

Walking in the Éire

Ireland's raw, elemental beauty and warm bonhomie are like a roaring fire in winter, says Adam Shaw

As the nights draw in and temperatures drop, suggesting a winter trip to Ireland might prompt a few raised eyebrows. But with fast, direct flights from several British airports, epic backdrops for country walks – and plenty of pubs for warming up in after – Ireland makes a strong case for a winter break.

Judith Cassidy, deputy head of Great Britain at Tourism Ireland, says: "We're looking forward to a successful winter for tourism on the island of Ireland. After two disrupted festive seasons, there is an appetite from British travellers to make the most of this winter." As well as wild, windswept walks, there's plenty to enjoy in Ireland's cities in winter too – from Dublin's nightlife to Belfast's Christmas market – so here we look at three Irish breaks where clients can combine the best of both.

GATEWAY TO THE ANCIENT EAST

Most visits to Ireland incorporate a stay in Dublin. It's not hard to see why, with world-leading attractions such as the Guinness Storehouse, historic sites like Trinity College, and lively pubs and music venues in buzzing Temple Bar.

While Dublin is an attraction in itself, Ireland's Ancient East is ideal for experiencing history and traditions. Its oldest city, Waterford, home of the famed crystal-making technique, holds the biggest Christmas festival on the island, the Waterford Winterval. A short drive away is the fishing village of Dunmore East, which boasts a charming harbour lined with traditional thatched buildings and is popular with local artists.

Nearby County Wexford is blessed with several walking trails. One route, near Hook Head, takes in the impressive Hook Lighthouse, the second-oldest operating lighthouse in the world. **Book it:** Newmarket Holidays' six-day Dublin & Ireland's Ancient East tour starts at £815 and includes four-star accommodation on a half-board basis, transfers, guided tours, excursions and flights. newmarketholidays.co.uk

WILD ATLANTIC WAY

The southwest boasts some of the country's most striking landscapes, from the craggy cliffs of the Ring of Kerry to the rolling hills of Beara, County Cork. This is Ireland at its most picturesque, with sparkling ➤

good to know

Titanic Belfast will undergo a multimillion-pound refurbishment next year and will be closed from January 2, reopening on February 28



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Titanic Belfast; Giant's Causeway; Cobh Church

PICTURES: Brian Morrison/Faillte Ireland/Tourism Ireland; Chris Hill; Killian Broderick

ASK THE expert

"Highlight Ireland's fantastic value for money during the shoulder seasons and winter months. We have many fantastic hotels and travellers are more likely to find their perfect bolthole, for less money, compared with summer. Also, the big attractions will be less busy, so visitors can make the most of their time."

David Wood,
trade, industry and
business tourism
manager,
Tourism Ireland



lakes dotted among seemingly endless fields, and along the coast, golden sands and windswept rock faces. Clients can stop off in quaint fishing ports such as Castletownbere and traditional towns like Killarney, where they can enjoy a classic pony-and-trap ride.

Compact Cork City has its own laid-back attitude. Be sure to visit the English Market in the heart of the city, a covered food market that has stood since 1788, filled with sights, smells and tastes that typify Cork.

Book it: A six-day tour to Killarney, Cork & the Ring of Kerry with Leger Holidays starts at £699, including accommodation in three and four-star hotels on a half-board basis, travel by coach and ferry, accommodation and most meals. leger.co.uk

NORTHERN GIANTS

The star of County Antrim is the otherworldly Giant's Causeway – a sprawling collection of around 40,000 mostly hexagonal basalt columns. This natural marvel is a must-see for anyone considering

a trip to the northern coast – and tends to be less crowded in winter.

While visitors are in the area, they can sample some of Ireland's famous whiskey – perfect for warming up on cold winter days – at Bushmills Distillery, the oldest licensed distillery in the world.

The distillery and Giant's Causeway are easily accessible from Belfast – itself a worthwhile place to explore in winter, with its Christmas market in the City Hall gardens. The impressive Titanic Experience – with its fun, interactive look at the history of the ill-fated ship – provides the ideal place to escape the weather on a rainy day.

Riviera Travel combines a trip to all of the above with a visit to the picturesque Strangford Lough and the Unesco-protected stately home Mount Stewart, with its manicured gardens.

Book it: Riviera Travel offers a five-day Belfast, Giant's Causeway and Mount Stewart tour, including accommodation in a four-star hotel on a B&B basis, from £639. Flights not included. rivieratravel.co.uk **TW**

3 IRISH WINTER FESTIVALS

Galway Christmas Market

Galway City's Eyre Square is decked out in full festive mode for six weeks each winter, with stalls and attractions for all. Until December 22, chalets with vendors selling staples like glühwein and bratwurst sit alongside classic rides including a carousel.

galwaytourism.ie



TradFest Temple Bar, Dublin

Born in Temple Bar, the traditional Irish music festival now covers some of the city's other iconic sites including St Patrick's Cathedral, the GPO Museum and Swords Castle. The 2023 event runs from January 25-29, with Cara Dillon, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Judy Collins set to perform.

tradfesttemplebar.com

Atlantic Irish Fest, Bundoran

The heritage of Ireland's Atlantic coast is celebrated in this County Donegal cultural festival. Visitors can expect live music and enlightening talks with a cosy atmosphere – all set against the stunning backdrop of the northwest's wild coastline. The next one will be held from January 21-25, 2023, and organisers hope to partner up with TradFest, encouraging visitors to double up on their celebrations.

govisitdonegal.com