

The **Connemara** Peninsula is located in Western Ireland and is surrounded on three sides by the Atlantic. Connemara is Irish for “inlets of the sea” and the coastal road winds through small bays and coves, passing seaside hamlets and hidden beaches.

The landscape is very diverse. Inland you can find bogs, valleys and lakes in the Gaelic-speaking south. In the north, the Maumturk Mountains and the Twelve Bens mountain range are at the heart of the region. Dotting the coastline are the islands of Connemara, some inhabited and others not. Much of Connemara’s wild beauty is due to its remote location and sometimes harsh conditions. In spite of this, it experiences a regular influx of visitors and yet still remains largely unspoiled.

Immediately southeast of Letterfrack, **Connemara National Park** spans 2000 hectares of bog, mountain and heath. The park encloses a number of the Twelve Bens, including Bencullagh, Benbrack and Benbaun. The heart of the park is Gleann Mór (Big Glen), through which the River Polladirk flows. It is possible to walk up the glen and over the surrounding mountains. The area also offers a wide variety of activities: golf, horseback riding, pony trekking, walking, hiking and rock climbing. There are also several water activities available, including scuba diving, sailing, swimming, and boat races in the summer months.

And of course, you can stop in at any of the cities for traditional music, singing and dancing. Each town has its own distinct character and local culture and several events, festivals, fairs and shows take place in each corner of Connemara throughout the year.

Connemara boasts around 5000 years of history, with megalithic stones, tombs, stone and earth forts, early Christian churches, castles (both ruined and inhabited), 19th century houses, and the landing place of Alcock and Brown (who made the first non-stop transatlantic flight in June 1919).



Clifden is the “capital” of Connemara. The town’s skyline continues to be dominated by the twin spires of the two churches, St Joseph’s Catholic Church and Christ Church of Ireland.

Clifden today represents all that is good about life in the west of Ireland: good food, good friends and good craic. Thousands of visitors each year stroll down its streets, sampling the local cuisine, exploring the local shops and generally relaxing in the convivial atmosphere for which Clifden is renowned.





History

Like so many other visitors before them, Mitchell and Margaret Henry fell in love with Connemara. Tradition says that they first visited Connemara on their honeymoon and they often rented Kylemore Lodge when vacationing here. After Mitchell inherited some money upon his father's death, they purchased the land and built Kylemore Castle between 1867 and 1871. Mitchell was instrumental in developing the area. He instituted a plan to reclaim bogland, and he provided work and shelter for locals recovering from the Great Irish Famine. He also built a school for his workers' children.

In 1920, the Irish Benedictine Nuns purchased the castle and lands after their abbey was destroyed in Ypres, Belgium during World War I. They converted the castle to an abbey and opened an international boarding school and a local day school for girls. With decreased enrollment and rising costs, the school was just recently closed in 2010.

The Benedictine Nuns still reside at Kylemore and continue with their daily work and prayer according to the ancient Rule of Saint Benedict. They run a farm on the estate, make handcrafted products and offer music education.

Local Legends

Many of the mountains and lakes in Connemara are mentioned in ancient stories that have been

passed down for generations and Kylemore is no exception. The beautiful lake that perfectly reflects the abbey takes its name from a legend that tells of a white horse that rises from the lake every seven years (Pol a Capall – The Place of the Horse). In 2011 some of the staff at Kylemore Abbey swore that they had seen the horse. On a windy day, the wind whipped up water from the lake in wispy white clouds that raced across the surface resembling the fabled white horse.

What to See at Kylemore

The Abbey

Visitors can tour the restored rooms of the abbey and learn about its history and tales of intrigue, tragedy and romance.

Victorian Walled Garden

Six acres are contained within the Victorian Walled Garden, which was built by Mitchell Henry at the same time as the castle. It was one of the last walled gardens to be built during the Victorian period in Ireland and is divided in two by a natural mountain stream. You can stroll through the flower garden and tour the restored glasshouses and the head gardener's house.

Gothic Church

Take a short walk from the abbey and you will come to the Gothic Church. In 1874, Mitchell and Margaret were vacationing in Egypt when tragedy struck. Margaret contracted dysentery and died two weeks later. Mitchell had her body embalmed and brought back to Connemara so that she could be laid to rest at her beloved Kylemore. The Gothic Church is a testament to his love for her. The two are buried side by side in a nearby mausoleum.

Woodland and Lakeshore Walks

The grounds around Kylemore Abbey include many hiking trails that date back to the development of the estate. You can take a guided hike to gain insight into the unique geology, flora and fauna, and history of the region.