

Standing just over 700 feet tall at their highest point and stretching 5 miles along the Atlantic coast of County Clare, the Cliffs of Moher are Ireland's most visited natural attraction. The name comes from the Gaelic meaning "ruined fort," for a 1st century BC fort originally built at Hags Head. The cliffs have been featured in a number of films. You may recognize them as the "Cliffs of Insanity" from *The Princess Bride*, and the caves at sea level were used in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*.

On a clear day, to the north you can see the Aran Islands and Galway Bay, as well as the Twelve Bens and the Maum Turk mountains in Connemara. As you follow the coastline south, you can make out Loop Head and the Dingle Peninsula beyond.

## About the Cliffs

The rocks that make up the Cliffs of Moher were formed over 300 million years ago. Ancient rivers carried sediment to the sea, where it was compacted into solid rock over millions of years. You can see the different layers of sandstones, siltstone, mudstone and shale on the cliff face.

Ocean storms produce massive swells and when the water reaches the reef, it is forced up into waves that can reach up to 30 feet. On a turbulent day, you may see surfers riding these waves, known as the Aileens.

Under the constant barrage of the waves, the cliff base erodes, causing sections of the upper cliff face to fall into the sea. This phenomenon is responsible for creating sea caves along the foot of the cliffs, as well as sea stacks and sea arches.

The great sea stack (Branaunmore) below O'Brien's Tower stands 220 feet high. This column of rock was once part of the cliffs but coastal erosion slowly removed the layers of rock joining it to the mainland.

A large sea arch can be seen at Hag's Head below the signal tower, and multiple smaller sea arches can be seen from sea level.



## Viewing the Cliffs

There are three viewing platforms. From the main platform, there are breathtaking views of the cliffs to the south. The south platform is the perfect vantage point to see the Puffin colony at Goat Island, to the right. The north platform is located at the highest point of the cliffs, Knockardakin, 702 feet above sea level. Here you can also access the tower viewpoint in O'Brien's Tower.

## O'Brien's Tower

From atop the tower, see stunning views south toward Hags Head and north toward Doolin. The tower was built in 1835 by Cornelius O'Brien, a beloved landlord and visionary who recognized the benefits that tourism could bring to the local economy. Travel journals dating to the 1780s show that the cliffs have long been a popular destination.

There is a ranger on the ground floor who can answer questions about the cliffs. For a small fee, you can climb the spiral staircase to the viewing platform at the top, where information plaques point out the neighboring sites.

## Walking and Hiking

The cliff edge is lined with pathways and talking telescopes for half a mile. If you enjoy hiking, there is a 12-mile Cliffs Coastal Trail.

The **Blue Walking Route** will take you around the grounds of the Cliffs of Moher near the visitor

center. The pathway is flat to the main viewing platform and there are steps leading to O'Brien's Tower.

**Length:** .6 miles. Allow 40 minutes to walk the site.

The **Green Walking Route** extends north to the highest point of the cliffs. A portion of this route is on the Cliffs Coastal Trail and follows the natural landscape, with exposed cliff edge in parts. It is recommended for experienced walkers.

**Length:** 1.8 miles. Allow 1.5 hours round trip for the hike, including time for photos.

The **Red Walking Route** extends south to Hags Head, where the ancient fort once stood. Today, a signal tower stands in its place. This route is on the Cliffs Coastal Trail and follows the natural landscape, with exposed cliff edge in parts. It is recommended for experienced walkers.

**Length:** 6.2 miles. Allow 3 hours round trip for the hike, including a picnic break and time for photos.

## Cliffs Exhibition

If you aren't feeling up to a hike, The Cliffs Exhibition, located in the visitor center, is a self-guided tour of interactive exhibits and displays exploring the elements of the Cliffs of Moher: ocean, rock, nature and man. Allow about 25-45 minutes to discover the cliffs.

## Plant and Animal Life

The cliffs are home to the largest colony of cliff-nesting seabirds on mainland Ireland, with 20 species of nesting birds. The area was designated a Special Protection Area for Birds under the EU Birds Directive in 1986 and as a Refuge for Fauna in 1988.

## Bird Watching

During the nesting season (from May to July), expect to see birds from any of the pathways and viewing areas. The south viewing platform provides the best vantage point to see Goat Island, where hundreds of Puffins make their nests. Puffin populations are decreasing across Europe, but they are thriving here. The Guillemots and Razorbills can be seen on the flat stone at the foot of the Brandán Mór sea stack. The Guillemots come to land only to nest and spend the rest of their lives at sea. The

Razorbills distinctive heavy bill is helpful in collecting sand eels. Fulmars nest on the ledges nearer the top of the cliffs. They look like gulls but are actually related to the Albatross. Kittiwakes can be seen on the ledges of the sea stack and the cliff edge. These are small gulls, but their colonies are very noisy. A pair of Peregrine Falcons, the fastest creature on the planet, nest below O'Brien's Tower. They prey on other birds and you might catch them in an aerial battle. A pair of Choughs, a rare species known as the Celtic Crow, nest below the sandstone ledge and often visit to the viewing areas. Bird identification cards are available in the visitor center.

## Flora

The plants growing on and around the cliffs have to be tough to survive the wind and thin soils. You can find seaweed and lichen at the base of the cliffs, and mosses and liverworts on the cliff face. Halfway up the cliffs, the falling debris has created a habitat for wild flowers and grasses. On the cliff top, the soil is not conducive to agricultural use, so you will find a wide variety of wild plants.

## Other Wildlife

Whales, Whale Sharks, Seals and Dolphins sometimes visit the water surrounding the cliffs. On land, you will find badgers, weasels, rabbits and hares. A herd of feral goats live precariously on the narrow paths below the top of the cliffs. Keep an eye out for them if you are walking to Hags Head.

## The Legend of Hags Head

There once was a witch named Mal, who fell in love with Cú Chulainn, a great warrior. He did not return her love, so he tried to avoid her. But she pursued him and he fled all the way across Ireland until he ran out of land at Loop Head, south of the cliffs. He leapt over to a small island, but Mal followed him. The wind caught her skirts and carried her over. When he jumped back to the mainland, she followed again. But this time the wind was against her and she fell and was dashed to pieces on the rocks.

It is said that the town of Malbay is named after her and the rock known as Hags Head took her form. It still resembles the profile of an old woman looking out to sea.