Off The Beaten Track:

Slieve Bearnagh

Within an elliptical area of about 22km by 11km, The Mourne Mountains are among the most famous tourist attractions and perhaps the most popular walking areas in Northern Ireland. The highest point in Northern Ireland, Slieve Donard the other 34 summits and forests, loughs, rivers and bogs attract visitors all year round. There is something for everyone here from casual "stroller" to dedicated rambler and runner and our rich heritage is written all over them.

This walk takes you along the Trassey Track, part of "The Brandy Pad" a track created by the boots of smugglers and the hooves of heavily laden ponies, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. Illicit cargoes of tobacco, wine, spirits, leather, silk and spices would be spirited through the mountains from the east coast to be distributed inland. So popular was the trade that by 1835 in the village of Hilltown, almost half the houses were pubs.

This route also takes in part of the famous Mourne Wall made from the granite quarried in the Mournes. On average 2m high and 1 metre wide, with virtually no cement to keep it together, it runs for 35km over the tops of 15 mountains and took 18 years between 1904 and 1922 to complete. The Trassey Track is one of the most beautiful gateways to the inner Mournes and the views from the summit of Slieve Bearnagh are stunning at any time of year.

Height: 739 metres (2424.5 feet)
Round trip: 10 Kilometres (6.2 miles)
Time: 5 hours
Level 3: Moderate to Difficult

This is a tough, steep continual ascent and needs a quite good level of fitness. Cloud covers this mountain frequently and so navigational skills and warm clothing are recommended.

Ordinance Survey of Northern Ireland Discoverer Series 1:50 000

Map 29 The Mournes. or with more detail:

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

Map Coordinates: Start: 307308 Finish: 314281
Refreshments

There are many cafes, shops and restaurants in nearby Newcastle and a few in Bryansford to get meals and sandwiches.

Start and Finish

The walk starts at either of two car parks. The first is the Trassey Track Car Park around 9km west of Newcastle. From Newcastle town centre, head west towards Bryansford. Turn left in Bryansford village and join the B180 to Hilltown. 4 Km later, turn left onto a signposted minor road. The Car Park is on the left around 1.5km along this road. Alternatively carry on for another 1km approx and park at Meelmore Lodge Amenities Centre where there is also an entrance to the Trassey Track.

Terrain

Initially the path is well defined gravel but as it tracks upwards it becomes more stony and rocky. Although there are muddy, gravel thin tracks around the base of the mountain, the main steep ascent to the Hare's Gap is then over very large stones and boulders. From the Hare's Gap to the top of Slieve Bearnagh is over very steep soft peat covered in heather and rock, although if you stick close to the Mourne Wall, the track, although muddy in wet weather, is quite solid and well defined.

Route

Beginning at the start of the Trassey Track simply follow that for virtually all of the walk with the Trassey River or Burn on your right. Keep along this track until you see the Hare's Gap (400 m high) in front of you (a saddle between Slieve Bearnagh and Slievenaglogh).

When you cross the stile over the Mourne Wall, you will be offered stunning panoramic views of the inner Mournes, with the Brandy Pad at base of Slieve Commedagh and Slieve Donard to the left, Slieve Beg and Cove Mountain slightly to the right ahead of you and Slieve Lamagan further to the right above the the Ben Crom Reservoir Valley and Slieve Binnian in the distance. Behind you is Slieve Meelmore towering above the Trassey Track Valley and in the distance Lough Island Reavy.

Turning right climb up built steps and round a precipitous escarpment with a flat top and bushes of dwarf juniper. Past a large rock outcrop, which can provide good shelter from the increasing wind and then it is a very steep but comparatively smooth slope to the top of Slieve Bearnagh. Its two Tors, separated by about 500 metres, are crowned with spectacular gigantic granite rocks, and the topmost summit offers superb 360 deg views of most of the Mournes, provided the frequent cloud has not obscured your view.

Local Walking Contacts and Association

Walk Ni

http://www.walkni.com/

Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs

http://www.ufrc-online.co.uk/

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

http://www.discovernorthernireland.com/

National Trust
Safety Information

Be Prepared

With a bit of forethought, common sense, the right equipment and knowledge, hill walking can be a fun, sometimes challenging and hugely rewarding experience. It is remarkable how many people go out hill and mountain walking, without the proper skills, information, clothing and equipment and preparation. National Outdoor Adventure Centres and rambling or walking clubs will always give advice.

- Whether walking with friends or alone, ensure you plan well and allow plenty of time for your walk. Be realistic in your estimates, allowing ample time for navigating/route finding, stops and breaks etc.
- Check the weather reports before you set off. Take note of extremes, especially heavy rain, high winds and high and low temperatures.
- Let someone know your intended route and when you expect to be back (and let them know when you have returned).
- A change of footwear and dry clothes left back in the car (if that is how you arrived at the start) will always be welcome.
- Don't take on too much and enjoy your day.
- Follow the Countryside Code, "Leave No Trace".

The following items should always be carried.

- A comfortable well fitted rucksack with a waterproof liner will allow you to carry all the basic equipment for a safe and enjoyable day on the hill.
- The straps should be suitably padded and sit on the shoulders without rubbing. It should have a supporting waist belt and chest strap to keep it in place. As a general rule of thumb, a 30 litre sack will be plenty for a day walk and 45 - 60 litres should suffice for most multi day camping trips.
- Warm hat and gloves or mittens (sun hat in hot weather) - preferably thermal insulated. Up to 33% of heat is lost through the head. waterproof jacket, waterproof trousers, fleece or jumper. Sunglasses may be beneficial during the summer months.
• Thermal Base layer. Quick drying layers worn against the skin which can transport moisture away from the skin are an important addition in all sorts of weather conditions.
• A fleece is a useful thing to carry, either as a "mid layer" between base layer and outer jacket in cold weather or as an outer layer in slightly warmer conditions.
• Dehydration is an issue at any time of year so ensure you take adequate fluids for the day ahead. Consider the forecast temperatures and how strenuous your day is likely to be. For a full day in the hills 1 litre of water should be the minimum.
• Food for the day. Sandwiches are the easiest to prepare and fruit and chocolate are always good additions.
• Emergency survival bag. This is a brightly coloured plastic bag designed to reduce the loss of body heat.
• A compass and suitable map of the area (with waterproof cover) - and know how to use them.
• A small personal first-aid kit including plasters, bandages, dressings, insect lotions or sprays and sun screen lotion or sprays in the summer months.
• A whistle for attracting attention in an emergency (six shorts blast on the whistle is the internationally recognised distress signal).
• Head torch and spare battery and bulb
• A fully-charged mobile phone (signal strength can be weak or non-existent in some areas, but better to have it than not). Do not rely on the mobile phone be self-sufficient in your planning.
• Tissue/toilet roll for sanitary requirements (and a lighter or matches to burn them afterwards). These can also be buried (away from water supplies) after use but that may require a small spade to be carried.

Footwear.

• Comfortable mountain boots with a suitable sole, and ankle support.
• There are many types available in leather or fabric often with a breathable waterproof membrane.
• Boots also vary in their rigidity. Generally speaking the more technical the terrain the stiffer the boot.,
• To avoid blisters and rubbing they should be laced snugly and broken-in over a series of progressively longer walks.
• To help minimise blisters use medical tape or sticking plasters on the normal rub points - back of the heel and sometimes where the top the top of high ankle boots rub against the leg.
• Do clean and dry them afterwards (slowly - overnight if possible) and waterproof them regularly with a suitable agent.
• Good quality wool mix socks often help avoid blisters especially on warm sweaty days.

Waterproof Clothing.

• Jacket and trousers should be waterproof and preferably breathable. The jacket should have zippered pockets and a roomy hood with draw cord.
• Trousers should not be restrictive and should have lower leg zips to ease fitting over boots.
• Waterproofs act as a barrier against rain and wind/chill.
The following items are not essential but advisable to have them.

- A pair of adjustable walking poles. These certainly help with balance and support when ascending a mountain and are particularly helpful when descending.
- Binoculars.
- Personal GPS (Global Positioning System). This should only be used as an addition and never a replacement for map and compass.
- Well fitted and adjusted gaiters are very useful when travelling through bog land. They help to keep the mud and moisture away from the boots and are an extra waterproof protection. In warmer, drier conditions they are a good alternative to over-trousers, especially when walking through rough gorse, brush or thorn bushes!

If you are intending to camp overnight you will need:

- Tent or Bivy Bag
- Sleeping bag
- Insulating mat (or inflatable mattress)
- Spoon, knife and fork. Bowls and mug.
- Stove, fuel and pans.
- Food (boil-in-the-bag packs are light to carry and provide good hot meals)

Do's and Don'ts - the Countryside Code

Land and its owners.

- Keep the number of cars to the minimum (use public transport where possible) and park appropriately allowing for easy access to property, especially for farmers and landowners. Farm machinery and emergency rescue services may need wide space to turn into a field or gateway.
- All land is owned by somebody. Agreed access to that land is often with the goodwill of the owner, not as a legal right. If unsure, check with the owner and observe signs regarding access agreements/restrictions.
- Use agreed routes in these areas.
- Be friendly and courteous when you meet landowners and local residents.
- Respect private property and do not interfere with machinery, crops or animals.
- Avoid taking dogs into the hills, especially with livestock around.
- Keep noise to a minimum.
- Be careful not to damage fences, walls or hedges.
- Use stiles and gates where they exist.

The Environment

- Take care not to disturb plants, birds and animals and in particular, nests.
- Where possible stick to tracks, or the most durable surface available.
- In heavily used areas, walk in single file in the middle of the path, even if it is wet and muddy. This helps reduce soil erosion and minimises path widening.
- In more remote areas, disperse use to prevent the creation of new tracks and campsites and try to avoid places where impacts are beginning to show.
- Avoid taking short cuts on zigzag paths as this creates new lines for run-off water and increases erosion.
- Leave cairns as they are: old cairns could have archaeological value.

Litter, waste and camping
• Apart from being unsightly litter is a hazard to wildlife. **As a general rule take out what you bring in.**
• Leave no litter behind: even biodegradable items like banana skins and teabags can take a long time to disappear and they are unsightly.
• With caution, pick up and remove litter when you see it.
• Human waste should be buried 6 inches deep and at least 30 metres away from watercourses and walking tracks and shelters. Toilet paper takes a long time to biodegrade. It and sanitary towels and tampons should be taken home in a sealed bag. Even if buried, they may be dug up by animals.
• Washing should never be done directly into a water-course, even if biodegradable soap is used. It is better to use a pot for washing and dispose of the dirty water away from the bank.
• Always ensure landowner's permission before wild camping.
• Choose unobtrusive sites at least 500m away from roads and buildings.
• Use a stove for cooking. Campfires leave their mark and poorly set fires, especially in hot summer may be dangerous.

To prevent damage to vegetation, tents should not be left on the same spot for more than two nights. In many wild areas tents should only be pitched between dusk & dawn.