

TRAVEL

Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way

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The wind has hurtled west from Amerikay, gathering strength along the way. Quixotic and dangerous, it howls over the Cliffs of Moher, bending tourists to its will. They lean into it, doubling forward, staggering and laughing.

Eight hundred vertiginous feet above the heaving Atlantic ocean, visitors who just landed at Shannon Airport this morning are getting their first introduction to Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way.

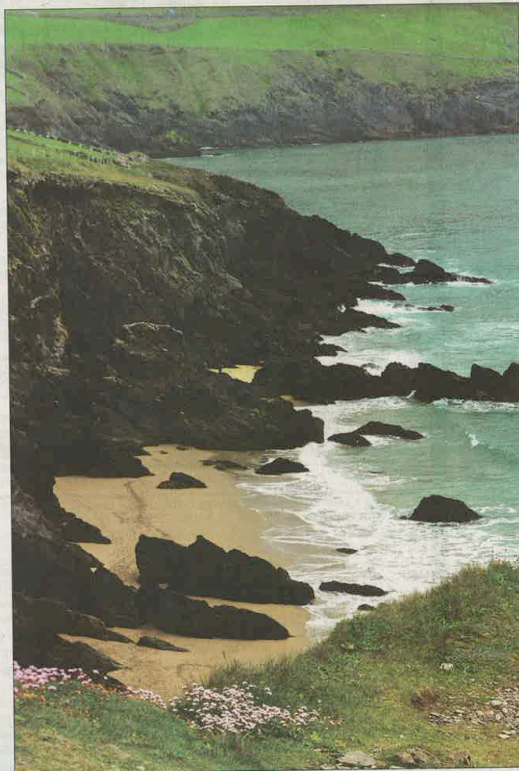
By turns verdant and green, blustery and remote, Ireland's coastal journey begins all the way up in Donegal in the north and travels the entire length of Ireland's west coast down to the Dingle Peninsula and the Ring of Kerry in the South.

The entire trail can be driven. It is marked with signs bearing a zig-zag wave pattern but first-time drivers to Ireland should beware! At places the roads are single car width, perched precipitously above cliffs and host to oncoming buses that might require you to back a stick-shift car down a curving hill while driving on the "wrong" side of the road! If you have never driven it before, you might well feel safer as a traveler on a group tour in one of those buses.

Given those warnings, however, there is no place on Earth more beautiful than the coast of Ireland, particularly along the Dingle Peninsula and the Ring of Kerry, the "fingers" of land that jut out into the sea along the south coast of Ireland.

The Dingle Peninsula is host to one of the six remaining "gaeltachts" of Ireland—regions where Irish Gaelic is spoken as the primary language. (There are six versions of Gaelic—Irish, Scots, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and Breton).

The Dingle Peninsula was also host to many of the earliest Christian communities in Ireland. Monks took themselves to the edge of the windy sea and built little stone huts shaped like beehives.



Ireland's breathtaking Dingle Peninsula

Eventually, to get even further away, they rowed out to sea, climbed distant Skellig Michael and put stone huts up along the side of a cliff. Visitors can stop at the Gallarus Oratory, a tiny stone church built in the 7th century, or pay a couple of Euros to climb a hill and duck into an ancient stone circle where one of the first Masses in Ireland might have been celebrated.

No trip to the Dingle Peninsula would be complete without a stop in the fishing village of Dingle, where you can sample Atlantic cod, with chips and malt vinegar, buy gorgeous Irish linen, wander in and out of art shops and churches, and smell the briny sea.

The Ring of Kerry is the furthest eastern point of the Wild Atlantic Way. Here, high cliff vistas give way to long, sweeping green fields that cascade toward the sea. Legend has it that the Milesian Celts from Galicia landed here in Kenmare Bay sometime around 500 B.C., and ancient ring forts abound.

As you travel the Ring you will notice that the sheep are marked with paint colors; this is because the Irish don't fence their sheep and the colors differentiate the flocks. While you are on the Ring, don't miss the border collie training demonstration by world champion Brendan Ferris of the Kells Sheep Center. On just a whisper and a whistle, Brendan's beloved dogs, herd sheep down from the high hills and into the paddock.

You can stop for lunch at the pastoral perfect town of Waterville, County Kerry, where Charlie Chaplin made his summer home, or, if you are truly adventurous, you can stop at a grocery for wine, cheese and grapes and perch on a stone wall high above an Atlantic beach. Raise your paper cup and toast the shifting wind, the mist and the magic that is Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way.

Julienne Osborne-McKnight's forthcoming book is *The Story We Carry in Our Bones: Irish History for Americans* from Pelican Publishing. It is now available for pre-order from amazon.com.

The fishing town of Dingle

