

# Lough Derg

the spiritual detox for your soul



St Patrick's Purgatory involves three days of prayer, fasting, going barefoot and keeping vigil. It's not for everyone, but there must be a reason why people return each year ... **Richard Scriven** reports

Stepping on to the boat on the lake shore, the new pilgrims are about to withdraw themselves from the world for three days. Leaving behind the hustle and bustle of everyday life, they are going on a spiritual and personal journey that offers a chance to take stock of what is important to them and re-engage with their faith.

In doing so, they are partaking in the centuries old tradition that is the Lough Derg pilgrimage in Co. Donegal, in the north west of Ireland.

Lough Derg, or St Patrick's Purgatory, is one of the most distinct and special places of pilgrimage in western Europe. It offers a unique space of spiritual retreat for people. It is a practice that has been inherited from the Middle Ages: visitors perform a pilgrimage of prayer, fasting, going barefoot and keeping vigil. Lough Derg continues to attract thousands of pilgrims annually as old devotees return year after year, and new visitors feel the call of the sacred island.

The origins of Lough Derg lie in the stories about St Patrick's evangelising mission across Ireland in the fifth century. The saint is believed to have spent the season of Lent on retreat in a cave on the lake island, during which he received a vision of the sufferings of purgatory and hell. For the early Christians, these events marked the island out as a sacred space, or a 'thin place', where the boundary

between the natural world and world-to-come was somehow more permeable. Later, a disciple of Patrick's, St Davog, established a pilgrimage of fasting, vigil, and prayer in imitation of Patrick.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, the site gained prominence across Europe, especially due to its connection with the doctrine of purgatory. An account of a pilgrim known as Knight Owein told of his visions of hell-like

*St Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg. St Patrick's Church. Old postcard dated 8th August, 1917.*



“The space to stay still and contemplate faith, life and other matters is especially important. Pilgrims are grateful for having time free from running around”



scenes at Lough Derg, while in 1396 Ramon, the Viscount of Perellos who had travelled from Avignon, described seeing deceased relatives in purgatory being spiritually purified in preparation for entry into Heaven.

The notoriety of the site grew as it was believed that by participating in the pilgrimage, the faithful could spiritually cleanse themselves by experiencing a worldly ‘purgatory’, so avoiding actual purgatory.

Augustinian canons and later Franciscan friars administered the site, with pilgrims travelling to a foundation on the nearby saint’s island before being brought to ‘Station Island’ where the pilgrimage took place.

However, in the 17th and 18th centuries under the Penal Laws, which attempted to force Roman Catholics and Protestant dissenters to accept the established Church, there were several campaigns to quash the pilgrimage, including the razing of all structures.

In the later 18th century, with the relaxing of the Penal Laws, the diocese of Clogher took over the pilgrimage and its numbers grew



steadily. The island was built on to accommodate the increasing volume of pilgrims, with the cave filled in and replaced by a chapel.

In the 1920s the current St Patrick’s basilica, which was constituted by Pope Pius XI in 1931, was built.

More recently, Lough Derg has been developed with modern buildings to accommodate and service the pilgrims. A diocesan priest oversees the site and the pilgrimage, with the assistance of other priests during the summer, and a lay staff provide the administration and services for the thousands who come to Lough Derg annually.

The pilgrimage actually begins the night before one goes onto the island. Pilgrims begin fasting at midnight, marking the beginning of the first day and continue to do so until the very end of the third day.

The fast consists of one meal a day, of dry bread or toast, oatcakes and tea or coffee without milk. Water can be consumed freely throughout the three days and soft drinks are allowed on the third day (when people are travelling home). Fasting, a penitential activity in many religions, allows pilgrims to sacrifice earthly desires to enable them to focus on spiritual matters in prayer and reflection. The practice also connects with asceticism in the early Celtic Church when British and Irish saints, such as Columba, Cuthbert and Hilda of Whitby, undertook extensive fasting as a means of directing their thoughts and energies towards contemplating God.

Talking with pilgrims today, the fast helps them have a renewed appreciation for the excesses of our lives, as we eat and have too much. >

*Pilgrims together in silence but connected in prayer circling the prayer beds on their eighth Station.*



On the morning of the first day, pilgrims travel to the lake shore to book in before boarding the boat across to the small island. Not only are pilgrims physically withdrawing themselves from the world, but they also leave behind their mobile phones – perhaps one of the hardest things for people nowadays.

Once on the island, shoes are removed and the barefooted pilgrimage begins. The custom of going barefoot and keeping a fast evokes the medieval and saintly origins of the site. The removal of shoes is also seen as creating a common bond between pilgrims who all share in the hardship of the pilgrimage.

A sense of equality and Christian fellowship is fostered among the pilgrims.

Throughout their time on the island, pilgrims perform nine prayer stations. These are a pattern of prayers involving the repeated reciting of specific prayers – Our Father, Hail Mary and the Apostles’ Creed – while walking around and

kneeling at different places on the island, principally St Patrick’s Basilica and the ‘penitential beds’. The beds are the reconstructed remains of monastic beehive huts with metal crosses in the centre. As these sets of prayers date back to at least the medieval period, present day pilgrims are partaking in a centuries-old tradition. This dimension adds an extra significance to the practice.

On the evening of the first day, pilgrims begin a 24-hour vigil. This is often seen as the very heart of the pilgrimage. Throughout the night, they perform four prayer stations, this time inside the basilica, and keep each others’ spirits up. After morning Mass, Confessions are heard. Pilgrims frequently find these to be very meaningful conversations, as their reflections and prayers during the night help them consider different aspects of their lives and their relationship with God.

There are also trained counsellors on site who offer a listening ear and

*A bare foot pilgrim in silent prayer.*





assistance to those who feel the need to talk things through.

The second day is mainly a time for reflection. Pilgrims renew their baptismal promises and pray the Way of the Cross. The space to stay still and contemplate faith, life and other matters is especially important. Pilgrims are grateful to have time free from running around, from phones and from work commitments.

Lough Derg is a challenging pilgrimage but it also offers a unique chance to stop, pray and reconnect with your faith and with God. On nice summer days pilgrims sit on outdoor benches, while there are enclosed spaces if the infamous Irish weather turns inclement. In a small chapel, dedicated to St Mary of Angels, there is exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, allowing pilgrims to pray in silence. The vigil ends with night prayers as pilgrims go up to the dormitories and have what many people describe as the best night's sleep of their lives.

Pilgrims get up for morning Mass, after which they perform the final prayer station. They then pack up their things, put on their shoes and get ready to leave the island.

Many collect holy water which is blessed daily as part of renewing

baptismal promises to take home and to give to family, friends and neighbours. Also, there is a shop that sells religious items and souvenirs from Lough Derg; at the morning Masses the religious items are blessed for people to take away with them.

Pilgrims return to the shore filled with a renewed spirit and begin their transition back into ordinary life.

Over 15,000 pilgrims travel to Lough Derg annually. There is a massive range of people of all ages and from all walks of life. Also, there are a great many people who travel over from Britain. It is common for pilgrims to have their first experience of Lough Derg as teenagers as they approach exams or accompany parents or grandparents.

Years later they find themselves returning to the pilgrimage, as it offers something special for them. The pilgrimage can give great solace to those with special intentions, as they undertake the spiritual and corporeal exercises for sick loved ones or the recently departed.

For these people, Lough Derg is woven into their concerns and worries, but also their faith and hope. It is a powerful and unique place.

The pilgrimage is also a welcoming one. It is, of course, primarily a

Roman Catholic site, with Masses, prayers, and ceremonies led by priests. However, those of all religious backgrounds can actively participate. The emphasis is on spiritual reflection and prayer. There are people who go to Mass weekly and even daily, those who rarely attend religious ceremonies, and those who have not practised for many years. In all cases the spirit of openness and welcome is found in Lough Derg. Indeed, for some pilgrims it offers a means of rekindling their faith, and even the most devout of Christians find they get something special from the pilgrimage.

The small lake island of Lough Derg has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries. It has continued to offer a distinct spiritual experience for those who chose to participate in this unique undertaking.

Pilgrimage is a journey of reflection and transformation.

At St Patrick's purgatory, the prayers, fasting, going barefoot and keeping vigil combine with the withdrawal from the world and sense of Christian fellowship to make a deeply meaningful experience.

For those considering going on this pilgrimage, be assured you too will go on a spiritual and personal journey as you step on that boat. ■

**The pilgrimage is open to all aged 15 and over, and who are able to undertake the fast and vigil, and to walk and kneel unaided. The three day pilgrimage season is still open and one can begin their pilgrimage on any day up until the 13th August, 2015. More information on the pilgrimage can be found at [www.loughderg.org](http://www.loughderg.org) or by calling 028 68632391. There are one day retreats offered for those unable to participate in the main pilgrimage, these recommence on the 17th August and continue on certain days in late August and September.**

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