



IRELAND'S 50 BEST PLACES TO STAY 2020

From hip hotels to cool campsites, self-catering stunners to glamping escapes, *Pól Ó Conghaile, Nicola Brady and Thomas Breathnach* have the year's hottest accommodation list

This is not a normal list. Over the past weeks and months, we've been travelling the length and breadth of this island, from Donaghdee to Dunmanus Bay and Dublin to Dingle. We've visited hotels, B&Bs, country houses and campsites, mapped trends, and painstakingly whittled findings down to our Fab 50 finalists.

St Patrick's Week was our deadline. That's traditionally when the tourism season kicks off, and with it the *Irish Independent's* annual list of Ireland's best places to stay. As long days lead to short breaks, here's a selection you can trust. It's not gathered via Google. We've spoken with owners and staff. We've listened to our readers.

This is the third year of our Fab 50, and by now you'll know we don't focus on the usual suspects. We look for game-changing new arrivals, places that are stretching our understanding of the staycation *now* rather than trading on former glories. We favour properties that continue to evolve and innovate (be it a design tweak, or a tasty new menu), and purposefully leave room for the unsung heroes of hospitality — from the Northern Irish couple who took a punt on log cabins to a sparkling penthouse in Cork or cosy shepherd's huts in Cavan. It's a distinctly Irish list, so we've also looked for creative investment in Irish design, art, food and community. As much as possible, these are places you could only find on this island.

Trends? Sustainability has gone mainstream, so much so that we asked properties for notes on environmentally-friendly efforts. We're also seeing a new generation of afternoon teas, more hotels embracing Irish art, and a proliferation of eye-catching copper baths, jewel-toned furniture, indoor greenery, garden-to-fork menus and, erm... wolfhounds. That, we didn't see coming.

What do you think of our picks? The Fab 50 is in no particular order; let us know your thoughts on social media using the hashtag, #IndoFab50. Safe travels.

— Pól Ó Conghaile

LOST COTTAGE, GLENBEIGH, CO KERRY

Seven trends for Irish stays in 2020

SMALL-H HOSPITALITY

Forget extravagant welcomes that fade after you swipe the credit card. Many five-stars could learn from smaller hotels, guesthouses and campsites crafting a céad míle fáilte for the 2020s. The best of our Fab 50 offer warm, personable greetings that understand exactly when to move in, and when to pull back. Places like the Foyle Hotel in Co Donegal, or River Valley Holiday Park in Co Wicklow, also know that involving your community both tells a story and helps create a sustainable tourism business.

COPPER IS THE NEW BLACK

While blue, rustic and jewel tones continue to dominate lobby furniture, copper is on the up. From the beautiful bath at Aurora North Coast's cedar cabins to light fittings, taps, strips of colour — or the sweeping, €40,000 copper-leaf ceiling of the newly-opened spa at Killea Castle — the warm-yet-decadent tone has taken root all over the island. Copper trended in fashion for years; in hospitality we think it works because it embellishes both modern and traditional settings. But less is definitely more.

AFTERNOON DELIGHTS

Forget raised pinkies and fusty old drawing rooms. A new wave of Irish afternoon teas is putting local ingredients front and centre... at a decent price. Try the 'Limerick Afternoon Tea' at the Limerick Strand Hotel (€26pp), nab a window seat at Waterford's revamped Tower Hotel (€260pp), or book a weekend treat at Kileavy Castle (€25pp).

GO GREEN OR GO HOME

Sustainability has gone mainstream. Ireland's best properties are involving staff (many through 'Green Teams') in creative solutions, and we think consumers are increasingly favouring those that reflect their values... it just doesn't feel right to find a hotel bathroom decked out with single-use mini-toiletries, for example, or a welcome note beside plastic water bottles. Our Fab 50 are leading the way. The Falls Hotel in Ennistymon has installed its own hydro-powered turbine, Galway Coast Cottages offers a 10pc discount to guests travelling by train, and Doolin's Fiddle & Bow is sourcing as many upcycled materials as possible (they look good too).

TALKABILITY

In our social media age, it doesn't hurt to have novel features that get guests chatting... and snapping. Think of 'hammock hides' where you can curl up with a book at Coolbawn Quay, that gorgeous red door leading into Avalon House in Castlecomer, Phil Lynott's leather jacket at Dublin's new Hard Rock Hotel, and a proliferation of... erm, wolfhounds. The breed remains a rare sight in Ireland, but is multiplying at character hotels like Ashford Castle, Kileavy Estate and Markree Castle. Brides and grooms just love their wolfhound wedding photos, too.

LIVELY LOBBIES

As boundaries blur between work and play, hotel lobbies are evolving to reflect the way we live. You'll have noticed more open-plan areas on your trips, with bars, restaurants and check-in desks sharing spaces, but it doesn't stop there. Dublin's Mayson has a barber shop in its Bottle Boy pub; both it and The Connacht in Galway have 'living walls' and barista coffee bars, and smart hotels are featuring more retail shelves selling everything from their chef's cookery books to local artists' wares... telling the story of both neighbourhood and hotel.

GARDEN VARIETY

Where space permits, we're seeing more and more properties invest in their gardens, polytunnels and composting, lowering food miles and cutting bills as they provide not just for their own kitchens, but in the case of Richard Corrigan's Virginia Park Lodge in Co Cavan, his London restaurants, too.

Brewery next to Mickey Finn's pub next door (the Lime Weiss Beer-steamed mussels are ace). — PÓC

Insider tip: There's no WiFi or TV. Bring board games and prepare the kids for some old-school activities... from 'Foot Golf' to a coming electric go-kart track.

Sustainability: The family is a big local employer, providing part-time staff with what they call the 'Mickey Finn College Fund', hugely involving the community in its business.

Details: Glampotel units from €280 for two nights; check website for camping rates; rivervalleypark.ie.

47 BIG STYLE ATLANTIC LODGE

Where: Louisburgh, Co Mayo.

Why: Set up by a group of outdoorsy guys with a passion for adventure, Big Style lodge is a place that draws thrill-seekers like moths to a flame. Out beyond Louisburgh, on the edge of a mountain overlooking the sea, the lodge is home to a surf and SUP school, and the base camp for adventure weekends. What's really cool is that it's attached to a village pub, where locals intermingle with visitors over a few pints and a bit of a session. The rooms are basic but the common areas are fab, utilising reclaimed materials and designed to encourage everyone to mingle. There's a great outdoor area too, with hot tubs heated by wood-burning stoves, and a platform overlooking the water. — NB

Insider tip: Take the train to Westport and get a transfer for €10pp each way, so you can leave the car at home.

Sustainability: The kitchen is on its way to becoming a zero-waste space.

Details: Adventure weekends from €230pp; bigstyle.ie.

48 AURORA NORTH COAST

Where: Bushmills, Co Antrim.

Why: Ship over two, hand-carved log cabins from Canada and reassemble them near Northern Ireland's Causeway Coast? It sounds crazy, but boy, has Pearl and Archie Linnegan's punt paid off. Step inside the roomy Western red cedar cabins and you're straight away struck by both comfort and warmth. Shooting for a five-star guesthouse finish, the couple has added under-floor heating, outdoor hot tubs, robes, tasteful furniture that complements the at-times almost surreal oomph of the cedar, and in one of the two cabins, a copper-plated bathtub. "We could have gotten lost in sea of accommodation, but we wanted to give a complete wow factor," they say. Guests have bought right in, "touching and feeling and loving" the two cabins, named 'Ulex' (whin) and 'Salix' (willow) Pearl says. "You can... disconnect, that's the word I'm looking for." — PÓC

Insider tip: Kids must be over 8 to stay... if they come with,

book 'Ulex' with its hand-made bunk bed.

Sustainability: Cabins have grass-topped 'living roofs'.

Details: Two nights (minimum stay) from £380 in low season, sleeping four; auroranorthcoast.com.

49 POTTING SHEDS

Where: Dromquinna Manor, Co Kerry.

Why: A great stay is all about the little touches. At the Potting Sheds, you'll find every last nook and cranny has been created to ensure your comfort and pleasure (what else would you expect from the Brennan brothers?). The sheds themselves date back to 1895 and were fully renovated last year, with extra big beds and plush linens, beautiful little gardens and lovely big sofas. Pull back the door on what looks like a wardrobe and you'll find a bunk bed, perfect for little ones but nice and hidden if it's just you. Breakfast comes in a little hamper, delivered filled with homemade granola, juice, and a pot filled with piping hot coffee or tea. You couldn't ask for anything more. — NB

Insider tip: Pack some marshmallows to make the most of the communal fire pit nearby.

Sustainability: Breakfast packs are made in the kitchen and presented in glass jars and bottles.

Details: Rates from €190; dromquinnamanor.com.

50 VIRGINIA PARK LODGE

Where: Virginia, Co Cavan.

Why: When Richard Corrigan took over Virginia Lodge, I felt it had the air of a vanity project. The ensuing years inspired me to think again, however, with the Blue Book bolthole improving rapidly in surprising new ways. Weddings and events are a key business, of course (a sweeping, light-flooded pavilion almost feels part of the woodland), but leisure guests can check in on several weekend 'stay-overs' a year. Accommodation is in country luxe rooms in the house, or new Shepherd's Huts, with Respa beds, cosy stoves, Voya products and Neff hobs. Corrigan is regularly on-site, and apparently dubs the experience 'a home-tel', evoking the intimate feel, friendly service and a scattering of his own personal stuff — like pedal cars and vinyl in the sitting room. Luxury cabins arrive this spring. — PÓC

Insider tip: Sign up to the newsletter to hear about the next stayover, or pop-up Sunday lunches from €69.

Sustainability: The estate is working towards self-sufficiency and organic practices, particularly in its kitchen gardens, which now supply some of his London restaurants.

Details: B&B and dinner from €450; virginiaparklodge.com.

NB: All rates subject to availability/change.

