

Border crossing

Dixe Wills cycles quiet lanes and high hills steeped in a poetic past on a 200-mile circular route round Ireland's north-western edge

So there I was, happily weary from a day's cycling, sitting in a stone-flagged kitchen being furnished with a stream of expertly made hot whiskeys, my glass resting on the very table on which was born a well-known Hollywood actor. Who would have thought that an evening in unfashionable Omagh could give so much pleasure?

Well, certainly very few tourists. Examine Ireland from the air and you'll notice a mysterious network of lines that links Dublin, Cork, Kerry and Connemara. These are not ley lines or long forgotten Druidic highways but merely well worn paths left by millions of visitors for whom the rest of Ireland outside the four honeypots might just as well not exist. This is good news, of course, because it leaves the rest of the country, and its kitchen tables, emptier for the rest of us to explore. Take your bike on Sustrans's North West Trail (northwest-trail.com), for example, and you'll have huge stretches of its 200-mile circuit to yourself.

The fantastically well-signposted route slides from the republic to the province and back again, mainly on little back roads, giving cyclists a taste of no fewer than six counties - Donegal, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Cavan (briefly), Leitrim and Sligo.

And for Sligo read WB Yeats country. It took just two minutes from my arrival at Sligo station for Ireland's greatest poet and philanderer to catch my eye. His unexpectedly groovy statue depicts him as a cross between



The road less travelled ... on the North West Trail in Donegal

Mick Jagger, a country parson and a large impact-flattened balloon, but is good for all that. A few miles later the trail passes the ground of a village football team - worth watching, if only for the pleasure of yelling, "Up and at 'em, Yeats United!"

The coastline hereabouts has not a little poetry of its own as it carves its way carefully around the foot of the fearsome Benbulbin mountain, but its choicest moment comes at Rossnowlagh beach, where the trail leaves the tarmac for a spin on the sands. When I arrived the sea was festooned with surfers heedless of the showers coming in from the Atlantic. Showers that became a downpour as I entered Donegal, so I hastily took refuge in the town's castle.

As you strike north-east from the town, there is little friendly about the

climb up to Barnesmore Gap, which is marked by what seems a limitless succession of false summits. Once you're up, however, the 10-mile descent to the town of Stranorlar via Meenglass Forest makes it all worthwhile. With a double rainbow arcing over me, I stopped to watch as hundreds of rooks swirled around a darkening sky.

And if County Tyrone hasn't

twinned itself with Sussex yet, it can only be a matter of time. I exchanged Donegal's mountains and general unruliness for Tyrone's gently undulating fields and an all-round diminution in scale, with only the Sperrin mountains to the east hinting at something grander.

Parking my bike in the high street of the county town, Omagh, I walked

the historic town trail and let its grand municipal architecture win over before I retired to Mullaghmore House, a Georgian B&B complete with steam room, billiards room and early Victoriana including a bath so vast I took the precaution of listening to shipping forecast before launching myself into it. It was Sam Neill who was born on the Mullaghmore kitchen table, by the way. He still keeps in touch too, which is nice.

Passing through Enniskillen and Florence Court Forest Park, the trail climbs punishingly into the northern foothills of the Cuilcagh mountain, the stalactitic Marble Arch Cave (028 6634 8855, marblearchcaves.com; adults £8.50, under-18s £5.50). Here a young guide called Niall explained to me how two daring speleologists discovered the system in 1895 by floating down an underground river on a folding canvas canoe. Less hazardously, an electric boat now sails along on a section of the extraordinary 35 miles of passages and chambers have since been mapped.

And so onwards to Sligo. One of the great advantages of cycling the circuit clockwise from here is that you can spend your last night at Ard Nahoo, an eco-cabinned health farm in Dromahair, a village just 15 miles short of the finish line. Since by then my muscles had the consistency of sun oil, you might imagine with what relish I anticipated the next morning's sauna, hot tub and massage. As Yeats might have said: "Knead softly because you knead on my thighs."

Way to go

Getting there

Irish Ferries (08705 171717, irishferries.com) has returns from Holyhead to Dublin from around £50 (plus £10 for a bicycle); Irish Rail (irishrail.ie) has returns from Dublin Connolly to Sligo €20 (plus €16 for a bicycle)

Where to stay

Mullaghmore House (028 8224 2314, mullaghmorehouse.com) has doubles from £78 B&B. Ard Nahoo (+353 71 913 4939, ardnahoo.com) has cabins from €190 for two nights, sauna and hot tub session €30, massages from €45



PHOTOGRAPH: DIXE WILLS



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