Adventure Leitrim** <http://slowadventure.ie/> which gives visitors the chance to explore wild, open and natural places. Experiences range from a vegan cookery class at **Edergole Kitchen** <http://www.edergolekitchen.ie/> to guided tours of the waterways in Canadian Canoes with **Adventure Gently** <http://www.adventuregentlyireland.com/>.

Other options include the **Organic Centre** <https://www.theorganiccentre.ie/>, described as having a timeless quality, so perfect for exploring the gardens and orchards. Or sign up to attend one of their workshops – a treat for all the senses.

Lunch in Dromahair.

Dromahair to Sligo (18km)

A place that's certainly worth making time for is the glacially-sculpted **Glenade**, the 'jealous valley'. The newly-signposted **Arroo Trail** <https://www.irishtrails.ie/Trail/Arroo-Trail/1327/> allows gentle exploration of dramatic scenery in this Special Area of Conservation – with views over the valley and lake to the Atlantic Coast. The area is not without its castles either; **Parke's Castle** <http://www.heritageireland.ie/en/north-west/parkescastle/> commands the eastern shore of Lough Gill and its guided tour helps you imagine life from hundreds of years ago. For lovers of water, a boat trip on **Lough Gill** will bring you to the famous Lake Isle of Inishfree <https://www.roseofinnisfree.com/>. And then there's **Glencar Waterfall**, ever beautiful but particularly impressive after rain when the sound of the water crashing into the pool below is a memory in itself. Described as one of the most enchanting areas in Ireland, the beautiful landscape around Lough

Gill and above Glencar were a rich source of inspiration for William Butler Yeats, and is immortalised in his poems 'The Lake Isle of Inishfree' and 'The Stolen Child'.

Depart for **Sligo**.

Day 7 Images

Glenade

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=989F25D3-0A95-4861-8DD1081FB89F5688>

Parkes Castle

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=BF344B46-CBF0-4D32-8246EB377ED1A185>

Lough Gill

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Glencar Waterfall

<https://www.irelandscontentpool.com/media/?mediaId=CE6CE06E-ACD4-49CC-B3D8C5B3E3C66D64>

Benbulbin

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