

NO COAST, NO PROBLEM

The megalithic site at Loughcrew Cairns



Known as Ireland's Ancient East, the Boyne Valley takes in Co Meath and south Co Louth and offers plenty in terms of history, lush green landscapes and food and drink. **Conor Coyle** enjoyed a weekend there

IT'S often a non-negotiable for our trips around Ireland that we pitch up along the coast – walks on the beach, a fresh breeze in your face and eating outside in the summer.

But that stance may have led to me overlooking much of what the inland counties have to offer.

The Boyne Valley, known as Ireland's Ancient East, takes in Co Meath and south Co Louth and offers plenty in terms of history, lush green landscapes and food and drink.

Our weekend started at Farmfield Escapes (farmfieldescapes.ie), a rural health farm and wellness spa comprised of a quaint wooden haven of cabins, treatment areas and relaxation points situated in the Boyne Valley in the small parish of Oris-

town, Kells.

While some spa experiences can end up being less relaxing than advertised with too many people ruining the atmosphere, this family-run operation provided a homely touch.

The hot tubs and saunas came with a tranquil view out to the nearby fields, and my first hot stone massage will almost certainly not be my last.

It was also my first seaweed bath experience – there was something a bit unnerving about it initially but I soon settled in after a glass of bubbly...

Feeling incredibly zen, we moved on to check in to our accommodation – the incredibly unique Johnsfors House and Farm (johnsfors.ie).

A working organic farm run by

Bairbre, Richard and their family, on arrival the welcome we felt from all was of the most Irish kind.

The two cottages on their land, which have been beautifully decorated, are normally booked out for the whole summer for Americans who arrive en masse in tour groups.

You can see why they love it – fresh jam left in the kitchen made on the farm, and a set of rashers for the next morning.

The cottage comes with a huge stove with firewood provided for the winter, while one of the highlights was getting to meet a selection of their farmyard animals, including Highland cattle Ború, Grace and Constance.

Nearby Jack's Bar and Restaurant (www.jacksbarrestaurantgarden.ie)

in Kells provided the food and drink for the evening, on a busy Friday evening during the summer you could tell this spot is a local favourite.

A significant step above your average pub grub, the signature chicken wings and crab tostadas for starters only further whetted the appetite.

Mains of featherblade of beef and Thai red curry with chicken were all gobbled down over the course of the evening.

The vibe of the bar was really varied, an outdoor beer garden which they have put a lot of effort into, and the cosy interior meant space was at a premium everywhere in Jack's.

But the highlight of all was local DJ Adrian Kennedy's music bingo,

with some generous cash prizes on offer for entrants. The craic was mighty, and we ended up winning a few quid back in the last round.

Having not over indulged in Jack's the previous night, we headed for Loughcrew Cairns and a tour of the local megalithic site from tour guide Malachy.

The Loughcrew Megalithic Cemetery, also known as the Hills of the Witch, are a group of Neolithic passage tombs near Oldcastle in Co Meath. Spread over four peaks, the tombs date back to 3000 BC and are a lesser known alternative to nearby Newgrange.

Malachy had a wealth of knowledge about the local area during the short climb to the top of the cairn during gorgeous weather.



One of the Highland cattle on site at Johnsfort House

There was a short drive to the nearby Loughcrew Estate gardens, a privately owned landscaped gardens which has taken shape through various owners since the 17th century.

The central area of approximately six acres includes a lime avenue, extensive lawns and terraces, and within the gardens stand a medieval motte and St Oliver Plunkett's family church and Tower House.

Part of the gardens and estate have been transformed into a one-of-a-kind wedding venue, with the ruins of the old church a particularly picturesque site.

Our action-packed two days came to an end with a visit to the nearby Fore Distillery (foredistillery.ie), where proprietor Adrian has put his passion for poitin distilling into a new venture.

The distillery and cafe nestles in the shadow of the renowned Fore Abbey. Oliver is a native Meath man who discovered his love for distilling whilst living abroad in the US. He was full of stories and knowledge about the distilling process and it is well worth a visit if you're in the area.

After our trip to the Boyne Valley, we continued on on a weekend of glorious weather down to the east coast of Waterford and Co Cork.

While they certainly are in their own right some of the nicest spots in the country for a summer road trip, the quieter heartlands of Ireland do offer an opportunity to get away from the crowds.

Most of the area can be reached in less than two hours from Belfast, so makes for a perfect long weekend.

If heritage and history are your thing as well as great hospitality from locals not over-weary of tourist throngs, the Boyne Valley is well worth a look.

For more information on the Boyne Valley visit www.discoverboynevalley.ie



Farmfield Spa Escapes, Co Meath



Johnsfort House, Co Meath



Jack's Bar and Restaurant, Kells, Co Meath



Loughcrew Gardens and Estate, Co Meath



Fore Distillery, Co Meath

Final Call

IRELAND

CO ANTRIM

DUNLUCE Lodge, Portrush. The 'Luxury for Longer' package includes a complimentary welcome refreshment on arrival, two nights in a luxurious suite, full Irish breakfast, access to The Spa and gym and treats from The Larder at Dunluce, a curated collection of the north coast's finest flavours, including snacks and beverages. From £270 per room per night. Visit www.dunluce.com or call +44 (0) 28 705 31 700.

CO DONEGAL

LOUGH ESKE Castle's Two-Night Summer Family Escape costs from €1,065 in total for a family of four. This five-star escape includes two nights in a spacious suite, breakfast each morning, a horse-drawn carriage ride through the castle grounds, access to the indoor pool and leisure facilities, complimentary bicycles and daily history tours. Children also receive their own Elli the Lough Eske Castle teddy bear on arrival. Visit lougheskecastlehotel.com.

EUROPE

SPAIN

IBIZA's 3+ star Playa Bella Apartments, seven nights self-catering departing from Belfast International on August 30. Price: £769 per person based on two adults and two children, includes a 22kg baggage allowance and return transfers. Visit jet2holidays.com, freephone 0800 408 5594, or visit your travel agent.

MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE

BELFAST to Palma, departing September 1. Highlights of the Mediterranean itinerary aboard Marella Discovery 2. Seven nights in inside cabin from £1,361pps. Visit tui.co.uk, or your local TUI store or travel agent.

AUSTRIA

THE Kitzbühel Cycle Marathon takes place on September 6, challenging riders to 216km and 4,600m of elevation gain through the Austrian Tirol. The route includes the Gerlos Pass, Zillertal Valley and the gruelling Kitzbüheler Horn, with gradients of up to 22%. Riders can opt for the shorter 209km KRM Kitz Course, which skips the final climb. A three-night stay at Pension Alpenrose, arriving September 4, costs from £247pp based on two sharing a double room with breakfast. Flights and transfers extra. Visit kitzbuehel.com/en.

WORLDWIDE

ANTIGUA

THE Verandah is a 30-acre adults-only all-inclusive resort on Antigua's northeast coast, with two white-sand beaches, four pools, five restaurants and activities including kayaking, tennis and catamaran trips. Book by August 25 and save up to £1,200pp. Seven nights from £1,469pp, including return flights, for September. Phone 01342 310571 or visit tropical-sky.co.uk.

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