



Made in Ireland

Head to the Boyne Valley for Stone Age wonders, Celtic gods – and all the fun of the Fleadh

THIS WEEK 20,000 musicians, dancers and singers will descend on one of Ireland's oldest towns for its biggest cultural festival: Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (usually shortened to Fleadh and pronounced "flah"). As well as parades, sessions, céilithe and concerts from the best traditional musicians, there are competitions with qualifiers from the UK and US. Brits can watch live shows and the highlights online at tq4.tv/en (Thursday to Sunday, 8.30pm to 11.30pm).

For those keen to join in the fun, next year's Fleadh will again be held in Drogheda, a pretty medieval port that straddles the River Boyne shortly before it flows into the Irish Sea. The Boyne Valley is only 30 miles north of Dublin and well worth a visit at any time of year for its rich historical and mythical heritage (Aer Lingus flies to Dublin from airports across the UK; see Aerlingus.com).

Known as Ireland's "ancient east", the region's gentle, fertile hills have been shaped by 5,000 years of history: Stone Age farmers, High Kings, Vikings, Normans, Oliver Cromwell and James II have all left their mark.

OLDER THAN STONEHENGE

Five miles west of Drogheda, a wall of glittering white quartz and 97 boulders encircle a vast mound that's visible for miles around. Newgrange passage tomb was constructed around 3200 BC and is even more astonishing when you creep past the enormous carved entrance stone and down the 19-metre inner passage; the chamber in its depths is still watertight and decorated with more enigmatic symbols. At dawn on 21 December – the winter

BOYNE ON THE BOX

VIKINGS SAIL AGAIN In 837AD, a fleet of 60 Viking ships sailed up the Boyne intent on plunder; recently longships set sail on it again, filming for History Channel drama *Vikings*.

SCOTLAND STAND-IN Mel Gibson stormed Trim Castle in 1995 film *Braveheart*, in which he played Scots hero William Wallace.

FAMOUS SONS Pierce Brosnan and comedian Dylan Moran both grew up in the town of Navan, on the banks of the Boyne. **CW**

solstice – the rays of the rising sun line up with the entrance and penetrate the tomb. Predating Stonehenge by a thousand years, Newgrange is the best preserved of the megalithic monuments that dot the Brú na Bóinne world heritage site, which has been described as Ireland's Valley of the Kings. Another 5,500-year-old burial tomb was uncovered here only last month.

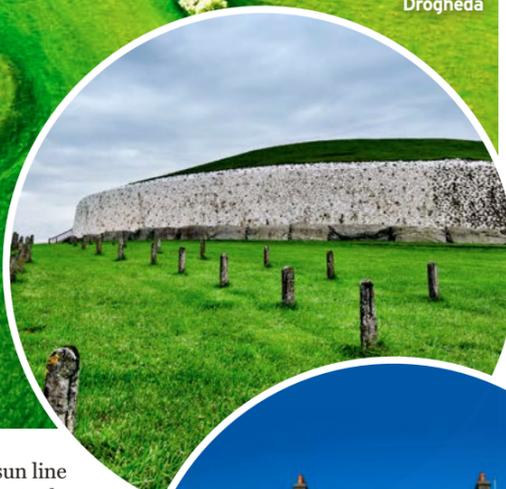
TOUCH THE STONE OF DESTINY

Three millennia later, the Boyne Valley was the seat of the High Kings of Ireland, who were inaugurated at the Hill of Tara, a dwelling place of the gods and the entrance to the "otherworld". Two grassy rings still offer glorious views on a clear day, and among the standing stones is the Lia Fáil – the stone of destiny – which is said to have cried out if a true Irish or Scottish king placed a foot on it. Legend has it that St Patrick travelled here in the fifth century to confront the pagan religion.



CAN'T BEAT IT
The annual Fleadh Cheoil celebrates the best of traditional Irish music

LANDSCAPE OF LEGEND
Main: the Hill of Tara. Below, from top: Newgrange tomb, Oldbridge House, and Tankardstown manor house, near Drogheda



TAKE TEA BY A BATTLEFIELD

Drogheda's walls were built by the Normans, who also erected Trim Castle, 25 miles upstream. Four hundred years later, Oliver Cromwell laid siege to the town and massacred Royalist defenders as well as ordinary townspeople. But the most famous chapter in its history came in 1690: the battle between the deposed James II and his nephew and son-in-law William of Orange, who faced each other across the river. After four hours of fierce fighting, the Jacobites were ordered to retreat and the Battle of the Boyne was lost. James fled back to France, earning him the nickname "Seamus an chaca" – James the s**t. The battlefield is at Oldbridge House, a stately home with a museum, weaponry displays, self-guided walks around the battle site, a tea pavilion and a delightful walled garden.

TUCK INTO MODERN IRISH CUISINE

When you've had your fill of history, explore the Boyne Valley's flourishing food scene. With its gilt furnishings and oak-panelled walls smothered in paintings, it's hard to believe Scholars Townhouse in Drogheda used to be a monastery. Now it's a boutique hotel with an award-winning restaurant that serves beautifully presented dishes in the cosy parlour (scholarshotel.com). Twelve miles down the road is Tankardstown, a Georgian manor house. You can stay in courtyard cottages or simply stop in to sample the seasonal menu in its two restaurants (tankardstown.ie). Nearby Slane Castle is famous for its rock concerts – Guns N' Roses, David Bowie, Queen and the Rolling Stones have all played here. The elegant restaurant dishes up steaks and hearty roasts, and you can take a guided tour of the new whiskey distillery in the castle's Capability Brown-designed stables, then indulge in an Irish coffee in the cocktail bar (slanecastle.ie).
CLAIRE WEBB

For more information, visit discoverboynevalley.ie

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