

An impulsive decision to move near to quality waves for the winter sees chronic wind addict **Brian McDowell** and his family, including their 4 week-old baby, up sticks to the sticks for an experimental lifestyle relocation in the depths of a wild Irish winter. What were they thinking?

# BRANDON BLOW-INS



great sadness in the community that week, as two popular local fishermen, both with families, lost their lives when their trawler sunk. Incidents like this being a stark reminder that the ocean is an overwhelmingly awesome force, not just the playground that the likes of us, who use it simply for recreation, can often be fooled into thinking it is.

The winds didn't stop the windsurfing, although it certainly made it interesting. With many regulars often overdone on 3.3s, local sail repairer Rob Jones fashioned himself a 2.4 to guarantee he's not sidelined! In fact on the evening we arrived, my overloaded triple boardbag was blown around the back yard, and tumbled over several times during the night, finally ending up in a courtyard about 30 metres away! Get the picture? Hopefully the weather will moderate, and the conditions improve as the longer days of spring approach...

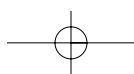
With everyone being so friendly on the Emerald Isle, one of the first things you have to remember is to say hello more – and not just on the beach. Of course windsurfers are a friendly bunch to chat with, but, after living a blinkered insular existence in the UK, where one hardly acknowledges even neighbours in the streets or shops, here the folks still relax, and take time to chat to everyone passing down the road – and in the pub!

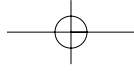
**N**ow, I'm not exactly starved of wind. I work flexible hours, have been living on the beachfront in Sussex, and pretty much never miss a day unless I'm badly injured or it's a close family member's funeral. Yep, call me selfish, but balancing

work, nappy-changing and windsurfing is a challenge, even for those lucky enough not to work the 9-5, so I've done everything I can to balance things in my favour so far. But was it possible to get things even better? The purpose of this experiment is to find out whether by living near an abundance of quality, regular conditions, the pressure's relieved enough to pass up a few sessions in the name of a happy family, and still feed the habit? Thanks to the wife's maternity leave, we've got five months to find out! So, in the midst of the wildest and windiest winter most folk can remember, we packed up and moved 400 miles west to our new home in Castlegregory...

Getting there, no problems. Moving in, no problems. Just one slight hitch – the same problem that's plagued the locals here all winter – *too much wind!* 70 knots plus to be exact. Whilst the UK enjoyed the best run of conditions ever, Ireland was, even after Christmas, still in the midst of a brutal, hurricane-force battering. Tragically, there was

Brandon Bay and its surrounds are such well-known windsurfing grounds nowadays that I won't waste words describing the place in detail. Even if you haven't yet been here you've doubtless read about it many times and seen it on the PWA videos. It's a great place, and has attracted great characters. One of the first people I met on arrival was the legendary Jamie Knox, in a typical Jamie moment; at the roadside on the Maharees, coaxing an injured duck (he'd obviously just run over in his Jeep) into the hedgerow with a stick. Despite owning a fearfully booming voice, even the oilskin-clad Knoxster had to shout above the elements. *"You know I'm always telling you it blows a hundred miles an hour all bloody winter – now you know what I mean. Feck! I'm late picking the kids up. Get yourself some wellies and I'll see you later..."* Mad as a hat-stand, but as always he and his wife Mary have a warm welcome for all at their Lodge here in this red-hot location. And if you're just passing, be sure to pop into the shop and see Knoxie's super-helpful manager, Jeremy, who's really helped





## BLOGS FROM THE BOGS



rude not to duck into a pub for a celebratory Guinness on the way home too!

Having had my gear permanently rigged up back in Wittering, I'm having to re-learn how to rig and de-rig, and to actually go out and about to check the conditions, instead of just flicking open the blinds by my bedside or desk. You can burn a lot of the cheap petrol available in

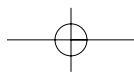
“...in the midst of the wildest and windiest winter most folk can remember, we packed up and moved 400 miles west to our new home in Castlegregory...”

Ireland endlessly checking the breaks, but I've now established some trusty viewpoints to scan the Bay from. Plus, without the danger of being seen sailing in front of the house by the wife, I can sneak out on the pretence of going to the post office, or getting bread, and not come back for ages. "Crikey! They do talk for a →

us out with contacts and local knowledge, and keeps the open fire roaring in the shop too!

Suddenly turning from dark and turbulent, the weather switched back to bright sunshine and glassy seas during a brisk cold snap that left snow on the majestic mountains behind the Bay. The lack of wind was more than made up for by several consecutive days of clean surf. What a shame! Monday morning waves

snatched here, with barely a soul in sight, must truly be classed as treasure. I did note, whilst pinching myself at the beauty of it all, that it was ironic to be sitting with my back to the landscape, having to turn around periodically to make sure the sight was actually real, and still there. It's no wonder photographers and artists flock to the area, when you witness the classic Dingle sunlight that drapes these wild backdrops in a heavenly golden-green glow. It's



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while around here," I'll mutter as I brush past with damp hair.

An 'initiation beating' is still on the cards, as even during the solid swells we've enjoyed, I've been in the right place at the right time so far. Gowlane is as gentle an introduction into riding 'proper' waves as you'll ever get, but my first and only sail so far came at Fermoy. It seems nearly all the 'local' sailors are English

transplants that've never left after holidaying. No beatings came, and a sunny cross-off waveriding session before the mighty silhouette of the white-tipped Brandon and Benoskeen Mountains, involving rainbows, snow and hail, rapidly turned to onshore mush and rain. Despite my intentions of learning to jump on port tack, a rare wind-shift meant I'd brought my gloomy South Coast, starboard tack conditions with me after all!

The local way of life definitely helps us to relax and shift down a gear, but the same can't be said for my employers. "So I can live anywhere as long as I've got a high speed connection?" I'd enquired. Signing a lease for a house I knew wasn't on the broadband exchanges, in the depths of rural Ireland, and gambling on radio connection's reliability, I simply suppressed some of the more sensible feelings I was getting. The ISP company was manned by one guy, often diverted to his mobile in the pub, who assured me everything would be "just grand" – subject to a site survey of course. Well, after 10 days or so of testing my boss's patience whilst working from a sketchy wireless network at Bolands Pub (I had issues explaining that one to the wife) or the community 'Club Rooms' in Castlegregory, the day of reckoning finally came. Aziz, a Turkish Cypriot with the broadest County Kerry accent you've ever heard, jumped up onto the roof and instantly proclaimed that no way would the house get reception. I realised I'd either just lost my job, or that we had to forfeit our lease and deposit and fork out more for another property miles away from the beach. By virtually blocking Aziz's way down the ladder, I suggested forcefully that he just give it a go anyway, as I could always have a swift word with the farmer whose trees were blocking the airwaves. An hour later and the signal worked just fine. One breezy night however, I realised that those trees' movement in the wind cuts the connection instantly at about 20 knots – which is fine, as I now know when it's time to go sailing! However, I might just actually have to go and have a word with the giant pines' owner one of these days, before the boss realises that when I'm not showing up on Skype, I must be skiving on the water.



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The area feels like home already, and although it's only for a few months, we're starting to resign ourselves to the likelihood we might stay for longer. We'd always be 'blow-ins' mind you, as even Irish folk who've lived here 30 years or more are referred to! It'll also be some time before my other half, Jenny, can get back on the water after having our two kids so recently. Nevertheless, the flat waters of Sandy Bay and Knox's staff are sure to have her up and running come the late springtime.

So far so good then. Despite a dearth of useful wind, there've always been waves, and the Bay doesn't seem too tide-dependent either – hopefully avoiding the narrow windows of opportunity that limit most spots. When the wind kicks in more regularly, it'll be interesting to see how easily I'll manage to forfeit an otherwise epic sail to spend time with the family, or work, and feel confident I can go later or the next day? Apart from the first windy day, that is... ☺