

To the waters and the wild of Sheep's Head

Carl Dixon visits one of West Cork's best kept secrets and found its Eden designation reflected in its unspoilt landscape

Of the five fingers of rock that project into the ocean from the South West of Ireland, Sheep's Head peninsula is the smallest. However, that hasn't stopped it from stealing a march on its illustrious neighbours by being designated as one of only six European Destinations of Excellence in Ireland.

The Eden designation reflects the unspoilt landscape with its small villages, its home-grown cottage industries, such as the world renowned Durrus Cheese, and the quality of its food.

The market town of Bantry is the gateway to the peninsula and my first port of call is Bantry House. It's perfect, formal setting overlooking the bay and colonial grandeur always serves as a contrast to the wildness of the landscape in which it is set.

Now struggling to keep its head above water — a proposed auction of some of the contents of the house was recently called off — it would be an awful shame if this house were to close.

The Fish Kitchen on the main street lives up to its name with only the faintest of nods to meat eaters or vegetarians.

Black sole, turbot, monkfish and crab figure prominently and my pan fried monkfish with crispy chorizo was brilliantly simple and perfectly cooked. With fresh fish available locally from Castletownbere and Union Hall and located over the family fish shop, this restaurant, which does little advertising, has trouble keeping up with demand.

We are staying at Dromloc House, one of the many traditional bed and breakfasts dotted around the area. Over breakfast the conversation ranges from the merits or otherwise of black pudding — "very few people ask for it these days" — emigration, to a surprising cure for gout. Apparently one should forgo cauliflower and eat black cherries.

Afterward Wally, their ancient collie, leads me down to the beach, enthusiastically chasing oyster-catchers and heifers as we go. Curlews — the cries of which are one of the most iconic sounds of

the Irish landscape — fly off as we stroll along an otter track carved over time into the grass above the high-tide line and past this year's crop of field mushrooms which are too old to pick.

To be in West Cork in autumn, particularly if the weather settles after a storm, is from a scenic viewpoint, almost perfect. The low slanting sun and clear air brings the hills and rocky ridges into sharp relief, creating intricate patterns of shadow which vary according to the dictates of cloud and wind.

The mountains of Beara seem more dramatic in this light. On this morning, the sea is flat calm; a heron ponderously flies by, its wings almost close enough to meet their own reflection in the water. A harbour seal pokes his head up to observe proceedings and even the gulls, buoyant on the water, are in no particular hurry. It is incredibly relaxing and a welcome respite from the endless distractions of modern life.

But time and tide as the saying goes — and I have a date with Eugene Wiseman, the proprietor of a small and eclectic shop in Durrus which sells everything from tools to tracksuits. As a labour of love he has created the superb Carraig Abhainn gardens alongside the turbulent Four Mile River.

This hidden garden includes classical and abstract sculptures and a vibrant mix of rhododendron, maples, Chilean firetree and camellias interspersed with native birch, holly and gelder rose. There is even a banana tree.

Requiring sustenance after my exertions and clutching a handful of donated cuttings, I retire next door to the cheerful Gateway Cafe for rich chocolate cake and tea.

By the late afternoon I am up in the hills above the village of Kicrohane with my guide Charlie McCarthy from Hillside Walks whose knowledge of the area is encyclopedic. From ancient copper which was mined locally and mixed with tin from Cornwall to form bronze, the use of sphagnum moss in field dressings during World War 1, through to ancient wedge tombs and crashed bomber planes, the detail he pro-



Ray McMullen and Antje Gesche explore Dunmanus Bay with Carbery Sailing. Clockwise: The Sheep's Head is a favourite escape for walkers. Bantry House and walks on Sheep's Head offering stunning views across Beara peninsula.

vides brings the landscape and its history to life.

Dinner at Blairscove, with its high-beamed ceiling, chandelier and exposed stone is a lavish affair which begins with its famous buffet of starters. Despite my best intentions, I over-indulge in gravalax in a sweet mustard sauce, spicy hummus, rich duck terrine, traditional herring rollmops and beetroot salad. Followed by smoke flavoured medium-rare, sirloin steak cooked on the open fire

beside me and Corona by the neck for lubrication. Finished with a fleeting, yet rewarding visit to the desert trolley

My final day finds me in Ahakista, summer home to Graham Norton. As it happens I have little time to dally, even were he to randomly invite me in to lunch. Which as it happens, he doesn't. I console myself with the rich and darkly meaty, game pie at Arundels by the Pier. It sets me up nicely for an afternoon with Car-

bery Sailing on 'Merlin', their high end, Hallberg Rassy yacht. Under the relaxed supervision of Chris Forker, there are options for training courses and for short or multi-day cruises. In near perfect conditions we pass islands and sea arches, watch seals and gannets dive and drink hot tea with gingernut biscuits. There is no noise, apart from the wind in the sails and as we reluctantly head for shore and a pint, I feel as if I have been away for a week.