

# Binevenagh

Wrapped around the northwestern edge of County Londonderry, Binevenagh Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty encompasses a dramatic and varied coastal landscape that forms the backdrop to one of the world's most beautiful train journeys, according to one writer.

**Natalie Hoare** investigates

**A**s I buy my return ticket to Castlerock from the small, dimly lit kiosk inside Londonderry Waterside station and grab a typically dire cup of coffee from the vending machine, it occurs to me that this may not be the best preparation for undertaking one of the world's great train journeys. According to RGS-IBG president Michael Palin, the trip between Londonderry (or Derry, as many prefer to call it) and Coleraine (the stop just after my destination) is 'one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world', but I must admit, I'm a tad sceptical.

Eventually, I board the short, near-empty train, and, as I settle into my seat beside a large west-facing window, it slowly makes its way out of the historic sixth-century city – Ireland's only completely walled city – and the visual display begins. Londonderry straddles a wide bend in the River Foyle, and travelling along its eastern bank towards the Atlantic, a spectacular riverscape gradually unfolds, sloping down into the broad grey-green waters of Lough Foyle, which forms the boundary between County Donegal in the republic and County Londonderry in Northern Ireland.

After passing the first stop, the small 19th-century station of Bellarena, the tracks skirt the market town of Limavady and then wind around the north coast, offering beautiful views over the estuary, where locals say you can regularly spot waders and seabirds, and even the odd porpoise breaching the water's surface.

From here, you can also see the fertile coastal plains, used predominantly to grow turf that's favoured by sporting venues such as Dublin's Aviva Stadium. Farther north, the sand dunes of Magilligan Point mark the boundary between the lough and the North

Atlantic, and the tracks pass the broad, unspoiled sands of Benone Strand. In stark contrast, the view inland is blocked off by the severe wall of inland cliffs and rocky crags of Binevenagh Mountain.

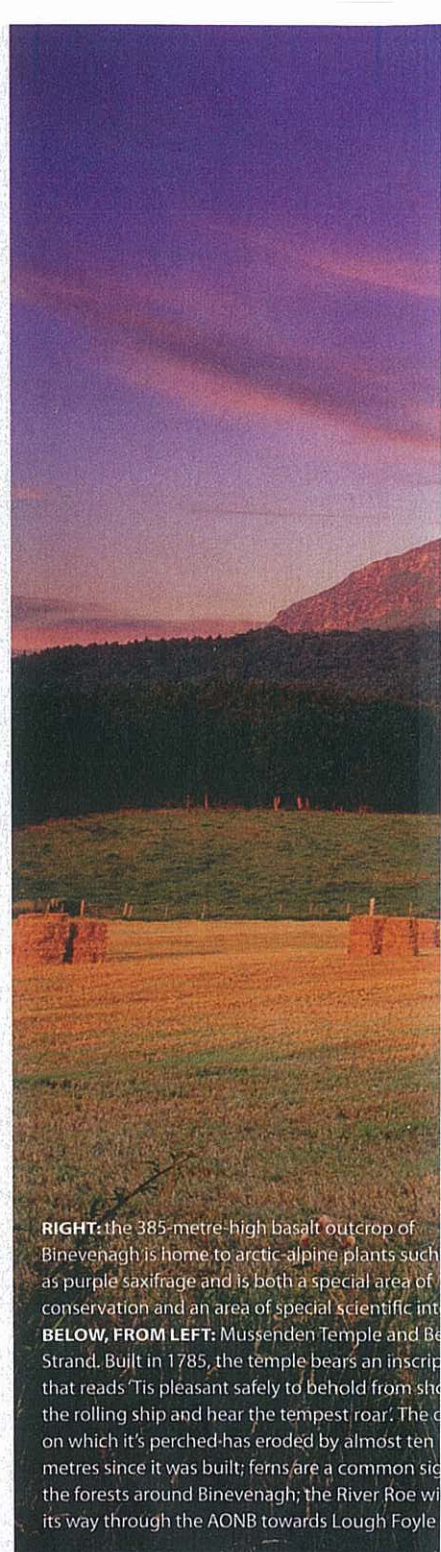
## RUGGED LANDSCAPE

Binevenagh (pronounced 'ben-ev-en-ah'; 'Foibhne's peak' in Irish) is part of the northernmost outcropping of the Antrim Plateau, which was formed around 60 million years ago when molten lava poured out over the land surface. The basalt crags and cliffs that tower above the flat coastal plain of Magilligan are an impressive sight, extending for more than nine kilometres and dominating the skyline over the villages of Bellarena, Downhill and my destination, Castlerock.

This rugged landscape forms the heart of the Binevenagh Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which encompasses a 16,500-hectare band that wraps around the coastline, from where my journey began to Portstewart, as well as a large inland chunk. Formerly known as North Derry AONB, it was renamed in 2006, when its area was also slightly extended.

'The thing about Binevenagh AONB is that you have just about every habitat that exists in the British Isles,' says Gerry Bond, a local wildlife guide and retired field centre warden. 'You have those fantastic cliffs towering above us, you have coniferous woodland, deciduous woodland, grassland, farmland, sandy shores, sand dunes, mudflats and rocky shores. It has it all.'

Just north of Castlerock, the Downhill Estate overlooks a large part of the AONB. 'From this lovely ruined estate, on a clear day if you look right around, you can see the Donegal coast and the Inishowen peninsula,' says Mike Jones, chairman of the



**RIGHT:** the 385-metre-high basalt outcrop of Binevenagh is home to arctic-alpine plants such as purple saxifrage and is both a special area of conservation and an area of special scientific interest. **BELOW, FROM LEFT:** Mussenden Temple and Benone Strand. Built in 1785, the temple bears an inscription that reads 'Tis pleasant safely to behold from shore the rolling ship and hear the tempest roar'. The dome on which it's perched has eroded by almost ten metres since it was built; ferns are a common sight in the forests around Binevenagh; the River Roe winds its way through the AONB towards Lough Foyle.

