

## The Western Way – Ballycastle to Ballina

<b>Trail surface:</b>	Quiet country roads and Forest Park
<b>Difficulty:</b>	Moderate. Bring food and water and suitable clothing
<b>Distance:</b>	32 Kilometres
<b>Total height gained:</b>	370 metres
<b>Duration:</b>	7 to 9 hours walking. 3 hours cycling.
<b>Start:</b>	At the newly erected map board in Ballycastle
<b>O/S maps 1:50000:</b>	number 23 and 24

"Anois teacht an earraigh

beidh an lá ag dul chun síneadh,

Is tar éis na féil Bríde

ardóidh mé mo sheol".

These oft quoted words from Raftery's poem Cill Aodáin portray the sense of relief that winter is finally over and invoke the great anticipation that spring is in the air. However, with a strong north easterly blowing in from Ballycastle Bay laden with hailstones the size of golf balls, the sense of exuberance amongst today's victims is muted. But, a hardy bunch is we and by commencing our cycle in Ballycastle, we will have that gale pushing us all the way into Ballina, journeys end.

Since leaving Oughterard many months ago our trek has been on an internationally recognised way marked way. To qualify for this distinction the route must adhere to a set of management standards and satisfy certain strict criteria. Currently, the route between Ballycastle and Bonnicolton does not meet these criteria. However many agencies and local concerns are working towards this goal. The result would be one of the longest way marked ways in the country and, without sounding biased, the best.

Departing Ballycastle we initially head north into the gale. After a mere 400 metres or so, but which had seemed like an eternity we abruptly turn in a south east direction. Happy days, with the wind on our backs we speed along amid the hedgerows and ditches on quiet country lanes. We quickly ascend Lacken Hill and take in a panoramic view of the Moy Estuary, Killala and in the distance Ballina Town. Upon reaching Killala one is struck with the beauty of this picture postcard town. Killala is immediately recognizable by its fine intact cobbled streets throughout the town. A hidden jewel!

The way then follows Bothar Na Sop, an old road used by the invading French army in 1798. The landscape in this area is dotted with megalithic tombs and old friaries. Rathfran, Moyne and Rosserk friaries are the most famous of these and are all accessible from the trail. We journey along with the Majestic Moy a constant companion over our left shoulders before entering Belleek Woods and sighting its famous castle. The castle was built between 1825 and 1831, on the site of a medieval abbey, one of the four along the River Moy. Belleek was commissioned by Sir Arthur Francis Knox-Gore and the family lived there up to the early 1940's. Marshall Doran, a merchant navy officer acquired the run down property in 1961, restored it and opened it as a hotel in 1970.

Our Western Way journey is gradually coming to an end and after Ballina only one stage remains, that is to Bonniclon and the Sligo border.