

What women doesn't like gems?

How about Emeralds?

How about a whole Island of Emeralds? How about the Emerald Isles?

Choose Ireland for your golf and you'll find the ever coveted hidden gems, Ok they might not be the shiny ones to bling up your fingers but they are worth the trip with heritage and long associations to golf.

Visiting Ireland last month I arrived into Dublin Airport and drove a couple of hours up through Northern Ireland and into the most northerly part of the Republic of Ireland; Donegal. Driving is a great way to see somewhere and the whole trip opened my eyes to landscapes and scenery befitting a well thumbed through coffee table book. Coming from England, the drive was an easy one, the roads are the same as in the UK, the signage clear and a sat nav to aid the way for a pleasant trip. I've never been to Northern Ireland before, certainly I know the names of the places, but never actually set foot in this part of the UK. It caught me off guard when the speed signs changed from KM/hour to miles/hour as I drove into Northern Ireland though.

Off the beaten track – in fact the sat nav had a habit of doing this aided by my ignorance of the geography of Ireland, I think it had been programmed by Failte Ireland so visitors see as much as they can – and it worked, I welcomed the unspoilt Ireland, even at that time of the year it is beautiful. Even the sheep looked content munching away on the lush green grass!

First stop, Rosapenna where I pitched my metaphorical tent and checked into this family run golf resort on the bay. To be fair the outside of the hotel building was a little 'corporate' so I expected it to be similar inside, you know 'one size fits all' kind of rooms-this was not at all. The restaurant and generous sized room overlooked the bay but my beautiful and tasty candle lit dinner for one was a little wasted on me. Rosapenna opened its arms to me, and I fully embraced the warmth and sincere welcome received from the freshly baked biscuits in

the room to the two 18 hole and one 9 hole golf courses. I played Sandy Hills with one of the members – this was something the Irish do very well, in my job I often play golf by myself, in Ireland they would not hear of such a thing and always paired me with members or with staff so I could enjoy the golf courses. A luna landscape links course, Sandy Hills invites you to crack a straight drive down the centre of the fairway and envelopes around you softly encouraging you to enjoy the course. A sunny yet cold and windy day open to ocean scenes is this elevated golf course in great condition despite the wet winter.

Next day I drove to Ballyliffin, a short distance as the crow flies, but a couple hours in the car in real terms going around the inlet – but definitely worth it. Passing through Ballyliffin, a sleepy village should have geared me up for the relaxing welcome at Ballyliffin Golf Club. The driveway up to the golf course had farmers' fields either side occupied by perfectly clean, white, fluffy lambs hovering close by their mothers for warmth and security. Ballyliffin, I was told is the most Northerly part of Ireland, and with two 18 hole golf courses to ponder I was spoiled for choice. Lady Captain, Molly had been drafted in to play with me, and she brought with her two equally wonderful ladies, Margaret and Lisa. Well talk about the Irish sense of humour, these ladies were on fire, we literally laughed our way around that golf course. We played the Old Links golf course on a beautiful sunny day with seagulls squawking in the background and ladies laughing in the foreground, it made for a perfect day. The Old Links course with short mown grass made it a bit thought provoking for me who is used to playing parkland, but I got the hang of it eventually. As I'm stood on the 13th tee watching a well hit drive soar through the air, words of warning pop into my mind as the ball

travels towards the bunker in the centre of the fairway. Giggles and sympathy from my playing partner's exclaiming that the bunker shouldn't be there anyway!! Slippery greens made any apathy towards them quickly disappear. Lines of concentration securely furrowed on my brow the stakes, a drink in the bar, were high. These ladies knew their golf course, were a delight to play with and made me feel very welcome. My only regret, I didn't stay for that drink as I had to drive back to Rosapenna- next time ladies, I promise (if you'll have me back that is!)

Base yourselves in Rosapenna or Ballyliffin to enjoy some great challenging golf courses for the ladies and gents alike.

Next stop Harverys Point, located near the Bluestack Hills on the edge of Loch Eske, this luxury boutique hotel retreat encompasses all things relaxing. Large warm rooms sectioned into areas draw you in to the far end to the panoramic views across the Loch with a large picture window illuminating the whole room with natural light. Met by the hotel owner whose obvious pleasure at sharing her hotel was refreshing and infectious. The main bar and restaurant also had Loch and garden views to please the diners, with the food being of top quality taste and appearance.

Playing at Donegal Golf Club the following day, this friendly golf club was a little overshadowed by the rain - the only day it did rain but it didn't deter us hardy golfers on this gently undulating luna landscape links where rugged beauty thrust out to the untamed sea despite the grey day. The course played well, again following the wet winter it showed little sign of the harsh weather it had been exposed to, the grass was slightly longer on the greens, but this didn't slow the ball down as the wind quickly dried them out. Bunkers, well it isn't often that people say how good the bunkers were, but they were very playable, good quality sand and 'easy' to get out of! A welcome Guinness followed the round - when in Rome...

Staying the next two nights in Mount Falcon, I was a little unsure about what to expect from

these three bedroom lodges. The Woodland Lodges had three bedrooms with private facilities lending themselves for all walks of visitor. Mount Falcon has salmon fishing on site and is associated with a number of golf clubs in the area, not having golf on site brings in other dimensions for the holiday goers- families or sports enthusiasts, as well as being able to morph for the buddies on their golf or fishing break. With sufficient cooking facilities in the lodges and the historic family home turned into a hotel you can choose where to eat, although I heartedly recommend their excellent restaurant. Mount Falcon also had one of the best falconry displays I've ever attended, with Jason, a young Irish chap prancing around to enhance the display with clear and obvious passion for his animals made it a treat to watch the whole shebang. This family owned business is making waves in the industry for all the right reasons - its location and varied offerings for starters.

Carne Golf Club was the next place to visit. Despite its relative youthful years, its appearance and play shows an old head on its shoulders cleverly designed with a complete understanding of working within its own peculiarities to produce a top golf course. Offering many challenges whilst winding your way through the dunes to the next lush green fairway. Undulating greens reflect the overall course, pretty tough yet rewards there for the taking. Blind tee-shots require courage and faith in one's game, especially if there is wind in play to fully appreciate Carne Golf course.

Connemara Sands Hotel with its 20 bedrooms and 10 holiday homes is again one to attract the families. We were treated to some Irish dancing by a young local girl who performed marvellously to an eager audience. A great location by the sea where the owner is also the chef and clearly keen as mustard to have visitors to his establishment.

Connemara Golf Club another highly regarded links, arguably the best course to play for ladies in so far as it is what you see, the layout is more open with dunes that don't over shadow the course the luna landscape look is almost by appearance only, with the overall effect being similar to that of other links. However once you start to play the course it opens up; you can see your ball land and can play for fairways to give yourself a chance with the second shot. Interestingly playing longer on the Red Tees than some of the other golf courses, it didn't seem to play longer.

Ardilaun Hotel – the only hotel on this trip to be in a city. Galway. A perfect place to stay and enjoy city life with countryside and golf on your doorstep. A larger hotel than previous ones yet retaining its friendly welcome. Lovely food and a bar that stays open far too late! Irish hospitality is world renowned as friendly open and welcoming, we experienced this at the Ardilaun after dinner and after most sensible people had gone to bed we were approached by a young gent who turned out to be a garda (policeman) who was staying in the hotel with his wife. He was playing the piano, she was singing. A circle was formed with the chairs and we spent the night caterwauling with the best of them, drinking far too many G&T's and Guinness a good night was had by all – except maybe those people in the rooms closet to reception!

The final day dawned, and with match sticks holding up the eyes and a few bottles of water in hand we set off for Galway Bay Golf Club, a hybrid golf course of links feel with parkland style, an unusual mix that really worked a treat with its versatility to blend from one to the next. Being a parkland course did not detract from the views overlooking the bay with the intense green course merging into the vivid blue sea in the background, add a bunker or two and you have the perfect golf beach holiday. A contrasting golf course with a welcoming clubhouse serving great food - but just because it is parkland, don't think it is a push over!

North West Ireland is still relatively undiscovered for golf and hospitality, Irish Fayre is as good as it gets, the golf can easily match or beat some well-known golf courses, and the people well what can I say. The Irish are known for liking their fine hospitality and a few bevvies, and I can honestly say, hand on heart – a reputation well deserved! The best Guinness in the world remains in Ireland.

Interested in going to Ireland?

Contact Sarah Forrest
info@redteebreaks.com