

## LEENANE WALKING FESTIVAL

1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009

The Scind Walking Festival took place in the village of Leenane over the May bank holiday weekend. The turnout of around 175 pre-registered walkers with at least another 30 registering on the day, whilst slightly down on last year, exceeded expectations and made for a very successful and enjoyable weekend. There were a number of other walking festivals both locally and in Donegal & Tipperary over the same weekend so we did well to hold our own.

Once again we had over 24 guides leading and helping out on the walks of whom nearly half of them actually live in the area and many of these have also grown up around the environs of Leenane. This made for a double benefit; firstly the locals were able to present, with pride, their own environment to people from further afield and secondly the walkers were treated to a feast of folklore, anecdotes and general information on the flora and fauna etc. of the area. Six of the guides were also farmers who have the foresight to see that there is a huge future in accommodating walkers in their pastime and there is great potential to develop a special type of tourism in the area. These six have taken part in the Mountain Skills Training programme 1 & 2 and have just set up a walking club in the area with plans to develop this further. Every Sunday they now go out walking and they are in the process of affiliation with BOS (the Irish Mountaineering Board). We have another 3 people living in the area who will be starting their mountain skills course at the end of June (two of these from farming families) and this will use up the training funds that Failte Ireland invested in 2008/9. Three of these farmers are now on the organising committee of the festival.

The walks on Saturday took place in much nicer weather than last year & once again Michael Gibbons' walk gained large numbers for his special brand of chat and historical knowledge. The general feeling at the end of the day was a great trust and admiration for their guides (especially up the high mountains). Sunday was again a great day, sunshine and a balmy wind with Mweelrea proving the most popular mountain by far with over 60 people walking two differing routes, both returning by speedboat across Killary harbour. The other 40 walkers were divided between another high and low level walk. At the end of each walk, the businesses in the area hosted Scones and Tea and coffee for all the participants which also offered the opportunity to showcase their establishments to the visitors.

The B&B's and other types of accommodation were not full this year but they need to realise that they have to make it easier for people to come. Also more people travelled this year from Galway, Castlebar & surrounds on a daily basis so there was less accommodation used and the challenge going forward for the village is to make it more attractive for people to stay locally and not go back home each evening.

Brian Quinn from Failte Ireland had organised for a sailing race from Westport to Leenane for the Westport sailing club to coincide with the Festival weekend so this time the visitors moorings were full with over 12 boats moored there on the Saturday night. The Leenane Hotel put on a marvellous BBQ for them and overall a great night was had by all.

There was music in the village on both nights, organised by the committee as well as Senois dancing on the Sunday afternoon. The Connemara sea cruise was once again on offer for evening cruises for guests and the weather was kind to us. The general feedback from the participants was that the walking programme and the guides was excellent but they would like a bit more participation from within the village which the committee will be looking at for next year. Overall people were very positive to the whole festival and the visitors were once again asking about the next festival before they left – what more could we have wished for.