

Northern Ireland

1- Some geographic information

Northern Ireland is 1/6 of the whole island of Ireland (14,000 km² out of 84,000). It is made up of 6 out of the 9 counties of the traditional province of Ulster (Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone). The 3 others (Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan) are in the Republic of Ireland.



There are three mountainous ranges. In the south-eastern part, the Mourne Mountains, where the highest point is (Slieve Donard, 850m) and one of the two BIGs (Spelga Dam). The Sperrin Mountains tower above the north. The second BIG, from which it takes its name is there, on the hillside of Sawel Mountain (678m). The north-east area is covered by the Antrim Mountains (Trostan, 556m). The Challenge visits them thanks to the Glenariff Forest.

Northern Ireland also has 4 main loughs:

-Lough Neagh in the centre, west of Belfast. The region is too flat for the Challenge.

-Lough Erne (Lower and Upper), 75km long in the south-west. Cliffs of Magho is probably the best climb to appreciate it.



Lough Erne from the cliffs of Magho

-In the south-east, Lough Strangford isolates the Ards Peninsula. In this region, we've selected Scrabo Tower, near Newtonards.

-Lough Foyle opens the door to the Atlantic Ocean, from Londonderry/Derry. Two climbs allow to discover it: Binevenagh, in the east, and Glenagivney, in the north, in the Inishowen Peninsula (Republic of Ireland).

2- A challenge made of mounts and hills

No high mountain in the list, the highest altitude is reached at Slieve Croob, 516m. The average climb is 5.6km long for 245m elevation gain and has 201 points, more or less the same as the Welsh list, and a little more than Scotland and England. The local beast is called « Benbradagh », 430 points (680 for Great Dun Fell), 5.8km long and 358m elevation gain, with 2km at 13%. It is integrated into the circuit of the sportive Man of Sperrin.



The monster

No easy picnic neither at Slieve Gallion (372pts), Divis (361pts), Slieve Croob (352pts), Bernish Rock (348pts), Torr Head (304pts), Binevenagh (300pts) and Sperrin (261pts).



Top of Slieve Gallion

These climbs have an elevation gain higher than 300m: Slieve Croob (484m), Slieve Gallion (438m) and Divis (423m) for the Top 3. In this ranking Glenariff Forest (326m) stands out from the rest.



Divis

Not many climbs are longer than 10km: Spelga Dam (14km), Slieve Croob (13km) and Glenariff (12km). Only Torr Head (9.4%) and Brougher Mountain (9.3%) have an average gradient higher than 9%. The others are about 5%.



Torr Head Challenge



Torr Head panorama

The highest gradients are more interesting: 17% in their best section for Benbradagh, Sperrin and Torr Head, 16% in Brougher Mountain and Windy Gap, 15% in Bernish Rock, Binevenagh and Scrabo Tower. A few none - mentioned climbs: Carnmore (14%), Spring Hill (13%), Pigeon Top (12%), ...

3- Green tourism

What is amazing in Ireland, for Mainland Europe Continentals accustomed to the Alps, is the colour of the landscape, with monochromes of green and brown, at such low altitudes.

The pearl is the 40,000 basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway, listed on the UNESCO World Heritage.



The Giant's Causeway

Other sites are worth seeing: Slieve Croob, which got the label « AONB » (« Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty »). The mount towers above the Dromara Hills and conceals a few Celtic remains, among which is a traditional « cairn ». Torr Head is a cape reachable by a wonderful undulating and steep scenic road. It is the key spot of a sportive (Torr Head Challenge). From Bernish Viewpoint you'll have a large panorama of Newry, one of the most beautiful in Ireland. There is a Celtic tumb.



Newry by night from Bernish Viewpoint

After having crossed the Lough Navar Forest, you'll be above the cliffs of Magho with a panoramic viewpoint over the lake. Let's close the green chapter with the Glengariff and Gortin Glen Nature Reserves.

North of Belfast, a World War II Memorial stands above Knockagh Hill. This is a memorial to the victims of « Bloody Sunday » is at the start of Springhill, in Londonderry/Derry.

Dungannon Castle was built in the XIVth century. It was the residence of the O'Neill dynasty, who ruled over Ulster for three centuries. One says that, in good weather, their seven counties can be seen in one glance.

Finally, an original stone chair stands at Carnmore viewpoint. It belongs to a 10km walk (Sleave Beagh Walk) which is included in a cross border project (Clones Erne East Blackwater).



Knockagh Cliff



Carnmore Stone Chair

4- Media

The Tour of Ulster is a really important race. Just like in the whole Anglo-saxon world, hill climbing is an autumnal tradition. Sportives are many and are often combined with charities. 7 climbs were or are media highlights:

Spelga Dam has a sportive, it is very often « King of the Mountain » and was three times the National Hill Climb in the early 2000's.

Benbradagh and its 27% climb belongs to the Man of Sperrin.



Torr Head gets a lot of visitors, thanks in particular to the Torr Head Challenge.

In Dungannon, the start and the finish of the Lap of the Lough (Neagh) are situated at the top of « Hill of the O'Neill ».



Start of the Lap of the Lough
with the castle in the background



Devilish Slieve Croob

Slieve Croob and Windy Gap are unavoidable south of Belfast, for instance in the sportive Dromara Hilly (125km). Up to its dead-end summit, the first is also a hill climb.

Last but not least, Fews Forest (included in Carrigtuke) was « Gran Premio della Montagna », 4th category, when the Giro d'Italia started in Northern Ireland in 2014 (3rd stage: Armagh-Dublin).