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The Best of Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way

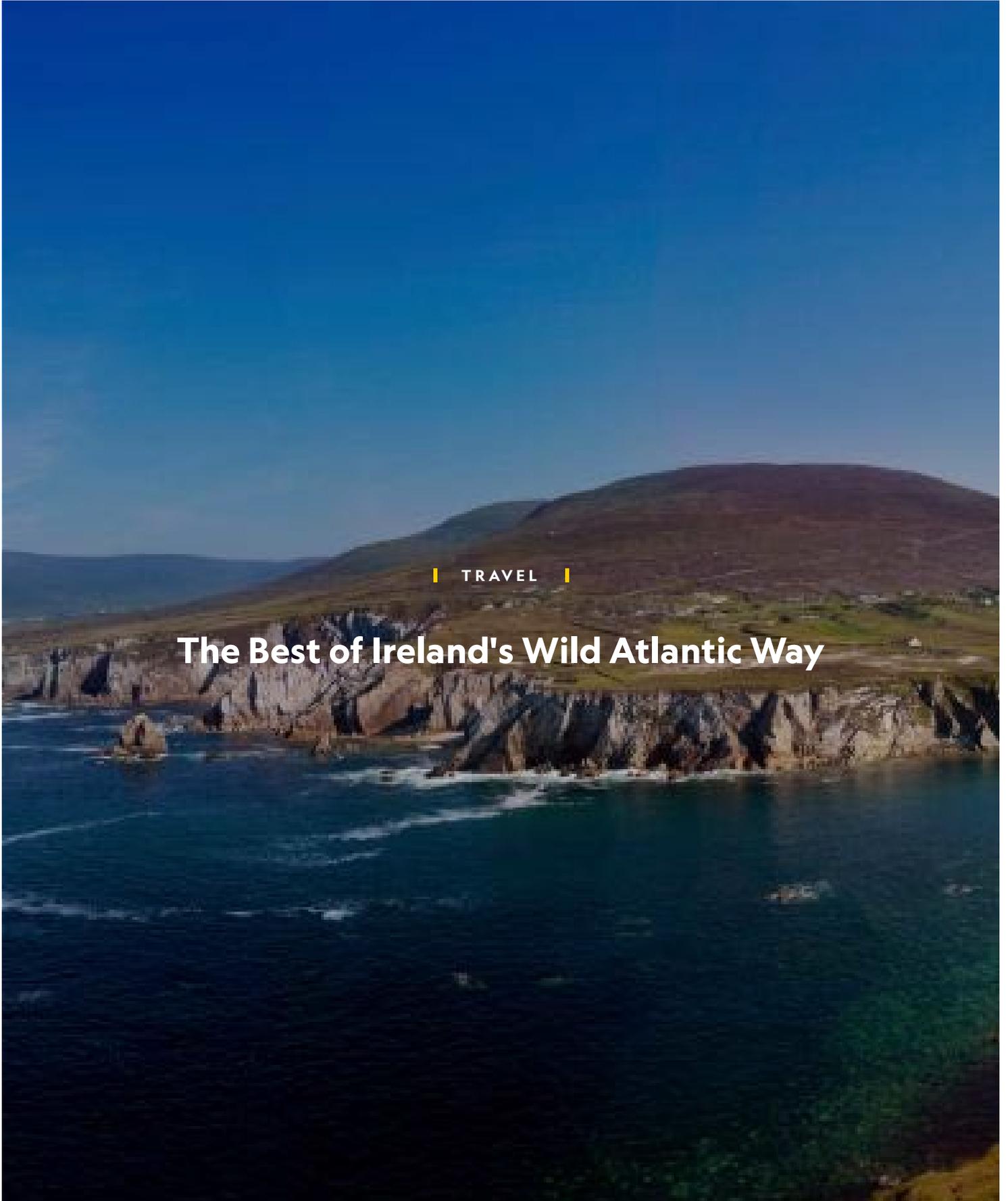




IMAGE CREDIT: NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

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Along the western seacoast of Ireland, this coastal touring route features wild landscapes, traditional culture, foot-tapping music sessions, and just-off-the-boat seafood.



BY KATHLEEN M. MANGAN

A WILD ATLANTIC Way journey in Ireland might include exploring castle ruins, taking a boat to an ancient island monastery, watching a step dancer in a pub music session, staying in a lighthouse keeper's quarters, or pulling lobster pots for your dinner. Authentic experiences are what this coastal touring route covering nearly 1,600 miles from Donegal to West Cork is about. Here are some insider favorites along the way.

Lively, Charming Towns

Ardara, Co. Donegal:

First stop in Ardara is at Eddie Doherty's, where this master weaver is typically found sitting at his 68-inch-wide wooden loom with both hands and feet moving to produce tweed fabric and throws. "It's like playing music; you get into a rhythm," says Doherty, who has been weaving for more than 60 years. "I love the threads and designs, and what you can do with the tweed," he says, adding that local seamstresses finish the garments on display. There are four additional woolen mill shops in town, plus Donegal Designer Makers featuring the work of 25 local craftsmen.

Stephen McCahill, owner of the Corner House, a traditional pub renowned for music (on offer year-round and every night May through September), says that in addition to the cottage industry, Ardara is known for its warm country spirit. "We welcome all; there are no outsiders," he says, adding that there is a festival here every month of the year. Catch the best Donegal fiddlers at the Cup of Tae Music Festival in May, and the Johnny Doherty Festival in September. You'll find the

same warm welcome at sessions in the Beehive Bar, sampling fresh scones at Sheila's Coffee & Cream, eating seafood at Nancy's, and set dancing Monday nights in the Ardara Heritage Center.



The winding road down Glengesh Pass from Glencolmcille to Ardara features stunning views of this glacial valley with ruined cottages and free-roaming sheep on the hillsides. There is an overlook among the hairpin turns.

IMAGE CREDIT NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Clifden, Connemara, Co. Galway:

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Clifden is an excellent base for exploration, as the area hosts rich archaeological sites including Neolithic tombs, standing stones, Iron Age forts, crannog lake dwellings, and more, says local field archaeologist Michael Gibbons. Plus, it hosts diverse landscapes on its doorstep – the dramatic Atlantic coastline to the west; boggy lakeland wilderness to the south; and stony mountain peaks to the north and east. Book a walking tour with Michael Gibbons Archaeology Travel for his encyclopedic knowledge, local lore, and funny wit.

Other must-see sites include the Clifden Castle ruins and the stunning views over Clifden Bay from the 10-mile-long Sky Road. Explore the new looped interpretive trail and boardwalk at Derrigimlagh Bog where the first transatlantic radio signal was sent and the first transatlantic flight landed in 1919. Clifden is known for Connemara ponies – ride one through blanket bogs and across beaches with Errislannan Manor, and coincide your visit with the Connemara Pony Festival in August. You can hear music year-round, and during the summer many pubs have music every night, including Lowry's Bar, E.J. King's Bar, Guy's Bar & Snug, Macdara's Bar, and Mannion's Bar.





Left: The Sky Road, a seven-mile loop on the western edge of Connemara, reveals picture-worthy views of the rugged seascape around every bend.

Right: The lively town of Clifden is backed by the Twelve Bens and is considered the capital of Connemara.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

Kinsale, Co. Cork:

Chef Martin Shanahan, originally a fishmonger who is now dubbed a “seafood hero,” helped turn this harbor town into a seafood destination with his award-winning Fishy Fishy Restaurant on the quay. Portraits of the local fishermen who supply their daily catch highlight the walls. Sample more locavore options on the popular Kinsale Food Tours and at the Kinsale Gourmet Festival in October.

Founded in the 12th century, Kinsale also hosts forts and castles, such as Charles Fort, one of the finest examples of a 17th-century star-shaped fort; James Fort across the harbor; and Desmond Castle in town. Hear the stories on Don & Barry’s Kinsale Historic Stroll as you also pass colorful, historic storefronts. At the Old Head of Kinsale, take in the 1804 Signal Tower hosting the Lusitania Museum, and a rooftop walkway overlooking the rocky coast and Old Head Lighthouse. For water-level views, take a harbor cruise aboard the Spirit of Kinsale or kayak under sea arches with H2O Sea Kayaking.



The historic port of Kinsale has a rich maritime heritage, and is now a port-of-call foodies.





The Wild along the Wild Atlantic Way

Fanad Head, Co. Donegal:

The lighthouse at Fanad Point has long been an important navigational aid to ships, including the Allied fleet in WWII. You can hear about the SS Laurentic and HMS Saldanha tragedies, plus the life of a lighthouse keeper, in the new visitor center and on the lighthouse tour. Then stay overnight in one of the three tastefully renovated lighthouse keeper's cottages. Dawn is as dramatic as sunset here with remarkable water views across Lough Swilly to Inishowen Peninsula. Take a coastal walk with Sean Mullan of Walking & Talking in Ireland along Fanad Peninsula's beaches and laneways. Or, cruise from Portsalon around the peninsula to photograph the natural stone arches and the lighthouse from the water with Packie Friel on the Curlew 2.





Fanad Head Lighthouse dating to 1817 is one of 70 working lighthouses around the coast of Ireland, and offers overnight lodging in the keepers' cottages.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

Atlantic Drive, Achill Island, Co. Mayo:

The Atlantic Drive is not only the most spectacular wild stretch of coastline on the Wild Atlantic Way, it's been named one of the most scenic drives in the world. It skirts rocky headlands, cliffs, and inlets, highlighted by water shooting up from blowholes when the waves are right. The two 12-mile loops take in castle ruins, Iron Age promontory forts, Blue Flag beaches, deserted Mweelin village, offshore island views, and a memorial to wrecked Spanish Armada ships. For the finale, drive up Minaun Heights for magnificent 360-degree views. Achill is Ireland's largest island, and its Croaghauon cliffs are the highest sea cliffs in Ireland.





Stony headlands, pocket beaches and thunder holes highlight Achill's Atlantic Drive, which finishes at the top of Minaun Heights, seen in the background, with long-distance coastal views.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

Fastnet Rock, Co. Cork:

Fastnet Rock eight miles off the mainland earned its renown from the iconic photo of a wave crashing over the 150-foot-tall lighthouse, and from the 1979 Fastnet Race disaster when a violent storm toppled boats. It's also known as Ireland's Teardrop, as it was the last of Ireland that emigrants saw when they sailed to North America. The Fastnet Rock Tour from Baltimore or Schull stops on Cape Clear Island where the Heritage Center explains the history of the light and the biennial yacht race from England. Then the boat circles Fastnet Rock, pending sea conditions, and patrols for whales and dolphins.

Islands of Ireland

Tory Island, Co. Donegal:

This island nine miles off the coast is home to globally threatened corncrakes, the Tory primitive painters featured in Gallery Dixon, and "the King of Tory" Patsy Dan Rodgers, who is also a renowned painter and accordion player. A walking loop takes in remains of a sixth-century monastery established by St. Colmcille, a stone bell tower, lighthouse, Iron Age promontory fort said to belong to the mythical Balor of the Evil Eye, and a Tau cross, one of just two in Ireland. Residents have their own music, dances, and stories, which you can witness on summer weekends

in the Social Club, or during Feile Soilse Thorai in July. The Tory Island Ferry departs from Bunbeg and Magheroarty.

Clare Island, Co. Mayo:

The highlight on this Clew Bay island is a stay in the charming Clare Island Lighthouse, a nautical landmark for two centuries and now a boutique hotel in Ireland's Blue Book. As an overnight guest, you'll get to climb to the top of the light. Guests revel in glorious views over Croagh Patrick and Achill Island, antique-filled rooms, and gourmet food. Walking trails lead from the lighthouse along the cliff edge, and crisscross the island that hosts few cars. "Clare Island showcases such an unspoiled way of life," says Roie McCann, hotel general manager.

Be sure to see the 16th-century tower house at the harbor, once owned by pirate queen Grace O'Malley who demanded payment from passing ships with a fleet inherited from her chieftain father. Her grave is inside the 13th-century Cistercian abbey, which also features medieval ceiling paintings of knights and dragons. The Clare Island Ferry runs year-round from Roonagh Pier.



Clare Island Lighthouse guards the entrance to Clew Bay, and is now an award-winning boutique hotel with magnificent views and gourmet food.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

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Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry:

The ancient stone monastery on Skellig Michael is an UNESCO World Heritage Site that was featured in the Star Wars movies, “The Force Awakens” and “The Last Jedi.” Built on a nearly sheer, double-peaked rock seven miles off the coast of Kerry, it was inhabited by monks from the 6th to 12th centuries who built beehive huts and oratories on narrow stone terraces 500 feet above the sea. To reach these inspiring ruins, voyage from Portmagee or Ballinskelligs when seas allow landing, walk past a puffin colony, and then climb 600 steep, winding stone steps.

As an alternative, take in the Skellig Experience Visitor Center on Valentia Island and the view of the Skelligs from the top of Geokaun Mountain & Cliffs. Don’t miss lunch at the Moorings Restaurant in Portmagee, a gastropub with award-winning seafood that served as home base for the Star Wars film crew. Owner Ger Kennedy will gladly share cast stories, including teaching star Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker) to pull a pint of Guinness.



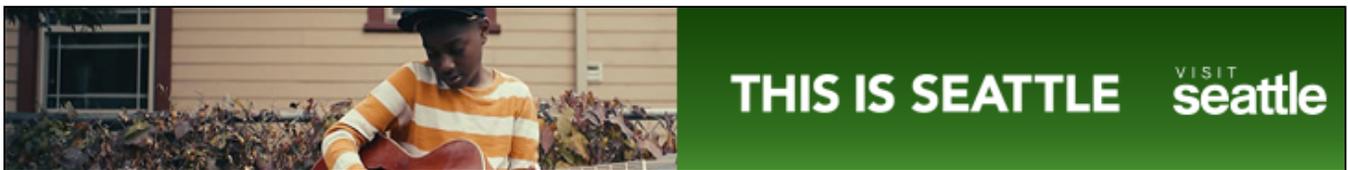
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Skellig Michael is a steep stone island seven miles off the coast of Kerry that served as home for early Christian monks and as a film site for two recent Star Wars films.

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Seafood along the Wild Atlantic Way.

Connemara Island and Lobster Excursion:

At Ballynahinch Castle Hotel, one of Ireland's most renowned fishing lodges, head out on the water from Roundstone Pier with John Sullivan, a local lobsterman, to pull your own lobster traps and fish for mackerel. Castle chef Gianluca Marongiu will cook your catch for your dinner. Sullivan also patrols for seals and dolphins, explains traditional seaweed harvesting, and lands on

now-deserted Inishlacken. “At one time there were 200 people living on this island, now there are just sheep and goats,” says Sullivan while walking past ruined cottages.

Dating to 1756, the castle invokes an air of aristocracy with lovely suites overlooking the river, significant art collection including works by Jack B. Yeats, walled garden, extensive estate walking trails, and multi-course prix fixe menu in the light-filled dining room.



Built in the 1700s, Ballynahinch Castle has a notable art collection, spacious rooms, award-winning cuisine, and fly fishing gear for guests.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

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Tasty Seaweed in Sligo:

Sligo's coast is renowned for seaweed, and you can learn all about it from Dr. Prannie Rhatigan, edible seaweed expert and cookbook author. "Seaweed is a wonderful health-giving food, and I want to make it easy to get the health benefits and the enjoyment of eating seaweeds on a daily basis," says Rhatigan. Join her for an identification walk with cooking demo or a foraging tour on Coney Island.

Gourmet cuisine incorporating seaweed is the highlight at award-winning Eithna's by the Sea Seafood Restaurant, easily spotted at Mullaghmore harbor with sea mural splashed across the front facade. "Seaweed adds a delicious umami," says owner Eithna O'Sullivan, who sprinkles different varieties into seafood dishes, bread, pesto, even desserts. Gain additional marine health benefits at VOYA Seaweed Baths in Strandhill.

Seafood Festivals:

The lively atmosphere known as the “craic” at a food festival is one of the best ways to share a laugh with the locals while sampling native seafood and hand-crafted brews. Music and dance highlight every food festival, too. The popular Galway International Oyster Festival presents bivalves in a variety of recipes accompanied by nonstop entertainment in September. Mark your calendar for the Connemara Mussel Festival and Baltimore Seafood Festival in May; Achill Festival of the Sea in July; and Seafood in September at Loop Head in County Clare, Clarenbridge Oyster Festival, and Hooked Killybegs Seafood Festival in September.

Traditional Music

County Clare:

County Clare has more musicians per square mile and more music festivals than any other county in Ireland. The two biggest festivals are the Willie Clancy Summer School in Milltown Malbay in July with music, dance, and singing sessions, and the Feakle Festival in August with fiddle phenomenon Martin Hayes and the Tulla Ceili Band. Ennis is a music Mecca with the Ennis Trad Trail featuring 11 live music venues around town. Other music hotspots are Doolin, Milltown Malbay, Kilfenora, and Feakle. Doonbeg has a reputation for its singing pubs like Comerford’s Pub on Friday nights. Enthusiasts can visit the Music Makers of West Clare, a museum in Milltown Malbay dedicated to traditional music, and the Kilfenora Ceili Band Parlour at the Burren Center exploring a century of music from this band.





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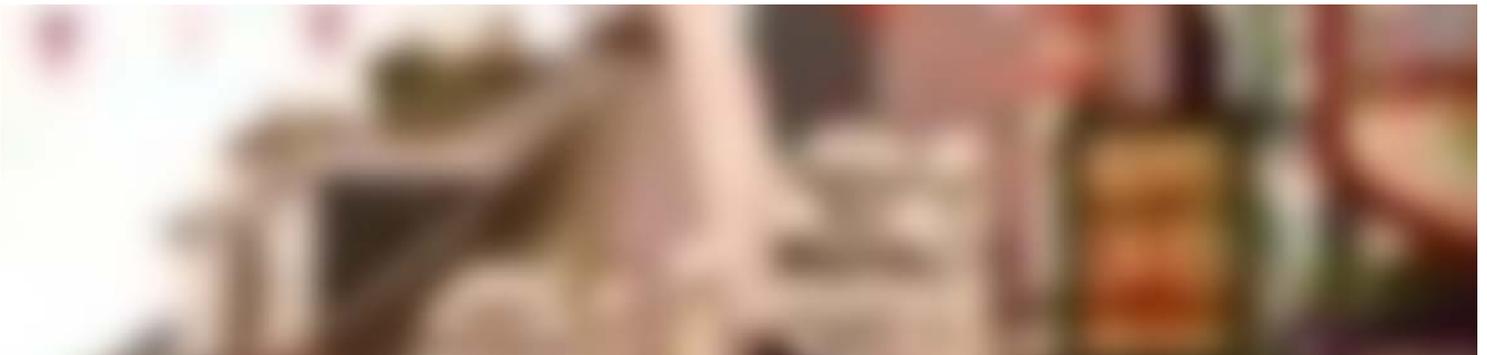


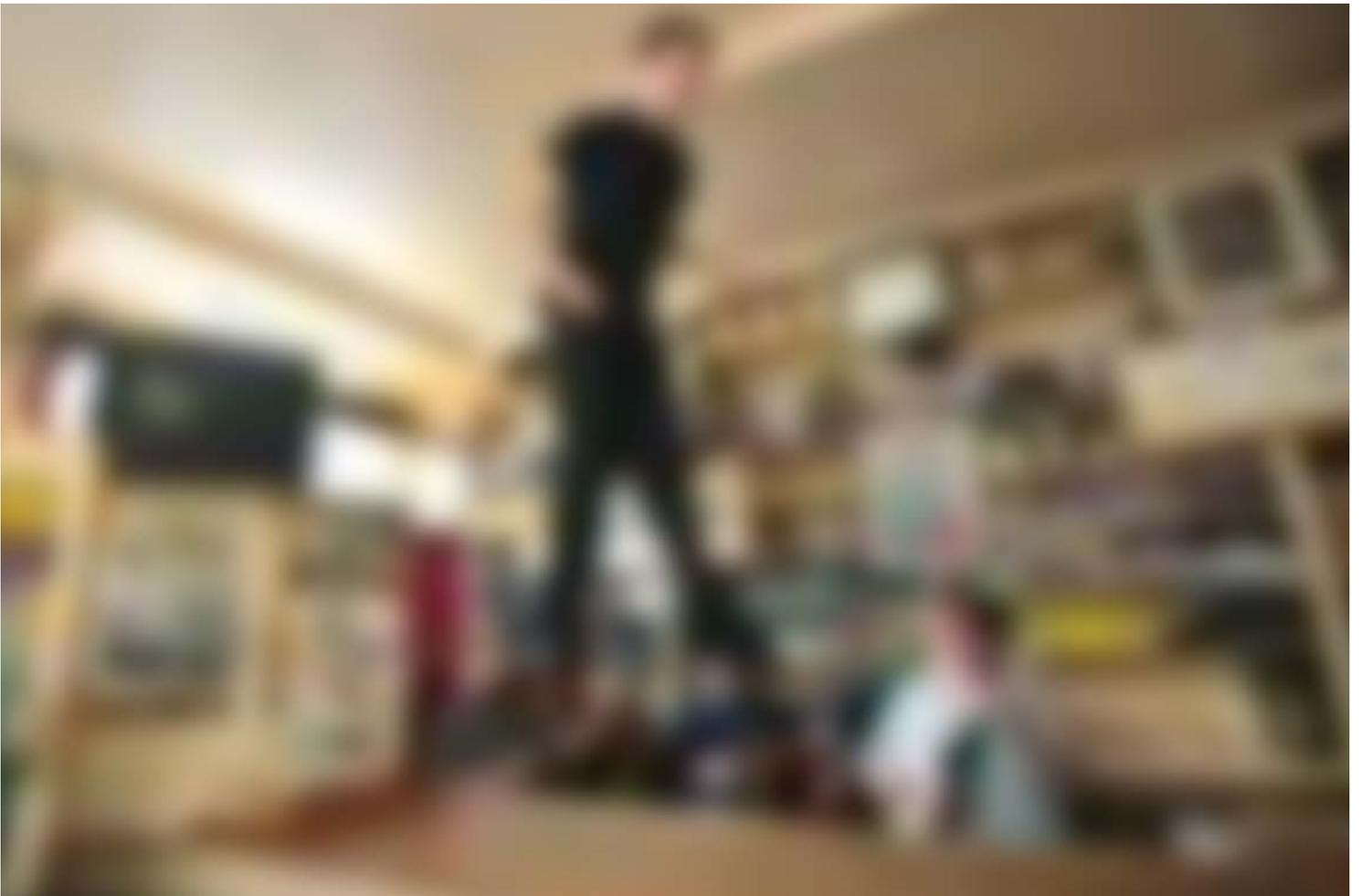
The condensed center of Ennis makes it a perfect place for pub hopping to catch lively music sessions along the Ennis Trad Trail.

IMAGE CREDIT: TOURISM IRELAND

Dingle, Co. Kerry:

Dingle's music scene offers nightly music in many pubs; sometimes there are Irish dancers and set dancing lessons. A favorite is O'Sullivan's Courthouse Pub, where owner Tommy O'Sullivan invites musician friends to jam with him nightly. At The Dingle Pub, David Geaney, five-time world champion Irish dancer, often comes out from behind his family's bar for spontaneous performances. Sessions fill the town at the Marina Inn, An Droichead Beag, John Benny's Pub, Foxy John's, M. Neligan, and more. There are folk concerts in St. James' Church a few nights a week in summer and Dingle Tradfest takes place in September. An Tintean Ceoil (The Musical Hearth) is an evening of music and storytelling around a turf fire in an Irish cottage on Monday evenings in Cloghane Brandon. 📍





Left: The Dingle music scene offers loads of choice with live music nightly at numerous pubs around town.

Right: Five-time world champion Irish dancer David Geaney often wows Dingle visitors with... [Read More](#)

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