The Wild Atlantic Way is one of the longest road trips in one country, winding through 2,500 kilometres of rugged coastal scenery scattered across seven counties. It takes you to ancient forts, monasteries, remote islands and villages off the map—just follow the 4,000 road signs!
Adrenaline junkies who don’t suffer from vertigo will enjoy the exhilarating day hike on the coastal path that runs along the very edge of the spectacular Cliffs of Moher. Stepping gingerly onto a grassy granite bluff that falls 200 metres into the sea far below, I spotted a brave band of surfers, boards under arm, leaping down a near-vertical descent to reach the wild waves crashing into a lonely rocky bay.

“Surfers come from all over the world to ride the big wave,” said Pat Sweeney, our local guide. On a really stormy day, the waves top 20m. The lads come from California and Hawaii to ride Aileen’s wave, named after the Aill Na Searrach, the “cliff of foals.” “If you come ashore on the wrong beach, there’s only one way out—by rescue helicopter!” These riders on the storm are like foals surging in the surf.

The funny thing is, this walk on the wild side runs on the outside—not the inside—of the ragged old safety fence along the top of the cliffs. The springy tufts of turf and occasional gaps and sinkholes in the path are challenges, and a good enough reason to take a guide who knows the terrain like an old billy goat, and leads from the front.

On the narrow defile down to his farm in Doolin, Pat remarked: “They said I was crazy when I started the walk along the Cliffs of Moher, and they were right. Growing up with the cliffs as my backyard was every child’s dream—and a mother’s nightmare! I’m a stubborn, fifth-generation Irish farmer. It took me four years to cut the path, and negotiate the right of way with the 39 other farmers whose land we cross.”

In season, Pat leads a walk up the cliffs every morning, and down again to milk the cows by teatime. The trail starts at O’Brien’s Tower, a Victorian landmark built in 1835 by the ruling chieftains of County Clare, a great vantage point. (They say the O’Briens built everything in County Clare except the cliffs.) And in true Irish style, it ends at Gus O’Connor’s Pub in Doolin—or, if you’re fortunate enough to stay there, at Doonagore Farmhouse, a traditional Irish B&B run by Pat and his wife. The Cliffs of Moher (meaning “ruined fort”) stretch eight kilometres all the way to Hag’s Head.

Talk about postcards from the edge. Along the precipitous path, we spotted the most amazing seabirds nesting on impossible ledges on the sheer cliff face. Pat pointed out a colony of puffins (“the clowns of the sea”) with their painted Mikado-style eyeliner, bright-orange beaks and flippers. We saw colonies of razorbills, gannets and guillemots nesting on 10-storey sea stacks, kittiwakes and choughs (a rare species of Celtic crow) as well as lovely wildflowers like sea pinks, primroses and cat’s ears. And we met Neddy and Little Jack, Pat’s donkeys who help him mow the lawn on the edge of the cliffs. “Farmers in Ireland believe donkeys bring you good luck,” he added superstitiously.

I was starting to learn how the Wild Atlantic Way earned its name. Hang on for the ride of your life if you follow all the new signposts painted with three blue waves, the icon of the touring route, all along the west and south coast of Ireland. Throw away your GPS. Billed as one of the longest road trips in one country, winding through 2 500km of rugged coastal scenery scattered across seven counties, it takes you off the beaten tourist path on a journey into the ancient landscapes of Celtic history and legend.

The northern gateway to the Wild Atlantic Way is remote Malin Head, the northernmost point in Ireland in County Donegal; the southern gateway is the fishing village and culinary capital of Kinsale in County Cork. Along the way, signs at 190 discovery points and 15 key destinations like the Cliffs of Moher take you to ancient forts, monasteries, remote...
islands and villages off the map. Some 4 000 road signs have been put up, so you can’t get lost—even in the maze of country lanes in Ireland!

This is the very western edge of Europe. On Loop Head, an incredibly scenic peninsula on the Wild Atlantic Way in County Clare, a sign at Keating’s Bar & Restaurant claims it is “the nearest bar to New York!” When I climbed to the top of an old lighthouse nearby to see if I could spot the Big Apple on a clear, sunny day, the amused keeper quipped: “Nope, you can’t see it today. You’ll have to come back another day!”

You don’t have to drive the whole of the Wild Atlantic Way in one go. It’s a point of departure, a way to help tourists discover unusual destinations. You can do parts of it on long-distance hiking, cycling, ferry and driving routes. It would take at least a month to explore all the scenic byways, peninsulas and out-of-the-way destinations. Over the years, I’ve driven most of it from windswept Slieve League in County Donegal, through towns like Sligo, Galway and Limerick down to the wild peninsulas of Connemara, Dingle and Loop Head, and around the coastal rings of Kerry and Beara. These unspoilt landscapes offer the finest untamed scenery left in Europe.

We stayed in the village of Doolin, the gateway to many tourist attractions in County Clare, which lies at the heart of the Wild Atlantic Way. It’s as good a place as any to start your journey. This scenic stone village is set in the heart of the Burren: one of 64 geoparks in Europe and known for its unique karst limestone geology of caves, glacial pavements and dramatic cliffs—a Unesco World Heritage Site and protected landscape of outstanding natural beauty which promotes sustainable ecotourism. It’s a great base from which to do day trips and stay over at hostels and farmstays, B&Bs and country hotels.

You can even go caving on the Wild Atlantic Way. The Burren literally means “rocky place”, as the landscape is intersected by thousands of kilometres of ancient dry-stone walls. I went to see Pol an Ionain (also known as The Great Stalactite) at Doolin Cave, the longest free-hanging...
The Burren Smokehouse in Lisdoonvarna is world-renowned for its organic smoked salmon, on the menus of some of Europe’s top chefs. A gift of their smoked salmon was presented to US President Barack Obama in a hamper of Irish produce on St Patrick’s Day this year, and served to the Queen at a banquet at Dublin Castle on a state visit. At Bartrá Seafood Restaurant in Lahinch, we feasted on the Salmon of Knowledge, a fish of great wisdom in the old Irish legend of the Shannon River. Owner Theresa O’Brien assured us, “We smoke our own salmon using oak chips we get from the local coffin maker!”

The Wild Atlantic Way diverts from the mainland out to sea to islands such as Aran, Great Blasket and Scattery. Doolin and Galway are gateways to the Aran Islands, one of the highlights of the entire route. We went island-hopping on Doolin ferries that operate daily trips to the three Aran Islands on an hour-long ride on the Happy Hooker (named after a wooden Galway sailboat, in case you were wondering how it got its name!). You can do a tour by cycle, horse and carriage, or minibus with one of the old islanders who have eked a living out of the land and sea for generations here.

The Aran Islands have been inhabited since the Stone Age, and are regarded as the spiritual heartland of Celtic culture and a shrine to the Gaelic language. Aran was once renowned as one of the holiest places on Earth after Jerusalem and Rome. The islands are littered with the ruins of ancient temples, churches and forts as well as the burial places of many Irish saints. The islanders built a labyrinth of 11 000km of stone walls on these rocky islands to protect their pastures from the wild winds of the Atlantic, and still harvest kelp to fertilise their stony potato patches and fields.

We enjoyed a wonderful plate of steamed crab claws in cream—caught in the rich Atlantic Ocean by local fishermen—along with lobster, mussels and fish at Ti Joe Watty’s, a pub on Inishmore, the largest island. By tradition, the women of Aran knit a distinct pattern into their Aran jerseys so they can identify drowned sailors. I bought a simple St Brigid’s reed cross from Vincent, a local weaver. When I asked if he was an islander, he replied: “I’m a blow-in [a stranger]. I’ve only been here 40 years. Around here, you’re only considered a local when you’re buried and can’t move on!”

The great Iron-Age Dun Aengus, a 3 000-year-old stone fortress built on the very cliff face, is one of the most dramatic sights I’ve seen anywhere in the world. On a clear day, they say you can also see all the way across the Atlantic to New York here. Incredibly, there’s no barrier on the precipice of the 150m high edge of the sheer cliff. Staring into the abyss, our guide Bartley Beatty explained: “The minute we put up a fence, some idiot is bound to climb over it! You make your own luck in life. I’m tired of telling people to stay off the walls and cliff edge.” That’s what I like about the Wild Atlantic Way: They’ve kept the wildness by not fencing it all in.