

The Western Way – Ballina to Bonniclon and the Sligo Border

Trail surface:	Quiet country roads and bog roads
Difficulty:	Moderate. Bring food and water and suitable clothing
Distance:	21 Kilometres
Total height gained:	260 metres
Duration:	6 to 8 hours walking. 3 hours cycling.
Start:	Beside the refurbished playground in Ardnaree
O/S maps 1:50000:	number 24

It is both with a feeling of sadness and accomplishment that we face today's leg of the Western Way. After all these months we have arrived at the final section from Ballina to the Sligo border. For my companions and me it has been a journey of discovery and fulfilment. We have come to realise that many walks and cycles exist on our own doorstep that compare with the best anywhere in the world has to offer. Being on foot, naturally the pace of life is slower and this has given us time to fully appreciate our surroundings as we journeyed along.

Ballina for instance, is a town dominated by the influence of water and after an extremely wet winter the River Moy was majestic in full flood. The Moy of course is well known for its salmon fishery and the Ridge Pool in the heart of Ballina is the most famous place to fish in Ireland. During the season, from the first of February to the end of September fishermen and women can be seen standing in the river casting for salmon. Otters can be quite a common sight around the bridges of the town and a less welcome sight for the salmon fisherman is the occasional Common Seal come to feast on the king of fish. Incidentally the river was first bridged in 1836 and the railway arrived in 1873.

Leaving Ballina we pass by the beautiful Brosna Falls resplendent in the early spring sunshine. Soon after we are in the heart of rural Ireland following a network of quiet country roads whilst all the time heading towards the Ox mountains which have now appeared in the far distance. As we journey along there is time to admire the many stone built houses and bridges still intact scattered throughout the way. One such example is the bridge at Kilgarvan, south of Bunnyconnelan. The craftsmanship of these early stonemasons is a joy to behold. Similar examples exist in Louisburg and Killawalla. The final stretch of the Western Way used to be an old Bianconi coach road dating back to the late eighteen hundreds which has now grassed over. We last encountered one of these roads when entering Leenane back in the summer.

The Western Ways ends at the Sligo border entering a quiet upland area where one only hears the chirping of birds, the bleating of sheep and the sighing sounds of the wind whistling along the slopes. This area is called The Gap, appropriately so as it is one of few mountain passes from county Mayo into county Sligo for many kilometres. Bunnyconnelan has a number of trails nearby and the Ox Mountain Trail begins a few kilometres North West of this location. For the more adventurous follow the R294 to the Sligo Way which begins a

short distance away at Lough Talt. Many thanks to Joe McDermott, an aficionado of the Western Way for all his help and support. When we return in two months' time we will be walking Mayo's second way marked way, the Croagh Patrick Heritage Trail.