

Connecting coasts

Pair up two popular road trips for an Irish escape that combines sea views and city sights, writes **Cathy Toogood**

Look forward, not down, Cathy. Use your arms," shouts surf instructor Zuhé Coronil, who is determined to help get me on my feet. I take a deep breath, paddle, push up and wobble – but for at least half a second, I manage to stand up. Zuhé whoops before I crash inelegantly into the water.

I emerge grinning, ready to go again and eager to keep my balance for longer. I wade back out and wait for what Zuhé tells me is a "green wave" (a wave that's not broken yet), which is the best type to surf on, he promises.

When I'd turned up at Sligo's National Surf Centre in the village of Strandhill, I have to admit the last thing I felt like doing was squeezing myself into a wetsuit for a lesson, having spent the day exploring

vast and rugged County Donegal at the tip of the Wild Atlantic Way. Ireland's fourth-largest county doesn't get as many visitors as it deserves – but as one of the least-visited areas along the Wild Atlantic Way, clients will often have its empty beaches and coastal walking trails to themselves, while cosy pubs such as The Rusty Mackerel, where I warmed up after walking atop the Slieve League Cliffs, offer a hearty welcome.

The lush landscapes – from those rugged cliffs to the Glencar Waterfall that inspired poet William Butler Yeats – looked smoulderingly good even while shrouded in drizzle and mist. I, on the other hand, was slightly soggy and bedraggled, but my lesson with Zuhé's Atlantic Surf School still left me feeling re-energised and ready to explore. ➤

Writer Cathy Toogood balances on a surfboard at Strandhill, County Sligo.

PICTURE: Diana Jarvis



DESTINATIONS

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Giant's Causeway, County Antrim; Causeway Coastal Route; Glencar Waterfall, County Leitrim; The Rusty Mackerel in Carrick, County Donegal **PICTURES:** Diana Jarvis; Richard Watson/Tourism Ireland; Shutterstock/Giacomo Fatigati

RUGGED ROAD TRIP

The surf lesson came near the end of a road trip that took me from Belfast to Strandhill on Ireland's northwest coast, joining up the Causeway Coastal Route in Northern Ireland with the Wild Atlantic Way in Ireland.

These routes take in some of the whole island's top sights, from *Game of Thrones'* Dark Hedges and Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge to Fanad Lighthouse and Ireland's

most northerly point at Malin Head. Now, as part of a collaboration between Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland, greater links are being made between the two routes, with investment in local tourism businesses and improved signage.

I'd combined stops at big-hitting attractions such as the Giant's Causeway, with its otherworldly hexagonal basalt columns, with smaller, less-visited towns such as Whitehead, 16 miles north of Belfast at the start of the Causeway Coastal Route. Here, clients can stroll along cliff path walk The Gobbins, look around a railway museum with steam train rides on Saturdays and snap pictures of the colourful Balamory-esque houses on Marine Parade. The Gobbins is also earmarked for investment via the Belfast Region City Deal to add a new walkway.

ASK THE expert



Judith Cassidy,
acting head of
Great Britain,
Tourism Ireland

"While visitors often pick either the Wild Atlantic Way or Causeway Coastal Route to explore, a new focus on the region is encouraging road-trippers to extend their stays and experience both iconic routes in one trip, taking in spectacular coastal landscapes and famous sites like the Giant's Causeway and Malin Head. This year Tourism Ireland has launched a Coast to Coast: The Scenic Route campaign to promote the Causeway Coastal Route and Wild Atlantic Way combined as one great holiday."

WILD WATERS

Another highlight was a boat trip around Rathlin Island with Kintra Boat Tours, departing from Ballycastle Harbour in Northern Ireland's County Antrim. Knowledgeable crew member Francis Close pointed out landmarks including Scotland's Mull of Kintyre – which is only about 12 miles away from Northern Ireland at its closest point – and soaring cliffs that are "like a motorway of birds", with dozens of gannets, guillemots and even the odd puffin swooping around. We passed three lighthouses on the shore, while inquisitive seals popped up to watch ➤

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ABOVE: Fanad Lighthouse (top), County Donegal; Rathlin Island, County Antrim PICTURES: Diana Jarvis

the boat go by. Telling me about the diverse wildlife around the island, from dolphins and jellyfish to orcas and basking sharks, Francis says: "No trip on the boat is ever the same. I never get bored."

At Slieve League Cliffs in Donegal – the highest accessible sea cliffs in Europe and three times the height of the better-known Cliffs of Moher – tour guide David Gillespie shared the same sentiment while describing how the sunset reflects from the rocks rising out of the Atlantic and how the heather turns the landscape around the cliffs purple by the end of summer. "I can come 10 times a day and it feels different every time," he says.

CITY STOPS

As well as rural beauty spots along the routes, clients can dip into lively cities including Belfast and Derry-Londonderry. On the Derry by Fork food tour with guide Hannah Ramraj, I see how much more

there is to the city than the popular Channel 4 programme – although I did make time to take a snap of the famous *Derry Girls* mural.

As we tried tasters in a range of independent venues – from fish tacos on Pyke 'N' Pommes' double-decker bus and sandwiches in Italian deli Salumeria Mariuccia to Irish bar O'Loughlin's Irish House, where we learnt how to

top tip

The shoulder seasons are the best time to enjoy these routes at their quietest, from March to May and September to October

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BOOK IT

McKinlay Kidd offers a 10-night Ireland's Greatest Road Trips – the Causeway Coast and Wild Atlantic Way holiday from £1,595 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes accommodation on a B&B basis, car hire and five guided excursions, but not flights. There is the option to start and finish in either Dublin or Belfast. mckinlaykidd.com

Rabbie's offers a five-day Northern Ireland & the Atlantic Coast tour starting in Dublin or Belfast and ending in Galway, from £515. It takes in the Causeway Coast, Derry-Londonderry, Donegal, Sligo and Galway, with travel in a luxury mini-coach, local guide, and daily pick-up and drop-off. Flights not included; accommodation can be added for £416 (B&B) or £523 (hotel). rabbies.com



FROM LEFT: O'Laughlin's Irish House, a stop on the Derry by Fork food tour; Slieve League Cliffs, County Donegal **PICTURES:** Diana Jarvis; Shutterstock/MNSStudio

pour the perfect pint of Guinness – Hannah's passion for the city became clear. "I love living here. The people are fantastic and so kind," she smiles as we bid farewell.

While clients can cram a lot into a road trip along the two routes, part of the appeal for me was slipping into a laid-back and joyful way of life. At Willow & Lore

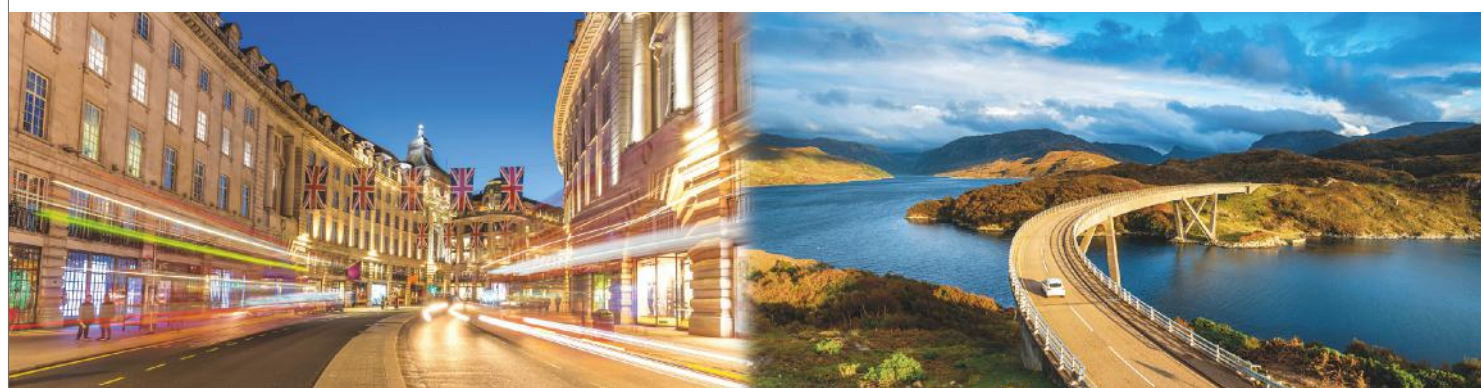
heritage farm in the Antrim hills, owner Declan Scullion took me back to simpler times, teaching me how to make butter by hand and how to separate grain from chaff with a winnowing stick.

He was keen to stress that the farm's Fire, Feast and Folklore experience is designed not only to teach visitors about

historic Irish ways of life, but also to "offer the opportunity to slow down and relax".

That's exactly how clients can approach these joint routes: looking forward to slowing down and savouring the scenery – whether surfing the waves, feasting on local fare or watching a trad band with a pint in hand. **TW**

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