RENAISSANCE IN COUNTY LEITRIM

Mike Bunn

LEITRIM'S VISUAL grandeur is often mistakenly attributed to surrounding counties, but its newly-forged identity is creating a unique atmosphere that's attracting attention and tourists to this sparsely populated rural haven.

It is quite strange that when asking almost anyone–whether Irish or foreign–which one of Ireland's counties has the shortest coastline, an extended pause nearly always follows and then a few incorrect answers and mutterings. The suspense is usually broken by the questioner, with the answer–County Leitrim–leaving jaws agape in disbelief.

The two miles of coastline prize an opening between County Sligo, just above Cliffony, and just below Co. Donegal's Bundoran. County Leitrim, with its long history of emigration and, according to some, its supposed lack of scenic grandeur, has been somewhat forgotten. And as for coastline...a couple of years ago one would have asked where it was. But today Leitrim is far from a forgotten county. True, during the years Leitrim has endured its fair share of hardship. But now, people are discovering that Leitrim is one of the last bastions of unspoiled natural beauty in Europe. This sparsely populated border county is flanked by Counties Donegal and Fermanagh from the North, and Counties Cavan, Roscommon and Sligo along the southeast and west. Some of Leitrim's most dramatic scenery has in fact been "poached" by surrounding counties, particularly Sligo. In fact, Glencar and Lough Gill, and a large chunk of the Dartry and Kinas mountain, are in fact very much in County Leitrim.

And most people driving between Sligo and Donegal might wrongly presume, because of Ben Bulben and Ben Wiskin, that all the dramatic scenery is in County Sligo, thus leaving Leitrim somewhat of an ugly sister. But this is just not so.

Here in Leitrim, nature has hardly been tampered with, and indeed over time, the landscape has developed into one of unkempt beauty. For the most part, Leitrim is a drumlin (small hill) county, one of rolling hills, rough woodlands, colourful and rich hedgerows, rushy meadows, lowland bogs and countless hundreds of smallish lakes, well-known by the angling tourist, for specimen of coarse fish, bream and pike. (This year on a small lake near Ballinamore, a lucky visiting angler caught a bream that broke the Irish record that had stood for over 100 years.) In midsummer, the necklace-like layers of white and pink dog roses that festoon the hedgerows have given rise to Leitrim being referred to as "Wild Rose Country".

Throughout the spring and summer, these hedgerows with their primroses, wild orchids, elder flower, honeysuckle, foxgloves, as well as the dog roses, are a splendid riot of colour. In the autumn, their fruits of hips, nuts and berries are a feast for the abundance of wildlife that finds this environment a perfect habitat.

In recent years, County Leitrim has been a favourite spot for people searching for alternative lifestyles and organic farming methods. Very much the pioneer of organic farming in Ireland is Rod Alston, whose farm, Edenplants, at Rossinver, has been a major catalyst for the renaissance in the supplying of good quality produce now in great demand from restaurants and country house accommodations throughout Ireland.

A visit to Edenplants during the summer months is quite spectacular. The careful husbandry that results in an embroidery-like quilt of more than 100 herb plants and summer vegetables is simply a modern art form. Not too far away, the deserted coal mines at Arigna momentarily remind us of the past hardships of this often damp landscape. But now it has a future. The mild climate is ideal for the growing of coniferous trees, and some specimens show a growth rate more rapid than anywhere else in Europe. Nearby, the inky brown threadlike headwaters of the Shannon, the mighty river that almost divides Ireland in two, pour themselves through the eye of a needle and yawn into the first of the great Shannon lakes: Lough Allen, the home of legendary monster pike. Approximately 10 miles long and two to four miles in width, Lough Allen is large by any standards. The recent re-opening of the Leitrim canal from the Lake at Drumshanbo to where it rejoins the main River Shannon at Leitrim Village means that inland waterway boats and cruisers can travel the entire Shannon system.

At Ballinamore, a little farther to the East, the Shannon-Erne Waterway has at the same time been redeveloped, and now Leitrim, with its huge marina at Carrick-on-Shannon, has at its heart the most interesting and beautiful inland waterway systems to be found anywhere. So, all in all, County Leitrim is very much alive, and for the traveller in not to much of a hurry, Leitrim will never disappoint. And who knows, you might still see a horse or donkey working the old farm machinery. Leitrim is one of the few counties in Ireland where people will always have a soft spot for tradition.

Mike Bunn is a photographer and author living in Co Sligo.