

Weekend *Travel*

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A new world of walks

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We've fallen back in love with walking over lockdown, and new trails are being created all over Ireland and the world. *Pól Ó Conghaile* and *Thomas Breathnach* choose 20 to look forward to, long and short, for when we can travel again

It's free. It's healthy. You can do it from your doorstep, or in the world's most exotic destinations. Walking has always been a beloved outdoor activity, but a year-long pandemic has taken our appreciation of it to a whole new level. From good old-fashioned headspace to health benefits like helping to manage weight and reducing the risk of heart disease and diabetes, its upsides are massive.

"In lockdown, we discovered something wonderful about our own backyard," says Jake Mac Manus of Trek Ireland, who creates virtual walking videos.

"Walking among the trees, moving slowly through open parks, kicking leaves. Cautiously following shallow rivers or climbing bare hill tops. They were always there, we just needed a reason to remember." Though we must abide by travel restrictions now, we think it's likely that nature, the outdoors and social distancing will drive holiday trends as lockdowns loosen, drawing people to great trails and greenways.

"Getting the 'walking bug' is one of the few positive things to come out of 2020," says Sara Zimmerman of Travel Department and TD Active. Bookings for future walking trips are outperforming all other holidays, both for overseas and homegrown options like their four-night Kerry Walking Holiday, she adds. "So many more people have taken to the great outdoors during lockdowns to exercise and for their headspace, which has reinvigorated both the appeal and appetite to explore more on foot."

New trails are being created, upgraded or waymarked both for local communities and future visitors all over the world. In Spain, the Camino's Holy Year will be stretched over 2021 and 2022. New Zealand has added a new trail to its 12 'Great Walks', with huts to stay in along the way. Walking is central to England's Great West Way, a 125-mile touring route between London and Bristol. Ireland is investing millions in new and upgraded greenways, and new walking options range from Cork City's Ardú street art trail to the High Kings Loop in Co Tipperary and 'Open Ground Walk', based on sites connected to Seamus Heaney's poetry, coming soon to mid-Ulster. Research by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland found 35pc more people were getting outdoors during the pandemic, with 41pc favouring trails that are entirely or partially off-road.

"We can see that walking has helped many people to cope with lockdown and in my small village in Blackrock, Co Louth, there is a steady stream of walkers of all ages getting their daily exercise," says Bronagh Carroll of Magic Hill Holidays. "It's a remarkable sight. It has helped people both physically and mentally since the virus reached our shores," she says. "We also believe walking holidays will do well once the pandemic is behind us, especially on the quieter trails, such as the Northern Way Camino in Asturias and the Finisterre Way near Santiago de Compostela."

For now, we stay home. But here's a taste of the new trails to look forward to. →

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1 EMPIRE STATE TRAIL, NEW YORK

Why: If you think walking down Fifth Avenue makes for an epic New York outing, try trekking all the way to Canada. That's now possible thanks to a series of trailhead tweaks to the state's recently extended Empire State Trail. From Manhattan, the route winds 750 miles upstate towards Buffalo, veering west, or the Quebec border via the northern route. But you don't need to wander so far. Try the 12-mile Manhattan Greenway, which starts at Battery Park. Or explore trendy Hudson Valley villages like Cold Springs, blotted with organic farm stands and beardy brewers. Thinking less beer, more bears? Walk and camp along the routes of the awesome Adirondack Mountains. — *TB*

Level: The views may be lofty but this is an all-level route suitable for all abilities.

Details: empiretrail.ny.gov

2 NATIONAL FAMINE WAY, IRELAND

Why: Epic trails catch the eye, and that's exactly what the new National Famine Way is — a 165km route following the footsteps of 1,490 emigrants (the Missing 1,490) who walked from Strokestown, Co Roscommon, in 1847 to set sail from Dublin in coffin ships. The trail, mostly following off-road paths along the Royal Canal, is bookended by museums — the National Famine Museum in Strokestown, and EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum in Dublin. Pilgrims can dip in and out, or do the full thing. A passport is available, with 27 stage stamps to collect along the trail. The journey, through six counties, "takes you through some of the most unspoiled countryside in Ireland", as John O'Driscoll, general manager of the National Famine Museum, has put it. — *PÓC*

Level: Mostly on the flat, the walking is straightforward aside from the distance, of course.

Details: nationalfamineway.ie

3 ROUTE 0.4.0, TENERIFE

Why: Anyone who has touched down in Tenerife will be familiar with Mount Teide. Spain's highest mountain towers above the island like a Canarian Mount Fuji. And now you can add new heights to your hiking conquests by scaling it. Last October, Tenerife Tourism unveiled a freshly rebooted route across the peak, which boasts the highest elevation gain of any trail in the country. Geared for seasoned trail-blazers, the 56km loop begins at El Socorro beach before literally reaching Spain's ceiling at 3,718m. Hikers can expect to cover it in 12 hours (make that four to six hours for trail runners) and you can compare performances on the Open Trail Races app, too. — *TB*

Level: Muy difícil! Consider this rugged mountain terrain for hiking pros, not casual walkers.

Details: hellocanaryislands.com; park permits from reservasparquesnacionales.es

4 KNOCKNASHEE, CO SLIGO

Why: Sligo is stuffed with wicked walks, from Knocknarea to Ireland's tallest waterfall, the Devil's Chimney. One of its newest upland trails takes walkers along fresh gravel paths and steps to the 270m summit of Knocknashee (from Cnoc na Sidhe, or Hill of the Fairies). This was one of Ireland's largest Bronze Age hill forts, and the summit features two neolithic cairns — not for climbing! From the top, the reward is stunning views over the drumlins and plains of south Sligo... you can even see as far as Croagh Patrick on a clear day. The trail is linear, kicking off at a 'kissing gate', and archaeologists believe the hill may have been the 'capital' of late-Bronze Age Connacht. The trailhead is roughly 10km north of Tubercurry. — *PÓC*

Level: Short (3km), but steep. Allow one hour to 90 minutes.

Details: sligowalks.ie/walks/knocknashee

5 COASTAL CAMINO, PORTUGAL

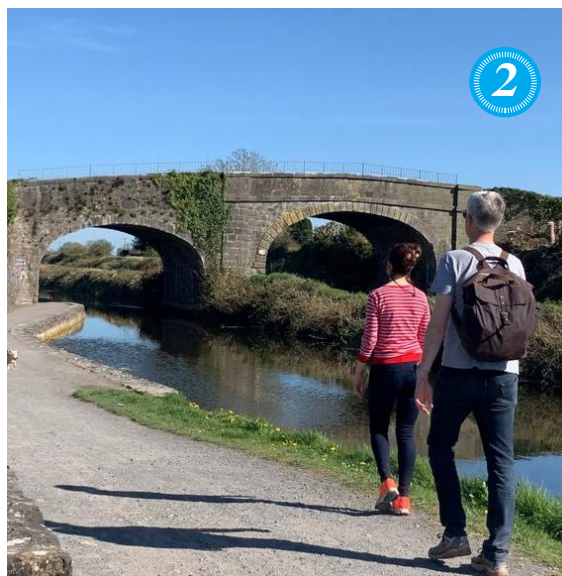
Why: Time seems to stand still in Portugal — and not just because there's no need to change your watch. The country is a poster child for slow tourism and nowadays, its Coastal Camino route is wooing backpacking pilgrims from more well-trodden Spanish trails. Starting from either Lisbon or Porto, the route weaves north along Portugal's charming Atlantic coast towards the beauty belt of Galician countryside. Depending on your pace, a month's wandering should draw Santiago de Compostela near, but there are myriad legs to cherry-pick for your timeline. — *TB*

Level: A good level of fitness, with decent pre-departure mileage, is advised for a long-distance walk like this.

Details: visitportugal.com; followthecamino.com



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6 CAHORE POINT TRAIL, CO WEXFORD

Why: You don't have to hit the Wild Atlantic Way for a good Irish coastal walk. The 5km Cahore Point Trail has been newly waymarked, surfaced and officially accredited by Sports Ireland, and is keeping lots of locals sane through lockdowns. Set just south of Gorey, it takes you along the coast towards the beautifully sandy Old Bawn Beach (bring the togs), before returning on country roads to the small seaside village. The loop begins and ends at The Strand Cahore, one of Ireland's tastiest gastro-pubs — once reopened, expect open fires, picture windows and sumptuous local grub (from Kilmore Quay prawns to wood-fired pizzas). A new takeaway, The Hatch, was added during the pandemic too, so a coffee and a quick bite are options. — *PÓC*

Level: Easy and accessible to all; doable in an hour

Details: visitwexford.ie; thestrandcahore.ie

7 SENTIERO DEI PARCHI, ITALY

Why: Stretching a Fitbit-busting 7,000km from the spaghetti mountain passes of South Tyrol to Mount Etna in Sicily, the Sentiero dei Parchi tracks and trails through Italy's most epic natural treasures — its 25 national parks. Inspired by the growing demand for sustainable tourism during 2020, the new route is being viewed as a key player in Italy's post-pandemic recovery. And with natural beauty dotted with medieval towns and mountain top villages, you can consider hiking this Italian trek as the ultimate al fresco holiday. — *TB*

Level: Much of the terrain is not overly taxing, it is rugged, but consider the flatter parks of Puglia if fitness is an issue.

Details: italia.it; caminonaturaledaiparchi.it

8 RING OF SPIKE, CO CORK

Why: Spike Island knows a thing or two about being locked down, and it has put recent closures to good use by planning for a reboot of the walkways around the former island prison site. By the end of summer, work should be completed on a formal 'Ring of Spike', encircling the island with new pathways, resurfaced old ones, information panels and signage. The ring will run some 2.4km from the pier to the "back" of the island and back, with views over to Cobh, Ringaskiddy, Roches Point, Haulbowline and other harbour



forts at Crosshaven and Templebreedy along the way. You'll be able to walk into Second World War era pillboxes (defensive lookout positions), pass a village abandoned in the 1980s, and of course, pay a visit to the former prison itself. Not a bad day out to look forward to. — PÓC

Level: Easy; allow a good half-day or more with ferry crossings included.

Details: spikeislandcork.ie; purecork.ie

9 PAPAROA TRACK, NEW ZEALAND

Why: For Kiwis, New Zealand's Great Walks are icons of the great outdoors — 12 epic trails, managed by its Department of Conservation, which tramp through the nation's mountains, rainforests and fjords. Last year saw the first trail added to the network in 25 years, with the launch of the purpose-built Paparoa Track, set along the South Island's rugged West Coast region. The 55km route can be completed in three days with hikers overnighing in earthy backcountry huts (with heating, cooking facilities, loos, water and USB charging points) en route. If you fancy upping adrenalin levels a gear, the track is NZ's first Great Walk to also welcome mountain bikers. "When the world starts to move again, find your dream destination here," as its tourist board says. — TB

Level: You'll need good fitness — and calves — to backpack this terrain over three days.

Details: paparoagreatwalk.co.nz; newzealand.com

10 THE BEARA BREIFNE WAY, IRELAND

Why: Here's an ancient walk for the future. Led by grass-roots communities, the Beara Breifne Way is a 700km trail based on the 14-day march undertaken by the chieftain O'Sullivan Beare and his supporters in 1603. Stretching from Dursey Island to Blacklion, Co Cavan, and almost 70pc off-road, it encompasses 12 other trails, like the Miner's Way in Roscommon, Leitrim and Sligo, and work is underway to develop, waymark and interpret it as a future centerpiece for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. Similar to St Declan's Way, which has been improved between Cashel and Ardmore, this has enormous potential as a long-distance trail for the mid-2020s. An Irish Camino, if you like. — PÓC

Level: Hard, multi-day (if not month) trail for the future.

Details: bearabreifneway.ie; discoverireland.ie

11 THE CAMBRIAN MOUNTAINS ASTRO TRAIL, WALES

Why: Thanks to the popularity of Dark Sky reserves, astro-tourism has become a shooting star in recent years. And now, you can combine a walking trip across Wales' Cambrian Mountains with added celestial oomph. The 80km Astro Trail is landmarked by six, specially designated Dark Sky locations en route, and with the lack of light pollution in the Welsh wilds, hikers can expect unfiltered views of everything from the Milky Way to meteor showers. For more Welsh adventure, keep tabs on Celtic Routes; a tourism collaboration between six counties in Wales and Ireland, which was interrupted by Covid-19 but is expected to gather steam in 2021 once we can travel again. — TB

Level: Experience is needed in Wales' hills, not least when hiking the trails at night.

Details: visitwales.com; celticroutes.info

12 SAINTS & SINNERS HISTORY TOUR, NORTH MAYO

Why: Lockdown reconnected us with the local, and nowhere more so than Moygownagh, Co Mayo. This is a rural parish in the triangle between Ballina, Crossmolina and Ballycastle, and led by historian Liam Alex Heffron, the community has used online and app technologies to animate three walks bringing the history of the area to life. The Saints and Sinners tour is a 15km looped walk (or cycle), with points of interest ranging from a 17th century lookout tower to the site of a Black and Tan raid, soldier memorials, graveyard and chapels. This grassroots led tour compliments the 15km Moygownagh Loop Walk and 5km Blanemore Forest Walk, which contains a number of Bronze Age monuments and court cairns thought to date from the same time as the Céide Fields. — PÓC

Level: Moderate, due to its length.

Details: mayonorth.ie; moygownagh.ie/history-tour

13 MICHINOKU COASTAL ROUTE, JAPAN

Why: Of all tourists that make it to Japan, only 2pc get to the far north region of Tohoku. Perhaps best known (if not infamous) for the tsunami which befell the region in 2011, 10 years on it's looking forward thanks to a new hiking epic: the Michinoku Coastal Route, from Aomori to Fukushima prefectures. In Japanese, this region means "the end of the road", and walking this remote route of 1,000+ kilometres, rich in cedar forests, rice fields, and sea caves — all doused in Pacific spray — feels just like that. If the Olympics go ahead this summer, the torch relay is slated

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to start in Fukushima, shining a light on the recovery that has taken place. There may be a lesson there for first steps towards a post-pandemic tourism recovery, too. — *PÓC & TB*
Level: Elevations along the route can dip and dive and require moderate fitness.

Details: michinokutrail.com; japan.travel

14 THE ROYAL CANAL GREENWAY, IRELAND

Why: Ireland has several tantalising greenways now being developed, discussed and upgraded, from Limerick's Great Southern Greenway to Dublin's Dodder and the New Ross to Waterford route. Nearing completion and launch, the 130km Royal Canal Greenway may just trump them all, linking Maynooth, Co Kildare, with Longford along one of Ireland's most historic waterways. Various stretches can be walked or cycled already, from the 11km of towpaths linking Mullingar to Coolnahay Harbour, for instance, or the section from Cloondara to Killashee and Keenagh. In Co Longford, a 1.2km new walk now connects Newcastle Woods with the canal along the River Inny, as part of its Longford County Trails. There's also a 5km trail to explore around the perimeter of Center Parcs. — *PÓC*

Level: Easy, on the flat, depending on distance of course!
Details: waterwaysireland.org; longford.ie

15 JULIAN ALPS TRAIL, SLOVENIA

Why: With its Toblerone peaks, turquoise river valleys and fairytale Alpine architecture, Slovenia is postcard-pretty — like Switzerland, but without quite the overdraft. So, if you're looking for an Alpine adventure that's easier on the knees and the wallet, consider Slovenia's new Julian Alps Hiking Trail. Centred on the national treasure of Mount Triglav and its namesake national park, the 300km route is designed around doable legs (averaging just 18km a pop), with dreamy towns like Bled and Kranjska Gora making idyllic daily targets along the way. — *TB*

Level: Gentle gradients make this family-friendly.

Details: slovenia.info; TD Active Holidays offers guided hiking trips (tdactiveholidays.com).

16 CAHERMURPHY LOOP, CO CLARE

Why: East Clare Way walkers may know this 9km loop, but a number of bridges on the walk have been repaired in 2020, and renewed way-marking now makes it easier to navigate the forested section. It's part of the Shannon Region Trails programme (follow the red arrows), and offers a chance to get off-grid in a lost world of boreens, country roads, forest tracks and spots many will not have heard of — White Sands at Lough Graney, or the Bleach River, for instance. There are super views of the lake, and afterwards, once it's open again, you can grab a cuppa in the Coffee Loft over O'Mara's shop in Flagmount. — *PÓC*

Level: Easy to moderate (150m ascent). You can also do a 2km loop to Bleach River.

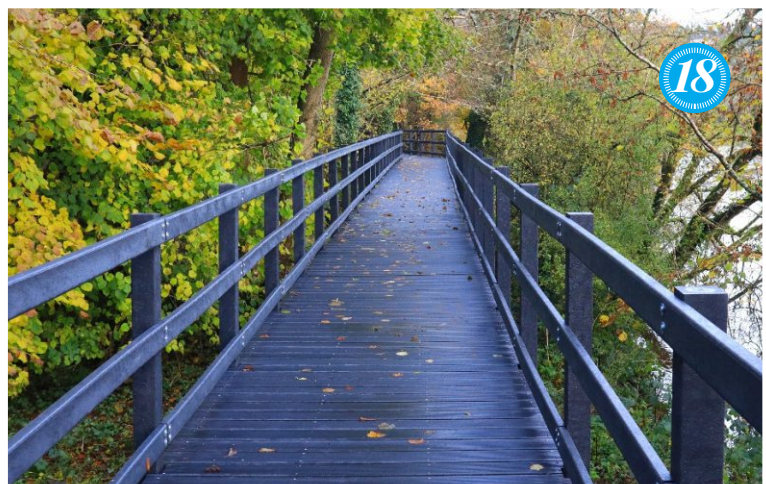
Details: visiteastclare.ie; discoverireland.ie

17 FIFE PILGRIM WAY, SCOTLAND

Why: It may be better known for its historic golf course these days, but for 400 years the town of Saint Andrews was one of medieval Europe's top pilgrimage destinations. Launched in 2019, a fresh new 100km route is aiming to revive the legendary trail, allowing walkers to follow in the steps of the monks and martyrs who paved this ancient path. Crossing coastal swathes, woodlands and countryside, the route can be joined at infinite points along the way but it does deviate a little from the traditional course. However, the detours are sweetly designed so you can beeline into Fife's charming towns and villages on your pilgrimage, too. — *TB*

Level: Much of the trail is flat so walkers of all abilities will find a stretch to suit.

Details: fifecoastandcountrysidetrust.co.uk



18 SILAIRE WOODS LOOP, CO KILKENNY

Why: Kilkenny is hoping to lead the way when tourism re-opens in Ireland, both in terms of outdoors adventure and sustainability. Exhibit A? The 400m, rot-proof boardwalk made from recycled plastic (a blend of household items like bottle caps and margarine tubs) in Silaire Woods. A new 3km looped walk here will be officially launched soon, running from Graiguenamanagh along the River Barrow and through the woods. Watch out for otters, kingfishers, and an 800-year-old oak growing from the Rock of Silaire itself. The old monastic woods owe their survival to the local community, who bought them from Coillte in the 1990s and nourished them until Kilkenny County Council took ownership in 2020. Short and sweet, it should be ready for local and visiting walkers by the time we can travel between counties again. — *PÓC*

Level: Easy. No need for blister plasters here.

Details: visitkilkenny.ie; trailkilkenny.ie

19 EL CAMINO DEL ANILLO, SPAIN

Why: If you're hankering after an alternative to the traditional Camino, consider lacing your boots for Spain's Camino del Anillo; a new rugged mountain trail which ploughs across the country's stunning Sierra Norte range, 100km north of Madrid. A USP here is that the route is inspired by the landscapes of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Camino del Anillo even translates as "the ring route") where scenes like Horcajuelo de la Sierra are said to resemble the fictional valley of Rivendell. But you don't need to be a Tolkien fan to appreciate the trek, which is broken into about a week's worth of hiking with remote mountain villages providing refuge along the way. — *TB*

Level: Medium fitness required; just keep your pace like the way of life here... steady!

Details: elcaminodelanillo.com

20 GIANT'S GRAVE LOOP, CO OFFALY

Why: Starting from Cadamstown, this 11km loop takes walkers up a lovely old laneway (Paul's Lane... I wonder is there a story to it?), through armland and along the Slieve Bloom Way to the chunky remains of a megalithic tomb known as the Giant's Grave. The route (red arrows) was recently upgraded, as was Croghan Hill, the remains of an extinct volcano rising from the Bog of Allen. Though only 232m high, it gains super views of the surrounding midland counties, and there's some grisly history, too: it was also the final resting place of Old Croghan Man, the 2,000-year-old bog body found in the area where kings of the Uí Failge (Offaly) were inaugurated. — *PÓC*

Level: Moderate to strenuous; allow 2.5 hours for the 11km.
Details: slievebloom.ie; visitoffaly.ie

#StayHome

As we publish, Ireland remains under Level 5 lockdown and travel is confined to within 5km of home. Always follow official guidelines and travel restrictions. gov.ie