

Sailing The Wild Atlantic Way & Cruising Ireland's West Coast

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WM Nixon



A different perspective on Ireland's West Coast. Clare Island at the mouth of Clew Bay, seen astern from Alex and Daria Blackwell's 57ft ketch Aleria as they sail to their home anchorage near Westport in County Mayo.

Photo: A & D Blackwell

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The unveiling of the Wild Atlantic Way tourism initiative last year along the entire western seaboard from Malin Head to Kinsale was greeted with mixed feelings by people from elsewhere who love the west of Ireland, and know it intimately. We feared - with justification - that it would result in a succession of tour buses dragging their weary way along tiny roads to get a glimpse of the coast, carrying passengers who would be a sort of landbound equivalent of those cruise liner passengers who don't spend a cent ashore.

But for those who sail along this challenging coastline, rather than struggling with its roads, the term Wild Atlantic Way has an altogether deeper meaning. So we can give a guarded welcome to a new cruising guide which looks at it from a sensible and seamanlike perspective, though admittedly still trading on the recognition which the brand "Wild Atlantic Way" conveys.



Alex and Daria Blackwell's Clew Bay-based Aleria is a Bowman 57 ketch



Atlantic seaboard boat people – Alex and Daria Blackwell

Alex and Daria Blackwell live on the shores of Clew Bay in Mayo, and sail the very handsome Holman & Pye-designed Bowman 57 Aleria, with which they've crossed the Atlantic three times. She's American, while he's Irish with a solid background in international seafaring at many levels. From their home, they run a desktop publishing operation, White Seahorse, which has produced a number of books on several topics, the most recent in an eclectic list being *Cruising the Wild Atlantic Way*, which is aimed at helping newcomers to "Discover Europe's Gem, the Wild West of the Emerald Isle".

You'll rightly deduce that it's aimed mainly at the American market, but I've found it fascinating to read not only for its many nuggets of very useful and specific information, but also because it's written from the point of view of people who see everything from the Clew Bay perspective.



"Doing the research". Aleria at Tory island in Donegal. Photo: A & D Blackwell



Island hopping in the northwest. Aleria at Gola island in Donegal, with the unmistakable peak of Errigal beyond. Photo: A & D Blackwell.



Big country. Aleria and other cruisers anchored in a breeze of wind off Leenane at the head of the fjord-like Killary Harbour. Photo: A & D Blackwell



Connemara – the Land of the Sea. Photo: A & D Blackwell

Thus although the good people of Kinsale may think of their beautiful and characterful port town as the hub of the universe, they might be a bit miffed to discover that up in Clew Bay aboard the good ship *Aleria*, Kinsale and Crosshaven are seen as being at the very tail end of the Wild Atlantic Way, and barely worthy of consideration.

Indeed, I don't think it's unfair to suggest that the book gives the impression that aboard *Aleria*, the reckoning is that anything south of Dingle or east of Malin Head is not really

for serious seafarers with a taste for Ireland's western coast. Donegal has to be given a certain respect as it's even more rugged than Mayo. But south of the Blaskets, you get the feeling they consider it no more than the lotus lands.



Expect the unexpected – a glimpse of Aleria seen from shore at Inishturk. Photo: A & D Blackwell



The tiny harbour at Inishturk is too small to accommodate Aleria, but other smaller cruisers manage to find a berth. Photo: A & D Blackwell



Paradise. Aleria in the anchorage at Inishbofin, with the Twelve Bens of Connemara in the distance. Photo: A & D Blackwell

And though they've sailed many miles on dozens of coastlines, you get the impression that Aleria's ship's company reckons you can find everything you really need in and around the islands between Clew Bay and Slyne Head, with Inishbofin and Inishturk coming out tops. And as both those places are within a comfortable day sail of their home anchorage, unlike visitors from distant ports who often hasten by hasten by, they – on the contrary - can linger and savour the moment.

It's profusely illustrated, the selection of photos we have here being only a tasting. It is what it sets out to be – a very useful introduction and a mine of information for anyone thinking of cruising Ireland's west coast, whether from home or abroad. But as it is selective in its ports visited, it doesn't try to replace the Sailing Directions of the Irish Cruising Club (of which Alex Blackwell is a member), which continue to be unrivalled for their sheer depth and breadth of information about virtually everywhere on the coast.



Queue for the loo? Island life, as spotted in the Aran Islands while cruising Aleria on the Wild Atlantic Way. Photo: Daria Blackwell

There's really only one quibble. Cruising the Wild Atlantic Way is very linear in its steady progress round the coast from Lough Swilly to Cork Harbour. But some cruising folk develop a fixed mindset as their cruise progresses, such that they always require their Chartplotter to be set so that the boat's course is seen as heading towards the top of the screen, regardless of where North might be. So the Blackwells are going to have to

publish a companion volume with the route in reverse, in which The Wild Atlantic way is cruised from Cork Harbour to Lough Foyle.

Another quibble might be that not everyone will be coping with the wayward conditions of the Atlantic seaboard in a very well found 57ft ketch. In fact, I'd go along with those who might think Aleria is just a bit too big to get the full benefit of many of Ireland's smaller anchorages and ports which are accessible to a 30-footer, whatever about the sheer joy she provides in rapid and comfortable passage-making across the broad Atlantic.