

Sheep's Head Lighthouse Loop

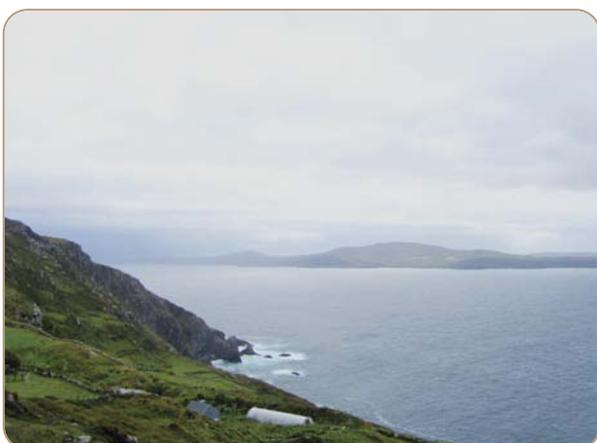
Sheep's Head, Co. Cork

Themes: Coast & Scenery

Suitable for reasonably fit walkers, this loop walk takes you on a circuit around the tip of the head, along sea-sprayed clifftops through rough and rocky terrain.

Sheep's Head is a narrow and rocky headland that extends 24km out into the Atlantic from the mainland of County Cork. Although the climate in this part of Ireland is influenced by the Gulf Stream which encourages a lush vegetation, this lushness all but disappears as you progress out Sheep's Head towards its tip, where trees and bushes are few and far between, and the rocky skeleton of the land breaks through its covering of bog.

The route starts from the carpark and continues along the road. Across Dunmanus Bay to the left undulating Three Castle Head can be seen 7 kilometres away stretching westwards to dip into the Atlantic, while the signal tower at Mizen Head is just visible in clear weather on the hill behind. The track the route follows reduces to a narrow path worn deep into the scant strips of turf remaining between ridges of bedrock: but for the telegraph posts that parallel the path the surroundings have a primitive and primordial quality.



Dunmanus Bay



Lighthouse and Bere Island

Soon the path crosses a little ridge and descends where an ancient stone wall wanders seemingly aimlessly, leading the eye towards the tiny reed-fringed Lough Akeen, nestling between fingers of rock. The coast on the far side of Bantry Bay to the north comes into view now. In the foreground is Bere Island with a white column marking its northern tip, and behind it the Beara peninsula steps down past Blackball Head to Dursey Island at its tip.

Scattered sheep glean nourishment here from the sparse grass and new shoots of heather and gorse, while the red-beaked choughs, rare birds elsewhere in these islands but common on Sheep's Head, perform aerobatics among the crags along the clifftops.

The rough path leads down to the tip of Sheep's Head to reach the tiny lighthouse. This is a very modern installation, erected as recently as the late 1960s to assist the safe passage of the giant oiltankers using the then newly-built Gulf Oil Terminal at Whiddy Island.

Now our route leaves the lighthouse behind and turning northeast continues along a narrow valley between ridges of rock scattered with lichen-decorated glacial erratics. They were deposited unknowable years ago by a great ice sheet that must have covered the sea offshore as well as the land. As evidence of the unpolluted purity of the air

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here on the south west tip of Ireland, some rocks display coatings of map lichens, different coloured patches that look like a page from a geography book.

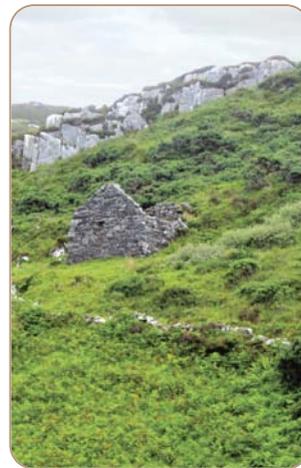
Our route comes quite close to dramatic cliffs at times now, dropping down to seething surf and turquoise swells. On the horizon beyond the eastern tip of Bere Island the rounded massif of Hungry Hill reaches up. Offshore gleaming white gannets with black wingtips can often be seen cruising the swells and diving headlong into the sea in search of fish. If you are particularly fortunate, you may catch sight of dolphins or even a whale, not uncommon in these waters.

Soon after sighting the low pyramid of Caher Mountain 7 kilometres ahead, the route turns right and away from the cliffs. The narrow interior of the head is crossed through a strange old landscape of little-used farmland with fern-topped stone walls dividing fields of bracken. Cattle graze the grass around the ruins of a stone cottage that overlooks the fields. Past this ruin the route reaches an old track, which takes it back to the starting point, where you can enjoy tea and delicious home-made scones and jam in the teahouse.

If you liked this walk, you will enjoy the Creha Quay loop, a more leisurely coastal walk at Eyries on the Beara peninsula to the north.

Useful Links

www.thesheepshead.com



Ruined Cottage



Map Lichen



Lough Akeen and Bantry Bay