

Discover Ireland: As Pilgrim or Tourist?

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Student Feature

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While walking up a well-paved road, the Irish Sea to my left, craft shops and cottages to my right, and following several signs saying “Pedestrian Access Only To Cliff Walk,” I already feel a sense of accomplishment arriving at this place long associated with Christian pilgrimage, one of two medieval Irish pilgrim paths I have been longing to visit (the other being Croagh Patrick).

The Pilgrimage Quest Begins

Today is a quiet Saturday as I strive to reach the temporarily uninhabited trail along the cliff, outside the tiny village of Ardmore. The sea is fairly calm with the exception of occasional thunderous cracks of waves crashing against the cliffs below. In the distance, the village sits picturesque against a barren beach. Along the shoreline, about 500 yards opposite the village and beach, are the few present signs of modernism: a mobile home park and campers lining a portion of the coastline. With failed resistance of the locals, Ardmore has given in to modern progress, most evident by the new Cliff Hotel being built along the initial path of the Cliff Walk. Construction of the hotel sadly distracted me from viewing St. Declan’s stone, which legend says was carried on the waves from Wales following his visit in the 5th century. Fortunately, these were only a few modern distractions on my quest to walk the same cliff as St. Declan did, which is adjacent to St. Declan’s Way – a 20 km medieval pilgrimage trail from Ardmore to Cashel/Lismore. Adamant about experiencing Ardmore’s Cliff Walk in pursuit of witnessing firsthand historic pilgrimage legacy, I began to wonder if I was doing it for the right reasons as a pilgrim or was I sucked into wanting to learn and see a part of Celtic history as a tourist?

In Search of Pilgrimage

Traditionally, pilgrims pursue pilgrimage as a part of an inner-personal and spiritual process, as part of prayer or penance – in search of something Holy. In the book *Soulfaring*, pilgrimage author and travel writer, Sister Cintra Pemberton, O.S.H, defines “a tourist visits to see, take in, learn about, to buy souvenirs[...]but a pilgrim comes to offer oneself and share personally with the people who live and work there in order to further inner growth.” So what does that make me? I was not in search of souvenirs. I am interested in learning about the Celtic legacy surrounding St. Declan and the medieval pilgrims’ path, but I also wanted desperately to experience the pilgrimage personally, even if was only a little portion of the original pilgrims’ path. Sister Cintra believes “the pilgrim’s journey begins even before the pilgrim leaves home; it begins with the decision to undertake a

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pilgrimage in the first place.” Quite possibly, for these reasons, I was already on the right track to experience my walk as a pilgrim, not a tourist.

St. Declan’s Hermitage – Getting Personal

As I wound my way around the construction barriers of the Cliff Hotel, before me stood the dirt trail leading to St. Declan’s Hermitage. It was at this moment I felt something spiritual within, hardly able to imagine over 1500 years ago St. Declan walked this same path – through a shaded tunnel of overhung trees, into a clearing where now stands a well and ruined church overlooking the Irish Sea. St. Declan’s Well contains two tiny entrances, one still holding water from an adjacent bubbling stream, and the other a small cell where Declan retired in seclusion. The sensation of claustrophobia gripped me. The western section of the church ruins is believed to be the oldest with no recognized date and resembles a small gable (shorter end of a church building or chapel) and mini-sized shrine. Constructed of various-sized rocks, the singular-remaining gable resembles the shape and size of a little shed. There are chalk-like markings of four crosses beneath the pointed portion of the gable holding a Celtic stone-cross at its moss-covered point. Attached to the side of the gable is a rock wall containing carved-out crevices framed by more etched crosses and a presently-blooming red rose bush in the corner crevice where another wall intersects. At the eastern end of the church, between the well and the shrine, there is a large, more modernly built rock-gable with an arched entrance (if you can call 14th century modern). Soon after arriving at the hermitage, I was not alone, as a couple of other walkers came to visit. They reverently visited the site, stopping as if to give silent prayer before going on their way. I would later end up talking and walking with this couple, true to authentic pilgrim behavior of sharing time en-route with other pilgrims. However, I lagged behind a bit to meditate in solitude, as St. Declan once did, but making it my own personal experience.



Wreck of the Samson

A Cliff with a View

As difficult as it was to leave this serenity, I moved onward following a wooden-railed fence and winding path along the cliffs, whose edges were carpeted with lush green grass adorned with large patches of bright purple and yellow wildflowers. It was along this cliff where I reached a cove harboring the only other visible sign of modernism along the trail – the wreck of the rusted crane ship Samson and a small boat transporting divers. Ironically, I did not feel as though the rusted device became one with the cliff, blending in with the landscape. The top of the hill, just past the cove, is where I met

up with the same couple I encountered earlier, Peter and Mary Callanan, from Cork City. This time all three of us sat on a rock bench admiring the grayish-blue shimmer of the Irish Sea. From behind our bench stood a small 19th century castle-like structure built as a watch tower and signal station. Across the path from the castle, keeping watch over the Celtic Sea, is a smaller drab one-room concrete look-out post used during World War II.

Easily Sidetracked Along Path

As the path took a turn to the north, the silence allowed me to hear every sound nature had to offer, even the buzz of a bumble bee as I leaned into a patch of wildflowers. Just past a barbed wire fence, the echoes of gulls sounded far below within one of the coves. As I was about to bravely abandon the path and hop over the fence to take a look, Peter and Mary came wandering up. Mary warned me to be careful at the edge, not to get too close. The hop over the fence landed me in a thick patch of moss-like grass, my feet sinking in and becoming lost with every footstep. Uncertain how steady and supported I would be at the edge, I stood a safe distance from the ledge, enabling me to see a colony of seagulls aligning the narrow entrance of two tightly-clenched walls leading into the cove – so much for my bravery. I could have walked further toward the outer walls of the ledge, but I did not want to disturb a large gull sitting there as though he were directing the others from a high-above throne. As the gulls seemed to communicate in rhythm back and forth with this large gull, I decided to carefully leave the cove and gulls in peace and head back on the path toward Father O’Donnell’s Well, an endpoint to the cliffs, but not the Walk.



Peter and Mary Callanan

Wishing at the Well

Approaching the well afforded me a view of green rolling hills and pastures occupied with cattle along the jagged outline of the shore below. I again met up with Peter and Mary, who were just finishing a ritual of drinking the water within the well. They reassured me the water was clean and safe, and to drink from it was good luck, but only after I walked around the well three times while making a wish. In 1928, Mr. Rahilly of Limerick found the waters to have curative properties, especially for eye ailments. He helped construct the stone structure that exists today hoping it would someday become a popular place of pilgrimage similar to that of Lourdes. As for Father O’Donnell, he is thought to be a silenced priest who came to read his office at the well. Upon leaving the well, I concluded my eyesight was still no different than before I drank the water, but nevertheless I felt as though I have intimately become part of its folklore. I soon accompanied my newfound companions around a bend heading back toward town as the rain began to fall, although never deterring us from enjoying our pilgrimage experience. As we approached what looked like a dead end, I followed Peter and Mary through a small concrete turnstile-like exit back onto a paved road. In the distance I could see we were approaching a 12th century round tower adjacent to a cemetery, ruined cathedral, and St. Declan’s Oratory. This is where I said goodbye to Mary and Peter vowing to keep in touch.



Past Meets Present: St. Declan’s Oratory and Cemetery

Since the rain made it impossible to tread through the cemetery, I decided to walk a few blocks back toward the village to seek refuge until the rain let up. When the rain subsided a bit, I walked back uphill to the round tower. Measuring 97 feet tall, divided into four stories, with doorway about 4 meters above the ground, it stood between a ruined cathedral and St. Declan’s Oratory within the middle of an ancient-like cemetery. This still-active graveyard successfully combines the past with present while maintaining the nostalgia of centuries gone by. Alongside the cemetery is St. Declan’s Oratory, the smallest and presumed oldest building in the graveyard, and believed to have once housed the grave of St. Declan. Many faithful pilgrims scoop dirt from the Saint’s grave for protection from disease. The gate entering the oratory was locked and unfortunately the outer perimeter littered with broken bottles and shards of glass from vandalism preventing me from wanting to scoop up any dirt. A few paces from the oratory is the ruins of a cathedral dating from 9th to 12th centuries, lying on the site of St. Declan’s Monastery. The cathedral ruin depicts various styles of architecture, telling of its various periods of life. Panels along the west gable are somewhat difficult to make out, but possibly depict what looks like religious figures, with one playing a harp.



St. Declan’s Cathedral – Meeting Elizabeth Julia

Entering the cathedral through a small wrought-iron gate, into what would have been the nave of the cathedral now resembling a graveyard with headstones scattered about, even in the ground where an aisle might have once been. Along one of the walls, in a little alcove all to itself was an Ogham stone. Unsure of the markings, I did not know how old the stone was or what it said. I could only guess it stood representing an Irish ancient tradition long lost to present world. Within these walls there was something about this final resting place that suddenly gave my pilgrimage inner-purpose. The most poignant moment was finding a headstone of an 11-year-old girl, not sunk into the ground covered with mud and rainwater but rather placed high into one of the cathedral walls, dated 1849. It was the survival of this headstone recalling the memory of little Elizabeth Julia when rain started to fall again – a moment of inspiration to write an entry into my journal. Overwhelmed with such an inspiring finality to my pilgrimage, I at last discovered my true transition from tourist into pilgrim; realizing, within present daily life, the past shall not be forgotten.



Ogham Stone

Final Inner / Outer Journey

Sister Cintra carefully emphasizes being aware of the inner journey in order to have a successful pilgrimage experience and “the outer journey must never be so filled with activity that the inner journey is crowded out.” In this context, I feel my quest was humbly accomplished, without fail, providing me with inspiration spiritually, intellectually, and physically. As ancient as the path may seem regardless of hints toward present-day modernism along the way, I have come to a realization that no matter what era, the Ardmore Cliff Walk will always remain timeless.