



# Why is the best surfing on the west coast?

Frederic Dias and Sarah Gallagher



**A**S an island exposed to the North Atlantic, Ireland boasts some of the best big wave/tow-in surfing in Europe. Some of the most famous big wave spots are Mullaghmore, Co Sligo and the Cliffs of Moher, Co Clare. The popularity of surfing in Ireland has increased greatly in recent years, attracting surfers from all over the world to our western shores and here is why.

In order to create excellent surfing waves, an energetic storm must be combined with appropriate bathymetry (bathymetry is

a scientific term to denote the water depth or the underwater topography).

When storms form in the North Atlantic, high winds blow across the surface of the ocean, creating larger and larger waves. These waves then begin their journey eastwards towards Europe, building at a speed. At this stage, these waves can now be referred to as the swell. As the swell moves towards the coastline, waves start to feel the ocean floor. In the nearshore, when there is a steep ascent of the sea floor, waves can be amplified locally by the bathymetry. This is precisely what

happens on the west coast of Ireland.

Aileen's Wave (pictured above), off the Cliffs of Moher, is named after "Aill na Serracht", meaning the "Leap of the Foals". This is Ireland's most famous big wave surf spot located at the Cliffs of Moher, Co Clare, and has been compared to world-famous big waves such as Teahupoo in Tahiti, Jaws in Maui, and Belharra in France. Swells usually reach



a height of about 8m, but have been surfed up to 12m. The wave is created by a submerged reef.

A surf spot deemed the "Prowlers" can be found about three kilometres off the coast of Mullaghmore, Co Sligo. The group of surfers who first surfed the wave in 2009 describe the area as an underwater mountain that focuses the wave as it emerges from 40-50m open ocean into approximately

2-3m depths. However, because this area is usually affected by crossing swells, surfers must wait months at a time for good surfing conditions. During the winter of 2013/2014, massive swells generated by various hurricanes created intensely heavy, tubular waves.

In February 2011, 'Tow-in Surf Session', Ireland's first big wave international surf contest was held in Mullaghmore with over 20 of Ireland's and Europe's best big wave surfers taking on the "beautiful beasts" as wave heights reached 6-7m. Later that year the European Surfing Championships

were held in Ireland for the first time, in Bundoran, Co Donegal. Summer may not be the best time of year to surf if you are looking for the really big waves but there are still plenty of spots along the west coast for beginners interested in taking up the sport.

Irish temperatures mean you will need to don a wetsuit but that means less scratches and scrapes when you take a tumble.

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