

# THE GARDEN OF Ireland



There's no finer way to get acquainted with the emerald isle than on the Wicklow Way through the hills and valleys south of Dublin.

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IT'S BEEN A long time coming, but I've arrived. The Avonmore River is wide and shallow and thrown into patterns of shadow and sunlight by the shifting branches of oaks and maple that overhang it. This bridge I stand on goes way back – about 350 years – but it's still a newcomer compared to the scene it overlooks. There have been oaks here, in the Vale of Clara in County Wicklow, since the ice age retreated, and the water, too, seems to chatter with some knowledge of time we can barely imagine. There's a church on the riverbank, a plain white foursquare structure whose simplicity suits this spot's serenity. It's a pervasive kind of peace that I didn't seek out in small details, but merely fell into in one long breath.

Before long I'll take the path that winds behind the church and make my way further into the forest towards the village of Laragh where I'll pick up the Wicklow Way: an 80-mile trail that dances a line between Dublin and the village of Clonegal on the County Wicklow–Carlow border. I'm sampling it on a four-day walk south to north through a landscape I have little concept of yet, except I know to expect mountains, and that it's so beautiful Dubliners proudly call it the 'Garden of Ireland'.



I'm not far from Dublin here: about 40 miles or so. Starting from Bristol in England yesterday morning, I hopped, skipped and jumped my way over on trains, a ferry, and another train from Dublin to Rathdrum – the small, brightly coloured town where I woke up this morning. This stretch from Rathdrum to Laragh isn't officially part of the Wicklow Way, but by starting

**▲ CLASS ACT**  
Samuel Hayes bridge near Rathdrum is named for the local MP who legislated in 1788 to encourage 'the cultivation and better preservation of trees'.



## OVER THE HILLS

Looking across Lough Tay from the memorial to JB Malone, the walker behind the Wicklow Way who also wrote a newspaper column, Over the Hills, for more than 35 years.





there I was able to do the whole journey without once getting in a car. And I wonder – as I sit down in front of the church – if Clara might have made its way onto the trail, if only JB Malone had tweaked his pencil lines slightly as he sketched out the Wicklow Way in the 1960s (see panel opposite). Its beauty certainly earns it a waymark.

The woodland of the Vale of Clara starts to thin as I walk into the afternoon and soon I'm on quiet, open lanes lined with rowan bushes and foxgloves. Skulking behind rich green pastoral fields are the rising brows of the Wicklow mountains: a passing glance, I feel, from friends I might meet again.

**‘...first I will be treated to one of Ireland’s most spectacular and historic landscapes: the mystical valley of Glendalough.’**

But first I will be treated to one of Ireland’s most spectacular and historic landscapes: the mystical valley of Glendalough. In Laragh the next morning, local tour guide Diarine Nuttall leads me from my hotel onto a gently rising track, where low stone walls form a mossy, permeable boundary between us and a dense woodland of ash and beech. “This was once the old military road,” she tells me, “but it would have been used by pilgrims too – even today, people still make pilgrimages to Glendalough.”

When the trees part, we are high above a valley, and below us is an assortment of stone buildings, some splendidly intact, and others ruined. “The ancient monastic city,” Diarine announces. “It’s strange to think of it as a city now,” she says, reading my mind – the buildings are huddled together within a modest rectangle of land not much bigger than a football pitch – “but back in the Middle Ages it would have been considered a centre of civilisation: a place of learning and healing.” The most striking structure is the round tower, a tall pencil-shaped building whose purpose, Diarine says, is slightly mysterious. ►

#### ▲ NATIONAL TREASURE

Views into the Wicklow Mountains, which form the largest of Ireland’s six national parks.

#### ▲ SKY NEEDLE

Pushing up more than 100 feet, the tower at Glendalough monastic city was lookout post, beacon to approaching pilgrims, sanctuary from attack and bell tower too.

#### ▲ TWICE BLESSED

The church at Clara Vale is dedicated to Ireland’s patron saint, Patrick, and to Saint Kilian.

## The Trailblazer

For a country so rich in wild and beautiful landscapes, walking in Ireland can be agonisingly restricted. The general public has no legal right of access to the countryside, except for a right to roam in designated National Parks – and even the legality of that is vague and hard to trace. All land is privately owned and every single walking trail is established by permission of the landowner, which means access can be withdrawn at any time. There are only 44 established walking routes in the whole of the Republic of Ireland, which amount to 3000km of paths – a meagre figure when compared with England and Wales’

225,000km of Public Rights of Way.

All that makes the Wicklow Way particularly precious: a rare free pass into Ireland’s gorgeousness. Pioneering too: the trail was the very first of Ireland’s trails to be established, opening to the public in 1980. It was the brainchild of JB Malone, a military cartographer and civil servant, who developed a love of hillwalking as a teenager in the 1930s. After acquiring a detailed knowledge of Wicklow’s walking routes, he had the idea for a public trail through the mountains in 1942 and started actively campaigning for it in 1966. Alongside writing public-facing articles for

## DISCOVER The Wicklow Way



the Irish Herald, he negotiated and secured rights of way with landowners until he finally achieved his goal. Forty-two years on, and his hard-won vision still paves the way for miles and miles of exhilaration.

For more information on Ireland’s access laws, visit Ordnance Survey Ireland ([osi.ie](http://osi.ie)) and the Keep Ireland Open campaign ([keepirelandopen.org](http://keepirelandopen.org)).

#### WALK ON WATER

Derrybawn is one of four bridges built to navigate the complex waterways of Glendalough valley, and once carried a military road across the Glendasan River.



“It might have been a symbol of power, but it probably also served as a defensive tower, designed to offer refuge to the monks when under attack.”

It isn't until we walk further along the track, known as the Spinc, that I start to understand how a monastic community came to settle here. We are now looking straight up the length of the valley and the scene is one of high drama: a lake unfolds like a silk mirror in between two careering glaciated slopes, and at the valley head there is a hint of the hills that lie beyond, a distant ripple rising on the skyline. With such a might of landscape surrounding it, the lake itself is an image of tranquillity. “It is still, after all these years,”

Diarine says, “my favourite place in all of Wicklow.” No wonder that Glendalough attracts souls given to contemplation. It was St Kevin who first came here, in the 6th century. It's said he spent seven years in solitary contemplation in a cave above the lake and established the monastic community shortly afterwards, attracting many followers after performing miracles. It seems he wasn't always entirely saintly though: according to one legend, he resolved the temptations of a seductive woman called Caitlín by chucking her into the lake.

The Spinc traces the skyline high above the lake – known simply as Upper Lake – until Diarine leads us down through the forest to meet the valley floor. We pass an ancient birch wood clothed in moss and part ways amidst the remains of the monastic city, feeling miniscule now in our proximity to the round tower, on its way into the clouds.

***‘I round the next crest and find myself gazing not at mountains, but at the sea. I had no idea I was so close.’***



#### ▲ A LONG VIEW

Looking back to Glendalough on the way to Wicklow Lodge.

#### ▼ RAISE A GLASS

Lough Tay is also known as Guinness Lake; the family estate runs through the area and this sandy shore is likened to the creamy head on a good pint.

The next day wastes no time in getting going. Before I know it I've emerged from a wooded lane and I'm staring straight at an upland outlier: it's a rough whale-backed thing, long and bracken brown above clumps of conifer plantation and deciduous woodland. I'm not climbing it today, but it marks the entrance to the scenery I've secretly been waiting for: mountain country.

Picture my surprise, then, when I round the next crest and find myself gazing not at mountains, but at the sea. I had no idea I was so close, but there it is, glistening a dark blue beneath the sky's lighter hue. But that's for tomorrow: for now, I'm staying high.

The trail leads steadily upwards through conifer plantations before I'm catapulted out above a lake chaperoned by three handsome spurs, one standing behind the other, leading the eye into the darkness of the mountains that lie beyond. This is Lough Tay, the so-called Guinness Lake. The Guinness family's estate runs through this area and modern legend has it they imported the strip of white sand at the head of the lake to make it look like a pint of their famous ale. To my eye, that's stretching it a bit: it looks more at home in the landscape, with its squiggly, misshapen edges, than in someone's hand.

This is my first time walking in Ireland, but there's a familiarity to this landscape that pulls at my heart: the heather-topped peat and the folded horizon, dark rounded earth layered underneath a sky fickle with clouds. It doesn't look exactly like anywhere else, and yet there is a hint of the Welsh hills here: something of the epic moorland of mid-Wales and the smooth curves of the Brecon Beacons. I pass a memorial stone to JB Malone, the trail's creator, on my way north, and note the cluster of people who have found their way there, each one appreciating their moment in the sun with that view.

A boardwalk picks its way neatly over the boggy ground and before I know it I've opted to detour slightly off-path in order to climb Djouce – a trig-topped summit so close it feels criminal not to follow the others who are similarly drawn upwards. ►





And I'm so glad I did: the sense of expansiveness once I get there is exhilarating. From here, the true scope and variety of Wicklow's landscape is spread out before me. The Wicklow mountains tumble over each other to the western horizon, while to the east, I am reunited with the ocean: in fact, I can see the whole route I'll be doing tomorrow to Bray Head on the coast – the tiny twin peaks of Great Sugarloaf and Little Sugarloaf rest like dropped nightcaps, a little isolated in the otherwise gentle land between me and the sea. Amidst it all, throughout the whole panorama, are regular stands of woodland, interspersed with open farmland: this is a green land, still.

The next day I'm glad I eyed the Sugarloafs so well from Djouce, because they are almost entirely lost in raincloud. My luck with the weather has run out. I opt to skirt round the edges of the Great Sugarloaf, but by the time Little Sugarloaf comes around, there's a glimmer of hope in the clouds and I scamper up its surprisingly rocky ridge: from here, the Wicklow mountains look broodier than ever under the swirling misty skies.

Bray Head is a spectacular end to my four days in Wicklow's company. I emerge from a beautiful wooded estate onto high sea cliffs, their rocky tops giving the eye a broad sweep over the swelling water below. To the north is the seaside resort of Bray, and I can make out its beautiful sandy beach, complete with matchstick figures enjoying the newly dry day. Today's walk to the sea is a brand new extension to the Wicklow Way, which otherwise continues northwards until it reaches Dublin's southern suburbs. I feel like I've hit the jackpot with my snaking, slightly unorthodox version of the trail: every section of path has delivered a different landscape – landscapes I'll be holding in my mind's eye as I get on the train and the ferry tomorrow. Until, that is, I start dreaming of what more there is, lying in the folds of those distant mountains. **CW**

## FRESH LOOK

Bray Head is on a new extension to the Wicklow Way, and its top, marked by a cross, has expansive sea views.

## Plan your trip



### GETTING HERE

Irish Ferries ([irishferries.com](http://irishferries.com)) and Stenaline ([stenaline.co.uk](http://stenaline.co.uk)) run regular services Holyhead-Dublin, with pedestrian fares under £40. Irish Ferries also run Pembroke Dock-Rosslare in the south of Ireland, from where you can connect to the rail network at Wexford. Several airlines also operate out of Dublin to a range of British cities ([dublinairport.com](http://dublinairport.com)).



### GETTING AROUND

There are regular trains along Ireland's east coast, connecting Dublin with this route's start and end points at Rathdrum and Bray. Times: find prices at [irishrail.ie](http://irishrail.ie). Local buses don't link up easily to the Wicklow Way, and taxis can be hard to come by in some of the remoter places, so if not travelling by train, a hire car is your best bet.



### WHERE TO STAY

In Rathdrum, **Stirabout Lane B&B** (00 353 404 43142, [stay@stiraboutlane.com](mailto:stay@stiraboutlane.com)) offers modern rooms, stand out breakfasts and a lounge for walkers to rest weary limbs. Further up the trail in Laragh, **Heather House** (00 353 404 45157, [wicklowheather.ie](http://wicklowheather.ie)) is the perfect starting point for the day's walk to Glendalough: the luxury rooms are decorated with an antique sensibility, and the house itself features a kitchen and numerous ornate rooms for guests to relax in. Doubles from €90. **Wicklow Way Lodge** (00 353 128 18489, [wicklowway](http://wicklowway)

[lodge.com](http://lodge.com)) once boasted Matthew McConaughey as one of its guests, such is its renown. Its setting is unbeatable, right on the Wicklow Way between Glendalough and the next day's walk to Lough Tay. The rooms face out into tranquil hill country; doubles from about €100.

**Coolakay Inn** ([coolakayhouse.ie](http://coolakayhouse.ie)) is one of the longest-running and last-remaining B&Bs in the area, between the mountains and sea, and owner Yvonne will greet you like a long lost friend. Doubles from €45 per person.



### MORE INFORMATION

See [visitwicklow.ie](http://visitwicklow.ie) for points of interest, accommodation and restaurants and [wicklowway.com](http://wicklowway.com) for detail on the walking route.

● **Country Walking** travelled with **Celtic Routes** ([celticroutes.info](http://celticroutes.info)), a partnership of coastal communities in Ireland (Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford) and Wales (Ceredigion Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire), that celebrates the countries' shared Celtic heritage and untamed landscapes.

● Local guides **Diarine Nuttall** (00 353 861 936861, [dnuttall@eircom.net](mailto:dnuttall@eircom.net)) and **Caroline O'Connor** (00 353 877 849599, [info@hilltoptreks.ie](mailto:info@hilltoptreks.ie)) both offer private walking tours of the Wicklow mountains.

