

# Pilgrims' progress in Northern Ireland

ROSAMUND BURTON

Standing on the central mound of Emain Macha, Navan Fort, once the seat of the Kings of Ulster, I have a clear view of the nearby Northern Ireland city of Armagh, the ecclesiastical centre established by St Patrick in the 5th century. Navan Fort is the start of the 132km St Patrick's Way signposted walk between Armagh and Downpatrick, which opened in 2017. It was while following the Camino de Santiago that late local artist and adventurer Alan Graham had the idea to develop a pilgrim path for Ireland's patron saint. Seven of us (friends and family) are about to walk it over eight days.

St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh is on the site of the 445AD original and on the hill across the city stands the twin-spired gothic St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral built after Catholic emancipation. In Shambles Market, we buy sausage rolls and scones from a generous woman who insists on giving us a rhubarb tart baked by her sister, because another of her sisters has walked the Camino de Santiago. With our St Patrick's Way passports from Armagh Visitor Information Centre ready to be stamped at 10 locations en route, we set off.

St Patrick's Way takes us along quiet country roads past hawthorn hedgerows topped with honeysuckle, before we follow the towpath of the Newry Canal, the oldest summit level canal in Britain and Ireland, and now home to pairs of swans rearing their grey-feathered young. We overnight in



Atop the Mountains of Mourne

Newry at Belmont Hall, a large Regency manor with spacious bedrooms and antique furniture. The next day brings us to Rostrevor, a pretty town on the shores of Carlingford Lough. At the 18th-century Rostrevor Inn, we down glasses of Guinness before a dinner in its restaurant featuring local produce. CS Lewis spent holidays near Rostrevor, and the region was the inspiration for The Chronicles of Narnia. With golden waxcap mushrooms growing beside swaths of sphagnum moss in Rostrevor Forest, it feels like entering the author's mythical world. On the

Mountains of Mourne we walk through gorse and heather and have stunning views of Hen and Cock Mountains, before taking a farm track to our B&B and gorging on blackberries along the way.

"Each day's walking gets better and better," comments my cousin after an enormous breakfast, referred to as "a wee Ulster fry". We ascend higher into the Mournes, skirting Slieve Donard, Northern Ireland's highest peak, and descend into Tollymore Forest Park with its grottoes and babbling river, and reach the seaside town of Newcastle, buzzing

## IN THE KNOW

The Walk Northern Ireland website features information on the route, map and downloadable guide. St Patrick's Day is celebrated this Thursday. [walkni.com/mourne-mountains](http://walkni.com/mourne-mountains)

with holidaymakers. The following morning, after a drenching of torrential rain, we arrive at Murlough Nature Reserve where curlews, redshank sandpipers and oyster catchers wade in the shallows. Tonight's accommodation is an apartment overlooking Dundrum Bay with a mesmerising view of fishing boats resting on mud flats veiled in a thin mist.

The final stretch to Downpatrick follows narrow roads hedged with fuchsia. Along a narrow breen (country lane) is the large Ballynoe stone circle, believed to be more than 5000 years old. St Patrick's Centre marks the end of the walk and, presenting our stamped pilgrims' passports, we duly receive certificates before walking up to the cathedral on the Hill of Down. On a huge boulder is an inscription of a Celtic cross and the word Patrick carved on it to mark the patron saint's burial place. I wish more of the route was off-road rather than bitumen, but with good accommodation along the way and ever-changing scenery, it's been a joy to discover this region and learn more about the legacy of St Patrick.

Rosamund Burton is the author of *Castles, Follies and Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures Along Ireland's St Declan's Way*.



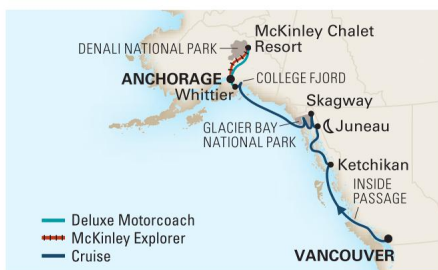
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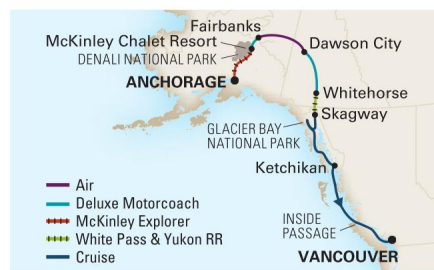
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