

## Glendalough

By Sara Hanton

The Glendalough trip occurred over the fifth and sixth of November; a trip which goes towards the Bronze Gaisce Award. The trip included a twenty-five kilometre hike spread over two days, valuable life lessons on skills of how to look after yourself without the assistance of adults and has proved an incredible experience that can never be repeated truly in the same fashion.

We set off on an hour and a half long bus journey at nine o'clock in the morning, arriving at approximately half ten. From there we walked for ten minutes to the Glendalough International Youth Hostel, where we stashed our bags containing all we would need for the overnight stay in a side room, and retrieved perishables from our bags to stuff into the fridge, with almost every person of the one hundred and twenty students needing at least a small portion of room in the two fridges.

It was half eleven by the time we set off for our first hike; eighteen kilometres up Glendalough's glacial valley.

The initial hike was easy; flat and straight. From there we reached a steep walkway, slippery due to the prior evening's rain. We walked beneath trees until we were once again on a path, this one uneven, and eventually reached a clear path again.

We took breaks intermittently along the paths through the up and downhills. Our guide, a local who hikes the path we took often, led us up the mountain, past scenic views, one of which we took a group picture at, the valley in all its glory displayed behind us, the waters clear and smooth, the trees towering out of rocky crags in the distance, blocked vaguely by the thick fog that was present that Wednesday.

The further we climbed, the deeper in the fog we were entrenched, the trees shrouded in mist all around us until we finally reached the top of the mountain, after two and a half hours of climbing, and ate lunch sitting on the grass, absorbing the nature around us and feeling the glory of reaching the top of a valley with a height of three thousand and thirty-five feet.

The descent was easier than the climb, more views, gorgeous and immortalised in preservation, leaving "No Trace" of our presence in a place that will continue in its peaceful beauty for centuries to come, surrounding us all.

While there was some confusion in our directions, eventually we made our way back to the hostel, warmed with key cards in-hand to settle into our rooms, bunkbeds stacked and sheets waiting to be made up.

Dinners and showers were staggered to prevent congestion, each half hour a new group coming to the general area of both a kitchen and dining room to heat up pre-prepared food and chat at tables about unfortunate blisters and aches, and the satisfaction of the journey, and eating a warm meal.

The night approached fast; ding-dong ditch, card games, and karaoke reigning supreme over all other forms of entertainment – as annoying as the initial mention was.

By eight the kitchen was closed, by ten everyone ensconced in their rooms, entertaining each other quietly – bar the few that apparently wished to run laps screaming around the hallways until one in the morning.

All were awake by eight the next day, if not an hour earlier, breakfast scarfed down and rooms cleaned until pristine, looking almost untouched. Linens were stripped for the bin, bags redistributed into the side room, ready for the second day of walking; seven kilometres on a mostly flat path, a regular route to coffee and food carts with a nearby path to the lake of the valley.

We stopped at the graveyard, on the site of an old monastery, full of crumbling stone and lichen-covered gravestones. We were given ten minutes to find the oldest grave in the oldest graveyard of Ireland – from the 1100s, it was determined – the winners earning ice creams (though asking the caretaker might have docked some points, even though it wasn't *not* allowed).

From there to walk continues, all stopping to take pictures by the incredible lake, both selfies and landscapes alike.

Eventually the car park with foodstuffs was found and put to use. Clumps of people gathered in lines, waiting to order chicken goujons and chips or a very strong coffee, or both, in an attempt to restore long-lost energy from the day – and night – before.

When finished, most gathered at the lake to take pictures and admire the ducks in the water, the second animal group sparking excitement, the prior being the doe seen the day before.

After the hour given for lunch, we continued our walk by marshes and towering trees, then up along roads until we arrived once again at the hostel, collecting our bags and preparing to leave on the buses back to Wexford, and back to normal.

The trip back was smooth, easy, and a time where many naps took place, along with singalongs from speakers blaring from the back of buses – Christmas songs included.

Our arrival back at the school led us to the PE hall, where we waited to be collected and brought home, or had to wait for Le Cheile to start, in some cases.

The trip was lauded as a success, something entirely different from something any of us had ever experienced, and likely never would get the chance to again.

