

IRELAND'S GREAT GREEN SECRET

Roger Wheeler visits Westport and explores County Mayo

Everything they say about Ireland is, probably, true. It's very green, the people are very friendly, the Guinness is good, they love to play music and sing in bars. There are a lot of sheep, not too many people and it used to be one of the most expensive destinations in Europe. But it's no longer pricey. Like the Greeks the Irish have woken up to the fact that if they want tourists they have got to be a little more realistic about their prices. Today, shop, pub and restaurant prices outside the main cities, Dublin, Cork etc, are about the same as here in the UK. You don't even have to use Ryanair to get there either as Aer Lingus and BA both fly from Gatwick and if you book far enough ahead the prices are very reasonable. Also, you don't need a passport as historically the British regard the Republic of Ireland as a domestic destination. But it's sensible to take your passport as it always makes passing through airports easier. On your return to the UK you go through a special exit in the Border Control zone. All you need show is your boarding card, no passport required. Known as the Emerald Isle, there is no doubt that Ireland is a beautiful place and it is very green. We flew to **Ireland West Airport** or **Knock** as it is usually called, with Aer Lingus; it's a great little airport on the west coast. We hired a car, essential as public transport whilst efficient is not very frequent and drove to **Westport**, a beautiful little town just 37 miles from the airport.

Westport, situated on **Clew Bay**, is truly lovely. In 1842, the novelist Thackeray visited and wrote, "The most beautiful view I ever saw in the world". There may be better but that was 1842 after all. With just 5,600 inhabitants it is a prime tourist destination, although there weren't many there when we

visited in July. This is a very Irish town, designed around the **Carrowbeg River**, with interesting Georgian architecture and all the shops have kept their original fronts. It's a fascinating place to wander round.

We stayed in the **Hotel Westport**, a pleasant four star hotel with friendly, efficient staff. Our room was fine but on the ground floor with a wonderful view of the car park. But we were only in it to sleep so it didn't matter. The Hotel Westport is very proud of its gay credentials hosting two gay weekends in March and November plus having many civil partnership celebrations.



Westport has a great bar and restaurant scene, with **Matt Molloy**, of the **Chieftains**, owning a bar right in the middle of the town, which gets busy on a Saturday, particularly when the man himself is playing in the bar. We had dinner in **Sol Rio**, which they say is the best restaurant in town. Owned by husband and wife team, Sinead and her Portuguese chef husband José, they offer great food and a terrific atmosphere, at a very reasonable price, about 70€ (£56) for cocktails, three huge courses and wine and that's for two!

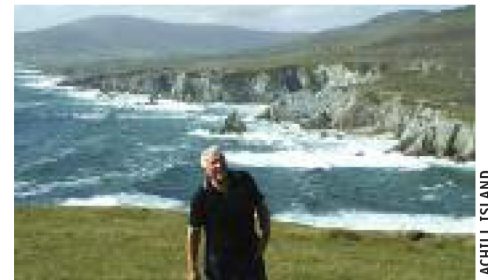
All of Westport seems to typify everything that is good about Ireland; the friendly people, the charm and unique atmosphere of the place which is summed up by the famous



CROAGH PATRICK

craic, which doesn't translate into English, but when you're there you know what it means.

This is a great area for touring; nearby **Ballycroy National Park** is 11,000 hectares of unspoilt wilderness and **Croagh Patrick**, the most famous hill in Ireland, 764 metres high, is just six miles away. But we went further west and headed to **Achill Island**. We could have cycled or walked along the famous **Great Western Greenway** which runs from Westport to Achill. The Greenway is an amazing 42km cycle track that runs along a disused railway line and is completely separated from the road and goes through some lovely scenery. In good weather this would make a fabulous walk, although all 42km would be more than an afternoon stroll, and so we decided that it might be easier by car.



ACHILL ISLAND

Achill is Ireland's largest island, connected to the mainland by a short bridge. There have been people on Achill for almost 6,000 years, so there is loads of history. Despite some pretty awful new architecture it still has its own striking natural beauty. There are miles and miles of fantastic beaches with some quite stunning views of the mountains, huge sweeps of sandy bays, some of the highest sea cliffs in Europe and if that's not enough lots of really interesting little villages, shops and craft galleries. Of course there are pubs and good restaurants and despite its apparent isolation Achill Island is really easy to get to. There is a fascinating deserted village, a result of Ireland's Great Hunger (an Gorta Mór) of 1845. We drove along the **Atlantic Drive**, which is quite spectacular. As a perfect holiday destination Achill has a lot going for it and it seems like you're not actually abroad. This corner of County Mayo in the west of Ireland is a serious holiday destination.

www.westporttourism.com
www.greenway.ie
www.hotelwestport.ie
www.achilltourism.com
www.discoverireland.com



CLEW BAY



DESERTED VILLAGE