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Hidden Corners of the Emerald Isle

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Introduction

Ireland is a landscape of storied contrasts: ancient stone fortresses stand watch over rolling green hills, while timeworn cottages cling to windswept cliffs above a wild Atlantic. It is a country celebrated worldwide for its literary legacy, vibrant music, and the warm, unbreakable bonds of community. Yet for all its famous icons—the bustling streets of Dublin, the spectacular Cliffs of Moher, or the mystique of Blarney Castle—there is a deeper, more elusive magic woven through the Emerald Isle’s lesser-known byways. Hidden within the folds of its countryside are villages half-swallowed by heather, age-old crafts kept alive by stubborn hands, and stories so entangled with myth they linger in the very hush of evening mists. This book is an invitation to wander those hidden corners, where the true spirit of Ireland quietly endures.

The criteria for inclusion in these pages go beyond historical noteworthiness or scenic appeal. Each chosen village or region embodies a singular convergence of folklore, tradition, and resilience—a place where the past is not just remembered, but lived. Some, like deserted Slievemore or the crumbling settlement on Great Blasket Island, stand as poignant reminders of hardship and emigration, echoing with the lives of those who once called them home. Others, such as bustling Doolin or vibrant Ardara, are living communities where music pours from open pub doors, craftspeople shape wool and willow by hand, and old tales are as much a part of the present as the landscape itself.

Rather than offering a checklist of popular sights, this book blends travelogue, local history, and cultural insight to create vivid portraits of twenty-five remarkable destinations. The journey was shaped by careful research—delving into historical archives, gathering stories from seanchaí (traditional storytellers), consulting contemporary interviews, and drawing on the wisdom that lingers in community gatherings and village festivals. From haunting legends and culinary specialties to the rituals that mark the changing seasons, each chapter weaves together narrative, direct voices, and rich sensory detail, ensuring that both the tangible and the mythical have equal presence.

Throughout these pages, you’ll encounter not only striking landscapes and historic ruins but also the living, breathing heart of rural Ireland: the people. Local characters—painters and weavers, fishermen and festival-goers, rebels and quiet heroes—bring these places to life, grounding Ireland’s universal appeal in the lived experiences and enduring dreams of its communities. Here, the old ways are not relics, but vital threads in the fabric of daily life, cherished as both inheritance and identity.

For the armchair traveler seeking solace in vivid storytelling, this journey offers a passport to a world of untamed coastlines, flickering hearths, and stories spun on salt-laden air. For the adventurer plotting a new path through Ireland, these pages provide practical guidance: how to connect respectfully with locals, when to visit for the most spirited festivals, where to sample a generations-old family recipe, or which windswept trail leads to a half-forgotten legend.

Above all, Hidden Corners of the Emerald Isle is a celebration of discovery—a love letter to the ordinary and the extraordinary, to the ancient stones and the living voices, and to the enduring magic that breathes through Ireland’s overlooked places. No matter how you journey through these pages, may you find yourself a little more attuned to wonder, a little more connected to tradition, and—like the best of Irish travelers—with a story ready to share by your own fireside.

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CHAPTER ONE: Slievemore: Echoes of the Deserted Village on Achill Island

Achill Island, a rugged outpost off the coast of County Mayo, often feels like the very edge of the world. Here, the Atlantic asserts its dominance with relentless waves crashing against dramatic cliffs and winds that sculpt the landscape into a raw, untamed beauty. Amidst this wild grandeur, nestled at the foot of the imposing Slievemore Mountain, lies a haunting testament to human resilience and the harsh realities of Irish history: the Deserted Village of Slievemore. It's a place that whispers stories on the wind, where the ghosts of a forgotten way of life seem to linger in the skeletal remains of stone cottages.

To walk among these silent structures is to step back in time, far beyond the well-trodden paths of modern tourism. Nearly one hundred stone dwellings, their roofs long since collapsed, stand in neat rows, their gable ends facing the prevailing westerly winds like stoic sentinels. The sheer scale of the village, spread across the lower slopes of the mountain, immediately conveys that this was once a thriving community, intricately connected to the land and its seasonal rhythms. The rough-hewn stones, seamlessly blending with the surrounding terrain, speak of a deep understanding of local materials and a connection to the very earth beneath one's feet.

The origins of these cottages stretch back further than many might imagine. Some of the existing structures are believed to date back to medieval times, their design evolving over centuries to suit the unique agricultural practices of the islanders. This wasn't a conventional village in the modern sense, with year-round inhabitants clinging to every hearth. Instead, Slievemore operated as a "booley" village, a fascinating glimpse into an ancient system of transhumance, where people moved with their livestock.

For generations, the families living in the scattered, permanent homesteads across Achill would migrate to Slievemore during the summer months. The mountain slopes provided richer grazing pastures for their cattle and sheep, and the temporary cottages of the Deserted Village became their seasonal homes. Imagine the scene: families herding their animals up the mountain, setting up temporary residence, and engaging in the hard work of subsistence farming, milking, and cheese-making, all against the backdrop of the wild Atlantic and the towering Slievemore. It was a rhythm of life dictated by the seasons, a practical adaptation to the challenging environment.

Life in Slievemore was undoubtedly simple, even austere. These were not homes built for comfort or luxury, but for utility and shelter from the elements. The thick stone

walls offered insulation, and the small windows minimized heat loss. Smoke holes in the roofs, now open to the sky, would have once vented the peat fires that provided warmth and a means for cooking. Despite the apparent hardship, there was likely a strong sense of community, a shared endeavor in the face of nature's demands. Neighbors would have relied on each other, sharing knowledge of the land, helping with the animals, and perhaps even gathering for storytelling on long summer evenings as the light faded over the ocean.

However, the seasonal migrations to Slievemore began to wane, and the village eventually fell silent. The primary catalyst for its final abandonment was the Great Famine, which devastated Ireland between 1845 and 1852. Achill Island, like many remote rural areas, was particularly vulnerable to the potato blight. The staple food source for countless families vanished, leading to widespread starvation, disease, and mass emigration. While the booley system had allowed for some flexibility in land use, it could not withstand the cataclysmic impact of the Famine. Families were forced to leave their ancestral lands, either perishing or seeking new lives across the Atlantic or in distant corners of Britain.

The last families to use the Slievemore cottages for booley purposes finally ceased their annual migration in the 1940s, bringing an end to a centuries-old tradition. Today, the village stands as a powerful monument to their struggle and perseverance. There's a palpable sense of loss and memory that hangs in the air, an invitation to reflect on the lives lived within these now-roofless walls. It's a place that speaks not of grand battles or famous figures, but of the everyday heroism of ordinary people striving to survive and thrive in a demanding landscape.

Beyond the stark historical facts, Slievemore also carries its own share of local legends and folklore. Given its remote location and the palpable sense of history, it's perhaps unsurprising that tales of the supernatural are woven into the very fabric of the village. One common belief surrounding deserted places in Ireland is their connection to the *Aos Sí*, the fairy folk. It's said that when humans abandon a dwelling, these ancient beings sometimes take up residence, making the site their own. While there are no specific, widely known legends of mischievous fairies within Slievemore itself, the quiet solitude of the place, particularly on a misty day, certainly lends itself to such imaginings.

More grounded, yet equally compelling, are the tales of the people themselves—the "key figures" of Slievemore's past. While no single "hero" or "artist" is famously attributed to the village in the conventional sense, the collective spirit of the families who practiced booleying here is a testament to their enduring strength and connection to the land. They were, in essence, storytellers themselves, their lives etched into the stones and the landscape, their unwritten narratives passed down through generations of islanders. Each cottage represents a family, a lineage, a history of struggle and survival that defines the character of Achill.

The traditions and crafts of Slievemore were, by necessity, tied to the land and the simple requirements of daily life. Farming was paramount, and the seasonal movement of livestock was a tradition passed down through countless generations. While specific crafts like weaving or pottery might not have been central to the booley system itself, they would have been practiced by the islanders in their permanent homes. The enduring craft here was perhaps the very act of survival, the ingenuity of living in harmony with nature's demands, and the shared labor that sustained the community. The building of the cottages themselves, using local stone without mortar, is a testament to an ancient, practical craft that understood the nuances of the environment.

Signature foods unique to this particular booley practice would have centered around the produce of their livestock during the summer months. Fresh milk, butter, and cheese would have been central to their diet, supplemented by whatever could be grown in small plots or gathered from the surrounding land. Imagine the simple, wholesome meals prepared over open fires, the rich taste of fresh dairy products enjoyed by families after a day of tending to their animals on the mountain slopes. These were not elaborate feasts, but sustenance, deeply connected to the rhythm of the land and the bounty it offered, even in challenging conditions.

While Slievemore itself doesn't host annual festivals in the traditional sense, its deserted state makes it a site of pilgrimage for those seeking to understand Ireland's past. Memorials and occasional gatherings do take place, especially during heritage weeks, where local historians and descendants of the Slievemore families share their knowledge and memories. The community spirit that once animated the booley system is now channeled into preserving the site and ensuring its stories are not forgotten. These gatherings, though perhaps somber, embody a deep reverence for the past and a commitment to remembrance.

For visitors, experiencing Slievemore is a uniquely immersive journey. The village is easily accessible by car, with a small car park marking the beginning of the walking path. There are no grand entrance gates or ticket booths, simply an open invitation to wander among the ruins. The best way to experience Slievemore is on foot, taking your time to stroll through the rows of cottages, stepping inside their roofless confines, and imagining the lives that once unfolded within. Allow the silence to envelop you, broken only by the bleating of sheep or the distant cry of a curlew.

Respectful interaction with the site is crucial. While there are no permanent residents to greet, treating the ruins with care and leaving no trace ensures that future visitors can share in the profound experience. The ideal time to visit is during the spring or autumn, when the light is often softer, casting long shadows that accentuate the melancholic beauty of the village. Summer can be busy, and the often-harsh winter weather can make exploration challenging, though it certainly amplifies the sense of

wild isolation.

A visit to Slievemore offers more than just a historical excursion; it's an emotional one. It's a reminder of how intertwined human lives are with the land, how quickly circumstances can change, and how powerful the echoes of the past can be. Standing amidst the remains of a once-vibrant community, one cannot help but feel a deep connection to those who came before, a silent acknowledgement of their enduring spirit on this remote, yet utterly captivating, corner of the Emerald Isle. It is a place that truly allows the visitor to peel back the layers of time and connect with the raw, authentic heart of Irish rural life, long after the last families made their descent from the mountain slopes.

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