



festive forays

Whether you've got shopping, eating or just relaxing on your to-do list this winter, these weekend escapes to Dublin, Cork and Clare have a little of all three.

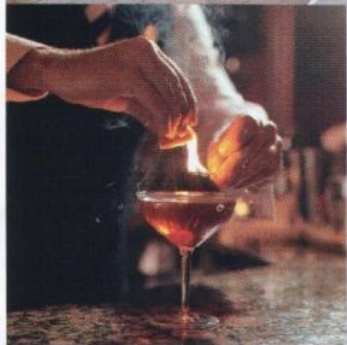
DROMOLAND CASTLE, CLARE A ROMANTIC RECESS

STAY Dromoland Castle in Clare has been welcoming guests for more than four centuries, and, nestled into a squishy sofa at the foot of the magnificent fireplace in the grand hall with a wickedly good tippie in hand, there are few places you would rather be on a winter's evening. Get your bearings by taking an amble through the castle, from its 16th-century stone walls, grand staircases and imposing portraits to cosy nooks and hidden hallways. Don't forget to take pause at the newly opened Castle Spa, which boasts a curated range of bespoke treatments from Dr Barbara Sturm, Seabody and Oskia. Outdoors, there are myriad romantic country pursuits to choose from, such as a horse-drawn carriage ride, falconry and lakeside picnics, as well as a world-class golf course (which recently hosted the Women's Irish Open). Make sure to take a stroll along the paths of the walled garden, magnificent at any time of year, with winter warmers on offer in the neighbouring Fig Tree Restaurant.

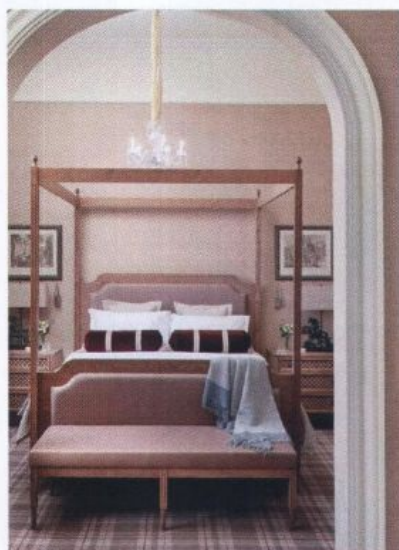
EAT Dine in your finest in the Earl of Thomond overlooking the lake, where the menu, created by executive head chef David McCann, bursts with local flavours – the tasting menu comes highly recommended. Then grab a perch at the cocktail bar and watch on as mixologist Alex Beyou concocts one of his ethereal cocktails based on Celtic deities.

HIGHLIGHTS Why not pick up a little memento from your trip at Charlotte & Co, the castle's gift shop, which boasts a deftly curated selection of modern Irish-made pieces, including Niamh Gillespie's Tidings scarf collection, Colin Burke's knitwear and Paula Rowan leather gloves. If you fancy venturing further afield, Ennis, just 15 minutes' drive, is awash with independent boutiques. Peruse Willow's modern silhouettes, or pick up something shiny at Blackbird, a veritable trove of contemporary Irish and European jewellery designs.

THIS WINTER Enjoy Christmas at the Castle with a three-night escape kicking off on Christmas Eve, including dinner every evening, a ballad singer on Christmas night and a trip to the Limerick Races on St Stephen's Day. From €2,532 per adult. Rooms, including breakfast, from €405 per room per night. dromoland.ie



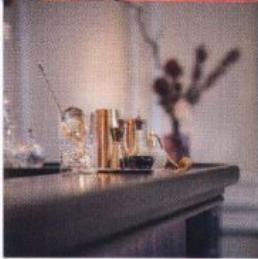
CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW The Stateroom suite is housed within the original castle walls at Dromoland. Alex Beyou putting the finishing touches on one of his signature cocktails. Blackbird jewellery boutique in Ennis. The view of Dromoland Castle on a winter's day.



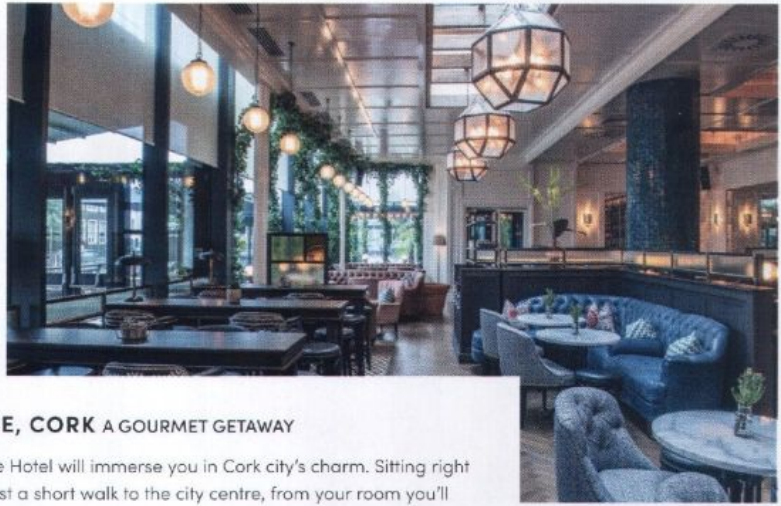
LEFT Irish brand My Name is Ted is one of a selection of local gifts available in Dromoland's Charlotte & Co. Crossbody Door bag, €695. RIGHT Winter foliage on a walk through the grounds.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MELANIE MULLAN



FROM TOP Farmgate Café in Cork's famed English Market. The Mirror Room in The River Lee. An expertly crafted cocktail at Cask. Breakfast at Farmgate Café.



THE RIVER LEE, CORK A GOURMET GETAWAY

STAY The River Lee Hotel will immerse you in Cork city's charm. Sitting right on the river and just a short walk to the city centre, from your room you'll get a wonderful snapshot of life in the city. Even the lift makes you feel right in the heart of things: through the glass, you can admire the river as you gently ascend. Spend some time relaxing in the modern yet cosy foyer, while The River Club bar and The Grill Room restaurant are always buzzy – the perfect place to start the evening. Ask at the front desk about the recently launched Curated Weekends in Cork guides, which showcase the city through the eyes of some of the county's most creative minds, like Jo Linehan and Caroline O'Donoghue.

EAT A trip to Cork is the perfect excuse to make the most of its thriving culinary scene. For daytime, Farmgate Café in the English Market is iconic for a reason, whether you just want something light or a hearty stew, and it's the perfect spot for people-watching. Those with a sweet tooth should head to Dulce Bun House on Oliver Plunkett Street for waffles and coffee, setting you up for a wander around the city's streets. Or head to Marina Market for incredible food and drink options. As evening draws in, have a glass of natural wine in L'Altitude 51 on Union Quay, where it's hard to resist the nibbles and small plates. For dinner, Goldie is a foodie favourite, with a Bib Gourmand for its fish-forward menu. 51 Commarket is a popular brunch spot, but its evening menu also impresses, with a notable list of local suppliers and a relaxed atmosphere.

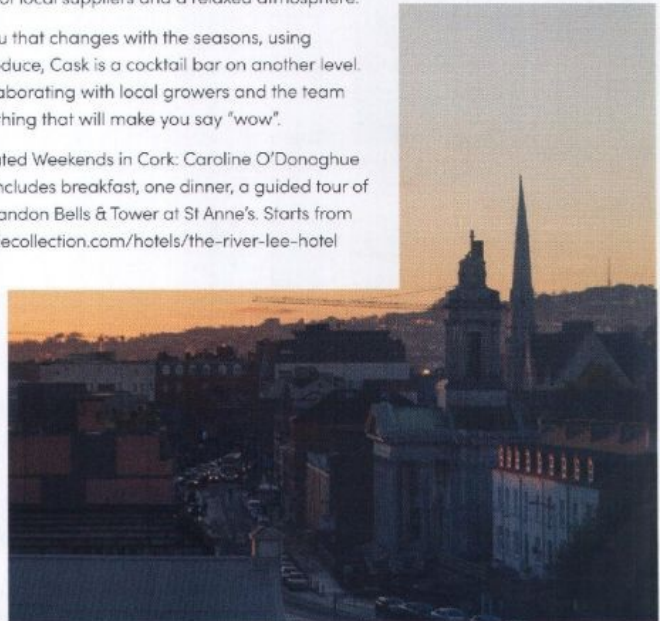
HIGHLIGHTS With a cocktail menu that changes with the seasons, using foraged ingredients and local produce, Cask is a cocktail bar on another level. Few are as passionate about collaborating with local growers and the team are always coming up with something that will make you say "wow".

THIS WINTER The River Lee's Curated Weekends in Cork: Caroline O'Donoghue Literary Cork two-night package includes breakfast, one dinner, a guided tour of the UCC campus and tickets to Shandon Bells & Tower at St Anne's. Starts from €686 for two people sharing. doylecollection.com/hotels/the-river-lee-hotel



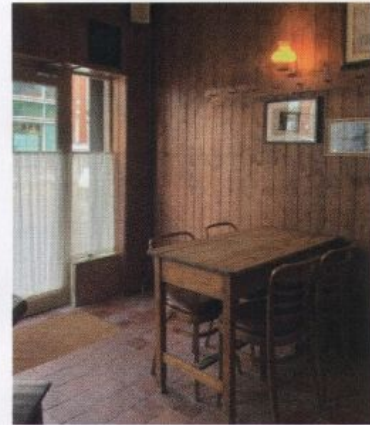
FROM TOP The River Club at The River Lee. Waffles are a must-try at Dulce Bun House. Views over Cork city.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUTH MARIA MURPHY





FROM LEFT Scout in Temple Bar has a curated selection of fashion and homeware. Simone Rocha shoes in Havana, Donnybrook. Bar Pez is the perfect spot for a glass of wine.



THE MERRION HOTEL, DUBLIN A SHOPPING SOJOURN

STAY A stay at The Merrion guarantees the city on your doorstep yet the most tranquil surroundings, for the perfect place to retreat at the end of a day exploring. Its Georgian townhouse style is luxurious and welcoming in equal measure, whether you want to relax in your decadent room, enjoy afternoon tea or make use of the swimming pool.

EAT The Merrion has plenty of dining options, from The Cellar Bar for drinks and gastro-pub food to The Garden Room or Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud for something more elevated. If you're out and about in the city, don't miss Bar Pez on Kevin Street. From the people behind Fish Shop, it has an incredible selection of wine and snacks, or book a table at speakeasy The Blind Pig to be given the password to get into this sought-after cocktail bar – you might even be treated to some live music.

HIGHLIGHTS Whether looking for a special treat for yourself or checking people off your festive gift list, Dublin has lots of options for finding something out of the ordinary. Wendy Crawford's Scout on Essex Street is a favourite for everything from forever fashion pieces to unique homeware, or head to Irish Design Shop on Drury Street for gorgeous locally made gifts and festive decorations to adorn your home for years to come. For something that sparkles, don't miss Chupi's stunning new flagship in the Powerscourt Townhouse, Clarendon Street, where you could spend an entire afternoon trying on treasures. Fashion lovers won't want to visit the capital without a trip to Havana in Donnybrook. Just a quick trip on the 39A from The Merrion, Nikki Creedon's edit is always worth browsing, and includes designers such as Simone Rocha, Dries Van Noten, Colin Burke and The Landskein.

THIS WINTER The Merrion's one-night Winter Family Getaway includes breakfast for a family of two adults and two children for €1,100. merrionhotel.com

BELOW FROM LEFT The peaceful luxury of The Merrion. A cocktail at The Blind Pig. Work by local makers on the shelves at Irish Design Shop.

