

Ireland's Aran Islands – Why The Stony Face?

Neil Sowerby explores a bleakly beautiful landscape on foot

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DUN Eochla is the highest point on Inishmore, largest and most visited of the Aran Islands. It was a steep stumble to find this remote, eerie stone ring fort on the evening of our arrival when just trying to find our bearings. The 360 degree views across the island of a billion stones and over to the Cliffs of Moher on the Clare mainland were astonishing. As was the (admittedly over-restored) fort with its inner walls 5m high and 3m thick.

*Suddenly sun illuminated distant Aengus across
the immense lacework of limestone*

We had it to ourselves in the gathering dusk. It was built between 550 and 800 and is part of an unprecedented cluster of such monuments in close proximity. All the day-trippers flock to the larger Dun Aengus further north, a World Heritage Status site with all the trappings.

We had seen the mini-buses and the horse-drawn traps coming back for the day as we trudged up the Mainistir Road. Our initial feeling on arrival at Kilronan, main town and ferry port, was of dismay at how shabby it looked. Not a place to linger, pubs apart. By sheer chance, though, we had arrived on an important day in the calendar – the Summer Solstice when islanders light bonfires for St John their patron saint (as in all Catholic places Guy Fawkes Night isn't a reason for striking matches). The old ways linger steadfastly here – like the ubiquitous Gaelic language.



Dun Eochla; below, a jaunting cart heads home



Our B&B had been arranged by self-guided walking specialists [Ireland Ways](#). Our landlady [Mary Joe](#) had pointed out the nearest blaze site and we were glad to check it out. It was being built as we walked up and there were no signs of it being lit – or merriment commencing – on our way back down, so we repaired to [Joe Watty's](#) pub, best on the island and a convenient 40 yards from Mary Joe's. The traditional music session was good, while the craft beer menu featured Belgian Duvel and a trio of bottles from one of Ireland's best new breweries, Dungarvan of Waterford.



We liked the pub's outdoor terrace, too (visiting ancient forts and seal colonies is thirsty work) and from it we noticed a modest caravan marked 'Craggy Island Tourist Office' – a clue to a more recent island celebration. Every

February fans of the cult sitcom *Father Ted* descend for The Friends of Ted Festival, dressing as the characters and reenacting key moments. All because Inishmore is pictured from the air in the opening sequence.



Connemara pony in a paddock

That's actually a good introduction to a spellbinding landscape, a great tiled plateau of limestone – a continuation of the Burren in County Clare, to which it was once joined. Close to the domino like stone patterns are hypnotic, every crevice sprinkled with wild flowers.

It is not for nothing that Aran's great chronicler, Tim Robinson called both his books, *The Stones of Aran*. Thousands of small stone-walled paddocks were created by first settlers just to clear the ground of those stones. For fertility these same hardy souls patiently packed seaweed, sand and the scant soil together to create pasture.... eventually.



View from Dun Aengus; below, distant view of the amazing fort



The plateau rears up to great cliffs along the south coast. Dun Aengus is perched there on a spellbindingly vertiginous site. I feared for the lives of the Spanish school party teetering on the brink snapping selfies. Entry is 4 euros and to get there is a 20 minute uphill trek, hard on ageing coachloads. Some don't make it past the tea shop.



Dun Duchatair

We did and headed back to Kilronan on deserted tracks, the sun suddenly bathing distant Aengus across the immense lacework of limestone. Offering a rare kind of hiking bliss. Further along is the final fort of note, Dun Ducathair, the 'Black Fort', awkward to reach on its precarious, gloomy promontory. One for the serious fort botherer. The northern side of the island is flatter, offering a coast-hugging amble via the seal colony to Kilmurvey



Inishmaan



All this solitude energised us and we sought a further shot by taking the daily ferry over to gentle, pastoral, scarcely populated Inishmaan (the Middle Island) which, boutique hotel Inis Meáin aside, is impervious to the tourist buck (the third Aran island, Inisheer, is closer to the mainland and is less insular).

For us Inishmaan was all about the island's great chronicler – John Millington Synge. He lived there for four summers (1898-1902) on the advice of WB Yeats, who told him: “Give up Paris....Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.” That he did, learning Gaelic and writing about his island experiences, which inspired the plots of his great plays, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*.



View from Dun Aengus

Today two lasting memorials remain to him, both exquisite. The first is **Synge's Chair**, a lookout point at the edge of a sheer limestone cliff with the surf from Gregory's Sound booming below. The writer installed a stone seat on the sheltered ledge. It's a bracing half hour walk from the thatched McDonagh cottage where Synge lived. Reopened as a museum and centre for Gaelic studies with great support from literary and theatrical luminaries but with scant public funding, **Teach Synge** is an evocative spot.



Theresa at the Synge cottage

Under the tenacious stewardship of a McDonough descendant, Theresa Ní Fhatharta it answers the description in Synge's *The Aran Islands*: "My room is at one end of the cottage, with a boarded floor and ceiling, and two windows opposite each other. Then there is the kitchen with earth floor and open rafters, and two doors opposite each other opening into the open air, but no windows. Beyond it there are two small rooms of half the width of the kitchen with one window apiece."

By the smouldering turf fire Theresa talked us through the trove of photographs, drawings and letters and a small reference library of relevant publications by and about Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory. Fascinating stuff. The cottage is only open in summer, usually around lunch hour and a modest three euros is charged for the upkeep of the place.



Teach Osta happy hour; below, Dun Conchair



Next door is Inishmaan's own fort, the oval-shaped **Dun Conchuir** and along the lane is the excellent thatched pub, the **Dun Osta**, which serves toasties and excellent Guinness. So excellent that with time short we got lost in the labyrinth of lanes and only made the ferry back thanks to a kind islander giving us a lift. A rainbow halo-ed Kilronan Harbour, imparting on landing a certain radiance to the run-down main drag. Time for a glass of Dungarvan Black Rock on the terrace, wouldn't you say, Ted?



Handy for us – Joe Watty's pub

Main image is a view over Inishmore from Dún Eochla with Inishmaan and the Cliffs of Moher in the background. Picture by Tuoermin.

Factfile

Getting there

Neil Sowerby flew from Manchester to Dublin with [Aer Lingus](#).

He hired a car from [Hertz](#) and Ireland's greatly improved motorway network got him out to the west coast in just over two hours. The Aran Islands are reached and linked via regular ferries from the mainland, but Neil chose to fly (adult return 49 euros) with [Aer Aran](#) from Connemara Airport at Inveran, Co Galway. The eight-seater plane gets there in 15 minutes.

Staying there

Our visit to Inishmore was arranged by [Ireland Ways](#), the Irish division of pilgrimage path specialists Camino Ways, who organise walking and cycling holidays along extensive sections of the Wild Atlantic Way (see below). Our three-day island stay is usually part of a walking trip that also includes Galway City, Doolin and the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare. Accommodation will depend on availability, island maps and information are provided digitally. It is hard to get lost on the well-signposted network of paths with the sea never far away on either side.

[The Wild Atlantic Way](#) is Ireland's inspired branding of that entire coastal touring route from the wild limits of Donegal down to gourmet hang-out Kinsale in Co. Cork. [Tourism Ireland](#) is making great play of the Way this year.

An essential printed companion is **Where To Eat And Stay On The Wild Atlantic Way** by respected Irish food and drink experts John and Sally McKenna (Estragon Press).

Aran Islands tourist information: <http://www.aranisland.info>.

There are also two classic books about the islands by mathematician/cartographer Tim Robinson – *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. Never an easy read but rewarding.