

Cracking Donegal

Let the local folklore enthrall you and the scenery enchant on a dreamy tour through Ireland's northernmost county

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US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

It was sunny and hardly a breeze disturbed the Atlantic at Malin Head in Donegal.

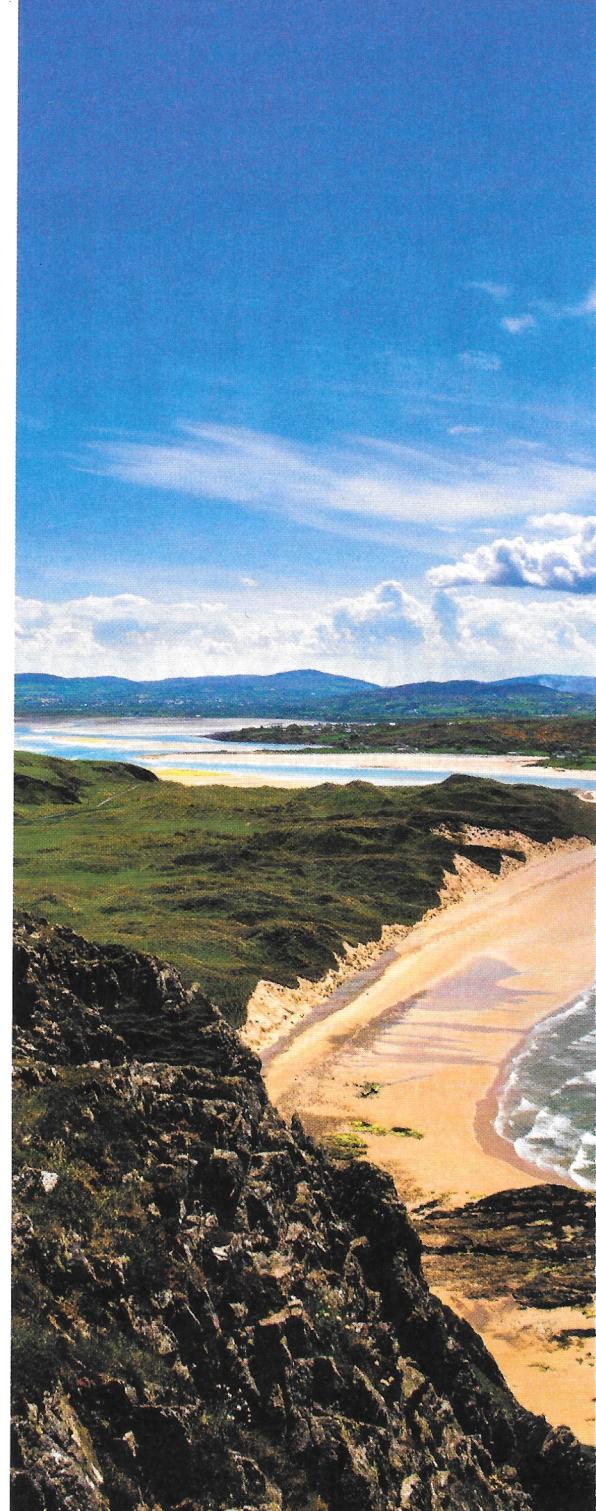
There weren't many people around as we sauntered over to the coffee van and chatted to the barista. I laughed when I noticed the napkins printed with *Ireland's Most Northerly Napkin* and the sign for *Ireland's Most Northerly Drinking Bowl*.

"You have to make the most of what you have," the barista quipped and told us anecdotes about working at this remote spot. When she said, "Believe me, you have come on a good day," I imagined how different it would be in stormy weather.

We sat in the sunshine munching chocolatey brownies, with a view over craggy rocks and a sparkling sea, feeling blessed to be here on a glorious day. From the high point of Banba's Crown we meandered above jagged outcrops through heather and wispy cottongrass to the weathered gash of Hell's Hole, where pink thrift brightened up the rocks.

Driving south through Inishowen, the off-the-beaten-track peninsula in the north of County Donegal, we made slow progress as we kept stopping when pretty thatched cottages and sandy bays caught our eye. At Trawbreaga Bay we ate lunch listening to the sound of waves gently lapping the shore.

Family-run museums are always more quirky than restrained corporate exhibitions and Doagh Famine Village is as unique a family business as they come. Beside a picturesque sandy bay, the museum is a narrow street of whitewashed cottages, thatched with marram grass from the



dunes. I met many natural storytellers in Ireland, but our guide here had mastered the art.

He brought alive the harsh circumstances of his family, including his mother, who lived here until 1983, while also making us laugh. We learnt about their modest home life, the food they ate (seaweed that tasted like 'salty rubber bands') and their traditions. 'That there' was added to most statements for emphasis. "That there is where the saying 'blind drunk' comes from," our guide asserted, handing out tiny glasses of potheen while explaining why the first concentrated distillation went to the fairies.

I was astonished to hear the challenges of creating a Protestant Orange Order



ABOVE Five Fingers Strand,
Malin Head, Inishowen*

exhibition here and how that led to the creation of a replica Republican safe house. In the latter we giggled like children discovering hidden doors behind bookcases, wardrobes and fireplaces, imagining we were in a *Scooby Doo* cartoon.

After a night in the seaside town of Buncrana, we drove to Grianán of Aileach before we left Inishowen. Perched on a hill, we could see it long before we reached it on

the steep and narrow roads. Entering the circular stone fort, we climbed worn steps up the terraces to the parapet, which gave a 360-degree view over the green countryside of Inishowen and to Northern Ireland.

Glenveagh National Park is an area of mountains, lakes and waterfalls with a castle at its heart. Driving into the plentiful parking we considered our options.

It's an easy 7km (4½-mile) return walk ►

“We pulled into an *amazing* viewpoint overlooking white sands, green hills and *inviting* blue water – a *perfect* spot for a brew”

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Lancashire to Donegal via Cairnryan and Larne (354 miles return), returning the same way. We drove a further 430 miles crossing Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland we travelled 382km (237 miles). We spent seven days touring with six nights on sites in June

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg	£182.90
Ferry P&O Cairnryan-Larne return	£351
Site fees (£124)	£108.51
Attractions Two adults: Doagh Famine Village, Donegal Railway Museum (€28)	£24.50
Parking Donegal (€2.70)	£2.36
Bike hire Glenveagh (€30)	£26.25
Total costs.....	£695.52

1,021 miles

**TOP TIPS**

Allow yourself plenty of time as every journey we made in Donegal took longer than we expected. The roads are often narrow and winding and there are so many scenic spots that will make you want to stop

Find the time to stop at a café and try a hearty Irish breakfast (or two)

along the scenic Lough Veagh to Glenveagh Castle on a well-surfaced path, or there are shuttle buses. We opted to hire bikes so that we could continue beyond the castle to the end of the lake. My sturdy mountain bike was fine, though I didn't need a bell on the busy shared path as the brakes squealed like an angry budgerigar.

At the castle we explored the cheerful gardens and climbed the hillside for the view. Beyond, we had the tree-lined track to the end of Lough Veagh and Astellen Burn Waterfall to ourselves.

We parked by the ruined white-marble Dún Lúiche church and set off to walk into the Poisoned Glen. There are many folktales about why this beautiful glen has such an unusual name. Most likely it's a cartographer's mistranslation.

The path increasingly became less clear and bogger and we reached the rocky amphitheatre with soaking boots. The soggy feet took the shine off the tranquillity (readers might want to enjoy the

spectacular view from no further than the stone footbridge).

Passing by the famous Leo's Tavern, home of the Celtic folk band *Clannad*, we rolled into the Sleepy Hollows campsite. The English owners gave us such a friendly welcome we knew we had struck gold.

The Slí na Rosann, a long-distance footpath around the Rosses region, passes Sleepy Hollows. Next day we followed parts of this, walking 24km (15 miles) on a circular route.

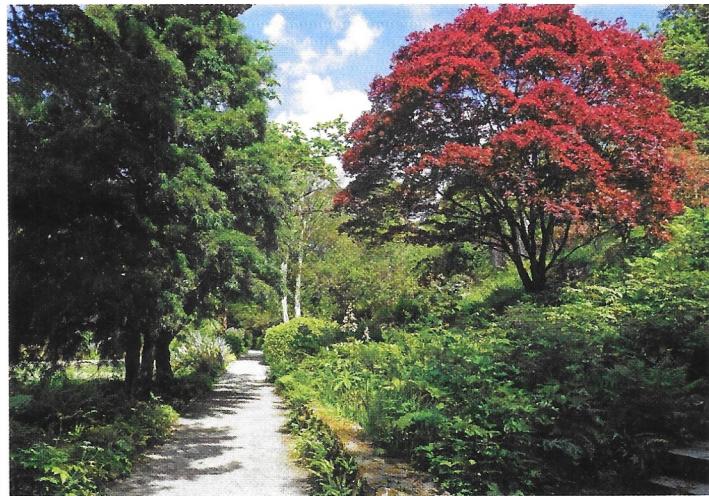
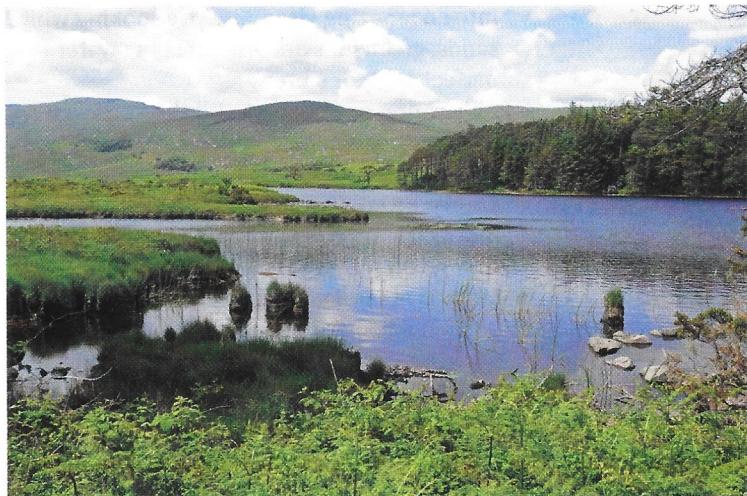
We mostly used lanes that rose and fell across bleak and beautiful heather and bog countryside, strewn with rocks and scattered with lakes and peat stacks. We peered into a green, corrugated metal church and passed hamlets of tidy bungalows.

On our last leg we caught a glimpse of the sea across Gaoth Dobhair. The pyramid of An Earagail dominated the skyline, standing white against the pale blue sky. Nearing the campsite we met the owners walking their dogs. They told us that the locals refer to ▶

ABOVE This giant hand welcomes visitors to the sand dunes and bay at the Isle of Doagh

BELOW LEFT Glenveagh National Park has mountains, lakes and waterfalls

BELOW RIGHT The colourful gardens at Glenveagh Castle





ABOVE The craggy coast of Ireland's most northerly point, Malin Head

BETWEEN Fishing boats of every size line the harbour at Killybegs

them as 'wind blown 'uns' and shared their story of how they had found Sleepy Hollows and came to love it.

Ireland feels both foreign and familiar. They drive on the left, yet use kilometres. Everyone speaks English, though we were spending euro. The road signs in the

Gaeltacht (an Irish-speaking district) were sometimes only in Irish.

There are few main roads in Donegal, and bumpy, winding and narrow lanes were common. The only way to drive is slowly, firstly making sure everything in the 'van is strapped down.

We blame the lumpy roads for our incident the next day. Just south of Dungloe we pulled into an amazing viewpoint overlooking white sands, green hills and inviting blue water – a perfect spot for a brew.

Turning on the tap to fill the kettle, all I got was a cough and sputter. Anthony checked the water level, which registered empty. Puzzled, we peered under the Blue Bus and spotted the problem. The hose from the water tank to the drain valve had slipped off and gallons of fresh water had gushed out on to the road. Fortunately, we always carry a couple of filled water bottles and so were able to make our brew. At the campsite, waterproof tape from our emergency kit saved our holiday.

The impressive Kilclooney Dolmen is



INFORMATION

You'll find lots of ideas for all of Ireland at discoverireland.ie

The Wild Atlantic Way winds along the Irish west coast, including the Inishowen Peninsula and Donegal

thewildatlanticway.com

Find a list of stopovers for motorhomes in Donegal
govisitdonegal.com/visitor-information/aire-de-service

For a local's view of Donegal
welovedonegal.com

Everything about Malin Head
malinheadcommunity.ie

Tourist info about Inishowen
govisitinishowen.com

Donegal's railway heritage
donegalrailway.com

Information about Ireland's National Heritage sites
heritageireland.ie

Donegal has plenty of splendid beaches
donegalbeaches.com

Find information about Rossnowlagh Friary at
rossnowlaghfriary.ie

Learn about the Irish Bog Restoration Project
irishbogrestorationproject.ie

ABOVE Kilclooney Dolmen is an impressive ancient tomb; Buncrana has plenty of lively pubs

reached by a short walk through fields of sheep and donkeys. The tomb has a huge slab of rock, the capstone resting on uprights taller than me. While I waited for a family to photograph themselves and the stones from every angle, I could only ponder how incredible it is that this dolmen has been preserved for 4,000 years.

Killybegs is Ireland's largest fishing port and it lives and breathes fishing. Boats that dripped with fishing-related bling lined the harbour and on the quayside I spotted a popular seafood stall. How would two vegetarians fare here?

Our coastal terraced campsite was quiet and we secured a whole rocky terrace to ourselves, parking side-on to make the most of the panorama.

The captivating view encompassed a stony cove, the sea and two lighthouses. Fishing boats pattered out to sea, returning accompanied by flocks of gulls.

In a radiant June sunset, we sauntered down to the still water of the cove, the rocks strewn with thick seaweed. We watched a herring gull eating a starfish while a heron hunted along the pebbly shore. At around 10pm the pulsing beam from the lighthouse at St John's Point shone across the sea.

The next morning we wandered around Killybegs' lively harbour, admiring the colourful fishing boats and peering into marine supplies shops wondering if we needed a yellow sou'wester. The museum wasn't open, but we learnt about the history of the town's fishing industry from its windows, including the infamous *Atlantic Dawn* (now *Annelies Ilona*), the world's biggest trawler, which was originally owned by a local family.

I've heard that the calories in a second

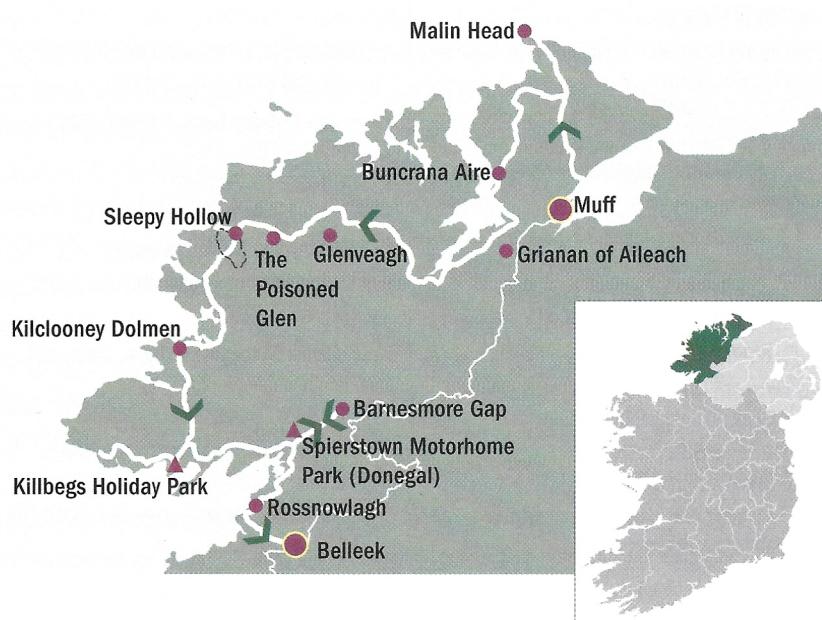


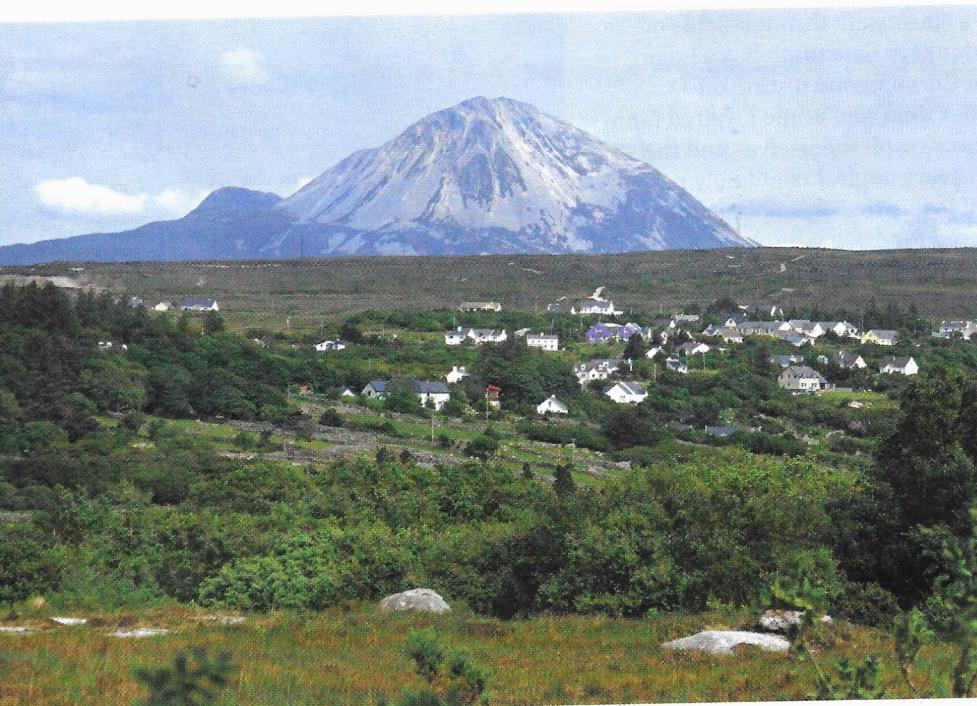
breakfast don't count, which is just as well as Killybegs offered plenty of good food for two vegetarians. At an outdoor table overlooking the harbour we discovered Irish breakfasts and tucked into a piled-high plate of pancakes liberally dribbled with syrup and fruit. We walked off the pancakes on the hilly lanes to Portnacross Pier, the hedgerows colourful with honeysuckle and pink thistles and with views to the long sheltered sands of Fintra Beach.

The high Sliabh Liag (Slieve League) sea cliffs were a short drive away, along an ever-narrowing undulating road. The stunning short cliff walk took us by one of 81 signal towers erected on the coastline during the Napoleonic wars, some unique sculptures that resembled large grenades and stones spelling out the word Éire, a navigation aid for allied aircraft flying from Fermanagh to the Atlantic across neutral Ireland during WWII. From the viewpoint the panorama of rugged cliffs plunging into Atlantic waves was breathtaking.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the English sought to extend their control over Ireland and replaced Irish landowners with English or Scottish settlers on four 'plantations'. Donegal town was built in the Plantation of Ulster ordered by King James I and the town still has a distinctive central square (the Diamond).

At a café on the square, we scoffed our (now obligatory) second breakfast. Nearby ▶





is Donegal Castle and where the River Eske meets Donegal Bay is the ruined Franciscan Priory, damaged when it came under siege by the English in 1601.

I am no train junkie, but I found the volunteers' enthusiasm for railways at Donegal's Railway Heritage Centre infectious and their readiness to share personal stories made our visit memorable. The county of Donegal once had hundreds of miles of railway track, now all closed.

The small museum has a charming model railway, colourful paintings of steam engines and vintage tourism posters. We watched a 1950s film of a steam train's journey from Donegal to Killybegs. It showed another world where small boys opened the wooden crossing gates with a cheery wave to the drivers.

A guide at the railway museum recommended Barnesmore Gap, a steep-sided U-shaped valley that the trains used to puff up and down. On a grey day, on the busiest road we had encountered in Donegal and with roadworks at the head of the pass, it really wasn't as picturesque as we had hoped.

Feeling deflated, we chanced upon an area of restored blanket bog on a side road. Admiring the yellow bog asphodel and russet sphagnum moss we felt privileged to have the place to ourselves. Back at the Blue Bus we realised Anthony had picked up a hitchhiker; a tick was sucking blood between his toes!

The Franciscans were persecuted and driven out of Donegal in the seventeenth century, but returned 300 years later.

ABOVE CLOCKWISE The view of the distinctive pyramid of Errigal from near Sleepy Hollows campsite; Colourful mosaic at Rossnowlagh Franciscan Friary; This green corrugated iron church has a wood-lined interior

Starting with two army huts in 1946, the Franciscan friars at Rossnowlagh built a church and community that has an enviable view over a sandy beach, where surfers were out enjoying the waves.

The friary has pleasant formal gardens adorned with statues, while the natural path following the Stations of the Cross was a riot of wild flowers.

We left Donegal for Northern Ireland after a remarkable road trip. We had often felt truly off the beaten track as we explored the stunning coast and glens and learnt about the county's shifting history.

Ireland had also introduced us to second breakfasts and plenty of imaginative and inspirational storytellers!

WE STAYED AT

Buncrana Aire de Service Point, Railway Road, Buncrana

00353 749 363451

govisitdonegal.com/visitor-information/aire-de-service

All year

Two adults, pitch: Free (electric extra). Electric available in three bays only. Tokens are €1 (87p) from the adjacent Buncrana Tourist Office or Topaz garage

Sleepy Hollows Campsite, Meenalecky, Crolly, Co Donegal F92 HK73

00353 852 523126

sleepyhollows.ie

All year, but call to check out-of-season opening dates

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €27 (£23.63) adults only

Killybegs Holiday Park, Roshin, Killybegs, Co Donegal F94 H720

00353 872 769765

killybegsholidaypark.ie

14 March - 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €25 (£21.88)

Spierstown Motorhome Park, Donegal F94 K5YH

00353 878 362727

facebook.com/spierstowntparking

All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: €20 (£17.50)