

Great Southern Trail

Limerick/Kerry, Ireland

Start Limerick End Tralee

Distance 53 miles (85 km) Time 4–5 days

Grade Easy Type Rail trail, asphalt

Map goo.gl/UpeMbU

Not so very long ago, in the last days of steam, the locomotives of Ireland's Great Southern and Western Railway (GS&W) would struggle their way for more than 2 miles (3.2 km) up toward the Barnagh Tunnel in Limerick, between Newcastle West and Abbeyfeale. The gradient, which began as a difficult enough 1 in 80, lost little time in angling its way up to an even steeper 1 in 60, a ratio that would hardly be noticed if one were on foot but that borders on the ridiculous for a hissing, growling steam engine trying to pull a couple of hundred tons of carriages and coal in its wake. For ninety-five years, between 1880 and 1975, trains of the GS&W ran along these demanding rails, but now the railroad is at peace. Trains no longer belch their way along it, and today the only sound you hear in the rather spooky Barnagh Tunnel, apart from your own footsteps, is the plopping of water as it seeps its way out through the mortar that borders its beautifully dressed stones.


The mixed-use (walking and cycling) Great Southern Trail is a 53-mile (85-km) asphalt ribbon that runs through the quiet, untouched farmlands of west Limerick and north Kerry along the route taken by the Limerick to Tralee railway. In 2011 the trail's volunteers won a European Greenway Association's Special Jury Prize for their efforts in not only breathing life into the disused trail but also for managing, so far, to keep it all in public ownership.

And just try finding a "softer" trail in terms of the flora: mosses, lichens, shaggy-looking ferns, and liverworts abound throughout. At times it seems like the whole thing is dressed in green velvet, a secret garden where once there were sleepers. **BDS**



"A grand open-air trail through the gorgeous back country of west Limerick and north Kerry."

www.independent.ie

 An abandoned rail line in County Kerry is now a ribbon of green.