



## The Magnificent Seven (a golf tour in Ireland's north-west)

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Arriving at Carne Golf Links with North & West Coast Links.



Guinness, soup & sandwiches.



Castlerock 1st with caddie.



Castlerock 10th



Bishop's Gate Hotel.

## Golfing brothers Andrew & Paul Marshall join a golf tour in a magical corner of Ireland to play seven classic courses...

Ah...the joys, frustrations and vagaries of links golf, where a well-executed shot can get an unfortunate kick and end up in a pot bunker, or a mishit shot may get a lucky bounce and finish on the green. Links courses with their unique characteristics retain their allure as the game's original and purest form – and some of the world's best can be found in the wild and rugged north-west corner of the Emerald Isle.

It's early May and the start of a week-long golf tour organised by North West Coast Links, where we are joining half a dozen keen golfers (Sam and Dan from Australia, Jo from Belgium, Kaia from Norway, Bo from Sweden

and Peter from Canada), to tee it up for seven magnificent rounds in County Londonderry, County Donegal, County Sligo and County Mayo. Just uttering the names of the courses on the schedule such as Castlerock, Ballyliffin, Portsalon, Donegal, Lough Erne, Enniscrone and Carne is enough to get the golf juices flowing.

Some layouts such as Castlerock and Portsalon are old-fashioned local-style links where golf has been played for over a century, whilst others such as Carne and Ballyliffin's Glashedy Links are relatively recent creations that still look as though they have been part of the landscape since then. All the key links ingredients are here in abundance: fast undulating greens, blind shots, dunes rising above fairways like skyscrapers, deep pot bunkers, hidden greens and weather so changeable, that you find yourself in a rainproof jacket one minute and a tee-shirt the next.

As we travel around the north-west region, we soon discover that getting to the courses is all part of the golfing experience – driving through heather-cloaked moorland, the home of curlew, buzzard and stacks of drying peat, past ancient castles perched on top of windswept headlands and through quaint villages with more pubs than shops. The roads, often twisting and narrow, take longer than expected to navigate, but it's time well spent in anticipation, until the next links course comes into view weaving its way through the dunes.

After a 256 km (3 hour) drive north from Dublin airport, our friendly chauffeur Saran turns the well-appointed Taurus minibus off the Causeway Coastal Route and parks outside the clubhouse of Castlerock Golf Club. There is a palpable buzz in the crisp afternoon air as we busily unload our clubs and then head for the practice putting green before our first round. What lies ahead is the golf trip of a

lifetime - no wives or husbands, no kids and no distractions. Talking about golf, playing golf and taking about playing golf. Time spent discussing such vital issues as: 'who had the most birdies of the round', 'who won the semi-final matches', 'how many shots it took to get out of a particular pot bunker' and 'best course of the trip.' Enhancing the golfing experience are the wonderful clubhouse bars to enjoy some hearty soup and sandwiches and a pint or two of Guinness after the day's round. This is one heavenly week of top-drawer golf, great accommodation and hearty Irish breakfasts, good laughs and grand camaraderie – and it doesn't get much better than this...

### DAY 1: CASTLEROCK – County Londonderry

Castlerock Golf Club's historic Mussenden Links (founded in 1901) is located just a few miles from Coleraine on Northern Ireland's north coast, and will test every department



Ballyliffin Old 18th (© Ballyliffin GC)



Caddy at Ballyliffin's Glashedy.



Ballyliffin GC.



Ballyliffin TownHouse

of your game. Play close to your handicap here, particularly when the wind is up and you are doing well. Set amid rolling sand dunes besides the picturesque River Bann estuary, this very natural links course offers spectacular panoramic seaside views as you play particularly from the elevated tee of the standout par-5 17th. Great courses have great closing holes and the short dog-leg right par-4 18th is another beauty. A decent drive leaves a mid to short iron approach shot to a tricky, elevated two-tiered plateau green with the clubhouse just a few metres beyond – beckoning with the promise of that first pint of Guinness of the trip.

Signature Hole: Hole 4 (Leg O'Mutton), Par-3, 200 yards. The club's best-known hole requires a tee shot struck over a meandering burn, with a railway line lurking to the right, and a tricky pot bunker in front of a raised green.

**castlerockgc.co.uk**  
**Overnight Stay: Bishop's Gate Hotel**

## DAY 2: BALLYLIFFIN - County Donegal

Situated close to Cardonagh and Malin Head on Donegal's Inishowen Peninsula, Ireland's most northerly golf club comprises a remarkable 36 holes that meander through the most beguiling of links land, with rocky outcrops, perfect greens and enchanting views. Principally designed by Mother Nature (with upgrades by Sir Nick Faldo including new bunkering, tees and enlarged greens), the natural terrain and gently rippling fairways give the classic Old Links a unique character, and it's the type of place where you can easily imagine the golfing forefathers striding along the sheep-cropped turf with their hickory clubs. The more recent Glashedy Links (designed by Pat Ruddy and Tom Craddock) is fashioned around the incredible dunes on higher ground beyond the Old Links offering stunning coastal views as you play. Home to the 2018 Irish Open, the Glashedy Links starts with three long par-4s, and from there the challenges never let up – negotiating

cavernous peat-riveted bunkers, large contoured greens, fairways that twist and tumble between towering dunes and a collection of exciting par-3s.

Signature Hole: Hole 7 (Loch na nDeor), Par-3, 174 yards. It's tricky to pick just one signature hole at Glashedy as each has its own charms, but this par-3 hole played from the course's highest point to a green sited 100 feet below, with water to the right of a green defended by four pot bunkers sticks in the mind.

**ballyliffingolfclub.com**  
**Overnight Stay: Ballyliffin TownHouse**  
**DAY 3: PORTSALON – County Donegal**

Portsalon Golf Club used to be one of the best kept secrets in Irish golf. It still isn't quite as well known as some of the Emerald Isle's other links, but word is gradually getting out. Nestled under the Knockalla mountains on the picturesque

Fanad Peninsula and stretching along Ballymastocker Beach, which was voted the second most beautiful beach in the world by Observer readers, Portsalon is one of the oldest golf courses in the world, with golf being played here since the 1880's. The course has an out and back feel to it, and the opening stretch of holes in particular, from 1-7 running out alongside the beach with raised tee blocks set in the dunes, rumped fairways and contoured greens are as good as you will find anywhere. To sum up, Portsalon may not have a posh clubhouse, any practice facilities or even a yardage book, but what it does have is an engagingly old-fashioned links course in a superb setting bristling with local character and charm.

Signature Hole: Hole 2 (Strand), Par-4, 396 metres. Offering a fantastic vista, this blockbuster par-4 is played from a high tee to a fairway running diagonally along a sea inlet and then across a river to a well-



Portsalon 2nd signature hole.



Donegal GC.



Drinking Guinness at Donegal GC.



Harvey's Point Hotel (© Harvey's Point).

bunkered green. If you find the fairway, you have a choice – be a hero and go for the green or lay-up short of the river, the choice is yours on what is widely regarded as one of Ireland's finest holes.

**portsalongolfclub.ie**

**Overnight Stay: Ballyliffin TownHouse**

#### **DAY 4: DONEGAL – County Donegal**

With the Atlantic Ocean on three sides and the magnificent Bluestack Mountains as a backdrop, Donegal Golf Club's Murvagh course is a testing, no-nonsense links designed originally by Eddie Hackett, with a more recent upgrade by Pat Ruddy. One of Darren Clarke's favourite tracks, the course at Murvagh plays a lengthy 7,456 yards and is configured in two elongated loops of nine. The front nine runs anti-clockwise and the back nine clockwise,

sitting inside the the outward nine. After a satisfying round, the 19th hole clubhouse beckons, that sacred place with the bewitching spell of an Irish welcome. Out on the terrace with 360-degree views, we join the rest of the tour group enjoying their pints, as the late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the links land, defining every undulation, bump and hollow.

Signature Hole: Hole 8 (Moyne Hill), Par-5, 549 yards. This memorable hole is the pick of Donegal's five par-5's and has everything ... dunes and sea views to the right, a tilting elevated fairway, a blind second shot, a hollow, a drop, plus rough and a bunker in front of the green with an attractive ocean view backdrop.

**donegalgolfclub.ie**

**Overnight Stay: Harvey's Point Hotel**

#### **DAY 5: LOUGH ERNE - County Fermanagh**

As a contrast and break from walking the links, we all set off in buggies to tackle the Faldo course, one of two inland parkland-style layouts (the other being Castle Hume) at the luxury Lough Erne Resort, located in the heart of the Fermanagh Lakelands. The Faldo course (designed by six-time major champion Sir Nick Faldo) meanders through pine forest before making its way to the Lough Erne side, and features wetland areas, elevated tees, deep bunkers and sloping greens. We round off a great day's golf with a fine meal in the 3AA rosette Catalina Restaurant, enjoying local dishes such as Kilkeel crab, Toombebridge eel, Lisdergen Irish Spring lamb, Kilkeel pan-fried hake and rhubarb tart.

Signature Hole: Hole 10 (Emerald Isle), Par-4, 347 yards. The green has been constructed on a man-made peninsula jutting out into the waters of Lough Erne. Big hitters will be tempted to go for it, but for many, a

combination of a hybrid or mid-iron off the tee followed by a wedge of some description will be the sensible strategy.

**[loughernerest.com](http://loughernerest.com)**

**Overnight Stay: Lough Erne Resort**

#### **DAY 6: ENNISCROME - County Sligo**

Enniscrone started life as a modest nine-holer in 1918, but it was the prolific Irish designer, Eddie Hackett, who put the place on the map when he extended the layout to eighteen in the mid-1970s. Then, a few years back, Donald Steel visualised another six holes in the dune range and built three others, enabling the club to spread its wings to 27 holes. The scenery of the main championship course, appropriately called The Dunes is second to none. Twelve of the holes wind and twist their way through a maze of the tallest and shaggiest dunes on the coast, where a sense of isolation and tranquility surrounds you, with only wild



An Irish breakfast at Harvey's Point.



Sir Nick Faldo statue at Lough Erne.



Mount Falcon Estate.



Falconry at Mount Falcon.

Atlantic views and the uplifting sounds of skylarks for company. One hole that will etch itself in the memory is the mountainous 349-yard par-4 13th, called The Burrows, which is like teeing off the summit of Everest with the green nestled down at base camp below. The Dunes at Enniscrone isn't your average layout – it's a serious golfing adventure on a breathtaking course.

Signature Hole: Hole 16 (The Long Bank), Par-5, 538 yards. Curving between the dunes and the ocean, this memorable stroke index-6 hole sums up what Enniscrone is all about. Keeping the ball on the fairway is key, and the second shot should favour the right hand side, for the best approach to an elevated green, which is wide but very shallow.

**enniscronegolf.com**

**Overnight Stay: Mount Falcon Estate.**

### DAY 7: CARNE - County Mayo

The special charm of Carne lies in the journey required to get there, plus its remote location in magnificent sand dunes overlooking Blacksod Bay and the wild Atlantic Ocean near the town of Belmullet. "If ever the Lord intended land for a golf course, Carne has it," so said the late Eddie Hackett, who laid out the course in the early 1990s. This was his final links layout, and it is now believed by many who have played it to be his greatest challenge. Carne finishes with an excellent trio of holes – the par-3 16th drops steeply from an elevated tee to a green encircled by dunes, and the challenging par-4 17th and par-5 18th weaving its way among the dunes - are a memorable finale to a rugged and natural links that has a lasting impression on all that play it. Complementing Hackett's original eighteen is the recently created nine-hole Kilmore course designed by Ally McIntosh, offering more exciting holes routed through the same mountainous dunes. Be sure to make the pilgrimage.

Signature Hole: Hole 13 (Aodh), 482 metres, par-5. There are arguably other holes at Carne that deserve the signature hole moniker, but for sheer atmosphere, this second of the three par-5's on the back nine takes some beating. It requires three good blows to reach the green situated at the furthest point of the course right by the sea. This is the spot to pause for a moment to take in the wild, yet serene coastal landscape of white sandy beach and turquoise waters.

**carnegolflinks.com**

**Overnight Stay: Mount Falcon Estate**

### FURTHER INFORMATION

#### WHERE TO STAY (The 5 Hotels)

Bishop's Gate Hotel (Londonderry): Located within the historic city walls in the heart of Londonderry's quaint Cathedral Quarter and within 'chipping distance' of a variety of trendy

bars and restaurants, this luxury Edwardian boutique hotel provides convenient access to over 20 golf courses within an hour's drive. [bishopsgatehotelderry.com](http://bishopsgatehotelderry.com)

Ballyliffin TownHouse (Ballyliffin): Listed as one of the top small hotels in Ireland 2018/2019 (TripAdvisor) this 4-star boutique hotel is famous for its AA award-winning Irish breakfast from the chef's porridge with a dash of whiskey/Irish Cream Liqueur, or the famous Donegal Fry to a tasty omelette, fresh fish, cheese or fruits. Ballyliffin Golf Club is only a 2-minute drive away plus easy access to many other championship courses. The owner has plans to install a golf simulator on-site covering courses in the area. [ballyliffintownhouse.ie](http://ballyliffintownhouse.ie)

Harvey's Point Hotel (Lough Eske / Donegal): Hidden in the hills of Donegal on the tranquil shores of Lough Eske is Harvey's Point, a luxurious hotel featuring award-winning cuisine, traditional Irish hospitality and the funky Octagonal Bar with its open peat fire

# NORTH & WEST COAST LINKS GOLF IRELAND

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Enniscrone 16th signature hole.



Carne 'Kilmore' 3rd.



## Tailoring Your Ultimate Ireland Links Golf Vacation



- the perfect place to relax after a day on the links. There's no question of roughing it here, with suites so palatial and spacious, they can double up for some long range putting practice. Located on the grounds of the hotel are thirteen compact, cabin-style guest rooms offering quality accommodation for golfers at an affordable price. [harveyspoint.com](http://harveyspoint.com)

Lough Erne Resort (Enniskillen): Set in the heart of the Fermanagh Lakelands, this award-winning 5-star resort features a range of luxury guest rooms within unique lakeside lodges and the hotel. Resort highlights include the 3AA rosette Catalina Restaurant, Thai Spa and 36 holes of quality golf on site (The Faldo and Castle Hume courses). [loughernereresort.com](http://loughernereresort.com)

Mount Falcon Estate (Ballina): Award-winning country hotel set on a 100 acre estate on the outskirts of Ballina. Accommodation options range from the luxurious Wall Pool Suite (named after the most famous salmon pool on the Mount Falcon estate) boasting original features, to deluxe rooms and self-contained

lodges ideal for fishermen and golfers. Guests can enjoy various fishing packages that include the River Moy, plus other excellent rivers and lakes in the region. Other activities include clay pigeon shooting, falconry displays, archery, biking forest trails and a 9-bay golf driving range. [mountfalcon.com](http://mountfalcon.com)

### NORTH & WEST COAST LINKS

With decades of experience, the North & West Coast Links are experts in organising quality golf trips to Ireland's north-west region. Contact John McLaughlin or Paul Collins who can help arrange a bespoke golf trip for you and your mates or join one of their organised itineraries. Depending on the size of your golf group, there are various transport options, from a self-drive 4-seater Mercedes V-Class vehicle, to a chauffeur-driven Taurus vehicle (6-12 golfers), and a full-size chauffeur driven coach (12-28 golfers). Accommodation options can range from comfortable guest houses to luxury hotels. For more details visit the website: [northandwestcoastlinks.com](http://northandwestcoastlinks.com)

- Co. Louth (Baltray) Golf Club
- Carne Golf Links
- Enniscrone Golf Club
- Donegal (Murvagh) Golf Club
- Lough Erne Resort
- Ballyliffin Golf Club – Glashedy & Old Links
- Castlerock Golf Club
- Portstewart Golf Club – Strand, Riverside & Old Course
- Royal Portrush Golf Club – Dunluce & Valley Links
- Portsalon Golf Club
- Westport Golf Club



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