



A Wild Irish Walk

The cliffs of Benwee Head stand at 255m high and give County Clare's famed Cliffs of Moher a good run for their money. At least that is what our Walk the West of Ireland walking guide, Jim Henry, tells us. I haven't seen the Cliffs of Moher but standing on this wild headland looking out at the raging Atlantic Ocean, I'm pretty sure I'm getting an authentic Irish walking experience. We've left our vehicles parked by the little school in the North Mayo village of Carrowteige and walked headlong into the wind, up and over the headland to see for ourselves the Dun Chaochain cliffs and, off shore, the Stags of Broadhaven.

This is the first serious walking day of a ten day tour, organized by Nelson based Irish woman Rachel Ryan, of Walk the West of Ireland. The climb up is stiff and exhilarating, with a few adrenaline rushes as the gusty North Atlantic wind gets hold of someone's Goretex rain gear, but we're all still on our feet and metaphorically, if not literally, blown away by the landscape, the scenery, the light and the sheer Irishness of the landscape.

There are eight of us in our group, plus Jim our guide. Our ages range from late 40s to early 70s and we are well equipped with poles, backpacks and hearty sandwiches for lunch. We stop frequently for botanical, geological and archeological chats about the bog cotton, the sheep, the mountain flora and fauna and the old stone walls buried under the encroaching bog. The bog itself has stories to tell, and is still harvested by local people. This is my first sighting of cut peat arranged to dry in rounded mounds that dot the landscape, and Jim gives us a laughing demonstration of how to stack cut peat. This is Common Land, so local landowners have grazing and peat cutting rights that they still exercise – small brown mountain sheep graze among the piles of peat and scatter as we approach.

The walking track leads us around the headland alongside an ancient black ditch which is believed to mark old boundaries, past stunning views of the sea and the wild coastal waters as they crash and boom against the cliffs below. Towards the end of the day we reach an unexpectedly modern shelter – a sculpture that is part of the Tir Saile North Mayo Sculpture Trail. This man made dry stone shelter is named for an ancient legend of the Children of Lir, children who were turned into swans and condemned to roam the countryside for 900 years. Whatever it's reason for being, it's smooth rounded form is reminiscent of the piles of peat lying back along the track, and it provides a much appreciated seat in the lee of the wind as Jim treats us to a rendition of the Wild Rover. From the sculpture it's not too far back down to the cars. We head back to our lodgings at Kilalla via a village pub, where instead of afternoon tea I get my first taste of Guinness. Here is Ireland indeed!

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