



The view of Slieve Donard and Rocky Mountain from Annalong Valley, Co Down. Photograph: Robby Garbett

Smugglers' trail

The south Co Down uplands and the Mourne Mountains offer some of the finest, and most accessible, walks in Ireland, writes **John G O'Dwyer**

APPROACHING Newcastle from Newry, the initial appearance is of yet another mundane beach, beer and burger resort. Avert your gaze upwards, however, and you will be inexorably drawn to the great mountains towering above. Indeed, when Percy French was moved to write his famous lines about the Mountains of Mourne sweeping down to the sea, Newcastle was surely the spot he had in mind.

Certainly, Co Down's tourist Mecca enjoys a superb location and recently has been trying to reduce its dependence on the climatic vagaries of seaside tourism by looking instead towards the towering Mournes. Proposals for a Mourne Mountains National Park, which would turn Newcastle into the activity-tourism capital for Northern Ireland, are already well in train.

There is, however, no need to wait for such a development to enjoy the South Down uplands, as they already offer some of the finest, and most accessible, walks in Ireland. Tackling Slieve Donard, the highest peak in Ulster, may seem a daunting prospect, but it can actually be accomplished in about three hours by following a track that leads directly to the summit from Donard Park in Newcastle.

A much better outing, however, involves starting from the memorably named Bloody Bridge, five kilometres outside Newcastle.

Begin by following a track that labours uphill beside the Bloody Bridge River. This is the Brandy Pad route, an old smugglers' trail once used to transport illicit cargos of liquor via the Hare's Gap to the other side of the mountains. As you ascend this well-trodden path you will notice a disused quarry on the left. Mourne

Slieve Donard, Co Down

Starting point

Bloody Bridge, 5km south of Newcastle on the A2 to Annalong.

Time

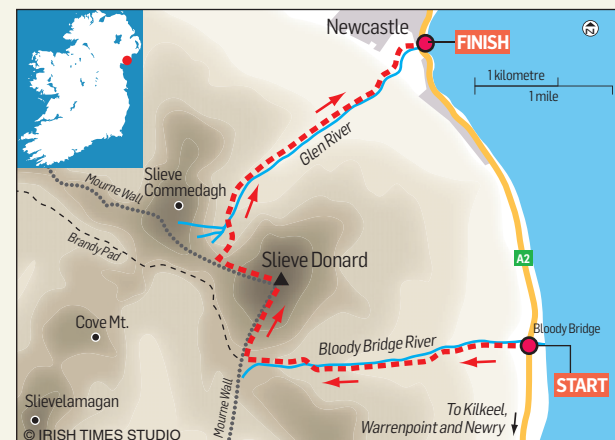
About three-and-a-half hours.

Suitability

Presents little in the way of navigational problems. It is entirely on tracks and, at higher altitude, it follows the handrail of the Mourne Wall.

Map

Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland: The Mournes, 1:25,000



Accommodation

Newcastle offers a full range of accommodation. Full details from Newcastle Tourist Office, 048-4372222.

granite has a worldwide reputation, and stone from here was transported in the 1930s to Belfast and used to construct the Stormont parliament building. More recently, local granite formed part of the base for the 9/11 memorial in New York City.

After about 90 minutes the unmistakable line of the Mourne Wall looms ahead. Ireland's answer to China's Great Wall is about two metres high and a metre wide and meanders for 35km across some of Co Down's most captivating summits. It was constructed to protect the water sources of the Silent Valley Reservoir. Today it serves mainly as a welcome handrail for walkers.

Now part company with the Brandy Pad and follow the wall northwards towards Donard. The going is of breath-robbing steepness, and you will be glad of an opportunity to stop and gaze across the Annalong Valley towards Binnian, Lamagan, Cove and Beg. These handsome hills are famous for offering high-quality

rock-climbing on sturdy granite. Divided Years is the name for the best-known route in this area. When it was first ascended by an English climber, John Dunne, in 1994, it was regarded as the hardest natural rock climb in the world.

Your own more modest ascent to Donard's 850m summit is complete when you come upon a sturdy tower on the Mourne Wall and an untidy summit cairn. On a clear day the astounding view stretches north to the Scottish Hills, south to the Wicklow Mountains and east to the Isle of Man.

Having imbibed fully of this deeply alluring panorama, descend steeply northwest for about 30 minutes on a path alongside the Mourne Wall. When the going levels out, leave the wall and follow a trail to your right, which drops into the jaws of the Glen River Valley. Eventually your route enters Donard Wood and a sometimes-confusing maze of tracks. Stick close by the Glen River, which leads you directly back to Donard Park.