

# Travel

## 21 cosy Irish hideaways for winter



KELVIN GILLMOR PHOTOGRAPHY

From 13th-century castles to carriages from the original Orient Express, these hotels offer plenty to keep you entertained this season, writes *Domhnall O'Donoghue*

Above: Christmas decorations at Glenlo Abbey. Below: a gingerbread house at Powerscourt Hotel

# 26

TO DIE FOR DINE  
IN A TRAIN FROM  
MURDER ON THE  
ORIENT EXPRESS



**T**here's an Icelandic phrase that succinctly describes the country's beautiful but chilly winter conditions: *gluggaveður*, or window weather. While the Irish might not be able to endure the extreme elements of our Nordic neighbours, we can relate to the joys of curling up indoors beside roaring fires and looking out as the wind howls and rain falls.

This winter, where better to escape Mother Nature's volatility than our myriad hotels? They are the envy of the international hospitality industry, evidenced by the number of Irish properties – eight – that featured in this year's instalment of the prestigious Condé Nast Readers' Choice awards. Plus, an incredible 14 Irish hotels

recently received Michelin Keys, a new distinction list spearheaded by the Michelin Guide to recognise the best establishments in the UK and Ireland. How could it be any other way, seeing as our country's unofficial tagline is *céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes.

For those looking for a reprieve from winter's harsh elements, here are 21 cosy escapes across four categories: luxury, family, self-catering and foodie favourites. From classical music performances to murder-mystery film screenings, this diverse selection has plenty in store for guests over the shivery coming months – when nothing is as cheering as a warm drink in front of a fire, surrounded by plush decor and festive flourishes.

Continued on page 22 →



# Travel

**21**  
cosy Irish  
hideaways  
for winter

Continued from page 21 →

## LUXURY

### 1. CARTON HOUSE, MAYNOOTH, CO KILDARE

No matter the season Co Kildare's five-star Carton House wows, but there's something particularly enchanting about the 1,100-acre estate on a crisp winter morning when the grounds are lightly coated with frost.

Not to be outdone, the Palladian mansion is equally bewitching, with many original period features sitting alongside a thoughtfully conceived modern wing and fitness centre. If you're enjoying a meal in the Morrison Room or Kathleen's Kitchen, you'll struggle to decide where to focus: the decorative flourishes overhead or the majestic views outside.

[cartonhouse.com](http://cartonhouse.com)

### 2. DROMOLAND CASTLE, NEWMARKET ON FERGUS, CO CLARE

As the castle claims connections to Ireland's most famous high king, Brian Boru, it's no surprise that guests, including international presidents and royalty, have been flocking to this property for VIP treatment.

A 15-minute drive from Shannon Airport, the five-star hotel is enchanting at this time of year thanks to the blazing fires and cosy nooks and crannies. Don your wellies and finest winter woollies before pursuing some onsite activities, including falconry, archery and horse-and-carriage rides. [dromoland.ie](http://dromoland.ie)

### 3. LISS ARD ESTATE, SKIBBEREEN, CO CORK

Winter doesn't always have to be about hibernation and overindulgence; instead it can be a time to restore and focus on personal growth. Liss Ard Estate in west

Cork offers diverse activities that combine nature, relaxation and luxury.

Here guests can participate in wellness retreats and yoga classes or ramble across the vast grounds, where they'll discover unique art installations, including James Turrell's sublime *Irish Sky Garden*. The lakeside wood-burning saunas are the perfect antidote to the cold.

[lissardestate.ie](http://lissardestate.ie)

### 4. THE MERRION HOTEL, MERRION STREET UPPER, DUBLIN 2

Standing tall alongside some of Dublin's finest architecture is the Merrion Hotel, a five-star property centred on a quartet of beautifully restored Georgian townhouses. Complementing its sweeping staircases, lavish suites and crackling fires is a commendable commitment to art, notably its afternoon tea with treats inspired by the work of Jack B Yeats, William Scott, Louis le Brocquy and others.

Other culinary options include the two-Michelin-star Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, the Garden Room, which serves excellent modern Irish cuisine, and the Cellar Bar, a casual gastropub. [merrionhotel.com](http://merrionhotel.com)

### 5. SHEEN FALLS LODGE, KENMARE, CO KERRY

Rousing classical music has always been synonymous with the festive season. Fittingly, on December 14 Sheen Falls Lodge will host the renowned Celtic Tenors for a decadent evening of music and fine dining. At the end of the night the trio – who have performed their broad repertoire of genres in cities such as Sydney, New York and Shanghai – will serenade guests in the lounge.

The five-star hotel, which is etched into the majestic Kerry countryside and overlooks a waterfall and the atmospheric Kenmare Bay, offers festive menus and overnight packages. [sheenfallslodge.ie](http://sheenfallslodge.ie)

“Enchanting at this time of year, the hotel has blazing fires and cosy nooks and crannies



## FAMILY

### 6. CASTLEKNOCK HOTEL, CASTLEKNOCK, DUBLIN 15

Thanks to its 190 bedrooms and proximity to Dublin, Castleknock Hotel has rightly earned a reputation as a great destination for all. It creatively embraces each season, and winter is no different, so prepare to be impressed by bursts of Christmas decorations throughout this sprawling property.

There are also ample family-friendly facilities on offer, including a swimming pool, cinema room and playground, along with children's menus and family bedrooms, with some interconnecting options. Many perennially popular attractions are nearby, such as Phoenix Park, Dublin Zoo and St Catherine's Park. [castleknockhotel.com](http://castleknockhotel.com)

### 7. HILLGROVE HOTEL, MONAGHAN, CO MONAGHAN

At this time of year Hillgrove Hotel is awash with Christmas trees, twinkling

lights and halls decked with boughs of holly – a stark contrast to the image of the “stony grey soil of Monaghan” conjured by the local poet Patrick Kavanagh.

For two years the Family-First Awards named this Ulster establishment the country's top family hotel, acknowledging its extensive onsite facilities and activities, including the Explorer's Kids Club, children's menus at PK's Bistro, cinema room and kids' pool. If that isn't enough, the little VIPs also receive a special activity pack during check-in to keep them entertained. The hotel also assists parents – deserving of a quiet glass of mulled wine – in organising babysitting services. [hillgrovehotel.com](http://hillgrovehotel.com)

### 8. STORMONT HOTEL BELFAST, UPPER NEWTOWNARDS ROAD, BELFAST

Part of Northern Ireland's Hastings Hotels group, the reasonably priced Stormont is a nice option for family breaks. On the first four Sundays in December the Grand Ballroom will be transformed into a supreme festive venue, with decorations, **Continued on page 24 →**

LISS ARD ESTATE: TADEUSZ SYMAWICZ; JACK HARDY; HILLGROVE HOTEL: ALEXANDRA BARFOOT; JAMES FENNEL; NICK CAVANAGH

# Travel

# 21

cosy Irish  
hideaways  
for winter

Continued from page 22 →

live music and five-course buffet lunches. There might even be a visit from Santa. Under-fours dine free.

Sustenance will be needed before guests young and old explore family-friendly attractions nearby, including the Mo Mowlam Play Park. Visitors can also enjoy ice skating in Dundonald International Ice Bowl – the perfect winter activity. Belfast is also easily accessed by bus from the hotel, and there you can marvel at the city's Christmas lights, markets and other seasonal festivities. [stormonthotelbelfast.com](http://stormonthotelbelfast.com)

## 9. POWERSCOURT HOTEL RESORT & SPA, POWERSCOURT, CO WICKLOW

One of the county's crown jewels, Powerscourt is embracing the festive spirit with brio this year. In an echo of the surrounding landscape this five-star resort has been transformed into an elegant winter wonderland, with seasonal menus and drinks available, including festive afternoon tea and mulled wine.

The resort is also well equipped to host families: it has an onsite playground, a lifelike chessboard and a swimming pool with dedicated swim times for children. Youngsters staying during Christmas will be whisked around the estate on a horse and carriage and, if they're well behaved, might even meet Santa Claus himself. [powerscourthotel.com](http://powerscourthotel.com)

## 10. MARKREE CASTLE, COLLOONEY, CO SLIGO

Exchange the wild Atlantic winds for roaring fires and festive celebrations in Markree Castle, a property that has witnessed many Christmases since it was built in the 17th century. This year's family-friendly festivities begin on November 10 when the Christmas lights are turned on. The annual charity event takes place in December, with support from local choirs and artists. Seasonal afternoon tea will be served on selected days leading up to Christmas.

Additionally, Markree prides itself on its family rooms, each equipped with a king-size bed and two single beds, with enough space for a cot or camp bed. [markreecastle.ie](http://markreecastle.ie)



10



11

## SELF-CATERING

### 11. JOHNSFORT, CLONMELLON, CO WESTMEATH

Where better to surrender to the majesty of the Irish landscape in winter than on a working farm? Straddling the Westmeath/Meath border, Johnsfort House and Organic Farm has been in the Ball family since the 1700s. In recent years the owners, Richard and Bairbre Ball, have taken on the commendable task of restoring it.

The farm offers guests two boutique self-catering options that sleep five people each: Marianne Cottage, with its exposed stone walls and log-burning stove, and Bartholomew's Loft. In addition to receiving homemade brown bread, fresh eggs and local jams, guests can feed and befriend the farm's beloved Highland cattle – Ború, Grace, Constance and, a new addition, Taylor Swift. [johnsfort.ie](http://johnsfort.ie)

### 12. TUBBRID CASTLE, BARN, CO KILKENNY

While Tubbrid Castle can't guarantee snow, it can ensure guests have a unique and magical experience. Uninhabited for the past hundred years, this medieval tower house near Kilkenny's Slieveardagh Hills has been beautifully brought back to life by its owners, the Campion family. Expect four-poster beds, vaulted stone ceilings and a fireplace inscribed with the year 1596. It's not just the interior that charms – from the original window seats you can admire foxes and deer roaming the nearby woodland.

The castle is open over Christmas when it will be festooned with decorations, including a real tree. The kitchen is fully equipped and the Great Hall has an oak banquet table suitable for festive gatherings. [tubbridcastle.com](http://tubbridcastle.com)

### 13. BISHOP'S GATE HOTEL, DERRY

In recent years Derry has enjoyed a

bounce in tourism thanks to its commitment to peace, and a certain Bafta-winning comedy series. Commanding attention in the heart of its Cathedral Quarter is Bishop's Gate Hotel, which, as the epitome of Edwardian elegance, has deservedly become a landmark in the walled city.

Adjacent to the property is a collection of one and two-bedroom boutique apartments. Here guests can enjoy the best of both worlds: the flexibility and convenience of a self-catering option and the home comforts of a four-star hotel. [bishopsgatehotelderry.com](http://bishopsgatehotelderry.com)

### 14. FARNHAM ESTATE, CAVAN, CO CAVAN

The four-star Farnham Estate has an award-winning spa and golf course and defines rustic country living. There are self-catering houses just steps from the main hotel. Along with all modern appliances, each property has an open-plan living room and kitchen/dining room – the ideal spots for hibernating.

For those feeling more energetic, the houses also make great bases to explore the ancient forests, walled gardens, green meadows and pristine lakes of this 1,300-acre estate, which looks even more beguiling as the year draws to a close. [farnhamestate.ie](http://farnhamestate.ie)

### 15. KILLYHEVLIN LAKESIDE HOTEL & LODGES, ENNISKILLEN, CO FERMANAGH

Few hotels on the island have embraced the self-catering sector better than the delightful Killyhevlin. Located on the grounds is a fine choice of well-priced options for group getaways. These include the Woodland Lodges, which have private hot tubs, and the Lakeside Lodges, which overlook the majestic Lough Erne. As if that wasn't enough, the four-star hotel recently launched 12 Lakeland Studios, which are suited to couples who want to enjoy a romantic escape.

Those anxious to rectify the excesses of the festive season will be pleased to learn that all self-catering breaks include access to Killyhevlin's health club. [killyhevlin.com](http://killyhevlin.com)

Continued on page 26 →



14



13



12



15

# Travel

ALAN PLACE/STEVE BROWNLESS



18

Continued from page 24 →

## FOODIE

### 16. THE MUSTARD SEED, BALLINGARRY, CO LIMERICK

A country mile south of Adare in the heart of the Golden Vale is the Mustard Seed. This captivating country house has earned a fine reputation for its creative, unpretentious dining. The tables are decorated with white linens, antique cutlery and colourful Villeroy & Boch tableware. [mustardseed.ie](http://mustardseed.ie)

### 17. BLACKWELL HOUSE, SCARVA, CO DOWN

Not content with being a multi-award-winning guesthouse, Blackwell House is also a destination restaurant run by Alessio and Edele Rampa, with support from their three children. The family fully embraces Christmas, decorating the property with trees and other natural arrangements.

Blackwell House is open throughout winter, serving its popular homemade five and seven-course gourmet tasting menus. Every Saturday from the end of November, the family will host Christmas afternoon tea, with treats including turkey and cranberry sandwiches, pizza pinwheels and candy-cane fudge. [blackwellhouse.co.uk](http://blackwellhouse.co.uk)

### 18. NO 1 PERY SQUARE, GEORGIAN QUARTER, CO LIMERICK

This funky 21-bedroom boutique Georgian townhouse neighbouring the People's Park has sophistication and old-world charm.

The hotel's kitchen uses local produce and draws inspiration from Limerick's rich food heritage. Its winter menus also feature many organic and biodynamic wines. The afternoon tea is especially popular. According to the owners, it is more than just a meal: it celebrates tradition, elegance and the joyous spirit of Christmas. [oneperysquare.com](http://oneperysquare.com)

### 19. BARBERSTOWN CASTLE HOTEL, CO KILDARE

This 13th-century castle used to be owned by the rock star Eric Clapton, who, legend has it, invited many superstars to stay and play music into the early hours. The property has a new owner, and the ambience is more four-star luxury than rock-star debauchery. A highlight is the original keep, which dates from 1288 and overlooks Elizabethan and Victorian extensions.

The culinary options here are varied, from casual cuisine to fine dining. The executive head chef, Pablo Bernardo, and his talented team create dishes that incorporate locally sourced Irish produce but are prepared with a little French flair. [barberstowncastle.ie](http://barberstowncastle.ie)

### 20. WINEPORT LODGE, GLASSON, CO WESTMEATH

Wineport is named for the local port where 6th-century monks brought wine from France. This spirit of hospitality encapsulates the friendly lakeside retreat, which began its journey in 1993 as a restaurant run by the husband-and-wife team Ray Byrne and Jane English.

The menus are awash with delicious cuisine, served against a backdrop of incredible views of Lough Ree. Ingredients are predominantly sourced in Ireland, including Glasson mushrooms, Duncannon smoked salmon and steamed Lissadell mussels. [wineport.ie](http://wineport.ie)

### 21. GLENLO ABBEY, BUSHYPARK, CO GALWAY

If ever there was a season to curl up and watch a film, it's winter. If you want to exchange your couch for something more glamorous, visit Galway's five-star Glenlo Abbey, which has Hollywood connections. It is home to the Pullman restaurant, which comprises two converted train carriages that were part of the Orient Express; one of them featured in the 1974 film adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*.

The hotel's Martini Movie Matinée Experience invites guests to watch the murder mystery, cocktail in hand, followed by a gourmet meal in the Pullman. Death by chocolate, anyone? [glenloabbeyhotel.ie](http://glenloabbeyhotel.ie)



21  
cosy Irish  
hideaways  
for winter

17

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