

Wave-mad dad **Brian McDowell's** Irish sabbatical has involved blood, sweat and now tears. Since dragging his family out to County Kerry for a five-month stint of fresh air, quality-time, and a new perspective on life, everyone wants to know if they're ever coming back. Pix by **John Bainbridge**.

# GOWLANE GROOVES



**Above** Niall McAuliffe  
**Below** Brian gouges

**A**fter a nigh-on windless April, the silhouetted island lying off Sleat Head that's known as 'The Sleeping Giant' at last awoke to gift us classic spring conditions.

That time of year here means the celebrity-coach clinics are in town and the waves crowded – but it's busy in a fun way, and certainly not what I'd have called jam-packed by south or south-west England standards. First up was the arrival of bald-headed,



Buddhist-style zen-master Jem Hall and his young prodigy – Connor 'You WILL Learn Grasshopper' Bainbridge.

Jem's gang got some fun conditions during their week, and 13 year-old Connor's sailing impressed me – especially when his dad, John, told me he'd only been in waves a handful of times before. In fact I was truly shocked. I'd actually judged Connor on the UKWA tour, and never considered that his heats at places such as Rhosneigr were actually near-virgin ventures into the surf.

On the last day of the clinic Connor and his dad had to leg it back to the UK for a Formula event. Typically, they missed the best day of the week. Up until then we'd had either moderate wind and small swell, or nuclear winds messing the waves. Such is the predilection of the peripatetic swell-seeker...

Super-positive Jem had me both mentally devastated and high as a kite after dishing out some nifty tips on my wavesailing style for free. Exposed to the naked truth that only the camera captures, I was shamed harshly but fairly into reassessing some fundamentals in my attack, yet uplifted by the challenge to break old habits.

May means the tourist-driven industry here is a hive of activity, but there were lots of busy locals out ripping in their lunch breaks, tea

breaks and days off regardless, and there was a great atmosphere on the water.

One of the most stylish regular sailors has to be Niall McAuliffe, who runs a posh hat, handbag and jewellery shop with his other half Kathleen – a milliner and designer. Yep, it's one of those shops in which your missus would, probably justifiably, spend a fortune on a visit to Dingle. (Or rather, 'An Daingean' – pron. *Awn Dangan* – to be more precise in this proud 'Gaeltacht' Irish-speaking region.)

Niall is in possession of what Jem would call a stylish, front-legged bottom turn, and can get pretty vertical even when it's really offshore and really windy. He's also often the earliest bird out, enjoying the surf before a stint in the shop to appease the wife.

Jamie Knox has been sailing well too (31 days in a row, including teaching at the school, he said), often along with his son Tom, who's the same age as Connor. Tom's showing signs of having great instinctive timing and rhythm on the wave – and you can just tell he's a surfer, using his legs and board for drive rather than just the rig.

I'm also now the proud owner of one of the famous Jamie Knox neoprene rigging jackets after the man himself saw me shivering on the beach during Pater Hart's clinic, took pity, and generously gave me one. (Harty apparently spent the best two days of May puking while travelling to and fro on the Rosslare-Pembroke ferry!)

Jamie was pretty surprised one afternoon to see that my rusty Golf, which takes two boards and all the gear inside, had driven miles along the beach from Fermoy in the far west of the bay, through two rivermouths, and back up onto the main road at Gowlane. His Jeep, however, needed a fair bit of encouragement to get up the final stretch of soft sand, and had to rely on the grooves my shoddy tyres had left behind. All I can say is that next time anyone's tractor, be it a farmyard or Chelsea version, is stuck on a fast-flooding tide, they'll now know who to call for assistance...

My favourite outings were at Aughacasa (*Okoshala*) on my floaty Exo Wave 105 – a bonus here when there's swell but not much wind on the inside. It was especially handy that day with no wind whatsoever near the shorebreak, but about 40 knots outside near the peak. Despite the hard work for those few small waves, they were clean, fast, and steep, and I'm positively frothing to sail there again when it's properly pumping.



Another plum session was at Fermoy where, while musing to myself that it was possibly the first time ever it hadn't hailed as I rigged-up, the heavens promptly jettisoned several tonnes of ice onto the beach, followed by a rainbow to maintain the trend. Oh, and it was sunny, logo-high and kind of, err, perfect too. Basically, May was great, and I sailed until my fingers bled. And then some more...

Reflecting back, I imagine the area must be paradise for the new craze of longboard sailing, or multi-purpose stand up paddling (SUP) boards. I reckon most days in Brandon Bay or the surrounds have some swell and breeze, but the lighter winds don't offer enough oomph to punch you through the white water, while good surfing waves can often be spoiled by onshore airs. I'm not convinced about pure stand up paddling here yet. There are enough days to be enjoyed on a Malibu or mini-Mal when the waves are thicker without being crowded, so I'd not be fussed about catching them any earlier or before anyone else. Jenny, my eternally understanding wife, made the valid point that I'd be pushed to find time for any work if I could get wet every single day. (I'm in online content management and copywriting if anyone's interested in hiring me – get me on [brian@concept-content-copy.com](mailto:brian@concept-content-copy.com)). But, in consistently wave-rich Ireland, I can happily pass on a chance to get my kicks as, unlike fickle England, I'm certainly less obsessed with the weather forecast and its implications on family or work time here.

And so to the big question: will we stay or will we go now? Well, despite the fact that the farmer eventually cut his trees, and the vital radio-broadband connection I rely on is significantly faster, even in the wind, we're not staying on longer than our planned six months. But we are coming back, probably in the new year, and probably for good. As a windaholic beyond repair, apart from the obvious lures for me there are good local skools for our young kids [*At least someone can spell correctly. Ed.*], the chance to own a significantly better property than in the UK, new friends, and outdoor living southern



hemisphere style (but without the heat and 20-hour flight).

To be honest with you, I'm totally distraught about leaving, but looking forward to being near family and old friends again –

recommendable – and, left otherwise, it would have been one of those things you tend to just talk about and never act upon. We're glad we took an opportunity to enjoy precious time together before we're locked eternally into the

**Above** Connor Bainbridge  
**Top left & below** Brian McDowell

**“ Basically, May was great, and I sailed until my fingers bled. And then some more... ”**

and it would be rash to stay as we've loose ends to tie up and commitments to keep. Apart from the wind and waves, I think what I'll pine for most are the mountain landscapes, the mesmerising beach, the light, and the overwhelming warmth of the Irish people. An elderly fella told me one night in a pub that we'd be back for certain if we were even considering it, as "*Kerry Will completely steal your soul*". Well, my heart has been totally and utterly robbed, and I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't feeling emotional about going.

To be fair, I'd miss most of the summer here anyway due to work commitments abroad, so it'll be nice for Jen and the kids to be close to our nearest and dearest in my absence. We shall just have to cane Ryanair in the autumn at the slightest sniff of a good forecast, and no doubt time will whip through quick enough and find us here on the back of a January gale once more.

All in all it's been an unmissable family adventure. Silly and impulsive, yes, but highly

refines of skool holidays – even if we never get back here at all.

So, unless the editor doesn't let me pick up from where I leave you now, *slán agus beannacht leat!* (Goodbye, and blessings on you.) ☺

