



Rosamund Burton and Lismore Castle, County Waterford, Ireland.

# The Irish Camino

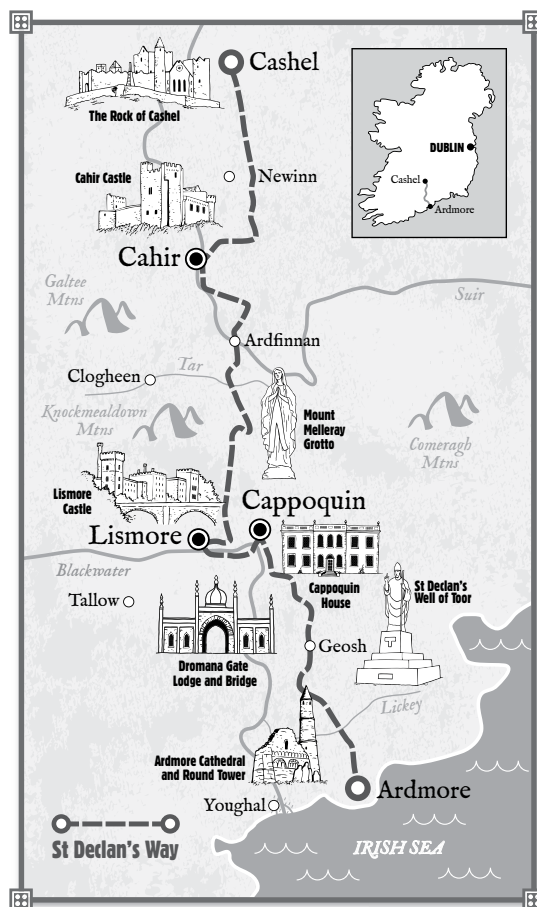
In recent years the pilgrim path of the Camino de Santiago in Spain has become a hugely popular walking route. But not so many people are aware that Ireland has its own ancient route of pilgrimage called St Declan's Way. **ROSAMUND BURTON**, author of **Castles, Follies and Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures along Ireland's St Declan's Way**, writes about how she discovered this ancient holy path and came to write a book about it.

Although I was born in Ireland, it was in England that I spent my childhood. But when I was 18 my father got a job back in Ireland and we moved to Lismore in County Waterford. On one of my visits back to Ireland, after I moved to Australia in 1995, a friend showed me a map of the pilgrim path of St Declan's Way.

In the early 1990s my cousin and I cycled the popular pilgrim route of the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. This was before it became the crowded spiritual superhighway that it is today. For three weeks, in between visiting magnificent cathedrals and beautiful old village churches, we cycled along tracks and quiet back roads and spent much of our days picnicking in fields or sketching and

writing our diaries. Inspired by those long outdoor days on the Camino I was fascinated to hear about St Declan's Way. Immediately I wanted to walk this little-known ancient pilgrims' route that stretches from the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary to the seaside village of Ardmore in County Waterford. But it wasn't until 2008 that I had the opportunity to do so.

Up until then I had only ever done day walks and I'd never carried a backpack. When I set off along St Declan's Way I covered only four kilometres on the first day before I seriously thought that I couldn't go on. By the time I reached Cahir, only 18km



from my starting point in Cashel, my feet were blistered and in agony. That was the hardest day of walking and fortunately it got easier after that.

As I ambled through the Irish countryside – along river banks and narrow country lanes – I loved seeing honeysuckle weaving its way along the top of the hedgerows, the purple flowering heather on the mountains and finding majestic foxgloves growing beside cushions of velvety moss and bubbling streams.

Before I left on the journey a friend suggested that I talk to the other pilgrims I met along St Declan's Way and find out why they were doing the walk. I passed many ruined churches and raths – circular fortified settlements that once contained huts in which people lived (now they are believed to be inhabited by fairies). But I never found another pilgrim. Bashing my way through brambles and nettles I often felt as if I was the only person to have ever ventured along the route. But at other times, as I walked along a dirt path flanked by high stone banks on both sides, it became clear that this was a way well trodden by many people over hundreds of years.

Midway along St Declan's Way lies the town of Lismore. When I left school my father got a job working for the Duke of Devonshire and we moved into the east wing of the magnificent Lismore Castle. My mother referred to our living quarters as 'the train'. A long corridor on the first floor ran the length of the east wing and rooms led off it. The Duchess, now the 91-year-old Dowager Duchess, is the youngest of the six famous Mitford sisters, and the reason for the unusual layout of our new home was because her sister, Lady Diana Mosley, stored her furniture in the rooms below. Diana married Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists, and the couple entertained Adolf Hitler as a guest of honour at their wedding.

I was awestruck to be living somewhere so steeped in history. Prince John, the son of King Henry II, built the castle here over 800 years ago. In the 16th century it was

owned by Sir Walter Raleigh, that favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, who is credited with having brought the potato back from the Americas. Before the castle was built this was the site of a huge monastery that had been renowned as a great centre of learning throughout Europe. Intrigued, I went to the local library to learn more and dreamt of writing a book about this part of Ireland. But I also wanted to be an actress so I left Lismore, went to acting school in Dublin and started working there in the theatre.

It was only when I walked St Declan's Way many years later with the idea of

with rain on the day an artist friend of mine, Wishy Martin, had decided to walk with me. As we settled into a steady pace she told me about learning to walk mindfully during her recent stay at Plum Village, the Buddhist centre in France run by the inspirational Vietnamese monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh. Despite the wet I was captivated as I listened to her talk about art and creativity and her practice of Buddhism. It made me so aware of the importance of spending time with friends when shortly afterwards she was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour and died 18 months later.

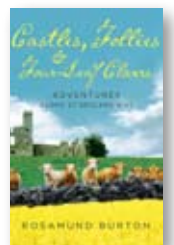
On another day I met a friend at the annual Tallow Horse Fair in the small town of Tallow. It was packed with horses. Horses of every shape, size and colour were being led or ridden up and down the narrow main street. Horses and donkeys were tethered to trees or tied together while people huddled in groups negotiating prices.

We ate lunch at the little Latch Restaurant and at the same table sat a man who worked at the donkey sanctuary. He told us that a donkey that smoked had recently arrived. It enjoyed puffing on a cigarette and a

pipe, because apparently its owner used to share them with the animal. The donkey definitely inhaled, he recounted, because the smoke came out of its nostrils.

As I continued walking along St Declan's Way I met more intriguing characters and heard many more stories – of miraculous wells and talking statues, of goddesses, ghosts and mischievous fairies. I got lost many times – including in the Bog of Hags on my way to St Declan's Well of Tour, known for its healing water. Perhaps it was the spirit of St Declan that guided me back from these inadvertent sideways excursions and led me safely to my ultimate destination of Ardmore. **91**

**Castles, Follies and Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures along St Declan's Way** by Rosamund Burton is published by Allen & Unwin, rrp \$24.99.



A depiction of St Declan on a signboard in Ardmore

The author and the ruined cathedral and round tower at Ardmore, Ireland.



writing a book about my experience that I realised that my forgotten dream was now being fulfilled. Following St Declan's Way was a fascinating journey, not only through the local history of the area, but also Irish history as a whole.

St Declan, who lived in the 5th century, is thought to have been born just outside Lismore. He was one of the four saints believed to have preceded Ireland's national apostle, St Patrick, in spreading Christianity throughout the country. He converted the people of the surrounding area to Christianity and founded a monastery on the coast at Ardmore. Whenever my mother and I would go to Ardmore we would walk down to St Declan's holy well and visit the ruined cathedral and the little stone oratory beside it where the saint is believed to have been buried. Ardmore has always been a magical place for me.

The summer of 2008 was the wettest in Ireland for 150 years and it was bucketing