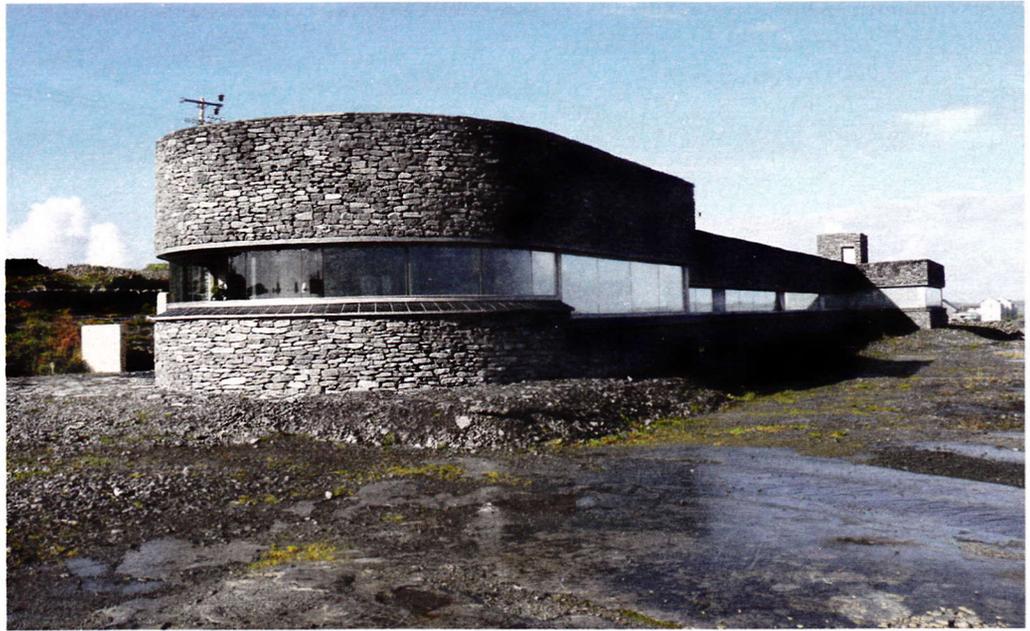


Can we put Maryann in row four, which makes 33, and Seán in row five, which makes 27,' says the woman organising our flight at the tiny Connemara airstrip in the west of Ireland. She is peering into the compact cabin of the Aer Arann aircraft, weighing up the balance of the plane with the pilot, and moving the complement of nine passengers around like jigsaw pieces until she is happy with the fit. The regulars, naturally enough, are referred to by their first names; their individual weights remain more discreet.

Minutes later, we are flying out across the silvery waters of Galway Bay to Inis Meáin (Inishmaan, in English), one of the three long, low, isolated Aran Islands anchored 10 miles out to sea. Depicted by Seamus Heaney as 'three stepping stones out of Europe', the islands' extreme geographical location, barren and bleakly beautiful landscapes, and importance as timeless strongholds of Irish language and culture have given these modest specks of grey, bare, weather-beaten rock an enduring and otherworldly appeal. These



A rock and a soft place

On one of the three bleakly beautiful and sparsely populated Aran Islands, Philip Watson comes across an exclusive and indulgent outpost for seekers of tranquillity

are islands of high, labyrinthine drystone walls elaborately constructed to provide small parcels of land that shelter stock and crop. Built like lace so that blustery Atlantic winds can blow straight through them, each imposing limestone wall has its own distinctive series of shapes and patterns, said, like the weave of Aran jumpers, to allow for easy identification of its maker.

They are also isles of winding lanes, storm beaches, sea cliffs, shipwrecks, a light both flinty and reflective and, most impressively, broad and glistening grey limestone terraces and pavements divided by narrow deep fissures that, in spring, sprout remarkable rare and hardy flowering plants. On the largest island, Inis Mór, there is Dun Aengus, an astonishing semicircular prehistoric fort perched precipitously on a 300ft sheer cliff and once described as 'the most magnificent barbaric monument in Europe'.

The reason we are heading for Inis Meáin, however, is decidedly more contemporary and sybaritic. The 'silent island' is only three miles across and supports no more than 150 inhabitants, yet this most tranquil and least visited of the Aran

Islands is home to an extraordinary, exclusive and unexpectedly in-demand design hotel.

Opened in 2008, Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites is a peaceful, private and wonderful remove from the world. Clad in local limestone, the modern building draws inspiration from, and blends seamlessly into, the singular landscape. It houses five large, understated open-plan suites dominated by 30ft-long windows that flood the rooms with light and frame spectacular views of the island and Galway Bay. Televisions, radios and phone lines are eschewed in favour of outside sitting areas, complimentary bicycles and fishing rods – and long, restorative walks.

The fine restaurant serves dishes that use ingredients mainly sourced on the island: the lobster and crab are caught by local fishermen from currachs, the traditional island fishing boats; much of the meat, vegetables, fruit, herbs and salads is home-grown by the hotel's talented, experienced and likeable owners, chef Ruairi de Blacam, who was born on the island, and his wife Marie-Thérèse, who looks after front-of-house. The quality of the accommodation, food and personal

service at the hotel is winning and world-class.

Close to home they may be, but the Aran Islands seem gloriously and spectacularly different, like visiting some older, less adulterated, more intense version of Ireland. On Inis Meáin we were introduced to one old man who had left the island only a couple of times and never spoken English. A journey there is like travelling from modern, bankrupt, bail-out Ireland to ancient Eire, or to Erin perhaps, a more poetic and romantic personification, a preserved and unbroken place that has long attracted writers, scholars, sentimentalists, musicians, folklorists, storytellers, priests, pilgrims – and a few adventurous and inquisitive tourists.

'The appeal of Inis Meáin is that it's a complete escape,' Marie-Thérèse de Blacam says. 'There are very few decisions to be made while you're on the island; it's simply the special beauty of the landscape and the sea.'

Suites cost €250 per night including breakfast; minimum stay two nights. Open April 15 to October 23 (00 353 86 826 6026; inismean.com). For general travel information, visit discoverireland.com or call 0800-039 7000

A journey there is like travelling from modern, bankrupt, bail-out Ireland to ancient Eire

Above opened in 2008, Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites is clad in local limestone.

Left the island's harsh landscape

