



Slí Cholmcille

THE COMPLETE GUIDE



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Overview

Slí Cholmcille: Donegal's Wild Coastal Loop

Slí Cholmcille is a 65 km National Waymarked Way loop in south-west County Donegal, [Ireland](#), starting and finishing in Ardara. Allow 3–4 days for this moderate route through Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, with about 1,600 m of total ascent. It suits walkers who want remote Atlantic scenery, Gaeltacht villages, boggy uplands and quiet Donegal roads without committing to a high-mountain traverse. Expect wet ground, exposed weather and some narrow road walking.

Route Overview

The official route is a circular walk from Ardara, typically followed Ardara → Kilcar → Carrick → Glencolmcille → Ardara. It links coastal and mountain country on the Wild Atlantic Way, passing near Assaranca Waterfall and Maghera, crossing open hill and bog towards the remote inlet of Port, then returning via the Glengesh valley/pass. Carrick and Kilcar are gateways to Slieve League, but the waymarked Slí Cholmcille does **not** traverse the Slieve League clifftops or Silver Strand; those are add-ons. For other Irish coastal comparisons, see the [Dingle Way](#), [Beara Way](#) and [Causeway Coast Way](#).

St Colmcille and the Donegal Pilgrimage Landscape

Slí Cholmcille is named for St Colmcille, also known as St Columba, one of Ireland's patron saints. Born at Gartan in County Donegal in 521, he is said to have lived for several years in Glencolmcille, a valley still associated with early-Christian crosses, holy wells and the Turas Cholmcille pilgrimage stations. In 563 he sailed to Iona, where he founded a monastery that became influential across the Gaelic world. The modern waymarked route links Donegal places associated with this tradition.

Notable highlights

- **Glengesh Pass:** A dramatic glacial valley between Ardara and Glencolmcille, with the road climbing to about 270 m over hairpin bends. It is the scenic high point of the loop.
- **Port:** A remote, abandoned coastal hamlet at the head of a lonely valley. The approach on stony tracks and sheep-cropped fields is one of the route's most isolated sections.
- **Maghera Beach and Caves:** A wide strand beneath Slievetooley, with sea caves, arches and tunnels accessible only in suitable low-tide conditions. It is a short detour near the early part of the loop.
- **Assaranca Waterfall:** A roadside cascade between Ardara and Maghera, passed on the western arm of the route.
- **Glencolmcille Folk Village:** A living-history museum of thatched cottages in the village named after St Colmcille, useful for understanding Donegal rural heritage.
- **Slieve League / Sliabh Liag:** The cliffs are near Carrick and Teelin and are often added to walking holidays, but they are not part of the core waymarked Slí Cholmcille route.

Challenges to expect

The main difficulties are wet blanket bog, exposed Atlantic weather, sparse waymarking across open moorland and long sections on narrow tarmac roads, including some busier stretches where care is

needed. Navigation is usually adequate via yellow-arrow waymarkers, but carry OSI Discovery Series Map 10 and a backup. Book village accommodation ahead. Dogs are not allowed on the route.

Key Data

Country	Ireland
Distance	65 km
Duration	3-4 days
Difficulty	Moderate
Trail type	Loop
Elevation gain/loss	1600 m
Highest point	270 m
Terrain & landscape	Mountainous, Coastal, Moorland
Trail surface	Paved, Bog, Gravel
Accommodation	Hotels, Guesthouses, B&Bs, Hostels, Campsites
Average daytime temp.	15°C
Chance of rainfall	High
Estimated cost	\$\$
Optimal season	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Facilities	Water Sources, Campsites
Permits & fees	No permits or fees

Introduction

Slí Cholmcille is a compact but serious 65 km loop through the Gaeltacht of south-west County Donegal, linking Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille by a mix of lanes, bog roads, open moorland and Atlantic edge. It suits reasonably fit walkers who want a quiet village-based route with strong local character rather than a busy, highly serviced trail.

Walked clockwise from Ardara, the route climbs through the Glengesh Pass before crossing hill country towards Kilcar and Carrick. From Glencolmcille it turns into wilder ground, reaching the lonely valley of Port before returning towards Ardara past the western arm of the loop.

The appeal is not just the distance on the map, but the setting: Irish-speaking villages, exposed blanket bog, glacial valleys, early-Christian associations around Glencolmcille, and optional short detours to Maghera and Assaranca Waterfall. Slieve League is a popular nearby add-on, but it is not part of the core waymarked route.

This is not technical walking, but it is tougher than a simple “moderate” label can suggest. Expect wet ground, sparse waymarking on open moorland, Atlantic weather, and a substantial amount of narrow tarmac road walking, with limited accommodation between the main villages.

This guide covers stages, days, accommodation, food, transport, terrain and the common mistakes to avoid.

Stage-by-Stage Guide

The standard clockwise schedule splits Slí Cholmcille into three village-to-village days: Ardara to Kilcar, Kilcar to Glencolmcille, then Glencolmcille back to Ardara. The distances are manageable on paper, but the combination of boggy ground, exposed hill country and long stretches of narrow tarmac makes each stage more tiring than a simple kilometre count suggests.

Carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and do not rely on waymarks alone. The route uses the standard Irish National Waymarked Trail marker — a yellow arrow on a black background — but marking can feel sparse on open moorland and in poor visibility.

Stage 1: Ardara (Ard an Rátha) to Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) — approx. 24 km

This is the longest day on the usual three-day schedule and makes an immediate transition from Ardara's village setting into the high, open country of south-west Donegal. The key feature is Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis), the dramatic glacial valley road between Ardara and the Kilcar side of the loop.

The walking is a mix of road, lanes, tracks and open hillside. Glengesh itself is reached by road, with the well-known hairpin bends climbing to about 270 m; this is the scenic road summit rather than necessarily the highest point of the full route. Expect exposure to Atlantic weather as soon as the route leaves sheltered ground.

Underfoot, this stage includes a significant amount of tarmac. Some of the roads are narrow and can be busy for walkers, so stay alert on bends and in poor visibility. On the hill and bog sections, waterproof footwear and gaiters are useful, especially after rain.

Food and water planning should be conservative. Start with a full day's supplies from Ardara, as services between the villages should not be assumed. Natural water on blanket bog and grazing land should not be relied on without treatment.

Kilcar is the usual overnight stop at the end of this stage. Accommodation in the small villages on the loop is limited, so book ahead rather than arriving without a bed, particularly in summer.

For transport and road access, Ardara and Kilcar are both served by Local Link Donegal buses, but services are infrequent and may not run daily. Timetables should be checked before travelling. Many walkers arrange this stage as part of a full loop rather than attempting same-day public-transport connections.

Navigation is generally straightforward where the route follows roads, but the transition between road, track and open ground needs attention. In mist, do not assume that the next yellow arrow will be visible from the last one; keep the map out and track progress from junction to junction.

Stage 2: Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) to Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) — approx. 20 km

This middle stage links Kilcar with Glencolmcille via the Carrick (An Charraig) side of the loop and some of the route's rougher upland ground. Although shorter than the first day, it should not be treated as easy: the stage includes exposed moorland and a final high crossing before the descent to Glencolmcille.

Carrick is the main settlement passed between the overnight stops and is the most useful place to plan around for services or road access. Opening times and bus connections should be checked before travelling, as this is a rural area with limited public transport.

The route crosses wet blanket bog and open hillside, with the waymarked line climbing over Faugher Mountain before dropping towards Glencolmcille. Discover Ireland describes this part of the Way as crossing a mountain pass at around 350 m, which is likely the true high point of the walk rather than the lower Glengesh road summit.

Conditions can be slow after rain. The boggy sections near Glencolmcille are known for rough, waterlogged ground, including hag bog, so allow more time than the distance suggests. In low cloud, this is one of the stages where navigation confidence matters most.

Glencolmcille is one of the cultural anchors of the route, associated with St Colmcille and the Turas Cholmcille pilgrimage. The village also has the Glencolmcille Folk Village, useful if timing allows, but the walking day should be planned around daylight and weather first.

Carry enough food and water from Kilcar unless specific services in Carrick have been checked in advance. Do not rely on streams or bog pools as a primary water source without treatment.

Glencolmcille has village-based accommodation, including the types of lodging found elsewhere on the loop, but capacity is limited. Book ahead, especially if walking during the main summer season or around local events.

Local Link Donegal buses serve Carrick and Glencolmcille, but services are infrequent. Road access is possible at the villages, which makes this stage one of the more practical points for joining or leaving the loop if the timetable works.

Stage 3: Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) to Ardara (Ard an Rátha) — approx. 21 km

The final stage is the most remote-feeling part of the loop, leaving Glencolmcille for the lonely western arm through Port (An Port) before returning towards Ardara. It is a day of open ground, stony tracks, sheep-cropped land and long, exposed stretches where weather can change the character of the walk quickly.

Port is one of the defining places on Slí Cholmcille: a remote, all-but-abandoned coastal hamlet at the head of a quiet valley. There are no services to count on here, so this stage should be walked with all food, water and bad-weather kit already packed.

The terrain includes rough bog and moorland as well as track and road walking. Around Glencolmcille and on the open ground beyond, wet conditions can make progress slow. Keep enough time in hand for navigation stops, especially if visibility deteriorates.

Maghera Beach and Caves and Assaranca Waterfall sit near the western arm of the route but should be treated as detours rather than guaranteed on-trail stops. Maghera's caves, arches and tunnels are only safely accessible at suitable low tide, so tide times must be checked before any visit. If the tide or weather is wrong, skip the caves and continue with the walking day.

Assaranca Waterfall is a roadside feature near the Ardara side of the loop and is easier to fit around the main route than Maghera's tidal caves. Even so, do not let detours compromise daylight on the final

stage, particularly in spring or autumn.

There is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port sections. The practical end point is Ardara, where the loop closes and where most walkers will already have started. Ardara has the best logistical role on the route, but beds should still be arranged in advance during busy periods.

Public transport at the end of the walk again depends on Local Link Donegal services, which are limited and timetable-dependent. If travelling onward by bus, build the final walking day around the actual departure time rather than assuming an evening connection will be available.

Navigation on this stage deserves particular care. The route is waymarked, but open moorland, rough bog and sparse markers make map-and-compass or GPS backup essential. Dogs are not permitted on the route, and livestock may be present on grazing land, so all gates and access points should be treated with care.

Recommended Itinerary

The most practical schedule is the standard 3-day village-to-village walk: Ardara (Ard an Rátha) to Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Kilcar to Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), then Glencolmcille back to Ardara. This keeps overnights in the main service villages and avoids trying to stop in the remote bog and Port (An Port) sections, where accommodation is limited or absent.

Distances are approximate. Use OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and check official mapping before booking accommodation, especially if adding detours to Maghera Beach and Caves, Assaranca Waterfall, or off-route sites such as Slieve League / Sliabh Liag.

Standard 3-day itinerary

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	24 km	A full first day that gets the longest stage done early and links two established villages. Expect a mix of road walking, hill country and exposed Donegal weather, so start promptly rather than treating this as a short warm-up.	Ardara has the best start/finish logistics on the loop. Kilcar has village accommodation, but beds are limited; book ahead in summer.
2	Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), via Carrick (An Charraig)	20 km	A moderate-length middle day with the useful service point of Carrick en route. The walking remains tiring in poor weather, with open ground and sections where navigation needs attention.	Carrick is useful for services and can also be used as an overnight stop on a slower itinerary. Glencolmcille has accommodation and makes the best base before the remote western return.
3	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Ardara (Ard an Rátha), via Port (An Port) and the western arm	21 km	A committing final day through one of the most isolated parts of the loop, including the Port area and remote boggy ground before returning towards Ardara. Keep enough time in hand for slow going on wet moorland and for any short detours.	There is little or no accommodation through the remote Port section, so this stage is best walked as a complete day into Ardara. Maghera Beach/Caves and Assaranca Waterfall are short detours on the western arm; tide times for the caves should be checked before travelling.

Slower 4-day itinerary

A 4-day schedule suits walkers who want shorter days, more time in Glencolmcille, or a less pressured trip in wet Atlantic weather. The cleanest way to slow the route down is to add an overnight in Carrick (An Charraig), splitting the Kilcar to Glencolmcille stage.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	24 km	Still a long opening day, but it keeps the first overnight in a proper village rather than trying to break the route in a thinly served area.	Book Kilcar accommodation ahead. If this day feels too long for the group, check official mapping and local transport options before committing to the itinerary.
2	Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	Carrick (An Charraig)	Check official mapping before booking	A shorter day that creates more recovery time and makes the overall route less compressed. Carrick is the logical intermediate stop between Kilcar and Glencolmcille.	Carrick has village services and accommodation options, but availability is limited and should be checked early.
3	Carrick (An Charraig)	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Check official mapping before booking	A shorter onward stage into Glencolmcille, leaving time for the village's heritage sites or simply for a slower start after poor weather.	Glencolmcille is the key overnight before the remote return towards Ardara. Book ahead, especially around busy summer periods and local events.
4	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	21 km	The final stage remains a serious day because the route crosses remote, boggy country around Port before returning to Ardara. Do not underestimate it just because the overall itinerary is slower.	There are no dependable midway accommodation stops on the remote section, so carry food, waterproofs and navigation kit for a full day out.

Faster variant

Most walkers should treat 3 days as the fastest sensible schedule. A 2-day crossing of the 65 km loop is only suitable for very fit walkers who are comfortable with long road sections, boggy open ground, sparse waymarking and poor-weather navigation.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), via Kilcar and Carrick	Check official mapping before booking	This combines the first two standard stages into one very long day. It is not a normal touring itinerary and leaves little margin for bad weather, slow bog or navigation delays.	Accommodation should be booked in Glencolmcille before committing. Carry enough food and allow for limited services between villages.
2	Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Ardara (Ard an Rátha), via Port (An Port)	21 km	A shorter second day on paper, but still remote and exposed underfoot. This is the section where tired walkers are most likely to lose time in wet bog or poor visibility.	Finish in Ardara, where start/end logistics are simplest. Local Link bus times and any onward travel should be checked before travelling, as services are infrequent.

Planning the Route

Slí Cholmcille is best planned as a village-to-village loop rather than as a continuous wilderness trek. The practical overnight stops are dictated by the small settlements on or near the route: Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille). Between them, accommodation and services are sparse, and the moorland and Port (An Port) sections should be treated as remote day-walks.

Most walkers complete the loop in three days, using Kilcar and Glencolmcille as the main overnight stops. This is efficient, but it makes for three fairly full days with bog, road walking and Atlantic weather all adding fatigue. A four-day schedule is more forgiving, especially if you want time for Glencolmcille's heritage sites, the Folk Village, or short detours such as Maghera Beach and Caves or Assaranca Waterfall.

Choosing a 3-day or 4-day schedule

A 3-day walk suits fit hikers who are comfortable with long days, wet ground and navigation on lightly waymarked open sections. It works best when accommodation is booked in advance and transport to Ardara is arranged around the start and finish days.

A 4-day walk is the better choice if pace, weather margins or sightseeing matter more than speed. Carrick can be useful for breaking the middle part of the loop, but accommodation availability should drive the final plan rather than a fixed itinerary on paper.

Schedule	Best for	Planning notes
3 days	Fit walkers wanting the standard village-to-village circuit	Common pattern: Ardara → Kilcar → Glencolmcille → Ardara. Expect full days and little margin if weather slows progress.
4 days	Walkers wanting shorter days, more time in villages, or extra weather flexibility	Build the plan around available beds in Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille. This should be checked before travelling.
Section walking	Walkers based locally or using buses/lifts	Possible in principle because the loop passes several villages, but public transport is limited and infrequent, so logistics can be harder than the walking.

Natural stages

The standard clockwise plan starts and finishes in Ardara, heading first towards Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis) and continuing round through Kilcar, Carrick, Glencolmcille and Port before returning to Ardara. Walking clockwise also puts the Glengesh valley early in the route and the remote western arm later in the circuit.

Stage	Approx. distance	Practical character
Ardara to Kilcar	24 km	A long opening day over the Glengesh side of the route, with road sections, hill country and exposure to Atlantic weather.

Stage	Approx. distance	Practical character
Kilcar to Glencolmcille	20 km	Passes through the Carrick area and includes open ground before descending towards Glencolmcille; allow for boggy going and slower navigation.
Glencolmcille to Ardara	21 km	The most remote-feeling stage, with the Port area and the western return towards Ardara. Do not rely on intermediate services.

The route's photographed scenic high point is often treated as Glengesh Pass at about 270 m, but the waymarked walk likely reaches higher open moorland of around 350 m. For planning, the important point is not the exact figure but the exposure: poor visibility, wind and wet bog can make modest heights feel much more serious.

Accommodation and booking strategy

Accommodation is village-based, with hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites in Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille. These are small places, not large trail towns, so beds can be limited in summer and during busy local periods.

Book the first and last nights in Ardara and the intermediate nights before arranging transport. If walking in three days, Kilcar and Glencolmcille are the key overnight points. If walking in four days, check availability in Carrick as well as Kilcar and Glencolmcille before committing to daily stages.

There is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port sections. Do not plan to improvise a bed halfway through a stage.

Food and water planning

Treat each day as self-contained. Carry enough food for the full stage, plus spare snacks in case boggy ground, weather or navigation slows progress.

Water planning should be conservative. The route crosses wet blanket bog and hill country, but that does not mean reliable drinking water is available. Carry sufficient water from the start of each day, and do not depend on untreated bog or stream water.

Even though the route links villages, services between them should not be assumed. Check opening times locally, especially outside the main summer season.

Navigation and waymarking

Slí Cholmcille is a waymarked National Waymarked Trail, using the yellow arrow on a black background. Waymarking is useful, but it should not be the only navigation method, particularly on open moorland where markers can be sparse and visibility can deteriorate quickly.

Carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and know how to use it. A GPS track or mapping app is a sensible backup, but batteries, phone signal and weatherproofing must be planned for. The hag bog near Glencolmcille and other waterlogged sections can make progress slower and route-finding less obvious than the map suggests.

Transport and section hiking

There is no railway close to the route. Most walkers reach Ardara by car or by travelling via Donegal Town and Killybegs, then using local transport where available.

Local Link Donegal buses serve Ardara, Killybegs, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, but services are infrequent and some run only a few days a week. Timetables should be checked before travelling, especially if using buses to start, finish or split the route into sections.

Because the trail is a loop, it can be joined at Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille as well as Ardara. In practice, section hiking depends less on the geography and more on transport: a short section may be straightforward with a lift or taxi, but awkward by public bus.

Shortening, extending and detours

The loop is not especially easy to shorten on foot without leaving the waymarked route, because the natural breaks are the villages. If time is tight, it is usually better to walk selected sections from a village base than to try to create an improvised shorter circuit.

Maghera Beach and Caves and Assaranca Waterfall are short detours on the western arm rather than core line-of-route objectives. The caves are only suitable at low tide, so tide times must be checked before making that detour.

Slieve League / Sliabh Liag and Silver Strand are popular add-ons to a walking trip in this part of Donegal, but they are not part of the core waymarked Slí Cholmcille route. Treat them as separate excursions, with their own transport and time allowance.

Weather, access and other practicalities

The main planning risk is weather rather than technical terrain. The route has no scrambling, but exposed moorland, wet blanket bog and long stretches of narrow tarmac road can make the walk tiring in wind, rain or poor visibility.

Waterproofs, warm layers and footwear that can cope with saturated ground are essential in any walking season. Road sections also require care: expect narrow roads, some busy stretches, and limited space for walkers.

Dogs are not permitted on the route. Current trail status, diversions and any local access notices should be checked with the official trail information before travelling.

Towns, Villages and Overnight Stops

Slí Cholmcille is best planned as a village-to-village walk. Accommodation is concentrated in Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, with little or no practical overnight infrastructure on the exposed moorland, Port and western-arm sections between them.

Beds are limited in these small Donegal villages, so book ahead, especially in summer. Food and shop opening hours should also be checked before travelling; do not assume late-evening resupply after a long stage.

Place	Role on the route	Overnight usefulness
Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	Usual start and finish of the loop	Best start/end base
Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)	High road pass between Ardara and the south-western side of the loop	Not an overnight stop
Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	Common first overnight on a 3-day clockwise itinerary	Key overnight stop
Carrick (An Charraig)	Village between Kilcar and Glencolmcille	Useful stop or schedule-break point
Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Common second overnight on a 3-day clockwise itinerary	Key overnight stop
Port (An Port)	Remote, all-but-abandoned coastal hamlet section	Not a service stop
Maghera (Machaire / An Machaire)	Beach and caves near the western arm	Detour/local interest, not a core overnight
Assaranca Waterfall (Eas a' Ranca)	Roadside cascade on the western arm	Short stop only

Ardara (Ard an Rátha)

Ardara is the normal start and finish for Slí Cholmcille, because the route is a loop and returns to the town via the Glengesh valley when walked clockwise. It is also the most logical place to leave a car, arrange the first night, and build in a buffer night before or after the walk.

Accommodation is available in and around the town in the general village-based mix used on this route: hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites. Availability is limited compared with larger walking centres, so advance booking matters.

For food and supplies, Ardara is the best place to arrive prepared rather than relying on the smaller places later in the circuit. Current shop, pub and café opening times should be checked before travelling, particularly outside the main visitor season.

Public transport is possible but light. Local Link Donegal buses serve Ardara, but services are infrequent and may not run every day; many walkers reach the area by car or by coach connections through

Donegal Town and Killybegs. Timetables should be checked before booking accommodation tied to a fixed start time.

Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)

Glengesh Pass sits between Ardara and the south-western side of the loop and is one of the major landscape features of the walk. The road climbs through a glacial valley to around 270 m, with the route using this corridor before continuing towards Kilcar.

It is not an overnight stop. Treat it as an exposed pass section with no reliable walker services, rather than as a village or resupply point.

Because the route includes substantial narrow-road walking, this section needs road awareness as well as hillwalking judgement. In poor weather, the pass can feel more committing than the modest height suggests.

Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)

Kilcar is the usual first overnight stop on the common 3-day clockwise itinerary from Ardara, after an opening stage of roughly 24 km. It is one of the key practical villages on the route and a sensible place to break the walk before continuing towards Carrick and Glencolmcille.

Accommodation is available in the village area, including the general mix of hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites found across the main Slí Cholmcille villages. Book ahead rather than arriving without a reservation, as capacity is limited.

Kilcar is also a useful food and rest point, but walkers should not rely on unlimited resupply options or late opening. Check current shop, café and pub hours before setting out from Ardara, and carry enough food for the day regardless.

Local Link Donegal buses serve Kilcar, though services are infrequent. This can be useful for section-walking or shortening the route, but bus times must be planned around rather than treated as turn-up-and-go transport.

Carrick (An Charraig)

Carrick lies between Kilcar and Glencolmcille and is an important intermediate village on the southern part of the loop. For walkers taking a relaxed 4-day schedule, it can be useful as a staging point, depending on accommodation availability and the exact daily split.

Accommodation is available in Carrick, again within the limited village-based pattern of hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites. It is also a practical place to consider if Kilcar or Glencolmcille beds are full, but any plan depending on this should be booked in advance.

Carrick is served by Local Link Donegal buses, but services are infrequent. It is also near the popular Slieve League / Sliabh Liag area, though those sea cliffs are an off-route add-on and should not be treated as part of the core waymarked Slí Cholmcille.

For route planning, Carrick is most useful as a flexible overnight, food or transport point rather than an essential stop on the standard 3-day version. Check current local services before using it as the basis for a shortened or extended itinerary.

Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)

Glencolmcille is the common second overnight stop on a 3-day clockwise walk, after the Kilcar to Glencolmcille stage of roughly 20 km. It is one of the most important bases on the route, both logistically and culturally.

Accommodation is available in the village area, including hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites. Demand can be high relative to the number of beds, so this is a place to book early rather than leave until the final planning stage.

Food, pub, café and shop options should be checked before travelling, especially if arriving late after wet moorland or rough bog. Carry enough food to finish the stage even if a planned stop is closed.

Local Link Donegal buses serve Glencolmcille, but they are infrequent and some local services run only on certain days. This makes it a possible section-hike access point, but not a transport hub in the way walkers may expect from larger trail towns.

Glencolmcille is also worth allowing time for if the schedule is not too tight. The valley is associated with St Colmcille and the Turas Cholmcille pilgrimage, and the Glencolmcille Folk Village is a useful local stop for understanding the area's rural heritage.

Port (An Port)

Port is a remote, all-but-abandoned coastal hamlet reached on one of the loneliest sections of the route. It sits on the return side of the loop between Glencolmcille and Ardara, where the walking becomes more isolated and service-free.

Do not plan Port as an overnight or resupply stop. The brief for this route is clear: there is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port sections between villages.

This is a place to pass through with the day's food, waterproofs and navigation already sorted. The surrounding ground includes stony tracks, sheep-cropped land and exposed Atlantic terrain, so delays in poor weather should be allowed for.

Maghera (Machaire / An Machaire)

Maghera Beach and Caves lie near the western part of the loop and are best treated as a short detour rather than a guaranteed service stop. The beach, caves, arches and tunnels are only safely accessible at suitable low tide, so tide times must be checked before any visit.

Maghera is not one of the core overnight villages for the standard Slí Cholmcille itinerary. If considering accommodation or food in the wider area, this should be checked before travelling.

The detour can add interest to the final day back towards Ardara, but it should not compromise timing on the longer Glencolmcille to Ardara stage. In poor weather or with a late start, staying on the main route may be the better decision.

Assaranca Waterfall (Eas a' Ranca)

Assaranca Waterfall is a roadside cascade on the western arm of the route near the Maghera side of the loop. It is a short scenic stop rather than a place to base a walking day.

There is no reason to plan an overnight around the waterfall itself. Use Ardara or Glencolmcille for accommodation planning on this side of the circuit, depending on direction and schedule.

Because this part of the route sits late in the common clockwise itinerary, it is easy to underestimate the remaining time back to Ardara. Keep the stop brief if daylight, weather or transport connections are tight.

Practical accommodation notes for the whole loop

The standard 3-day pattern is Ardara to Kilcar, Kilcar to Glencolmcille, then Glencolmcille to Ardara. A 4-day version usually works by using the same village network more flexibly, with Carrick the most obvious additional village stop where availability and stage lengths suit.

There is no railway near the route. If relying on public transport, plan around Local Link Donegal services to Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, and check current timetables before fixing accommodation dates.

Carry enough food for each full stage, even when ending in a village. Weather, boggy ground, road walking and sparse waymarking on open moorland can make arrival times less predictable than the headline distances suggest.

Dogs are not permitted on the route, so accommodation planning should not be based on bringing one. This is especially important on a route crossing sheep country, open moorland and small rural communities.

Getting to the Start

Slí Cholmcille is normally started in Ardara (Ard an Rátha) town centre, because the route is a loop and returns there. It can also be joined at Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) or Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), which may suit walkers using local buses or booking scarce accommodation.

By train

There is no railway close to Ardara or the south-west Donegal coast. Rail is therefore not a practical way to reach the start without a substantial onward bus, coach or taxi journey.

For most walkers using public transport, the realistic approach is to travel by coach or bus towards Donegal Town and Killybegs, then continue by local bus or pre-booked taxi to Ardara. Current connections and same-day onward options should be checked before travelling.

By bus

Local Link Donegal buses serve Ardara, Killybegs, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, making it possible to reach the route without a car. Services are infrequent, and some routes run only a few days a week, so the bus timetable should shape the walking schedule rather than the other way round.

A common public-transport approach is to travel by coach to Donegal Town, continue towards Killybegs, and then use local services or a taxi for Ardara. This should be checked before travelling, especially for weekend arrivals, public holidays and late-afternoon connections.

If starting somewhere other than Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille are also served by Local Link Donegal, but the same warning applies: do not assume there will be a convenient daily service after finishing a stage.

By car

Driving is the simplest way to reach Ardara and gives the most flexibility for accommodation, food shopping and weather delays. Ardara sits in south-west County Donegal on the Wild Atlantic Way, with many walkers approaching via Donegal Town and Killybegs.

Because the route is circular, leaving a car in Ardara avoids the need for an end-of-walk transfer. Long-stay parking arrangements in Ardara should be agreed with your accommodation or checked locally before leaving a vehicle for several days.

The loop includes long stretches of narrow tarmac road, and some minor roads in this part of Donegal are slow. Build in extra time if arriving after a long drive, particularly before a first stage to Kilcar.

From the nearest airport

The nearest airports are City of Derry and Donegal Airport at Carrickfinn. Ireland West Airport Knock and Belfast are larger alternatives, but both involve a longer onward journey to south-west Donegal.

From any airport, expect to combine bus or coach travel with a local bus or taxi for the final leg to Ardara. Flight times, bus connections and taxi availability should be checked before travelling, as a late

arrival can make same-day onward travel difficult.

For groups, a pre-booked taxi or private transfer from a regional transport hub may be more practical than trying to connect multiple infrequent services. Confirm the fare in euros before booking.

Where to stay before starting

Ardara is the most convenient place to stay the night before starting Slí Cholmcille. Accommodation is village-based, with hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites in the wider route villages, but beds are limited and should be booked ahead in summer.

Staying in Ardara also makes the first morning simpler: the walk can begin from the town centre without arranging a transfer. If accommodation in Ardara is full, Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille can work as alternative joining points, but this changes the stage order and depends on current local bus or taxi options.

Getting Home from the Finish

Slí Cholmcille is a loop, so most walkers finish back in Ardara (Ard an Rátha), where they started. That makes departure simpler than on a point-to-point trail, but public transport in south-west Donegal is limited and should be planned before the walk.

By train

There is no railway anywhere near Ardara or the Slí Cholmcille loop. Rail is not a practical finish option unless it is combined with a longer bus, coach or taxi journey to a rail-served city elsewhere in Ireland.

If onward travel depends on a train connection, allow generous time for the road transfer out of Ardara. Exact connections and same-day feasibility should be checked before travelling.

By bus

Local Link Donegal buses serve Ardara, Killybegs, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, but services are infrequent and some routes run only a few days a week. Do not assume there will be a convenient bus after finishing the final stage.

For onward travel, many walkers route out through Donegal Town and/or Killybegs, then connect with longer-distance coach services. Current Local Link and coach timetables should be checked before booking accommodation or flights, especially for weekends, public holidays and late-afternoon finishes.

If finishing late in the day, the safest plan is either to stay overnight in Ardara or pre-arrange a taxi. Waiting until arrival in Ardara to solve onward transport can leave too few options.

By car/taxi

Because the walk finishes where it starts, leaving a car in Ardara is the most straightforward option. Check with accommodation providers where guests can park for the duration of the walk, rather than assuming long-stay parking is available in the town centre.

Taxis are useful for reaching Donegal Town, Killybegs, Donegal Airport at Carrickfinn, or for retrieving a vehicle if the walk has been started from Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille instead of Ardara. Pre-booking is strongly advised, particularly outside the main summer season or for early-morning and evening transfers.

From the nearest airport

The nearest relevant airports are Donegal Airport at Carrickfinn and City of Derry Airport. Ireland West Airport Knock and Belfast are larger alternatives, but require longer onward road or public-transport connections.

For the journey home, allow for the fact that Ardara is in a public-transport-light part of Donegal. A same-day flight after completing the final stage may be unrealistic unless a taxi or private transfer has been arranged and the timing is comfortable. Airport transfer options and current schedules should be checked before travelling.

Where to stay at the finish

Ardara has village-based accommodation, including hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and campsites, but capacity is limited. Booking ahead is sensible in summer and around busy local periods.

Staying in Ardara on the final night is often the most robust plan. It removes pressure from the last stage, gives a buffer for poor weather or slow boggy ground, and makes it easier to take a morning bus, taxi or onward coach connection the next day.

Which Direction Should You Walk?

The usual and most practical direction is **clockwise from Ardara (Ard an Rátha)**: Ardara → Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) → Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) → Ardara. This matches the common three-day accommodation pattern, with nights in Kilcar and Glencolmcille.

Because Slí Cholmcille is a loop, there is no major start-versus-finish transport advantage in either direction if you begin in Ardara. The bigger issue is simply getting to and from south-west Donegal: public transport is limited, Local Link services are infrequent, and current bus times should be checked before travelling.

Clockwise: Ardara → Kilcar → Glencolmcille → Ardara

Clockwise is the best default for most walkers. It gives a straightforward three-day rhythm of roughly **24 km, 20 km and 21 km**, with the longest day first rather than saved for the end.

It also works well psychologically. The route begins with the climb towards the Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis) and then builds towards Glencolmcille, before the final day crosses the more remote western arm via Port (An Port) and returns to Ardara past the Maghera and Assaranca area.

The main caution is that the final day is not a soft wind-down. The Glencolmcille-to-Ardara leg includes exposed, remote ground and wet boggy sections, so it still needs an early start, proper waterproofs and reliable navigation.

Anti-clockwise: Ardara → Glencolmcille → Kilcar → Ardara

Walking anti-clockwise is entirely possible, especially if accommodation availability makes it easier. It puts the western, more remote side of the loop early, then finishes with the Kilcar-to-Ardara leg.

The trade-off is that the longest stage falls at the end if you use the standard three-day split in reverse. That can be less appealing after two wet or windy days, particularly because the route includes plenty of hard tarmac as well as bog and open hillside.

Anti-clockwise can make sense for section-hikers joining at Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille, but bus links are limited and should not be treated as turn-up-and-go. Any plan depending on Local Link connections should be built around the actual timetable.

Climbs, weather and waymarking

There is no decisive climbing advantage either way. Total ascent is the same, and the harder parts of Slí Cholmcille are caused more by wet blanket bog, exposure, road walking and occasional sparse waymarking than by any technical ascent.

Atlantic weather is a bigger factor than direction. On a circular route the wind angle changes through the day, so there is no reliable way to choose a direction that avoids headwinds. Check the forecast before setting out, and treat exposed moorland sections seriously in poor visibility.

Recommendation

For most walkers, **walk clockwise from Ardara**, staying in **Kilcar** and **Glencolmcille** on a three-day schedule. It follows the most natural accommodation flow, avoids leaving the longest day until last, and gives a strong final stage back to Ardara through the wilder western side of the loop.

Only choose the reverse direction if beds, buses or a section-hiking plan make it more practical.

Accommodation Along the Route

Slí Cholmcille works well as a village-to-village walk, but only if accommodation is arranged before setting off. Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) have the useful overnight options: hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, hostels and some camping options. These are small Donegal settlements, not large resort towns, so availability can disappear quickly in summer and at weekends.

The standard 3-day clockwise plan uses Kilcar and Glencolmcille as the two overnight stops after leaving Ardara. A 4-day schedule can be made more comfortable by using Carrick or by arranging a transfer, but exact accommodation location matters because the route includes long road and moorland sections where there are few fall-back options.

There is little or no accommodation on the remote open-moorland and Port (An Port) sections. Do not plan a stage ending at Glengesh Pass, Port, or on the western arm near the Maghera and Assaranca detours unless a pick-up or accommodation has been arranged in advance.

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Ardara (Ard an Rátha)	Good	Start/finish nights; pre-walk and post-walk logistics	The usual base for the loop. Book the night before starting and the final night if transport connections are awkward.
Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)	None	Passing through only	Scenic high point on the road section, not an overnight stop. Continue to the next village or arrange a pre-booked pick-up.
Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh)	Limited	First overnight on the common 3-day clockwise itinerary	A practical stop after the Ardara–Kilcar stage. Beds are limited, so this is one of the key bookings to secure early.
Carrick (An Charraig)	Limited	Shorter itineraries; breaking up the Kilcar–Glencolmcille side; off-route Slieve League add-on	Useful for a slower schedule or for walkers adding time near Sliabh Liag, which is not on the core waymarked route. Check exact accommodation position against the trail before booking.
Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	Good	Second overnight on the common 3-day clockwise itinerary; rest or cultural stop	One of the most important accommodation bases on the route. Still book ahead, especially in summer.
Port (An Port)	None	Remote through-section only	Do not rely on services or beds here. The onward section towards Ardara is exposed and should be planned as a committed walking day or with a pre-arranged transfer.
Maghera / Assaranca western arm	None	Detours and passing points	Maghera Beach and Assaranca Waterfall are useful landmarks/detours, not dependable overnight stops for the waymarked walk.

Booking strategy

Book the route as a chain before committing to travel: Ardara, Kilcar, Glencolmcille, then Ardara again. If one of the middle villages is full, changing only one night can affect the whole itinerary because there are long gaps between settlements.

For a 3-day walk, the most straightforward pattern is:

- Night 0: Ardara
- Night 1: Kilcar
- Night 2: Glencolmcille
- Night 3: Ardara, if needed for onward transport

For a 4-day walk, Carrick can help shorten the middle of the route, but the exact split depends on where beds are available and whether a transfer is being used. This should be checked before travelling.

Luggage transfer and taxis

Slí Cholmcille is suitable for inn-to-inn walkers because each normal overnight is in a village rather than on high ground. However, dedicated luggage-transfer availability should not be assumed. If walking with a light day pack is important, arrange baggage movement directly with accommodation providers, a local taxi, or a walking-holiday operator before booking non-refundable beds.

Taxi transfers can also solve awkward accommodation gaps, especially if Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille is full. They are most useful when pre-booked to collect from an agreed road-access point, not as a last-minute fix from open moorland or the Port section. This should be checked before travelling.

Camping

Camping options exist around the route villages, but opening dates, facilities and exact locations vary. Check directly before relying on a campsite as a stage-end option, particularly outside the main summer season.

Wild or informal camping should not be treated as the default solution for this route. Much of the ground is wet blanket bog, exposed to Atlantic weather, and crosses working rural land, so village-based accommodation remains the most reliable plan.

Camping and Wild Camping

Camping is possible on Slí Cholmcille, but this is not the easiest way to walk the route. The loop is better set up for village-based overnights in Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), where accommodation and services are concentrated.

There are campsites in the wider accommodation mix for the area, but exact locations, opening dates and booking rules should be checked before travelling. Many facilities in rural Donegal are seasonal, and the villages are small, so do not assume a pitch will be available on arrival in summer.

Does the route suit camping?

Slí Cholmcille can be walked with camping gear, but it is tougher than the 65 km distance suggests. The route includes wet blanket bog, exposed open moorland, rough hag bog near Glencolmcille and long sections of narrow tarmac road, all of which feel harder with a full pack.

A camping itinerary works best if pitches are planned around the main settlements rather than relying on finding places between them. There is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port (An Port) sections, and the exposed Atlantic weather makes casual high-level camping a poor plan.

Wild camping and permission

Do not assume that wild camping is permitted simply because the landscape is remote. Much of the route crosses private land, grazing land and commonage, and walkers should seek landowner permission before pitching away from formal campsites.

Rules and local sensitivities can vary, especially near villages, beaches, archaeological sites, holy wells and pilgrimage places around Glencolmcille. This should be checked locally before relying on a wild-camp plan.

If permission is granted, keep the camp small, late and unobtrusive. Pitch on durable ground where possible, stay well away from houses, livestock, walls, gates, paths and waymarkers, and leave early.

Practical camping notes by section

Section	Camping practicality	Notes
Ardara to Kilcar	Limited between settlements	A long stage with road walking, Glengesh Pass and open ground. Plan water and food before leaving Ardara; do not rely on finding a suitable pitch en route.
Kilcar to Glencolmcille via Carrick	Best planned around villages	Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille are the logical places to look for formal accommodation or campsites. Check current availability before setting off.
Glencolmcille to Ardara via Port	Most remote and least forgiving	The Port section is isolated, exposed and has little infrastructure. Wild camping here should only be considered with permission, settled weather, strong Leave No Trace practice and a realistic exit plan.

Water and supplies

The safest approach is to fill up in villages and carry enough water for the full stage ahead. Do not rely on moorland water as your main supply: blanket bog, grazing land and roadside drainage can make sources slow, peaty or contaminated.

Any untreated water taken from streams or boggy ground should be filtered, boiled or chemically treated. In dry or windy weather, exposed sections can still be dehydrating, especially where the route follows tarmac.

Leave No Trace on Slí Cholmcille

Use established campsites where available. Away from formal sites, only camp with permission and leave no visible trace of the pitch.

Essential practice on this route includes:

- take all litter out, including food scraps and toilet paper;
- never light open fires on bog, moorland, dunes or grazing land;
- use a stove only where it is safe and sheltered from wind;
- keep well clear of livestock and farm access;
- avoid camping beside waymarkers, gates, walls or narrow roads;
- bury human waste only where appropriate and well away from watercourses, paths and dwellings, or carry it out where burial is not suitable;
- do not disturb archaeological, religious or pilgrimage sites around Glencolmcille.

Dogs are not permitted on the route, which also matters for campers passing through sheep country and working farmland.

Seasonal considerations

Spring, summer and autumn are the sensible camping seasons. Even then, Atlantic weather can bring heavy rain, low cloud and strong wind, and the boggy ground can remain saturated after prolonged wet spells.

A low-profile tent, full waterproofs, dry bags and warm layers are essential if camping. In poor weather, village accommodation or a booked campsite is far safer and less damaging than trying to force a wild camp onto wet open moorland.

Food, Water and Resupply

Slí Cholmcille is a village-based walk, so food planning is straightforward if each day starts with supplies already packed. Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) are the practical resupply points; the open moorland, Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis), Port (An Port) and the longer road sections should be treated as service-free.

Do not rely on finding lunch en route unless it has been checked directly in advance. Rural Donegal opening hours can be limited, seasonal and shorter on Sundays, and cafés, pubs, village shops or petrol-station-style resupply may not suit a walker's timing. This should be checked before travelling.

How much food to carry

For the standard 3-day itinerary, carry a full packed lunch, snacks and an emergency reserve each day. The stages are around 20–24 km, with exposed bog and moorland where progress can be slower than the distance suggests.

Breakfast and evening meals are easiest to arrange in the overnight villages, either through accommodation or local food outlets. If arriving late, walking on a Sunday, or travelling outside the main summer season, arrange dinner plans before setting off for the day.

Water planning

Start each stage with bottles filled from accommodation or a village tap where available. For a full day on this route, 1.5–2 litres is a sensible minimum for many walkers in normal conditions, with more in warm, windy or slow-going weather.

There is plenty of wet ground in this part of Donegal, but natural water should not be treated as automatically safe. Streams, drains and bog pools may be affected by livestock, peat, road run-off or stagnant ground, so any natural water used should be filtered, treated or boiled.

The key point is not scarcity of water in the landscape, but reliability and quality. Carry enough treated water to avoid needing to drink from bogland unless necessary.

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Ardara (Ard an Rátha) to Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), via Glengesh Pass	Stock up in Ardara before leaving. Treat the route to Kilcar as having no dependable food stop.	Fill bottles before leaving Ardara. Natural water may be present in hill and bog areas but should be treated.	Longest standard stage at about 24 km. Carry lunch, snacks and extra food in case boggy ground slows progress.
Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) to Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille), via Carrick (An Charraig)	Kilcar and Glencolmcille are the main start/end resupply points. Carrick may be useful on a 4-day split, but opening times should be checked before relying on it.	Fill at Kilcar before setting off. Refill opportunities depend on village services being open; carry enough for the moorland sections.	Do not assume a mid-stage meal will be available. This stage includes exposed upland ground, so keep food and water accessible.

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) to Ardara (Ard an Rátha), via Port (An Port)	Stock up in Glencolmcille. Port is remote and should be treated as having no resupply. Food is next reliable at Ardara.	Fill before leaving Glencolmcille. Natural water on the remote western arm should be treated if used.	Carry a full day's food. This is the stage where poor weather or slow navigation can make spare snacks particularly useful.
Carrick (An Charraig) as a 4-day overnight option	Useful if splitting the route more gently, but do not assume all food outlets will be open when needed.	Refill from accommodation where possible.	Check accommodation meal arrangements and local opening hours before booking a shorter-stage itinerary.

Practical resupply tips

Book accommodation with meals or nearby food access in mind, not just bed availability. In small villages, a room without an obvious dinner option can become awkward after a wet day on the hill.

Buy lunch supplies the evening before if there is any chance of an early start. Morning opening hours are not something to depend on without checking.

Carry a small reserve of high-energy food for the bog and moorland sections. Slí Cholmcille is not technically difficult, but wet ground, Atlantic weather and sparse waymarking can make a planned day longer than expected.

Navigation and Waymarking

Slí Cholmcille is an official waymarked loop, using the standard Irish National Waymarked Trail marker: a yellow arrow on a black background. In settled areas, on lanes and at road junctions, these markers are the main navigational aid and are usually what walkers follow between villages.

Do not treat the arrows as a substitute for navigation. The route includes open blanket bog, exposed moorland and rough ground where waymarking can be sparse, weather can close in quickly and the trodden line may be unclear. A map, compass and an offline digital route are sensible rather than optional.

Maps and digital navigation

Carry **OSI Discovery Series Sheet 10**, which covers the route area. This is the key paper map for the loop and is the safest fallback if a phone battery fails or visibility deteriorates.

A downloaded GPX track is strongly recommended, especially for the moorland sections and for checking turn-offs from minor roads. Use an offline mapping app with topographic mapping rather than relying on a live mobile connection. AllTrails has a mapped Slí Cholmcille route, but the line should still be checked against current trail status and on-the-ground waymarks before setting out.

Mobile coverage should not be relied on across the whole loop, particularly around the more remote moorland, bog and Port (An Port) sections. Download maps, GPX files and accommodation details before leaving each village.

Where navigation needs most care

The most straightforward navigation is generally on the tarmac lanes and village approaches, although the amount of road walking means missed turn-offs can still cost time. Watch carefully for waymarks where the route leaves a lane for bog road, track or open hillside.

The open moorland between the village sections is more demanding. Wet blanket bog can make the obvious line wander, and in low cloud the landscape gives few reliable visual features. The rough hag bog near Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille) is a particular place to slow down and check position regularly.

The Port (An Port) area is remote and feels more committing than the distance on the map suggests. It is not a place to be navigating for the first time by phone screen alone in poor weather.

Gaeltacht place names also matter for navigation. Road signs and local signs may use Irish names, so walkers should be familiar with both forms: Ard an Rátha (Ardara), Cill Charthaigh (Kilcar), An Charraig (Carrick), Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille), An Port (Port) and Bealach Ghleann Geis (Glengesh Pass).

Suitability for less experienced navigators

In clear weather, a competent walker used to following waymarks and checking a map should find the route manageable. It is not a technical navigation route, and there is no scrambling.

However, it is not ideal as a first multi-day walk for someone with very limited navigation experience. The combination of sparse waymarking on open moorland, waterlogged bog, exposed Atlantic weather and long gaps between villages means walkers should be able to locate themselves on a map, follow a bearing if required and make conservative decisions when visibility drops.

Terrain, Conditions and Difficulty in Practice

Slí Cholmcille is usually described as **Moderate**, but it is a route where the ground conditions matter more than the headline grade. There is no scrambling and no technical mountain terrain, yet the combination of wet blanket bog, exposed Atlantic weather, long road sections and sometimes sparse waymarking on open ground can make the walk feel harder than expected.

Sport Ireland grades the route as **Strenuous**, which is a useful warning for planning. Fit walkers used to Irish hill paths should find the terrain manageable, but anyone expecting a firm, continuously waymarked leisure trail may be surprised by how rough and tiring parts of the loop can be.

Surfaces underfoot

The route uses a mixed set of surfaces rather than one consistent path type:

Surface	What it means in practice
Tarmac roads and country lanes	A considerable share of the route is on narrow roads. Some sections are quiet, but others can feel busy for walkers because there is limited space at the roadside. Road walking also adds foot fatigue over multi-day distances.
Bog roads and rough tracks	These are generally easier to follow than open moorland, but can still be wet, uneven and stony. Tracks around more remote sections, including towards Port (An Port), can feel isolated.
Open hillside and blanket bog	The slowest and wettest ground on the route. Expect soft, waterlogged turf, tussocks and uneven going, especially after rain.
Hag bog near Glencolmcille	This is among the rougher ground on the loop. Progress can be slow, and dry-looking ground may still be saturated underfoot.
Sheep-cropped ground	Around remote coastal and hill sections the walking may cross grazed, uneven ground. Dogs are not permitted on the route.

Waterproof boots are strongly preferable to trail shoes for most walkers, particularly outside a dry spell. Gaiters are useful on the boggier stages, and spare dry socks are worth carrying even on a three-day itinerary.

Road walking and traffic

The amount of road walking is one of the defining practical features of Slí Cholmcille. The roads are part of the character of the loop, linking Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig), Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) and the western arm back towards Ardara, but they are not always relaxing to walk.

Narrow tarmac, bends and limited verges mean walkers should stay alert, especially in poor visibility or rain. A bright pack cover or visible outer layer is sensible in dull Atlantic conditions. Trekking poles can be helpful on bog and descents, but they are less useful during long tarmac sections and may need to be stowed.

Bog, wet ground and slow going

The open moorland is the main reason the route can feel tougher than the distance suggests. Blanket bog holds water for long periods, so conditions do not necessarily improve immediately after a dry day. After sustained rain, expect slower progress and more energy spent balancing, stepping round wet hollows and picking a line through rough ground.

The hag bog near Glencolmcille deserves particular respect. This is not technical terrain, but it can be awkward, tiring and messy, with broken peat and uneven footing. In mist, this sort of ground also makes navigation slower because waymarks can be harder to spot and straight-line progress is rarely possible.

Climbs, descents and exposure

The route has about **1,600 m of total ascent** over the loop. The climbs are not high by mountain standards, but they are repeated often enough to add up over three days.

The best-known high road point is **Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)**, where the road reaches roughly **270 m** over tight hairpin bends. The true highest walked point on the waymarked route is likely higher, around **350 m**, on open moorland associated with the crossing over Faugher Mountain before the descent towards Glencolmcille.

The difficulty on these higher sections comes less from altitude and more from exposure. Wind, low cloud and heavy rain can arrive quickly from the Atlantic, and there is little shelter on open hillside or moor. In poor visibility, a map, compass and confident navigation are important rather than optional.

Waymarking and navigation

Slí Cholmcille is a waymarked National Waymarked Trail, using the standard **yellow arrow on a black background**. Waymarking is generally easier to follow on roads and tracks, but can feel sparse on open moorland.

Do not rely on arrows alone in mist, fading light or heavy rain. Carry **OSI Discovery Sheet 10** and know how to use it. A GPS device or offline map is useful as a backup, but it should not replace basic navigation judgement on boggy open ground.

Stage-by-stage difficulty in practice

Ardara to Kilcar is a long first stage if walked as part of the common three-day schedule. The climb through the Glengesh area is steady rather than technical, but the road ascent and exposed upland weather can take energy early in the walk.

Kilcar to Glencolmcille includes varied hill and moorland walking, with the route crossing higher open ground before descending towards Glencolmcille. This stage is where the difference between “moderate” and “strenuous” can become apparent if visibility is poor or the bog is saturated.

Glencolmcille to Ardara includes some of the loop’s loneliest ground, including the remote Port (An Port) area and the western arm back towards Ardara. Tracks, sheep-cropped ground and wet moorland can make progress uneven, while road sections later in the day can be tiring on the feet.

Seasonal conditions

Spring, summer and autumn are the realistic walking seasons, but none guarantees dry ground. Spring can bring cool, wet upland conditions and soft bog after winter. Summer gives the longest daylight and the best chance of settled weather, though accommodation in the small villages should be booked ahead.

Autumn can be excellent in clear weather, but daylight shortens and Atlantic systems can make the exposed sections much more serious. After prolonged rain at any time of year, allow extra time for the boggy ground and do not plan stage timings too tightly.

The core waymarked route does not require beach walking or tidal timing. If making the short detour to Maghera Beach and Caves, access to the caves depends on suitable low tide, and tide times should be checked before travelling.

What makes it easier or harder

Slí Cholmcille is easier in settled weather, with good visibility, dry-ish bog and a sensible three- or four-day schedule. It is harder when walked fast, in rain or mist, or with heavy overnight gear over the rougher moorland sections.

The route is best treated as a remote Irish hill-and-coast walk rather than a simple village-to-village ramble. Good waterproofs, broken-in boots, navigation skills and realistic daily timings make the difference between an enjoyable loop and a punishing one.

Weather and Best Time to Walk

Slí Cholmcille is best treated as a spring, summer or autumn walk. The route is not high by mountain standards, but its exposed Atlantic position, open blanket bog and sparse waymarking on moorland make weather a serious planning factor.

The most reliable walking window is the main season from spring through early autumn, when daylight is longer and village services are more likely to suit multi-day walkers. Summer gives the most daylight for the 20–24 km stages, but accommodation in Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) is limited, so beds should be booked well ahead.

What the weather means on the trail

Expect wet ground at almost any time of year. The route crosses blanket bog, moorland and rougher hag bog near Glencolmcille, so waterproof boots, gaiters and a proper waterproof shell are more useful than lightweight fair-weather kit.

Wind and rain are the main hazards. The open sections over the moorland, around Port (An Port), and on the higher ground towards Glencolmcille can feel much more committing in low cloud or Atlantic squalls than the modest altitude suggests.

Fog or hill cloud can also make navigation awkward. The route is waymarked, but the open moorland has sparse marking in places, so carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and do not rely on arrows alone in poor visibility.

Road walking is a major part of the route, including narrow tarmac roads. In heavy rain, mist or low light, visibility to drivers matters: wear bright clothing or a pack cover, and take particular care on bends and exposed lanes.

Seasonal notes

Season	Practical implications
Spring	A good walking season, but bog and moorland can still be very wet. Longer daylight makes the standard three-day schedule more comfortable than in winter.
Summer	Best for daylight and generally the easiest logistics, but also the period when small-village accommodation should be booked furthest ahead. Carry rain gear regardless of the forecast.
Autumn	Often a good quieter option, though weather can become more unsettled and daylight reduces. Start early on the longer stages, especially Ardara to Kilcar and Glencolmcille to Ardara.
Winter	Not the normal season for this route. Short daylight, wet bog, Atlantic storms, low cloud and limited services make the 65 km loop a poor choice unless you are experienced, well-equipped and willing to alter plans.

Is winter realistic?

There is no specific seasonal closure for the waymarked route, but winter should not be underestimated. Snow is not the main issue on this low-level Donegal loop; the bigger problems are wind, rain, saturated bog, short days and navigation in cloud.

A winter attempt should be planned with conservative daily distances, firm accommodation arrangements and escape options from villages such as Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille. Local Link Donegal bus services are infrequent, so winter transport back-up should be checked before travelling.

Detours and weather-sensitive side trips

Maghera Beach and Caves are a short detour near the western arm of the loop, not part of the core waymarked line. Access to the caves depends on suitable low tide, and tide tables should be checked before travelling.

Slieve League / Sliabh Liag is a popular add-on near Carrick and Teelin, but it is not on the Slí Cholmcille route. Treat it as a separate weather decision rather than part of the three-day loop.

Safety Notes

Slí Cholmcille is not technical, but it is more committing than its moderate grade can suggest. The main risks are exposure to fast-changing Atlantic weather, wet blanket bog, lightly waymarked open ground, and long sections of narrow road walking between villages.

Emergency help

In the Republic of Ireland, call **999 or 112** in an emergency. Be ready to give your location as clearly as possible, using place names, grid references from **OSI Discovery Sheet 10**, or coordinates from a GPS/map app.

Do not rely on being able to make a call from every point on the route. The moorland sections and the lonely ground around **Port (An Port)** are remote, so carry a map, know your next escape point, and tell someone where you are staying when you expect to arrive.

Navigation and remote sections

The route is waymarked with the standard **yellow arrow on a black background**, but waymarking can feel sparse on open moorland. Carry **OSI Discovery Sheet 10** and have the route downloaded offline before leaving each village.

The roughest ground is on the open bog and moorland sections, especially around the Glencolmcille side where hag bog can make progress slow. Allow extra time in wet weather, and avoid pushing on late in the day if visibility is dropping.

Weather exposure

Although the high ground is modest by mountain standards, the route is exposed to Atlantic wind and rain. Waterproofs, warm layers, hat and gloves are sensible even in spring or summer.

Cold, wet wind is the more common safety issue, but hot days can also be tiring because long road and bog sections offer limited shelter. Carry enough water between villages and adjust the day's pace if heat, wind or heavy rain makes progress slower than expected.

Road walking

A considerable share of Slí Cholmcille follows tarmac lanes and roads, including some narrow and busy stretches. Walk on the side that gives the best view of oncoming traffic, move into single file on bends, and be especially cautious around the hairpin roads of **Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)**.

In poor visibility, mist or evening light, a bright pack cover, reflective detail or small torch makes a real difference. Do not assume drivers will expect walkers on blind bends.

Bog, water and coastal detours

Blanket bog can hide ankle-deep holes, slick grass and slow, waterlogged ground. Waterproof boots or robust trail shoes with good grip are strongly advised, and walking poles can help with balance on soft ground.

The core route includes coastal and strand scenery, but the most tide-sensitive feature is the optional detour to **Maghera Beach and Caves**. The caves, arches and tunnels are only safe at suitable low tide; tide times should be checked before visiting, and the detour should be skipped if conditions are uncertain.

Keep clear of slippery rocks around waterfalls, wet stream edges and sea-washed areas. There is no need to take risks for a photo.

Livestock and dogs

Expect sheep and working farmland along parts of the route, particularly on the quieter hill and bog sections. Give livestock space, avoid disturbing animals, and leave gates as found.

Dogs are not permitted on the route. This matters for livestock safety as well as landowner access.

Solo walking

Solo walkers should be comfortable navigating in poor visibility and walking long quiet sections without immediate help nearby. The loop is village-based, but there is little support between **Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick** and **Glencolmcille** once you are out on the open ground.

A simple check-in arrangement is worthwhile: leave your planned stage, accommodation and expected arrival time with someone reliable. Carry a charged phone, power bank, food, water and an emergency warm layer.

Check before setting off each day

Before leaving your overnight stop, check:

- The day's weather forecast, especially wind, rain and visibility.
- Current trail status or diversions with Sport Ireland or local information. This should be checked before travelling.
- Your map, offline route and battery level.
- Water and food for the full stage, not just to the next village.
- Local Link or taxi options if you may need to shorten the day. Timetables should be checked before travelling.
- Tide times if visiting **Maghera Beach and Caves**.
- Whether there is enough daylight for slow boggy ground and road walking.

Gear Recommendations

Slí Cholmcille is not a technical mountain route, but it is hard on kit. The main gear challenge is the combination of wet blanket bog, exposed Atlantic weather, open moorland with sparse waymarking, and long sections of narrow tarmac road.

Pack for a wet hill day even in a settled forecast. The route is village-based, but the stretches between Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick, Glencolmcille and Port can feel remote once the road and houses fall away.

Footwear

Waterproof hiking boots are the safest default for most walkers. The bog and haggy ground near Glencolmcille can be very wet and rough, and boots give better protection than lightweight shoes when the route leaves tarmac.

That said, there is a considerable amount of road and lane walking. Very stiff mountaineering boots can feel tiring on the tarmac, so aim for a boot that is waterproof, grippy and supportive without being overly rigid.

Gaiters are useful on this route. They will not keep feet dry all day in deep bog, but they help keep wet grass, peat and grit out of boots.

Waterproofs and warm layers

A proper waterproof jacket and overtrousers should be carried on every stage. The high ground is modest by mountain standards, with the route rising to around 350 m, but the moorland and passes are exposed to fast-changing Atlantic weather.

Carry at least one warm insulating layer, plus hat and gloves outside the warmest settled summer days. Wind chill can be significant on open ground around Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis), Faugher Mountain and the Port (An Port) side of the loop.

A dry bag or pack liner is strongly recommended. Rucksack rain covers help, but wind-driven rain and wet ground can still soak gear.

Navigation

Do not rely on waymarks alone. Slí Cholmcille uses the standard yellow arrow on a black background, but waymarking can be sparse on open moorland and visibility can drop quickly in poor weather.

Carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and know how to use it. A phone with the route downloaded offline is a useful backup, but it should not be the only navigation tool.

A power bank is sensible, especially for walkers using a phone for mapping, photos and accommodation contact details. Keep electronics in a waterproof pouch or dry bag.

Water and food

Start each day with enough water and food to reach the next village comfortably. There is little or no accommodation or reliable service provision on the remote moorland and Port sections between

villages, so do not plan on regular cafés or shops once away from Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille.

A 1.5–2 litre water capacity is a practical baseline for most walkers, adjusted for weather and personal needs. Natural water should not be assumed to be drinkable; if using it, carry a filter or purification method.

Lunch should be packed before leaving the village each morning unless current facilities are known. This should be checked before travelling, especially outside the main walking season.

Trekking poles

Trekking poles are useful rather than essential. They help with balance on wet bog, reduce fatigue on the longer road sections, and make the descents from passes and moorland less punishing on knees.

Rubber tips are worth considering for the tarmac sections if using poles throughout the day.

Inn-to-inn hikers

Walkers staying in hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs or hostels can keep the pack relatively light, but should not strip it down to fair-weather day-walk kit. A typical day still needs waterproofs, warm layer, map, offline navigation, food, water, head torch, first-aid basics and a power bank.

Because accommodation is concentrated in small villages and beds are limited, carry booking details and phone numbers offline. A lightweight pair of dry socks and something dry for the evening is worth protecting in a dry bag.

Campers

There are campsites in the wider village-based accommodation mix, but camping needs more planning than on busier trails. Do not assume there will be a usable pitch or services at the end of every stage; this should be checked before travelling.

A tent, mat and sleeping bag should be suitable for wet, windy Atlantic conditions, not just summer campsite weather. Choose a shelter with a reliable flysheet, good pegs for soft ground, and enough space to manage wet kit without soaking sleeping gear.

Campers should also carry a stove or cold food backup if evening supplies are uncertain. Fuel availability along the route should be checked before travelling.

Fast and section hikers

Fast walkers and section hikers may be tempted to use trail-running kit, but the bog and exposed moorland still require serious weather protection. Lightweight waterproofs, a warm layer, map/offline navigation, emergency food and a phone power reserve are minimum sensible kit.

Shoes should have aggressive grip and enough protection for peat, stony tracks and wet grass. Pure road shoes are a poor choice despite the amount of tarmac.

If walking a single section from Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille, plan transport around infrequent Local Link Donegal services or a pre-arranged lift. A head torch is still advisable if timings depend on public transport or late finishes.

Seasonal extras

Spring and autumn require warmer layers, gloves and a more conservative approach to daylight. A head torch should be carried even on planned daytime stages.

In summer, sun protection is still needed on exposed roads and open moorland: hat, sunglasses and sunscreen are useful even in Donegal's changeable weather. In warm, still conditions, insect repellent can be useful around boggy ground.

If making the short detour to Maghera Beach and Caves (Machaire), check tide times before leaving the route. The caves are only safely accessible at suitable low tide.

Budget and Costs

Slí Cholmcille is priced like a small-village walking trip in the Republic of Ireland: costs are in **euros (€)**, accommodation is the main expense, and availability can matter as much as price. Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille have a limited bed base, so booking early is usually the best way to control costs.

Current prices vary by season, room type, cancellation terms and whether meals are included. Check current prices before booking, especially for summer weekends and holiday periods.

Main cost drivers

Cost item	What affects the budget
Accommodation	Campsites and hostels are the lowest-cost options where available; B&Bs, guesthouses and hotels cost more but are the simplest village-based choice. Beds are limited in Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille.
Food	Costs depend on whether breakfast is included, whether packed lunches can be arranged, and how much food is bought before leaving each village. Remote sections between villages have little scope for buying supplies.
Transport to Ardara	There is no nearby railway. Most walkers use a car, coach and bus combination via Donegal Town and Killybegs, or travel from airports such as City of Derry, Donegal Airport at Carrickfinn, Ireland West Knock or Belfast.
Local buses	Local Link Donegal services connect places including Ardara, Killybegs, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille, but services are infrequent and some run only a few days a week. Timetables should be checked before travelling.
Taxis	Useful for missed buses, stage adjustments, or returning to a parked car, but they can add significantly to the trip cost in this rural area. Agree the fare before travelling.
Luggage transfer	Do not assume a regular baggage-transfer service exists for every stage. Ask accommodation providers, local taxi firms or walking-holiday operators before booking. This should be checked before travelling.
Guided or self-guided packages	Package holidays may bundle accommodation, route notes, transport support and sometimes luggage movement. They cost more than arranging the walk independently but reduce planning risk on a route with limited services. Check current prices before booking.

Budget approach

The lowest-cost version is to camp or use hostel-style accommodation where available, carry most food, and rely on Local Link buses or a pre-arranged lift to reach Ardara. This keeps spending down but requires the most planning, because campsites, hostels and public transport options are limited and may not line up neatly with the standard stages.

A budget walker should still allow for at least one contingency taxi or paid transfer. Weather, boggy ground, sparse waymarking on open moorland and long road sections can slow progress, and there are few mid-stage escape options.

Mid-range approach

The most straightforward independent budget is a village-based B&B, guesthouse or small-hotel itinerary, usually using Ardara as the start and finish with overnights in Kilcar and Glencolmcille on a three-day schedule. Breakfast may be included depending on the booking, but packed lunches and evening meals should be planned separately.

This approach avoids carrying camping equipment and suits most walkers on the 65 km loop. Book the key overnights first, then fit transport around the confirmed accommodation rather than assuming every village will have spare beds.

Comfortable approach

A more comfortable trip uses private rooms throughout, allows an extra night to split the walk over four days, and budgets for taxis where bus times do not work. This is the best option for walkers arriving without a car, or anyone wanting more flexibility in poor Atlantic weather.

A package trip may also fit this category if it includes accommodation booking, local support and luggage arrangements. Exact inclusions vary, so check whether transfers, packed lunches, baggage movement and route information are included before comparing prices.

Food and supplies

Food costs are easiest to manage by buying supplies in the route villages before setting out each morning. Do not rely on finding shops, cafés or pubs on the open moorland, Port or bog-road sections between settlements.

Accommodation providers may be able to advise on breakfast, evening meals or packed lunches, but this should be arranged in advance. Carry emergency food regardless of budget, as bad weather or slow boggy going can make the days longer than expected.

Transport and contingency costs

Because Slí Cholmcille is a loop, there is no end-to-end transfer cost if you start and finish in Ardara. The main transport cost is getting to and from Ardara, plus any local bus or taxi needed to connect with accommodation or airports.

Public transport can be economical but is not frequent enough to treat as a fallback without checking times. If travelling by bus, build the walking schedule around the actual Local Link Donegal timetable and allow for the possibility of a taxi if a connection is missed.

Camping, hostels and luggage

Camping can reduce accommodation costs, but it is only practical if confirmed sites match the stage plan and weather conditions. The route crosses wet blanket bog and exposed Atlantic ground, so carrying camping equipment adds weight on already tiring terrain.

Hostels and campsites can be good-value options where available, but they should be booked or checked ahead in the small villages on this loop. Luggage transfer, where arranged privately, may remove the weight penalty but adds cost and should not be assumed without prior agreement.

Luggage Transfer, Guided Tours and Support Services

Slí Cholmcille is not a high-volume trail with a guaranteed daily baggage network. Support is possible, but it usually needs arranging in advance through accommodation hosts, local taxis or a walking-holiday operator rather than relying on a turn-up-and-book system.

The route is short enough for many fit walkers to carry their own overnight kit, especially on a 3-day schedule. Luggage transfer becomes more useful if you want to walk with only a daypack, are using village B&Bs or hotels, or are adding extra nights around Ardara, Cill Charthaigh (Kilcar), An Charraig (Carrick) or Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille).

Luggage transfer

For an independent walker, the most realistic approach is to ask each booked accommodation whether they can help move a bag to the next village or recommend a local taxi. This should be arranged before arrival, particularly in summer when beds and drivers can both be limited.

A typical clockwise 3-day transfer pattern would be:

Walking day	Main luggage would usually move from	To
Day 1	Ard an Rátha (Ardara)	Cill Charthaigh (Kilcar)
Day 2	Cill Charthaigh (Kilcar)	Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille)
Day 3	Gleann Cholm Cille (Glencolmcille)	Ard an Rátha (Ardara)

Because the trail is a loop, walkers driving to Ardara can also leave non-essential luggage at the start if their accommodation allows it. That is often simpler than arranging a full multi-day bag transfer, especially for a short itinerary.

Do not assume baggage can be collected from isolated sections such as Port (An Port) or the open moorland between villages. Transfers should be planned between road-accessible accommodation points, not from the boggy or remote parts of the route.

Prices, bag limits and collection times vary locally, so check current details when booking. If using a taxi for luggage, agree the pick-up point, destination, date, time window and payment method clearly in advance.

Self-guided walking holidays

Self-guided packages are the easiest way to remove the logistics from this route. Companies such as Walking Holiday Ireland include Slí Cholmcille in their Donegal walking-holiday material; current itineraries, inclusions and availability should be checked directly before booking.

A self-guided package will typically suit walkers who want accommodation arranged, route notes provided and luggage handled where available. It is also useful on Slí Cholmcille because the villages are small, public transport is limited and the exposed moorland sections require better planning than the modest distance suggests.

Before booking, check exactly what is included:

- accommodation locations for each night;
- whether luggage transfer is included or optional;
- whether transfers to or from Ardara, Donegal Town, Killybegs or local bus stops are included;
- whether the itinerary follows the core 65 km waymarked Slí Cholmcille loop;
- whether any extra days include off-route add-ons such as Sliabh Liag (Slieve League), rather than presenting them as part of the trail.

The distinction between the official loop and add-on sightseeing matters. Sliabh Liag is a popular nearby extension from the Carrick and Teelin area, but it is not part of the core waymarked Slí Cholmcille route.

Guided walking

A guide is not essential for competent hillwalkers with a map, waterproofs and navigation confidence. The route is waymarked, but the markers can feel sparse on open moorland, and the wet blanket bog near Gleann Cholm Cille can be slow and tiring.

Guided support is most useful for groups, less experienced walkers, or anyone who wants interpretation of the Gaeltacht, St Colmcille associations and local heritage around Gleann Cholm Cille. It can also reduce stress in poor Atlantic weather, when visibility and footing on boggy ground are more demanding.

If booking a guided option, ask whether the guide covers the full walking route or only selected day walks. Also check whether road sections, Glengesh Pass, Port and the return to Ardara are included, and whether transport is provided at the start or finish of each day.

Taxi transfers and local back-up

Taxis and private transfers are useful on Slí Cholmcille because public transport is limited and some Local Link Donegal services run infrequently. They can help with arrival logistics, luggage movement, bad-weather changes or shortening a stage.

The most useful transfer points are the villages on or close to the loop: Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille. Arrange lifts before setting out where possible, as mobile coverage and availability should not be relied on in the more remote sections.

Taxi support is particularly worth considering if:

- arriving without a car via Donegal Town or Killybegs;
- walking a relaxed 4-day schedule with shorter stages;
- staying off the exact line of the route;
- needing to avoid a long section of narrow tarmac road;
- adding off-route sightseeing such as Sliabh Liag.

Current Local Link bus times, taxi availability and any accommodation shuttle arrangements should be checked before travelling. This is a rural Donegal route, and the best support plan is one that is agreed before the first walking day rather than improvised from the trail.

Shorter Hikes and Best Sections

Slí Cholmcille is short enough that many walkers complete the full loop, but it can still be broken into strong point-to-point sections using Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille as access points. The main limitation is transport: Local Link Donegal serves these villages, but services are infrequent and can run only on certain days, so bus times should be checked before travelling.

Distances below use the standard three-stage split where exact section distances are available. Shorter village-to-village cuts and out-and-backs are possible with OSI Discovery Sheet 10, but precise distances should be measured before relying on them for a day plan.

Best for	Start → finish	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best single day	Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) → Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)	20 km	A substantial day linking two useful trail villages, with Carrick (An Charraig) on the route corridor and access to the wilder south-west Donegal hill country. Good if only one full walking day is available.	Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille are served by Local Link Donegal, but timetables are limited. This should be checked before travelling.
Best weekend section	Ardara (Ard an Rátha) → Kilcar → Glencolmcille	44 km over 2 days	Covers the first two standard stages, including the Glengesh Pass approach and the village-based overnight at Kilcar. It gives a proper taste of the route without needing to commit to the remote western return to Ardara.	Start in Ardara and finish in Glencolmcille, both served by Local Link Donegal. Plan the return journey before booking accommodation.
Best 3–5 day option	Full loop from Ardara	65 km	For a 3–5 day window, the best option is usually not a section but the whole circuit. A 4-day schedule makes the boggy and road-heavy walking less pressured than the common 3-day plan.	Ardara is the simplest start/finish because the route is circular. Public transport is possible but light; many walkers use a car or arrange travel via Donegal Town and Killybegs.
Best scenery	Glencolmcille → Ardara via Port (An Port) and the western arm	21 km on the core stage, plus any detours	The wildest-feeling part of the loop, with the isolated Port valley, rougher moorland, and optional detours towards Maghera Beach and Caves and Assaranca Waterfall. Expect exposed weather and wet ground.	Glencolmcille and Ardara have Local Link services, but same-day logistics need careful checking. If visiting Maghera Caves, tide times must be checked before travelling.

Best for	Start → finish	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best for villages and accommodation	Ardara → Kilcar → Glencolmcille	44 km over 2 days	The most practical partial traverse for walkers who want village accommodation each night. Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille are the key service points on or near this side of the loop.	Book beds ahead, especially in summer. Small villages have limited capacity, and there is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port sections.
Best for public transport	Kilcar → Glencolmcille	20 km	The most manageable public-transport section because both ends are named Local Link points, with Carrick also on the transport corridor. It still needs a full walking day and good weather judgement.	Do not assume a convenient bus at the end of the walk. Local Link Donegal times should be checked before travelling, and a taxi or pre-arranged lift may be needed.
Best for camping	Use the normal village stages: Ardara → Kilcar → Glencolmcille → Ardara	24 km / 20 km / 21 km	Camping works best as a village-based plan rather than relying on remote stops. The exposed bog and Port sections are not sensible places to improvise late in the day.	Campsites exist in the wider accommodation mix, but exact locations, opening dates and booking requirements should be checked before travelling.

Beginner-friendly choices

There is no especially easy, short, fully described section of Slí Cholmcille in the available route split. Even the shortest standard stage is about 20 km, and the route includes wet blanket bog, exposed moorland, sparse waymarking and long stretches of narrow tarmac road.

Less experienced walkers should either tackle one stage with an early start, settled weather and arranged transport, or walk a short out-and-back from a village after measuring it on OSI Discovery Sheet 10. The Kilcar to Glencolmcille stage is the most practical named day section, but it should still be treated as a full hill-walking day rather than a casual beginner walk.

Sections to treat with extra care

The Glencolmcille to Ardara stage via Port is the standout wild section, but it is also the one where poor visibility, wet bog and tiredness can matter most. Carry proper waterproofs, navigation tools and enough food, as there are long stretches without services.

Road walking is also a real factor across the route. On narrow roads, especially where traffic is faster or visibility is limited, high-visibility clothing and disciplined verge walking are more useful than lightweight trail-running assumptions.

Highlights and Points of Interest

The most memorable stops on Slí Cholmcille are split between the waymarked loop itself and a few worthwhile detours close to the western arm. For planning, treat Glengesh Pass, Glencolmcille and Port as core route highlights; Maghera, Assaranca and Sliabh Liag need extra time and should not be assumed to sit directly on the waymarked line.

On the waymarked route

Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis)

Glengesh Pass is the signature landscape of the loop: a glacial valley where the road climbs through tight hairpin bends between Ardara and the south-west Donegal uplands. The road summit is around 270 m and is the best-known scenic high point of the walk, although the route's true highest walked ground may be higher on open moorland elsewhere.

This is one of the places to slow down rather than simply cover distance. Weather can change quickly on the exposed hillsides, so views down the valley and back towards the wider Donegal landscape are best enjoyed with waterproofs and warm layers close to hand.

Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh) and Carrick (An Charraig)

Kilcar and Carrick are useful village stops on the southern side of the loop, but they also mark the transition from the first day's road-and-hill walking towards the more remote western sections. They are good places to build in time for food, supplies and rest before the route becomes more thinly served.

Carrick is also the practical jumping-off area for the popular Sliabh Liag add-on, although the cliffs are not part of the core Slí Cholmcille waymarked route.

Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille)

Glencolmcille is the main cultural highlight of the walk and is worth more than a rushed overnight stop. The valley is closely associated with St Colmcille, and the local pilgrimage landscape includes early-Christian cross-slabs, holy wells and the fifteen-station Turas Cholmcille, traditionally walked each year on 9 June.

The Glencolmcille Folk Village (Áislann Ghleann Cholm Cille) adds useful context for the area's rural heritage, with thatched cottages and displays focused on traditional life in Donegal. If the schedule allows only one place for extra time on the route itself, Glencolmcille is the strongest choice.

Port (An Port)

Port is one of the loneliest and most atmospheric sections of the loop: an all-but-abandoned coastal hamlet at the head of a remote valley. The approach uses stony tracks and sheep-cropped ground, with a much stronger sense of isolation than the road-linked villages.

This section is not difficult in a technical sense, but it is exposed and feels committing in poor Atlantic weather. It is a highlight for walkers who want the wilder side of the route, rather than a serviced sightseeing stop.

Short detours close to the route

Maghera Beach and Caves (Machaire)

Maghera Beach and Caves lie near the western part of the loop and make a worthwhile detour if conditions and timing suit. The wide strand sits beneath Slievetooley, with sea caves, arches and tunnels accessible only at suitable low tide.

Do not treat the caves as an automatic stop on a fixed walking day. Tide times should be checked before travelling, and extra time is needed if adding the beach to a long stage.

Assaranca Waterfall (Eas a' Ranca)

Assaranca Waterfall is a roadside cascade between Ardara and Maghera on the western arm of the route area. It is one of the easiest natural features to include if walking or travelling between Ardara and the Maghera side of the loop.

Because it is roadside, it suits walkers who want a short scenic pause without committing to a longer detour. In wet weather the waterfall is likely to be more impressive, but the same conditions can make the surrounding walking boggier and slower.

Off-route add-on

Sliabh Liag / Slieve League

Sliabh Liag, near Carrick and Teelin, is one of Donegal's major walking and sightseeing objectives and is often added to a wider walking holiday in the area. It is among Europe's highest sea cliffs, but it is not on the core Slí Cholmcille waymarked loop.

Plan it as a separate excursion rather than folding it casually into a Slí Cholmcille stage. Transport, timing and current access arrangements should be checked before travelling.

Common Mistakes and Planning Tips

Common mistake	Why it causes problems on Slí Cholmcille	Better plan
Treating “Moderate” as easy	The route has no scrambling, but it is not a gentle village stroll. Wet blanket bog, rough hag bog near Glencolmcille, exposed moorland, about 1,600 m of ascent and long sections of narrow tarmac make the 65 km loop more tiring than the headline grade suggests.	Plan for full hill-walking days, not short coastal rambles. Carry proper waterproofs, warm layers, sturdy boots and enough time for slow going across wet ground.
Leaving accommodation too late	Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille are small places with limited beds, especially in summer. There is little or no accommodation on the remote moorland and Port sections between villages.	Book the key overnight stops before fixing travel. The common 3-day pattern uses Kilcar and Glencolmcille; a 4-day version needs accommodation to be checked carefully because the route does not have evenly spaced service towns.
Assuming public transport is straightforward	There is no nearby railway, and Local Link Donegal buses are infrequent, with some services running only on certain days. Missing a connection can mean losing a walking day.	Build the itinerary around current bus timetables, not the other way round. Local Link services to Ardara, Killybegs, Kilcar, Carrick and Glencolmcille should be checked before travelling. Many walkers will find Ardara easiest to manage by car or by coach connections via Donegal Town and Killybegs.
Relying only on waymarks	Slí Cholmcille is waymarked with the yellow arrow on black National Waymarked Trail marker, but marking can feel sparse on open moorland. Mist, rain and boggy ground make missed turns more likely.	Carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10 and a reliable offline digital map or GPX. Use the waymarks as confirmation, not as the only navigation method, especially between villages and across open hill country.
Using the wrong route or an extended online description	The official loop is about 65 km / 65.3 km and links Ardara, Glengesh Pass, Kilcar, Carrick, Glencolmcille, Port and back to Ardara. Some longer descriptions include places near Portnoo, Glenties, Narin or Inishkeel that are not on the core waymarked southern loop.	Check that maps, GPX files and accommodation plans match the 65 km Slí Cholmcille loop, not a different or extended Gaeltacht Way itinerary. The separate cross-border Slí Cholmcille / St Columba Way pilgrimage is also not the same route.
Underestimating the road walking	A considerable share of the route is on tarmac roads and country lanes, including some narrow and busier sections. This can be hard on feet and requires attention to traffic.	Wear footwear that copes with both wet bog and long road miles. Walk facing oncoming traffic where appropriate, use high-visibility colours in poor light, and avoid planning road sections late in the day if visibility may be poor.
Planning over-long days without allowing for bog	The standard stages of Ardara to Kilcar, Kilcar to Glencolmcille and Glencolmcille to Ardara are manageable for fit walkers, but wet ground can reduce pace sharply. The rougher moorland sections are not measured by distance alone.	Start early, keep daily plans realistic and avoid counting on fast road-walking pace across open bog. A 4-day itinerary is sensible for walkers who want margin for poor weather, photography, heritage stops or slower terrain.

Common mistake	Why it causes problems on Slí Cholmcille	Better plan
Assuming every village stop solves food and water logistics	The route is village-based, but services are limited in small Donegal settlements and may not fit a walker's exact timing. Remote sections between villages should be treated as self-sufficient walking.	Buy food before leaving each overnight stop and carry enough water and snacks for the full stage. Opening hours, evening meals and any resupply plans should be checked before travelling.
Ignoring Atlantic weather exposure	The route crosses open moorland and hill country where wind, rain and low cloud can arrive quickly. The high ground is not technically difficult, but exposure makes poor-weather navigation and temperature management important.	Check the forecast each morning and be prepared to adjust the day. Carry full waterproofs, warm layers, hat and gloves outside high summer, and keep map/phone navigation usable in rain.
Treating Glengesh Pass as the route's only high point	The photographed road summit at Glengesh Pass is about 270 m, but the way also crosses higher open ground, with the walked high point likely around 350 m. The difficulty is spread across the route rather than concentrated at one road pass.	Do not judge the day solely by the Glengesh road profile. Expect further climbing and exposed moorland, particularly around the Glencolmcille side of the loop.
Adding Slieve League as if it is on the trail	Slieve League / Sliabh Liag is a popular add-on near Carrick and Teelin, but it is not part of the core waymarked Slí Cholmcille. Adding it can turn a manageable walking holiday into a rushed one.	Treat Slieve League as a separate excursion requiring extra time, transport or an additional night. Do not build it into the 65 km waymarked distance.
Misreading which sights are on-route and which are detours	Glengesh Pass, Port and Glencolmcille are on the route. Maghera Beach and Caves and Assaranca Waterfall are short detours on the western arm, not automatic parts of the waymarked line.	Decide before the day whether detours fit the schedule. For Maghera Beach and Caves, tide tables must be checked before relying on access to the caves.
Bringing a dog	Dogs are not permitted on the route. This is an easy detail to miss when planning a rural Irish walking holiday.	Leave dogs off the itinerary and check any accommodation rules separately if travelling with non-walking companions.
Not allowing for Irish-language place names	Slí Cholmcille passes through Gaeltacht districts where signs may use Irish names such as Ard an Rátha, Cill Charthaigh, An Charraig and Gleann Cholm Cille. This can confuse transport, navigation and accommodation matching.	Save both Irish and English place names in booking notes and offline maps. Match the route order carefully: Ardara → Glengesh Pass → Kilcar → Carrick → Glencolmcille → Port → Ardara.
Failing to check current trail status	Waymarked routes can have temporary diversions, damaged markers, access changes or maintenance issues, particularly across wet ground.	Check the current Sport Ireland trail status before travelling, and carry a map-based alternative plan for any short diversion. This should be checked before travelling.

Final Advice

Slí Cholmcille is best for reasonably fit walkers who want a quiet, village-based Donegal route with a strong Gaeltacht character, exposed Atlantic hill country and no technical scrambling. It is not the right choice for anyone expecting constant services, dry underfoot conditions or easy waymark-following across open moorland.

The main planning priority is accommodation and transport. Beds in Ardara (Ard an Rátha), Kilcar (Cill Charthaigh), Carrick (An Charraig) and Glencolmcille (Gleann Cholm Cille) are limited, and Local Link Donegal buses are infrequent, so both should be arranged before committing to daily stages. Current bus times, trail status and any diversions should be checked before travelling.

The route's biggest rewards come on the wilder sections: the climb and descent around Glengesh Pass (Bealach Ghleann Geis), the remote valley of Port (An Port), and the open ground around Glencolmcille. These are also the sections where poor weather, bog and sparse waymarking matter most, so carry OSI Discovery Sheet 10, have an offline map, and be prepared to navigate rather than simply follow arrows.

Most walkers will find the full 3-day circuit satisfying if they are comfortable with 20 km-plus days and some long road walking. A 4-day schedule is better for those who want shorter days, more time in the villages, or a more forgiving buffer for Atlantic weather. Section-hiking is possible from Ardara, Kilcar, Carrick or Glencolmcille, but transport gaps make it less straightforward than the loop suggests.

Treat the headline "Moderate" grade with caution. The walking is not technical, but wet blanket bog, haggry ground near Glencolmcille, exposed passes and narrow tarmac roads can make the route feel harder than its distance alone implies. Dogs are not permitted on the route, and walkers adding Maghera Beach and Caves must check tide conditions before visiting the caves.