



# Luck of the Irish

*Wagtails, honeysuckle and, yes, a little rain—walking across Ireland brings me back to my true nature*

By Rosamund Burton



I'm sitting alone at the bar of a busy pub in the Irish town of Cashel. All the tables are full of families having dinner, and the lady serving told me to perch on this high stool, in full sight of everyone but not close enough to strike up a conversation with anyone.

Usually, I love being alone. After all, 15 years ago, I immigrated to Australia on my own. But now I feel like pinning a notice to my forehead that says, 'I do have friends; they're just not here'. The reason I'm here is that I've decided to walk St Declan's Way, a 100-km ancient highway and age-old pilgrim path from the iconic Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary to the village of Ardmore on County Waterford's south coast.

When my meal arrives, I start to feel less self-conscious, and as I taste my first mouthful of delicious floury potato, my discomfort falls away, replaced by a glorious sense of freedom. I have no commitments; my time is my own. I've left behind my frenetic Sydney life and given myself a break from supporting my elderly mother. And my husband decided he didn't want two wet weeks of walking. I'm sad he's not here, but I know that his eagerness to reach the next pub would mean he'd set a cracking pace and have little patience for my

ambling and interest in all the ruined castles, churches and holy wells along the way.

I first heard about St Declan's Way seven years ago, and I've wanted to walk it ever since. Although Sydney is home for me, I love returning to this region of Ireland, where my family's lived for decades. I feel as if part of me belongs here, and I want to make sense of that feeling.

A day later, I leave Cashel along the first 18-km stretch of the route to the next town, Cahir. I'm fairly fit, but I've never carried a backpack before. I saunter along trying to find raths—circular earth-bank enclosures that were home to people and their animals hundreds of years ago; they're also believed to be the dwelling places of fairies.

With aching shoulders and sore feet, and despondent at having failed to find the two raths marked on my map, I stop and realise, to my horror, that I've walked only 4 km and it's another 14 km to Cahir. I contemplate returning to Cashel and giving up this whole walking lark. It's only the realisation of how ridiculous it would be to have flown all the way from Australia to walk just 4 km that makes me press on.

When I limp exhausted into Cahir at nightfall, I'm unable to take another step. Still, I have really enjoyed the day's walking—travelling at my natural speed instead of whizzing along in a car with the landscape flashing past too fast to take in. I was able to appreciate the exquisite creamy-yellow honeysuckle winding along the top of the hedgerows and could stop to pick the succulent blackberries growing beside it.

Every day of my walk from then on, I feel physically fitter and so much more present. One of walking's many gifts is time. Your mind starts to unravel some of its tangles. All my worries about work, family and whatever else, which filled my mind when I first set out, have eased.

I've become more aware of the world around me—it's as if nature is providing me with a series of signposts. I smile when I see a pied wagtail, a symbol of good luck, and I'm spurred on by the traveller's joy, a climbing plant, growing along a stone wall. Still, I wish I'd never noticed the alder, the tree thought to be unlucky for travellers. I walk all day in torrential rain and reach the village where I plan to sleep, only to discover that there's no accommodation. A man kindly gives me a lift to the nearest bed and breakfast, and I end the day, much to my frustration, only a couple of kilometres farther along the Way from where I'd set out that morning.

I take 24 hours' rest at a Cistercian convent. The nuns spend most of their lives in prayer and silence, speaking to visitors and one another only when absolutely necessary. The other guests are intrigued to hear I'm following St Declan's Way, especially when I tell them I've met no fellow walkers. Someone asks whether I call myself a pilgrim. I avoid the question, because I don't know the

answer. I'm certainly not bursting with religious zeal, but I do hope to experience some sort of transformation.

I'm still questioning what I hope to achieve with this walk when I visit St Declan's Well of Toor. Beside the well is an ash tree festooned with socks, ribbons and rags. These tokens, known as 'clouties', symbolise the prayers, wishes and worries that people have given up to the healing powers of the woods and the water. I tie my red-and-white spotted handkerchief to a branch to be worn away in the wind, along with my worries.

On the last stage of my walk, I pass a small gnarled tree dripping with little rosy-coloured apples. In Celtic mythology, the apple is associated with choice. Seeing these apples makes me aware of how necessary it is to choose what I want in life and then to take action to make that choice a reality.

*“Treading the ground  
day after day has reconnected  
me with the earth”*

Eventually, I catch a glimpse of the sea and Ardmore, where St Declan founded his monastery 1,600 years ago. After standing beside the ruined cathedral and peering into the stone oratory where the bones of St Declan are buried, I walk down to St Declan's hermitage, or *díseart*. I scoop up the cool healing water from the well and drink to my journey. I feel such a sense of achievement and realise that I *do* now feel like a pilgrim.

Treading the ground day after day has reconnected me with the earth, and I've been deeply nourished by my natural surroundings: magnificent oak trees, symbols of strength; rowans with fiery red berries, symbols of protection; and swathes of purple heather, the bringer of luck and happiness, that cover the mountains. I'm filled with a phenomenal sense of joy and peace, and I realise that this—and not the stressed state I'm in when I've taken on too much—is my natural state of being.

Back in my Sydney life, I haven't forgotten those red apples and what they represent. However busy my days get, I now go for regular walks either along the beach or through the bush, taking time to reconnect with nature. When I do, my concerns and worries seem less overwhelming. I shift from thinking there aren't enough hours in the day to simply enjoying the moment, and I realise I have all the time in the world. ■

*Rosamund Burton is the author of Castles, Follies & Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures Along Ireland's St Declan's Way (\$24.99; Allen & Unwin).*