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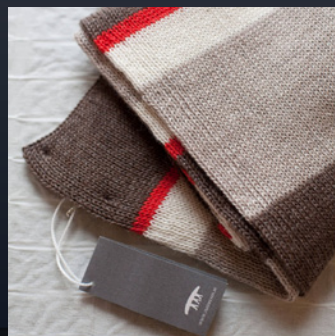
A stylish knitwear boutique based where its heritage-rich clothes are made – the Aran Islands.

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A chic knitwear outpost in the Aran Islands

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Deirdre McQuillan

It's a far-flung spot for a spending spree, but this knitwear boutique on Inis Meain, one of the three Aran Islands at the mouth of Galway Bay in Ireland, is in a league of its own, being the most westerly and remote shopping destination in Europe.

Access to Inis Meain, by ferry from Rossaveal on the Connemara coast, or in a twin-engined Islander from the tiny nearby airport at Inverin, adds to the fun of getting to this, the least-visited and most beautiful of the islands, which the poet Seamus Heaney once called the "three stepping stones out of Europe".

The views of the Atlantic and the island's stony landscape from this cool, modern shop, with its white-washed walls and floor-to-ceiling windows, are as mesmerising as the sophistication of its knitwear. The building adjoins the factory, where the knits are made and exported all over the world - to Bergdorf Goodman and Barneys in New York, Isetan in Tokyo, Amin Kader in Paris and Grey Flannel in London.

Moss-stitch hoodies (€250), cute vests (€120) or lightweight, chunky-looking cardigans (€250) in alpaca, merino and cashmere are modern takes on traditional fishermen's knits and vie for attention with supersoft shawls (€100), hand-woven ties (from €25) and other accessories. With the exception of current collections, much of the knitwear is end-of-season samples at a fraction of the usual retail price — €160 to €180 for sweaters in baby alpaca and silk, to jackets, pullovers and cardigans from €250 and coats from €350 to €400.

Anchored in a long tradition of hand-knitting, Inis Meain has grown from humble beginnings, making traditional sweaters for tourists, into a successful business producing mostly men's but also women's knits, hand-loomed on state-of-the-art Japanese machinery, using top-quality Irish, Italian and South American yarns. Collections that rework familiar classics into luxury-modern streetwear are shown in Florence and Paris annually. The shop also stocks its new ready-to-wear men's shirts, jackets (from €75) and trousers, made in Italy in Irish tweed and linen.

Tarlach de Blacam and his wife Aine, an islander, started the business in 1976, drawing on the island's long heritage. They delve into the huge repertoire of local hand-knitters, sometimes using old photographs of island knits for inspiration, reproducing them in some cases. Old pictures from island families have pride of place in the shop, as does J M Synge memorabilia - he immortalised the island in his writings.

Visitors can also stay in the newly built suites with heart-stopping views of Galway Bay, dining on superb food prepared with local ingredients by the owners' son, award-winning chef Ruairi de Blacam and his wife Marie-Therese.