

The Western Way - Oughterard to Maum

Trail Surface:	Bog tracks, quiet country roads and forest board walks
Difficulty:	Easy but a long trek. Bring food and water.
Distance:	24 km
Highest point:	130 m
Duration:	hiking 6 to 8 hours
Dogs:	No dogs allowed as this walk goes through open farmland.
Start:	the trail begins in Oughterard at the newly erected Map board beside the town playground.
O/S maps 1:50000:	numbers 45 and 38

Description: This month I am commencing on an epic trail that will eventually bring me from Oughterard in Co Galway all the way to Bonniconlon on the Sligo/Mayo border some two hundred kilometres away. The trail is the Western Way, Ireland's longest way marked way. This trail is currently being upgraded with improved reroutes, clearer signage and thirteen new map boards which, when complete, will all combine to improve the experience of recreational users.

Logistically, when doing the Western Way you must plan for some means of being collected when finishing each stage as it is a linear route as distinct from a looped walk. In my case I bribed innocent work colleagues to accompany me for the trek and so we left one car at Maum Bridge and all bundled into the second car and headed for the start in Oughterard.

It was late May and changeable weather, but one thing that doesn't change is the beauty of the Irish countryside at this time of year. Having quickly negotiated our way out of town we were soon walking along quiet country roads shaded in the dappled light breaking through the old oak and birch trees that line much of this part of the route. The whitethorn was particularly resplendent, endowed in a coat of bright white blossoms filled with the sound of bee's industriously working away collecting pollen.

This initial part of the trail is all on road and we followed the Lough Corrib shoreline for some 12 kilometres heading north westward towards Maum. Lough Corrib is Ireland's second largest lake at 176 km² and in places it is up to 47 metres deep. The lake contains over 1,000 islands, one of which is Caislean-na-Circe between Maum and Doon which by now is clearly visible from the viewing platform at Doon Rock. This island is where Grainne Uaile's husband, Donal an Cogadh (Donal of the battles) lived for a time in the 16th century. The Castle still stands defiant to this day but disappears from view as you cross the footbridge and enter the forestry plantation near Derryherbert. It is now for the first time that a true sensation of remoteness is experienced.

This is the land of pine trees, waterfalls and gushing meadow streams. We walk for some period of time, each lost in their own thoughts, along a meandering river covered in a

profusion of water lilies with their yellow bulbs about to flower. For any child who grew up in the one channel land of the eighties, this is "Grizzly Adams" country. At any moment I was expecting "Mad Jack" to appear from behind the trees with his team of pack mules, but instead we meet Pedro and Mariá from Spain who ask us, why have the Irish kept the secret of the Western Way from the world? We travelled onward on roughly 6 kilometres of boardwalk before exiting the forestry and meeting the R336 which brought us over the pass and down toward the finish at Maum. Then a well-earned rest and grub in Keane's of Maum Bridge and stage one complete. Stage two, Maum to Leenane, bring it on!