

Hiking Ireland's Coast - Alumni

Connemara, Burren, and the Western Way

July 5-11, 2026



Features

- Five nights in the “field” at Irish guest houses
- Eating and sleeping in guest houses keeps pack weight down
- Six hiking/backpacking days
- Irish culture w/ potential for live music
- One night (paired hotel lodging) on each end of the trip and use of public transportation
- Up to 40 miles of trails and lanes
- Stunning coastal scenery

Cost: \$3,355

Minimum Age: 18

Historic Age Range: 18-74

Maximum Trip Size: 14 Participants
2 Instructors

Trip Description

Join a small group of NOLS grads, friends, families and instructors for a week of spectacular hiking along the rocky, windswept Irish coast. The area is known for its stunning scenery, friendly populace and musical traditions.

The trip starts and ends in the small city of Ennis, just north of Shannon International Airport. From Ennis, we'll travel to the small coastal town of Doolin (population ~500, probably without an ATM) in County Clare. The area is a center of historic fishing and traditional Irish music with several castles and historic pubs sprinkled nearby. Doolin is a jumping off point for ferry service to the Aran Islands and the Cliffs of Moher.

The Cliffs of Moher rise 400' above the Atlantic and were cast as the “Cliffs of Insanity” in the 1987 movie, *The Princess Bride*. On clear days, the view is as incredible as the bird life that roosts along the cliffs. There is a new visitor center and a variety of walking routes along the cliffs.

We'll ferry to small, rocky Inis Mór Island, the largest of the Aran Islands. Inis Mór, where Gaelic is still the primary language, is a rural and extremely scenic locale crisscrossed with hand-stacked rock walls and an occasional prehistoric ring fort or beehive hut. Perched atop a high cliff, Dun Aengus is the area's most famous Iron-Age ring fort with hand-built walls four meters thick and six meters high.

One of our biggest hikes will explore Devil's Mother (2,116') peak, which affords incredible views in clear weather. We'll also take a side shuttle to see Kylemore Abbey and its impressive formal gardens. Towards the end of our trip, we will head south to Galway and take a final shuttle back to Ennis.

This trip will re-acquaint you with NOLS backpacking techniques in a convivial, relaxing and visually stunning location. Instruction is geared to your interests, with optional walk-up peaks, time for journal

writing and photography, and more. Of course, non-alumni friends and family are also invited— this is a great way to introduce NOLS to your sidekicks. Unlike a standard NOLS expedition, we won't carry cook gear or heavy rations—even pads and sleeping bags are not needed, but we'll do “real” trail walking over varied terrain with our lightened backpacks. Everyone will carry their personal equipment and some group lunch items in their backpack.

The route offers a moderate level of hiking— the average hiking day is about five miles with slight changes in elevation. This trip is all about scenic hill walking. Our plan gives plenty of flexibility for hike length and difficulty. For those that want more, there will be options to do additional day hiking with an instructor. Hikes are point-to-point and in/out adventures.

Connecting our string of inns gives us the chance to savor Irish cuisine and culture while mixing with other, mostly European travelers. Sleeping and dining (dinner and breakfasts) in the inns allows us to considerably lighten our packs for our daily walks along the countryside's green coasts and historic landmarks. Traditional Irish music may be part of many evenings.

Trip Environment

Ireland is green. That color comes from abundant light rain and mild temps. Summer highs in County Clare are in mid 60s°F to mid 70s°F with lows in the 50s°F. Average rainfall is 3.5” in July/August. The Atlantic Ocean is a stone's throw away, so weather changes quickly. Cliffs, hills, wind, mountains, crags, country lane walking, rain, and streams will all be part of our trek.

In summer, the trails attract people from all over Europe, providing a true cross-cultural experience. Of course, English is ubiquitous, but Gaelic is also common. You might enjoy an Irish reference book—*Ireland for Dummies* is good for tourist ideas and basic country facts.

NOLS Staff

Our staff are employees of NOLS and trained and certified accordingly. This means they maintain certifications in wilderness medicine, and are trained to NOLS' high standards in risk management. They are senior staff at NOLS who have spent years working and teaching in backcountry environments all over the world. Additionally, our staff specialize in bringing together groups of strangers and building the group culture and camaraderie that makes NOLS trips great.

A Day in the Life

In the mornings, generally around 8 a.m., the group gathers in a common area or dining room for breakfast. Options include various eggs, meats, fish, cereal or a traditional “full Irish breakfast” (bacon, eggs, mushrooms, toast, sausage, tomatoes, and black/white pudding). The team then returns to their rooms to change into hiking clothes (shorts or hiking pants and t- shirts) and expeditiously packs up before gathering outside with their belongings for a review of the day and maps. The team hikes as a loose group along the trail, stopping for water and snack breaks as needed. Hikes vary, but are generally ~4-hours on the trail.

We arrive at our lodging, where instructors will organize rooms. People re-group for additional optional hikes or change from hiking clothes into comfortable, country travel wear for lounging in the inn's great room. Dress is not formal, so warmish casual clothes like hiking pants, fishing shirts, and light-pile jackets are common and appropriate around the lodging and rural villages.

Our group dinners usually happen at a set time from a multi-course menu. Various meats and fowl are common options, with vegetables, breads and a dessert selection. Meals (which are quite excellent) are included in the trip tuition, but alcohol is not. Participants often pair up to buy a bottle of wine, or folks order beer or spirits from the bar.

After dinner, groups often come together for parlor games and socializing or to listen to live music, which is sometimes available at our lodging or nearby. Most music starts playing around 9:30 or 10 pm so, if you are a music lover, be prepared to stay up a little later.

Food on the trip

There will be plenty of food provided on the trip for everyone. We are happy to ensure that folks who have reasonable dietary needs and/or preferences are well taken care of throughout the entire trip. Listing those needs on your registration paperwork is critical for our success here.

If you would like to bring your own snacks along, that is highly encouraged. We all have treats that we enjoy and bringing something special is a great way to keep motivation high and not have to rely on the group's schedule for your munchies.

Curriculum

This trip focuses on many traditional NOLS activities, including map reading, hiking and group travel. The instructors will present information necessary for the group to comfortably travel and can present optional topics desired by the participants— including natural history, leadership topics and relevant local human history. Formal “classes” are few and mostly optional. Anticipate a required base level of group management and cohesion— this is an expedition.

About Ireland

Inhabitants have resided in current day Ireland since 6000 B.C. with Celtic communities beginning around 700 B.C. Around the ninth century A.D., the Vikings began invading Ireland, settling in areas that would later become major cities such as Dublin. But they also spent much time fighting with the Celts. After 200 years of fighting and a very short-lived peace, Ireland was broken up into small kingdoms.

In the 12th century, the Norman Vikings made Ireland an English territory. Later, in the 17th century, the Irish and the English famously clashed over religion; England became a Protestant nation while much of Ireland remained Catholic. These tensions continued for centuries with movements towards Irish sovereignty in the 1800s. Today, Ireland is divided into two parts; the majority of Ireland is a separate nation while a few provinces in the northeast remain a British territory, possibly due to the mainly Protestant population.

Today, Ireland's government is an elected parliament which makes the laws, a president, who is head of state, and a Taoiseach, who is head of the government. The Taoiseach is the leader from the party with the most seats in parliament. Historically a farming and agricultural economy, current trends to appeal to businesses have boosted Ireland's economy and made it a very wealthy nation, earning it the nickname, “Celtic Tiger.”

The Aran Islands, where this trip spends much of its time, are more representative of the historic Irish culture and way of life. Located in the mouth of Galway Bay, the islands are home to smaller villages and a more agricultural lifestyle. Besides the plundering of Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century, the islands have been relatively untouched. Now, tourism is a main draw to the islands and allows the preservation of this slower lifestyle and Gaelic language.

Expectations of Participants

The alumni trip atmosphere is more relaxed than a typical NOLS expedition. However, it's not a full-service vacation or guided experience. You'll have to participate, carry your load, and help out as needed. These expeditions are fun, but they still require self-reliance, self awareness, risk management and sound decision making as we trek through remote areas where evacuation to modern medical facilities can take several days.— And like all NOLS courses, these expeditions emphasize hands-on learning and the application of new skills in a variety of situations.

All participants need to complete and submit application materials, including a medical history form. These forms highlight the intersection of your trip's anticipated physical rigor and your current health and fitness status. Your forthright and timely completion and submission of the forms sets you and your trip up for success in the outdoors.

Alumni trips allow electronics and alcohol (for those of legal age in the country of the trip). Many participants find that these luxuries can add to the course experience and local flavor. Excessive alcohol consumption is not a part of the culture of Alumni trips.

Trip Itinerary

July 3/4	Depending on connections and pre-trip plans, many participants will depart the U.S. on this day. Strongly consider arriving a day early for jet lag recovery and possible airline/baggage snafus.	
July 5	Many people arrive at Shannon Airport in the morning on this day. Travel to Ennis' Temple Gate Hotel via taxi or bus. The hotel is ~5 blocks from the bus and train station. Our pre-trip orientation occurs at the Temple Gate Hotel lobby at 6 p.m.	Lodging provided by NOLS at the Temple Gate Hotel, Ennis (we'll double up same gender pairs — let us know if you're a couple!). A group dinner is included with the room this night.
July 6	We'll bus to a trailhead at the busy Cliffs of Moher Visitor Center. The windy, cliff-top hike is about 6-miles to our lodging in Doolin.	Lodging: Doolin's West Haven House B&B. Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.
July 7	Breakfast and pack up. Walk ~1 mile to the morning ferry to Inis Mór Island. A shuttle will meet us for a tour of the island, and exploration stops at Dun Aengus Fort and Seven Churches. Then explore trails along Inis Mór's southeast edge and catch a late afternoon ferry to Galway.	Lodging: House Hotel, Galway, Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.

July 8	After breakfast, a morning walking tour of Galway, then meet our shuttle to Leenaun. Optional stunning afternoon ~4-mile hike along Killary Fjord to the sea.	Lodging: Leenaun Hotel on the edge of Killary Fjord. Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.
July 9	Optional hike up to 13-miles round trip on the "Devil's Mother." The hike mixes road walking and steep, off-trail travel. Some people opt for a rest/spa day.	Lodging: Leenaun Hotel. Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.
July 10	Hike ~9-miles on the Western Way to our incredible manor hotel on Lough Inagh. Afternoon shuttle to Kylemore Abbey and Garden for a few hours of exploration.	Lodging: Lough Inagh Lodge. Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.
July 11	Hike ~6-miles on the St. Patrick's Bed trail up and over Maumeen Pass. Shuttle to Ennis. The hike mixes country road walking and rocky trails. Final night of the course. Group dinner.	Lodging provided by NOLS: Temple Gate Hotel, Ennis. Dinner and Breakfast included, lunch on the trail.
July 12	Shuttles/taxi/bus available to Shannon Airport.	

Trip Logistics

Getting to Ennis

The trip starts and ends in Ennis, a small city (~25K) a dozen miles north of Shannon International Airport (SNN) on Ireland's west coast. You could also fly into Dublin (DUB) if you like. Many flights from the U.S. leave in the early evening and arrive early morning the next day in Ireland.

Busses or private hire cars are available to get to/from Shannon. Private taxis (for up to 4 people and bags) are available for about 50 euros (see: <http://www.suntransfers.com/shannon> or www.silverbus.ie). Public bus service is also available (~12 Euros, one-way). Here's a link: <http://www.shannonairport.ie> or <http://www.buseireann.ie>.

Depending on where you first touch down in Europe, you may either clear customs in that city or in your final destination.

Lodging

The trip starts and ends at the Temple Gate Hotel, The Square, Ennis, about a half hour north of Shannon Airport.

We'll stay nightly in guesthouses, B&B's, or small hotels. Anticipate couples or single-gender rooms. Group dinners and breakfasts are included. The lodging is universally comfortable and well appointed. Wi-Fi is often available. The food is excellent. See the day-by-day itinerary for specifics.

Storage of Personal Belongings

You can leave valuables and luggage in a secure area at our The Temple Gate Hotel for the duration of the backcountry trip. While the storage is secure, NOLS assumes no responsibility for the stored items.

Currency

You'll need Euros for miscellaneous purchases and transportation throughout the trip. You'll receive the best exchange at your local bank, but money change kiosks are handy in most airports. ATMs are common in most towns. U.S. credit cards will work in most locations, including train stations, but it's often a good idea to give your credit card company a heads up that you're traveling internationally. About 100 Euros will be plenty of cash for the field portion of the trip for incidental purchases. It is difficult to predict if our rural lodging will consistently take credit cards.

Travel Insurance (Cancellation and Medical)

We will confirm your trip is running approximately 60 days before the start date. It is best to purchase tickets that are refundable or changeable, as well as consider travel cancellation insurance in case of unforeseen events causing you to change your plans or if NOLS has to cancel a trip for any reason. Check your personal insurance carrier and credit card to understand what you might already have. Travel medical insurance is highly recommended should you need any kind of medical attention while out of your home country. Check out cat70.com or worldnomads.com for a wide variety of options.

Cancellation and Transfer Policy

For your reference, here is the [Alumni Trips Cancellation and Transfer Policy](#). When enrolling on a trip, you will need to agree to this policy.

Carbon Footprint and Offset

Current estimates are that the Travel Industry accounts for ~8% of global emissions. This percentage includes everything from transportation to accommodation and shopping. NOLS recognizes that our business contributes to this problem but we do not have a comprehensive strategy at this point.

If you would like to offset part or all of the carbon emissions related to your Alumni trip, we recommend [South Pole](#). [Their calculator](#) can help easily calculate your footprint and choose a project to contribute to. [Here is a link to their calculator.](#)

Tipping

Tipping in the service industry in Ireland is not standard but is common amongst tourists. A decent tip is 10% in restaurants while a very good tip would be 15%.

While tipping is common in the outdoor guiding culture, your NOLS Instructors are not driven to excellence by tips but rather a love for taking people outdoors. You are welcome to tip the Instructors if you choose, but many instructors are honored by [a donation in their name to the NOLS Annual Fund](#) which supports scholarships for future NOLS students.

Immunizations / Vaccinations / Travel medications

International travel poses special health considerations. NOLS strongly advises that all participants traveling to international locations carefully consider what vaccinations or inoculations are required,

recommended, or suggested for their specific travel itinerary. Consulting with a physician, travel medicine specialist, or other healthcare professional is strongly advised.

Visa / Passport - Attention International European travelers - **Must read... Action Required**

If your travels have you **entering or transiting (passing through or laying over in) the UK**, you will need to apply for and have an approved Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) to continue to your destination.

This [article](#) explains that starting Jan 8, 2025, US and Canadian citizens will need to apply for the ETA to enter the UK.

Here's [the link](#) for how to apply.

As well, for NOLS International Alumni trips, your **passport must be valid for a minimum of 6 months post trip**. For example, if your trip in Europe concludes on July 30, 2025, your passport must be valid through January 30, 2026.

At some point in the near future (last quarter of 2026) Europe (EU) will be requiring a travel authorization for most countries that are currently visa-exempt. This includes USA citizens. Once this system goes into effect, you will need to apply using this new system before traveling and pay a small fee for the authorization.

[You can read about this new program, check your requirements, and view the most up to date expected implementation date here.](#)

Electricity Stuff

Every night there will be electricity available at our lodging. You will need a Type G adapter in order to plug your things into the plugs at the lodging.

Registration and Payment

Call the NOLS Alumni Department at (800) 332-4280. A non-refundable \$200 deposit secures your spot on the trip. Your enrollment is complete with receipt of your full tuition and your completed application forms; these are **due 60 days prior to the start of the trip**.

Your tuition includes meals starting with dinner on the first night through dinner on the last night.

NOLS is not responsible for any additional costs incurred by late arrivals or evacuations. Those expenses are the responsibility of the trip participants and we recommend purchasing travel insurance to mitigate the risk of unforeseen circumstances.

Things to do in Ennis

Ennis is a dream town for history lovers. The Clare Museum, historically a convent, now houses 6,000 years of historical artifacts from County Clare. Not only is the museum free, but it gives visitors a wealth of knowledge of the area - a great way to start a trip!

There are also a plethora of historical friaries, abbeys and castles to visit if you have time. The ruins of Ennis Friary are a stonethrow from the Clare Museum and a must see. The Dysert O'Dea Castle is worth a visit if viewing the countryside from the top of a 15th century battle tower piques your interest; there's also a museum below and an archaeology trail which takes you to the ruins of a monastery. The Ennis Cathedral, Clare and Quin Abbeys - the latter of which was sacked by Oliver Cromwell, the Bunratty Castle, and Killone Abbey are also in the surrounding area.

The Burren, just a 15 minute drive north of town in a glaciated karst landscape, is stunning and surrounded by diverse flora and fauna, really an incredible spot if you have time. Nearby is the Dromore Woodland Reserve, home to 8 of the 9 bat species in Ireland and many historical ruins.

If you're looking for other cultural activities - books, music, and restaurants - [Lonely Planet](https://www.lonelyplanet.com/ireland) online has great suggestions, as does www.visitennis.com.

Suggested Readings

- *Ireland for Dummies* by Elizabeth Albertson
- *For the Love of Ireland: A Literary Companion for Readers & Travelers*. Edited by Susan Cahill
- *Wars of the Irish Kings: A Thousand Years of Struggle from the Age of Myth through the Reign of Elizabeth I* by David McCullough
- *Rick Steves' Ireland 2013* by Rick Steves
- *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* by Tim Robinson

Packing System

Please utilize a 3-bag packing system.

1. Travel Bag—This might be a larger suitcase of some variety you traveled to Ireland with. You will leave this bag at the first hotel along with anything you don't need for the trip. You will not have access to this bag throughout the trip.
2. Trip Luggage—This bag will be transported between lodgings during the trip, but you will also have to carry it on a few short walks (10-15 minutes). Please keep this bag size to an airline carry-on or something equivalent to a 40-liter duffel. A rolling bag could be nice, but make sure the wheels are robust for rough roads, cobblestones, and some stairs.
3. Day Pack - Something small that can carry water, sunscreen, snacks, and layers.

The luggage shuttle is included for 40 L /20kg/45 Lbs. These restrictions are based on the luggage service provider. If your suitcase is larger, there might be an additional charge.

Equipment List

Upper Body Clothing	
Equipment	Notes
Mid- weight base layer (1)	Mid-weight underwear top made of wool, synthetic, or Capilene®.
Insulating Jacket (fleece, wool or synthetic puffy)	Warm layer to wear in chilly weather or when we are done hiking for the day.
Wind shirt - optional	A lightweight, breathable, durable nylon wind shell, in either pullover or parka style.
Rain jacket	A sturdy, roomy waterproof jacket with a hood. Both coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable.
Hiking shirt (1-2)	A lightweight synthetic or merino wool t-shirt. Many folks hike in one shirt and lounge in the other (see “town shirt” below).
Sports Bra or Tank (1-2)	Synthetic sports bra or a synthetic sports tank are recommended.
Town Shirt/Top (1)	Lightweight items for town. These do not need to be fancy, but presentable for dinner out in town.
Gloves/Mittens	Wool or fleece gloves or mittens
Warm hat	Wool or synthetic beanie
Sun hat	Baseball cap or sun hat
Lower Body Clothing	
Mid- weight base layer (1)	Mid-weight bottoms of high performance polyester, synthetic, or Capilene®. Cotton and cotton blends are not acceptable.
Hiking pants/shorts	Breathable nylon pants or shorts, roomy enough to fit over all lower body layers.
Wind Pants - Optional	A lightweight, breathable, durable nylon wind shell.
Rain pant	A sturdy, waterproof pant. Both coated nylon and breathable fabrics such as Gore-Tex® are acceptable.
Underwear (2-4 pairs)	Wear what's comfortable; cotton, silk, or synthetics are fine.
Town pants/dress (1)	Lightweight items for town. These do not need to be fancy, but presentable for dinner out in town.
Footwear	
Medium or Lightweight hiking boot/shoe	You will need a sturdy pair of shoes for hiking. Some people prefer a sturdy hiking shoe vs a boot, you should bring something you are used to.

Town shoe	A comfortable pair of sneakers or street shoes to wear around the hotels.
Socks (2-4 pairs)	½ crew to crew length wool socks. Cotton socks are not advised.
Gaiters (optional)	Short gaiters are great to keep the rocks out.
Miscellaneous Personal Gear	
Equipment	Notes
Small backpack	Must be big enough to carry personal items (e.g., water, food, clothing layers) and lunch—15-25L
Plastic Compactor bags (1-2)	Heavy mil thickness to waterproof your backpack while hiking. We use these as liners for packs.
Water Bottles/Bladder	Total carrying capacity of at least 2 Liters.
Lip Balm (1-2)	SPF 15 or greater.
Sunscreen	SPF 30 or greater.
Sunglasses	Good-quality sunglasses with 100-percent UV protection; lenses should be dark.
Toiletries	Toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, brush, skin lotion, tampons, etc.
Optional Personal Items	
Book or e-reader	Bring something fun to read.
Camera	We would love to see your photos post-trip!
Trekking Poles	We find that most people prefer to have 2 poles
Earplugs and Facemask	Many folks find these help them sleep
Pack Cover	This can help keep your pack a bit drier in the rain.
Umbrella	Great secondary option for the rain.
Mosquito head net	It is possible this could be handy.
Day Pack	Something small and light for town explorations.