ON THE WATER

Athlone’s beauty is intrinsically linked to the water that surrounds it, from the fast-flowing Shannon to the sun-dappled shores of Lough Ree. Cruising this part of the island is all about long, lazy days stopping off at lakeside restaurants, drifting past mystical islands where Vikings defended forts and monks founded monasteries.

How ever you choose to explore this majestic part of the island of Ireland, getting out on the water is essential. A great bet for a relaxed day trip along the Shannon is the River Run Pleasure Cruiser, with a comfortable interior that’s enclosed, heated and even has a bar!

For something a little special, book in for a trip with Viking Tours Ireland. This gorgeous replica Viking ship follows the route the Vikings took from Athlone to Clonmacnoise back in the 9th century. It’s a magical, evocative and memorable way to arrive at this monastic site, and Captain Michael McDonnell will keep you entertained with his knowledge, enthusiasm and passion for the area.

Another good option is Barracuda Boat Trips, which offers both a slow cruise and a high-adrenaline, high-speed powerboat experience, as well as fishing trips, evening river taxis and dining cruises.

In summer, the area springs into action with lots of watersports-related fun including kayaking, stand-up paddle boarding and pedal boats, all of which can be rented from Baysports on Lough Ree. Baysports also plays on the fun in the warmer months with a huge waterpark boasting the highest floating waterslide in the world.

FIVE GREAT THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN ATHLONE AND LOUGHREE

1. Athlone Castle
Athlone Castle has a formidable presence, with a dramatic location overlooking the River Shannon. Step inside and you’ll unearth the fort’s extraordinary history that reaches back to the 12th century and is traced through interactive exhibits and a 360-degree film. It’s a place that holds your attention from start to finish, with a few fun elements thrown in along the way. [athlonecastle.ie]

2. Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park
Just by the village of Moate, this excellent park contains, among other things, a heritage museum, pet farm, walking trails, tea rooms and playground. In the amenity park, you’ll find lovely walks through wetland and parkland, where wild birds shelter in the reeds and artistic creations emerge from the grasses. The heritage park, meanwhile, takes you on a journey through Ireland’s past, from ancient forts to traditional crafts and trades. The park is also accessible along the Old Rail Trail by bike from Athlone. [dunns.ie]

3. Clonmacnoise
The extraordinary beauty of the setting is the first thing that strikes you about Clonmacnoise. Blanched in emerald green and overlooking the grey-blue waters of the Shannon, this incredible monastic site was founded by St Ciaran in the 6th century and has endured Viking attacks, plague and raids in the centuries since. [heritageireland.ie]

4. Ballinahown Craft Village
Sitting on the Offaly/Westmeath border, the Ballinahown Craft Village is a creative haven with the Ballinahown Design Shop and Celtic Roots Art Studio and bog oak Écomusée, which tells the remarkable 3,000-year-old story of ancient bog wood. Drop into the pleasant tea rooms just above the Design Gallery for a lovely cake and coffee. [ballinahownartist.com]

5. Out and about
Under an hour’s drive from Athlone are some of Ireland’s top sights and family activity parks, making it an excellent base for exploring. Check out Belvedere House, with summertime events, a fairy garden and woodland walks (drive time around 40 minutes) and Birr Castle, with an amazing science centre and beautiful gardens to explore (around 45 minutes). A great bet closer to town (around 10 minutes) is Glendeer Pet Farm with goats, sheep, emu, donkeys, llama, parrots and wallabies.

THE ANCIENT WATERS OF ATHLONE & LOUGHREE

From centuries-old pubs to a booming restaurant scene, Athlone is a bustling, vibrant destination surrounded by some of the most spectacular natural landscapes in Ireland...
WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

Athlone is a town layered with little surprises. Wander around the left bank or stroll the leafy paths beside the River Shannon, and you quickly get the sense of a place rooted both to its past and to the waters that flow through it. Here, beneath the calm, echo centuries of sieges and raids, battles and attacks...

It’s this feeling of history being by your side that gives Athlone its appeal: old town walls sit next to modern architecture, new craft beers are served in ancient pubs; and a 12th century castle stands guard over a gleaming contemporary art gallery. In the vibrant left bank of town, medieval history forms a backdrop to streets lined with everything from traditional pubs to a super little Lebanese restaurant called Al Mezza. It’s pure charm.

As you’d expect from such a buzzy hub, Athlone keeps you entertained with brilliant things to do right on its doorstep, but beyond town you’ll find some of the most picturesque liquid landscapes in Ireland... A short hop north and the vast River Shannon opens into the beautiful waters of Lough Ree, a natural playground that’s as rich in wildlife as it is in history. Here, secret islands once harboured Vikings and holy men while today the lough is a magnet for pleasure-seekers from kayakers to foodies, with lovely places to eat including the waterside restaurant at Wineport Lodge, and the traditional surrounds of Grogan’s of Glasson. Head south and you’re into the majesty of the mid-Shannon, with its rippling blue waters, pale green reeds and the spellbinding 6th century monastic site of Clonmacnoise.

FIVE GREAT PLACES TO EAT AND DRINK IN ATHLONE AND LOUGH Ree

1. Fine Wine and Food Co
   Athlone
   You’ll be greeted with big smiles and a waft of fragrant coffee in this gorgeous little foodie enclave on Church Street. It’s tiny, yes, but it’s a little pocket of pleasurable experience, with super-friendly staff who welcome you like a friend. facebook.com/fwawfoodco

2. Thyme Restaurant
   Athlone
   Serving creative modern Irish dishes, you’ll be planning your second visit to Thyme before you’ve even finished your first. This is a wonderful, local fine-dining favourite with a focus on provenance and seasonality, and has been a top choice in Athlone since it opened in 2007. Dishes are impeccably presented and full of flavour, with a great value evening menu that keeps the dining room busy right through the week. thymerestaurant.ie

3. The Villager
   Glasson
   This friendly old pub makes a nice place to enjoy a casual lunch, when soft light floods through the windows into the stone-walled interior. Enjoy classics such as roast beef and BLT, or opt for more refined dishes within the smart dining room in the evenings. thevillager.ie

4. The Corner House Bistro
   Athlone
   Not many restaurants give teenagers a nod when thinking about menus, but Corner House is that kind of place. Children and teens are catered for with specific menus while adults will be kept happy with a stream of tasty dishes from hot breakfasts to excellent lunch options. cornerhousebistro.ie

5. Sean’s Bar
   Athlone
   The history of this place wraps itself around you, from the slope of the sawdust-flecked floors to the low arched beams. Dating back to 900AD, and with a claim to be the oldest pub in Ireland, Sean’s is one of those rare places that really does live up to the hype. seanbar.ie

THE ISLANDS OF LOUGH Ree

Strange and fantastical creatures, plundering Vikings and a literary icon – look beyond the surface of Lough Ree and you never know what you might find...

Gaze out across Lough Ree and the islands seem to rise from the rippling waters like apparitions. Thousands of years of folklore and legend, history and myth, swirl together around these grassy enclaves, and, at times, it feels like all of the area’s past is contained within them. Take Inchcleraun (Quaker Island) for starters – this quiet wilderness was a retreat for Quaker Meave, a haven for St Diumrid who founded a monastic site here in 540AD, and was attacked and plundered repeatedly from the 9th to the 14th centuries. It’s not the only island that harbours a turbulent history.

Walk down to the shores at Coosan Point and you can see Hazel Island in the distance. Back in the 19th century, a massive hoard of Viking gold was found here, while the island was also a lure for St Ciaran, who later founded a monastic site at Clonmacnoise.

It’s easy to see why saints and scholars, adventurers and attackers were drawn to these islands over the years, and they add a unique beauty to the waters of Lough Ree.