Travel

In sheep's clothing

Ireland | On Connemara's new 'Sheep and Wool Trail', *JR Patterson* meets farmers, knitters and sheepdogs — and seeks out the perfect jumper

I went to Connemara to get a jumper. It's not really necessary; there are several Connemaran shops (the Inis Meáin Knitting Company, An Túirne on Inis Mór, Standún in Spiddal) that will pack up and send a hand-knitted Aran sweater to anywhere in the world. However, because you can't really appreciate something until you understand what went into making it, and in the spirit of farm-to-closet, I wanted to get it myself.

Sheep are part of the mise-en-scène of Connemara: as stew, as cheese, as rugs, in the fields and on the roads, slowing down my car. I was driving the region's Sheep and Wool Trail, launched last summer, an agritourism circuit that links travellers with the local ovine culture — shops, knitters and working farms where one can book in to watch sheepdogs and shearers in action.

I'd been led to understand that Irish woollen clothing was experiencing a resurgence, as an answer to fast fashion, and even on a squally April mid-morning, the Connemara Sheep & Wool Centre in Leenane was doing brisk business.

Proprietor Áine O'Toole gave me a tour of the shop and wool museum, where she offered a spongy hank of raw Connemara fleece. It was oily in my hand, with a petrolic funk. "That's the lanolin," she said, the natural wax that helps the wool shed water. "That, and the kemp [a coarse, wiry hair fibre] keep the sheep warm out there." She nodded at the rain-battered window.

Pure, 100 per cent Connemara mountain wool carries the qualities of the fleece — warmth, durability, water resistance — but its itchiness means that knitwear blended with imported cashmere or merino sells better. "Look," Áine said, peering over her glasses, "people have gone very high maintenance with their expectations of what life should be like."

Knitwear today isn't considered the workwear it was a century ago, when a collective in Leenane used local wool to produce a variety of textiles, but some Connemarans still believe it's the perfect material. Bernard King, a local farmer, told me he has a variety of fabrics from that era, "as good today as the day they were made".

Blond, broad and blunt, King told me shearing is often done at a loss. "My father used to be able to buy a car after selling his wool," he said. "It could pay all your bills for the year." After the last shearing season (June to August), he had 1.5 tonnes of wool to sell. "How much do you think I got?" I named what I thought a fair price. "Feck no! 'Twere 5 cents a kilo — €75 all in. The shearing alone cost me €2 apiece — about two and a half thousand."

Although there are plans for two new spinning mills in counties Wicklow and Galway, Ireland currently has few large-scale facilities for scouring and cleaning fleeces, whether imported or domestic. Of the roughly 7,000 tonnes of Irish wool produced annually, much of what is sold commercially is sent to Bradford in England for processing, even if some of that then returns to Ireland to be turned into clothes and other products.

What little money there is in sheep farming comes from the meat. At the Maam Cross auction market, a Connemara farmer might sell a hogget (a sheep between one and two years old) for up to €9/kg. King had recently sold 170 of his organic Blackface Mountain lambs for €70 apiece, which he wagered may just about cover the cost of his occasional hired help. EU and Irish subsidies make up the rest, up to €23.50 per ewe.

From top left: locally sourced oysters and Guinness at Lough Inagh Lodge; Killary Sheep Farm; Carina Coyne at the spinning wheel; some of Joyce Country Wool's yarn stocks; Ballynahinch Castle; Clíona Standún

Photographs for the FT by Cliodhna Prendergast

Moving down the Killary fjord through wind and rain, I stopped at Killary Sheep Farm, operated by the Nee family, to watch one of their daily sheepdog demonstrations. In weather that PJ Nee described as "fresh," and any non-Irish person would call "cataclysmic", he worked his sheepdog Rex around a sodden paddock. Staring into the wet wind to watch the pair at work, I felt like a captain rounding Cape Horn in a hoary sea.

PJ bore the weather with the poise of a hardy boatswain, though there was no hollering here. While his muted commands were rendered silent to me in the gale, Rex did what 12 yeomen would have struggled to do under the same conditions, gathering a dozen black-faced ewes from around the field and bringing them into the fold.

Afterwards, bottle-feeding scraggy lambs in the barn, we talked dogs. "One-to-120 is the perfect dog-to-sheep ratio," said PJ. There were seven working dogs on the farm, and I asked if his herd bore out that balance. He gave me a beady eye. "Rough estimate," he said, "is somewhere between a lot and a hell of a lot." And the hell of a lot of wool they produced? PJ shrugged. "Goes over to Bradford, doesn't it? And then China buys it up to make carpets." Nee poked the nipple of a bottle into the mouth of an eager lamb. "We're just a hill farm," he said. "The first rung on a long ladder."

Feeding done, he said, "You better get home. It'll be getting even fresher." Yet by suppertime, the rain had passed, the howl of the wind had dropped half an octave, and over a platter of Killary oysters at Renvyle House Hotel, I watched the sun draw down the sheet of blue sky into a milky ocean.

Nee's mention of hill farming took me into the mountains. Much of the Connemara mountainscape is designated as common grazing land, and even Connemara National Park has its own stock of grazing heritage breeds: Connemara ponies, Irish Moiled cattle, Old Irish goats, Tamworth pigs. I met the park's foreman Martin Coyne at its headquarters, where he described his involvement in an ongoing programme to resurrect, through selective, DNA-based breeding, the extinct Cladóir sheep. "It's light in bone, with soft, fine wool," Coyne told me, speaking through his own woolly beard. "You can swaddle a baby in it."

The local saying has it that "You're not in Connemara until you see the Twelve Pins", and from the Pins themselves, much of the region spreads out beneath you. It was a clear day of sneaping wind and as I hiked towards the peak of Benlettery, there were the villages of Clifden and Roundstone, the white breakers on the jagged Atlantic coastline and, nearer, the ruin of the O'Flaherty tower house and Ballynahinch Castle, a hotel where I planned to spend the night listening to traditional music in the Fisherman's Pub.

As I ambled down the mountain, the hills echoed with a sudden yelping, lunatic melody. It might have been an injured animal, but, having worked on a farm for years, I knew the sound of a farmer corralling his animals. This one-man re-enactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn sliced the air: "Yeow! Whoo!" — "Go on! Go on!" — "Yeeeooop!" — "Ah, ya bugger!" I followed the ricochet to the source, and there they were, cresting the ridgeline, a drove of sheep, the farmer and his dog.

> All the yarn is dyed with plants from the valley — 'Put this on, and you melt into the land'

I spent a couple days in Roundstone, staying at a cluster of self-catering cottages called Within the Village and walking on the strand, picking my way between orange sea wrack and houses built like bunkers on the rock. There were sheep there too, nibbling on seaweed at the water's edge. "Does wonders for the meat," said a farmer I spoke to. "There's nothing like Connemara hogget for sweet meat. Don't be fooled by no talk of lamb. It's hogget on yer plate!"

Moving north, I met with Dominic O'Morain, chair of the local tourism network and general manager of Lough Inagh Lodge, where I passed my final nights. A born-and-bred Connemaran, he seemed to know everyone, and Lough Inagh Lodge acted as a kind of coaching inn for locals and travellers both. Among the dozens of people O'Morain introduced me to was Carina Coyne, who, with her husband Marcus, rears an eclectic herd of Blackface, Jacobs, Blue Texel and Zwartbles on the steep shores of Loch Na Fooey.

Coyne makes knitwear the old-fashioned way, washing, picking, carding, spinning and dyeing her own fleeces into yarn. (She, too, had old pieces, including a 200-year-old Connemaran wool blanket.) As Joyce Country Wool, she offers two- and four-day crash courses, guiding students through the process. I spent a weekend with her, commuting from Lough Inagh to study alongside five other Irish women.

Each day we convened in Coyne's workshop, a clutter of spinning wheels, jennies and looms. The walls were lost behind scarves, jumpers, hats and blankets, and hundreds of variegated skeins, each article adherent to her "one fleece, one piece" philosophy. All the thousands of yards of yarn are dyed by Coyne using plants gleaned from the valley — red from meadowsweet, ochre from onion skins, yellow from gorse, green from nettle. On the wood-stove, lichen simmered in a pot of purplish water. "Nothing bright," she said, rolling a burly loop between her hands. "Put this on, and you melt into the land."

Each handmade item is tagged for her reference, showing the time spent on the creation. One skein may take 50 or 60 hours to produce; a child's cardigan 77 hours; an adult jumper 88 hours. One jumper, cockleshell white, took an astonishing 191.5 hours. She doesn't part with these creations lightly, if at all — "It would be like separating siblings!" — but she will occasionally sell an item, such as a sweater, for €2,000. After a few back-cracking, brain-twirling hours spent producing my own imperfect yarn, that price seemed about right.

It was mind-numbing at times, but Coyne was a steady, patient teacher, offering up endless tea and kind words for our muddled work. Sitting at the spinning wheel, I felt hypnotised by the turning spokes, the zip of the wool through my fingers, the roll of the pedal under my foot, the ladies' broguish chat, and the sheep beyond the window, bleating in articulate monotony.

When the conversation turned to foreign affairs, Coyne said: "I haven't a clue what other people are doing in the world. Why would I?" Indeed, all she needed to live and work happily was right outside the window. This, I decided, was the battle cry of the provincial.

More than one person I met proudly described Connemara as "the opposite of what's happening in the world right now". It can be parochial territory. Corner shops advertise chimney sweeps and farmhands, it's still possible to get a pint of Guinness for €5, and the language is peppered with rusticisms like, "It's the days of the Brindled Cow!" (approximately meaning "It's a cold start to April"). The faces you see repeat again and again, but they are friendly and kind. After a week, you'll look for them, and vice versa, to ask after family and health.

I finally got my jumper, a thick, hand-knitted, cream-coloured beauty of 100 per cent Irish wool, at Standún. "That'll last your whole life," said Clíona Standún, proprietor, when she handed it over, filling me with the gratification that follows good investment.

Each evening thereafter, I wore my Standún jumper to the nearest pub, where I fortified myself with stout and soda bread, chowder and cheese. On my last night at Lough Inagh Lodge, the barman, Thomas, had my pint waiting for me. "Lovely knit," he said. "Oh, by the way, yer man Bernard King was in and asked after ye." After a week of this, it was difficult to put Connemara behind me. Not because I didn't want to go home, but because it felt as if I was leaving it.

i / DETAILS

JR Patterson was a guest of Tourism Ireland (tourismireland.com) and the Irish National Tourism Development Authority (discoverireland.ie). For details of the Sheep and Wool Trail see connemara.ie. Wool-making courses at Joyce Country Wool (joycecountrywool.com) cost €250 for two days or €400 for four days. Sheepdog and seasonal shearing (June to August) demonstrations at Killary Sheep Farm (killarysheepfarm.com) cost €12 per person. The writer stayed at Ballynahinch Castle (ballynahinch-castle.com; double rooms from about €325), Within the Village (withinthevillage.ie, house sleeping two from €215 per night), Renvyle House Hotel (renvyle.com; doubles from €270), Lough Inagh Lodge (loughinaghlodgehotel.ie, doubles from about €200), and The Lodge at Ashford Castle (thelodgeac.com; doubles from €245)