

Rogue vacation

Forget fun in the sun — experience the beauty of Ireland

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Eagle Island Lighthouse is one of many places to go storm-watching in Ireland.

Complain about the Irish weather to a local and you'll be told the weather is grand — you're just wearing the wrong clothes. If baking on a sandy beach isn't your cuppa tea, pack your fleece and rubber boots and make Dublin your first home base for

winter-storm watching. And Ireland hasn't yet billed itself as Storm Watch Central, so all the more reason to go now.

Of course, there's more to do besides watching waves crash over the Giants Causeway and the Wild At-



lantic Way. Ireland off-season has a vibrant culture and culinary scene, from pub crawling to museum haunting to theatre going, all very affordable and a perfect time to avoid crowds.

And winter travel gives you the luxury of planning almost day by day.

Check into Dublin's Dylan Hotel, once a 19th-century townhouse, now artfully decorated and just steps away from museums, galleries and great restaurants. Get your bearings with a "Hop-on Hop-off" Bus Tour. You can get off and back on at more than 30 stops. Most everyone stops at the Guinness Storehouse, which packs in more than one million visitors annually, yet another reason for visiting this winter.

Discover how Guinness is made and sample a pint from the Gravity Bar, seven storeys up, while gazing at the 360-degree view overlooking all of Dublin.

The last stop on the DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transit) deposits you in the coastal town of Howth, where you'll likely experience waves crashing over the pier. Alternatively, drive the Dublin Coastal Road: Just remember to stay on the left side. Take a walking route through Howth's incredible landscape and end your day with the freshest seafood at the King Sitric, including crab and lobster caught just a few metres away by their own fishermen.

A few rooms upstairs look onto seagulls sparring above breaking waves just across the street.

If you're jet-lagged, the Ely wine

bar is next door to the Dylan. The wine list is extensive and the food is very good. Speaking of which, lots of ground is covered by a Dublin Tasting Trail. Two hours and several bites later, spiked with snippets of the city's architecture and history, you'll taste what Ireland is doing extremely well. You might end with a pint at the Swan, circa 1600.

Getting one of the regulars to discuss its history is easy but leaving is usually difficult. "We have all kinds here, from fellas sweeping the streets to fellas who own the streets," said the proprietor, laughing.

Besides the friendliest people, another best thing about the Emerald Isle is that the countryside is never more than about half an hour from its cities.

Ireland's natural beauty is just as breathtaking in grey winter days as in sunny days of summer. Head north, past fields thick as felt, past undulating drumlins that, from the air, resemble a basket of eggs.

Have lunch at Brunel's in the seaside town of Newcastle before your next home base, Belfast. How can they charge less than 10 pounds (\$18) for a superb entrée with locally sourced ingredients? You'll find these prices throughout Ulster. Shopping, anyone? (Tip: Northern Ireland's currency is the British pound, while the Republic of Ireland's, which includes Dublin, is the euro.)

Newcastle Harbour may be a good place to storm-watch, but if you don't see anyone walking the promenade, it may not be safe. And that warning ap-



Waves crash at Dingle Bay, County Kerry, Ireland.

plies to just about anywhere along the coast, where rogue waves can appear suddenly and take you off-guard. Visitors also come to Newcastle to tramp the Mourne Mountains, through howling gales and swirling mist, where on a clear day you can see all the way to Scotland. This landscape inspired Jonathan Swift's tales of Gulliver, with Lilliput being Ulster, albeit smaller.

Check into Belfast's Europa Hotel, once the most bombed hotel in Europe, and wallow in your bubbly hot soaker bathtub. Lousy weather is a perfect excuse (if you need one) to seek shelter in a pub and warm up with a Jameson Irish whiskey. Across

the street from the Europa is the Crown Liquor Saloon, one of the National Trust's greatest treasures. And spend a few hours at the Titanic Museum. You are certain to hear more than once: "She was fine when she left Belfast."

Fuel up with a fine Ulster breakfast at The Europa and drive the Antrim Coast, billed as "one of the world's great road journeys," to the spectacular Giants Causeway and some serious storm-watching. Be sure to visit the clifftop Mussenden Temple and mull over the area's myths and legends and tales of heroism, fairies and banshees.

The Causeway Coastal Route con-

nects with the Wild Atlantic Way so you could drive the coast through to Derry/Londonderry, where you'll want to stay a few days more.

First-time visitors are amazed at how so many wonderful places are a short drive from one another, but Northern Ireland is just 135 km long and 110 km wide. And off-season, you'll drive uncrowded roads rather than get stuck behind a fleet of tour buses. You don't need to be Irish to experience the "Cead Mile Failte" — 100,000 welcomes.

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