

TRIP 36: MULLET PENINSULA AND ACHILL ISLAND

This trip was conceived to visit the main chunk of the west and north coasts of Ireland that I had not visited in previous years: the coast around the Mullet Peninsula in the north-west of County Mayo. While I was there, I fancied re-visiting Achill Island which I had cycled around in the 1990s. That was such hard work that I had not had the energy to do any walks so I bought a local guide leaflet to put that right. Here is the location of my ten trails:



6753: from Ireland West map; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2011; www.osi.ie

I investigated walks around the Mullet Peninsula online and found buses that would take me to them. The Achill guide mentioned is Achill Walks Guide from achilltourism.com which outlines nine walks of varying lengths and difficulty with motivating pictures. I only did parts of three of these but it helped me to make up my mind what I wanted to do.

The trip was in April/May 2022. I flew to Knock/West of Ireland Airport and did the whole trip by bus staying in Belmullet, Kilgalligan and Blacksod around the Mullet and in the Valley area on Achill. Irish buses are usually several minutes late but occasionally turn up on time so be prepared for long waits at bus stops. Another important tip is not to rely on online information as times and pick-up points can change and services can even be cancelled as I found to my cost. Check locally when you arrive.

My use of English language or Gaelic place names is inconsistent but in general I follow the names on the maps I show, except where the English language name is in common use. As for pronunciation of Gaelic names, I invariably got that wrong!

351: Around North Belmullet (Beal an Mhuirthead)

Once I have arrived somewhere, it is almost a compulsion to explore my immediate surroundings; so on my first morning in Belmullet I set off to do just that.



6304: from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

From my apartment by the canal, I walked north-west round the first bay in that direction. No sand was visible, as shown on the map, as it was high tide. At the junction with the main road, Belmullet welcomes visitors with standing stone sculptures (6385).

Rounding the head of the bay, I took the first turn to the left towards the end of the promontory. This turned out to be a drive to a holiday home, complete with exercise bike and telescope, but which was clearly unoccupied. The drive goes past the house to:

6385: welcome to Belmullet



“Slipway at Point 7 on the OSI map”

It's not spectacular but you are surrounded by the wide, flat expanse of Blacksod Bay, with Belmullet town on one side, backed by the Nephin Beg Mountains of Central Mayo (6393); the mountains of Achill Island straight ahead (6409); and the next promontory to your right. In the days when people got about by boat rather than roads, this whole area would have been one territory, whereas now, apart from a summer ferry from Blacksod village to Achill, you have to go about 60k by road from Belmullet to the centre of Achill Island and they seem like two separate communities (see trail 335 for a walk around Blacksod).



6393: Belmullet and the Nephin Bogs



6409: Blacksod Bay and Achill Mountains

Returning to the main road, I noticed a further instalment of my saga of Irish houses from Trip 34 (6394). The main road takes you back to a bridge over the canal which joins the bays on either side of Belmullet.

6394: I call this “Irish baronial”



A white pillar by the bridge proclaims the “Water Walk” on a road to the left beside the canal (6396). This goes a short distance to another such pillar before the road goes inland and uphill. There are views along the bay to the Nephin Beg Mountains again (6398) and across the bay to the harbour of Belmullet (6402).



6396: the road beside the canal



6398: along the bay to the Nephin Bogs



6402: Belmullet Harbour

I then wandered around Belmullet town centre and visited the Tourist Office (open all year round, surprisingly to me) for further info about local walks, before returning to my apartment via a footbridge over the canal (6404).

By now, after a 5k stroll, I knew where I was.

6404: the canal, looking west from the bridge



332: Croise

My first proper trail was one that appears on the OSI map and in all the publicity around the Mullet Peninsula: the Croise (Cross) Loop walk. You can catch the 446 bus from Belmullet to Droim and alight at the nearest point to the marked trail. There is a Green Loop, which follows the coast and part of the loch, and a Blue Loop, which takes a circuit around the loch. I chose a bit of both.



6447: from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

After following the road around the south of the loch for 1.5k, you turn left for the coast on the Green Loop. My day was a mixture of wind, lowering cloud and sun which produced a stunning first impression on reaching the beach (6410, 6411, 6412 & 6413).



6410: beach looking south



6412: beach looking north-west towards the islands

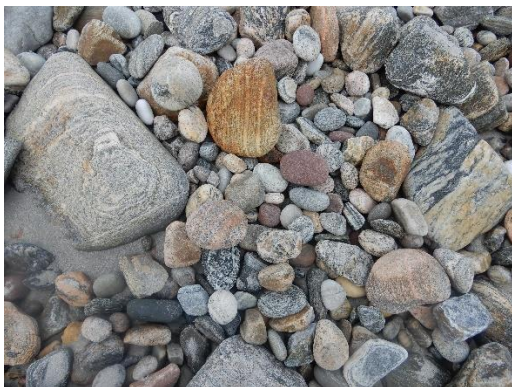


6411: beach looking out to sea

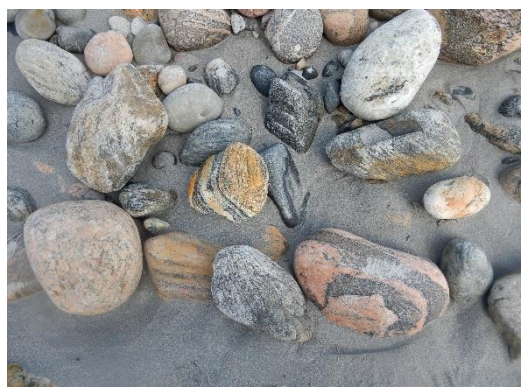


6413: close-up of Inis Gluaire and breaking waves

Beneath your feet as you descend to the sand are a myriad of variously-coloured and -striped stones (6415, 6423), stretching away behind the sand (6424).



6415: stones



6423: more stones



6424: stone bank behind the beach



6425: close-up of waves

The wind was whipping the waves up into a frenzy (6425). I walked along the beach, which was firm (I hate soft sand and pebbles for walking on) to the corner at Gob an Chorrain. Rather than continuing on the path of the Green Loop, I was seduced out towards the islands and the waves – possible because it was low tide:

“Far Out to the West at Gob an Chorrain”

There’s a long spit of rocks stretching out towards the islands – I went out to the right of it:



6429: along the spit towards the islands



6430: towards Inis Gluaire



6432: back to the sand dunes behind the beach



6435: a rock and a pool



6433: close-up of spuming waves with Croaghau (on Achill Island) looming behind

While I was there, the tide started to come in – fast (6437) and I beat a hasty retreat. By the time I was back at the dunes, the area of my foray was completely covered.

The Green Loop takes you along the yellow beach on the map – which seemed no different from the map's grey one I had just walked along (6438).

6437: tide coming in fast



Reaching Gob na Croise, you can take a break at a picnic table before following a road inland and right at a junction to the north end of the loch (6439).



6438: a lonely cloud wandering



6439: the loch, Slievemore and Croaghau (on Achill)

I turned left at the loch, now with the Blue Loop. For a while, the road hugs the shore of the loch with verges packed with primroses and ...celandines (?) come to mind (6444). Further along there are also daisies and what looked like iris shoots in profusion (6445).



6444: flowers in the verge



6445: the east side of the loch

Another picnic table awaits you at the next road junction, where I decided to turn left on the road through Rinneanach because that was a 0.5 k shorter return to the main road and because the Blue Loop soon leaves the loch for fields – a good decision as it turned out as, once you reach the top of a rise, a great vista opens up of the whole sweep of Mayo mountains from Croaghnaun in the west, past the Nephin Beg Range in the south-east, to Glinsk in the north-east. Unfortunately, the mountains are too distant and spread-out for a worthwhile photo.

And there was another reason why taking that road was a good decision: as soon as I reached the main road, I stuck out my thumb (the bus wasn't due for another 2½ hours) and the first vehicle stopped and took me right to the canal in Belmullet, 50m from where I was staying.

I hope my photos give you an idea what an exhilarating, wind-blown day on the beach this was. The walk along the beach seemed to go on for ever as the distances appeared so great but only lasted about an hour. The rest of the trail was so-so, mainly through non-descript fields, apart from the short stretch by the loch. Altogether my route was 10k, longer than either the Green Loop (5.7k) or the Blue Loop (7.6k) but preferable to both, in my view.

333: Port an Chloídh (Portacloy) to Cill Ghallagain (Kilgalligan)

I had originally planned to do the Ceann Iorrais (Erris Head) Loop to the north of Belmullet but gave up the idea when I looked at images online and decided that it is not as scenic as the Ceathru Thaidhg (Carrowteige) Loop Walks. Erris is also reputed to be boggy in places. Both trails are somewhat inaccessible without your own vehicle: Erris requires a taxi, Carrowteige a shopping bus from Belmullet on Tuesdays and Fridays only, or a taxi, or a daily bus from Ballina. Don't be fooled by an online schedule for bus 944 operated by Corduff Travel – it is no longer running, as I found to my cost (a 35-euro taxi from Belmullet).

There are three 'official' loops to choose from at Carrowteige: the Bhinn Bhui (Benwee) Head Loop (purple arrows) from Portacloy to Carrowteige (about 13k), the Children of Lir Loop (blue arrows) from Carrowteige to Kilgalligan (about 10k) and the Black Ditch Loop (red arrows) also from Carrowteige to Kilgalligan (officially 13k but more like 11k on the

map). There's also an unnamed loop with green arrows which seems to be a short one around Carrowteige. The advertising leaflet for the three named loops carry this quote from Lonely Planet: "The finest sustained coastal walk in western Ireland, with a profusion of precipitous cliffs, crags, caves, chasms and islands along the North Mayo coast". However, this only really applies to the coastal stretches which my trails cover with as little inland walking as possible. I was able to do this because I was staying in Kilgalligan and asked my taxi to drop most of my baggage there and then take me to Portacloy. I split the coastal trail into two sections.



6489: the map omits a brief part of the trail above Port an Chloidh; from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

My trail starts at Portacloy Beach (6449) and goes up the west side of the bay to join the official trail at a road junction, seen on the map. At a quay, the trail goes onto grass (6451) and makes a slightly awkward, boggy crossing of a stream. Thereafter, it's plain sailing with posts to guide you all the way, warning you to keep away from the cliff edges. However, if you do that and stick to the posts, you'll miss most of the best views – I kept about 20m from the posts most of the way, quite safely.

My first encounter was with a black sheep (6453). After a last retrospective of Portacloy townland (6454) you pass sheer cliffs on the east side of the bay (6455) and climb onto a promontory from where you get your first glimpse of the Stags of Broadhaven, five sea stacks 3k out to sea, only one showing in the photo (6457).



6449: Portacloy Beach and Bay



6451: purple arrow points onto grass



6453: multicoloured black sheep



6455: cliffs on the far side of the bay



6454: Portacloy townland and beach



6457: view from the first promontory



6459: west side of An Duna Bay



6462: east side of An Duna Bay & the Stags



6464: straight up An Bhinn Bhui

The trail then takes you round the wide bay between An Duna promontory fort (Dun Ceann Tire on the map) and Hag Island (6459, 6462). From here the official trail takes you straight up An Bhinn Bhui (6464) but I liked the look of the knoll in the direction of Hag Island:

“Knoll at Point 164 on the Map”

On the way, you get a good retrospective back to the start of the trail (6465). At the top you are rewarded with great views in all directions (6467, 6469 & 6471).



6465: back to the start



6467: the Stags of Broadhaven (now four)



6469: view inland towards Portacloy



6471: towards An Bhinn Bhui

Rather than cutting back to the official trail, I recommend following the coast for this view (6474) before finding your way back to the posts – you need to do this as there's a boggy patch to cross at point 113 on the map and the posts take the first easy route.



6474: the bay to the west of Hag Island

Now you are faced with the 140m climb up the slope seen in photo 6464. It took me 40 minutes hard slog. There's not much point in going round by the fence that guards the cliff edge as the views are nothing special. Here's one from my only visit to the fence about two-thirds the way up (6475). From here, you can follow the fence but it leads away from the cliff edge so that you are prevented from looking downwards from the top of An Bhinn Bhui, presumably for safety reasons.

Near the top you are helped by slat bridges over boggy bits (6476). The views are tremendous away from the cliffs but don't show up well on my photos (6477). You can also see the Nephin Beg Range and, I'm told, the mountains of Donegal on a really clear day.



6475: caves and the Stags from the fence



6476: slat bridges at the top of Bhinn Bhui



6477: the best I could do: from the left, Dun Cheartain no Glea, Broad Haven with Slievemore and Croaghaun hazy in the distance, Kilgalligan and the Mullet Peninsula

At the end of the fence, you can again look along the coast (6488). As you descend the slope, you see different perspectives on the picturesque Oilean Mionnan (Kid Island) (6485) until you reach the cove at the bottom (6487). Nearby there's the Children of Lir sculpture, mentioned in all the publicity, but which I found boring and pretentious – nothing about it evoked in me the famous legend so I didn't take a photo. Later I heard that its local nickname is "the bike shed".



6488: Oilean Mionnan from near the top of Bhinn Bhui



6485: Oilean Mionnan from lower down



6487: cove at the bottom of the slope

Just before reaching the cove in photo 6487, just after crossing a bridge, you can take a section of the purple- and red-arrowed loops over boggy land to a road that leads down to Carrowteige village, but I went along the road to Kilgalligan where I was staying. The 8.5k from Portacloy had taken me 4 hours walking time and certainly lived up to its Lonely Planet billing. I'm just sorry that the views away from the coast, inland and over Broad Haven aren't done justice in my photos because the features are too distant and spread-out to show up well. However, I still had a sizeable chunk of the coastline as far as Barr na Rinne (Rinroe Point) awaiting me for the next day when I hoped I could get better photos and have an easier time of it.

334: Cill Ghallagain (Kilgalligan) Loop

This is my name for this trail from Kilgalligan, part of the Children of Lir Loop (blue arrows). I had expected it to be easier and shorter than the trail from Portacloy, which is why I did it second as I wasn't having a rest day in between. As it turned out, it was no easier and of equal length by the time I had gone 'off-trail' several times.



6492: from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

I retraced my steps to the disappointing Children of Lir sculpture (6494) and turned left to continue my progress round the coast.

6494: the road from Kilgalligan northwards to the coast



After ten minutes, just off the marked trail, I came to:

“A Little Promontory past Two Little Pools”

from where you can see across the cove in photo 6487 at the end of the previous trail, up to An Bhinn Bhui (6495), along the coast to the Stags of Broad Haven (6496, 6501), along the coast in the other direction for yet another view of Oileán Mionnán (6498) and more or less south past one of the pools in the direction of the trail (6499).



6495: across the cove to An Bhinn Bhui



6498: the coast to Oilean Mionnan



6496: the coast to the Stags of Broad Haven



6501: close-up of the Stags (now five showing)



6499: the trail ahead

As on the previous trail, you can choose to follow the posts which cut out most of the promontories and the best views or go ‘off-trail’, as I did, and search out those best views as you wander nearer to the cliff edge (6502 – 6506).



6502: a deep cove before Oilean Mionnan



6503: still cutting and stacking peat



6504: as near as you can get to Oilean Mionnan



6506: looking back to An Bhinn Bhui

Now there's a 1.5 k stretch where I kept to the posts as the coast looked less interesting but you have to cross a rather awkward cwm (I don't know what they call them in Ireland but that's the Welsh name) (6507 – 6511).



6507: just before the cwm



6508: going down into the cwm



6509: looking up the cwm to An Bhinn Bhui



6511: the cwm hits the sea, Erris Head behind

After another, much smaller, cwm, it's uphill to the top of the 120m hill to the west of Kilgalligan – not as tough as the climb up An Bhinn Bhui but tough enough for me without my rest day. At the top, as usual, I got my rewards: views of the head, unnamed on the map, pointing to Slogaide island (6512), a lovely mini-Amazon bog pool (6514) and sheep ignoring the safety fence (6517).



6512: headland with Erris Head behind



6514: a bog pool



6517: sheep like good views, too

Continuing along the trail, or near to it, you reach

“A Knoll to the Right of the Trail just before it goes Downhill”

This is a top spot to cap a top trail: the views are better than those from the top of An Bhinn Bhui as the features are not as far away – so my photos are better. To my mind, they show everything you come to this part of the world for: up to An Bhinn Bhui and along the coast (6522), over the promontory to Erris Head (similar to photo 6512 shown above), over Broad Haven towards the Mullet Peninsula and the mountains of Achill Island, now visible in my photo (6525) and down to Barr na Rinne (Rinroe Head) and the beaches beyond. Inland, you can see parts of the townlands of Carrowteige and Kilgalligan.



6522: back to Oilean Mionnan and An Bhinn Bhui



6525: Broad Haven and Achill Island

The trail now descends – about 200m further west than shown on the map, in fact, down the steepest part of the slope. The short distance took me 20 minutes of zigging and zagging while I watched a younger and fitter hiker disappear into the distance. Two compensations: the views around Barr na Rinne improve because you see more beach and coastline (6529) and I spotted several tiny purple flowers, the first flowers I'd seen on the Carrowteige trails (6535).



6529: Barr na Rinne and its surrounding beaches



6535: tiny purple flower

Once at the bottom, you have a lovely flat 1k walk, much nearer the coast than shown on the map, towards the first beach (6534). Just before the point from where photo 6534 was taken, you have to turn inland on the far side of a small cwm to a gate into a narrow path between two fences. This brings you out into sandy terrain and after ½k to the road down to Barre na Rinne. Turn right for the Barre and left for Kilgalligan.



6534: the beach before Barre na Rinne

For me, this trail was even better than the previous one as it had more variety and even better views. I had expected it to be comparatively flat when I viewed it from An Bhinn Bhui but there were plenty of ups and downs and it took me exactly the same walking time (4 hours for 8.5k) on another perfect day. It turned out to be the best trail of the whole trip so it's going into my pantheon of heavenly hikes (see under "Odds & Sods").

335: Cuan an Fhoid Duibh (Blacksod Bay)

I'm calling this trail "Blacksod Bay" because it's dominated by views of the bay. The previous day I had tried to take a route round the tip of the Mullet Peninsula from Gob an Fhoid Duibh, marked on the OSI map as a track. I had been assured by the Tourist Office in Belmullet that this turned into a walkable path to An Port Mor. Bad advice: the track deteriorated after ½k into a bog and the surrounding terrain was deep heather and very long grass.



6536: boggy terrain and Achill Island

I gave up after about 1k and fought my way up the slope to the north to another track which was walkable and returned me to the road just above where I was staying. This little expedition took me 1½ hours hard labour and I gave up for the day (photo 6536 shows why I tried the route – the views to Achill – and why I failed – the long grass between the rocks, which only got worse).



6768: the south end of the Mullet Peninsula; from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie



6300: from Discovery Map 22; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

The next day dawned brighter in every sense. I decided to stick to the roads in my attempt to see as much of Blacksod Bay as possible. Going west on the minor road from An Fod Dubh (Blacksod), after just over 1k, you come to a stone circle which is officially part of a sculpture trail to entice us tourists (see also the Children of Lir sculpture excoriated on the previous trail). This one is more convincing and could pass as an ancient monument in a few years' time, although it is only 22 years old. It's not a circle either but an incipient spiral, rather like a curly question mark. I arrived early before the sun had burned off the clouds so I took an atmospheric photo (6541) and left the rest for later.



6541: early morning with Slievemore behind

The road continues down to An Fal Mor and An Port Mor, with islands out to sea (6543). Going straight on at An Fal Mor, you reach an extensive graveyard, part of which is on a hillock with the remains of a chapel.



6543: An Fal Mor village with islands out to sea

You can struggle through very long grass to a spot:

“By a Celtic Cross on Top of the Hillock at An Port Mor”

where the views over Blacksod Bay are exceptional (6548, 6549 & 6552).



6548: over the graveyard to Slievemore



6549: over the graveyard to Croaghaun



6552: the Celtic Cross and An Port Mor beach – plus a few islands

Follow the road to the car-park above the beach where there's a better view of the beach without the walled-in, regimented graveyard (6562). Then you simply have to walk along the beach which is just one large spot:

“Beach at An Port Mor”

I judge this to be one of the most beautiful, and natural, beaches I have ever walked along, both for the views and the flotsam thrown up on it (6563, 6564, 6566 & 6568).



6562: beach from the car-park



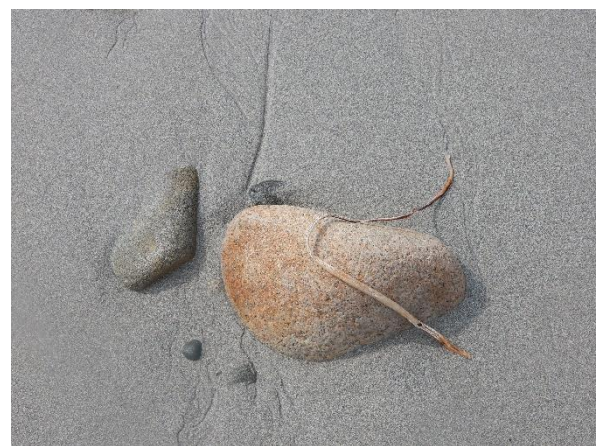
6564: Slievemore and Croaghaun



6563: Croaghaun and the bay



6566: Ok, I 'posed' this one



6568: but I didn't 'pose' this one

At the far end of the beach, a ‘Strong Currents’ notice carries a surprising subscript (6571). Then there’s a long walk past the houses of Toin na hOllai with various animals in fields (6573) to a crossroads at Leitir Beag.



6573: I liked this tableau

6571: in case you can’t read it on your smart-phone, the lower notice says: “Customs Drug Watch”



Turn left at the crossroads to visit:

“An Old Signal Tower in a Fenced Field”

My spot is about 60m west of the tower to get the best all-round views from a sittable-on bank (6578, 6580, 6587).



6578: looking north (close-up)



6580: Inis Ge Theas and Inis Ge Thuaidh



6587: Slievemore and Croaghaun again

Obviously, I couldn't leave without taking a photo of the ghostly signal tower (6589).

Back at the crossroads, go straight ahead up the hill. The unmade road takes you over the hill past a mast with extensive views, most of which I've shown already. However, you can also see north to the Mullet Peninsula (6593) and east to the Nephin Beg Mountains (too far away to photo).



6589: my spot is to the right, out of shot



6593: a typical bay on the Mullet Peninsula at An Eachleim

I spent ten minutes trying to persuade a stray bleating lamb on the road back to its mother through a gate I'd opened for it and felt smugly in tune with the animal realm only to be mooed at vociferously by a herd of cattle. However, this little bunch seemed more curious than annoyed with me (6594).

6594: curious bunch of cattle with Croaghauun and islands in the distance



Turning right at the T-junction, I passed this house and forgot to take a photo. As with many houses in the townland, this is a work in progress: the front 'garden' area is covered in a jumble of huge stones, one of which carries "STONE MAD" in large letters – the Irish do love to have large stones in their gardens. I took the photo from around the next corner (6599).

6599: 'Stone mad' house

Back to the 'stone circle', now in bright sunshine and blue sky (6601 – 6605). There I met two locals who kindly offered to give me a lift back to my b&b.



6601: looks like a circle....



6602: but isn't (note 'tail' on the left)



6604: the 'tail' and Croaghaun again

6605: the 'tail' and islands

This trail more than made up for yesterday's fiasco. It was what I'd come to Blacksod for and whetted my appetite for forthcoming trails on Achill Island over the water. The only reason I'm not putting it into my pantheon of heavenly hikes, despite the glories of An Port Mor, is that it was almost entirely on roads – in fact, I could have driven all of it, apart from the beach and the signal tower.

336: Keem

We have now moved to Achill Island, easy enough by Local Link bus from Belmullet to Mulranny and bus 450 onto Achill. I had been to Achill before but by bike and the main thing I remember from 25 years ago is the hard slog from Dooagh to Keem and back again, up and down long, steep hills. So I didn't do that again: instead I relied on my thumb and a notice saying "DOOAGH PLEASE" for the return. Keem is at the end of the line. A beach and two parking areas beneath the steep slopes of Croaghaun on one side and Benmore on the other. Between the two slopes there's a valley going up to two small tarns and down the other side.



6317: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie



6318: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

The bus dropped me at Dooagh (on the right of the first map) and I walked up the road for about 1k so that the vehicles I thumbed would almost all be going to Keem. After ½ an hour or so and about a dozen vehicles, a drone expert, who was looking for sharks in Keem Bay, stopped for me and gave me a lesson in both drones and sharks. He also suggested that I go up to a tower on Moyteoge Head and showed me his terrific photos from there (6607).



6607: Keem Bay from the car – the tower visible on top of the hill

First, I went towards the beach and found the obvious spot:

“By the Keem Bay Signpost above Keem Strand”

No apologies for breaking my rule (see Introduction) of not including spots that are accessible by car: it really is a wonderful spot and rightly famous for it (6608 – 6612).



6608: spot is by the bent pole



6610: out towards Minaun Hill (see later)



6611: towards the valley



6612: Croaghaun Mountain

I set off towards Moyteoge Head, as advised, but, as you can see from photo 6607, it's awful steep, even if you go up a path slanting to the right. I gave up almost immediately, having taken a slightly better photo of the beach area than was possible from my spot (6614).

6614: Keem Strand with car-park and road up the far hillside



Instead I reverted to my original plan: to walk up the valley to see what was on the far side past the tarns. I gave myself 1¼ hours each way as I wanted to give myself enough time to thumb it to the bus from Dooagh.

Not a lot to say about the trail, more of a boggy obstacle course. It starts from the upper car-park along a track to a white building (6624). At first there's an obvious path which continues past a ruined building frequented by sheep and then gradually disappears, leaving you to meander around boggy runnels between foot-high banks.



6624: the path starts just round the bend

Because the saddle around the two tarns is long and more or less flat, the view down the far side never seems to arrive. After my 1¼ hours, I had reached a point well past the second tarn but still with no view down to the coast (6616). Returning past the two tarns, you can clearly see the steepness of Benmore (6617).



6616: this shows the worst of the terrain



6617: the two tarns and Benmore

At the top of the down slope to Keem, you can see the whole spread of the bay area (6619):

I got back bang on time but had to wait 40 minutes and another dozen vehicles for a lift from two Belgian mountaineers who had just climbed both peaks of Croaghaun and were off to climb Slievemore from Dugort Beach near where I was staying.

6619: you can just see the tower on the right and the white building at the start of the trail



I got the bus to the crossroads at Valley from where there's a 2k walk to my b&b on the coast, an unwelcome end to a tough day avoiding the notorious Irish bog. One tiny compensation: a prettier version in a wall by the road of the little flower seen on the Kilgalligan Loop (6625).

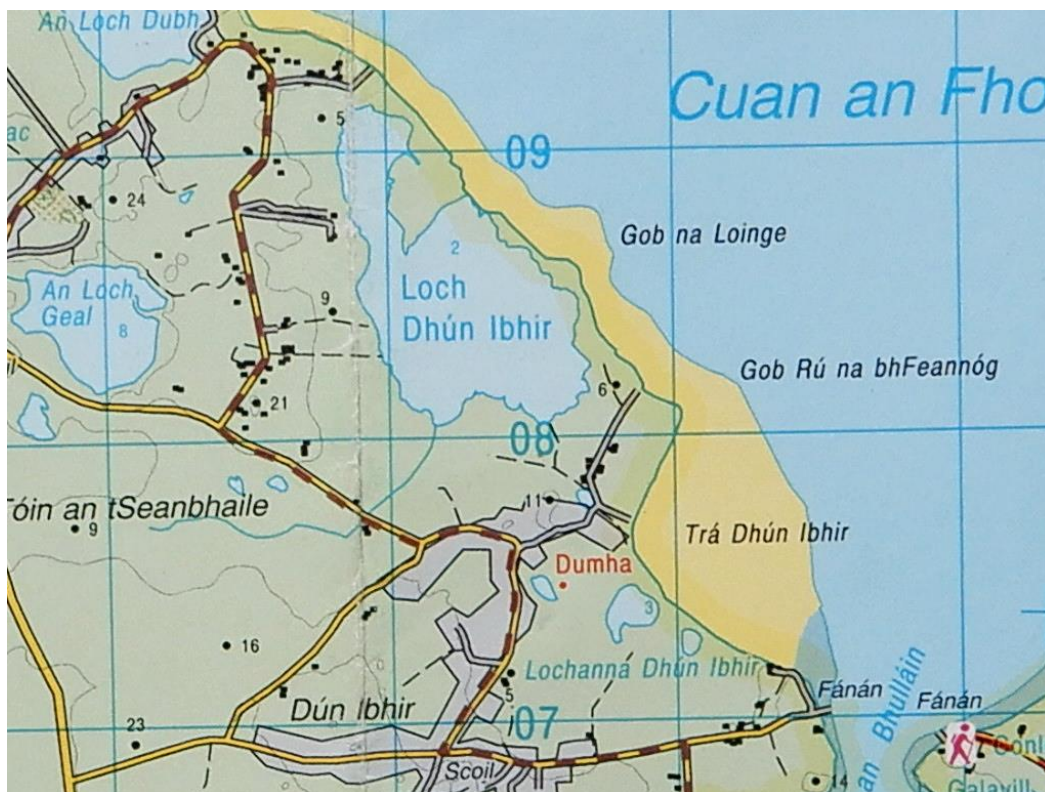
6625: don't know what it is but I like it a lot



Could I recommend this trail? Not really, unless, like me, you enjoy finding a route on difficult terrain and can put up with the disappointment of the expected view not being seen. Of course, you could go further down the far side of the saddle but that was too much for me. As it turned out, I reached the same height as the suggested tower – but up and down a much gentler slope so my knees were intact for the next trail.

Dhun Ibhí (Dooniver) Loop

This doesn't get a trail number as it didn't work out for me and I can't recommend it. I had been told that it is possible to do a loop around Loch Dhun Ibhí just to the north of the townland of Dun Ibhí (Dooniver) near where I was staying. So I set off from near An Loch Dubh (top left of the map) on the road to the south.



6638: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

Straight away, there's a view across Loch Dhun Ibhir towards the Nephin Beg Range (in cloud) and one of Achill's hills (6626). Just before the junction, the bulk of Minaun (trail 338 coming up) lies ahead (6627).



6626: view over Loch Dhun Ibhir



6627: Minaun Hill in the distance

Passing through the northern part of Dooniver, you can visit Tra Dhun Ibhir (Dooniver Beach) (6629). At the end of the road to the south-east of Loch Dhun Ibhir, you descend to the beach and can make your way along a sandy strip for 100m or so but then the strip ends and the stones start (6633).



6629: Dooniver Beach



6633: end of the sandy strip

You can go up onto the grass but that only takes you another 100m to where you are confronted with the outflow of the loch and a thin strip of stones between it and the sea (6634). I spent 15 minutes of sheer hell trying to make my way along the stones, shouting in frustration and fear of doing myself serious damage before giving up and retracing my steps to the safety of the turf and the sandy strip.

6634: n.b. those stones are large and wet



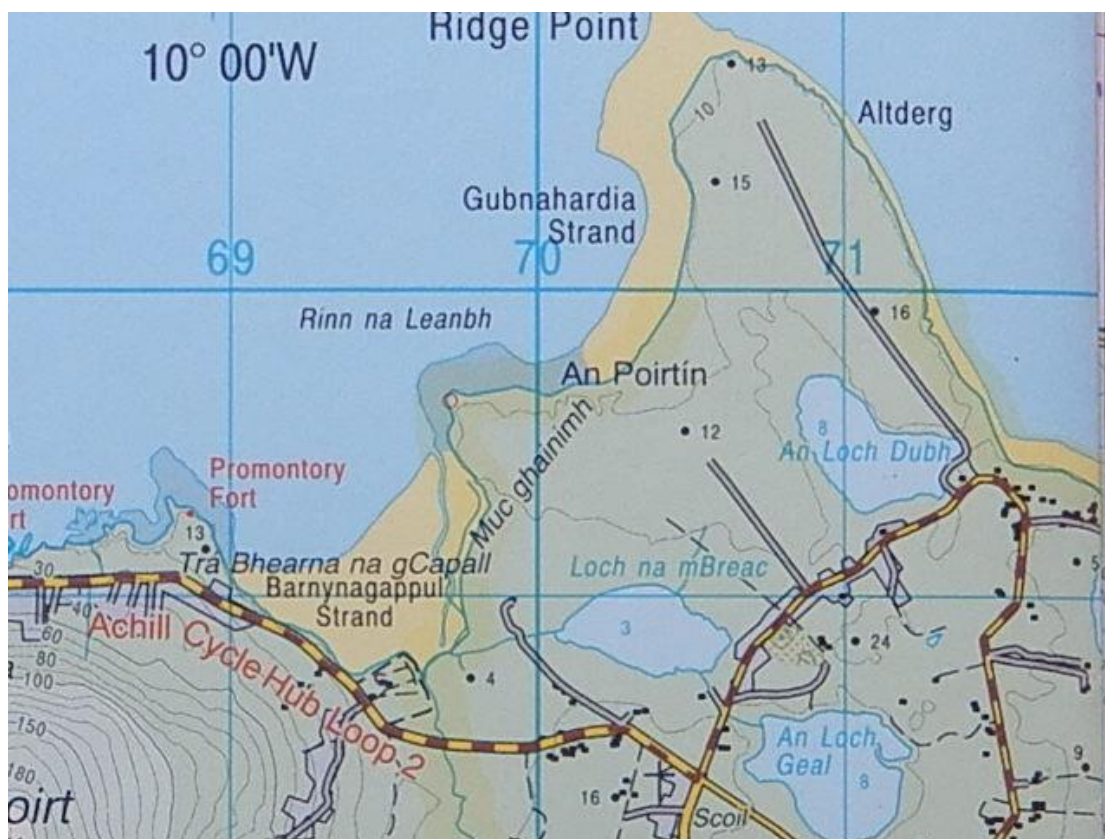
I returned on the roads I came by to my b&b and went down the cul-de-sac to the north of the loch to see the beach. It's clear that more stones would have to be crossed at the north end of the beach – the map is misleading: there's not much sand to be seen (6636). Further enquiries revealed that you can get through on sand at really low tide but that there's always about 50m of nasty stones to cross. Rather you than me!

6636: north end of the beach past the loch



337: The Valley Loop

Did this trail on May Day Bank Holiday because the bus schedules didn't work for trails further afield from where I was staying. I didn't expect much because it looked like a flat traipse around the coast but the second part turned out well.



6306: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

I started out from Valley House just to the north of An Loch Geal and turned right on the road towards the coast at An Loch Dubh. This is the opposite direction to that indicated on the post waymarkers so you have to interpret your route backwards, if you see what I mean. I chose to do this for two reasons: I wanted to catch a bus at the Valley crossroads later on, thus saving 1k of walking, and I thought the views ahead would be better, as they were.

The Valley road walk to An Loch Dubh and left on a bog road past it are both pretty boring, relieved only by these views (6606, 6639, 6640 & 6641).



6606: Slievemore across Loch na mBreac (taken 2 days before)



6639: Slievemore in cloud over An Loch Dubh



6640: neat rows of cut peat



6641: a peat bank and stacks with a cutter at work

The trail turns left before fenced-off fields about 1k along the bog road but I went straight on to the end and probably trespassed through sheep fields to resume the trail by the coast north of Gubnahardia Strand (6644).



6644: from north of Gubnahardia Strand



6645: Gubnahardia Strand

The Achill Walks Guide leaflet suggested walking along the stony strand but I didn't fancy it, especially after my debacle on Dooniver Beach (6645) so I stuck to the springy turf behind the beach. You have to cross a few runnels (6646) but otherwise the walking is very pleasant (6648).



6648: pleasant walking terrain and handy bench



6646: one of the runnels you have to cross

Straight after the bench in photo 6648, I found myself in an unexpected spot:

“Sandy Hollow behind Gubnahardia Strand”

I found it very peaceful here and the beauty of its immediate surroundings summed up for me what is attractive about this part of the trail: on one side, large pink, white and grey stones (6649); on the other, low sandy dunes (6652) with views along the coast both ways (6654, 6650). The turf was sprinkled with lots of snails with lovely blue and white striped shells. The hollow kept out the wind and what noise there was so I could easily have slept there the rest of the afternoon but of course I didn't (shopping to do as I was self-catering). As you can see here and later, the better views are ahead, justifying my choice to do the trail 'backwards'.



6649: stones behind the beach



6652: low, sandy dunes



6654: view back to the bench



6650: view ahead

About here, a slim path develops and continues through long grass to the large dunes at Rinn na Leanbh (also known as Caraun Point). Helpful stepping stones enable you to cross the wetter runnels on the way. Less unexpectedly than the last spot, my next one is:

“On Top of the Largest Dune at Rinn na Leanbh”

This provides an overview of most of the trail, albeit at a distance (6660 – 6664).



6660: ahead to Barnynagappul Strand



6661: inland to the Valley road (line of trees)



6662: back along the coast to Ridge Point



6664: close-up of Minaun over Barny Strand

Then comes Barnynagappul Strand (also known as Golden Strand) (6667) but the trail takes you behind it, mercifully for me avoiding the soft sand of the dunes, to a road serving a football pitch. This takes you back to the main road where I waited for my bus.

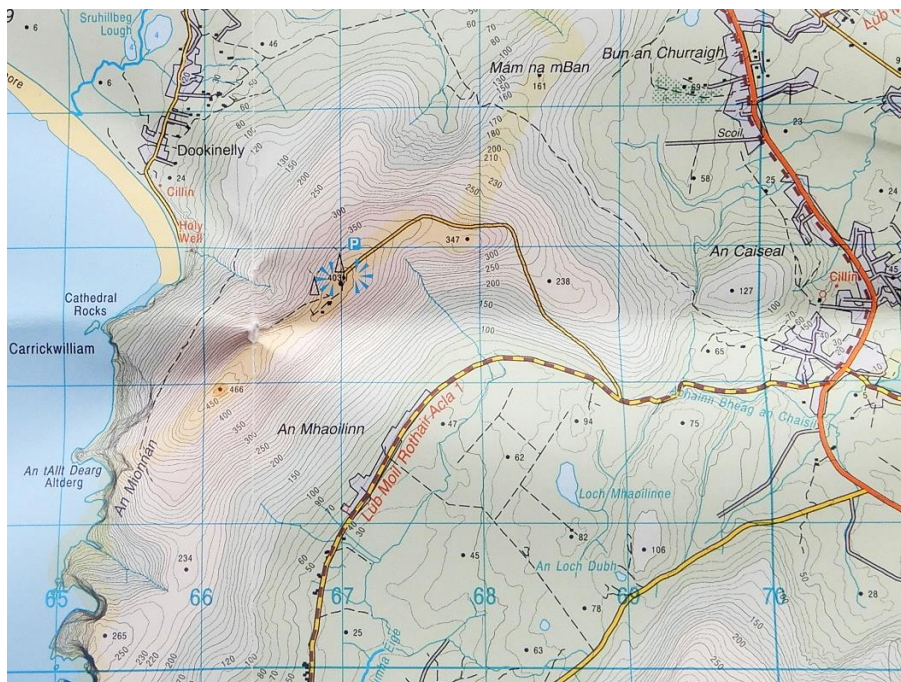


6667: Barnynagappul Strand – Slievemore still in cloud on the right

As you can tell, I was pleasantly surprised by the second part of this trail. So my suggestion would be to do it ‘out and back’ along the shore past the two beaches and skip the rest.

338: Minaun

The rationale behind this trail was “the best view in Achill” from the top of Minaun.



6326: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

I could see the top from my b&b – the cloud was ominously close but I set off anyway as the forecast for the next day was even worse. Bus to An Caiseal (Cashel) and I set off on the road westwards (6669) and veered right at the junction. A short way after the junction, the scenically-located coastal village of Dumha Eige (Dooega) comes into view (6670). However, cloud had returned to the summit of Minaun (6677) and I thought about turning back.



6669: Minaun in the distance



6677: top of Minaun now in cloud



6670: Dumha Eige townland (on the coast) with the Minaun Ridge on the right

Then I reasoned that, having come this far, I might as well keep going to see what I could see from round the first left-hand turn on the map which was still below the cloud. It was hard going for me but I was rewarded with some decent views, despite the cloud cover on the hill-tops (6671 – 6675). Keel and Croaghaun were obscured by the ridge in photo 6671.



6671: towards Slievemore



6672: towards Valley and Dooniver



6673: towards Dooniver and Inis Bigil



6674: towards Achill Sound



6675: close-up of the Valley Loop

Well that was the best I could do. On the way down, I got a different shot of Dumha Eige from higher up (6676) and one of An Caiseal from the main road (6678). I got back to the bus stop in time for a visit to Ted's (6679), which offers everything from bingo to takeaway fish'n'chips – in my case, a cold Guinness.

6676: Dumha Eige from near the top of the road I went up



6678: the townland of An Caiseal



6679: Ted's Bar – a more typical Achill view

I don't think the effort was really worth it but I wasn't to know that when I set out. Reputedly, the views from Minaun take in the whole of Achill Island, including the Minaun Cliffs on the far side of the ridge, plus the Mullet Peninsula, the Nephin Beg Range and Clare Island. Here's a post-card of Keel and Croaghaun to show you some of what I missed (6758).



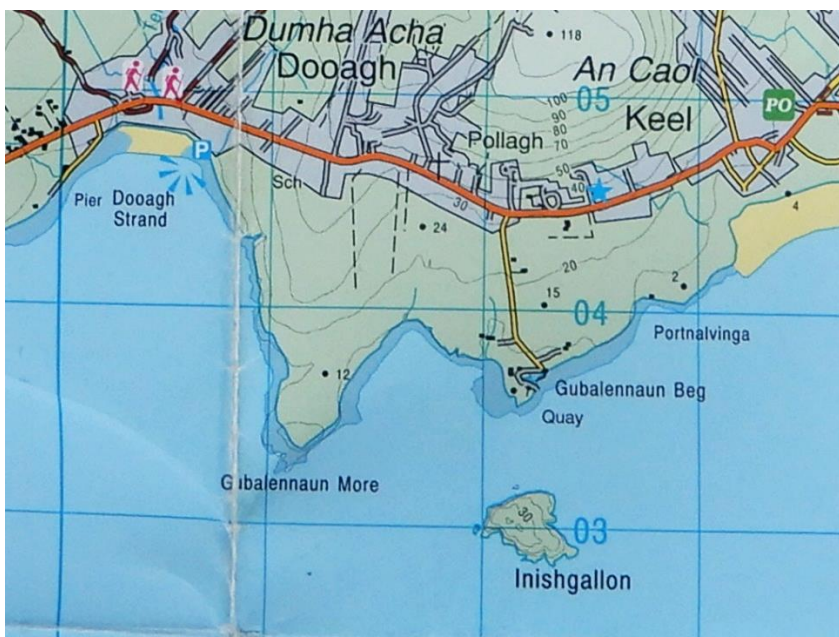
6758: photo Michael Diggin; copyright John Hinde Ltd.

339: Dumha Acha – An Caol (Dooagh – Keel)

On my last day on Achill Island, I intended to do part of the Dooagh - Keel Loop (a.k.a. the 'Deserted Village Walk' in the Achill Walks Guide). Because of bad weather, this was my third walk in three days so I didn't want anything too taxing. My idea was to do the section from Dooagh Beach round the two Gubalennaun Headlands and back to the main road at Pollagh, a mere 5k.



6681: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie



6682: same map, more detail

On the way from the bus stop to Dooagh Beach, I passed this house and somewhat tropical garden that outshone every other house that I saw on Achill (6704). The start is at the east end of the pebble beach (6685). Straight away, I met a couple returning from the headland and asked about a tidal section of the trail that I had read about. They said the way is by a rough stony beach when the tide is out but that the cliffs behind are badly eroded and not passable (the tide was in). However, the first headland was accessible. So that's what I did.



6704: impressive property



6685: the start of the trail

The way is relatively straightforward with a little chasm to go round (6688) and a boggy patch to negotiate (6689).



6688: the little chasm (or inlet)



6689: the boggy patch is after the rocks

The actual headland is a tussocky place with 'pin cushions' (6690) and little flowers (6691).



6690: a 'pin cushion'



6691: little flowers

Needless to say, my spot is:

“The Very End of Gubalennaun More Headland”

from where you can see all the most famous landmarks of Achill Island (6693 – 6698). This is my favourite spot on Achill Island and what I had come for: sea, islands, cliffs, beaches, mountains and sky. Hence, lots of photos....



6693: the Minaun Cliffs and Clare Island on the horizon



6694: Minaun, its cliffs and Inishgallon



6695: what would have been the trail to the next headland, part of Keel and Slievemore



6697: part of Dooagh, Croaghaun and Keem, on the left

Well satisfied, I retraced my steps to Dooagh, ten minutes quicker than on the way out because I knew the route better (6699, 6700 & 6702).

6698: close-up of Keem





6699: avoid those rocks



6700: a green-lined rock pool



6702: Dooagh Beach and Croaghaun

I caught the bus to the top of the road down to Gubalennaun Beg (a.k.a. Purteen) (6705) and went down to see what would have been the far end of the route along the coast (6707).

6705: the road down to Purteen





6707: the 'impassable' route from Gubalennaun More (left)

Then I went out to the headland for these views (6712, 6714):



6712: Inishgallon



6714: Purteen Pier & Trawmore Beach (vaguely)

Back up at the main road, I turned right for the bus stop at Keel and a better view of the 3k expanse of Trawmore Beach (6721).

By dodging around, I reckon I saw the views I had anticipated without subjecting myself to the stony beaches and dubious eroding paths of the stretch between the two headlands. The guides say it's possible but local knowledge says otherwise.

6721: Trawmore Beach from the road to Keel



340: Mulranny Causeway Loop

Strictly speaking, this trail is not on Achill Island but at an isthmus on the way to it from Westport and Newport. The village of Mulranny (An Mhala Raithní) lies just before the isthmus at the north end of a sandy bay (Trawoughter). This trail goes over a causeway between the bay and a salt marsh and then round an inland loop back to the village. By the way, the OSI map has got its labels wrong: the Lookout Hill Loop is the section to the north of the Greenway Cycle Track that runs to the north of Mulranny. The Causeway Loop is waymarked by blue arrows on posts.



6334: from Discovery Map 30; copyright Ordnance Survey Ireland, 2015; www.osi.ie

The start is opposite the Mulranny Park Hotel down about 90 steps to the causeway (6725): to the left, stunning views over the sands towards the famous islands of Clew Bay (6728); to the right, the view is green – over the salt marsh to the next bit of the trail (6727).



6725: the causeway



6727: the trail goes behind the houses



6728: over Trawoughter to the islands of Clew Bay

You cross an arched bridge (6762) to a stony beach (6734, 6736).



6762: unfortunately, not my photo but from the Tourist Office; www.mulranny.ie



6734: from the beach back to the start



6736: the beach, looking east to Clew Bay

Leaving the beach on a road, you climb gradually behind the salt marsh (6740). Then you leave the road at a corner on an uphill track to the left which takes you across another minor road to another track that becomes a bog road.



6740: over the salt marsh to Trawoughter, the beach and Clew Bay

After 300m, a blue arrow directs you over boggy ground to the right. Don't miss the view from here (6741) before you head off down the not-immediately-obvious path (6742). To your right, you can see Mulranny lined up on the hillside above Trawoughter (6744).



6741: probably the best view of Clew Bay and a few of its many islands



6742: the trail crosses this terrain to the trees



6744: Mulranny behind Trawoughter

Having crossed a stream (6745), the trail takes a more circuitous route than shown on the map, with a steep, boggy final descent to the main road past a church. The Causeway Loop continues on the far side of the main road, taking a twisting path through rhododendrons and pines with hardly any views – so no photos, just this post-card in clearer weather (6764).



6745: this was prettier than it looks



6764: from Lookout Hill; www.mulranny.ie

You finally emerge onto the tarmacked Greenway Cycle Track where the Causeway Loop turns right to end at the back of the Mulranny Park Hotel where there's a snack shop at the old railway station. The Lookout Hill Loop turns left at the Greenway to take a 2k loop at first on the old railway line that the Greenway follows and then over the hillside to a viewpoint before returning to the back of the hotel (6749).

6749: view from the Lookout Loop along Bellacragher Bay; from Achill Walks Guide, available from achilltourism.com



My advice: do the Causeway Loop as far as the main road by the church and skip the rest !

Overall Conclusion

The Mullet Peninsula was a revelation: I had feared flat and boring but got vast vistas, craggy coastline and bonny beaches. The only disappointment was that the offshore islands are too far away to be seen clearly and create much of an impression.

As for Achill Island, walking around was undoubtedly better than biking around: I saw more and I'm sure the memories will last longer. Unfortunately for me – and my photos – the weather wasn't as co-operative as it had been on Mullet. Still, despite losing views of mountain-tops and far-off places, I loved the beaches and the coastline.

Both areas are remote but accessible by public transport and have sparse but conveniently-placed accommodation. Apparently, they are becoming popular with tourists, like me, seeking something a bit different so book early – I had some difficulty booking one month in advance for my April/May trip.

Plus, of course, there's the Irish people and culture, of which I mostly approve (main negative is their propensity for changing online bus timetables and pick-up points). See the endpiece to Trip 34: Around Dingle Bay for the things that I approve of about Ireland and the Irish.

