



and stunning scenery. Light bounced off emerald grass swaying gently in a light breeze, and I was reminded, as I often am, of the wonderful serendipity of cycling.

Travelling by bike is one of the greatest ways to see the spaces between destinations, which is why I've taken to bringing a sketchbook with me to remind myself to stop and appreciate those rarely seen places.

HARD MILES, SOFT DAYS

My route took me north out of Belfast and towards the edge of Glenariff Forest Park. By day two I had hit one of the most northerly parts of Ireland, passing the Dark Hedges avenue of beech trees made famous by the Game of Thrones TV series, before following the coast west towards the Giant's Causeway.

Each day took me deeper into the wild. Hills turned to mountains and the weather progressively worsened. I only enjoyed dry days at the beginning and end, and in between faced some of the most challenging downpours and headwinds I've ever encountered on a bike.

On the third day I navigated along the northern coast, following it all the way to Magilligan Point. Cycling UK's Northern Ireland lead, Andrew McClean, had recommended this route so I could catch the ferry over to the Republic, which would avoid having to cycle south for another 20 miles to enter Derry-Londonderry. The recommendation turned out to reveal a hidden gem.

Just before reaching Magilligan, I followed the cycle trail from Portstewart to a National Trust forest where I found Mussenden Temple. After a little bit of exploring, I climbed Dungannon Hill where I followed the ridgeway to Gortmore viewpoint. With a clear horizon there were panoramic views, letting me see all the way to the heart of Donegal, to the islands of Islay and Jura off the west coast of Scotland and over to the campsite where I was planning to stay that night,

Clockwise from top left: Giant's Causeway, on the north coast near Bushmills, is formed of thousands of interlocking basalt columns. Manannán mac Lir takes in the panorama from Gortmore viewpoint. Camping on the edge of Glenveagh National Park. Giant's Causeway again – the volcanic 'stepping stones' march from the foot of the cliff into the sea

prior to catching the ferry. Standing beside me as I gazed around was a statue of Manannán mac Lir, a figure from Irish mythology associated with the sea. The statue's hands were parted wide, as if it were taking in the view.

On day four I took the mountain pass bridleway through Glenveagh National Park towards Lough Veagh. Clouds formed around me as I cycled through misty rain between the mountains of Bingorms and Moylenanav, bringing me to the edge of the pass. The clouds parted as I turned the corner, and for the next 20 minutes I descended on a gravel track beneath partially blue skies while the sun helped to dry out my kit. I couldn't believe my luck.

CAMPSITE CAMARADERIE

Camping each night took me to some incredible places in the heart of Ireland's wilderness but, ▶

Fact file Unsurfaced Ireland

Distance: 366 miles (589km) over seven days.

Route: From the heart of Belfast, crisscrossing between Northern Ireland and the Republic to explore its wild and rugged terrain. Rolling hills, historic landmarks and some really fun off-road segments.

Conditions: Two days of sun, rain the rest of the time (May 2024).

Bike used: Focus Atlas 6.8 gravel bike.

Maps/guides: Komoot and a Garmin Edge 530.

I'm glad I had... My rain jacket! And my sketchbook.

Next time I would... Pack a little lighter, swapping the winter sleeping bag for my summer one.

My route is here: bit.ly/komoot-belfast-jgill