

Why visitors are flocking to this Mayo farm

This west Mayo farm integrates a high-performing sheep unit with a dynamic tourism enterprise targeting national and international visitors

Patricia Lynch
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Remote west Mayo has always had overseas connections. For centuries local ships sailed to the continent trading hides for wine and other goods. A trade “discouraged” by the British navy when it began anchoring in nearby Killary harbour. Emigration, particularly related to the famine, created links worldwide.

Today, the natural beauty of the region and the marketing success of the Wild Atlantic Way which has become an international tourism superhighway is drawing national and international visitors to the county, creating opportunities.

The Glen Keen farm, the family home of the O’Gradys, is located six miles from Louisburgh on the Leenane road. The farm was transferred to Catherine O’Grady Powers and her husband Jim in 1999 and they returned from the US in 2009 to run what was largely a sheep enterprise. Catherine is the sixth generation of the O’Grady family to farm at Glen Keen. Her local ancestors, the seafaring O’Malleys, can be traced back to the 1600s.

“Initially, we followed the traditional farming system of the area and ran the Blackface Mountain ewe with a mountain ram but we soon realised that this was not viable as a standalone business,” says Catherine. “So we decided to investigate other ways to achieve sustainability, including farm tourism.”

The farm is set in a stunning location which includes waterfalls on the Carrowniskey River, and views of the Sheeffry and Mweelrea mountain ranges. It has been designated by the EU as a special area of conservation for its natural beauty, unique habitats and wildlife. Extending to over 1,400 acres with a commonage footprint





Catherine O'Grady Powers and Patricia Lynch.

of over 5,500 acres, the farm is larger than some national parks.

Tourism

“Growing up on the farm, tourism had always been a part of life. As a child, I was amazed when tourists stopped to photograph my father and uncles cutting tur,” says Catherine. “As we did our own research, the Wild Atlantic Way was being developed, so we were able to have Glen Keen Farm up and running to coincide with the launch of the Wild Atlantic Way in July 2014.”

The construction of the visitor centre at Glen Keen was supported by South West Mayo Development Company LEADER programme. “Linking the visitor experience with everyday farm life means that the day-to-day running of the farm can work alongside the new tourism business, and that’s important,” Catherine notes. Visitors can enjoy a number of on-farm experiences including farm walks which include a treasure trove of natural and historical interest.

“We are fortunate that a number of very old farm buildings and houses are still in place and even ridges indicating where potatoes were being grown 180 years ago are fascinating for visitors.”

Catherine’s background in hotel sales and marketing means she understands what is involved in reaching her target market and managing risk. “We don’t want to be overly dependent on any one market so while we get a lot of our business from the US, I we have prioritised China, Germany and Canada.”

Catherine and Jim’s farm experience made such an impression at the Britain and Ireland Marketplace tourism event in 2017 that they were invited by the Chinese National Tourism Agency to a major tourism fair in China. They were subsequently invited back to China for promotional visits to solidify their new relationships. Their hard work has paid off and Glen Keen has been rewarded with a stream of visitors from the Chinese market, more than 1,000 so far. When entering new markets, Catherine is always keen to also promote other Mayo businesses. “Together, we achieve so much more for the local area than any of us can do alone,” she says.

Since 2014, the business has grown steadily and has welcomed over 55,000 visitors in its fourth season. Attractions include a visitor centre which consists of a café, craft shop and a demonstration area.

The business was built with a focus on the coach tour and private visitor market where guests enjoy; sheepdog herding, sheep shearing, agricultural

group visits, traditional turf-cutting and farm style lunch to include the Glen Keen farm lamb dishes.

The focus for the future at Glen Keen is to continue to build on the group visitor market, increase employment in the area while continuing to operate a successful working hill sheep farm. “The sheep enterprise is still very important for us, generating a substantial and steady income,” says Jim.

Catherine and Jim are constantly seeking new techniques and increased profit opportunities for the working farm. In 2015, they introduced Texel breeding rams into the flock of 330 blackface ewes at Glen Keen to produce a more profitable Hilltex lamb (mountain ewe x Texel ram).

“We selected 100 blackface ewes to breed with two Texel Rams as a trial,” says Catherine. “With 90% scanning success rate and a higher number of twins produced this has proved a huge success.”

“Texel rams have been a perfect fit for us. The lambs can survive in harsh conditions in the mountainous terrain and the Hilltex lamb prices are double the value of a blackface hill lamb with the same amount of farm effort in terms of lambing, etc.”

All of the Hilltex progeny are sold, and all female progeny from the mountain ewes mated with Blackface Rams are kept as replacements and all blackface ram lamb are sold bar 20 ram lambs that are kept for the tour lunches which promotes the Glen Keen “farm to fork” concept.

Although Glen Keen Farm has achieved a great deal in its five years in business, Catherine feels “There is still room for expansion and diversification in the agri-tourism business. But sheep will always play a big role. “People appreciate the landscape and the scenery and the history but they also enjoy hands-on activities such as spinning wool from our own animals. They are often city dwellers, and absolutely love to come out and see the sheep up close and to watch our sheep dogs Holly, Liz and Jess working.”

As this offering works equally well for visitors from locations as diverse as Cologne, Chicago and China, west Mayo and Glen Keen’s international connections look set to grow ever stronger.



The Team at Glen Keen Farm has availed of the ‘Fáilte Ireland China Ready’ training programme to provide a warm welcome for Chinese visitors. Catherine works closely with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.