



NORTHERN EXPOSURE

*It's off-radar, under-visited and home to some of the Wild Atlantic Way's most dramatic twists and turns. **Pól Ó Conghaile** drives the Donegal coast. Photographs by **Al Higgins**.*



Coast is clear
- Silver Strand,
near Malinbeg, is
the perfect place
to blow away the
cobwebs.



Top, our writer Pól Ó Conghaile climbing a sea stack near Glencolumbkille under the expert tutelage of Iain Miller. Above, Pól happily back on dry land.

I'm standing at the edge of the earth. Actually, it's further than that. I'm standing on a gnarly old outcrop that has long since broken away from the edge of the earth. It's a sheer, brawny knuckle of a sea stack punching out of the Atlantic Ocean at the tip of Donegal's Slieve League Peninsula. To get here, I've driven across Ireland, poked the car down pencil-thin bohareens, hiked 500 metres from a storm beach and paddled across a mutinous little passage whipped with waves. Oh yeah, and then I got strapped into a harness and helmet and climbed the damn thing.

"What could possibly go wrong?" laughed Iain Miller. That was half an hour ago, when we paused on the last shard of mainland to inflate the souvenir-sized dinghy that would take us across Black Channel (not a very reassuring name, that) to the base of Berg Stack. Donegal boasts more than 100 sea stacks – stonking great

lumps of rock sprouting offshore – and Miller, who leads hill-walking, mountain training and rock-climbing activities with **Unique Ascent** (uniqueascent.ie), has climbed almost every one.

Offshore, two fishermen in yellow oilskins bob about on a boat. Above us, a wary pair of gulls guard their nest. More people have set foot on the moon than on some of these formations, Miller tells me. There is zero signal on my phone.

He's in his element. Fixing a rope between the mainland and stack, he ferries us across, kits me up in safety gear and dances up the 20-metre rockface in jig time. After anchoring the ropes up top, he signals for me to follow. I dig deep, ignore my thumping heart and kick my boot into the first toehold. The initial metres are surprisingly easy. Then the vertigo kicks in. By halfway, I'm way out of my comfort

zone, struggling to tackle the rock one grip at a time. I laugh at none of Iain's jokes. When I finally flop over the top, my hands are raw, I'm breathing hard and I splutter a big, fat F-word.

The view is awesome – heaving waves, great, chunky cliffs and undulating hills, scarred with stone walls. The gulls have taken off, leaving three camouflage-coloured eggs like precious stones in their nest. There's an elemental feeling of freedom. My office desk seems very, very far away.

"Whoop!" Iain shouts. "We got away with it, man!"

I'm in Donegal on a mission. I'm driving the most off-radar (and arguably, under-appreciated) stretch of the Wild Atlantic Way. Skipping obvious attractions such as Bundoran and Rosstown, I started out in Donegal Town, following the coastline as closely as possible right up to the Inishowen ✈

MORE PEOPLE HAVE SET FOOT ON THE MOON
THAN ON SOME OF THESE FORMATIONS



When in Donegal ...

1 Drink Kinnegar As Ireland's craft beer scene explodes, it's getting harder and harder to separate the wheat from the chaff. Kinnegar is a small brewery keeping things simple (and tasty), however. Named after a beach near Rathmullan, its farmhouse beers include a snappy IPA (Scraggy Bay) and citrus-spicy Rye Ale (Rustbucket). When in Donegal, do as the locals do ... and drink it. (kinnegarbrewing.ie)

2 Surf the Peak The Peak in Bundoran is one of Ireland's top waves, breaking on a rocky reef to kick up a lovely, steep shape suiting all styles of surfing. It's most definitely not for beginners, however. If you don't surf, catch it from the shore, before taking the Rougey coastal walk. Locals say you can wish for anything at the wishing chair here ... as long as it's not love or money. (discoverbundoran.com)

3 Have an island adventure Donegal doesn't stop at its coast. The offshore islands here offer some of the wildest scenery on the Wild Atlantic Way. Try Tory Island, with its very own king (no, really), or Arranmore - reached via a 60-foot ferry through the narrow channels between Rutland and Inis Coon. It takes just 15 minutes to reach a wild Atlantic outpost. (087 317 1810; arranmorefastferry.com)



This picture, scenic Silver Strand, where you can often stroll without seeing another soul. Above right, Donal Doherty of Harry's Bar & Restaurant.



Eat at ...

BIG HOUSE The cherry on the Fanad Peninsula's cake, **Rathmullan House** is a Blue Book country house and restaurant offering creature comforts that perfectly offset the wild, Lough Swilly landscape. Local producers (think Pat Patton's lamb, or Greencastle-landed fish) feature large on the bar and restaurant menus, and there are pizzas in the Tap Room, too. (Rathmullan, 074 915 8188; rathmullanhouse.com)

SIMPLY SMART Set in a former Royal Irish Constabulary base in Mountcharles, the **Village Tavern** is a simple, smart and friendly reboot of an old building, doing tasty food that lets local ingredients sing. Try the seafood tasting plate, including a mini prawn cocktail, scallop in chilli oil and crab claw with pesto (among other treats) from €8.95. It does a neat line in craft beers, too. (Mountcharles, 074 973 5622; villagetavern.ie)

LEGENDARY **Harry's Bar & Restaurant** is an Inishowen legend. Donal Doherty & Co refuse to stand still, however, and their energy, enthusiasm and fierce commitment to local produce have helped what is, in effect, a roadside eatery in Bridgend to punch way above its weight. There's a new beach shack on Portstewart Strand, too. (Bridgend, Inishowen, 074 936 8544)



Above, Julie Scott and Jonny Watson of The Rusty Oven pizzeria, hidden away in Dunfanaghy. Below, fishermen head to shore at Port Bay.

✈️ and Fanad peninsulas. It's a journey of hundreds of kilometres, thousands of things to do, and a breath-taking mix of cliffs, beaches, stacks and surprises along the way.

Even before I'd met Iain Miller, in the Gaeltacht village of Glencolmcille, my phone signal had been wavering. Three bars. Two bars. None. That's how remote the Slieve League peninsula gets. Following the N56 and R263 through the trawling port of Killybegs, dipping down to the Blue Flag beach at Fintra and continuing towards Malin Beg, I could no longer access emails, tweets, texts or other updates. Maybe that was Donegal sending a message ("Live in the now, man!"), but the road finally ran out above the scallop-shaped strand cut into the cliffs. Apart from the sheep, I had the place to myself.

The Slieve League cliffs, pummelling 300 metres into the ocean in a sweep of rusty red and charcoal grey, had been steeped in a duvet of dirge. A grey pall hung over the lighthouse at St John's Point. But here, miraculously, a window of blue moved in, allowing shafts of sunlight to spill down on Silver Strand. At Harvey's Point Hotel that night, owner Deirdre McGlone told me that locals can never agree on the number of steps

leading down to the cove. But they can agree on how special it is. When I post a photo on Facebook, a man identifies it as the spot where his mother's ashes were scattered. It's that kind of place.

The following morning, I leave the placid shores of Lough Eske, driving across southwest Donegal to Ardara, a village well-known for its hand-weaving traditions. It feels like a breezy, optimistic kind of place, with 19th-century shop and bar fronts interspersed with design and textile stores. In one, weaver Eddie Doherty works herringbone patterns into blankets, throws, scarves and hats as he has done since 1956. In another, the **Donegal Designer Makers** (donegaldesignermakers.com) – a collection of the county's leading artisan design and craft workers – exhibit their wares. There are colourful

knitwear bags from Michelle McCarroll (Michi), splashes of ceramic from Brian McGee, chunky Rathlin Knitwear and even Japanese papercraft from Naomi Fleury.

"Most of them do it full-time," says Anna Kee, a ceramicist and teacher who is tending the store when I visit. "The likes of me do it for sanity."

Pushing north, I follow the Duquesa Santa Ana Drive, named after a Spanish Armada vessel wrecked off Rosbeg in 1588. Commanded by Don Pedro Mares, the survivors made their way ashore, briefly fortified an area on Killybegs Lough, and marched on to Killybegs where they embarked on a ship

called *La Girona*, an information point tells me. That ship sank off Co Antrim a month later. Of an estimated 1,300 souls ✈️

LAND OF PLENTY

Have you ever dreamed of owning land in Donegal? Well, you can – buy, or gift, a personal, certified plot at the foothills of Muckish Mountain, Falcarragh, for €20. Available at Dublin Airport and at irishlandowner.ie





Stay at ...

ROMANTIC Fresh lobsters in the tank. Fabulous views over Donegal Bay and McSwyne's Castle. Yup, **Castle Murray House Hotel** in Dunkineely is a bona fide gem – but don't just take our word for it. *Travel + Leisure* magazine once voted it one of the world's Top 50 Most Romantic Hotels. B&B from €60pp. (St John's Point, Dunkineely, 074 973 7022; castlemurray.com)

POPULAR Topping TripAdvisor's list of the best hotels in Ireland for three years in a row, **Harvey's Point** in Donegal town needs little introduction. Enormous rooms, an awesome location overlooking Lough Eske and a constant drive to improve (check out the new restaurant and open kitchen) combine in a four-star that sets the standard for hospitality in the northwest. "Sunday sleepover" packages bundle B&B and a five-course lunch from €109pp. (Lough Eske, Donegal Town, 074 972 2208; harveyspoint.com)

TRADITIONAL A family-run, three-star hotel overlooking Sheephaven Bay, **Arnold's** has been a Dunfanaghy mainstay since 1922. The lively bar, cosy fireplaces, on-site stables and warm welcome lift it above the sometimes-timeworn rooms. The fresh mussels are good, too. Two nights' B&B, one dinner and an hour's horse-riding from €180pp. (Main Street, Dunfanaghy, 074 913 6208; arnoldshotel.com)



Rock of ages – the cliffs at Slieve League, opposite. Here, Eddie Doherty – one of the last independent hand weavers making Irish tweed – operating his loom in Ardara. Far right, fish pie and a pint of Kinnegar Swingletree Farmhouse Saison in Harry's Bar. Below, steps down to Fintra Bay.



✈ on board, only nine survived. The Wild Atlantic Way wasn't named for its gentle nature, I guess.

Driving this little loop – and others – the roads grow tight. At times, there's a laughable 80kmh speed limit as I squeeze between bungalows or pull into grass verges to let oncoming drivers by. For the most part, the Wild Atlantic Way is well-signposted, but its thinnest tendrils lead me astray on several occasions ... and I wouldn't exactly rely on the SatNav either. You could see this as part of the adventure, of course, but with more visitors winding their way along the west coast (I had to marvel at the Porsche Cayenne powering its way through Portnoo), an upgrade of signage and parking, a widening of



certain roads and the provision of toilets on beaches is now necessary.

“Donegal was hit by a six-inch wave of tourism last summer,” Iain Miller joked, referring to the touring route’s launch. “We’re struggling to cope!”

Continuing north, I detour to the dramatic beach at Magheroarty, dwarfing the small pier from which ferries to Inishbofin and Tory Island depart. I pull in at a viewing point, rain teeming down on the windscreen, and admire a sandy sickle that could be a magazine cover. I drive past Horn Head with its 200-metre rockface, teeming with sea birds. I pass through the bustling holiday town of **Dunfanaghy**, slipping off the main road to the almost-deserted sands of Marble Hill, where I find Lee Wood of **Narosa surf school** (narosalive.com), rinsing wetsuits beneath the trees near a new coffee shack.

“We keep finding new spots,” he tells me, bright blue eyes shining out from his weather-tanned face. Dunfanaghy recently featured in *Missing*, a surf movie starring ASP World Champion Mick Fanning, he adds (during July and August, Lee will be doing several surf lessons a day). As we chat, he introduces me to two girls from South Africa and Greece, cradling hot chocolates after their lesson. They are cold. But there is sand in their hair and smiles on their faces.

The final stretch of Donegal’s Wild Atlantic Way (or first, if you’re travelling in the opposite direction) nips and tucks around the Fanad and Inishowen peninsulas. Both



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE MCCARTHY

have their highlights and well-concealed gems. **Portsalon Beach**, overlooking Ballymaddock Bay near Rathmullan, is a stunner. A mile of golden sands, safe swimming, floury dunes – and even a secret surfing spot under the humpy Knockalla Mountain – all reward the long drive north.

Inishowen culminates in **Malin Head**, Ireland’s most northerly point. The wind-buffed barrenness here belies a bountiful nature – beneath the waves are basking sharks, and local photographer Rónán McLaughlin has captured images of snowy owls and even the elusive Northern Lights here.


Give us a wave!
Above left, Lee
Wood of Narosa
Surf School,
Dunfanaghy.

Local provider **Cycle Inishowen** (cycleinishowen.com) runs Wild Atlantic Way and other bike tours, and **Inish Adventures** (inishadventures.com) offers kayaking and other activities from their base on Lough Foyle in Moville.

It’s been hundreds of kilometres since my sea stack adventure with Iain Miller. I’ve driven highways and byways, in rain and shine. Donegal doesn’t have the tourism profile of Kerry or Cork, but once you make the journey, watch the bars drop off your phone and hit the groove of its roads, it gets under your skin. The edge of the earth is closer than you think. 🍀

Follow Pól on @poloconghaile

COAST TO COAST Over in Bundoran,
join street parties and parades, and marvel
at fireworks and vintage cars, during
Carnival Weekend on July 18-19.

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