

Paths of Irish history

Walking tours in the west put hikers in the footsteps, and sometimes the mind-sets, of generations stretching back to prehistory.

By Emilie C. Harting

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Walking along the stone ruins of a village on Achill Island, off Ireland's west coast, I imagined the rhythms of everyday life in these long-abandoned cottages built into the hillside.

A woman keeping house and eking out meals for her family would be taking our route to the brook for water, balancing a child or two and a pail, and praying that neither would fall into the rocky crevices along the way.

What would these people of Connemara, County Galway, have eaten before the famine of the 1840s, I asked.

"Only potatoes and the very occasional piece of lamb," said our guide, John.

We made our way up the squishy heather bogs to the top of the hill and looked out at the Atlantic. Pointing to a 10-foot-high ruin of rocks, John explained, "That's one of the signal towers built in the late 1700s, when the English wanted to keep the French from invading to help the Irish. This tower sent signals to one up on the Mullet Peninsula . . . and then to one on Clare Island."



Poulnabrone Dolmen is the Burren's most famous prehistoric grave, dating back 3,000 to 6,000 years.

In the distance, three islands - Clare, Inish Turk, and Inish Boffin - stretched into the ocean like splayed green fingers.

It was very still, with only the occasional bleating of sheep. In the 1700s, we might have heard grinding donkey carts or marching soldiers.

Turning around, we could see specks of white cottages and pubs in the heart of the island. The causeway we'd taken was a tiny ribbon that led to inlets, bays and mountains. The cows we'd seen strolling into the water at low tide were out of sight.

We were on a hike through the western counties of Galway and Mayo, on the opposite side of the island from Dublin. Each trail was on different terrain, though at every moment I felt I was walking through Irish history, imagining life in ancient huts built into the hills, subsisting on potatoes and facing the threat of disease, war and death.



The Cliffs of Moher in County Clare are one of the most popular places for hiking in the west of Ireland. To the north is the Burrens, also popular.

Our lives were a sharp contrast. For three days and four nights, we stayed at a bed-and-breakfast in Westport and hiked in Connemara. Then we moved three hours south to County Clare and hiked for 21

2 days in the Burren, on the west coast.

There were 12 walkers, ages 14 to 78: ten Americans, a German, and a native Swiss. A robust 20-year-old would sprint ahead with his elderly father and two teenagers, while a middle group of us kept a steady pace, and two others often lagged behind with John.

After hearty breakfasts, we would lace our hiking boots, fill our backpacks with lunch, water and raingear, and take an hour's van ride to a trail. At the end of the day, we would shower, relax, and eat lamb stew, fresh-caught fish, and homemade brown bread. Those who had the energy went to pubs such as Mike Malloy's, home of the Chieftains, in Westport, to listen to traditional Irish music.



On a morning that began with 13 vibrant rainbows emerging one by one along Lough (Lake) Kylemore, I imagined how fairy tales might rise from the mist.

We made our way across the rocky Famine Road high above Killary Fjord - formed 30 million years ago by a glacier that left the steep sides of the Mweelrea and Twelve Bens mountains stretching to the harbor below.

Famine Road was a public-works project for farmers during the potato famine of 1845-49. They were paid three pence a day plus soup. Seeing the ruins of another hillside village, I pictured women and children struggling to keep warm and dry while the men worked on the road.

"These scruffy inclines don't look at all good for farming. How did they survive?" I asked John.

"With only potatoes, and the occasional piece of lamb," our guide reminded us, his lips pursed, his voice solemn.

The population of Killary Valley, like that of Achill Island, has shrunk drastically since the famine. Looking down at the dark blue water of the fjord, we saw mussel farms - fishing has become a major industry. Yet, the floating gear used to raise the mussels angers those who want to keep the area natural.



Hikers take the Famine Road , built during the potato famine, in Connemara, with Rosroe Harbor in the background.



"It's too windy up there to eat lunch. We wouldn't be able to stand up," John said after we'd climbed through a valley of rocky streambeds and into a remote pass in the Maamturk Mountains.

No one has ever lived here. As we climbed rocks and slippery grasses and watched the landscape change color with the shifting light, I could imagine how people might have thought fairies and leprechauns were casting spells.

Bent almost double against the wind, we reached Mam Ean, or Pass of the Birds, and St. Patrick's Well, a once-secret shrine Catholics built centuries ago, when the English were burning their churches. Crosses stood in shaley rock leading to an altar and stations of the cross built into dark rock. No matter how hard I braced myself against the wind, I could not keep my camera steady. Three hundred years ago, worshippers would have walked miles over desolate land to attend services here.

As we descended into the Inagh Valley, we were suddenly presented with a scene of lakes, peat bogs and sheep farms reaching to Galway Bay and its inlets. W.B. Yeats described this area in his play *The Dreaming of the Bones*, as did George Bernard Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*.



While our hikes through Connemara took us back hundreds of years, the Burren took us back thousands.

The 14 square miles feature contrasting terrain. From a distance, limestone hills look like swirls of green and silver ice cream melting into the sea. There are a few green valleys, but most of the land is covered with scaly rocks - calcite or karst limestone that built up under the sea and erupted 30 million years ago.

Sprouting between cracks in the stone are purple and white geraniums, thyme, orchids, mountain avens, yellow silverweeds, and many other varieties of flowers. Because of an underground system of caves and rivers providing natural irrigation, lakes, called turloughs, appear after rainstorms and disappear for months at a time.

I was afraid my boots would break the crusted tops of the rocks and make them crumble, but they are indestructible. Europeans started coming here 9,000 years ago, walking on land that is now under the English Channel.

Farmers live in the rich, green valleys and send their cattle to the tops of the limestone hills in winter because it is warmer up high. We walked through fields where wildflowers grow over former potato rises. I had an odd feeling that centuries of life were rolling beneath me.



The fog was dense as we climbed into a 3,000-year-old ring fort, a large circle of rocks on the top of a shaley hill. We rested on rocks that had fallen from the sides. Had we been settlers thousands of years ago, we might have scrambled up the hill from our timber houses when invaders were sighted.

The forts served as more than military shelters - one was an early Gaelic school of law.

When the fog lifted, we saw more prehistoric ruins on the horizon. Cairns, or burial sites, looked like mushrooms on hilltops.

On flat ground, we came to the Burren's most famous prehistoric grave, the Poulnabrone Dolmen, with one large, flat stone perched on four vertical ones like an unwieldy table. Dolmens in the Burrens are 3,000 to 6,000 years old, among the oldest in Ireland.

On one trail, we stopped at a holy well and, nearby, a carving of a fertility symbol, both dating back several thousand years. Part of the symbol was scratched out of the rock by church members in medieval times because they considered it vulgar, and a 16th-century prayer was carved next to it.

Winding north from the Cliffs of Moher, we hiked in warm rain along the Burren Way - first on a busy, narrow highway bordered by high grasses, then along rural roads with ruins of stone houses and barns overgrown with bushes and wildflowers. The lush green fields of native grasses sloped to the cliffs shooting down to the sea. We ran our fingers over the bright-red fuchsia bushes and the stone walls alongside the road.

Reaching the South Sound, we descended on winding roads to a striking view: Multicolored buildings lined a cove, framed by the rolling green countryside stretching to the horizon. We were heading for the village of Doolin, one of the most photographed sites in Ireland, known for its traditional music. That afternoon, we rain-soaked travelers joined jovial locals in O'Connor's Pub for juice, tea or a pint.

Back at our small hotel in Lisdoonvarna, the owner, Mary, who specialized in gourmet Irish cooking, served a bounteous dinner of crab salad, beef stew and brown bread.

It was a lot better than only potatoes and the very occasional piece of lamb.

Ireland on Foot

The **Connemara and Burren Walk** is given by Cross Country International Walking Vacations. Since I took the trip in 2006, though, some of the hikes have been shifted to the **West Coast Walk**.

The Connemara and Burren Walk is scheduled for June 7-14, for \$2,340 per person, shared, or with a \$355 single supplement. The West Coast Walk's dates are: June 14-21 and 21-28, July 12-19 and 19-26, Aug. 9-16 and 23-30, Sept. 6-13 and 13-20; \$2,280 per person, shared, \$355 single supplement.

Both trips include seven nights in a B&B or hotel, five days of guided walking, breakfast, lunch on walking days, five dinners, transfers to and from Shannon Airport.

Difficulty of walks

The walking is over dirt tracks, back-country roads, some boggy areas and limestone rock. Ascents up to 1,500 feet on the Connemara and Burren Walk, gradual ascents on the West Coast Walk.

Getting there

Aer Lingus, Air France, American Airlines, Delta and US Airways fly to Shannon Airport from Philadelphia International Airport with one stop. The lowest recent round-trip fare was about \$841.

More information

Cross Country International Walking Vacations

1-800-828-8768

www.walkingvacations.com

Tourism Ireland

1-800-223-6470

www.tourismireland.com

www.discoverireland.com

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