



# Winter walkers urged to 'leave no trace'

**G**IVEN reasonable weather, thousands of people will be taking to the outdoors for long walks during Christmas — a good way of working off excess calories and the over-indulgence of the festive season.

Walking is the most popular form of leisure time physical activity in Ireland today, according to Fáilte Ireland. We're truly blessed with some of the best terrain in Europe for hill walking, rambling and trekking.

Some braver souls will be heading into the mountains. St Stephen's Day, for example, is now a well-established date on the calendar for climbing Ireland's highest mountain, Carrantuo-hill, with more people taking part year on year.

But, whether you're staying on the lowlands, or opting for the heights, the clear message coming from the recently-formed Leave No Trace Ireland group is that people should visit the countryside with care.

Respect for property and nature are high on the group's priority list, which includes many seemingly obvious messages that, like commonsense, have to be constantly driven home.

Some of these matters are very basic, such as closing gates, not blocking entrances, keeping dogs under control, not lighting fires and not disturbing farm animals or nature.

Many Irish people are now walking for health reasons, while Fáilte Ireland research shows that increasing numbers of overseas walkers are coming here, with over half under the age of 35. A growing number of these walkers are looking for shorter, high quality circular walks in a natural environment where they can also interact with locals and enjoy the relaxed pace of life.

A new walking initiative has been introduced to develop walking tourism throughout Ireland. A key element of the initiative will be the identification and marketing of a countrywide network of 14 looped walks to complement the existing portfolio of other walking routes.

Around 280,000 overseas visitors

participated in hill walking, or hiking, during 2005. Our walks are seen as a key tourism resource and Tourism Minister John O'Donoghue says the aim is to establish Ireland as 'one of the premier walking destinations in the world.'

Importantly for regional tourism, over 93% of walkers visit areas outside of Dublin and tend to stay longer than the average tourist. Also, 90% of foreign walkers say they intend to return here. Leave No Trace Ireland represents a number of organisations concerned with the outdoors, including the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Coillte and the Heritage Council. The group's co-ordinator is Jane Helps, who points out that no national country code has existed in the Republic, though many organisations have their own codes.

"Leave No Trace differs from all existing country codes in that it is an education programme that constantly puts the message and skills before outdoor users," she explains.

Ms Helps says all outdoor enthusiasts — be they walkers, mountain bikers, canoeists, or horse riders — are encouraged to do their part for the benefit of fragile ecosystems and future generations.

The concepts can be applied in the uplands and lowlands, in urban parks, on lakes and rivers and even in local neighbourhoods.

Seven principles are at the core of the group's aims to reduce damage caused by outdoor activities.

- Plan ahead and prepare.
- Be considerate of others.
- Respect farm animals and wildlife.
- Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
- Leave behind what you find.
- Dispose of waste properly.
- Minimise the effects of fire.

Winter walking brings its own hazards. Reduced daylight hours mean that darkness can fall on people sooner than they bargain for and, if they stray or something unforeseen happens, they can become stranded in a remote area.

People are advised to always check the weather forecast before they set out, to wear warm clothing and suitable footwear, to bring food and drinks, and a map and compass if they're going up mountains.

Remember: weather conditions can change unexpectedly.

Mountain rescue teams are always at the ready for call-outs at times such as Christmas and, invariably, call-outs will come from people who get lost, or are injured in falls. Sadly, people also get killed in mountain accidents.

All too often members of groups such as the Kerry Mountain Rescue Team put their own lives and limbs at risk to help people that get into trouble, and call-outs often come at night, increasing hazards in what are hazardous situations in any case.

Something else worth remembering is that mobile phones don't always work in mountainous terrain.

Other tips from Leave No Trace:

- Keep group numbers small and split larger parties.
- Don't feed wild animals or birds: our foods damage their health and leave them vulnerable to predators.
- Preserve the past: examine, without damaging, archaeological structures, old walls and heritage artifacts such as holy wells, mine workings and monuments.
- Conserve the present: leave rocks, flowers, plants, animals and all natural habitats as you find them.

■ [www.leavenotraceireland.org](http://www.leavenotraceireland.org)

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