

Take a walk on the Wild Atlantic Way

Winding 1600 miles around the edge of Ireland, the Wild Atlantic Way is one of the world's most spectacular coastal routes. **Norman Wright** chooses some highlights

The Cliffs of Moher in County Clare



© TOURISM IRELAND CHRIS HILL

Macgillcuddys Reeks, Ireland's highest mountain range



© TOURISM IRELAND CHRIS HILL

▶ **A**FTER NEWFOUNDLAND the Atlantic Ocean has 2000 miles to build up its strength before it crashes onto the western shores of Ireland. No wonder they call the tourist route along that rugged coast the Wild Atlantic Way.

The Way winds and twists around 1600 miles of coastline from the Inishowen Peninsula in the north round to Kinsale near Cork in the south. It is one of the

longest defined coastal routes in the world and one of the most beautiful.

Scenic in the extreme, it isn't just towering cliffs and pounding seas. A touch inland are other spectacular views and unique natural features as well as picture-postcard villages and vibrant towns.

We have picked some highlights of the Wild Atlantic Way but there are hundreds more. Seeing them and discovering more for yourself would probably need several

visits unless you have a few weeks to spare and attempt the whole distance.

Starting point for the Wild Atlantic Way is officially Derry/Londonderry but if you take a ferry over to Belfast, the Northern Ireland coastal drive is the most scenic way to get to Derry. In fact, there's so much to see you might never get there.

Ballintoy Harbour about half-way is ideal for a pit-stop. *Game Of Thrones* fans will recognise the little fishing harbour as

one of the 'TV series' locations. To start the route proper you cross the border into Donegal just after Derry.

Malin Head on the Inishowen Peninsula is the most northerly point of mainland Ireland. Rocky and windswept, it is familiar to anyone who listens to the BBC Shipping Forecast as it gives its name to a sea area.

There are remains of a Napoleonic Wars watch station, and during the Second

World War the Irish government allowed Britain to build radio masts there to help the fight against U-boats in the Atlantic.

The coast of Donegal has been formed by the seas into a jagged collection of inlets, cliffs, rock formations and little coves. Donegal Bay is more sheltered from the relentless Atlantic.

Just north of Sligo city is Ireland's table mountain, Ben Bulbin; formed by glaciers, its face is crenelated into vertical

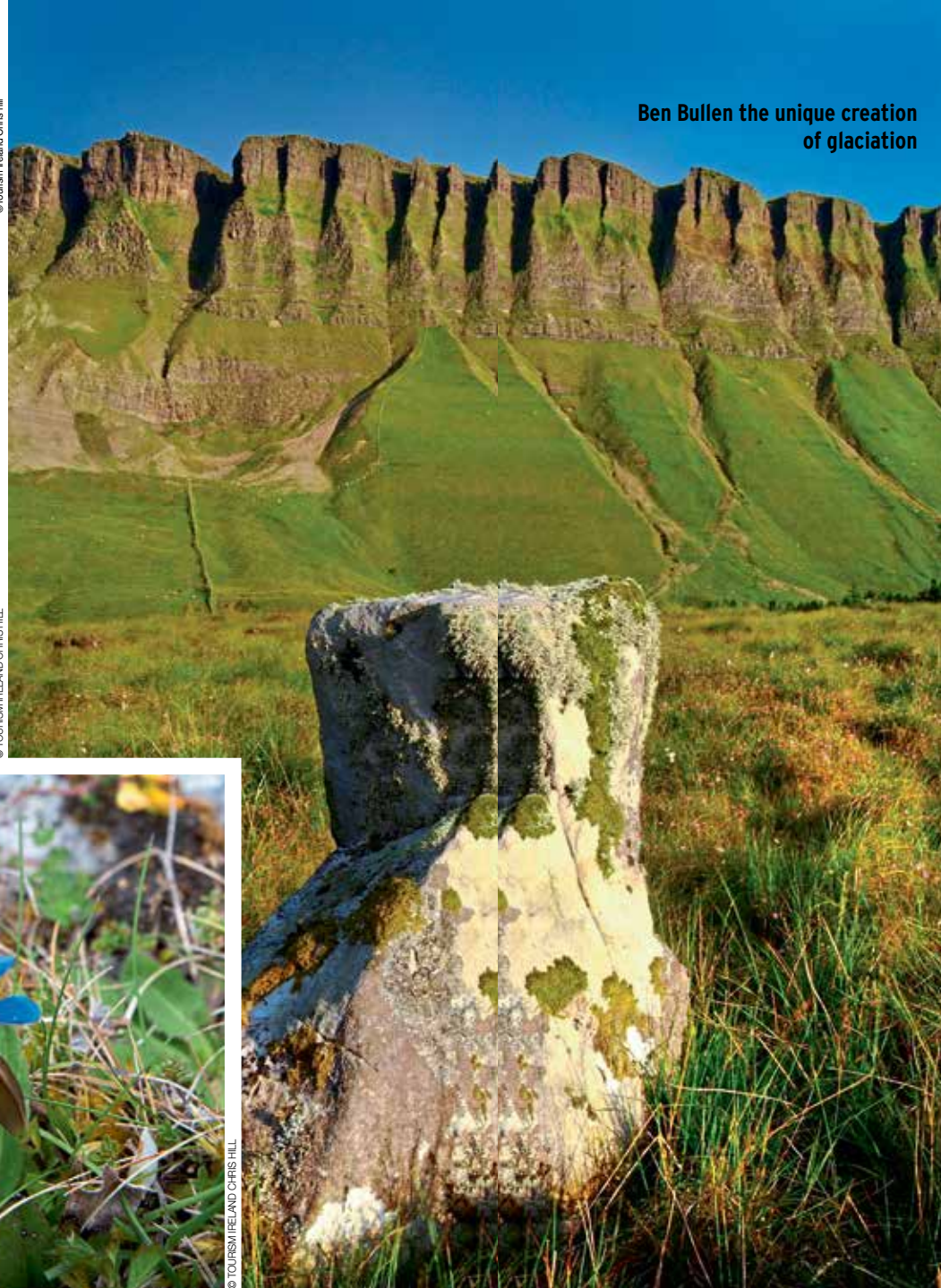
folds and its flat-top form seems to rise out of the surrounding land.

Benbulbin overlooks the village of Mullaghmore, the site of the assassination of Lord Mountbatten in 1979.

The most unusual landscape along the Wild Atlantic Way is the barren limestone area of The Burren in County Clare. Grey hills of flat rock formations rise up like a lunar landscape. Rivers disappear into the ground and flow on, ▶



Malin Head the most northerly point of mainland Ireland



Ben Bulbin the unique creation of glaciation



The Burren is a perfect environment for many wild flowers



The Burren's rocky landscape

underground; huge boulders lie on bare plateaus. A unique flora thrives in the cracks and trenches between the rocks. Three-quarters of all species found in Ireland grow in The Burren – including arctic and alpine plants.

Clare's coast features the towering heights of the Cliffs of Moher, five miles of vertical faces up to 700ft high. It is one of the most popular tourism sites in Ireland, with a visitor centre and safe paved pathways to allow you to see the majestic formations.

The Cliffs are a special protected area for seabirds. More than 20 species are

represented with 30,000 breeding pairs, including guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, puffins and peregrine falcons.

Further south past Limerick city on the River Shannon estuary, you can take a break from spectacular scenery to find out about spectacular feats of aviation at Foynes, once a main terminal for transatlantic flying boat services. The museum there has an example of the craft that flew up to and during the Second World War. The layout inside is fascinating to experience – a service that emulated that of a cruise line.

Not many villages can look more

chocolate-box than Adare, a few miles south of Limerick. With its main street of thatched cottages and medieval buildings, the village is rich in ancient and archaeological remains with a history dating back to 1200.

Even the entrance to the village from the east gives way to views of ancient buildings, including the Norman-built Desmond Castle.

The Dingle Peninsula has wonderful sandy beaches, both in the north near Castlegregory and the south around Inch.

Leaving Tralee, the Wild Atlantic Way goes over the Connor Pass – Ireland's

highest mountain pass – on its way to Dingle town. The very narrow road in parts twists and turns, rises and falls, but always with breathtaking views.

From Dingle, the Sleat Head Drive offers some of the most enchanting scenery in Ireland. Again, it is another narrow road winding its way west along the steep rocky coastline. The Blasket Islands lie off the coast here. There is a boat going over from Dunquin to the biggest of the islands, An Bascaod Mór. Mount Brandon, Ireland's second highest mountain, reigning over the land, can be seen at the end of the drive.

The Wild Atlantic Way follows a very similar route to the famous Ring of Kerry drive, which is the most frequently travelled tourist route and follows the coast of the Iveragh Peninsula.

The Way departs from the ring to continue along the Skellig Ring. This road is not frequented as much as the other ring. Highlights are Valentia Island, connected to the mainland by a bridge at Portmagee, the drive over Coonmaneaspig Pass and the coves and beaches of St Finan's Bay.

The boats for both Skellig Islands, which lie seven miles off the Kerry coast, depart from Portmagee and Ballinskelligs. The

Skellig Islands are two very steep rocky islands. Skellig Michael, which peaks at just over 700ft, was the home of a small group of monks in the seventh century. This monastic settlement was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1996. The smaller island, Little Skellig, which is a haven for various seabirds, has one of the largest colonies of Northern Gannet in the world.

The Ring of Kerry connects the towns of Kenmare and Killarney via the wide circuit. Within the ring is Ireland's highest mountain range, Macgillycuddy's Reeks – reeks being the local name for ridges. They

The Dingle Peninsula



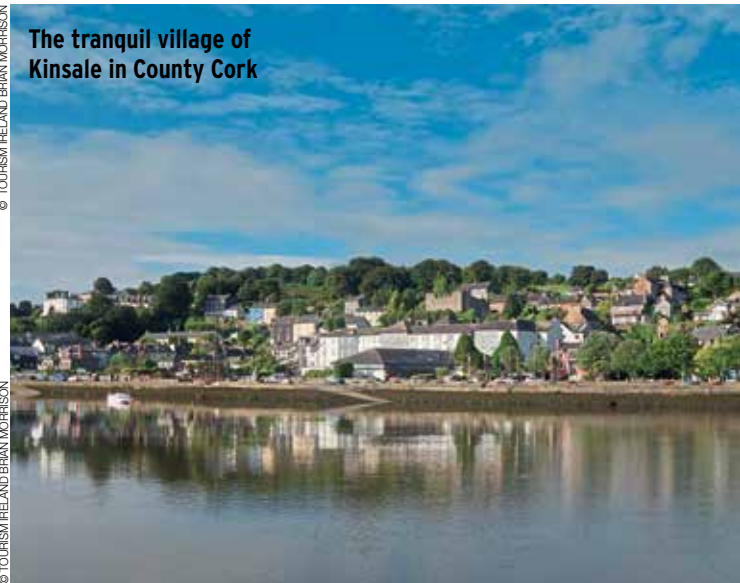
© TOURISM IRELAND JOHN HESSON

Ireland's prettiest village, Adare near Limerick



© TOURISM IRELAND BRIAN MORRISON

The tranquil village of Kinsale in County Cork



◀ are a popular hiking spot but you can see some of their ruggedness from the road.

The Ring of Beara is another ring road which has a lot less traffic than the Ring of Kerry. The roads are so narrow that they are not suitable for buses or camper vans.

This section of the Wild Atlantic Way is striking both from a scenic point of view and the pace of life. A stone's throw out in the Atlantic lies Dursey Island, which is connected to the mainland by Ireland's only cable car. The journey by cable car, which takes about ten minutes, is used both by man and beast.

Sheep's Head, which is near Bantry, is another peninsula protruding into the Atlantic. It is a place of peace, unspoilt beauty and tranquil scenery. At the most westerly point the tip of the peninsula is the Sheep's Head.

Fastnet Rock, which was known as "The Teardrop of Ireland" as it was the last image the emigrants had when sailing for the New World, houses the country's tallest lighthouse at 177ft.

The Wild Atlantic Way continues eastwards towards Baltimore. Baltimore Beacon, a signal tower, offers the perfect

view over the islands in the bay. This area benefits from a mild climate due to the presence of the Gulf Stream, enjoying a lush vegetation, but is equally exposed to the whims of the Atlantic.

The bustling harbour town of Kinsale is the start, or end, point of the Wild Atlantic Way. Kinsale is popular for its colourful houses on Milk Market, its pubs and restaurants and the sheltered harbour.

Find out more

■ Website: thewildatlanticway.com.