

TRAVEL



WEEKEND BREAK

Biking into the West

Dan MacCarthy on falling in love with the landscape of Mulranny, Co Mayo

AS I STAND at the Mulranny Park Hotel in Co Mayo on day one of a weekend trip, my eye races over the empty spaces, trying to comprehend the beauty of the interlocking mountains, the sweep of the sea, the sense of boundless landscape.

On the north side of Clew Bay you look across at the imposing Croagh Patrick and the sun-filled bay while, reputedly, 365 islands lie like a pod of sleeping whales. Again the eye races to where a silver river disappears into a wood. A village nestles in a cove. Everywhere nature assails you.

Food sourced locally — not least, trout, salmon and lobster — is served at the Mulranny Park. Suppliers bring in truckloads of vegetables and the outstanding Carrowholly cheese. In fact, visitors can take part in a gourmet trail to visit Kelly's butchers in Newport, the Curraun Blue trout farm, Croagh Patrick Seafoods, Achill Island Turbot and Keem Bay Fish Producers.

And in Mulranny itself, Cheryl Cobern Browne also runs the Essence of Mulranny centre, providing workshops on glass and bead-making, often with a therapeutic twist.

Mulranny Park Hotel, along with the Great Western Greenway, the causeway and the loop walk have collectively just won the European Destination of Excellence Award — an outstanding achievement for a village.

After a sumptuous lunch in the hotel, we take a quick trip out the Atlantic Drive, past the prehistoric sight of Clare Island, to Achill Island to visit the Secret Garden, which is run by a Dutch couple Doutsje and Willem. The coastal garden is an oasis of woodland in the otherwise barren Achill and has been nurtured over the last 100 years to create several themed gardens.

But the jewel in the crown of the Mulranny area is the Great Western Greenway — suitable for walkers and cyclists. An 18km stretch of uninterrupted dedicated cycle path which takes the carefree cyclist from the village of Mulranny (west Mayo, the gateway to Achill Island) to the village of Newport, with its stunning viaduct.

The route can be accessed from several points so you don't have to do the whole lot, or you can do the 18km before turning around and heading



Above, Cyclists enjoying the Mulranny Cycleway in Co Mayo; top, Mulranny Park Hotel on the north side of Clew Bay. Picture: Paul Deane

back to Mulranny and then Achill — though some of that crosses public roads.

Along the dedicated route, upwards of a 100 cyclists, of all ages, sweep past in small groups. Though mentioned above it is worth repeating: the views are quite incredible. As you pedal on, the blanket bog gives way to leafy meadowland, then to woodland. All along the track there are several spots to stop and have a picnic — or nip off and have lunch at Nevins Newfield Inn half way along.

Funded by Fáilte Ireland, the track is spotlessly maintained by Mulranny Tourism and Mayo County Council in the form of the endlessly positive John O'Donnell. Anything left behind by a cyclist is picked up

that day. Anything left behind by a wandering cow is cleared away.

Several new businesses have sprung up in the area on the back of the Greenway popularity. A cafe and bike rental shop (great value from €14) are just two of them. Kayaking is ever popular.

Day two, and on onwards to Newport House in the village of Newport. This is an ivy-clad 19th century mansion that has its own river and is one of the great fishing hotels of Ireland. A hub for golfing, horseriding, walking and shooting, it brings you back to the age of Dickens. Oil paintings festoon the walls, an old billiards room lurks in a games room in the courtyard and a superb cellar

complements a diverse menu.

Nearby Westport House is the home of the 16th century pirate queen, Grace O'Malley. It boasts beautiful parklands and is a children's paradise with its pirate adventure park and giant swan pedaloes. Park your caravan or pitch your tent and just indulge.

Finally, a trip to Inisbiggle (how could you resist travelling to a place that evokes the name of boyhood war novels), taking in the outstanding national park of Ballycroy.

Michael Leneghan runs a small boat from Doran's Point to Inisbiggle. A tiny island community, this place is held together by the likes of Michael.

We take a quick look at the simple church with arched doorway and an old Protestant school as we bob and weave on the broken roads. All around birdlife lands incessantly. Here, the hard-to-find chough, there the exotic yellowhammer. You can keep your celebrities and A-listers — an hour in the unrushed company of this man is worth way more.

Back on the mainland, it's a quick hop to the Ballycroy National Park which exemplifies the ongoing development of the area with a superb interpretive centre. Among the activities are a boarded walkway through the heather — perfect for junior to

get their walking boots on.

An appropriate quote by TH White is displayed on a board: "At sunset, in some atmospheric conditions, the horizontal rays would for a few moments turn everything saffron, but everything — the earth, the sky, the turfstacks, the whitewashed cottage, all would momentarily glow into glory."

Enough superlatives. The definition is already creaking under its own weight. Okay, dammit, just one more. They say to live a fulfilled life you should live for a year in Paris or New York. You can add Mayo to that list.

Info and contacts:

www.mulrannyparkhotel.ie
Two nights B&B and one gourmet evening meal from €189 pp sharing, plus bike trip and lunch.

www.newporthouse.ie
Special offer: two nights B&B one evening dinner, €235 pp sharing. Other rates to include fishing
www.westporthouse.ie
2-4 activities: €90 adult, child €50

www.mulranny.ie
www.achillsecretgarden.com
www.eomworkshops.com (glass and beadmaking)
Clew Bay Angling/ tour: Mary Gavin Hughes, 086-8062282
Inisbiggle: Michael Leneghan, 087-1269618