

Adventure

So close, so far

Handily, one of Ireland's greatest long-distance walks starts in Dublin. Philip Watson strides out of the city straight onto the wild Wicklow Way

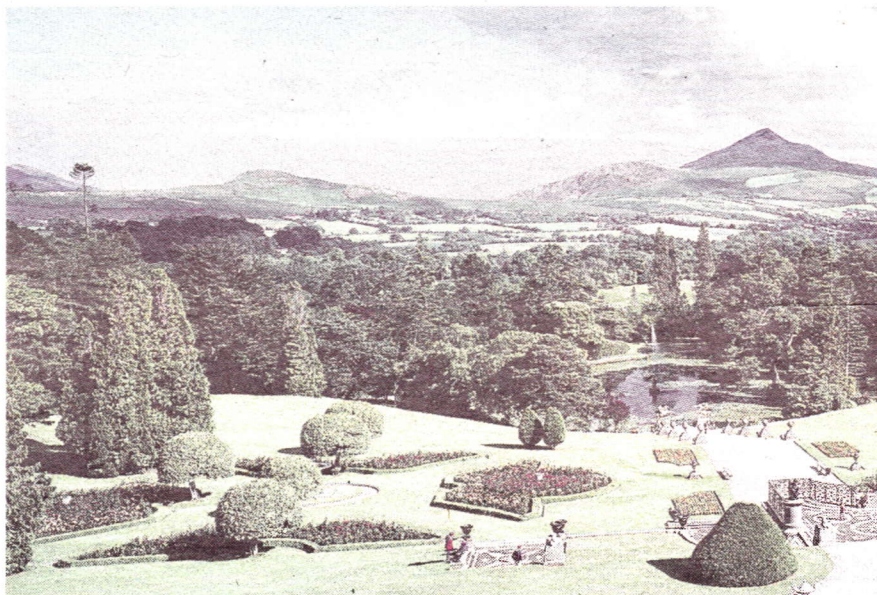
It was a perfect spring Monday morning in Dublin and I was on a number 16 bus heading to the suburbs. Leaving behind the office workers, coffee shops and delivery drivers - the buzz and bustle of a vibrant capital rousing itself for the week ahead - I was travelling south to Marlay Park, a large public open space on the urban fringe.

It was in this unlikely setting, among the playgrounds, tennis courts and miniature railway, that I strode onto one of Ireland's great long-distance walking routes: the Wicklow Way. Extending 132km south-west to Clonegal in County Carlow, it traverses the country's largest mountain region and boasts many extraordinary scenic and historic landmarks.

Within just a few hours, I was high up in the heathery hills, granite outcrops and peat-coloured streams of the humpy Wicklow mountains. While the hiss of traffic on Dublin's M50 motorway lingered long after passing from view, I was soon immersed in the painterly, panoramic wilds of the Irish uplands. The contrast between country and city, ancient and modern, was exhilarating, like having the Pennine Way start in London's Richmond Park.

Although there are decidedly luxurious places to stay (the Ritz-Carlton Powerscourt, for example, with its Gordon Ramsay restaurant), they are not the only choice. At the end of my first day I checked into Knockree, a sleek new "five-star hostel", at which beds in shared rooms start at €18.50, four-bed en suite family rooms are just €90, and the wonderfully oxymoronic "hostel honeymoon suite" is a snip at €65.

Opened last year by the Irish Youth Hostel Association (anoige.ie), its somewhat institutional architecture, utilitarian concrete floors and Ikea furnishings may be too spartan for some, but the bright interiors and views of



Glencree valley more than compensated.

Elsewhere, I stayed at B&B guesthouses, such as Lough Dan House (+353 1 2817027, loughdanhouse.com) near Roundwood and Stirabout Lane in Rathdrum (+404 43142, stiraboutlane.com), which cater specifically for trekkers for around €30-40pp per night, while Roundwood Camping Park (+1 281 8163, dublinwicklowcamping.com) is just €12 for a hiker with tent. My load was lightened by Wicklow Way Baggage, whose luggage transfers cost just €7.50 per bag per day.

I spent four days walking 80km as far as Glenmalur; then headed back to Dublin from Rathdrum, taking the picturesque train journey along the coast. At the end of each day, however, my tired and aching legs were a reminder that you need to be reasonably fit to tackle the route, with some isolated stretches involving day-long hikes of 20km or more. While it goes no higher than 630m (2,070ft), much of the trail involved long ascents. The right gear is essential - Irish weather can be as brutal as it is changeable.

The route is well-maintained and its yellow icons and brown metal signposts reasonably easy to follow. Yet several sections were remote and exposed, so take a map, plenty of water, a whistle and mobile phone.

For those who make the effort, though, there are myriad rewards.

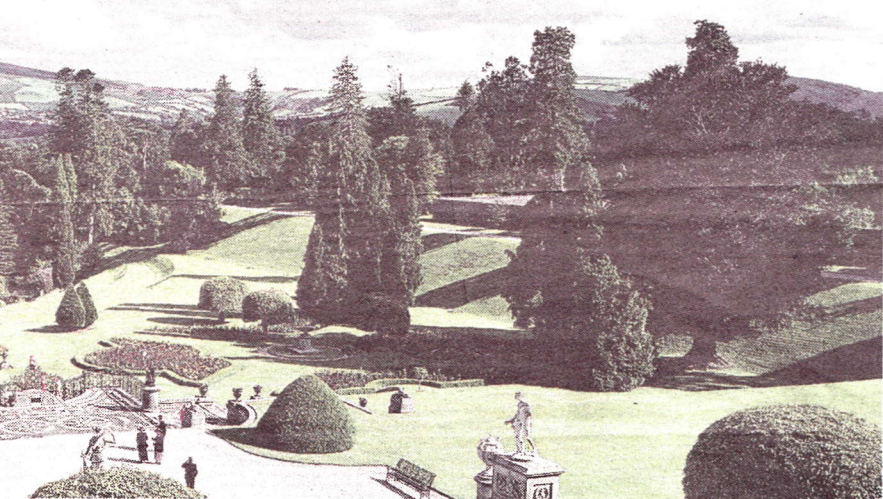
From the Knockree hostel, I completed a splendid 20km circular road-walk that took in Powerscourt, an 18th-century Palladian mansion whose formal grounds are considered the finest in Ireland. Theatrically backdropped by conical Great Sugarloaf mountain, the estate is landscaped with terraces, lakes and ponds, and also embraces the country's highest waterfall.

My circular walk also stopped off at the pretty, monied village of Enniskerry, as well as the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, which has a cafe with a small exhibition on the former barracks' history and the modern centre's estimable peacebuilding work.

On my fourth day, the way dropped dramatically into Glendalough, the steep-sided "valley of the two lakes" that shelters one of Ireland's most impressive monastic settlements. Established by St Kevin in the 6th century, the site has an arched gateway, a 30m-high round tower, a roofless cathedral, and St Kevin's Cell, the ruins of a beehive-shaped stone hut, thought to have been the hermit's home.

Little is known about the saint; myths and legends have filled in the gaps. As well as living to the age of 120, handsome yet devoutly chaste St Kevin supposedly repelled the advances of a love-struck local woman by throwing himself naked into a patch of nettles

Nature tamed . . . Powerscourt's formal gardens, just off the Wicklow Way



and her into the icy lake. A visitors' centre tells a fuller if more sober story of the saint and settlement.

The path offered many grand scenic gestures including long, lingering vistas over Dublin and the bay from Fairy Castle cairn, with Poolbeg power station's red and white chimneys standing out like giant barber's poles. Up on the bleak, blustery mountain summit of Djouce (pronounced "Jowss"), I could see along a large stretch of the eastern coastline; on a very clear day, it's said you can see as far as Snowdonia.

Just south of Djouce was a 3km-long raised boardwalk of beautifully weathered railway sleepers, conserving the saturated blanket bog and speeding me along to a memorial boulder to JB Malone, the "Wainwright of Ireland" who established the idea of the Wicklow Way in 1966. From a seat next to the memorial I looked down on a small, impossibly pretty, slate-blue lake called Lough Tay.

St Kevin repelled a love-struck woman by jumping into a patch of nettles

There were pleasures in the detail, too. Mica flecks in ancient granite shone like gold dust in caramel-coloured streams, beech trees were decorated with delicately suspended catkins and the upland breezes infused with coconut-like scent from early flowering gorse.

The landscape here is strong, enduring, and so scoured by glaciers and patterned by drystone walls that it seemed almost abstract. Mountains and moorlands are permeated with rich and rusty reds, greens and browns. The light was both muted and mutable.

But for all the acute observation and reflection the Wicklow Way inspired, it was also - for this is Ireland - very social. Local walkers often asked me how far I'd come, how far I was going. Knowledge was imparted, the weather commented on ("Ah sure, doesn't it only rain between the showers"). And I was sent on my way with good cheer: "Enjoy your walk"; "Have fun now"; "Happy days". Happy days indeed.

● *Ryanair* (ryanair.com) flies to Dublin from various UK airports. Wicklow Way route and accommodation details: wicklowway.com. Essential guides: *The Wicklow Way Map Guide* (eastwestmapping.ie), *The Wicklow Way* (rucsacs.com). Wicklow Way Baggage (+86 269 8659, wicklowwaybaggage.com). More information: discoverireland.ie/walking.