

Interview with Forbes Magazine (Jan 2020)



Standing on the summit of Pyramid stack

First of all, what is sea stack?

Sea stacks are towers of rock that stick out of the sea and are usually found at the bases of huge sea cliffs. A sea stack is created when relentless wave action erodes and chips away at a sea cliff to first create a peninsula, this then forms an arch as more bits get chipped away by the sea. Finally, as the sea arch collapses a stack or tower is left standing free from the parent sea cliff. The three main locations of sea stacks around the world are North West Scotland, North West Ireland and the southern coast of Tasmania. The anomaly of these three places is Tasmania as its stacks are primarily Dolerite, which is a hard igneous rock usually quite unsuitable for natural sea stack production. The stacks of Donegal and Scotland are mostly made of the relatively softer Quartz and red sandstone respectively. What these three places have in common is plenty of angry seas and big wave action to smash the sea cliffs and create the stacks.

And what made you first curious to climb them?

Sea Stack climbing is the climbing the summits of the towers of rock that stick out of the Atlantic Ocean. This activity involves kayaking, swimming, climbing, abseiling (rappelling) and Tyrolean traverses in the Atlantic Ocean at the bases of enormous sea cliffs. The allure to climb sea stacks is quite simply the challenge of the unpredictable nature of the environment that they live in. If you imagine that a sea stack is like a mountain peak but instead of snow and ice you are dealing with the sea. Pretty much everything about sea stack climbing is designed to be an obstacle in your way from unhelpful sea conditions, potentially tetchy weather, sometimes poor quality rock and the general remoteness of their locations. The reason why I began sea stack climbing was the uncertainty of the entire activity as it is this

uncertainty that ensures the outcome is never certain and therefore you are guaranteed an adventure. When I started at first in the Orkney Islands (<http://www.orkney-seastacks.co.uk/>) and then in Donegal (https://uniqueascent.ie/sea_stack_guide) my primary objective has always been finding previously unclimbed rock and therefore a summit that has never been stood on before.



Luke on the Sturrall

You made headlines when took your 5-year-old sea stack climbing up Sturrall Headland, Ireland's longest rock climb, with you – did people's reactions to that surprise you? What was it like to experience that through a 5-year-olds eyes?

Luke harassed me for months to let him climb a sea stack as he had seen 6-year-old Isla Halls climb one with me over that summer. Going to the top of the Sturrall with Luke was an excellent day out as he was totally focused on what we were doing and where we were in terms of atmospheric surroundings. I had also strategically packed a lump of his favourite uber gooey chocolate cake for lunch on the summit. This ensured he was focused on the task at hand and our only rule was lunch was on the summit.

The general public reaction to the footage of our climb was perhaps a predictable one, as it is all too easy for people with no knowledge, experience or comprehension of what it is they are watching, to have strong opinions on such matters. As the footage went around most Irish and European news agencies and websites around 70% of comments were along the lines of "This is what we should be doing with our children." and the remaining 30% of comments called for me to be jailed and or crucified. Which both Luke and I found funny as the most dangerous thing we did that day was the drive to and from the Sturrall on western Donegal's winding single track roads.

For me it was an outstanding experience to do this day out with Luke as he now wants to do more and more outdoor activities and has told his teacher at school he is leaving school as soon as he can to become a rock climber. :-)



On the Summit of Cnoc na Mara

And maybe it's because most people think you need to be an experienced climber to explore the sea stacks and this part of the west coast in general – is that the case?

The most important attribute required to climb a sea stack is a spirit of adventure and a sense of humour. are much more important attributes to climbing in the adventurous and sometimes challenging conditions found on the west coast of Ireland.

Many visitors come to Ireland from all over the world specifically to climb sea stacks. Several people have got engaged and several people has scattered the ashes of a loved one on the summits of sea stacks. Many American visitors who live in inland states have little to none ocean experience. Many have found it a life-altering experience and made major

changes in their lives. Being spat on by fulmars or swimming with basking sharks are once in a lifetime experiences that are impossible to describe.

There is no previous rock climbing experience required as there are over 100 sea stacks on the coast of Donegal. Some are technically easy to climb and a few are very difficult and potentially very dangerous to climb. The youngest person at the moment to climb a stack is 6-year-old Isla Halls, <https://youtu.be/vHyVYLPtGIA> and the oldest is an 81-year-old woman from Alaska.

Being abled-bodied is no even a requirement as this has not stopped several disabled people from climbing sea stacks. <https://youtu.be/mrSucsOxaBA> <https://youtu.be/MNPKDTyy79A>

Not a sea stack but quite dramatic footage, <https://youtu.be/CXcXihgvbeo>

A day out climbing on Donegal's sea stacks will take you to the most remote places in Ireland. We will paddle with Bull Selkies, basking sharks and visit the realms of the Fulmar, Gannet and Razorbill.

Imagine descending 250m sea cliffs to arrive at outstandingly beautiful storm beaches in the most remote and atmospheric locations in Ireland. We then launch from the shore to cross open ocean to land at the bases of towering monsters of immaculate rock. We then climb these towers of rock to arrive on pristine pinpoint summits far from anywhere in the real world.

Standing on a pinpoint summit over 100m above the ocean, 500m from the nearest point of land and 20KM from the nearest main road can easily be described as a truly spiritual experience.

Donegal Sea Stack climbing is the most adventurous commercially available activity in Ireland and we are the only people who provide this unique service. What we guarantee you is a day out you will never forget in places you never knew existed.

You have a photo of ice caves on your Instagram – what other amazing things are there to explore in this area that people don't know about?

Rock Climbing

County Donegal is quite simply an outdoor playground with more climbable rock than the rest of Ireland combined boasting two major Irish mountain ranges, over a thousand kilometres of coastline, one hundred sea stacks and as many diverse climbing mediums and locations as you will find in the rest of the country.

Currently, almost 3,000 rock climbs have been recorded throughout the length and breadth of the county. These climbs include Ireland's longest rock climb, Ireland's largest mountain crag, Ireland's longest ice climb and Ireland's highest sea stack. This is in addition to many more standard single and multi-pitch locations above the sea, by the road, on the offshore uninhabited islands and in the mountains.

https://uniqueascent.ie/undiscovered_donegal

The best places to climb in the county are also the most beautiful and dramatic locations with few visitors and an abundance of wildlife both on land and in the sea.

Sea Kayaking

With over 1000km of coastline, 30 uninhabited islands and over 100 sea stacks, found around the counties coastline. It is easy to see why Donegal is the sea kayaking capital of both Ireland and off course, the Wild Atlantic Way. For more information on what sea kayaking is currently available, have a look through, https://uniqueascent.ie/donegal_islands and download your chosen free mini-guide to that area of the county.

Sea Caves

Living underneath our feet along the coast and islands of western Donegal is a large collection of spectacular and little-known granite sea caves. The islands of Umphin, Owey, and Arranmore contain perhaps the more impressive and larger of these caves. The effect of direct sunlight at the correct position and angle into a sea cave causes what I call the **Blue Lagoon effect**. The seawater in the direct sunlight area glows very brightly the same colour as the sky outside. This, in turn, illuminates the cave walls and roof. In a granite cave, the walls will glow all the colours of the minerals contained within the rock. The whole effect looks like an explosion of light and is a surreal natural phenomenon to witness first hand. This effect happens in any sea cave in which the sunlight enters the cave mouth at the correct angle. Its just a case of being in the right place at the right time. More Details https://uniqueascent.ie/sp/article_manager/detail/the_cave_of_light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8UVle0PTzs&t=>

Sea Tunnels

One of the more unusual features found on The Wild Atlantic Way is a 300m long tunnel that travels right through the centre of **Umphin Island**. The tunnel starts at one of the many huge sea caves on the seaward side of the island and ends at the smaller sea cave beside the sheltered raised shingle beach on the landward side of the island. The tunnel is the perfect size for a kayak and has a 40m long section of complete darkness at about mid passage.

For a safe traverse of the passage, you will need very calm seas with anything over a metre from the south through west to north causing huge amounts of motion in the seaward cave entrance. The ideal tide is about an hour after low at about 1.0m and just remember to bring with you as much artificial light as you can carry. More Details https://uniqueascent.ie/umphin_island

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZkUHlgNh60&t=>

Explore Uninhabited Islands

With 20 or so previously inhabited and now uninhabited island around the coast of Donegal, there is a lifetimes worth of exploring to do on these alone. These islands come in several degrees in remoteness and length of sea passage from inhabited islands with a daily ferry service and modern facilities such as https://uniqueascent.ie/cruit_island_guide, https://uniqueascent.ie/arranmore_island and https://uniqueascent.ie/tory_island

For a worldclass wilderness experience, the remote and slightly more difficult to access islands such

as https://uniqueascent.ie/stag_rocks_owey_island and https://uniqueascent.ie/roan_inish

Stag Rocks, Owey Island

Stag Rocks are a mini archipelago of three very small rocky islands lying approximately seven kilometres north-west of Kincasslagh on the Donegal mainland. They are very easily seen from most places along the Rosses coast and always look very distant indeed. They are known by several different names such as The Brothers, The Three Sons or simply The Stags in Irish they are called Na Trí Mic Ó gCorra or the three sons of O Gorra. The Irish story Seachrán na Mic Uí gCorra by Pádraig Ó Gallchóir and Clannad's Na Laethe Bhi are both based on this archipelago. In a sentence, three brothers were turned to stone by Colmcille for not accepting his rule on Tory Island and to this date, they try and move every seven years but alas are turned back to stone if any Christian person sees them moving. The Stags are very seldom visited and even more rarely landed on as it is a bit of a committing paddle out to them and there is no simple landing on any of the islands. The best approach is from the wee pier on [Cruit Island](#) at the golf course clubhouse. From here it is a 4km sea passage passing [Owey Island](#) out to The Stags. The Stags themselves offer very little lee and all sides have deep ocean drops which in turn simply means you will have a difficult landing unless of course it is uber calm. One of the perhaps best aspects of landing on the brothers is the feeling of solitude, loneliness and isolation that these small rocks far from land in a big ocean can give you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffStzvQnyHE&t=>



Playing on Cruit Island

Roan Inish

Roan Inish (Roaninish) is a low lying storm lashed small archipelago comprising five main islands and a large collection of tidal skerries. The islands are reasonably remote being 4 KM from the nearest point on mainland Donegal and sitting in the huge coastal basin from Arranmore to Tormore Island to the south. Easiest access to the islands is from Port Noo and involves a 5 KM sea passage to arrive on a perfect little sandy bay at the eastern end of the main island. The outlying skerries at the eastern end of the island catch all incoming sea motion and it would not take much west to north west motion to make accessing the beach impossible or at the very least not safe.

Once on the main island there is a small lake feeding a stream into your landing beach with the land around the western end of the lake providing excellent flat almost sheltered ground for camping on the island. The water in the lake does not look like it would make a good cup of tea so best bring drinking water with you. The rest of the main island is the domain of the

small flock of sheep who will follow you around the island as you walk about. At the western end of the main island there are the remains of four small buildings facing onto a smaller western island and [Tormore Island](#).

A visit to Roan Inish allows spectacular views north and east towards Arranmore and into Gweebarra Bay with views south over Loughros Bay towards [Gull Island](#) and the Slievetooley Massif.

Roan Inish is a full 5 kilometre paddle from Port Noo but once you arrive at the island it is a very easy sandy beach landing at the eastern end of the island. It is also a very easy amble from one side of the Island to the other with a small lake and tiny sheep flock to keep you company.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egVfwuYsTe4>

Lake of the Sturrall

The Lake Under The Lake

On [Owey](#) there is one of the most unusual natural features in Ireland. Living at the furthest north west tip of the island there is a lake on the clifftops overlooking a huge lawn and the Atlantic Ocean below. This is a standard lake and is easily accessible by a short walk along the inland path running north out of the island's village. The lake provides the village's water supply as it feeds the stream running the length of the island back through the centre of the village. Directly below this lake lives another lake, this lower lake is 50 metres underground and is accessed by descending a narrow sink hole hidden at the northern end of the upper lake. It's a bit of a squeeze and a crawl down the sink hole and in the last third of the way down it is very, very muddy. This takes you to a deep silt beach at the northern end of the narrow underground lake. The lake is the flooded floor of this impressive 150 metre long and 40 metres high cavern and it is fed by both the lake above and the trickle from the ocean at the collapsed cave entrance to the sea. The descent walls into the cavern are covered in a very nice bioluminescence and this makes the cave walls glow under your torchlight beam. The underground lake is approx 150 metres long and between 8 and 2 metres wide along its entire length. About half way along the lake there is a constriction and there was a little bit of fresh debris (07/03/17) which had fallen from the cave roof 40 or so metres above, which is slightly worrying as the upper lake is directly above here. The underground lake ends in an 8 metre wide pool, which we called The Pool of Tranquility as it is a place of complete darkness with no natural light and a surreal haunting silence. more

Info, https://uniqueascent.ie/the_underground_lake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NF4dzbMAPTM&t=>

Ice and Winter Climbing

Winter climbing in the County of Donegal in the North West of Ireland is quite simply outstanding, alas it has a very fleeting window of opportunity. Due to its coastal position and relatively low lying mountains good winter conditions in Donegal are a rare commodity indeed. Usually temperatures have to be below 0 for 5 days consecutively, and down to -5 at night, and an ill timed dump of snow can spoil it all. To take advantage of these fleeting conditions you have to drop everything, and brave the inevitably appalling road conditions to

get there, for be assured, it won't last! For more details of what is available https://uniqueascent.ie/winter_climbing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fvgb4bmVC8&t=>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-aIgKu-Q_s&t=

Whenever you find a new sea stack to summit you often times have to kayak out to it and then you free solo it (climb without harnesses, ropes), all alone. How do you decide which stack to climb and are there many left that have never been summited?

The process I normally adopt was pre-internet I would read Ordnance Survey maps looking for the tell-tale mini islands close to big cliffs with lots of contours and a big numbered spot height. Now in the digital age, a lot of the legwork is done online with digital mapping like google maps. Once I've found online a potential new sea stack, I make a judgement call as to whether I can visit it alone and safely climb it. This judgement is based on potentially how steep and hard the climbing appears to be. If the stack looks to be a freesolo proposition then distance and commitment for the sea passage dictates which mighty vessel will be used. For less than a say 500-metre open sea passage I may opt to use a lightweight inflatable dingy esp if it needs to be carried any great distance before being launched. If the sea passage looks long and committing I tend to use a single seat sit on top and a tandem if I think I need a lot of climbing toys with me.

What's been the experience that's pushed your limits the most when climbing?

I think the day I realised the planets had aligned and conditions were perfect to free solo Cnoc na Mara, (https://uniqueascent.ie/cnoc_na_mara) a cunning plan I had been thinking about for approx 10 years. Cnoc na Mara lives in a very remote location in south-west Donegal. It involves a 6-kilometre round trip sea passage from Ireland's most remote public road end at An Port, 4 pitches of technical rock climbing on suspect rock. Getting back down from the summit involves a little bit of mountaineering guile and good fortune. With hindsight, I had been mentally preparing for this day for decades as the entire day was at what I call the Outer Realms. This, off course, translates to a location, situation and activity in which death is a very real consequence of having a mishap. When I make the decision to go and solo a new sea stack, I don't tell anyone where I am or what I'm doing. Have a wee read of this and see if you want to add some of this type of content to your article. <https://borealism.ca/blogs/2019/iain-miller>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCRpGiUUaqY&t=> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFFv0ijUo8I>

This day out also came close and 5 years on I am still the only person ever to stand on top of this guy. :-)

https://uniqueascent.ie/dunaff_head

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNw6wNKpqQQ>

It's easy to see why Donegal is your playground, but it seems like many visitors (and even locals) overlook it when they're exploring the country. Why do you think that is?

County Donegal has long been known as the Forgotten County, this is mainly due to its geographical location at the north-west tip of Ireland. Donegal is in the Republic of Ireland or southern Ireland but Ireland's most northerly point is in Donegal at Malin Head which is further north than Northern Ireland but still in the south. Donegal is in the province of Ulster along with Monaghan and Cavan which are also part of Southern Ireland. The rest of Ulster is the 6 counties of Northern Ireland, two of which border eastern Donegal. Donegal is connected to the rest of southern Ireland by a very narrow corridor into Leitrim at our southern tip. Being part of Ulster during the troubles in Northern Ireland did not entice many foreign visitors to Donegal's endless sandy beaches. this has begun to change in the last four years with a steady increase in visitor year after year.

And maybe it's because most people think you need to be an experienced climber to explore the sea stacks and this part of the west coast in general – is that the case?

Most people watch one of the sea stack you-tube video's and immediately decide that the activity is far too dangerous but this is simply not the case. There is no previous rock climbing experience required as there are over 100 sea stacks on the coast of Donegal. Some are technically easy to climb and a few are very difficult and potentially very dangerous to climb. The youngest person at the moment to climb a stack is 6-year-old Isla Halls, <https://youtu.be/vHyVYLtGIA> and the oldest is an 81-year-old woman from Alaska.

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What's next for you?

I have so many cunning plans for days of play along the coast of Donegal, there are still a couple of large unclimbed stack to get stood on and easily several lifetimes of unclimbed rock on the stack climbed so far. :-)

This is the article

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/breannawilson/2020/02/12/the-worlds-only-professional-sea-stack-climber-is-soloing-parts-of-ireland-that-will-blow-you-away/#777d284928e7>