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JOURNEYS**



Yvonne Gordon loses her mobile phone signal and gains a sense of wonder as she explores some of the most remote and magical destinations Ireland has to offer

It's on a hike to an isolated valley in the Beara Peninsula in the southwest that I start to appreciate how easy it is to find remote places in Ireland, where you might not see another soul for hours. We've hiked up a hill into a valley and are now descending into a second, the Rabach's Glen, further into the Caha Mountains on the Co Kerry side of the peninsula.

As we descend, I survey the boggy valley floor ahead of us, covered with tall clumps of spindly looking grasses, red and green sphagnum moss, bog violet and boulders. A river zigzags its way along one side, a glint of silver under a cloud-laden sky. Only the odd call from a chough

breaks the silence. At the back of the valley ridges of grey rock sit at angles, with shiny slabs and jagged peaks all disappearing up into the mist.

In a far distant corner there's a waterfall. That corner is where we are going because there is an abandoned village underneath the waterfall, with a mysterious and dark history.

Brendan Grant, a marine and countryside guide (and head gardener) from Sheen Falls Lodge, is leading the way. To drive here we turned off near Lauragh on to a narrow road with grass down the middle. Our walk started at a 2,000-year-old stone circle, which a fat

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Above, a pair of sheep perch on a ledge as the clouds darken and rain sweeps into the valley around the Healy Pass in the remote Beara Peninsula

Travel



YVONNE GORDON

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woolly sheep with curly horns was busy using as a back-scratching aid as we passed.

In parts of the hike the rocks make the going tricky. The first path is muddy; in many places it’s boggy underfoot. We have to cross a river too. We meet sheep that stop and stare. I notice that Brendan has a wooden walking stick with a carved handle. He tells me that the wood, blackthorn, is ideal because it grows straight and can be sourced sustainably. Carving it took about eight hours. As well as making a handy hiking staff, the wood has extra properties. “Blackthorn is a traditional Irish stick, said to ward off evil spirits if you carry one,” Brendan says.

A small trailmarker on a post shows that we’re on a designated hiking trail but, even though it’s a weekend day, we haven’t passed anyone. We have the whole valley to ourselves and it feels so remote that you imagine not many people have been here at all.

We pass the outline of ancient potato fields and see potato ridges on the hill. As we near the rear of the valley, I can distinguish the outline of the cottage ruins, the grey stone blending in with the backdrop. Long sitting empty, the cottage roofs and doors are gone and moss on the walls and floors is slowly taking the stones back to nature. There’s a mysterious atmosphere – the silent ruins, the absence of people, the encroaching mist from the hills.

I wonder who lived here and why it was abandoned. Brendan tells me that around 1800 a sailor came over the mountain and sought shelter in the village. A villager, Cornelius O’Sullivan Rabach, apparently

killed him because he thought he might have money, and he later murdered a neighbour who had witnessed this. He hid out in a cave but was eventually caught and hanged for murder. After the Famine the population of the village, Cummeengeera, went from 29 in 1841 to just 7 in 1871.

The story makes the hike interesting but Brendan says he also loves the silence that people can experience in these places. “People can probably relate to this better since lockdown when we had birdsong and no traffic,” he says. “As soon as lockdown came, everybody could hear something about nature.

“The sounds out here, it’s just clarity. You hear your blood going through your body. When you’ve climbed the hill, all you’re hearing is your heartbeat and your breath. This is a place where you can get away from coverage. You can’t get anything online, you’re not going to get phone calls.”

Brendan also fishes and says there are about 100 remote lakes in the Caha Mountains where you never meet anyone. That’s the thing about Ireland – even when places get busy, it’s not hard to find remote locations such as this, if you look beyond the popular spots. I discovered this hike when staying at Sheen Falls, near Kenmare, and rather than heading for somewhere such as Killarney, I inquired about local walks.

For exploring by yourself, a good map, especially an Ordnance Survey map, will show you all the beaches and coves, lakes, rivers and mountains. A paper map gives a better overview than a phone screen and is vital if you’re up a mountain with poor phone coverage. It’s easy to look up waymarked trails in an area too, or talk to locals where you are staying.

It’s possible to find remote accommodation as well, especially this summer when the obvious places might be booked. You can still go sightseeing, to the beach, or even eat out at night but your accommodation can be away from the crowd.

One of the most remote places I found to stay last summer was an old train station in Donegal, Cashelnagor.

Surrounded by bogland, it has that middle-of-nowhere feeling. If you stick a pin in a map of Donegal, somewhere above Glenveagh National Park and Mount Errigal, where maps show a small network of country roads and a few lakes, it’s in here.

It’s difficult to find at first – one of those places where your phone hasn’t a clue either but takes you off in the wrong direction, just to appear to be helpful. We followed a local to get there but often got lost on the way out. Drive the wrong direction and you’ll go further into the bogland, the road getting narrower and narrower. I am still not sure where exactly it is but that is the point, and finding it is part of the adventure.

A train station is not something you expect to find in Donegal either. It was built in 1902. In the era of the steam train from the 1860s on, Donegal had miles of railway line and Cashelnagor was along the Letterkenny and Burtonport Extension of the Londonderry and Lough Swilly Railway line. The railway was built to alleviate poverty and improve



Finding your way to the old train station at Cashelnagor, Co Donegal, above, is part of the adventure; below right, a ram uses a 2,000-year-old stone circle as a scratching aid; below left, St John’s Point Lighthouse in south Donegal, where you might have the entire headland to yourself



economic prospects in the area. It went into decline after the Second World War and the advent of the motor car and stopped running altogether in 1947.

Cashelnagor station became derelict but in recent years was restored and is now a holiday rental, with the one-bedroom Waiting Room flat, which opens onto the platform, or the two-bedroom Station House, where the station masters once lived with their families. Because there’s bog all around, and no trees or buildings, there are uninterrupted 360-degree views to Muckish Mountain, Errigal and the rest of the Seven Sisters.

The old platform is still there and the railway line runs off into the distance. Although it’s now covered in grass, you can walk or cycle much of the old line. When we sit outside in the evening, there’s somehow an expectation that a train might pass at any minute but after a while the midges force us back inside.

Further north in Donegal, two remote Airbnb rentals, Breasty Bay and Skildren Cottage, sit on 60 acres of secluded land under Malin Head. There are headlands and rocky coves for picnics, beaches to swim from, telescopes for stargazing and patios for sunbathing or barbecues, and you won’t meet a soul all day.

Lighthouses are great for remote stays too – their function as navigational aids to ships means they are located on cliffs and along shores, away from towns, with amazing sea views. At Wicklow lighthouse you can survey the surrounding land from the kitchen at the top of the old tower. In St John’s Point in south Donegal a road takes you down a long, narrow peninsula. You can stroll the headland at sunrise, looking at the bay all around you, and maybe, as the world gradually opens up more to the noises of everyday life in the background, you can appreciate the silence of nature for that bit longer.

THE BRIEF

Double rooms at Sheen Falls Lodge (reopening on June 2) from €455 a night (summer) and €190 (winter); guided half-day hikes with Brendan Grant from €120 per group of four; sheenfallsloodge.ie. Cashelnagor (sleeps 4 or 6) from €130 a night; dunsuan.ie. Breasty Bay (sleeps 6) and Skildren Cottage (sleeps 8) from €350 a night. Wicklow Lighthouse from €636 for two nights and St John’s Point Lighthouse from €451 for two nights (both sleep 4); greatlighthouses.com.