

## **The Western Way - Maum to Leenaun**

<b>Trail surface:</b>	Quiet country roads, mountain paths and forest trails
<b>Difficulty:</b>	Moderate and a long trek. Bring food and water and suitable clothing
<b>Distance:</b>	29 kilometres
<b>Highest Point:</b>	540 metres
<b>Duration:</b>	6 to 9 hours
<b>Dogs:</b>	No dogs allowed as this walk goes through open farmland
<b>Start:</b>	Beside the Football field/Community Centre in Maum at the newly erected Map board
<b>O/S maps 1:50000:</b>	numbers 37, 38 and 44

Our walk this month is stage two of the Western Way from Maum to Leenaun. I am fortunate to be accompanied by Rosaleen Ni Shuilleabhain, my fellow Recreation Officer from Forum Connemara. Logistically, when doing the Western Way you must plan for some means of being collected upon finishing each stage as it is a linear route as distinct from a looped walk. As it was Rose's home turf I left my transport safely across the Mayo border at Aasleagh and we both travelled together to Maum, promising not to mention football or any such divisive issues.

After partaking in brunch of tea and toasted sandwiches (rumoured to be the finest in Connemara) in Keane's of Maum, we head off on the trail from the football field following a minor country road in a northerly direction. After 5 kilometres or so we join a mountain track that brings us, after a steep climb up through a pass, to Maumeen. Maumeen is a place of pilgrimage and religious beliefs suggests that St. Patrick himself stood here and blessed all of Connemara some fifteen hundred years ago.

This is a most unique and spiritual place with a small church hewn out of the mountain's rock face, a sight that would not be amiss high up in the mighty Himalayas. On this particular day mist clouds rolled in from Roundstone Bay, reducing visibility to a mere few metres only to clear again in moments to give tantalising views across the bogs and lakes of Connemara. All the while Saint Patrick kept a watchful eye on us from his perch high up beside the church.

We gradually descend from Maumeen and re-join a quiet country road that leads us through the Inagh valley. The Western Way along this section is the geographical divide between the Maumturks on our right and the Twelve Pins Mountains to the left. We pass through quaint villages with homes that look down on Lough Inagh with its clear waters and wooded islands. The trail on reaching the Town land of Illion leaves the road again and from here to Lettershanbally Forestry local landowners take great pride in keeping the route maintained and repaired.

Emerging from the forestry the Western Way now loops around the northern slopes of the Maumturk Mountains and Killary Fjord becomes the focus of attention. The Killary is 16 kilometres long and 45 metres deep in places and is Ireland's only Fjord. This section of the trail is an old coach road dating back to the nineteenth century and is dotted with the old ruins of homesteads long abandoned. Here and there the hiker will see traces of ridges on the hill sides these are the stark reminders of the potato patches from the famine. We are now beginning our final descent and the trail eventually brings down us to Leenaun. The name Leenaun means the shallow sea bed which is somewhat ironic as it sits at the head of the Killary fjord and fjords are renowned for their depth.

The last kilometre of our walk is on road beside the sea and we arrive in the village tired, hungry but content. Next month, stage three and crossing the border into Mayo.