

**TOMORROW**  
**ROSITA BOLAND**  
 reports from Cúirt,  
 in Galway



# Four of the best places to live in Ireland

Last week, we published readers' accounts of Clondalkin, Kinsale and Mullagh. This week it's the turn of Killaloe/Ballina, Dundalk, Ballyunion and Howth. 'The Irish Times' is on the hunt for Ireland's nicest neck of the woods and has invited the public to nominate their favourites

**T**HE IRISH TIMES Best Place to Live in Ireland competition – our search for the country's most habitable habitat – is now entering its fourth week. We invited people who believe they've found that place to nominate it, and to date there have been more than 250 entries, representing 29 counties. At time of going to press, counties Derry, Fermanagh and Offaly have yet to enter.

You can read all the entries at [irishtimes.com/bestplace](http://irishtimes.com/bestplace). There, people have been expressing their love and enthusiasm for the places they live in or, in some cases, miss. They include towns, cities, suburbs, villages, remote locations and tiny communities.

The reasons given for their nominations range from the great neighbours, the sense of community, the social life, the welcoming a newcomer has received, the beautiful scenery and the facilities.

If you're living in your ideal place, and believe it could win, go to [irishtimes.com/bestplace](http://irishtimes.com/bestplace) and tell us in no more than 500 words why it's the best place to live in Ireland.

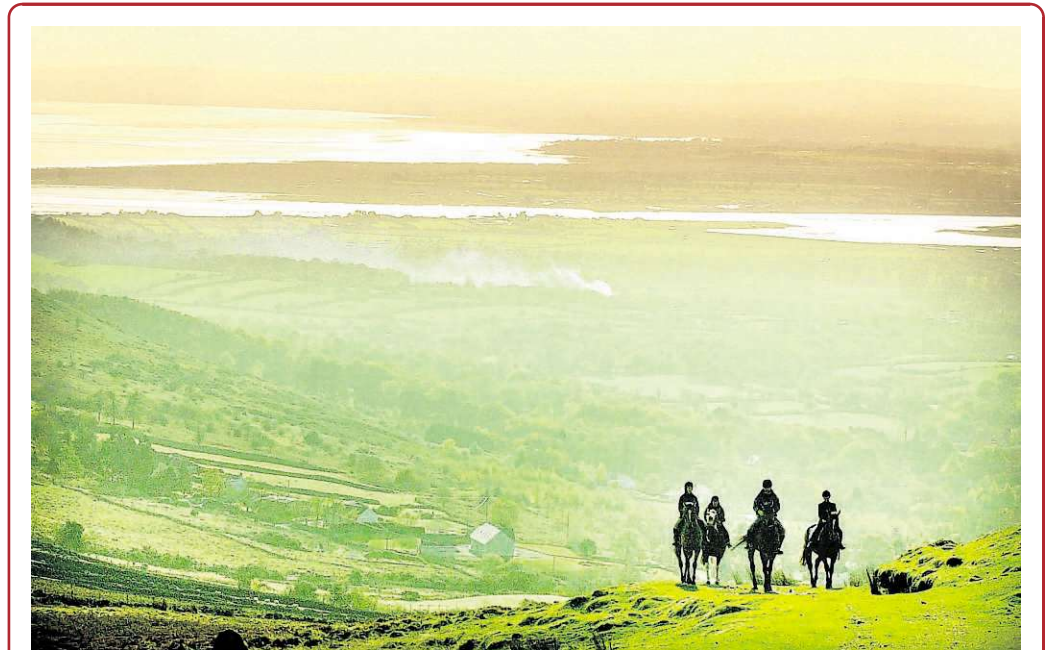
To help us form a clearer picture, the website has questions about everything from the local schools to the local environment. But don't be put off if you live in an area that doesn't meet all these criteria. Ultimately, it's the strength of your pitch that will count with the judges.

They are the psychologist Maureen Gaffney, the architect Paul Keogh, Gerard O'Neill of Amárach Research and the 'Irish Times' journalists Edel Morgan and Frank McDonald, Environment Editor.

You have until May 31st to enter, but the sooner you pitch, the better. All nominations are open for comment on the website, so once a nomination is published, your fellow residents can add to the entry, pointing out positive points that the original author may have missed, allowing for a collaborative cross-community effort.

We will announce the longlist, shortlist and winner during June.

'The Irish Times' will mark the accolade with a plaque, a short film for [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com) and a story in the newspaper. There will also be a prize-giving event in the winning place later in the summer.



## Emily Ross: Killaloe/Ballina, Cos Clare & Tipperary

WE DEPARTED Dublin, turned our backs on a city we loved. The city felt bitter, choking on negative equity, job losses and failure. Our friends were leaving en masse for other promised lands. Hearts in our mouths, children crying in the back seat, we travelled west, in search of something better.

Eighteen months after coming to Killaloe, my family has embraced this little town, and it has embraced us. In the mornings the mist on the mountains peels away to reveal astounding views. The people who have gathered to this place are extraordinary, remarkable. They are kind. The mountain road to our house has a grassy hump in the middle.

Steeped in history, it was the birthplace of Brian Boru, and his legacy remains, in the place names and the stones. There is coffee to rival any cafe in Rome, gourmet food, art and friends. Lots and lots of friends.

There is music everywhere. A gospel choir, a community orchestra, both open to all, free, voluntary.

There are surprises. An Indian festival of lights, lanterns sailing into the night sky, full of hope, people cheering. Hundreds of women in pink T-shirts walking up steep hills, hand in hand with sisters, mothers and cancer survivors. Ukulele nights. Art exhibitions, walking trails, mountain running, triathlons, bungee jumps, dragon-boat racing, rowing regattas, farmers' markets.

Bear hunts. Story telling. Piglet racing! In the distance, goose-fleshed teenagers are jumping into the lake; I can hear their yells of enthusiasm from my desk.

Last night we gathered in an old stone-walled pub and sang our lungs out to a Black Eyed Peas cover, the trad version. Last month, Jack L sang in the cathedral for 100 people. Then he came for coffee with the audience. Rugby fans ignore Keith Wood on another epic run around the lake.

Both tidy towns committees bustle on by, already planning next year. Ballina and Killaloe are inseparable, but cranky at times, rivalry played out passionately on GAA and soccer pitches year in, year out.

It's time to go. More friends are making the short trip from Dublin to stay the weekend. I have never done so much laundry. Visiting our house has become the new mini-break.

In Dublin, I had work, a commute and home. The move has replaced the lifetime spent trapped in traffic with something wondrous. The chance to rediscover the things we love. There are no parking meters. The only traffic jam is the one crossing the narrow bridge, where the view is a privilege.

My children have freckles, and I have a life I never imagined. We are happy. I love this place inside out, from the tips of my fingers and to the ends of my toes, and 500 words is not enough to explain why.



## Michelle Dolan: Dundalk and environs, Co Louth

I WANT TO begin by stating that I would have empathically argued against nominating Dundalk as the best place to live even three short years ago. I moved to a rural area, almost three miles from the town, as a new bride almost 15 years ago, and for 12 of those years I was unsettled, disconnected and disparaging of Dundalk, happily mocking the local accent and perpetuating its "bandit" credentials to those with whom I worked in Northern Ireland.

I think, if I'm honest, that my dislike grew from feeling so anonymous when I visited the town. Infrequent visits and its larger population meant I visited the centre to shop and didn't meet anyone I knew. I complained that the locals were clannish and cold, but I know I too failed to really try to engage regularly with the town, its culture or its people.

So why do I feel so differently now, having held such a strong antipathy for so long? My epiphany came in the form of a bicycle, a Dawes hybrid to be exact. I had been surrounded by bikes and skinny cyclists for years, having married into a hard-core cycle-racing family, but it was only on my decision to take up cycling in 2009 that Dundalk's heart and her true beauty were revealed to me.

In the early days of my growing friendship with the town I was grateful for the relatively flat roads that converge on the town from Newry, Armagh, Monaghan, Ardee and Carrickmacross. My favourite soon became the flat, wide stretch to Castlebellingham where a rookie biker can measure her progress by how close she can get to the site of the old forge before she suffers a stitch, and later her success on reaching the 20km mark at Dunleer roundabout before heading back, piston-legged, being chased by a pack of braying local racers in the scratch group.

So cycling opened my eyes to some of the physical advantages of living along the flat east coast compared with the relentless drumlins of Monaghan, but the small crack in my hardened attitude has widened ever since.

I love watching the sun rise over Slieve Foy as I drive north every morning, especially when it's frosty and the mountain seems to have marched closer over night. I love the strong form of Annaverna and her cairn as she looks both north and south and observes the new-found peace and growing tolerance of the people who are finally learning to share the ancient land around her feet. I love the quirky waitresses and service at Strandfield House Cafe in Ballymascanlon and the seafood chowder in Fitzpatrick's in Jenkinstown.

But most of all I love the newly refurbished square in the town centre that echoes a proud Celtic past and a confident European future.

Finally, I love that my small children squeal with delight when we visit the town as they run playfully and happily through the fountains in the town that we all now love to call home.

## Joanna McCarthy: Ballyunion, Co Kerry

**B**reathtaking beauty of the rugged cliffs, amazing sandy beaches and crystal clear, crashing Atlantic breakers.

**A**ir that has the worthy credit of "Champagne" and fields as green as emeralds themselves.

**L**ocals always welcoming and friendly, with a community spirit that warms the Atlantic breezes.

**L**obster, bass, chowder and periwinkle, sea food to suit all tastes.

**Y**oung, old and those just plain in the middle, there is something for everyone in Ballyb.

**B**irds, dolphins, whales, and wildlife, on land, sea and air for you to discover.

**U**nderground tunnels, castles and stately ruins encouraging explorers and the adventurers to take the present to the past.

**N**ightlife, fabulous food, great places to stay. The craic is mighty.

**I**nspiring, inspiring, interesting, irresistible, always infatuating.

**O**ld Course, Cashen Course, links golf at its absolute best.

**N**o better place to live, no better place to visit, and no matter where you go, Ballyunion is always in your heart.



## Patsey Murphy: Howth, Co Dublin

"The Bronx? No thonx," said Ogden Nash, succinctly.

If you look at William Orpen's painting above, *A Breezy Day in Howth* (1913), you are looking at the view from my window, the landscape unchanged except for the endlessly changing skies and seascape.

You are looking south over Dublin Bay as far as Wicklow Head, with Dún Laoghaire, Dalkey Island, Bray Head, Great Sugar Loaf and a graceful blue line of mountains across the sparkling sea. Or you are looking out at a barely visible back garden that drops suddenly down the cliffs, shrouded in fog or fleeting mist; or at a stormy sea, with high winds rattling the windows.

At night, the beam of the Baily Lighthouse sweeps across the

cliffs and the lights of the southside twinkle in the distance, with ships and ferries chugging their way towards Dún Laoghaire or Dublin ports. In summer, yachts swoop past or occasionally drop anchor in Doldrum Bay, and lobster fishermen putter close to shore to check their traps.

We're steeped. Just 15km from the city, but far enough from city lights for the stars to dazzle from a country-black sky. Even on successive grey days, there is a rim of radiance. The view is all-embracing, alert to changing weather patterns, seasons, wind and light.

There might be a kestrel hovering, a pair of ravens dive-bombing. Porpoises, occasionally. A pheasant struts around the garden while rooks,

black-headed crows, wood pigeons and magpies chasten the cats, and songbirds feed from the relative safety of the crooked ash tree.

There was once a badger sett. And who wouldn't want to live on a peninsula that is home to the Bog of the Frogs?

I've been a Howth head for 30 years, a blow-in from the Bronx. It's more parochial village than suburb, with generations of families who rarely leave the peninsula, so my alien status is assured for years to come, although the natives have been kind and our neighbours stellar.

Two Howth-born fans conjure up some advantages: "It's the kind of place where you can go to the shop in bare feet and no one looks twice at you." "I think of going to the jumps on a sunny day, or lying in the spongy grass on the cliffs." Just like Molly Bloom.

"Every time I'm home I think, why would you want to be anywhere else . . ." adding a wry, forlorn " . . . property prices aside."

We bought the house, preboom, from Dick and Doreen Kelly, who generously introduced us to neighbours, to anchor us. It was a fine beginning.

The late sculptor Eamonn O'Doherty, wearing his architect's hat, gave us a kitchen opening out to the garden, and, years later, Denis Looby designed an ingenious cantilevered deck hanging out over the cliff. Good times, more than not, growing into "this felt sense of life".

Attractions? Picnics on Ireland's Eye, stomps through the rhododendron forest on the castle grounds, the cliff walk lined with

gorse and heather, clinking boats and trawlers on the pier, the fishmongers' banter at Nicky's Plaice, coffee at Ivan's, jazz and supper at the House, exotic foodstuffs from the Country Kitchen, kind ministrations from the local chemist, and patience at the post office. Everybody knows your name. It's that kind of place, even for commuters Darting in and out.

The boom divested us of a brave independent bookshop and a petrol station and left behind a few sorry buildings, but nothing beyond redemption (apart, perhaps, from the burial grounds at St Mary's Abbey, where coffins were left exposed by last year's floods – that was grim). But we've still got the ancient portal dolmen, Aileen's Grave, with views north as far as the Mourne.

There's the Howth Singing Circle and a local pipe band, a library, playground, good public transport (but killer taxi fares) and plenty of community support services. Cyclists, bikers and joggers circle the hill, kitesurfers and posh dog walkers prowl along Claremont beach.

There's the odd celebrity to pretend to ignore. The market brings crowds every weekend, when the cliff walk goes single file in a babble of European languages.

Some city friends think we live in the boon docks, but they are easily seduced once they get here. What great fortune to have landed in Howth, to have worked and gadded about town, and ways to come home to the lighthouse.

Where else would you be, Mr Nash?

## Do you live in the best place in Ireland?

*The Irish Times* is on the hunt for Ireland's nicest neck of the woods, and invites you to nominate your favourite. It can be a town, suburb, village or remote spot – anywhere that, despite all the problems our little nation is going through, you feel supremely lucky to have landed in.

### THE PRIZE

The winning "place" will be announced in early summer. *The Irish Times* will mark the accolade with a plaque for the locality, publish a story on the winning place, and make a short film about it for [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com).

### THE JUDGES

The best place will be chosen by a

panel of five judges: Maureen Gaffney, adjunct professor of psychology and society at UCD; the architect Paul Keogh; the statistician Gerard O'Neill of Amárach Research; *Irish Times* Environment Editor Frank McDonald; and *Irish Times* journalist Edel Morgan.

### YOU

But the process starts with you. We want you to tell us in no more than 500 words why you think your area is the best place to live in Ireland. Pitch, argue, convince and gush, and explain what gives your neighbourhood the X factor.

See [irishtimes.com/bestplace](http://irishtimes.com/bestplace) for details on how to submit your entry.

