



MacGillycuddy Reeks Rock!



Post-summit of
Carrauntoohil.
NCL35-0109

I HAVE been fortunate enough to clamber and climb – and cling onto – various peaks in Europe, Asia and Africa, but for some reason, I have never made it to the top of Ireland's highest mountain Carrauntoohil, in a mountain range known as MacGillycuddy Reeks in Co. Killarney.

Last weekend, Patrick Jack and I decided to fill in the neglectful deficit on our climbing palmares. There were a number of logistics involved. Firstly, Carrauntoohil is not exactly in the Sperrins. Limavady is just about as far North as you can travel in this island and Killarney is nearly as far South as you can travel without needing a boat. Secondly, Patrick was at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh as he was ticking that off before he flies to Japan next week, for a year's teaching. We got the stars to align and our diaries to coincide for once so I picked him up at Dublin airport and off we ploughed into the Dublin Friday night rush hour traffic. We had 4 hours to go and we were immediately stuck in traffic moving at about 5 kilometres an hour for 45 mins. Eventually it cleared and we took advantage of the excellent motor way system from the Dublin ring road to Limerick before the last 1 hour to Killarney, in the Ring of Kerry.

Carrauntoohil flattens out at 1,039 metres and is surrounded by two other peaks, each of which are over 1,000 metres, namely Beenkeeragh at 1,010 and Caherwhich makes it over the 1,000 metre mark by 1 metre! In the North, our highest peak is the mighty Slieve

Donard, 850 metres. I have been up and down that a fair few times, some times in a race and sometimes merely for enjoyment. It is a relatively straight forward up and down and even someone like me couldn't possibly get lost on it. Carrauntoohil on the other hand has a reputation for being difficult. The Irish Times travel section last weekend describes it as "More enigmatic, offering a variety of ascents, none of which can be considered straight forward". It is a "demanding outing suitable only for experienced hill walkers with scrambling ability and advises you to set aside 7 hours for the task. It is also not without hazard, 17 people died in the Reeks between 1966 and 2000 but now it averages 2 fatalities per annum. Many people come ill prepared, lacking proper gear or even a map. The routes are not clearly marked and the mountains are covered in mist 75% of the time. Just because it's nice and sunny and calm in the valley doesn't mean anything 3 hours later, when you are surrounded by a howling gale and blizzard conditions when you are near the summit.

Sometimes the highest mountain in a range is not necessarily the one with the nicest views. In the past, I have managed to summit Slieve Donard, Snowdonia, Scafell Pike and Ben Nevis inside 48 hours, (sleep optional) and there is no doubt that there are nicer peaks in the Mourne, in Snowdonia, in the Lake District and also in the Highlands, but you have to bag the highest one, don't you? It's just human nature. Talking of nature, you could feel very close to nature at the foothills of our intended climb as the whole area was very scenic.

For the reasons outlined

above, I didn't want Patrick and I to be stumbling around a 1,000 metre peak, possibly in the mist, with no notion of where up was and where down was, so we hired a guide. John O'Sullivan was recommended to me and from the first moment we met him, we felt at ease in his presence. We were reassured by his experience and we knew we would be well looked after. We were lucky with the weather and perhaps we could have made it up and down without John's expert company but the weather on the mountain can change in an instant. One minute you are in clover, the next you are in deep trouble. John showed us the main route which went up the "Devils Ladder", a seemingly never ending scramble on a rock surface which steeply led to a saddle before you turn right and up to the summit. We went however on a more scenic route. As we crossed a few bridges over a bubbling stream, we were able to gaze up at the beautiful summit away in the distance topped off with an impressive looking cross. When John pointed out to us our intended route I wondered how on earth we would traverse this jumble of rocks and gullies.

But John has been up here many times and knows every rock and toe hold. We climbed up and around the "Hags Tooth" into a clearing beside Ireland's highest lake, Cummeenoughter. It was then up through O'Shea's Gully before we turned back on ourselves and up the last section which was relatively easy – unlike the previous three hours!

When we arrived at the summit, the mist rolled in and we could hardly see the cross let alone the majestic panorama laid out beneath us, but as the mist and fog cleared, there we were on top of Ireland, Kings of all we

surveyed. At the bottom lay real life with real problems and a constant background noise of chatter, of relentless communication, of 24/7 social media and non-stop nonsense. Up here you felt free as a bird, free of clutter, free of the luxuries that are meant to free us but actually imprison us. Up here you get what matters, a love of nature and chance to spend a few precious hours with a precious son who was about to leave for the other side of the world.

John, our guide was taking lots of photos because everyone who books him as a guide gets a free CD of photographs a few days later. I couldn't recommend him highly enough and when he heard me talk about Rotary he quietly informed me that he was the President of the local Killarney Club, I was delighted. I had spent the previous weekend in the company of Rotarian Matt Porter in Dublin when I was at the 70.3 Triathlon. One week later, I was with another Rotarian. Rotary is normally the world's best kept secret, but here we were, two Rotarians from either side of the Island enjoying the country at its best.

We left the summit and after a steep descent, everyone else was funnelling off the hill via the "Devil's Ladder", but John had an even better way down which gave us even more spectacular views via a zig zag path. Six hours after we started, we gratefully stumbled back into Cronin's Yard to say our goodbyes – and our thanks to John, a peerless guide.

Patrick and I drove to the very famous Kate Kearney's Cottage for a well deserved bowl of soup before heading back to a very touristy Killarney, full of travellers, tourists and trekkers from all over the world, most of whom

appeared to be sharing our dorm in the excellent Neptune Hostel.

The next day we were up at the scrape of dawn, not to enjoy the lakes of Killarney or the Gap of Dunloe or the Ring of Kerry (I had cycled through most of them on my Mizen to Malin bike trip a few years previously) but for the 4 hour drive north to Mayo. We could of course have driven straight home but we had a chance bag yet another iconic peak – the legendary Croagh Patrick.

At 1.00 p.m. we rolled into a very busy car park near Westport & Castlebar the Visitor centre. About 25,000 people climb Carrauntoohil annually but a few weeks ago 25,000 people climbed Croagh Patrick – in one day! It was Reek Sunday, a famous day in the local religious calendar. Again, we were blessed with fabulous weather. Being half sensible, Patrick and I took a rucksack with energy drinks, water, rain jacket, etc. and we were wearing our hiking boots, but still we felt positively over dressed in the next 3 hours as we passed people in trainers with no rain gear and some without water on a really warm humid day. We even passed one pilgrim on her way up without shoes.

The route is easy, straight up the central wide path, but full of scree and rocks which would be very slippery in the wet, up to the shoulder, then take a right up a particularly steep section where the summit disappears from view, then magically reappears just as you begin to think it was actually a mirage. On top, there is a church which was built in 1905 by 12 local hardy labourers, with the materials carried uphill by donkeys. There is also a marauding sheep which has a knack of stealing tourist's sandwiches! As we reflected on our

success on our second summit in 24 hours, I was regaled by a friendly hello, it was Liam Mullan and John McNicholl from Limavady who had driven down that morning and thought they would get a bit of fresh air before visiting the Fleadh in Sligo, as you do! I admired their youthful spirit of adventure.

I had arranged to meet another Rotarian, Niall Taylor, president of the Castlebar Rotary Club at the foot of Croagh Patrick who would look after us and kindly take us to his home for some down time and food before another 4 hours slog in the car. In the meantime on the summit, I marvelled at the views, beneath us lay a myriad of small islands linking in the sunshine, a fantastic combination of water and islets and causeways which has to be one of the most panoramic and spectacular sights on this beautiful island of ours.

Beneath us also lay the path home – and for Patrick, a long trip to Japan. That weekend travelled 770 miles over 55 hours, through 4 provinces and 19 counties to bag two remarkable peaks. I gave my son a bear hug on top of Croagh Patrick, knowing that he and I would not be on top of another mountain for a long, long time. Patrick had gone from Arthur's seat in Edinburgh to Carrauntoohil in Kerry to Croagh Patrick in Mayo and would also conquer Slieve Donard before he made his way to the Far East. It was good bye from an old PJ to a much more important PJ. His next peak would be Mount Fuji. Meanwhile we embraced in front of a 110 year old church on the top of County Mayo. I stifled my tears and hoped that he would be safe on his trip to the land of the Rising Sun. Sayonara, Patrick.