



RIDE, EAT, DRINK GUINNESS, REPEAT

Rapid Training coach **Ryan Decarteret** rides Ireland's 1000-mile Wild Atlantic Way, then turns round and does it again. If ever there was a blueprint for a good time on a bike, this is it...

By Ryan Decarteret and John Westlake
Photography Pacemaker Press

Writhing down the entire west coast of Ireland, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) is the North Coast 500's harder, bendier, and more Guinnessy big brother. The 500-mile Scottish route is glorious but the Irish

version takes things to a whole new level.

For a start, at over 1000 miles it's more than twice as long as the NC500. It might even be three times longer – the Irish tourist board says it's 1600 miles, various locals say it's 1300, but my mileometer ends up saying it's 1209. It seems to depend on how many little peninsulas you visit.

Whatever. The main thing is it is a truly extraordinary route – not just because of the roads, cliffs, beaches, medieval banquets and pretty American ladies (more on the latter two later), but because of the remarkable attitude of the locals. It sounds corny, but thanks to them, the evenings really are just as entertaining as the days.

I get the ferry from Fishguard to Rosslare on the south east tip of Ireland, and roll off the boat at 4am. My plan is to do a big-mile day to get to the official start/finish of the Wild Atlantic Way in Kinsale, but things immediately go awry. For a start, the coast road takes its name far too literally and squiggles round even the tiniest inlet. Nadgery doesn't even begin to cover it. And then there's the dark: this is the darkest place I've ever been – no moon, no stars, no street lights, no villages. I've seen some seriously dark nights in Iraqi deserts and Kenyan jungles [Ryan is ex-Army] but nothing like this.

It takes me five hours to do the 120 miles to Cork – average speed 28mph – and it dawns on me that my aim of riding the entire route in two days might be ambitious [he has form here, riding the NC500 in a single 12-hour day – Ed]. Still, *Bike* have lent me a new Suzuki Hayabusa for the trip, so I'm hoping I can make up some time.

There's also the small matter of visiting hotels. I'm a coach for Rapid Training and officially I'm here to do a recce for a guided tour

later in the year, so I need to check out potential accommodation and points of interest rather than just engaging warp drive. Mentally, I shift my target from two to three days. Or perhaps four...

The roads

My time with the Wild Atlantic Way was first and foremost about the roads. And they don't disappoint. Ireland's west coast was chiselled by glaciers in the last ice age then smashed by the Atlantic for aeons and the result is an endless series of peninsulas. Some are huge, in fact they are big enough to have ring roads – the Ring of Kerry, Beara and Dingle, for example. And others are tiny, with a single lane leading to a lighthouse at the end. A ten-mile stretch of road hugging a coast would be good enough, but there's 1000 of miles of it here.

Given that distance there's a real mixture of tarmac. You come across everything from fast A-roads to Alpine-a-like switchbacks, tiny lanes and swooping dual carriageways. And there's no telling what comes next – you can be cracking through open flowing bends one moment and then suddenly have to throw out the anchors and drop three gears for a nadgery section. There's variety and it's addictive.

The surfaces are in good nick too, unlike the pothole-infested rubbish we get on the UK mainland. I'm guessing that's partly down to the lack of traffic – apparently there are more people in London than in the whole of Ireland.

The only downside is that what little traffic there is goes so, so slowly. No-one seems in any rush. Even locals in white vans – which can usually be relied upon to impersonate Lewis Hamilton – dawdle like stoned OAPs. This phenomenon is made worse by some roads having an unbroken single white line down the middle, which means the same as our double whites.

Some riders would just go for it – you could safely nip past four or five cars in places – but I can't bring myself to. When I did my police advanced training [Ryan's previous career was as a surveillance rider

Which way to go: there's no end of distractions along the whole of the Wild Atlantic Way





Bliss: unnamed road runs along the coast from Kilkee to Portacarron, past Kilkee Cliffs in County Clare

‘The Wild Atlantic Way is the North Coast 500’s harder, bendier, and more Guinnessy big brother’



Riding South bound on Hillhead (part of the N56) through Ardara, County Donegal



L5223 running north from the R251 at Money Beg, next to McGrady’s bar on Google Maps

5000 miles on a Hayabusa

» I had to set my sat nav to beep at me at the speed limit and then when I was 20mph over, because the Busa hides its speed like no other bike. I’ve ridden Gen 2 Hayabusas and had a ZZR1400 in my old job [in the National Crime Agency] so I like to think I’ve developed a rough gauge of how fast I’m going, but this Gen 3 is something else. What a thing – I love its effortless power. With Michelin Road 6s on it’s a blisteringly fast road bike, even in the wet.

It is quite uncomfortable though. Towards the end of the trip, during the last few hours of each day I was getting pain in the base of my neck – the reach to the ‘bars is just too long. I’d definitely have a Busa in my dream garage, but as a Rapid coach I don’t suppose I’d actually ride it much. I’d take my BMW S1000XR instead.

Adventure

for the National Crime Agency] we weren't even allowed to cross solid whites on blue lights so it's etched into my head.

Curiously, there is a solution, which a local explains in the pub one evening: if a driver notices you're there – a big if – there's an understanding that they'll move left as far as possible onto a mini hard shoulder that loads of the roads have. The weird thing is that the hard shoulder is also a footpath, so you get cars driving on a footpath to let you pass. It's all a bit odd.

But the quality of the roads more than makes up for the occasional bit of frustration and/or bafflement. Imagine your favourite section of the Yorkshire Dales, Scottish Highlands or mid-Wales going on for hundreds and hundreds of miles and you'll get the idea.

Scenery

For most of the trip the scenery is on one side, your left: riding north you get the Atlantic ocean, with swells that have rolled 2000 miles from America crashing into limestone cliffs that were lifted skyward by the last bout of tectonic shuffling. There are endless places where you can stop, walk ten metres, peer over the edge of a cliff, breathe in the ozone and gaze towards Nova Scotia with not a tourist in sight. Then there are the beaches, which are so numerous it's almost possible to become blasé about how beautiful they are. Almost.

On the right, you're mostly looking at farmland until you get further north, to County Mayo and Donegal. This is where the high ground starts and it's more like riding in Scotland. But even then, the ride is about the Atlantic and I have to ration the number of times I stop to take photos of astonishing beaches and cliffs otherwise I'd never get anywhere.

Where to stay

There are plenty of guest houses along the route and in my experience you'll struggle to find a duff one. I do these trips because I love riding, but every time I get to a guest house, they are so friendly that the evenings are as good as the days. The owner always tells me the best places to go for Guinness, food or a night out, and everywhere I go, whenever I sit down on my own, locals come over for a chat. I know a lot of these places depend on tourism, but the friendliness doesn't feel fake. I think it's just the way Irish society works, and is on a different level to trips I've done in Wales, Scotland and England.

The best pub that I visit is called Durty Nelly's in Bunratty (durtynellys.ie), near Limerick. I get chatting to some American girls – Shannon airport is nearby which is a stop-over to America apparently – and they say they're going for food at Bunratty Castle opposite the pub. This turns out to be a medieval banquet, and to be honest I'd normally give it a massive swerve. But the girls are pretty and they're keen for me to join them...

I'm assuming the banquet will be the cheesiest thing in the galaxy and the signs don't look good – there's a hall, 200 people and I'm handed mead [an ancient honey wine] as I go in... and there's a harp

Sustenance: WAW refreshments range from a nice hot brew to medieval mead



If the WAW follows the North Coast 500 success trail the roads won't be this deserted for much longer



You don't need to be a cartographer to find your way around



‘Imagine your favourite section of the Yorkshire Dales or Scottish Highlands going on for hundreds and hundreds of miles’

How to do the WAW

Ferries

» There are various crossings from Fishguard, Liverpool, Holyhead, Cairnryan and Pembroke. Ryan went from Fishguard to Rosslare (three hours, £220 return), putting him 140 miles from the southern start of the WAW.

Guided tours

» Ryan’s trip was a recce for Rapid

Training’s 2023 Ireland tour from 1-8 April. More details at rapidtraining.co.uk

Motorcycle hire

» If you don’t fancy the haul to get to Ireland, you can fly there and hire a bike. For example, flyrideireland.com have a fleet of Honda Africa Twins, NC700s and CB500Xs based near Dublin and Belfast airports. Africa Twins: £89 a day.

Other stuff

» Obviously there is all manner of touristy nonsense you can get embroiled in, ranging from *Father Ted* tours (tedtours.com) to medieval banquets (bunrattycastle.ie) to stalactites (doolincave.ie). Plus of course there are road races galore in the summer. A good start for your research is to click your way through to tourismireland.com

Adventure



A local shop, but not just for local people

player going for it. On the table there are no knives and forks, just a dagger. It sounds cornier than my grandma's toes, but I have such a good night, and the 60€ [£55] actually feels about right. I add it to places to visit on the Rapid tour.

If you can only do one bit

For sheer riding, the south west corner, with the Ring of Beara, Kerry and Dingle, is the place to go. If you only have a weekend free, I'd head there and just ride the peninsulas. If you have more time, ride north from there to the cliffs of Kilkee, west of Limerick, which are amazing, and a bit further north there's Doolin, where all the tourists go to see the world's biggest stalactite. Alternatively, I'd concentrate on the far northern section - Donegal - where you get the Atlantic on one side and mountains - well, almost - on the other. The middle patch has some great things to see, but I could live without it. As for Dublin, well, I rode there because I'd never been, and it was like one massive stag town. I'm sure there are authentic Irish bits, but I didn't find them.

Food

While you're riding, the petrol stations - mostly Circle K or Mace - are actually pretty good. Even more encouraging there's usually a take-away roast dinner from a hot plate counter - take notice England, Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland. In the evenings it's pub food, and as you'd imagine the seafood is special. To be honest, a lot of my evening nourishment came from Guinness.



'Fancy going to a medieval feast?'

Weather

It's been known to drizzle a bit, so you'll be needing waterproofs. It's not as bad as some people say because a lot of the rain falls on the higher ground inland. April to July are the driest months, but I went in October and only

had one day of solid rain which, of course, was when I met up with *Bike's* photographer.

Riding techniques for the WAW

Obviously the basics are the same as riding any road - reading the road, planning, machine control... But one of the highlights of the WAW is its variety. To ride these ever-changing types of road safely and fast, your visual skills have to be spot on, and one key technique I'd recommend is consciously using your peripheral vision. So, for example, if your main point of concentration is the limit point [the furthest point you can see into a bend - Ed] and you see a junction that's clear, you don't keep flicking your eyes to it to check for vehicles, but instead use your peripheral vision to monitor for movement. That means you can focus on the limit point, looking out for new hazards. Using your peripheral vision like this is a skill that takes practice, and it can be a game changer for your riding when you crack it *Bike*

Competition

Win £425 of advanced training!

» *Bike* have teamed up with Rapid Training to give you the chance to win a full day of bespoke, one-to-one training with an expert riding coach. We're big fans of Rapid here at *Bike*, partly because of their blend of racing heritage and police Class One road riding, and partly because of their no nonsense approach. If you want to get the best out of your bike - whatever your experience - this prize, worth £425, is a brilliant place to start. Entry is free. Just go to www.rapidtraining.co.uk/bike-rapid-competition



'There's 200 people and I'm handed mead as I go in... and there's a harp player going for it'

