

Driving Tour of West Sligo

West Sligo, encompassing the ridge of the Ox Mountains and the stretch of lowland coastline running beneath them, is uniquely beautiful country with wild and rugged stretches of shore, fabulous beaches, lonely hill top lakes, renowned rivers, and some of the best blanket peat bog in Europe. Its views can be breathtaking, its scenery inspiring, and its history, as always, recounts man's struggle with man, God and the elements. Let us take a day tour that will reveal some of the secrets of this landscape.

Ballysadare

We start our tour at the top of Ballysadare Bay where the river cascades into the sea. Overlooking the waterfall are the remains of a church built to St Fechin in the 7th Century. Apparently he also had a salmon fishery and a watermill here even in those distant days. The river is still full of salmon, up to 2,000 fish being caught on a rod and line each year. Ballysadare has often been a place of explosions, with the mills (now derelict through disuse) destroyed that way in 1856, and the bridge much later, after which the river had to be crossed by planks. Happily both were restored in due season, although the mills later fell into disuse. Now we cross the bridge and turn right onto the N59.

Coolaney & Knocknashee

Taking the Coolaney turn, we climb into the Ox Mountains to this quiet little village. A local tale relates that a long-dead

MacDonagh Chief gave two neighbouring areas to his daughters, Oonagh and Annie as dowries, hence the confusing names Collooney and Coolaney. Approaching the village we pass the strangely shaped Hawk's Rock close to the Hawk's Well - Tubber Scanavin. Yeats named a play after the well, and the theatre in Sligo Town has very fittingly taken the same name. Leaving the village we follow signs for Gillighan's World at Knocknashee, or Mullinabreena, the Hill of the Fairy Palace which stands alone. A large Bronze Age fort once covered the hilltop. Children especially will enjoy stopping to visit the fairies who now inhabit the hill, and the views from the top are beautiful. Below lie the ruins of Court Abbey, built by the O'Haras in the 14th century. Nearby is the source of the famous salmon river, the Moy.

Tubbercurry & Banada Abbey

Sligo's second largest town lies at the foot of the Ox Mountains, and every April hosts the Western Drama Festival, and every July the South Sligo Summer School for Traditional Irish Music.

The earliest historical reference to the town is 1397 when the O'Connors built a fortress here. For centuries Tubbercurry thrived, and in 1853 was further enhanced by its inclusion on Charles Bianconi's route. Based in Sligo Town his wonderful horse-drawn open conveyances seated up to 14 passengers seated back to back and facing outwards. These cars allowed regular travel to Ballina. In 1895 the railway line opened, but was closed in 1975.

No hint remains today that the town was all but destroyed during a reprisal raid by the Black & Tans in September 1920. The main street burnt for days and it is said the gutters ran with petrol, porter, whiskey, melted soap and candle grease.

3km north-east of the town lies Achonry and the smallest Cathedral in Ireland. Built in 1820, and designed for 250 people, it is now restored and in use again.

Leaving Tubbercurry we turn towards the Ox Mountains again and soon come to quiet Banada. Hard to believe that in the 1850's the main coach road passed through here and the thriving community had a pub, 2 butchers, 2 coopers, 2 weavers, a shoemaker a blacksmith, a corn mill, a pound and a kiln! The 5 arch bridge was built around 1800, but the Abbey dates from 1423. It was once home of the Jones family, but when 2 sons and 3 daughters of the house embraced the church they gave the Abbey and its contents, including a silver chalice made in 1641, to the Sisters of Charity.

Lough Talt & Lough Easkey

At the foot of Crummus peak, Lough Talt is a beautiful place, and on calm days when the water reflects the surrounding mountain, it is truly magical. A favourite spot for trout fishermen, and equally popular amongst walkers for the path winding around the shore – a 6.5km circuit.

Now we retrace our steps for 3km to Mullaney's Cross, turn left, then left again signed to Lough Easkey. A few miles up this winding road we pass Mass Hill where mass was said during the time of the Penal Laws. Here the Shaking Rock is to be found, a massive boulder high above the road which can be rocked by a touch of the hand, but which, miraculously, has never fallen. Sharing the road with mountain sheep we come to Lough Easkey, a solitary place whose wide open skies and peat bog has a spare beauty. This lake is also popular with anglers who fish for trout and salmon. Leaving the Lough, and passing the remains of an old hunting lodge, we descend towards the coastal plain, fabulous views of the sea stretching before us.

Enniscrone or Inishcrone

Reaching the N59 just past Dromore West we turn left and then left again to visit Culkins Emigration Museum (open summer only) which recounts the aftermath of the 1845 Famine when so many were forced to leave the country in order to survive. On this site once stood Daniel Culkin's Shipping and Emigration Agency – the way to a new world. Back on the N59 we immediately pass the old workhouse, now privately owned, and continue to Enniscrone, a little seaside holiday town famous for its sunsets. The 3km beach, including the 'valley of the diamonds' stretches invitingly into the distance, its great sand dunes forming part of the widely acclaimed golf course. Also renowned are Kilcullen's Seaweed Baths, as popular now as they were when they opened in 1912!

In the main street a large black pig (The huge creature made by local sculptor Cillian Rogers) recalls a tale - A huge boar ran amok in Donegal, devouring women and children.

Pursued, it fled south, disappearing into the sea in Sligo and later emerging on Enniscrone beach. It was finally slain at nearby Mackduff, and being too big to bury was covered with a pile of stones which remain to this day.

Passing a ruined O'Dowd castle, we leave Enniscrone and come to Kilglass Protestant Church behind which is the old Abbey, believed to be the burial site of Duaid MacFirbis of Lecan Castle. Historians of the O'Dowds, the MacFirbis family were scholars for 4 centuries, their home a centre of learning and culture. They compiled 3 major manuscripts on the history of Sligo.

Easkey

This small village lies on the river of the same name, which means 'full of fish', famous for its salmon and trout. These days Easkey is even more famous for its surf, and has a Surf School and Information Centre in the village. The Protestant Church was burnt (along with many others along this coast) during the uprising of 1798, and was rebuilt in 1820 at a cost of ?1,238 15s 4d with a grant from the Board of First Fruits. Down by the sea are the remains of Rosslea Castle, and the old pier, a popular spot for fishermen. On the way out of the village we pass the Split Rock. It is said that Fionn Mac Cumhaill, idling in the Ox Mountains challenged a comrade to throw a stone to the sea, which he did. Fionn's stone fell short, and in rage he split it with his sword. It is also said that if someone walks through the split 3 times, the rock will close on them!

5kms on, the road follows a sharp right-hand bend, near a distinctive modern water tower. We turn left instead, down Ballykillcash Hill to the coast road. At the top of this hill, on clear day, the views are spectacular, with the Sligo coast and much of Donegal laid out before us.

Aughris Head

Along this beautiful stretch of coastline we can see the newly installed Wind Farm in the Ox Mountains, and for ornithologists this area is a paradise, with many species of seabird – gulls, shags, curlews, storm petrels, kittiwakes, fulmars and guillemots. Aughris Head can offer a wild and rugged cliff walk, a lovely beach with stunning views, and a pub close to the water. Round the corner, Dunmorán Strand is yet another lovely beach. Dolphins are often to be seen leaping and tossing all along this coast, and seals can also be spotted, their heads sticking up like little periscopes.

Skreen and Ladies' Brae

Turning inland we come to Skreen, its name probably deriving from the latin for shrine. Adamnan, the saint who was biographer of St Columba, founded the church here in the 7th Century, and his well is at the base of a pillar to the right of the road. The Protestant Church, founded in 1704 is particularly noted for its graveyard monuments, most of which were made by the local Diamond family, originally from Italy. In the Rectory here the famous 19th century scientist Stokes was born. Close by, near the remains of Ardnaglas castle, the last wolf in Ireland was killed by a wolfhound, a beautifully carved stone marks the event!

We turn towards Knockalongy, the highest peak in the Ox range, to take the scenic drive over the mountains known as Ladies' Brae. The road winds along the side of the hill and suddenly offers panoramic views over the Sligo coastline - on a clear day, a truly wonderful sight, revealing all the magic of this county, beloved not only by the poet Yeats but by so many who came before him and all those who have come since.

Taking the next left turn after this viewing point, the road brings us to Beltra, a short distance from Ballysadare, which ends our tour.