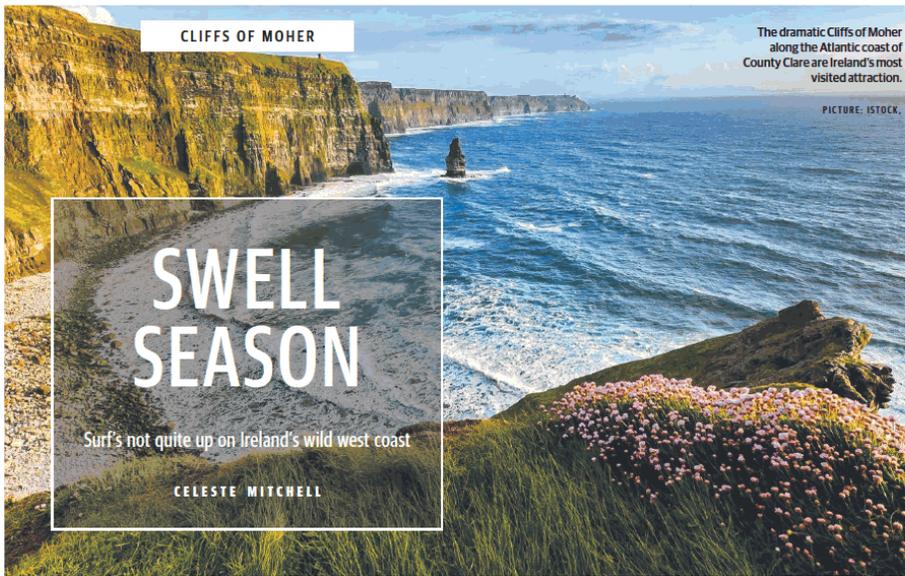


DESTINATION ♦ IRELAND



ESCAPE ROUTE

IRELAND

GETTING THERE
Several airlines fly from Melbourne to Dublin including Etihad, Emirates, Qantas and Singapore Airlines.

STAYING THERE
Powered campervan sites at Ocean View Park in Lahinch cost €30 (\$440) a night. +353 (0) 65 7081626 Strandhill Camping & Caravan Park has powered sites from €22. sligocaravanandcamping.ie

DOING THERE
Campervan hire starts from €35 (\$456) a day with Bunk Campers, who have stations at London Gatwick, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast and Dublin. bunkcampers.com

MORE
Ireland.com

You going to surf the Thames, are you?" If the oversize baggage check-in attendant in Brisbane wasn't incredulous enough, walking through London's Underground with a surfboard is a sure-fire way to attract attention. But my partner is dedicated to the cause. We're on our way to Dublin, where we'll be picking up a campervan and heading west in search of waves. "Surf in Ireland?" was the repeated disbelieving question we heard before our trip, but it's a secret that's slowly getting out. And while it's not the sole purpose of our visit, the hunt for waves opened up Ireland's jewellery box of natural assets and put the keys to the ignition. A patchwork of green materialises all around us as we cruise the M7 towards the west coast to join the Wild Atlantic Way, the name given to the 2500km route that hugs the dramatic coastline. It's surreal; as if an artist has run ahead and splashed the landscape across a canvas, his palette blending from vivid lime to deep olive, while wind turbines swing their heavy arms around in open fields. We pass crumbling forts and

I WATCH FAMILIES HIGH ON ICE CREAM ... NOT LETTING A LITTLE SIDEWAYS RAIN CLOUD THEIR DAY

ancient stone farmhouses that neighbour modernised B&Bs, as if the upkeep just became too much so the owners decided to start afresh next door. Once we leave the motorway, the roads become narrower; the scenery more spectacular. We slice straight through the centre of Ireland's belly in three hours, passing Barack Obama's ancestral village in the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of Moneygall, looping under Limerick, and pulling up in County Clare surf town, Lahinch, about 6pm. The beach is a long grey arch butting up against the headland of Lisconnor Bay, on which another rocky fortress stands defeated. Around that headland, just 10

minutes further north lie the hulking Cliffs of Moher (where tomorrow we'll battle bracing winds but smile uncontrollably at their beauty). As far as surf goes, it's disappointing, but we have arrived on a day of 25km/h onshore winds. At dead low tide, it's as if the ocean has sucked the beach dry like a kid with a straw on the last drops of a milkshake, revealing rock-studded sands. If it weren't for the string of surf schools lining the beachfront, I'd be dubious of the town's surfing demeanour. We wander the main street instead—a tight cluster of old pastel pubs and restaurants, ice-cream shops and the Lahinch Surf Shop, where photographs of visiting pro surfers hang proudly on the wall. There are no beachfront skyscrapers or golden arches here, just piercing green farmland lined with stone fences built diligently long, long ago. On our way back to our van after dinner, we stop to pat two donkeys as if it were the most normal thing to do in the world. The next morning we discover even though an Irish summer can be an oxymoron at times, it's always sunny inside Joe's cafe, which serves up hearty Irish breakfasts and steaming

bowls of porridge—and free WiFi. It turns out it's not the best time of the year for surf but my partner's not deterred. After sussing the best spots to avoid the raging onshore winds, he paddles out while I stroll the foreshore and watch families high on ice cream and sandy walks; not letting a little sideways rain cloud their day. It's that attitude I come to embrace as we meander our way along the coast north towards Strandhill, a little surfer town near Sligo. Our trip develops into a Wi-Fi-free, laissez-faire drive with our bed in the back and the open road in front. We shift the search from surf to scenery, with stops to sample local produce and whiskey along the way. Along the Sky Road that loops its way out from Clifden, near Galway, time becomes elastic. I lose myself in the vistas as nature reclaims once impenetrable castles, painting their sides with leaves and moss. Cows and sheep spot the hillsides and trees hang over the road in places, creating a tunnel effect. We pull off the side of the road to stumble upon the perfect lakeside picnic spot to eat hot-smoked local salmon and goat's cheese, picked up from the Burren Smokehouse just

outside Lisdoonvarna. Arriving at our destination that evening, we find Strandhill camping ground sitting beachfront in the shadow of Knocknarea Mountain. Wiping light rain from the windshield the next day, we pass through Yeats country—past his grave in Drumcliff—and stop to survey the scene in Bundoran, where seaweed baths and carnival rides sit on the headland and the main street plays to theme with shops called Surf Co and Surf Girl, and the Rolling Wave B&B. At Tullan Strand I warm up with coffee from a cute blue cart named "Flotsam & Jetsam" and sit on the headland overlooking surfers competing for small and peaky waves. In this wild and windy landscape, horse riders amble over the grassy dunes and up the beach until they become tiny specks in the distance. In just four days our quasi-surf trip has matured like a fine whiskey, giving me a deep appreciation of Ireland's west coast beauty. And board or no board, the ground swell of emotion I've felt more than compensates for a mediocre wave.

THE WRITER TRAVELLED AT HER OWN EXPENSE WITH ASSISTANCE FROM BUNK CAMPERS.



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