

TRIP 2: IRELAND

I feel I should explain my somewhat eccentric itinerary around Ireland. I was ‘mopping up’ places I had not visited on previous holidays. Those trips took in Southern Donegal, the Mayo coast, Connemara and Kerry. This time I wanted to visit Clare, Wicklow, the tombs of Newgrange, the Mourne Mountains, Northern Donegal and the Antrim coast. All of this was possible taking advantage of the excellent Bus Eireann and Ulster Bus services, plus a few private bus services to reach the remoter places. I also recommend the extensive network of independent hostels throughout the Republic and Ulster, many of them in outstanding locations. Where there was no hostel, it was always easy to find a b&b in May and June.

13: Castle Point, near Kilkee, County Clare

If you’re visiting Clare without a car, please don’t miss out the Loop Scenic Drive from Kilkee to Loop Head and back. It’s about 55k and there’s no bus service. So it’s a long walk but it’s ideal for a bike ride (you can hire one at Williams hardware store at the south end of Kilkee). There are places to stay at the end of the peninsula.

The quick road is the R487 down the middle of the peninsula; if you take the road along the south coast, you can enjoy views over the mouth of the River Shannon and a fairly flat ride; if you take the northern coast road, it’s all up and down but you are rewarded by views of cliffs and bays. Loop Head itself is not that special but has a good view south towards Kerry Head and Brandon Mountain on the Dingle Peninsula.

The loveliest spot I found was further north at Castle Point, which is within easy walking distance of Kilkee (about 6k). Indeed, many walkers must come this way since I saw for the first time in my life a road sign announcing ‘Alert: Walkers on the Road’. There is a tarmac cliff path for the first 2k then you have to follow the road but that’s no hardship as it passes several great viewpoints.

After about 5k, ignore the first ‘no dumping’ sign by the road – you are looking for another ‘no dumping’ sign 1k further on, off to your right on a headland past a car parking area. This is Castle Point. At the sign, you can turn right for a view of a rocky inlet with tall cliffs where someone has applied for permission to erect a rope bridge and a zip line to attract some tourist dosh (May 2013).

Better, though, to turn left at the sign and look for a little ramp carpeted with pink sea thrift and tufts of grass. Walk down this, then over striated rocks that look like the bark of a pine tree to a tiny shale, beach-like ledge with several ponds round about, a distance of about 30m. Here is the spot, although you’ll have to move around a bit to see everything I describe. To the seaward side, it’s pretty windy, while the landward side is relatively still and out of the wind:

South-West – a lovely view towards Goleen Bay with a large rock shelf, almost like a beach, and smooth cliffs, shaped rather like a tortoise shell; off-shore, a large sea-stack, beyond which Loop Head juts out in the distance

South and South-East – the peninsula you have just descended backed by green hills with a solitary standing stone in the middle of a field

North-East – along the coast to two more sea-stacks and four headlands, culminating in Hag’s Head 30k away by the Cliffs of Moher

North – any distant view is obstructed by the rocks around you, which resemble mille feuilles pastry, only dark grey with flecks of golden lichen

North-West and West – just below you, rocks add their roaring surf to the general splendour; beyond, the Atlantic Ocean

It's a dramatic spot, even on a calm day; on a windy one, it might be impossibly wet and dangerous.

14: Cliffs of Moher, County Clare

Next stop was the famous Cliffs of Moher, which were not as dreadful an experience as Lonely Planet suggests. It is true that most of the visitors were foreign tourists, herded here by the coach-load, but I felt that the hoards are dealt with surprisingly well, without destroying the actual experience of the cliffs; also, that the chest-high slabs that form a fence are necessary to prevent fools approaching the unstable cliff edge and killing themselves; and lastly, that the Visitor Centre provides a welcome refuge, particularly on a wet and windy day – at least you don't have to pay to get in for your cup of tea, unlike the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre. I also found its design and immersion in the hillside rather attractive.

Don't worry, though, I haven't sold out to this tourist trap: my spot lies outside the 'Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience', in fact, a 40 minute stroll along the cliff path towards Doolin. To start with, the path is easy and protected by a fence but after a steep descent it becomes more open and closer to the cliff edge. This is actually part of the Burren Way (more about this later), which then takes you inland. At this point, turn left rather than right and continue past one headland to the second, where there is a lush patch of grass in a delightful hollow just before the cliff edge. However, please don't attempt this last stretch if you're not sure on your feet with a good head for heights as it is somewhat exposed and close to the cliff edge. Nor should it be attempted in wet or windy weather. With these provisos, the path is nowhere dangerous, otherwise I would not be recommending it.

As you approach the cliff edge on the second headland, these spectacular views really hit the spot:

South-West – all the way along the Cliffs of Moher to Hag's Head from a vantage point that is about half the height of the Cliffs so that they both tower above and drop down below you.; the view includes the much-photographed sea-stack beneath O'Brien's Tower, nicely silhouetted against the sea; below you is a sheer drop

West – the Atlantic

North-West – the hills of Connemara can just be made out; out to sea, the Aran Islands, floating like a mirage (on the day I was there) in the Atlantic Ocean

North – Galway Bay and the south coast of Galway

North-East – more cliffs and the coastline to the majestic landscape around Doolin, enhanced by Doonagore Castle, standing proud and aloof like the King piece in a chess set (Photo 1408); beyond Doolin, Slieve Elva rises up

East – green pastures and hills

South-East – the steep path you've just descended from the top of the Cliffs of Moher

South – a bay with jagged rocks beneath the cliffs you are sitting on

To complete the exhilaration I felt, the hollow was surrounded by pink and yellow flowers, while to the landward side a herd of cows wondered serenely what my yelps of delight were all about.



Photo 1914: Doonagore Castle with Doolin Point in the background (copyright: Liam Blake, www.realireland.ie)

I heartily recommend you finish the walk all the way to Doolin and that you do it in this direction for several reasons: it's more downhill, the prevailing wind is at your back and the better views will be in front of you. It's mainly a newly-created section of the Burren Way, which is rejoined soon after the detour I have just described. The path is mostly right by the coast with roiling rollers ravaging the sea-shore and waves vaporising into waterfalls on the rocks. This walk from Moher to Doolin is, in my opinion, one of the ten best short walks in Ireland (some of the others are featured later in this book, namely the walks around spots 18, 20, 22/23 and 27).

15: Doolin Point, County Clare

This is one for those of you who like a shower. The shower is optional but the grandeur of the crashing waves is unavoidable. The best start (on the advice of the owner of the excellent Aille River Hostel) is to follow the road past said hostel to the very end, by which time it has become a track, and turn right through a gate. A path leads to the shore, where there's a nice, peaceful view of the Aran Islands.

However, turn left here for something more dramatic. Pick your way through the Burren landscape, keeping close to the shore, until you reach the towers of sea-spray you can see not too far away. Choose your spot if you want a shower – or to run away from one – and then notice the extensive views all around:

North-West – the Aran Islands out to sea, with Connemara faint in the distance

North – Galway Bay and the south coast of Galway

North-East – the Burren coast with the noble head of Slieve Elva in charge

East and South-East – classic Burren terrain: tiered layers of limestone, interspersed with salt-sea-spray-loving pink thrift

South – more of the same rough coastline, ending in Doolin Point

South-West – the Cliffs of Moher, now quite distant, rounded off by Hag's Head

West – the Atlantic

If you go a little further round the coast, Doolin Pier and the cliffs beyond come into view, with Doonagore Castle strutting its stuff. Another attraction of this walk is that you can alternate, according to your whim, between rock-scrambling and picking your way through verdant nooks and crannies just inshore from the rocks. When you reach the actual Doolin Point, there's a stone shelter in case the weather cuts up rough and a perky little island that reminded me of a mini Dutchman's Cap (one of the Treshnish Isles off the coast of Mull - the one with the pointy pimple in the middle of a flat, circular brim). Out at the Point, the sea is simply crashing all around you - on three sides, anyway - and you have the option to go down onto a flat shelf for a real soaking. The return from the pier is straightforward, past the shops of Fisherstreet to Aille River Hostel.

16: Cathair an Ard Rios, the Burren, County Clare

The Burren is a wonderful and surprising area many miles across in the north of Clare. It's defined as a 'limestone karst area' or 'limestone pavement' but that doesn't give you the feel of an utterly unique landscape. There are limestone pavements elsewhere - in Malham, for instance, or near Penwyllt in the Brecon Beacons - but they are nothing compared to the Burren in variety and extent of landscapes.

There is a Burren Way, already mentioned, which winds its way through many parts of the Burren from near Lahinch via Doolin and Ballyvaughan to Corofin. I didn't do the whole thing, just the sections from Moher to Doolin and the one I am about to describe, so I can't vouch for the whole of the Way but what I did see was unforgettable. I started from Ballyvaughan on a lovely stretch of about 1k through shrub and pasture. Then the Way follows roads through Croagh and turns north up a valley to Feenagh, where the Burren Way turns left over the hill towards Fanore. Up to this point, the Burren is only visible in the distance and, after two hours of uphill walking, I wondered when I would get to walk on it.



Photo 1555: typical Burren landscape (copyright: John Hinde Ireland Ltd., www.johnhindestudios.com)

Then it appeared right by the track as I crested the hill and I was able to inspect it at close quarters. The first flower I saw was a purple orchid and then the grykes hit me: grykes are the spaces between the limestone slabs where smallish plants, flowers and mosses grow, protected from the elements. They harbour all sorts, my favourite being the blue gentian, now adopted as the symbol of the Burren. It's such a pleasure to walk on the limestone, stepping from slab to slab, marvelling at the curly-wurly shapes of the rocks and the varied flora in between (Photo 1555).

Further along this track, just over the hill, you come to some ruined buildings on your left, marked on the map as Cathair an Ard Rios. Apparently, it was once a chapel, or even a small monastic settlement, but later became a shebeen. As John Feehan says in 'The Secret Places of the Burren' (4), what a delightful place to have an illegal pub – or a monastery, for that matter. Whoever built it definitely hit the spot for it has the best views of the surrounding landscape:

North-West – right down the Caher Valley to Fanore Bridge and out over Galway Bay to the islands of Connemara; on a clear day the hills of Connemara can be seen

North and North-East – Burren hills

East – the road over to Feenagh

South-East – small Burren cliffs and a mass of limestone slabs waiting to be explored

South – two roads weave their way up the head of the Caher Valley

South-West – a ridge extends south towards Slieve Elva

West – the Burren Way continues up the opposite side of the valley before turning south-west just before the top of the ridge

All around is the vast expanse of the Burren, apparently bleak and barren from a distance, but surprisingly lively and fertile close up.

Cathair an Ard Rios itself is surrounded by a stone wall, inside which the grass and flora grow especially lush, making it a little oasis in the apparent bleakness of the Burren. There are mosses and ferns and lichens, as well as some of the Burren flowers. In the second building from the road, I made a small seat in an alcove in the far wall – see if it is still there.

After my lunch in this delightful spot, I descended into the Caher Valley but it didn't have the same magic for me. I'm sure the walk down to Fanore Bridge would be pleasant but I retraced my steps over the hill to Feenagh and turned left towards Cregg. After zig-zagging up Poulaneagh Hill for a while, I cut across towards the summit of Capanwalla and back to Ballyvaughan. There's lots more Burren to enjoy on this route but try to hit the summit and find a track that descends from there. I missed it and had quite a hard time scrambling through pathless tracts of scrub and boulder – the views over Galway Bay are magnificent, though.

17: St. Kevin's Cell, Glendalough, County Wicklow

Rules are made to be broken and this is such an exquisitely enchanting spot that I have to include it. It is part of the much-visited tourist trap of Glendalough National Heritage Site, thus breaking my rule about not including spots that are easy to reach by vehicle – you can drive or catch a bus right up to the Visitor Centre. However, I strongly recommend you leave your vehicle at the Visitor Centre and walk the kilometre from the monastic site past the Lower Lake to the Upper Lake. Once there, you can enjoy the open space at the foot of the lake and the view down the lake to the watershed at its head. You can also visit the Poulaneass waterfall. Then check out St. Kevin's Cell.

This is a spot on one of the walking trails where St. Kevin is supposed to have built a beehive cell for contemplation. There's not much of it left, just a few boulders on a rocky platform, but he certainly knew how to pick his spot. It's about five minutes stroll up a woodland path from the foot of the lake. I arrived there to find another chap sitting on a rock in meditation posture. I said, "You must be St. Kevin". He replied, "Yes, I am". So I said, "Well, I'm your first disciple". He replied, "I knew if I just sat here someone would come". Then I found another rock to sit on and we meditated together for a few minutes before he left. My rock was on the edge of the platform, overlooking the lake with budding tree-leaves all around and birds singing their hearts out and streams bubbling away in the distance. It was almost like actually being up in a tree and probably felt like being in heaven to St. Kevin.

Before you leave Glendalough, you may like to consider the longer walk (8k) along the north side of the Upper Lake and up the valley to the footbridge and back down the south side; it looks terrific but I didn't have the time to do it. You could also follow the Wicklow Way south-west through the woods or north-west towards Glenmacnass and my next spot, the mountain-top of Scarr. Be sure to pay your respects to the monastery site where the famously beautiful tower is trumped, in my opinion, by the even more beautiful St. Kevin's Kitchen (Photo 1348). Lastly, there's a pleasant walk to Laragh continuing on from the path to St. Saviour's Church. All of this will be clear from the excellent leaflet provided by the Wicklow Mountains National Park.



Photo 1348: the Glendalough site – Kevin's Kitchen to the left, tower to the right, Upper Lake just visible between the hills left centre (copyright: National Monuments Service, Dept. of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht)

18: Scarr, Wicklow Mountains

To compensate for the ease of reaching St. Kevin's Cell, here's a spot that took me two and a half hours to reach. Studying the map, I concluded that the top of Scarr must be the best

viewpoint in the Wicklow Mountains, a guess confirmed by a local hiker I met who had climbed all the peaks in the Wicklows.

Scarr rises up due north of Laragh. It's an easy climb but try not to do it, as I did, with a wind from the north. The climb itself is lovely, with progressively better views. Scarr is not as high as some of the other mountains around it but that actually improves the view because you are not looking down on everything else: I'm told, photographers get their best shots from half-way up mountains.

I was not the only one on the summit – a bird was there, too, tweeting away merrily and probably feasting on the abundance of flies congregating on the very top. It was early morning so the sun was in the east, lighting up the Irish Sea in a golden haze:

East – over the village of Roundwood and the Vartry Reservoir to the east coast and the Irish Sea

South-East – hills rolling away towards Wicklow Town on the coast and Rathdrum inland; for Ballykissangel fans, the Avoca Valley is visible in the distance

South – the hills get bigger as you approach Croghanmoira Mountain

South-West – over Glendalough to the highest Wicklow Mountain, Lugnaquilla

West – Tonelagee and the distinctive shape of Table Mountain, with the Wicklow Gap between them

North-West – the upper reaches of the River Glenmacnass, which rises on the slopes of Mullacleevaun; lesser mountains descend towards Sally Gap

North – Sally Gap cuts through mountains on either side

North-East – a valley leads to the two Sugarloaf Hills near the coast at Greystones

The landward side reminded me of some parts of Scotland with its conifer plantations, heather, gorse and bare, rounded mountain-tops. All the main Wicklow peaks are visible plus an unobstructed view of the coastal plain from Bray to Arklow.

Leaving the summit towards the north, the path is strewn with gorgeous striated rocks, flecked with silver and gold, glinting in the sunlight. Resist the temptation to take some home with you – they don't look the same on your desk. If you follow the ridge past Carrigeenshinnagh, there's another good viewpoint just off the path to the left at the place where most of Lough Dan comes into view. It's softer and slightly less windy than the summit and offers more detail of the Roundwood area, with Lough Dan surrounded by gorse and Great Sugarloaf peeking over a ridge.

When descending from here, don't head for the track to the left of the plantation – there's an officious notice on the gate from the landowner, quoting Government Acts and implying danger to life and limb if you enter his property. Instead, follow the main path to the right and either find your way through the plantation or follow the track heading south on the edge of the plantation. Both end up on roads which lead back to civilisation near Oldbridge.

I recommend climbing Scarr from Laragh because the ascent is gradual and you can see the top most of the way, whereas from Oldbridge it's steeper and you can't see the top until just before reaching it, with many 'false tops' to dishearten you on the way.

19: The Brandy Pad, Mourne Mountains, County Down

This is one way to cherry-pick the best of the Mourne Mountains in one walk – but it's a long one. Starting from the community-run Mourne Lodge Hostel in Atticall, a few miles north of Kilkeel, you can reach Silent Valley in about an hour. I assume it's called that because it went silent after it was flooded to provide water for Belfast. However, it's no

longer silent: there are lots of birds and other wildlife, even up by the first reservoir where there are few trees. When you reach the second reservoir (Ben Crom), don't try the path up the west side, marked on the map I used - it doesn't exist. What path there is peters out after about ten minutes of ever-decreasing progress. The path on the east side is the one to use.

Unfortunately, this path has been severely damaged by some disrespectful walking – people charging through, causing the path to erode and slip towards the reservoir, and making detours necessary to avoid making matters worse. I feel strongly about this so here comes the sermon.....

This damage is totally unnecessary if walkers will take the trouble to walk round the affected areas and to tread lightly (a walking pole helps here). In general, instead of choosing the quickest route, choose the route that will do the least damage.

I think all this stems from what I'm calling the 'macho' approach to walking: rush along as if there's some imaginary record to beat or some contest to win. I see people (mainly men) doing this. There seems no joy in it – just a schedule to keep to or a destination to reach. Instead, why not allow plenty of time and try to caress the earth with your feet as you pass by? Stop and stare, lie down in a hollow, bathe in a stream, take it easy. There is no hurry – your speeding is a habit created by our time-obsessed society. Slow down, there is nothing to prove. Here endeth the lesson.

Incidentally, I was glad I didn't struggle further along the west side: nasty stretches of scree awaited round the corner, which would have made progress even more difficult.

There's a lovely place to take a break at the head of Ben Crom Reservoir – plenty of others have had the same idea from the evidence of many fireplaces. A stream comes out of a little gorge and empties into the reservoir. You can see right down the reservoir with the top of Slieve Binnian just visible to the south and the jagged rocks of Slieve Meelbeg to the west.

The way ahead is up past the slabs of rock where a larger stream falls into the reservoir. I suggest you cross it just above the largest slab to enjoy the whorly shapes of the rock pools created by the cascading stream. Two pools are large enough for a swim. You are heading for Hare's Gap. Make for two large rocks, one flat and the other five-sided. From here, the Gap becomes obvious, as does the Brandy Pad, which has in fact been visible for some time. It cuts eastwards across the mountainside from Hare's Gap towards Slieve Donard and Dundrum Bay. It was, of course, a smugglers' route. More importantly, it's a lovely path, comparing favourably with Moses' Trod in the Lake District, also used for smuggling.

The most stunning stretch of the Pad comes by The Castles, a series of rock turrets just above the path on the slopes of Slieve Commedagh. At this point, the Pad traverses the head of the Annalong Valley and a magnificent view opens up:

South – the River Annalong squiggles through the green valley, which sweeps down majestically, passing through Annalong Wood on its way to the sea; the furthest mountain on the right is the other side of Slieve Binnian, on whose slopes a small lake sparkles – the whole scene epitomises the song: "Where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea".

West – the Brandy Pad rises to a pass between Slieve Commedagh and Slieve Beg
North-West and North – The Castles rear up, more like gnarled fingers than castle walls; above them, looms the steep southern flank of Slieve Commedagh

North-East – a path branches off and rises to the col between Slieve Commedagh and Slieve Donard, whose tops cannot be seen

East – the Brandy Pad continues around the southern slopes of Slieve Donard on its way to Bloody Bridge on the coast

South-East – the eastern side of Annalong Valley is dominated by Chimney Rock Mountain

From here, it would be a shame not to climb Slieve Donard, the highest of the Mournes, but it's a slog. It took me three-quarters of an hour from the col between it and Slieve Commedagh, zigzagging as if on a mountain road to mitigate the steepness (Photo 1580). The view from the top is extensive, taking in lots of coast, the other Mourne Mountains and much of Northern Ireland. However, the foreground is rather ugly rocky terrain and it is often very windy, so I preferred the Brandy Pad view.



Photo 1580: view of Mourne Mountains from the slope of Slieve Donard (copyright: John Hinde Ireland Ltd., www.johnhindestudios.com)

After returning to the col, you can turn north-east for Newcastle down a well-constructed stone path. Please note: when you reach the woods at the bottom, the way is not at all clear (no waymarking). My advice is to stick close to the Rosa River until you come to a park on the outskirts of Newcastle. The whole hike took me twelve hours, with lots of short breaks.

20: Tramore Beach and McSwyne's Gun Loop, Dunfanaghy, County Donegal

The peninsula to the west and north of Dunfanaghy is an absolute delight – the question is: how best to enjoy it? My guide-book recommended Tramore Beach, directly west of Dunfanaghy, so I headed in that direction. At the start of the path by a bridge, a notice-board informed me that I was entering a Nature Reserve and advertised McSwyne's Gun Loop, a walk extending beyond Tramore Beach to Pollaguill Bay and returning via a road. Liking a waymarked path as I do, I decided to follow it and then to continue round Horn Head, clockwise. This turned out to be a good decision, as you will see.

The path from the bridge is strewn with daisies and other wild flowers and heads into the sand dunes. It is also strewn with lots of black slugs and little snails with spiral shells in various hues, which it was quite hard to avoid treading on. Despite this, it's a delightful path to walk on. I hit my spot about ½k before reaching the beach, a small sand-hill just to the left of the path:

East – over Dunfanaghy townland (the Irish word for a town and the area around it) to the stately mountains of Inishowen
South-East – over an inland lake to the Salt Mountain Range

South – brooding Muckish Mountain starts a line of hills running south-west to the pointed shape of Errigal Mountain; beneath them, the coastal plain
South-West – the coast of Donegal runs away into the distance with Bloody Foreland and the hills of Gweedore prominent; in the foreground, Tramore Beach spreads itself invitingly
West – out at sea, lie three Inishes, getting progressively smaller from south to north
North-West – the jagged outline of Tory Island, reminding me of Worm’s Head in the Gower Peninsula, a dragon afloat in the Atlantic; the central cleft brings to mind the Maiden Bower, a rock far out west beyond Bryher in the Isles of Scilly
North and North-East – sand dunes hide any possible view towards Horn Head

More than this was the feeling of the whole scene: larks larking, slugs slugging, snails snailing, clouds scudding, waves murmuring, a gun-metal sea merging into a gun-metal sky.

By the way, don’t follow the Gun Loop markers slavishly, otherwise you might miss Tramore Beach itself, at low tide a glorious expanse of pristine, rivulet-embossed sand, backed by flat, rounded fifty-shades-of-grey stones on a high-water shelf. I recommend walking along the beach until Tory Island comes into view. With Muckish glowering at the southern end, you can easily lose yourself in the expanse of sea, beach and sky – a great time to run along the beach. On a previous occasion (when I could still run), I came up with this poem – I hope you like it:-

I ran along the beach today,
All sand and sea and sky
Were still, and I
Running but not moving,
As if the world had gone
Slo-mo – and me with it.

Splashing through shallow water,
Soggy prints at once devoured
By waves, running
Past a flock of seagulls,
Seagulls rising, spirit rising,
Seagull-soaring spirit.

(Written at Cruden Bay, near Aberdeen, May 1989)

From the beach, the walking becomes even more delightful – soft, springy turf, not too much sand-scrabbling, as so often happens in dunes, and great views along the Donegal coast. Incidentally, the name of the path stems from three exploding blow-holes along the coast called the Two Little Pistols and McSwyne’s Gun. At high tide, they are apparently capable of firing stones up to 10cm in diameter into the air. On the way to Pollaguill Bay, the path traverses lots of small rocky headlands. On one of them I encountered a posse of lovely little fawn chirruping birds with yellow feet, a black, white and fawn face, a white underbelly and a white chest ring, scuttling about, quite oblivious to my presence.

There are also a few cairns to help you on your way. At the first one, you get a good view of Meenaclady townland across the bay to the south-west and the hills behind Horn Head appear. At the second, Pollaguill Bay comes into view and there is a pretty pond with wispy grass at its edge. Pollaguill Bay is more rocky than Tramore with a hinterland

stretching back to the heathery hummocks of the Horn Head hills. The path bisects a shallow valley strewn with daisies – and dung – and not a slug or snail in sight. If this isn't called 'Happy Valley', it should be: a perfect stream flows through its middle, crossed by two planks, little islands of gorse in bloom adding contrasting colour to the mainly green setting.

Following the Gun Loop, you come out onto a tarmac road where you can turn right for your starting point but I suggest you turn left and continue on around the peninsula. Follow the road to its end – about 1½ k – where you come to The Arch farm. Here I was given some good directions around Horn Head by a very affable farmer who didn't mind me tramping over his land. He told me that the locals had plans for a Horn Head Coast Path but walkers' dogs were the stumbling block because of the sheep. Fences were too expensive so the only solution would be a dog pound in Dunfanaghy but how many walkers would comply with this?

After the farm, keep to the right of the swamp as far as the fence near the coast. I couldn't resist climbing the highest hill, Crockaclogher, but the view isn't much different from what's already been seen. However, you can see Horn Head for the first time and it's immediately apparent how it got its name. Follow the fence all the way to Horn Head, crossing three other fences on the way. The coastal scenery is magnificent and you arrive at Horn Head after about an hour.

21: Horn Head, Dunfanaghy, County Donegal

I chose to have my lunch at a spot on the col just before the two horns of the head, overlooking the steep drop on the east side. After lunch, I went up both horns but, to me, the views were not as good as those from my lunch spot:

East – at the bottom of the drop, a blue pool nestles amongst rock faces from which seagulls make their sorties; higher up the cliff-face beyond the pool, what looks like a ruined castle is silhouetted against the sky; beyond that lies the entrance to Sheep Haven; next in line is Rosguill Peninsula; further still, are Fanad Peninsula, Malin Head and the mountains of Inishowen

North-East and North – the view is obscured by the horns of the head but from the horns you can just make out Scotland to the north-east – probably Islay and Jura

North-West – Tory Island, more of an end-on view than from Tramore

West to South-West – more or less the same view down the Donegal coast as from Tramore but now with a foreground of the magnificent cliffs you have just walked past

South – the headland leading up to Horn Head

South-East – a bay with steep cliffs leading round to the 'ruined castle'

Despite the steep drop in front of you, this is a safe place to rest, surrounded by grasses, heather and little yellow and pink flowers.

Returning from the head, I followed the farmer's instructions to make for the 'castle', then on towards the look-out post on the next hill. The 'castle' turned out to be a mere dilapidated house but also a good viewpoint. Not surprisingly, the view from the look-out post is also good but there's nothing much in the foreground to catch the eye. Apparently, this place was used in World War II when the Irish were not supposed to be helping the British (I've heard similar stories from other parts of Donegal).

As you come down from the look-out post to the south, you meet a road where you turn right and after about 1k you have the choice of the high road to the left or the low road

straight on. I was advised that the views from the high road were no better than those I had already seen, so I chose the low – and shorter – road. The high road, I learned later, is the ‘scenic drive’ for people who don’t want to get out of their cars. After seven hours on the trail, I was glad of this further good advice from the farmer and made a bee-line for Dunfanaghy and a panted-for whipped ice-cream washed down with a can of cold Guinness. On the way, there’s a perfect view of Dunfanaghy across its bay with Muckish looming behind.

22: Gortnalughoge Bay, Rosguill, County Donegal

This spot is pretty easy to reach if you are staying at the Tra-na-Rossan hostel. You have to find your way through the Quiet Moments campsite to the bay beyond. This involves negotiating a few gates and fences before you emerge onto Gortnalughoge, a classic sweeping arc of a beach with lovely views all around. However, the rocks at the northern end of the bay hit the spot for me. It’s very quiet and soft there, with the gentle murmuring of the waves and a profusion of yellow and pink flowers and with these lovely views:

North – another sandy bay (Backstrand), sweet and tiny, like a child to Gortnalughoge’s parent; in the distance, Melmore Head points the way to the Atlantic

North-East – across Mulroy Bay and along the coast to Fanad Head

East and South-East – across Mulroy Bay to the low hills of the Fanad Peninsula

South – Gortnalughoge Beach curves round to a point at the narrowest part of Mulroy Bay; looking along the bay, which is actually a long inlet, houses are sprinkled on the hills around the shore

South-West – the larger hills of Rosguill, also dotted with houses

West – dunes and marram grass almost hide a caravan park; in the background, Crocknasleigh Hill

North-West – the hills of the peninsula behind Melmore Head, with more caravans in evidence

This would be an ideal spot to spend a lazy day with rock pools to explore and gentle breezes to soothe your troubled brow. However, bathing is discouraged due to steep shelving and dangerous currents.

Another note of caution: extricating yourself from this lovely spot is not so easy without retracing your steps back to the campsite. I wanted to continue north round Melmore Head, where my next spot is, so I’m giving you more directions than usual for the tricky sections of this walk. The choices are: return to the beach and find a way up to the road that goes north; cross the large dunes to the west; or pick your way along the rocks on the shore to the north. I didn’t like the look of the rocks and tried the dunes but the bushes were too thick, so I ended up going up from the beach through a caravan park that displayed a notice saying “STRICTLY PRIVATE – RESIDENTS ONLY”. Fortunately, there was nobody around to object. Once on the road, access to Backstrand is easy – through the next gate past the caravan park. This beach is a gem, facing due east and sheltered from the prevailing south-westerly winds. There’s a simple escape, requiring a little rock-scrambling, to the next not-quite-so-charming little beach (Loughanarlan Strand).

After these delights, continue round the rocky shore. The faint path meanders through the yellows of buttercups, clover and dandelions, spiky marram grass, daisies and tiny purple and blue flowers, with bees and butterflies in attendance. All too soon, you have to plough

inland due to an impassable gulch – but the thick grass is not as difficult as it looks and after five minutes you are back on the road by a sign announcing An Meall Mor (Melmore Head).

23: Melmore Head, Rosguill, County Donegal

Continuing past the road sign mentioned above, you come across another idyll – a lone white cottage with a red door that could have come off one of those ‘IRELAND’ postcards, enclosed by a garden wall and surrounded by soft, flower-strewn pasture and gentle rocks, with a boggy stream by its side. If you turn the other way, you are faced with another caravan park (caravans for the Irish, twee cottages for the tourists?). Follow the road through the park and out onto the head proper. Wend and weave your way to the top of Melmore Head, choosing from multiple paths. I decided here that I like the Irish walker because the main paths take the route I’d like to take – too often the paths in other countries take the direct route, rather than the scenic route that I prefer.

At the top, there is a cairn but this is not the highest point or the one with the best view, which is from a rise slightly inland from the cairn. I started a new cairn there on a rocky outcrop just south of the highest point (I wonder if my four rocks have grown?):

North – over the cairn and a ruined building to the Atlantic

North-East – the coast is seen to good effect – a series of points provide stepping-stones to Fanad Head, with Malin Head in the distance and Scotland hazy on the horizon

East – across Fanad Peninsula to the mountains of Inishowen

South-East – Mulroy Bay insinuates itself between the hills of Fanad and the Salt Mountain Range

South and South-West – Altwearry Bay presents a classic U-shape, backed by the hills of Rosguill and our old friend Muckish peeking over the top; in the foreground, a pond with a strangely beautiful pattern of reeds, rather like an early Christian man’s bearded face (probably not repeated in subsequent years)

Further South-West – the rocky coast of Rosguill grasps the sea with gnarled fingers; beyond, the coast-line bends round to Dunfanaghy and the Horn Head Peninsula

West – Tory Island is seen end-on

North-West – the Atlantic

From this spot, you can spy out which way you would like to return: I chose a grassy ramp at the back of Altwearry Bay which leads up and over the hills in the general direction of Muckish. In the event, I came down from the hills because the coast looked so enticing – green rolling humps alongside the gnarled fingers of rock – and wandered round to Boyeeghter Bay. This is my kind of walking: distances not too great, plenty of time to meander as my whim takes me, no great ups and downs, just varied and intoxicating terrain.

Boyeeghter Bay is worth a closer look, especially when approached from Lough Melmore through a carpet of daisies and buttercups. In fact, there are two bays, a smaller one, reached first, and a larger one that requires a little more effort to see. From the second bay, the rocky terrain behind the bay looks daunting, so, rather than trying to continue round the coast, I decided to cross the pass between the two peaks of Crocknasleigh. To get to the pass, follow sheep tracks behind Boyeeghter round a bluff and up the valley. It looks rather hairy round the bluff until you do it and it turns out to be quite easy – except perhaps if it’s wet and windy. At the top of the pass, look for a gate in the fence, slightly to your right. On the far

side, there's a cart track that traverses the slope of the larger hill, passing some old dwellings and coming out just short of the hostel.

This hostel, by the way, is beautifully situated above Tra-na-Rossan Beach to the west and Gortnalughoge Beach to the east, both being visible from this stone-built former holiday-home. You can reach it by bus to Downings, from where you can blag a lift or walk the 5k past Mevagh and Clontallagh villages.

24: Raghtin More, near Clonmany, Inishowen, County Donegal

There's a pleasant path from the car park at Glen House in the village of Straid to Glen Nevin Waterfall, which is a thin stream about 10m high, falling into a pool surrounded by a pretty bowl of trees. From the waterfall, the direct route is up the steep slope to the east of the valley out onto the flat plain above, where you can join a track heading towards Raghtin More Mountain. Then you have to decide when to strike off to start the ascent. I suggest you turn off at the first green and black marker post after the fenced-off area on the right: at this point, it's easy to cross the stream and there's access to a grassy ramp which bends away to the left towards the col between Raghtin More and Crockmain. The col provides a glorious view down the Donegal coast but the two peaks obscure an all-round view. The summit is reached after a further slog up a steep, rocky slope.

Once there, the shape of the summit plateau prevents you from seeing in all directions at once. However, by moving around, you can see vast distances:

South-West – on the other side of Crockmain and Mamore Hill is the Mamore Gap, a high pass between Dunaff and the road to Buncrana; beyond that, the Urris Hills form a ridge leading to Lough Swilly, the defining water feature of the area that extends 35k south to Letterkenny; just to the right of the ridge, beautiful Portsalon Beach may be glimpsed on the far shore of Lough Swilly; in the distance, Muckish, Errigal and the Derryveagh Mountains

West – the Donegal coast now seen from a higher perspective, thus yielding more distant views: Fanad, Rosguill, Horn Head, Bloody Foreland all lined up for inspection with Tory Island off to the north of Bloody Foreland

North-West – Dunaff Head with the Atlantic beyond

North – in the foreground, Rockstown Harbour and Tullagh Point with the Atlantic beyond

North-East – over the long curve of Pollan Bay, the Malin Head Peninsula reaches north-westwards to Malin Head; beyond the peninsula, the island of Inishtrahull sits placidly on the direct route to Scotland, visible on the horizon

East – Clonmany, Ballyliffin and the inhabited plain towards Lough Fad; in the background, the eastern hills of Inishowen

South-East – Slieve Snaght and the central mountains of Inishowen

South – more hills with Lough Swilly beyond

Beautiful as all this was, I was distracted by a baffling mystery. Directly over Horn Head to the west lay an island, clearly visible, with light brown cliffs. I estimated it to be at least 4k long and 100m high. The trouble was, according to my maps, there should be nothing there: it was further away than Tory Island and Inishbofin, also visible, and to the west of Bloody Foreland. I concluded that it must be the fabled Celtic land of the dead. If you solve the mystery, please let me know at nigelarmistead@yahoo.co.uk .

Descending to the north-east, I had to wade through pathless heather so worked my way round to the grassy ramp and found it much easier going.

25: The Wee House of Malin, Malin Head, County Donegal

At Malin Head, the main walk to do is the circular one round the head itself but there's also a nice little excursion to this place, where monks used to come to wash away their sins. It's an easy stroll eastwards from Portmore along a grassy shelf between the sea and a heathery slope. The site consists of a spring, a rock-cut cell and a chapel, all located in a little cove, protected from the sea by a sizeable rock. Clearly, it had pre-Christian origins as a holy well but, as usual, the Christians took it over and installed the Virgin Mary by the spring and stuck a chapel in the middle.

This wonderful 360 degree panorama from just seawards of the explanatory board hit the spot for me:

South-East, South and South-West – the sacred site, framed by beautiful cliffs covered in white flowers and ivy

West and North-West – the coast stretches away past Portmore to the tower at Malin Head

North – the guardian rock is swathed in pinks and yellows and green grass; out at sea, Saddle Rock peeks over its left shoulder and the Garvan Isles over its right; and further out, a bunch of rocks and a lighthouse pierce the horizon

North-East – about 8k away, lies Inishtrahull, a once inhabited island, still hauntingly beautiful; over Inishtrahull, the Paps of Jura and Islay pop up

East – a shoreline of rocks and cliffs

Taking all this in, I could see why the monks felt absolved from their sins in this lovely spot.

26: Devil's Bridge, Malin Head, County Donegal

The circular walk round Malin Head from West Town to Portmore is entirely on the road and there are good views for much of the way. However, to find what I consider the best view on the peninsula, you have to venture off-road and on foot. At first, the road heads west; next, at an official viewpoint, it bends north; then, about 200m past the second house on the left, where the road curves east, there is a track leading west towards a remote house on Breasty Bay. Follow this track until just before the house, where you can turn north, cross a stream on a plank and climb uphill to Devil's Bridge. This is a sea-arch somewhere that I didn't manage to locate but it's a magnificent setting, anyway – my spot is on the cliffs at the eastern end of the bay:

West – the bay is dominated by a massive sea-stack, crowned by sharp pinnacles and surrounded by sheer cliffs; beyond, the Atlantic Ocean

North-West and North – over the cliff-edge the coast-line is quite vicious with the Atlantic beyond

North-East – the grassy cliff-top leads to the rocky coast which extends to the headland of Banba's Crown and its conspicuous tower

East and South-East – the low hills you have just crossed and the road you have just left; in the background, the rest of the Malin Head Peninsula and the golf-ball radar station on the highest hill

South – in the foreground, the extraordinarily picturesque rocky shore of Breasty Bay, with its solitary house and soft pastures behind; the coast then gives way to White Strand Bay with Glashedy Island prominent in front of Pollan Beach and the golf courses of Ballyliffin on the far shore

South-West – across the bay, the townlands from Straid to Dunaff line the shore, with Raghtin More behind; further afield, the by-now-familiar sights of the Donegal coast-line unfold: Fanad, Rosguill, Muckish, Errigal, Horn Head and Tory Island

An extra delight is the carpet of pinks in which you are sitting, so many it's hard to avoid squashing them.

From here, there's a footpath along the coast to Banba's Crown, which is well worth taking, rather than returning to the road, for it passes Hell's Hole and other caves and clefts in the cliffs before flattening out as you approach Ireland's most northerly point. There is another great view from the top of the headland but it's spoilt somewhat by the ugly concrete of an old signal station and the tower itself. One new feature is a good overview of Ballyhillin and its four raised beaches to the east.

The return journey along the road is pleasant enough through Ballyhillin with 'Ireland's most beautiful thatched cottage', Ecky Bay with its curiosity shop and past the Malin Head weather station. The alternative, which I didn't take, would be to return from Ballyhillin over the hill past the masts from where more good views should be available.

27: The Little Isles of the Camplie, Ballintoy, County Antrim

This is one for the dedicated spot-seeker, as the final ascent is quite tricky, but the walk there and back is no problem at all. I recommend you approach from the west via Whitepark Bay (Photo 1556). You could do this as a continuation of the excellent Causeway Coast Path or by descending from the road past the Whitepark Hostel. Either way, it's a glorious beach-walk towards the cliffs at the eastern end. In order to enjoy coming round to the Little Isles of the Camplie this way, you have to watch the tides because you can't get past at high tide. Then you'd have to go over the top to Ballintoy Harbour and approach from the east.

The first thing you see is a bunch of weirdly shaped rocks jutting out into the sea. Then you notice that one of them resembles an elephant and another is a free-standing arch. They are surrounded by an impressive array of various shapes and sizes covered in the usual patina of pinks, yellows and greens with sea-birds mewing and waves crashing. As I walked past them, I noticed a cave and I thought, "I wonder if people once lived here?" Right outside the cave, there's a little inlet where a coracle could be beached and stay hidden. The cave also faces away from the open sea, so the dwellers could hide from seafarers if they wished. About 100m to the east is a small stream flowing from under a large boulder with no stream the other side, so it must be a fresh-water spring.

I imagined people living here, fishing and hunting, cooking and making clothes, playing on the grassy plain and keeping watch from one of the sea-stacks. What's more, the whole place is incredibly beautiful – who wouldn't want to live here? Naturally, I looked for the best spot from which to appreciate it. Well, that spot is on top of the stack in which the cave is situated and it's not an easy climb: the way up is a rake to the right of the cave and the

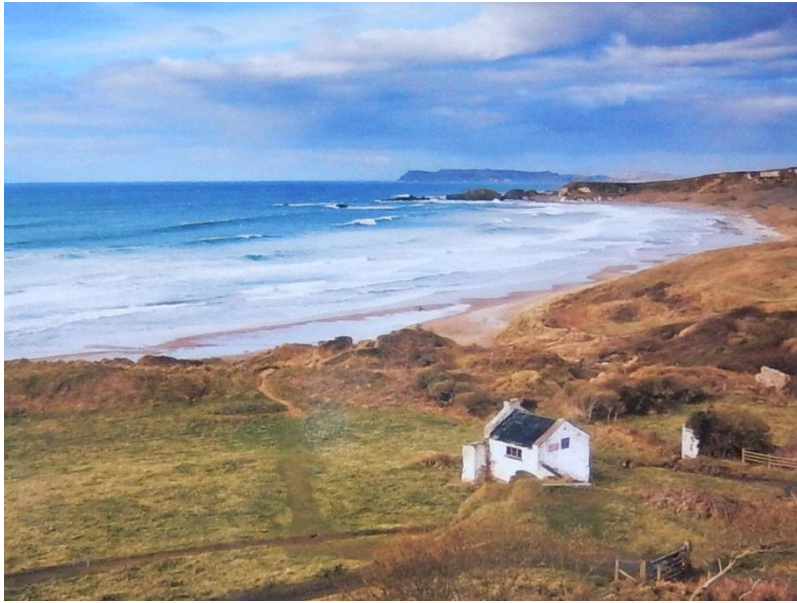


Photo 1556: Whitepark Bay looking towards Little Isles of the Camplie, Rathlin Island in the distance (copyright George Pafilis, www.cglphotography.co.uk)

difficulty is at the start where a ‘bad step’ impedes your progress. I found the easier ascent was on the left side of the bad step. Once up, the rake is steep but easy and brings you out onto a lush plateau which overlooks the whole area and the coast-line in both directions:

West – the sea-stacks I’ve mentioned; beyond them, Whitepark Bay curves round to the village of Portbradden, nestling in its cove; then there are cliffs all the way to Bengore Head

North – a few sea-stacks and rocks and the Atlantic Ocean

East – rocks galore, those further out to sea looking like dumplings in a stew, those nearer the shore pointed like witches’ hats; in the middle distance, a curiously-shaped hump-back rock which resembles a fish with its offspring trailing behind (this turned out to be ‘Sheep Island’, so named because people used to graze sheep there); away to the north-east, looms Rathlin Island, looking from this direction like a giant slug (it’s actually very beautiful – see spots 28 & 29); the view is completed by a few of the houses of Ballintoy and its startlingly white church, lit up by the afternoon sun – the classic shape of the church stands out on the cliff horizon and looks as if it’s been transposed from some Greek Island

South-East, South and South-West – the whole demesne is laid out beneath you, a verdant playground between cliffs and shore with access from east and west, a beach, a spring and a cave: a veritable Neolithic des-res

When you’ve had enough of the views, you can lie down amidst the 2ft high grass or watch the nesting birds on a nearby sea-stack.

On the way down, the rake is not so easy and I found it necessary to adopt the sitting position and slide on a cushion of grass – similarly for the ‘bad step’ at the bottom but with no cushion. There’s a lovely walk along the coast to Ballintoy Harbour, where civilisation intrudes – I was greeted by a phalanx of camper-vans lined up against the harbour wall, ready to do battle with the ocean. On the way, you pass several more habitable caves and a notice-

board tells you that these caves were indeed inhabited and could well have been the dwellings of the first settlers in Northern Ireland – Neolithic tools have been found in some of them.

One last point of interest for any architects: on the road up from the harbour, there's an unusual house, Le Corbusier meets Legoland, spoilt by a grotesque sculpture of a sea-horse and a bull above the front door.

Interlude: The Causeway Coast Path

Maybe you're wondering why there's nothing here about the Giant's Causeway. That's because it's now a World Heritage Site organised by the National Trust with a spanking new Visitor Centre and Audio Guides that most people were listening to on headphones. As such, it falls outside my criteria for inclusion, being too well-known and too easy of access.

My choice was to walk the Causeway Coast Path from Runkery Beach in the west through the Giant's Causeway and along the cliffs to Dunseverick Castle in the east. The first part of this walk is a travesty. As you move from Runkery Beach around the coast to Runkery Head, you are confronted by the hideous Runkery House. This is owned by a property developer and it shows. He has fenced off his territory with an ugly barbed-wire fence upon which a notice reads: 'Seaport Investments Ltd PRIVATE GROUNDS NO ENTRY'. This fence encloses a mock baronial house surrounded by grounds clearly levelled by bulldozer with regular banks and newly-planted turf. Apparently this character has Donald Trump-style plans to create an international golf-course development right next to the Giant's Causeway. Let's hope such an intrusive monstrosity fails in its greedy ambition.

Continuing past the Causeway and the tourist trail, there are many great promontory views, including what seems to me the best view of the Causeway area: this is from the promontory between the bays of Port Noffer and The Amphitheatre. From here, you can see the Causeway itself plus several spectacular rock formations in the cliffs of The Amphitheatre, including at least two 'organs', several 'garden fences' and a couple of 'Cheshire Cats'. The view also extends along the coast to Portrush, with its offshore Skerries, and as far as Inishowen Head.

Further along the Coast Path, there are rock pinnacles called 'The Chimneys' and two rock-stacks in Port-na-Tober that I christened the 'Rhino' and the 'Portuguese Man-o-War'. Once past Benbane Head, there are fewer spectacular sights but the path skirts the cliff edge and offers great views over towards Whitepark Bay and the Little Isles of the Camplie (see spot 27).

28: Coastguard Look-out Station, Ballyconaghan, Rathlin Island, County Antrim

Rathlin Island is worth a day or more of anyone's time. There's a spectacular RSPB reserve on the western end where seabirds gather in staggering density on towering sea-stacks. I like the fact that there's free entry and the only charges are for drinks and souvenirs. Obviously, donations and memberships are solicited.

There's also a lovely walk to the north coast of the island and the option of returning via the East Lighthouse. It begins by the Catholic Church above the harbour. Take the road that goes in a north-easterly direction, with a babbling stream and luxuriant trees on your left and a bank of gorse to your right. Soon you reach the open pasture and shelved hills that are typical of Rathlin. Just before what looks like the residence of the last surviving hippie, turn left for the Ballyconaghan walking trails. Follow the marker posts in an anti-clockwise

direction (the walk is circular) through pasture graced with lots of pink-mauve heath-spotted orchids. At a track where you are encouraged to turn left to complete the circle, turn right and head for the now-derelict Coastguard Look-out Station.

It used to be a cosy (or cramped) three-room apartment with space for an office/look-out area, a rest area, a kitchen and a loo. Now it boasts some unusual graffiti. My favourite reads: "Lily and family here again! '95, '96', '97, '98, '99, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011. Where are you? It's 2012!"

There was also a haiku left on a piece of paper:

Only a light wind
blows away my lunchtime crumbs
to feed small brown birds.

Not to be outdone, I left my own attempt:

A strong wind whistles
through an empty door: grasses
bend in reverence.

A National Trust board proclaims: "Here you can enjoy the finest panoramic sea view in Ireland, taking in the Scottish Islands, the Mull of Kintyre, Fair Head, the Glens of Antrim and the North Channel". However, I have to disagree with the National Trust – in my opinion, spots 23, 25, 26 & 28 offer better panoramic sea views. The trouble with this view is that much of what can be seen is too far away to be enjoyed in more than outline. Nevertheless, it's a pretty good spot when you include the rest of what can be seen:

North-West – the south-west tip of Islay

North – the main body of Islay with the Paps of Jura behind

North-East – the west coast of Kintyre, ending in the Mull

East – across the North Channel to the Mull of Kintyre, with the island of Sanda just off its tip and Ailsa Craig further off in the Firth of Clyde; nearer at hand, cliffs lead round the coast of Rathlin Island to the East Lighthouse

South-East – in the foreground, the eastern part of Rathlin Island; in the background, Fair Head

South – over Church Bay to the Northern Irish coast at Ballycastle, with Knocklayd, an extinct volcano, immediately behind; the most northerly of the Glens of Antrim, Glentaisie, climbs inland to the east of Knocklayd

South-West – the tiered hills of Rathlin

West – cliffs along the north coast of Rathlin

On this particular day, there was a magical atmosphere. Scotland was shrouded in a purple blanket of cloud, while Ireland snuggled under a fluffy, cotton-wool duvet. Over both there were flying-saucer clouds – Ireland looked as if it was the launch pad for a flying-saucer invasion of the Arctic regions. All around were heath-spotted orchids, daisies, buttercups, bird's foot trefoil, heather and tiny blue and yellow flowers, quivering in the wind.

Instead of rejoining the circular walk, I suggest you head for the East Lighthouse and return from there. A faint path leads towards a little cliff that not everyone will wish to clamber down but, as usual, it's much easier than it appears at first sight. If you follow the coast, there are a couple of barbed-wire fences to slide under or over and an electric fence

which is easy to circumvent. You pass a series of pretty loughans before reaching the lighthouse where a notice tells you: “Private Land – No Trespassing”. Talking to locals later, I discovered that the farmer wants to discourage what I and ten other walkers did by following the cliff path (n.b. there were no animals or crops in the areas we walked through, just heather). Like most walkers, I hate this aspect of land ownership.

29: East Lighthouse, Rathlin Island, County Antrim

I would not have hit this spot, had I not lost the top of a Celtic-motif pen that I had bought in Doolin. I really like this pen so I retraced my steps to the place where I had last used it (the ‘No Trespassing’ notice – see above) and found the top at a point where I had remembered stumbling. On the way, I noticed how well the view along the path frames the island of Islay over in Scotland.

The spot is near the gate to the East Lighthouse:

North – down a little buttercup-strewn valley to an inlet (as if to confirm my choice, a horizontal V of white seabirds crossed the upright V of the valley); the curves of the lighthouse wall, of the fence just crossed and of the path just ascended frame and embellish the view

North-East – the lighthouse hogs the view

East – the Mull of Kintyre, Sanda and Ailsa Craig

South-East - beyond the east coast of Rathlin Island, Fair Head and Torr Head say hello to Scotland

South-West - the road back to the harbour demonstrates perspective with its line of telegraph poles marching in single file over the horizon

West – the heathery ground just crossed with the hills of Rathlin behind

Despite several notices proclaiming private property, the views more than make up for such minor irritations.

Return along the road past another pretty loughan. On the way, there’s a good view of the village to the south of the harbour. Turn left at the junction to walk down a gorse-encrusted valley and enjoy some even better views of the harbour. At the harbour, there’s a visitor centre and a pub but also a hideous outsize chair sculpture, supported by an EC grant and dedicated obsequiously to visiting writers, who are listed thereon. It’s very uncomfortable to sit on – too large, too deep, too high, too wide, too slippery and too cold. Not my cup of tea.

30: Murlough Bay, near Fair Head, County Antrim

The last spot on my Irish trip came in the course of a walk from Murlough Bay to Fair Head and back to Ballycastle. I was lucky enough to be dropped at the turn-off for Murlough Bay. After about 3k, you reach a coal-yard on the left, just before the road goes steeply downhill into the bay. A yellow spot marks the trail.

I passed several good vantage points for viewing Murlough Bay before I hit my favourite one. On the way, I spotted two buzzards circling and mewing to each other in turn like an operatic antiphony. The spot worth waiting for is on a rocky outcrop high above the

north end of the bay, with a sheer drop in front of you and a convenient rocky seat to perch upon:

South-East – you can look down the length of Murlough Bay towards Torr Head from the opposite direction to that featured in the postcards and pictures that I saw (Photo 1557); you can see its pretty lay-out, sheltered from the prevailing winds, with a rocky shore backed by green pastures and steep, wooded escarpments; the trees cling to the most sheltered areas, while the hillocky pastures are threaded by a winding road; there's a particularly beautiful area just above the foreshore where a rocky outcrop shelters a clump of trees, which in turn shelter a kidney-shaped green-sward – just the place for a fair or a camp-site; the bay luxuriates in its fifty shades of green, surrounded by fifty shades of grey in the sky and the sea (on another day it might be fifty shades of blue); further afield, Torr Head points towards the Mull of Kintyre; inland, Carnanmore rears its lofty head

East – Ailsa Craig, Sanda and the Mull of Kintyre

North-East – the west coast of Kintyre

North – the Paps of Jura and the mountains of east Islay

North-West – Rathlin Island appears as a beret atop Fair Head, with the south-west tips of Islay on the horizon

West – in the foreground, a picturesque lough with a crannog lies in the hollow behind Fair Head; in the background, the north coast of Ireland stretches away from Ballycastle past Kinbane and Larrybane Heads to Sheep Island and the Little Isles of the Camplie

South-West – an inland view past Ballyvoy to Glentaisie and Knocklayd

South – the path you have just walked with pasture land behind



Photo 1557: Murlough Bay from the south – Fair Head and Rathlin Island beyond (copyright: John Hinde Ireland Ltd., www.johnhindestudios.com)

Moving on, you find yourself on a delightful path. The predominant heather is interspersed with all kinds of grasses and flecked with a few orchids and little flowers

of yellow, red, white and blue – my favourite was luminescent tufts of deer grass which outshone the stiff competition.

The ramparts of Fair Head did not reveal a spot worthy of inclusion but did support several ‘erratic’ boulders perched on high, as if abandoned by some celestial litter-lout. For my taste, Fair Head was too austere and too predictable – high cliffs, lots of rocks, extensive views but nothing to enthuse about. The only thing that got me going was the location of the Grey Man’s Path, referred to in a walking guide. This turns out to be a really steep gully down to sea level which I, for one, would not dream of attempting.

The route back to Ballycastle involves a choice: it looks as if it’s possible to go the whole way along the cliff tops but the recommended path is to descend from the cliffs after about 2k. This requires a tricky descent of a steep slope opposite two rocky islands with a waterfall to your left. There’s a nice view from the top of the Ballycastle coast to your left and Rathlin Island to your right like two open arms embracing the sea.

Once down, the path ahead is clear but not as easy as it looks: the ground roller-coasters unevenly and at one point, amongst tall ferns, is quite dangerous as it’s hard to spot where the path has eroded. Eventually, you reach a road which takes you back to Ballycastle beach.

Let me just finish with an image which, for me, sums up the essence of rural Ireland (Photo 1900):

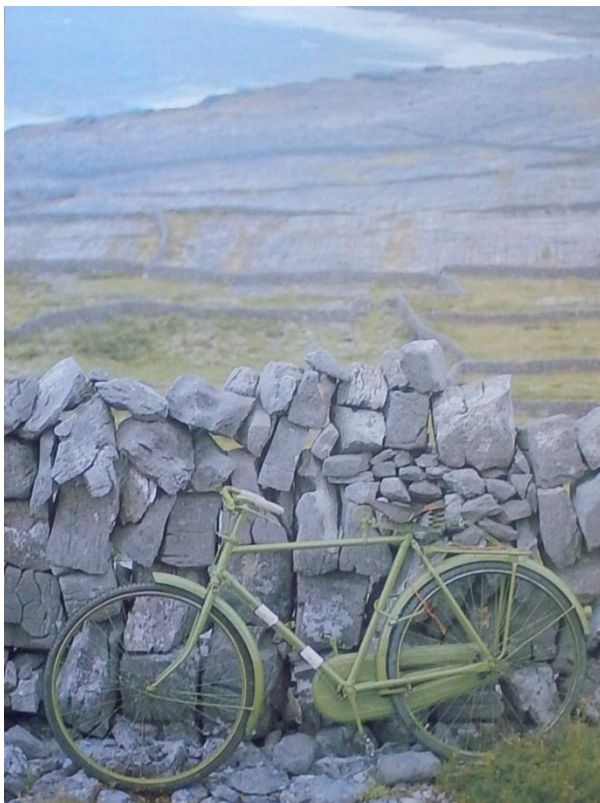


Photo 1900: taken on Iris Mealin, Aran Islands, County Galway (copyright Liam Blake, www.realireland.ie)

4. John Feehan, *The Secret Places of The Burren*, Royal Carberry Books, 1987.

