

THE WILD ATLANTIC WAY AND WESTERN IRELAND



About the Author

Tom Cooper is a writer and editor who fell in love with Ireland's Atlantic coast many years ago on a six-week ride from Belfast to County Cork. He enjoyed himself so much that he keeps going back for more.

THE WILD ATLANTIC WAY AND WESTERN IRELAND

6 CYCLE TOURS ALONG IRELAND'S WEST COAST

by Tom Cooper

CICERONE

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Front cover: Author off the beaten track approaching Cleggan (Route 3, Stage 4)

CONTENTS

Map key	9
The Wild Atlantic Way cycle route – Route summary table	10
The Wild Atlantic Way cycle route – Overview map	11
Six cycle tours in Western Ireland – Route summary table	12
Six cycle tours in Western Ireland – Overview map	13

INTRODUCTION	15
Geology	16
Wildlife and flowers	17
History	17
What's in a name?	23
Built heritage and architecture	24
Culture	25
Getting there	26
Getting around	28
When to go	29
Accommodation	30
Health and safety	31
Food and drink	33
Language	34
Money	34
Post, phones and internet	36
Cycling in Ireland	38
What to take	41
Maps	47
Using this guide	48

THE TOURS	53
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Route 1 Tour of Donegal	54
Stage 1 Derry/Londonderry to Culdaff	61
Stage 2 Culdaff to Clonmany	63
Stage 3 Clonmany to Letterkenny	65
Stage 4 Letterkenny to Portsalon	67
Stage 5 Portsalon to Downies	69
Stage 6 Downies to Bunbeg	71

Stage 7	Bunbeg to Portnoo	73
Stage 8	Portnoo to Carrick	74
Stage 9	Carrick to Donegal Town	76
Route 1	Route cards	78

Route 2 Into the Atlantic	87
Stage 1 Donegal Town to Ballyshannon	92
Stage 2 Ballyshannon to Sligo	94
Stage 3 Sligo to Ballina	96
Stage 4 Ballina to Belmullet	97
Stage 5 Belmullet to Achill	99
Stage 6 Tour of Achill Island	101
Stage 7 Achill to Foxford	103
Stage 7A WAW link from Newport (Stage 7) to Westport	105
Stage 8 Foxford to Sligo	105
Route 2 Route cards	107

Route 3 Tour of Connacht	117
Stage 1 Westport to Roonah Quay	122
Stage 2 Tour of Clare Island	124
Stage 3 Roonah Quay to Tully	125
Stage 4 Tully to Clifden	127
Stage 5 Tour of Inishbofin	129
Stage 6 Clifden to Kilkieran	130
Stage 7 Kilkieran to Galway	132
Stage 8 Galway to Cong	134
Stage 9 Cong to Westport	136
Route 3 Route cards	138

Route 4 The Aran Islands and the Burren	146
Stage 1 Galway to Inishmore	152
Stage 2 Tour of Inishmore	154
Stage 3 Tour of Inisheer	156
Stage 4 Round the Burren	158
Stage 5 Doolin to Kilrush	160
Stage 6 Kilrush to Ennis	162
Stage 7 Ennis to Limerick	163
Stage 7A WAW link from Limerick to Tarbert	165
Route 4 Route cards	167

Route 5 The Dingle and Kerry Peninsulas	176
Stage 1 Tarbert to Tralee.	181
Stage 2 Tralee to Dingle.	183
Stage 3 Tour of the Dingle Peninsula	184
Stage 4 Dingle to Killorglin	186
Stage 5 Killorglin to Portmagee	188
Stage 6 Portmagee to Caherdaniel	190
Stage 7 Caherdaniel to Kenmare	192
Stage 8 Kenmare to Killarney.	194
Stage 9 Killarney to Tralee	196
Route 5 Route cards.	198

Route 6 The Fuchsia Coast	210
Stage 1 Kenmare to Allihies	215
Stage 2 Allihies to Glengarriff	217
Stage 3 Glengarriff to Schull	219
Stage 4 Schull to Clonakilty	221
Stage 5 Clonakilty to Kinsale	224
Stage 6 Kinsale to Cork	226
Route 6 Route cards	229

Appendix A	Useful contacts	239
Appendix B	Glossary	240
Appendix C	Deviations from the Wild Atlantic Way driving route	244
Appendix D	Further reading	250
Appendix E	Calibrating your cycle computer	251



Map key

	Route start and finish
	Route start
	Route finish
	Stage number
	Major road
	Intermediate road
	Minor road
	National boundary
	Route
	WAW link route
	Ferry
	Direction
	Airport
	Major town
	Small town/village
	Hill or mountain
	Pass
	Point of interest

GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/909/GPX.

THE WILD ATLANTIC WAY CYCLE ROUTE

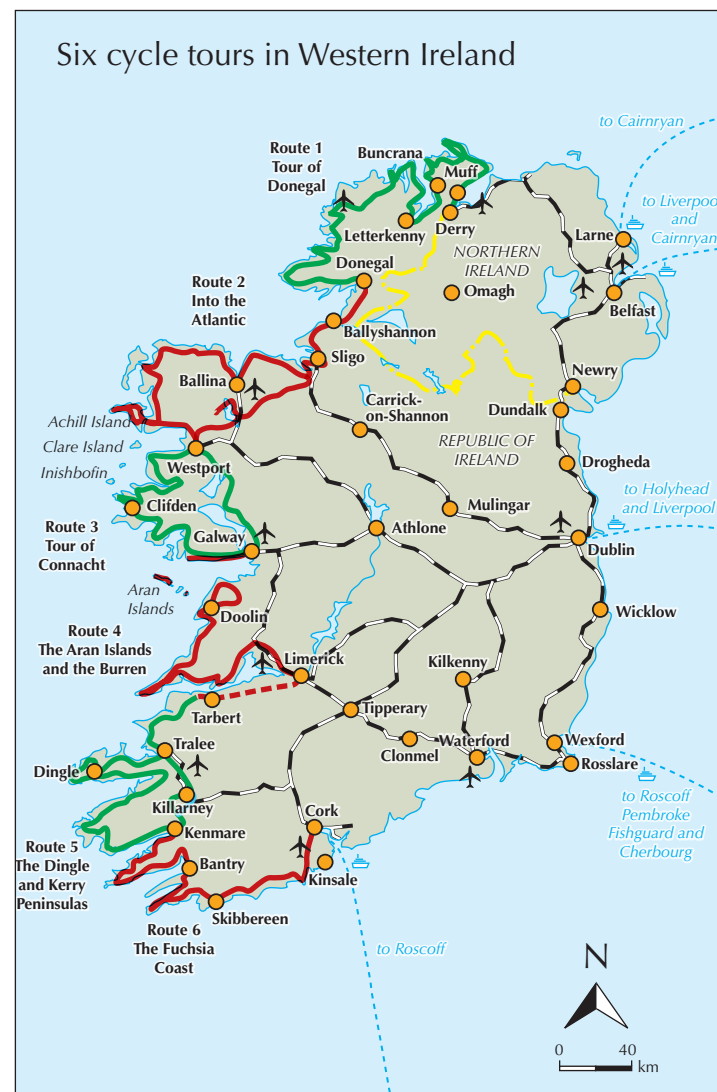
This table lists the stages from the six cycle tours devised for this guide (see ‘Six cycle tours in western Ireland’) that make up the route of the Wild Atlantic Way. Details of any variations from the official WAW driving route are set out in Appendix C.

Section	From	To	Route/ stages	Days	Distance (km)
1	Derry/Londonderry	Donegal Town	1	9	503.8
2	Donegal Town	Westport	2/1–6, 7 (part), 7A	7	465.4
3	Westport	Galway	3/1–7	7	291.0
4	Galway	Tarbert	4/1–7A	8	440.6
5	Tarbert	Kenmare	5/1–7	7	389.7
6	Kenmare	Cork	6	6	359.3
Total	Derry/Londonderry	Cork		44	2449.8



SIX CYCLE TOURS IN WESTERN IRELAND

Route	Start/Finish	Stages	Total distance (km)	Average stage (km)	Longest stage (km)	Ascent (m)	Highest point (m)
1	Derry (Londonderry)/ Donegal Town	9	503.8	70.0	81.4	6903	280
2	Donegal Town/ Sligo	8	559.9	70.0	99.9	6142	200
3	Westport/ Westport	9	407.6	45.3	68.1	4354	110
4	Galway/ Limerick	7	381.2	54.4	130.6	4053	190
5	Tarbert/Tralee	9	468.4	52.0	69.7	6323	410
6	Kenmare/Cork	6	359.3	59.9	94.4	6107	160





Greencastle Harbour, County Donegal (Route 1, Stage 1)

INTRODUCTION



Sunset at Strandhills (Route 2, Stage 3)

Officially launched in 2014, the Wild Atlantic Way winds along more than 2000km of coastline at Europe's far northwestern shore. Here, breakers rolling in from the Americas have shaped ancient rocks into a land of special beauty. The people, too, have forged a distinct cultural identity. Gaelic is still spoken along the Atlantic coast and the island's story is etched into the landscape in prehistoric remnants, early Christian architecture, castles, grand 18th century houses and contemporary Nationalist murals. From Derry/Londonderry and Malin Head in the north to Mizen Head and Cork in the southwest, fine beaches, harbours and towering cliffs await the turn of your pedals.

This guide adopts and adapts the Wild Atlantic Way to suit the cycle tourist. The official Wild Atlantic Way is a driving route. As such it includes long stretches of main road when quieter and more scenic alternatives are close at hand for cyclists. The 'Way' also skips two excellent cycling spots – the Aran Islands, where there are no car ferries, and Killarney, which is a sublime day-ride away from the coast. (See Appendix C for a detailed breakdown of the ways in which the route described in this guide differs from the WAW driving route.)

Since not everyone has seven weeks to spare for a full Wild Atlantic Way tour, this guide offers six self-contained tours based on sections of



Canon on Derry/Londonderry's city walls

STAGE 1

Derry/Londonderry to Culdaff

Start	Derry/Londonderry
Distance	56.1km
Ascent	949m
Terrain	Coastal, stiff climb from Greencastle; hilly along coast.
Summit	275m at 39.3km

This stage follows gentle terrain close to Lough Foyle before hitting some stiff climbs over the hills to Kinnago Bay and on to Culdaff. The opening of the Peace Bridge and associated improvements in cycleways make possible a quick exit from the city.

The **Peace Bridge** in Derry/Londonderry is a purpose-built cycling and walking bridge which was completed in 2011 at a cost of £14 million.

The name **Derry** is derived from the Irish 'Doire' – 'the oak grove': the city was previously known as 'Doire Chalgach' – 'Calgach's oak grove' – and then 'Doire Cholmcille' – '(St) Columba's oak grove'. It is thought to have acquired the 'London' prefix in 1613, when James I granted the city a royal charter and the London guilds became involved in funding its construction. Unionists call the city 'Londonderry'; Nationalists call it 'Derry'. It's also nicknamed the Maiden City because the walls have never been breached – the express bus service from Belfast is called 'The Maiden City Flyer' – and sometimes also referred to as 'Stroke City', because the name is so frequently written with the forward-slash: 'Derry/Londonderry'.

But if you have some free time the city centre is worthy of exploration on foot. If you fancy a leg-stretch on the bike, the ancient fort of **Grianan Aileach**, about 11km north-west of the city on Regional Cycle Route 1 has panoramic views of the route ahead into Inishowen.

Leaving Derry/Londonderry this stage passes the ruins of the Georgian villa of Boom Hall, reputed to be one of the most haunted places in the city.

The ruins of Boom Hall are close to the site of the **boom across the Foyle** that was used to prevent William of Orange's forces coming to the aid of the

encircled city during the Siege of Derry. The boom was broken on 28 July 1689, effectively ending the siege.

The official Wild Atlantic Way driving route starts when you cross the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland border at **Muff**. After **Greencastle** the stage climbs into the coastal mountains before dropping into one of the most beautiful sections of the Irish coast. **Kinnago Bay**, with dark-grey cliffs dropping to a semi-circle of golden sand, is stunning. To the north of here the mountains flatten out to be replaced by a low, rocky, wind-blasted coast all the way to **Culdaff**.

On the road

Take plenty of cash (euros). ATMs are thin on the ground from now on. There are shops at Merville and Greencastle. Merville has the better choice. After Greencastle the roads are slow going. While they are sealed, they are bumpy, and in some places badly potholed.

Accommodation

Derry/Londonderry has no official youth hostel but the independent hostel scene is quite lively. I've stayed at the very friendly Paddy's Palace (028 7130 9051, www.paddyspalace.com). You could also try the Derry City Independent Hostel (028 7128 0542, www.derryhostel.com). Derry has a selection of the major hotel chains plus a wide choice of independents along with a range of B&Bs. It's best to book ahead, particularly at weekends. The nearest camping to Derry/Londonderry is at Elaghvale Camping Park (078 0173 1815) about 8km to the north off the Buncrana road. Culdaff has a limited choice of other accommodation, but McGrory's (074 9379104, www.mcgrorys.ie) is popular. With an early start from Derry/Londonderry, you may choose to push on with Stage 2 where Sandrock Holiday Hostel (086 3256323, www.sandrockhostel.com) is about 18km further on. Wild camping is sometimes possible along the coast but don't wait until you are close to Culdaff, where it is too populated.

STAGE 2

Culdaff to Clonmany

Start	Culdaff
Distance	55.1km
Ascent	743m
Terrain	Low coastal terrain
Summit	120m at 6km

From Culdaff this stage climbs through a pass (180m) in the coastal mountains to enter the central valley in the finger of land leading out to **Malin Head**, mainland Ireland's most northerly point.

In 2016 **Malin Head** was used as a location for the shooting of *Star Wars: Episode VIII*.

The southern side of the peninsula is the better sheltered from the Atlantic, and has a sandy beach at Five Fingers Strand. After **Malin** village the route crosses



Looking east from Malin Head