

Driving While Holidaying in Ireland

The great thing about driving in Ireland is that the country is small enough to allow you to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time – and without feeling rushed. In a single week you can easily take in The Book of Kells in Trinity College Dublin and the Titanic museum in Belfast, and then head west to wend your way through the untouched wilderness of Connemara or The Burren.

These days too, it's much easier to get around than in the past. Road infrastructure was radically improved during in the Celtic Tiger years, and journey times between all of the major cities have been slashed.

Hotel building was another boom-time pastime. It's left the country with some of the cheapest hotel rooms in Western Europe. Declining economic fortunes have also eased congestion in major cities and towns. Avoid peak hours and you'll get where you want to go with satisfying ease.

Check out discoverireland.ie, where the national tourist agency has plotted more than ninety self-drive itineraries. You get a journey overview, historical information on the attractions you'll pass, along with detailed maps of how to get around.

If you've flown into Dublin, Belfast, Cork or Shannon and don't have too much time at your disposal, there are several day-trips within easy striking distance of the airports. The Wicklow Gap drive, for example, begins in Hollywood, just forty-five minutes south of Dublin. It winds its way up through the stunning Wicklow Mountains, giving you spectacular views over the Kings River and the upper lake of Glendalough, before taking in monastic ruins and Bronze Age stone circles.

While the motorways may get you from A to B in record time, much of the charm of motoring through Ireland lies in meandering along country roads.

The key thing to remember is that you drive on the left hand side of the road. Speed limits and road signs are designated in kilometres per hour. It's 120 km/h on motorways and 100km/h on national routes, while the top speed on those twisting regional roads is 80km/h (Though very often you'll need to go a lot slower than that).

In urban areas, the limit is 50km/h, while you'll see lower limits flagged on road signs as you approach schools and villages.

You shouldn't need an international licence. Most car rental companies will accept a licence issued by the country in which you're normally resident. Remember too to keep your rental agreement, along with your licence and insurance info in the car.

Drink driving is a very serious offence in Ireland and is closely policed, as is mobile phone use. If it rings when you're driving, don't answer. Seat belts are compulsory in both front and back, and of course children will need child seats. Be sure to notify your car rental company ahead of time how much and what kind of child seating you'll need. Check out the Road Safety Authority's site www.rsa.ie or www.rulesoftheroad.ie, where you can browse rules and familiarise yourself with road signs and conventions before you go.

Those meandering regional roads may lead you to the hidden gems of Ireland, but do take particular care when you get off the beaten path. There's no hard shoulder, and often no central markings.

Moreover, it's not uncommon to round a corner and encounter a herd of something being moved from one field to another. Cyclists and pedestrians also make more use of the roads during the summer months, as does agricultural machinery, so when driving in rural areas, expect the unexpected. That said, Ireland's roads are among the safest in Europe, currently ranked sixth out of 27 countries.

And if you end up lost, don't bother with the sat nav. Pull in and ask directions. Last year, the Lonely Planet voted Ireland the friendliest place on earth.