

## The Slí Cholmcille- An Irish Camino experience

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With the Covid crisis and international travel proving challenging to say the least, Irish walkers turn their eyes homeward, asking if it is possible to have a Camino experience in Ireland? Surely, we don't have the network of trails, the ubiquitous hostels, or for that matter, the continental weather!?



In July 2021 I was lucky enough to take part in a Donegal walking pilgrimage, the Slí Cholmcille, which is pioneering a Camino style trail from Glencolmcille to Derry (I have to confess up front that an injury prevented me from walking the whole thing). Even though there are issues still to be ironed out (the exact route, daily distances or stages, and cheap accommodation), this walk proved that it could be done. The trail, which is about 280 km in length, links together key sites associated with Saint Colmcille (or Columba), traverses some stunning Donegal scenery, and finishes in the historic city of Derry. There are plans to link it to the iconic Iona island in Scotland, the ultimate Celtic pilgrimage destination.

Having walked the Spanish Camino a number of times, for me this pilgrimage had all the aspects of a genuine Camino experience. Firstly, it is a long-distance trail that took 12 days and covered a lot of ground, not to mention some stunning Donegal scenery, ancient sites and modern towns. There is something about walking over many days that enables you to get into a rhythm, to inhabit your body fully and to slow the frantic mind, and get some distance from and perspective on your life. Then, there is the rare privilege of being out in nature, something that Donegal excels in: the rugged coastlines, peaty bogland, dramatic mountains, patchwork farmland, grassy boreens and fuchsia laden hedgerows.



Secondly, there is the subjective experience of walking a Camino that inevitably entails emotional highs and lows, the agony and the ecstasy of the trail. This was evident in abundance as you move from Atlantic coast to urban streets, mountain tops to coastal plains, rainy days to (ironically for Donegal) blistering heat. Then there is the inevitable wear and tear of long-distance walking, the blisters, fatigue and pain. This reaching the

limits of physical and emotional endurance is key to those hard won 'breakthrough' moments of spiritual self-awareness and growth.



Thirdly, inevitably pilgrimage throws up unexpected and surprising aspects, to remind us that we are not in control and that there is a bigger plan at work. As this was the second year this walk had been run and we were still ironing out the details, there was a lot of flexibility needed as some things didn't work as planned. This was most evident in terms of the route, as there were discrepancies with the app we were trialling and which we were refining it as we went along. Also daily distances were inaccurate and there was a lot of walking involved!

Fourthly, there were the people we met along the way. Even though there is no real tradition of walking pilgrims, we were recipients of some wonderful hospitality. Of course, it helped that the walk had been publicised and many turned out to greet the Bishop of Raphoe, Alan McGuckian SJ. We had reception committees and organised groups receiving us along the way, but also clusters of locals lined the roadway, often applauding the Bishop and the walkers. Then there were a variety of kind people we met along the way in churches, shops and guest houses, all an essential part of making a pilgrimage possible. One person that stands out for me in particular, was the taxi driver who brought me down for an evening sea swim near Bloody Foreland, waited for me and brought me home, charging a pittance. He was the living embodiment of Donegal warmth and genuineness, I felt better for being in his presence. Another key moment was when a woman who wasn't well was staying in the same guest house one evening, and was received with great warm and compassion by our group.



Fifthly, there is the variety of different types of accommodation we stayed in along the way. Although there is not a great network of low-cost pilgrim hostels as yet, we did stay in hostels, B&Bs, AirBnB apartments, hotels and a retreat house. While still not as cheap as the Spanish Camino, it was good to know that there were a variety of different types of accommodation available, and also that food was consistently available for the

hungry pilgrim. Most importantly, this was proof that the route could be walked sequentially from end to end with overnights stays along the way. While important logistically, it is also an important point of contact with locals and a focus for hopefully meeting other pilgrims in the future.

Sixthly, even though there are not many people walking the trail yet (though we did meet one enterprising hiker who was following in our footsteps), there was a strong sense of solidarity in our group. This was particularly evident in the small group that walked the trail, but also evident in the support team and the many other walkers who joined us for different sections. Again, this is a key element of Camino walking, the bonds that spring up between strangers and the way that the trail ties people together in a simple sharing of challenges that brings out common humanity.

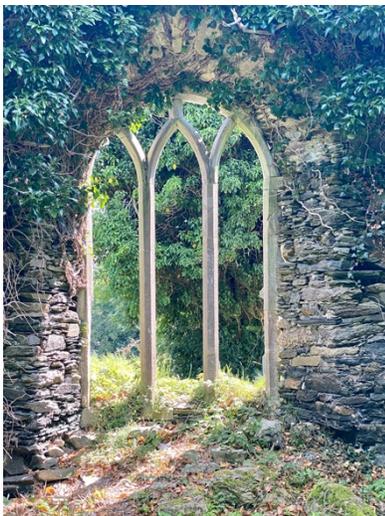


Finally, there was the spiritual dimension of the pilgrimage. The Camino de Santiago dedicated to St James, even though it welcomes pilgrims of all faiths and none has a strong Catholic tradition that underpins the entire pilgrimage and gives meaning for those who choose to see it. Our Sli Cholmcille pilgrimage had exactly the same foundations: it linked together those sites associated with Saint Colmcille and provided a coherent narrative with stories, places, symbols, rituals and traditions along the way. Our 2021 pilgrimage made this aspect very explicit with daily spiritual inputs, regular mass, structured time walking alone, evening reflections, prayers and blessings. Just like the Camino de Santiago, pilgrims are invited to participate at this deeper level, not just to perform external observances but to savour something of the inner experience of Colmcille who called himself a 'Pilgrim for Christ'.



Having said all that, there is something unique about Donegal. It is a place apart, literally, in terms of the border with the North, but also there is a different feel to it. Although a holiday destination for many northerners, there is a slower pace of life here. The Wild Atlantic Way is a bit wilder here, the rugged coastline and constantly changing scenery reveals a very rural way of life and tradition, faith and family are still important here.

There was a uniquely Irish flavour to this Sli or Camino that pilgrims will not fail to notice. The prominence of the Irish language and culture is quite striking. Often hikers will be walking through the Gaeltacht area where Irish or Gaelic is the first language. A little Irish helps to understand the original place names which reveal a rich tradition. For example **Inishbofin**, *Inis Bó Finne* in **Irish**, means *Island of the White Cow*, an island passed by on the route. The other unmissable aspect is the sheer number and variety of historic sites, from Bronze age stones, cairns, forts and multiple Celtic Christian sites. You have the sensation of walking through an ancient landscape where evidence of previous inhabitants makes it seem like yesterday. It is hard to pick out one spot from so many, but for me it would be the Cloch an Aonaigh, “The Stone of the Assembly”, in Glencolmcille that we passed on the first day. It is a cross inscribed pillar, nearly two meters tall, with a hole in the centre. Nearby is a ruined Court Tomb, several thousand years old, about 60 meters in length. It is these layers of history that are fascinating, often the pre-Christian relics are altered and reinterpreted in a new context. If that were not enough, more recent history is evident in terms of famine markers, points of emigration, abandoned houses, old railway lines and bridges, reminders of the plantation of Ulster and the reign of the High Kings in Ireland.



Most important however, is the window into early Celtic Christianity, the monastic system that predominated in the time of Colmcille, the 6th century CE. Even though little survives from this period and later constructions now dominate, you still get some tantalising glimpses of Colmcille’s world visiting these places associated with his life. Principal among those are<sup>1</sup>: **Glencolmcille**, legend has it Colmcille battled and defeated a demonic host here; **Gartan**, the birthplace of Colmcille; **Ray Church**, stands on the site of an earlier monastery associated with Saint Fionán, a contemporary of Colmcille; **Doon Well**, connected to

<sup>1</sup> Neil Jackman & Dr. Conor Ryan, Audit Of Columban Heritage, Donegal County Council, Derry City & Strabane District Council, Foras na Gaeilge and The Heritage Council:  
<https://www.donegalcoco.ie//media/donegalcountyc/heritage/pdfs/AUDIT%20OF%20COLUMBAN%20HERITAGE%20mid%20res.pdf>

Colmcille though Manus O'Donnell who wrote an account of Colmcille's life in 1532; **Tory Island**, legend has it that Colmcille built a monastery here; **Kilmacrennan**, reputedly the site of monastery founded by Colmcille and also where he was educated by his foster father, Cruithneachán; **Cnoc na Naomh**, Colmcille stood here with his companions, discussing the conversion of Tory Island; and **Raymochy Abbey** and graveyard, where Colmcille is said to have recited an entire psalm from memory.

In conclusion, there is still a lot of work to be done to make these Slí or Camino accessible for walkers in terms of infrastructure, signage, maps and accommodation. Tantalisingly, all the elements are there that would make this a coherent pilgrimage trail in honour of St. Colmcille, that would rival the great Caminos of Europe.

