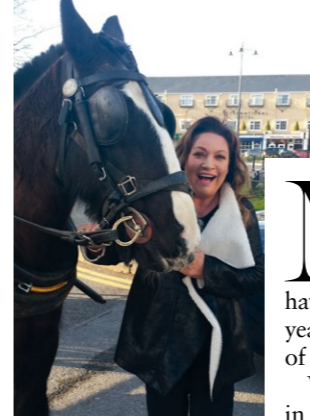


Dramatic Sleat Head, County Kerry,
taken from the dunes above

Ireland's best-kept secrets and culinary gems
along the Atlantic coastline are revealed, as
Norah Casey revisits her favourite hideaways.

The wild West



My father instilled a love of Ireland in all of us. He insisted that we would never travel abroad until we had seen the length and breadth of it. I may not have been an enthusiastic traveller back in my teenage years, but now, I am so glad he showed us the beauty of our own country before we sampled others.

With a mother from Leitrim and a strong heritage in the West we spent most of our summers helping to bring in the hay and walking the deserted lanes of her home county. I discovered an ethereal and remote beauty there that is unparalleled. So although I often say that Kerry is my spiritual home, Leitrim is part of my blood and I escape there as often as I can. I am almost loathe to let you in on my secrets because I cherish the wilderness and unspoiled charm of this often overlooked corner of Ireland.

Thanks to my father, we ventured further south with holidays in caravans and on farms in Mayo, Galway and Clare. We travelled throughout Kerry and along the coast to Cork, stopping regularly to view the spectacular scenery (and because there were eight of us cramped into an old Wolsley).

When I came back to Ireland in 2002, I loved bringing Richard (my late husband) to all my secret haunts and we discovered new places along the way. I am passionate about great food so my

shortlist is heavily weighted towards good dining options! I also filmed all over Ireland with RTÉ for programmes like *The Takeover* and *Travellers' Academy*, so at times I unearthed the real hideaways while on the road.

Here are my favourite spots along the Atlantic coastline – not an exhaustive list but some of my own little gems.

Sometimes there is an element of destiny about connecting and interconnecting with a place that weaves in and out of your life. As a summer resident of north County Leitrim, we regularly strayed into the south of Donegal and one of my favourite beaches, Rosstown. I had forgotten how beautiful it was until Richard was very ill with cancer and we had taken to escaping to Leitrim as often as we could – we had good friends there and nature's wonders to soothe the soul after a week in oncology units. We sometimes parked high above the beach at Rosstown to watch the surfers navigate the gentle waves. There's a great restaurant there called the Smugglers Creek Inn (Smugglerscreekinn.com) which is a perfect spot in which to lose a few hours watching the wild Atlantic while feasting on seafood and shellfish.

A few years ago the Sandhouse Hotel in Rosstown reopened under the capable

A personal favourite – Rosstown Beach,
in south County Donegal



Lissadell House and Gardens, Co Sligo



The Smuggler's Creek, Donegal

stewardship of former general manager, Paul Diver, who rescued it from liquidation, saving 50 local jobs and securing this fine hotel (now The Sandhouse Hotel & Marine Spa) for generations to come (Sandhouse.ie). His son Gerry Diver subsequently did an internship on *Dragons' Den* – a chip off the old block for sure.

My mother comes from strange-sounding places in

the remotest part of Leitrim and my family are scattered throughout Aghanlish, Largydonnell and Fertagh with the family farm still in the Glenade Valley, one of the finest glacial valleys in Ireland, nestled at the base of the Dartry Mountains. An aunt and uncle settled in Kinlough where they ran a local shop; I have cousins nearby at the base of Benbulbin and my aunt, since departed, went into the closed order at the convent in Rossinver. This is Ireland untouched.



An hour and a half walk will get you to the top of Benbulbin, County Sligo



The Doolough Pass, near Westport, County Mayo



MacNean House and Restaurant, County Cavan



Hargadons, County Sligo



Knockranny House, County Mayo



Joan O'Connor with Norah

Kinlough and the surrounding areas are worth a small detour inland. Apart from the great fishing in Lough Melvin, the wonderful Sardinian-inspired cooking in The Courthouse courtesy of Piero Melis and the stunning walks around Ballaghnastrillick are highlights of this land steeped in history. The Dartry Mountains were said to be the hunting grounds of *Na Fianna* – a band of warriors from the 3rd century led by Fionn Mac Cumhaill (Finn McCool). In 1979, *Poll Na mBéar* (Cave of the Bears) was discovered in the mountain range near Glenade with ancient bones of Ireland's long since extinct brown bear scattered along the cave floor.

Sligo's own table mountain, Benbulbin was immortalised by WB Yeats in *The Celtic Twilight* and *Under Ben Bulbin*. An hour and half moderate climb will take you to the top (on the south side) where you can see up close the mound of the flat top, believed to be the cairn of Queen Maeve of Connacht. Nearby you can visit Drumcliff Church, where Yeats is laid to rest, and drop into Lissadell House and gardens where he holidayed with Irish heroine rebel Constance Gore-Booth (Lissadellhouse.com).

I'm lucky enough to chair the Restaurant of the Year Awards, so I am a gourmet traveller in Ireland and will organise routes and stop-offs around revisiting old haunts and trying new offerings. Some of my favourites

include Neven Maguire's wonderful MacNean House and Restaurant (Nevenmaguire.com) – fantastic food, locally sourced, matched with brilliant service and the warmest hospitality from the great chef himself and his wife Amelda.

I am regularly in Sligo and love Hargadon's – a great gastropub that serves amazing steak in O'Connell Street in the town (Hargadons.com). If you are en route to the Céide Fields then try and stop off at the eclectic Ice House Hotel & Spa in Balina – winner of many awards from our magazine stable (Icehousehotel.ie).

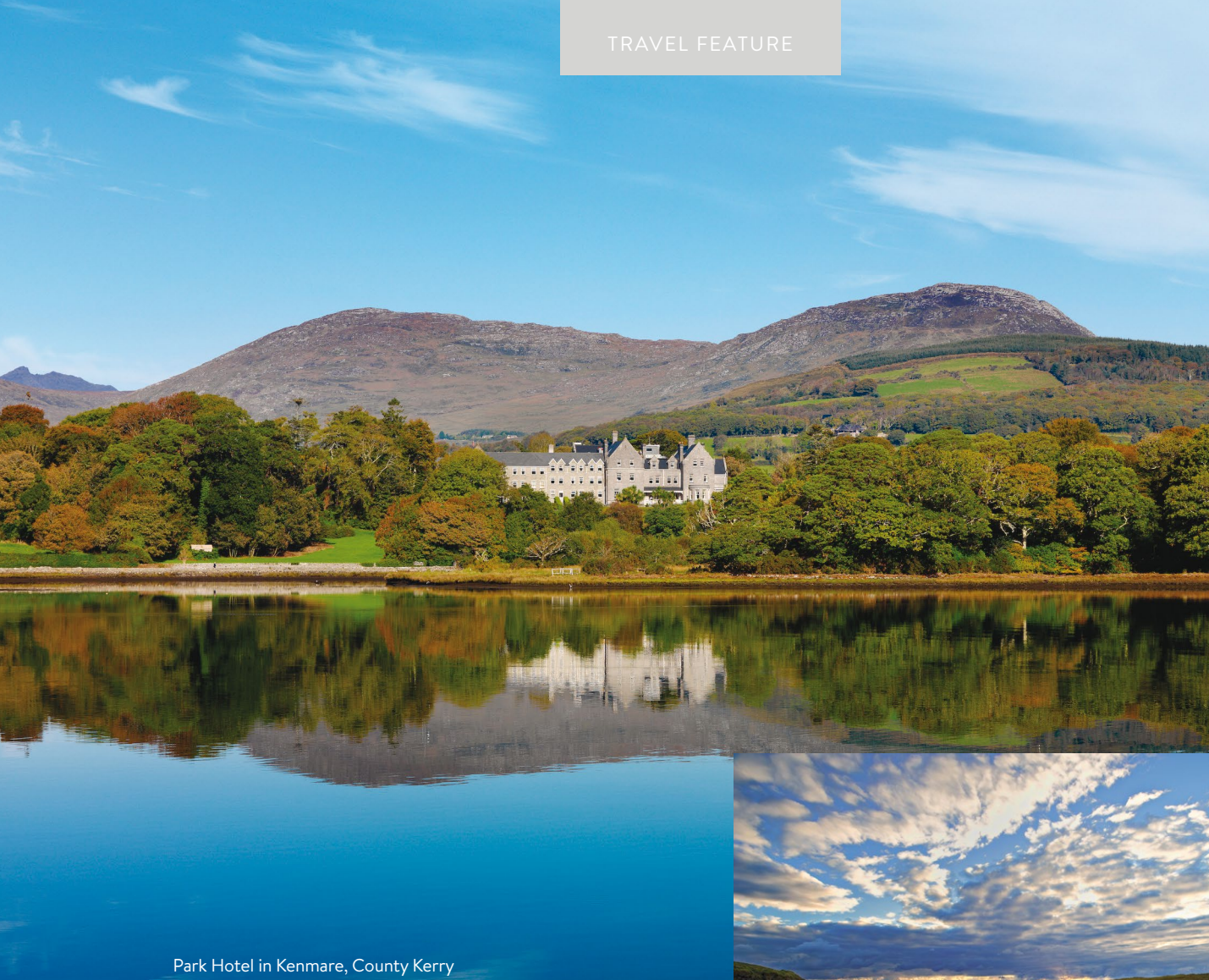
I filmed *The Takeover* in Westport and I am a big fan of chef Séamus Commons at Knockranny House (Knockrannyhousehotel.ie) – especially if you catch one of his game dinners. For fantastic seafood you can't beat Frankie Mallon's great little eatery, An Pórt Mór in Brewery Place off Bridge Street (Anportmor.com). Pop in to say hello to Maria Ruddy and Darren Madden who own The Clew Bay Hotel (Clewbayhotel.com) and were brave enough to stand aside for two weeks to let me take over with the staff for the RTÉ series – a great team.

If you find yourself in Clifden (and I hope you do because it's one of my favourite places) then head

for Mitchell's – a glorious seafood restaurant with cozy open fires on both floors and a warm welcome from Kay and JJ Mitchell (Mitchellsrestaurantclifden.com).

Galway has many foodie jewels but last time I was there I dined at Aniar – chef and entrepreneur JP McMahon's flagship, Michelin-starred restaurant serves top class food in a contemporary setting with stunning service – put it on the map for sure (Aniarrestaurant.ie). For platinum-plated afternoon tea and cakes to die for then stop off at the Tea & Garden Rooms at Ballyvaughan in the Burren – as you walk through the flower-filled country garden at the front prepare to enter a time warp back to the 1800s in this antique laden café run by Jane O'Donoghue (and her mother Katherine before that).

We have been hailing the greatness of chef Aidan McGrath in *Irish Tatler's* sister publication *FOOD & WINE magazine* for some time now, so it is worth heading to Lisdoonvarna (home of the annual match-making festival) to visit the Wild Honey Inn which boasts a Bib Gourmand from The Michelin Guide and with good reason (Wildhoneyinn.com). Further south at Liscannor is one of my favorite places in Ireland – Vaughans



Park Hotel in Kenmare, County Kerry

Anchor Inn with Denis Vaughan in the kitchen. This family restaurant and bar has now added rooms upstairs for a 'dine and duvet' experience. Winner of great seafood awards matched with an old style shop front bar and open turf fires – you may never want to leave (Vaughans.ie).

I'm skipping to Listowel in Kerry where I spoke at the food festival in recent years and sampled the delights of Allo's Bar & Bistro – Armel Whyte in the kitchen and Helen Mullane front of house – deserved winners of best casual dining awards. While you are there stop into John B Keane's bar on William Street now run by his son Billy Keane and still a haven of literature, poetry and great music on occasion.

If you are heading back to the coast then I fell in love with the ivy-clad, late-Victorian Kilcooly's Country House on the main street in Ballybunion run by an amazing woman Joan O'Connor and her husband John.

Dingle is where I spent my honeymoon and I return often to see good friends and enjoy the wild beauty of the peninsula. There is great food all round in Dingle but my favourites are Doyle's for seafood (Doylesofdingle.com), Global Village (Globalvillagedingle.com) and I always try to stay at Benners because it's so close to everywhere (Dinglebenners.com).

My last recommendation offers food for the soul as well as the body – The Park Hotel in Kenmare – run by the Brennan brothers – Frances and John. The Park embodies the essence of all that is great about Ireland – impeccable service, beautiful interior with incredible art and antiques (adding interest at every turn), a formal dining room with great food and an atmospheric bar where you will meet fellow travelers and locals and, above all else, you will feel at home (Parkkenmare.com). ■



Streedagh beach, County Sligo

MY PERFECT DAY...

I would spend it in the wilds of north Leitrim with good friends and relations. The day would start on the back of a horse cantering down Streedagh beach – there are great stables between Grange and Cliffoney overlooking the beach and Inishmurray, an uninhabited island which is home to a 6th century, ancient Irish monastic settlement (Islandviewridingstables.com). There is nothing quite like the salty wild Atlantic wind to wake you up and kick-start a great day. Afterwards, a walk (just 10k) taking the Horse Shoe trail in Gleniff Valley near Ballintrillick. This is one of the most dramatic walks in Ireland, sometimes I don't see a solitary human being which makes it quite possibly the most magical place in Ireland for feeling at one with nature. Lunch at the Court House in Kinlough surrounded by the entire McGowan clan and my wonderful son Dara by my side. A visit to Aghanlish and Glenade to see my uncle, aunts and cousins during the afternoon. As evening falls – a sundowner with some great friends at Rosses Point – their sitting room has stunning views of Sligo Bay and a final meal in the capable and comforting arms of MacNean House with Neven Maguire cooking up a storm.