

Introduction

The Wicklow Way is Ireland's most popular Waymarked Way. There have been many improvements to the route and its signage since the early 1980s when it opened: see page 70 for its origins and management.

Starting from Dublin, Ireland's capital and principal airport, it's a surprisingly accessible long-distance walk. With time to reflect on the varied scenery and a countryside steeped in history, you will start to see Ireland through different eyes.

The Way quickly leaves the city behind as it climbs into the granite mountains and sheltered glens of County Wicklow, the 'garden of Ireland'. The Dublin and Wicklow mountains are Ireland's largest upland area, with wild scenery that belies their modest altitude. The Way runs above Ireland's tallest waterfall, passing around the shoulder of Djouce to reach White Hill at 630 m (2100 ft) and descending past a memorial to J B Malone, architect of the Way.

Appropriately, this overlooks Lough Tay, which he regarded as 'the jewel of these hills'.

The Way then takes you to the superb Monastic City of Glendalough: see pages 19-24. After the waterfalls and oak woodlands of the Wicklow Mountains National Park, it then climbs the shoulder of Mullacor mountain and descends into the historic valley of Glenmalure, with its military road and derelict barracks. Beyond the Ow River it passes by hills with sonorous names – Ballygobban, Sheilstown, Slieveroe, Ballycumber and Garryhoe.

From Tinahely, the Way meanders through lush farmlands before finishing at the tiny village of Clonegal, County Carlow. The southern section, with its narrow lanes and rolling hills, is in strong contrast with the grandeur of the Wicklow mountains.

Lough Tay, seen from the Way



Planning to walk the Way

If you are new to walking in Ireland, the Wicklow Way may surprise you. First, only four pubs actually lie on the Way: the Glendalough Hotel, Glenmalure Lodge (Drumgoff), the Dying Cow (Stranakelly) and Séan O'Dúinn's (Clonegal). This is because the Way's began life as a circuit through the Wicklow mountains that was later extended southwards, not as a route that connects villages: see page 70. So most sections end at a crossroads or a car park, not at a village. Unless you are camping and fully self-reliant, you then need to travel for accommodation, food and drink. This increases the overall distance considerably: see pages 11 and 14.

Second, most of Ireland's Waymarked Ways involve a high proportion of road-walking, much higher than many visitors expect. Overall, about 28% of the Wicklow Way consists of road-walking, but in the southernmost section this rises to 63%. This partly reflects history: most Irish people used to live in dispersed small rural communities linked by tiny roads and tracks, moving about on foot or donkey. It also reflects the strength of private landowners and the difficulty of securing off-road access for walking.

Some of the road-walking is along narrow winding country lanes, often with very little traffic. Be aware that a car may appear suddenly around a bend, it may be travelling too fast, and the driver may seem oblivious to walkers. If there's a verge or path, use it: otherwise, always walk on the right so as to face oncoming traffic. If two vehicles need to pass each other, try to wait in a wider section. Remain alert. See and be seen. 

Away from roads, the Way uses a number of historic footpaths, their very names evoking Irish history – boreens, green roads and mass paths: see page 71 for a glossary. Ireland's population fell drastically in the mid-19th century, and you'll see many signs of depopulation.





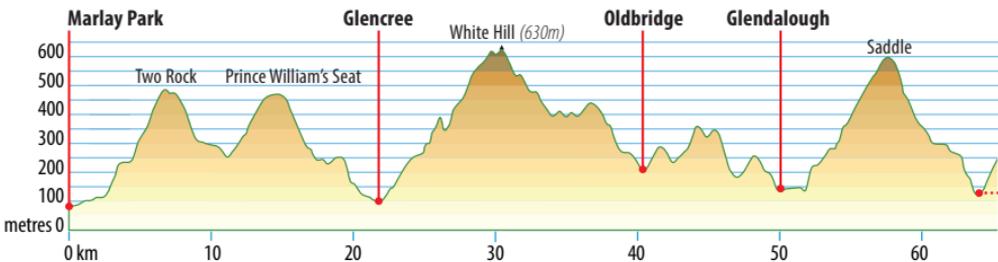
Altitude, terrain and waymarking

The Way is comparatively low-level, never venturing above 620 m (2035 ft). This makes it easy to underestimate. Unless you're a very fit walker, rapid progress may prove elusive. In general, the Way crosses the lie of the land, so you are repeatedly climbing a ridge and descending to a valley: see below for an altitude profile. You gain (and lose) some 3200 m (10,500 ft) of height in all. Rough terrain, steep gradients and stiles all reduce average speed, and a group travels at the speed of its slowest member. You are not likely to average more than 4 km/hr (2.5 mph) unless seriously pushing.

The terrain underfoot varies widely: the Way uses grassy boreens, woodland paths, tracks that may be stony or muddy, broad forest roads and, inevitably, some stretches of minor public road, extensive in the southern portion. There are some long sections of boardwalk made of railway sleepers.

The route is well waymarked, mainly with a distinctive yellow walker logo on a black post and by brown fingerposts. Occasionally you need to look for yellow paint splashes or arrows. The Irish name for the Way *Slí Cualann Nua* means literally the 'new Cualann Way'. The old *Slí Cualann* was one of the five ancient roads running through the Land of Cuala, now known as Wicklow.

Wicklow Way: altitude profile



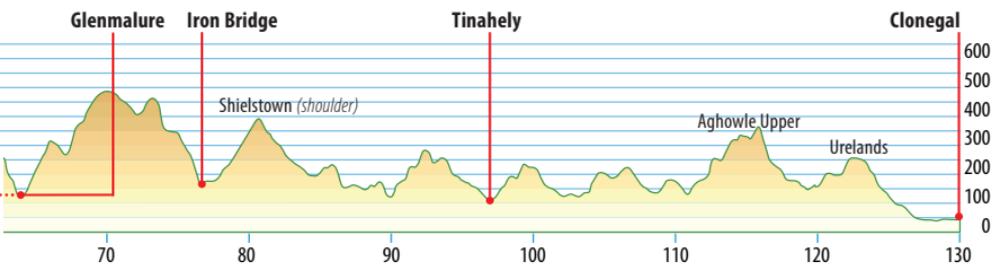


Overall the waymarking is excellent, much improved over recent years. However, remain vigilant: signage may be obscured by vegetation, or damaged by animals or people.

If you haven't seen a waymarker for 20-30 minutes or arrive at an unmarked junction, you are probably off the Way: backtrack and check your position. Walkers who are over-confident or in a hurry are more likely to make mistakes than those who take time to check as they go.



The Dublin Mountains Way also uses the yellow walker logo, but combined with a yellow DMW. Be alert for where those two Ways diverge, and also for places where the Wicklow Way shares signage with the Kyle, Mangan's and Ballycumber Loops, and with the many walking trails around Glendalough. On the ground the signs are colour coded, but the current OSI maps use the same red broken line for all trails.





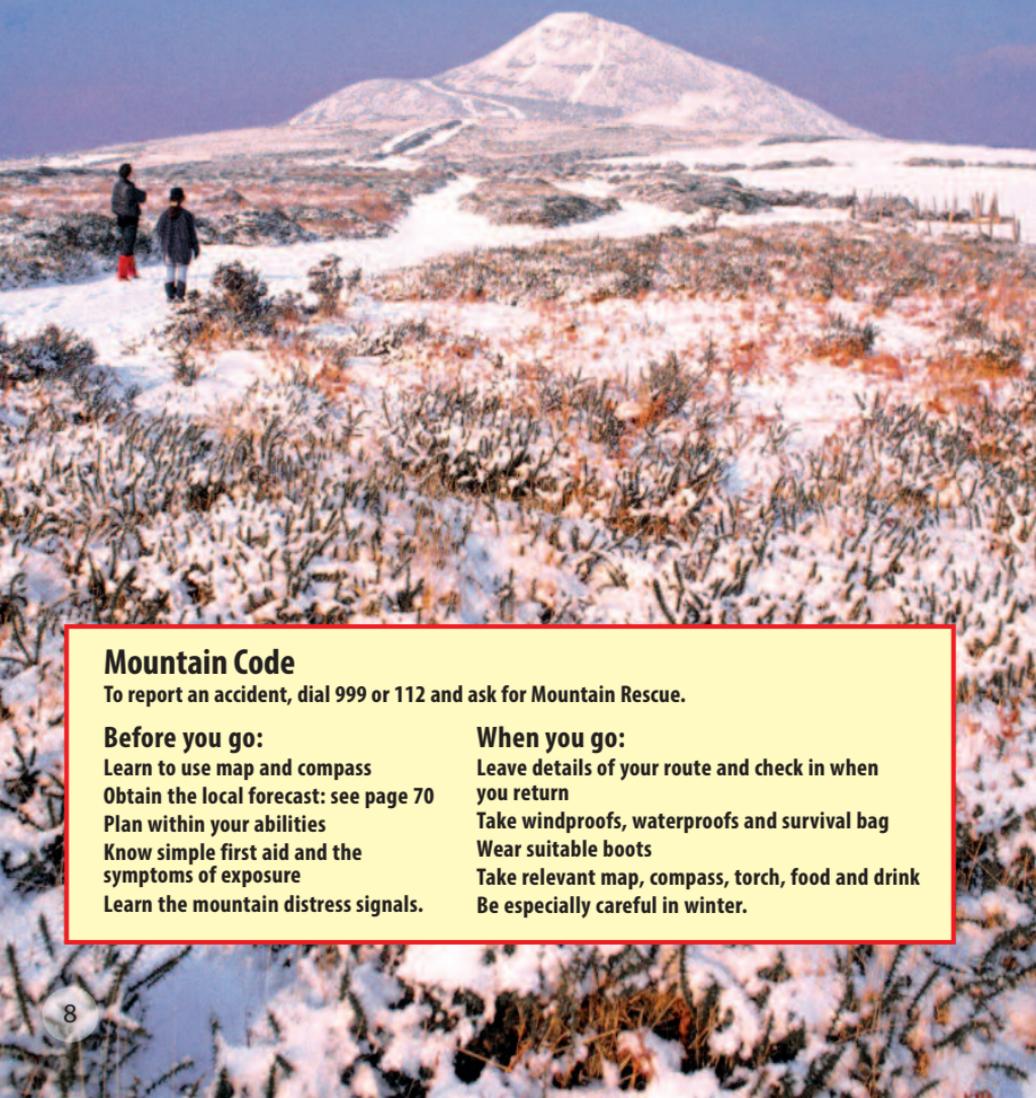
Safety, weather and walking alone

No-one should undertake the Way casually, because especially in the Wicklow mountains parts of the Way are very exposed, and it runs through largely uninhabited country. Even a minor accident can have major consequences if you can't get help. Walking in a group is considered safer, but if you decide to walk alone, think how you would handle an emergency, bearing in mind that mobile phone (cellphone) reception is patchy.

A major factor in planning is the Irish weather. Apart from a high probability of rain at any time, it is unpredictable year-round. On any given day, you may experience weather typical of any season, and perhaps of all four. This makes it especially important to have the right gear: without proper waterproofs, you are likely to become chilled or hypothermic, and with damp feet you may suffer serious blisters. Check the weather forecast well before you set out on each day's walk: ask locally or go online, see page 71.

Well in advance of your first long walk, complete a few long day hikes, to test your footwear and fitness. If you haven't done much walking before, don't choose this as your first long walk unless you (or someone walking with you) can use a map and compass reliably.

Great Sugarloaf Mountain in winter



Mountain Code

To report an accident, dial 999 or 112 and ask for Mountain Rescue.

Before you go:

- Learn to use map and compass
- Obtain the local forecast: see page 70
- Plan within your abilities
- Know simple first aid and the symptoms of exposure
- Learn the mountain distress signals.

When you go:

- Leave details of your route and check in when you return
- Take windproofs, waterproofs and survival bag
- Wear suitable boots
- Take relevant map, compass, torch, food and drink
- Be especially careful in winter.

Dublin to Clonegal, or vice versa?

This book follows the traditional direction, from Marlay Park, Dublin, south-west to Clonegal. Existing sources nearly all describe it thus, for mainly historical reasons. However, there are good reasons to consider walking it in the opposite direction:

- The more challenging terrain and wilder scenery are in the northern part of the Way, so it makes sense to tackle these later, when you are well into your stride.
- The prevailing wind is from the south-west, so you are (on average) more likely to have the wind at your back.

Most tour operators, and many experienced walkers, organise their walks northerly towards Dublin for these reasons. Visit our website for resources: www.rucsacs.com/books/wlw offers (under **Bonus content**) specific help for those who choose to walk south to north. Bear in mind that the Wicklow Way's southernmost section is its least satisfactory.

As an independent walker you'll need to decide:

- whether to begin your walk at Marlay Park and walk southward
- if going northward, whether to begin at Clonegal or Tinahely: see page 10
- how to reach your starting-point from Dublin (where most people arrive by plane, ferry or train).

Clonegal: the end or the beginning?

