



## Hillwalk Guides – Hikes in Clare

# Black Head Loop (Info Booklet)

### Shorter Route via Caher Valley

Dear fellow hiker!

We trust that you are looking forward to a wonderful walk in the varied coastal and inland landscape around Black Head. We hope you will enjoy the views of the Aran Islands and Galway Bay as well as exploring the flora, archaeology and geology of the Burren's folded limestone layers.

In this document, we have put together some information that will help you to maximise the enjoyment of your walk. Please consider the environment when printing this booklet, route notes and map (supplied separately).

- Important Information for your walk
- What to Wear & What to Bring
- The Burren
- The Burren Way
- Local Attractions
- Where to Eat
- Safety Information
- Emergency Procedure
- Leave No Trace & Countryside Code
- More from Hillwalk Tours

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR YOUR WALK

**PARKING:** Your walk begins from the car park at Fanore Beach (GPS: 53.1176, -9.2860) on the R477 coast road between Ballyvaughan and Doolin. We advise that you do not leave anything of value in your car.

**WEATHER:** Check the weather forecast before hillwalking and do not do so during any known weather event. Conditions locally can vary, even in the absence of weather warnings, so always consider your own stamina, confidence and comfort level when deciding if you will go ahead with any walk. Weather can change unexpectedly, especially on higher ground, so always be prepared for this. See what to wear, what to bring and safety information sections for more details.

**BRINGING YOUR DOG:** This hike crosses land that is used for cattle and sheep grazing. For this reason, we recommend that you do not bring your dog on this hike.

**COMMENTS, SUGGESTIONS & FEEDBACK:** Hillwalk Tours take great care in the preparation of all our material. However, we rely on comments and suggestions from walkers to continue to provide the best experience possible. We consider all feedback, make improvements where possible and reply individually to every walker. Send your thoughts to [feedback@hillwalktours.com](mailto:feedback@hillwalktours.com) – thanks!

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### What to Wear

**BASE LAYER** - This is what you wear against your skin and the best options are breathable and wicking fabrics instead of cotton t-shirts. They will move moisture away from the skin so that you feel more comfortable when you are walking.

**FLEECE** – Will keep you warm in the cooler months and on top of the hills, and it will allow you to shed layers when you are working hard in the summer.

**LIGHT AND COMFORTABLE TROUSERS** - Make sure you choose trousers that are stretchy or allow enough space to move your legs freely and choose fabrics that repel water or dry quickly. Jeans / Denims are not suitable for hill walking.

**WATERPROOF JACKET AND OVER-TROUSERS** - You never know when you will need protection from wind and rain so make sure you pack a breathable, waterproof jacket and over-trousers.

**WICKING SOCKS** - Choose non-cotton socks that fit well and will move moisture away from your feet to stop them feeling sweaty. Some people wear two pairs: a sock liner against the skin and wool or wool-blend socks over that. This will help to reduce the likelihood of blisters.

*Our tip: Apply a little Vaseline or a similar anti-blister ointment and then put on your socks, this reduces rubbing and helps to prevent blisters.*

**FOOTWEAR** – We recommend you bring comfortable, waterproof, lightweight shoes or boots, that provide good ankle support and offer good grip on rock, grass and mud. Remember that the trails can become quite wet and muddy, after periods of rain.

**GAITERS** – By covering your upper boot and lower leg these help to keep your feet and trousers dry in wet grass and boggy terrain.

**WARM HAT & GLOVES** – Essential, even in summer, at higher altitudes and on exposed places.

**CHANGE OF CLOTHES:** We advise bringing a change of clothes (which can be left in your car, if preferred) in case you get wet during your hike, ensuring a more comfortable journey home.

### What to Bring

**MOBILE PHONE** – The most important safety item on the trails is a fully charged mobile phone as it will allow you to call for help in an emergency. If you are planning on using our GPS tracks as a navigational aid or referring to this booklet on your phone during your hike you may need to pack a power-bank to supplement your phone battery.

**BACKPACK / RUCKSACK** (with Waterproof Cover or Liner) - To store all your essentials including extra layers of clothing, your waterproofs, first aid kit, camera and your lunch, snacks and drink

**WATER** - Don't forget how important it is to stay hydrated and bring at least 1 - 2 litres of water per person, and more depending on the weather!

**PICNIC LUNCH:** Even on shorter walks it is essential to bring some food with you. Traveling to the start point, weather/trail conditions on the day as well as wanting to capture that perfect photo can all add time to your walk and make breakfast seem like a distant memory! Even for the most experienced hiker, being adequately fuelled throughout a walk will add to your overall enjoyment.

*Our tip: Choose a sheltered spot to enjoy your picnic (and optional flask of tea or coffee!). Even on a warm day, we recommend putting on an extra layer while taking your break as the body can cool quickly once at rest.*

**FIRST AID KIT** – It is a good idea to have a small, basic first aid kit to deal with little injuries such as sprains, scrapes, cuts and blisters. Good things to bring are plasters, wound dressings, blister plasters, sterile cleansing

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wipes, pain killers, tweezers (for splinters & ticks), bandages, zinc oxide tape (for blisters or sprains). Many hikers also bring a foil rescue blanket or small bivvy bag, which keeps you dry and warm (or cool) in case of an accident.

**WHISTLE & TORCH** – In the very unlikely event you need to signal for help (whistle/torch) or if your walk takes longer than expected (torch).

**CASH** – Remember that ATM & card services may be limited in more rural locations.

### Additional Suggestions

**SUN CREAM, SUNGLASSES AND SUNHAT** – Let's hope you'll need those ☺

**MIDGE/TICK/INSECT REPELLENT** – A good idea, especially if you are prone to get bitten

**CAMERA** – Vital for capturing photos of the stunning scenery

**WALKING POLES** – Assist forward movement and balance, reduce impact on your knees, and help with balance in difficult terrain. A pair is best, but many hikers also just use one.

**SIT MAT** – A small, foldable mat that provides comfort when sitting on the ground during breaks.

**COMPASS** – A compass (and the ability to use it), although useful, is not an absolute requirement.

### The Burren

***“A country where there is not water enough to drown a man, wood enough to hang one, nor earth enough to bury them.”*** Edmund Ludlow, Member of British Parliament, 1651-52.

The Burren forms the northern part of County Clare, overlooking Galway Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The word “Burren” comes from an Irish word “Boíreann” meaning a rocky place. This is an appropriate name when you consider the lack of soil cover and the 130 square kilometres of spectacular terraced carboniferous limestone hills and valleys that characterise the area.

Human civilisation came to the Burren shortly after the end of the Ice Age, 10,000 years ago. Stories of the ancient peoples are still passed on by word of mouth, through imaginative tales that take the form of the folklore for which Ireland is famous as well as through serious scholarship.

There is evidence of past cultures and learning everywhere in the Burren. Indeed, in addition to its unique geological attributes, the Burren is also renowned for its collection of archaeological sites and artefacts – a collection which led famous cartographer Tim Robinson to describe the region as one *'vast memorial to bygone cultures'*.

The magnificent portal tomb at Poulnabrone in the rocky heart of the Burren is one of the most easily recognised monuments in Ireland but is only one very small piece of an extraordinary wealth of heritage to be found in the Burren. However, this one monument alone reveals much about the people who live here. Dating back around 5,800 years, studies have shown that this tomb contained the remains of up to 22 people, interred over six centuries. Evidence recovered from this site indicated that these people were farmers of cattle, sheep and goat, and that cereal was also grown.

Farming has been important to the area for over 6,000 years and it is hard to believe today that the apparently barren Burren could once have supported a large, thriving and settled farming community. But when the first farmers arrived in the Burren the landscape was covered with a shallow but fertile soil which supported extensive woodlands of hazel and pine.

This woodland was much easier to clear than the dense, deep-rooted elm and oak forests of the lowland regions. Year-round natural fertilising with manure further improved the existing soil and even today there are still places in the Burren with deep, fertile soil that are known as *gáirdíní* (*little gardens*).

That said, in the years leading up to the Great Irish Famine (1845-52), far too much pressure was being put on the land (up to 400 people living off one square mile of land) with the result that it had the appearance of a

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barren, desolate wasteland. Following the famine, the pressure on this environment diminished notably through an enlargement in farm holdings, a decline in sheep numbers and a reduction in population.

As well as farming, the Burren (and neighbouring Aran Islands) was home to some of the earliest places of education in Europe. Missionaries from far and wide would come to train at the monastic school at Kilmacduagh during the 7th century while the law school at Cahermacnaughten and the bardic (poets, artists, etc.) school at Finavarra thrived between the 6th and 16th centuries.

In addition, the Burren has a long history of traditional Irish music. It is particularly known for the "West Clare Style" of concertina playing and the music festival in Doolin and the region is home to countless artists and writers who are part of a continuing revival of the west of Ireland.

### The Burren Way

One of the best ways to experience the Burren is by walking the Burren Way. This 123km long trail starts at Lahinch, follows the coast along the Cliffs of Moher past Doolin and on to Fanore before turning inland and making its way through the heart of the Burren to Corofin.

This walk takes in the best of what the Burren area has to offer. From the coast at Doolin to the remains left by the Neolithic inhabitants of the Burren to the rich heritage of early Christian churches and sites. Terrain consists mainly of quiet tarmac roads, old green roads, ancient cattle droving roads, paths and forestry tracks.

### Local Attractions

#### **Ailwee Cave & Birds of Prey Centre, Ballyvaughan – Deep Underground & High into the Sky**

The Burren region is full of thousands of ancient caves but, of these, Ailwee is considerably older than most with calcite samples taken from the cave adjudged to be more than 350,000 years old.

The cave system itself has more than 1km of passages leading into the heart of the mountain above. Once home to a fast-flowing underground river, this flow of water has now largely left the cave leaving behind interesting geological features such as stalactites, stalagmites and a small waterfall.

One other interesting aspect of the caves is the fact that it was once home to a group of brown bears. These animals have been extinct in Ireland since the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (due to over-hunting) but caves such as Ailwee would be typical of the type of shelter they would have sought out.

The Birds of Prey Centre beside the cave has been educating and entertaining visitors with dynamic flying displays set against the dramatic Burren Landscape since 2008. The mission of the Centre is to aid the conservation of Birds of Prey through visitor awareness and education.

For more details, opening times and prices visit [www.aillweecave.ie](http://www.aillweecave.ie) or call +353 (0)65 7077036

#### **Caherconnell Stone Fort & Poul nabrone Dolmen – The Best of Irish Archaeology & Sheepdog Demonstrations**

Caherconnell, near Carran and Ballyvaughan in County Clare, is one of the best-preserved stone forts in the Burren. This impressive structure, which measures 45 metres in diameter and is protected by a 3-metre-high wall, was built 1500 years ago. The visitor centre provides an informative 20-minute audio-visual presentation on the fort, its inhabitants, its rich history and archaeology.

Learn about the lives the former inhabitants led and the stories they told in the shadow of the great stone fort. Ongoing excavations by the archaeology field school during the months of June, July, and August each year have yielded fascinating results, enhancing Caherconnell's reputation as a prominent archaeological site.

A visit to Caherconnell Stone Fort from May to September may also coincide with enthralling sheep dog demonstrations. As well as giving you a chance to get more acquainted with the history of the area, the Mountain Haven Café provides a welcome respite from the walking and is a great place to savour delicious farm fresh food, home baking and freshly ground coffee.

For more details, opening times and prices visit [www.burrenforts.ie](http://www.burrenforts.ie) or call +353 (0)65 7089999

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### **Burren Perfumery, Carran – Something Smells Good!**

A family run business deep in the heart of the Burren, the Perfumery produces a range of soaps, balms, creams and perfumes using only natural and organic ingredients. Ingredients are sourced worldwide but local flora is also used and some of them, such as meadowsweet and marjoram, are harvested from the surrounding area each summer.

One of the main attractions of the centre is the possibility to mingle with the staff and learn about and witness the manufacturing process from start to finish. Visit the *Soap Room* to find out why it takes six weeks to handcraft one 100g bar of soap or drop into the *Blending Room* to learn how to make the perfect hand cream or body lotion.

The on-site tea rooms also come highly recommended and are a beautiful spot in which to relax and enjoy the freshly baked breads, cakes and scones, the locally produced cheeses and herbal teas from the on-site garden.

Opening hours at the Burren Perfumery are from 10am to 5pm year-round, with longer opening hours in the summer. See website for more details. All products are for sale, make wonderful gifts and can be shipped worldwide directly from the Perfumery.

For more details, opening times and prices visit [www.burrenperfumery.com](http://www.burrenperfumery.com) or call +353 (0)65 7089102

### **Cliffs of Moher, near Doolin – “The Eighth Wonder of the World”**

Standing a stomach churning 214m above the Atlantic Ocean at their highest point, it is no wonder that the famous Cliffs of Moher are consistently ranked as one of Ireland’s premier tourist destinations and were put forward as Ireland’s finalist in the global campaign to nominate an 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder of the World.

Look south and on a good day you will see the shape of Mount Brandon on the Dingle Peninsula, more than 110km (70 miles) away. Looking west, across the Atlantic Ocean, you will see the three islands that make up the Aran Islands while further to the north the mountain ranges of Connemara are clearly visible.

In addition to the compelling views, the Cliffs are home to one of the major colonies of seabirds in Ireland with 40,000 breeding pairs making their homes there. Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes are just some of the birds to look out for. Although, to be honest, you will probably hear their raucous calls before you see them!

To learn more about the Cliffs, we recommend that you make time to explore the Cliffs of Moher Information Centre, which you will pass on your walk (see route notes). The centre is open throughout the year from 9am until the early evening (at least 6pm) and has a wide range of facilities (ATM, gift shop, café, public toilets, first aid, etc.) as well as an interesting exhibition area.

For more details, opening times and prices visit [www.cliffsofmoher.ie](http://www.cliffsofmoher.ie) or call + 353 (0)65 7086141

### **The Doolin Cave & Visitor Centre – Home to the longest free-hanging stalactite in Europe**

This limestone cave hosts the truly impressive Poll an Eidhneáin, the Great Stalactite. The stalactite is said to weigh over 10 tonnes and is reported to be 7.3m in length, hanging freely from the ceiling of the cave. This makes it the longest known free-hanging stalactite in Europe! Usually stalactites grow at roughly 10cm per 1,000 years - so the Great Stalactite likely took over 70,000 years to form.

Apart from the Great Stalactite, the Doolin Cave & Visitor Centre also features a self-guided outdoor nature trail, a pottery shop and a café that serves soups, tasty sandwiches and home-baked cakes. The perfect place for a coffee break for hungry walkers! The outdoor nature trail is free to all cave visitors and you can also enjoy the delightful fairy village during your visit.

The Doolin Cave & Visitor Centre is generally open between 10am and 6pm. Tours are approximately 45 minutes in length and the last tour leaves at 5pm. You will be happy to hear that they also offer a 20% discount to walkers, or if you pre-book your ticket online!

For more details, opening times and prices visit [www.doolincave.ie](http://www.doolincave.ie) or call +353 (0)65 7075761

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### Where to Eat

Below is a selection of evening meal suggestions near your walk, put together based on the recommendations of previous walkers and on the advice of members of the local community. For lighter bites, there are also a selection of lovely cafes in Doolin, Lisdoonvarna, Ballyvaughan and Kinvarra, in particular during the summer.

#### FANORE

**O'Donohues Pub, Fanore:** You can enjoy an excellent pint or a great home-made meal in the only pub in Fanore. During the summer, you might also happen to find an Irish music session in full swing here. Tel. +353 (0)65 7076119 **Note: O'Donohues only serve food from 1 May till 1 October**

#### BALLYVAUGHAN

**L'Arco Italian Restaurant, Main Street, Ballyvaughan:** Chefs Matteo and Gianmaria Gala prepare the most delicious authentic Italian dishes with locally sourced ingredients. You know you can't go wrong if the locals drive for miles to eat here. Tel. +353 (0)65 7083900

**Monks Seafood Restaurant and Pub, Coast Road, Ballyvaughan:** Situated on the coast road by the old pier in Ballyvaughan, this bar and restaurant is renowned for its tasty seafood chowder. A lovely place for an 'al fresco' dinner by the sea on a warm summer evening. Tel. +353 (0)65 7077059

**The Wildflower Restaurant, The Wild Atlantic Lodge, Main Street, Ballyvaughan:** The chefs at the Wildflower Restaurant believe that food should be sophisticated yet uncomplicated. They are committed to offering you the finest and freshest Irish produce in an elegant atmosphere, with high quality service. Tel. +353 (0)65 7077003

You will also find food in **Doolin** or **Lisdoonvarna** as well as along the N67 between Ballyvaughan and Galway City, at **Linnane's Lobster Bar**, in New Quay, and in the **pubs and restaurants in Kinvarra**.

### Safety Information

Even on the best of days there is the possibility that something can go wrong. All it takes is an accidental slip and a badly sprained ankle. In order to know what to do in those circumstances and how to prevent them, if possible, we have provided the following information.

#### General Advice

- We recommend that, if possible, you **stay on the trail** during your hike.
- Take particular **care on the descent** and/or when you are tired, as this is when most accidents occur.
- Be careful when walking near cliffs and stay clear of the edge.
- Hills and mountains **create their own weather systems**. Allow for it to get 1° cooler for every 100m climbed, and for 2 – 3 times stronger wind conditions than in the valleys.
- Remember, the general rule for **walking on roads** in Ireland is to walk on the right-hand side (facing oncoming traffic). However, if the road is turning to the right, cross over to the left-hand side for better visibility of oncoming traffic.
- Note that the provided walking times do *not* account for breaks taken for lunch/rest/photos/etc. Always ensure that you still have plenty of time to reach the end of your hike before darkness falls.

#### Impassable & Hazardous Trail

(e.g. due to snow, fog, floodwaters, etc.)

- **Do not take any risks!** If you are not confident at navigating, stick to the trail, or, if necessary, make your way safely to the nearest road where you will come across locals who will help you.



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- Rivers and streams may be flooded after heavy rain, particularly in hills and mountains. **Do not take risks by trying to cross flooded rivers** – seek an alternative route on your map *only* if you are confident at navigating. If not, do not take any risks, but make your way back along the trail to the nearest road.
- Hills and mountains are often covered by a low cloud base. If you notice fog descending:
  - Try to take note of as many large physical features around you while you still have visibility, and to locate yourself on your map.
  - If you are not knowledgeable in using a compass and map to navigate safely off the mountain, stay where you are for 10-15 minutes, as this is sometimes enough time for the fog to clear.
  - If the fog does not clear, and you are confident that you are able to navigate back the way you came, do so, until you reach clear ground again.
  - If you are not confident enough to navigate forwards or backwards, and the weather does not clear, it might become necessary to contact Emergency Services to take you off the trail, particularly on mountains.

## Encountering Animals

**DOGS** may occasionally be encountered while on the trail. If you are fearful, or the dog is threatening, the general rule is to try to get out of the situation calmly and quickly without making the dog any more upset.

- Try to stay calm and don't yell at the dog or scream. Don't throw anything at the dog or pick up a stick as a weapon. Many dogs are simply afraid of you and this will only make their fear worse.
- Never run from a dog as it will outrun you easily. Running triggers a dog's instinct to chase you. Avoid sudden movement.
- Speak to any harassing dog in a firm, calm voice. Don't smile or speak in a pleading voice. When using vocal commands, deepen your voice as much as possible.

**CATTLE** are a common feature on some of our walks where the hiking trails cross private land. Cattle may look intimidating but are generally quite timid. Here are some tips for dealing with cattle on your hike:

- If possible, walk around cattle not through the middle of them and don't walk between cows and their calves.
- Calves and young bullocks are very curious and may even run towards you. Continue walking normally. Don't run away. If you do this, the cattle will simply follow you. If they get too close for comfort, don't worry. Simply stand your ground, jump up and shout and they will run away again.

**MIDGES** can become a real nuisance as they often appear in great numbers and their bite can leave an itchy rash. Midges don't like direct sun and prefer calm, humid weather. They are most active in the early morning and late evening. Midges only attack bare skin and can't bite through cloth. In general, you will not be pestered by midges while walking. Nevertheless, it can be a good idea to bring an insect and tick repellent on your walk.

**TICKS** are tiny (1mm), spider-like blood sucking creatures which feed on many different types of animals, including humans. They are frequently found in moorland and other grassy areas, usually close to the ground, especially in moist, shaded places. Once attached ticks feed for several days and then simply drop off. Through their bite ticks can, **very rarely**, transmit a bacterial infection called Lyme disease or Borreliosis. *For information on prevention of tick bites and what to do if bitten, see [www.ticktalkireland.org](http://www.ticktalkireland.org).*

### EMERGENCY PROCEDURE

- **In case of an emergency, try to stay calm. Try to work out your exact location on the map and decide if you can help yourself out of the situation.**
- **In a genuine emergency call 112 or 999 free of charge.** The operator may ask you which service you require. For example, ambulance (*if you are near a road*), mountain rescue (*for inaccessible places*), coast guard (*near the sea*), etc.
  - You can call emergency services using any mobile/cell phone - even if does not have call credit or is locked. Simply type 112 instead of the unlock code.
  - If you do not have a phone signal it may still be possible to contact emergency services. Emergency calls can be made on *any* available mobile phone network. If no networks have signal, you will be told that there is no reception and you cannot make emergency calls. You will have to move to another location to place the call, if possible.
  - Please keep in mind that if your phone does not have network coverage on your own network **others will not be able to call you back. So, do not hang up unless directed to do so!**
- You can also signal for help using your whistle or torch. The International distress signal is six blasts on your whistle or six flashes with your torch. If your whistles are heard, you should hear three whistles in reply. Keep repeating the whistle blasts so that your location can be determined.
- Try to keep everyone safe, warm and comfortable while waiting for help, particularly **if you have an injured person**. Move to a sheltered area if possible. Ensure everyone puts on any spare layers of clothing that they are carrying. Insulate everyone from the ground by placing backpacks underneath them (if it is safe to move them). You may loosen the laces on your boots, but *do not* remove them, even in the case of swelling. Try to keep everyone well hydrated, but only drink bottled water.
- If there is no signal to phone emergency services, and you are not capable of moving to an area where there is signal, do not panic. Someone will always know to look for you, or someone will find you e.g. other walkers using the trail.



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### The Countryside Code

While out walking in the countryside, remember you are walking in areas where people live and work. And we also share the countryside with much wildlife.

The following are a number of important recommendations to abide by when out walking:

- **Be safe - plan ahead and follow signs**
- **Leave gates and property as you find them**
- **Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home**
- **Where you are permitted to bring them, keep dogs on a lead**
- **Consider other people**

### Leave No Trace

**Hillwalk Tours** is a proud supporter of **Leave No Trace** – an Outdoor Ethics Programme designed to promote and inspire responsible outdoor recreation through education, research, and partnerships. An ethic can be defined as knowing what the right thing to do is, and doing it, even if there is no one about to see you do it. Leave No Trace depends more on attitude and awareness than on rules and regulations.

**Practising a Leave No Trace ethic is very simple: Make it hard for others to see or hear you and LEAVE NO TRACE of your visit.** See <https://www.leavenotraceireland.org> for more information.

**Toilets:** If you need to answer 'the call of nature' and there are no facilities nearby, please take care to find a discreet spot away from the trail and any water sources. Ensure that you **Leave No Trace** of your visit, i.e. bury your waste and 'pack out' your toilet paper by bringing it with you inside a double zip-lock bag or similar. You can find more info on this at [www.trailspace.com/articles/backcountry-waste-disposal.html](http://www.trailspace.com/articles/backcountry-waste-disposal.html)

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### More from Hillwalk Tours

#### Did you enjoy your self-guided walk? Consider one of our walking holidays!

Hillwalk Tours was founded by Kilkenny man, James Byrne, and is based in Galway. We have been organising self-guided hillwalking tours in the Burren and other parts of Ireland, the UK and Spain for over 10 years, providing thousands of happy hiking experiences to our many loyal walkers. This walk is a perfect introduction to our other offerings that include overnight accommodation, luggage and walker transfers if required. We take care of everything so all you need to do is put one foot in front of the other along some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world!

We have over 200 walks across 20+ different trails with options to suit everyone from the part-time hiker to those with more experience.

Explore our catalogs to learn more about our exciting walking holidays. Discover the diverse range of experiences that await you on each adventure by [clicking here](#).

See our website [www.hillwalktours.com](http://www.hillwalktours.com) for more or contact us at [info@hillwalktours.com](mailto:info@hillwalktours.com) and one of our team will personally advise you.



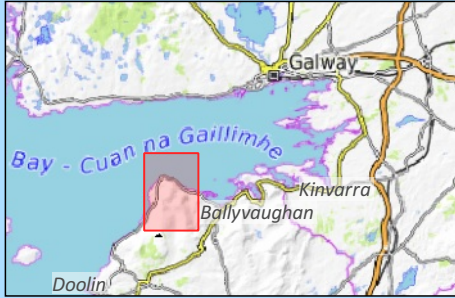
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Hillwalk Guides *Hikes in Clare*

# Black Head Loop

*Shorter Route via Caher Valley*

Distance: 19.5km



Galway Bay

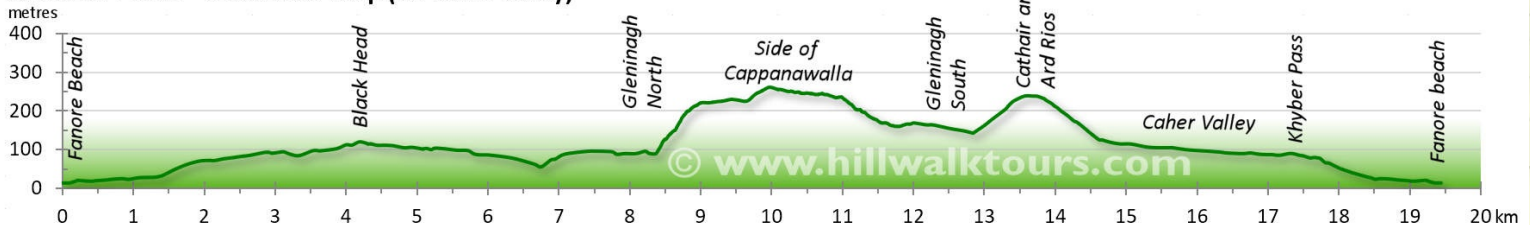


Scale: 1:35,000



**Start & Finish**  
Fanore Beach Car Park,  
on the R477 coast road  
between Ballyvaughan and Doolin  
GPS: 53.1176, -9.2860

Elevation Profile - Black Head Loop (via Caher Valley)



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## Hillwalk Guides – Hikes in Clare

# Black Head Loop (Route Notes)

### Shorter Route via Caher Valley

**Please Note:**

- a. This is a shorter version of the 26km long Black Head Loop which omits the section across the shoulder of Slieve Elva and instead returns via the Caher Valley.
- b. Parts of the trail can become a little overgrown at certain times of the year and some sections can feel quite exposed in bad weather. For this reason, we recommend that you bring your waterproof pants (and gaiters, if you have them) when walking this section.
- c. Please be aware that changes to the route may occur of which we are unaware.
- d. The approximate **'Walking Time'** is based on a moderate walking speed of 4km per hour and does not include any breaks.
- e. The **'Total Ascent'** is the cumulative elevation gain or climb over the entire distance of the walk.

### YOUR WALK AT A GLANCE

**Distance:** 19.5km

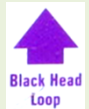
**Walking Time:** 5-7 hours

**Total Ascent:** (↑) 500m

**Terrain:** A mix of Burren hill and coast, following green laneways, tracks, and rugged mountain paths (can become overgrown at times), some sections on road; a few medium climbs; great views of Galway Bay and the Aran Islands.

**Food & Drink:** Fanore, Ballyvaughan

**Way Marking:** The way marking for most of this walk is a purple arrow with the words 'Black Head Loop' written underneath. If you are in doubt about the directions follow these markers. However, please note this shorter version leaves the 26km long official 'Black Head Loop' after 14.5km, at the Caher River. This is clearly indicated in the route notes below.



**Access & Parking:** The walk starts from the car park at Fanore Beach (GPS: 53.1176, -9.2860) on the R477 coast road between Ballyvaughan and Doolin. Please make sure that you leave no valuables in the car.

### From the car park at Fanore Beach (GPS Coordinates: 53.1176, -9.2860):

- Exit from the car park and, following the purple arrow, turn left onto the R477 road. (The other coloured arrows are for further walks that start and finish at the car park.)
  - Follow the road on the right-hand side and cross the Caher River at Fanore Bridge, after 700m.
  - Continue straight on in the direction of Ballyvaughan for 340m, and then take a sandy track that veers off the road to the right.
  - Ignore a track on the right, after 40m, and keep walking uphill. After 160m, the track bears to the right; follow it until you reach the last house, after a further 180m.
  - Cross a stile just beyond the house and continue straight along the narrow track between the stone wall and a boulder embankment.
- ① You are now on the 'Green Road', an old cattle drover's road, from Fanore to Ballyvaughan. Cattle, horses, sheep and donkeys graze here all year round, but keep your eyes open for the Alpacas (Llamas) that are being bred in the fields below you, towards the coast.



## HILLWALK TOURS

Escape to Nature!

- For the next 1km, you will come to a series of gates with stiles. Cross them and continue straight on until the track bears right around the hill.
- ① *The green fields below have been replaced by limestone pavements dotted with erratics – large boulders left behind by the glaciers after the last ice age.*
- After a further 900m, you come to a gate that you will need to climb over. A few metres beyond the gate the track climbs steeply uphill for 30m, after which it levels out again.
- Continue for 300m to the point where the track bears right around a headland. You are now at Black Head - the most north-westerly point of County Clare.
- ① *The beautiful 'Song for Ireland' by Phil and June Coldough describes this walk around Black Head:*

Walking all the day, near tall towers where falcons build their nests.  
Silver-winged they fly, they know the call of freedom in their breasts.  
Saw **Black Head** against the sky, like twisted rocks, that run to the sea.  
Living on your western shore, saw summer sunsets, asked for more.  
I stood by your Atlantic sea, and I sang a song for Ireland.
- Keep following the track as it narrows and widens, crossing occasional wet areas and low walls, for 2km until you come to another wall.
- Cross over the stile and just beyond it, your trail turns sharply right and climbs uphill. (Do not follow the track that leads straight on!)
- After climbing straight uphill for 50m, cross a low wall, then turn left and follow the narrow path running parallel with an old stone wall.
- Continue for 650m until you come to a waterfall. Cross the stream on a metal bridge, continue on the rocky ledge for 30m and drop back down to the path next to the wall.
- Follow the path for 1.5km until you come to another wall. Cross the stile and, ignoring the gate on the left just beyond it, continue on the trail as it bears to the right and climbs up the hill.
- ① *You are now on the old 'Mass Path' leading up from the valley below. During the centuries that Catholic mass was declared illegal in Ireland mass was often secretly held in such remote areas. Shortly before the stile, you may also have some great views of the 16th century Gleninagh Castle (inhabited till 1890), in the fields below and you might also be able to spot the hidden ruins of Gleninagh church.*
- Follow the 'Mass Path' up the hill for 750m until you come to a wall crossing the lower land between Gleninagh Mountain on your right and the slopes of Cappanawalla on your left.
- Cross the stile and turn left immediately after. Follow the path with the wall on your left for 200m, until you come to another wall. Cross over the stile and just beyond the wall, follow the path as it veers to the right and leads up the slope.
- After a short climb, follow the now faint path as it bears slightly left continuing in the same direction as before, keeping the slope and the wall below on your left side. You are now on a grassy plateau and the trail continues at the same elevation for almost 400m.
- Then, the path turns right and climbs gently up the side of Capanawalla for 250m. Soon after the trail levels out, you come to a gate. Cross over the stile and continue on the gravel track that leads around the west side of the hill.
- Keeping the high stone wall on your right and the rocky side of the hill on your left, follow this track for 800m until you reach a gate. Soon after crossing over the stile the track starts descending towards the green Feenagh valley.
- ① *After 400m, you pass the enclosed area of a natural spring on your right. These places are important for the animals grazing here, as there are few natural lakes and streams in the Burren, due to the porous nature of the limestone.*
- Continue past the spring for another 250m until you reach a gate near some cattle pens at the valley floor. Cross over the stile 5m to the left of the gate and continue onto the track leading away to the left. Follow this track along the valley floor crossing a number of gates and stiles on your way.

## HILLWALK TOURS

Escape to Nature!

- After a little over 1 km, at the first house on your left, you come to a junction. Here, the track changes into a minor road. Do not follow that road straight on! Instead, turn right and take on the track that leads up the hill, just opposite the house.
- ① *After almost 1 km, you pass an ancient ringfort called Cathair an Ard Rios, which might translate as 'the fort of the high door'. Ringforts, or cahers, are ancient, circular fortified settlements that come in many sizes and may be made of stone or earth. They were constructed from the Iron Age up until the Early Middle Ages (800 B.C. - 1000 A.D.) - though some have still been in use in the 18th century. It is estimated that there may have been in excess of 50,000 of these ringforts throughout Ireland.*

*Inside Cathair an Ard Rios, you can see the remains of two buildings side by side. Local lore tells us that these used to be a chapel and a shebeen (an illegal drinking place). You might say, that all your spiritual needs were looked after at this location.*
- Just after the ringfort, the track begins to descend and after 800m, you come to a junction with a minor road, opposite a house.
- Turn right here and after 30m, continue straight on and ignore the purple markers for the official 'Black Head Loop', which we are leaving here. Stay on this minor road and ignore all tracks leading off it.
- ① *After 1.3km, you are passing the remains of the village of Caherbannagh, on the slopes on your right. The village was wiped out during the Great Famine in the 19th century and only the foundations and hearths are left as mute testimonials to this "deserted village".*
- Cross the bridge over the Caher River, after another 500m and pass a hidden cottage just beyond the bridge, on your left. After a further 1 km, the valley narrows to a small canyon locally known as the Khyber Pass.
- ① *The Khyber Pass has probably been named so by a local man who had seen service in India with the British Army. The Caher River is unique in the Burren in that it flows entirely above ground. Most streams have cut their way down through the limestone and run underground where they create extensive cave systems. On the opposite bank of the river, you can see a glacial moraine and large boulders inside it, left behind by glaciers after the Ice Age.*
- Keep walking for 500m at which point the valley widens again. After another 400m, you come to a church on your left and soon after that you reach the R477 road next to Fanore Bridge on your right.
- Turn left onto the R477 and, taking care of the traffic, follow the road for 700m back to the car park at Fanore Beach.

### After Your hike

Depending on the time of the year you may be able to get refreshments and food in **Fanore** (Irish: Fán Óir, meaning "the golden slope"). It is a small village stretching along the north-west coast of County Clare for more than 5km.

Alternatively, you will find some food in nearby **Ballyvaughan** (Baile Uí Bheacháin), a charming coastal village on the shores of Galway Bay. It sits between the hard land of the limestone hills and a quiet leafy corner of Galway Bay.

**Fanore** is renowned for its extensive sandy beach which is very popular with surfers. (Following your hike, you might want to spend some time there cool your feet.) Fanore has appeared many times on Irish television and Father Ted in particular, often featured scenes filmed in Fanore and its surroundings.

The famous poet and philosopher John O'Donoghue, author of the book *Anam Cara*, grew up near Fanore. After his untimely death in 2008, he was buried in Creggagh cemetery (located 2.5km south of the beach along the R477). Below is an excerpt from his beautiful poem 'For the Traveller'.

May you travel safely, arrive refreshed,  
And live your time away to its fullest;  
Return home more enriched, and free  
To balance the gift of days which call you.

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