

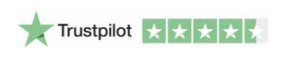
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Bid for glory: The Dolomites, where Cormac often trains and, below, in action

Irish skier's uphill battle to reach Olympic dream

ON A rainy Saturday morning in county Wicklow, a star of Irish skiing graced the Ski Club of Ireland slopes.

Like acclaimed British racers Dave Ryding and Laurie Taylor, Cormac Comerford bears testimony to the level of elite skiing that can be reached via dry slope learning – especially when that dry slope is one of the best in Europe.

The 29-year-old, who comes from a non-ski family background, is poised to compete for Ireland in the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy, aiming to race in the men's downhill events in Bormio next February.

Confident that he will make the Olympic qualification in January, Cormac stumbled into the world of skiing during a visit to the Ski Club in Kiltiernan with family friends.

He was eight years old at the time and having been bitten by the ski bug, has competed for Ireland at Federation Internationale de Ski (FIS) level for the past 14 years, racing against skiers born and bred in Alpine countries like Austria, France, Switzerland and Italy.

'My mother skied once in the Himalayas in her mid-20s and my father has never put skis on in his life,' says Cormac. 'I feel very privileged and lucky that I fell into the sport and found something that I enjoy.'

'I'm driven to push the sport in Ireland because more and more, small nations are biting at the tail of Alpine nations like Austria. In one recent FIS race, fewer than half the competitors were Austrian and we are seeing more wins from small countries like Belgium.'

Norwegian-born Brazilian ski racer Lucas Pinheiro Braathen is also breathing life and colour into the World Cup ski circuit – he's known to do a samba dance after each race finish and achieved a historic first World Cup win for Brazil in Levi, Sweden, in November.

Back on the slopes of Kiltiernan, Cormac took the time to spend a morning skiing with the 'mini' or children's classes, helping to inspire the next generation of Irish skiers.

'It's great to have the ski club facility,' he tells me. 'Without it, there's nothing.'

The club and its many volunteers do trojan work promoting the sport and teaching thousands of people to ski each winter. Nearly half a million euro has just been invested in new features including improved slope surfaces, jumps and a mogul line. A new beginner slope will be constructed and the club also received a €90,000 SEAI grant to

PEAK SEASON

CATHERINE MURPHY



install new sustainable LED lighting. The facility has been described as 'one of the best there is' by Warren Smith, who teaches the Irish Association of Snowsports Instructors course at his Verbier academy.

Before hitting the slopes at Kiltiernan, Cormac had just returned from racing in Italy and happily reported that he achieved a personal best in the first races of the season.

He has done much of his racing in the northern Dolomites and loves that ski region due to its stunning mountain scenery and great slopes.

'It feels great to start the season strong, my world ranking has improved,' says Cormac, who has one top 30 European Cup win under his belt. To qualify for the Olympics, the average of his five best scores from FIS races will be calculated. On the Irish scene, he is currently ranked number one.

It's a measure of his talent, determination and resilience that he competes internationally. 'I'm not a full-time pro racer,' he explains. 'I work as an engineer and usually work 60 hour weeks during summer to save money to train and compete during winter. It can be exhausting working full-time and training.'

Last summer, he managed to fit in ski training in Saas Fee, Switzerland, on the Hintertux glacier in Austria and in Les Deux Alpes in France.

This winter, he will be based near Zell am See in Austria, a favourite destination for Irish skiers. He has joined a team of international racers coached by former Belgian ski racer Kai Alaerts and Ireland's Gareth Reilly, which he says gives him vital support.

Cormac gets financial support from Snowsports Ireland, the Ski Club of Ireland and his employer, Atlanta Projects. His parents also help and Get Cover insures him to race at FIS level.

Realistically however, Cormac needs more financial support to achieve his – and Ireland's – Olympics goal. During a Winter Olympics year, it costs between €70,000 and €100,000 for him to be based in the mountains full-time to train and compete.

By all accounts, Ireland has more than its fair share of millionaires and a few billionaires too. It would be fantastic if the ski enthusiasts among them decided to step up and support Cormac's path to the Olympics.



AS A busy mum of two daughters – Layla, 9, and Lana Rose, almost 11 – I treasure any chance to slip away together for a little girls' break.

Recently we chose the Boyne Valley in Ireland's Ancient East, a place steeped in history and, as we found out, lots of fun.

We based ourselves at Killeen Castle, a resort more widely recognised for its Jack Nicklaus signature golf course. It sits on a beautiful 600-acre estate near Dunlany, but has recently opened luxury lodge accommodation.

Our home away from home was modern, warm and spacious, with our own bedroom and bathroom but a shared living area and kitchenette, which came in handy for making popcorn.

The castle itself isn't open to the public yet – however, watch this space, there are big plans – but its striking gothic silhouette in scenic woodland sets the tone for a wonderfully atmospheric stay. The resort's location is within easy reach of lots of family-friendly attractions – it's a 15-minute drive from Emerald Park, for example – and places of heritage, but still far enough away that you feel secluded in nature.

It's well set up for families, as you can do self-catering or eat at the resort. We had both breakfast and dinner in the resort's Kiln lounge bar, which offers tasty fare without the fuss, and there's also the Sixteen restaurant for more formal dining.

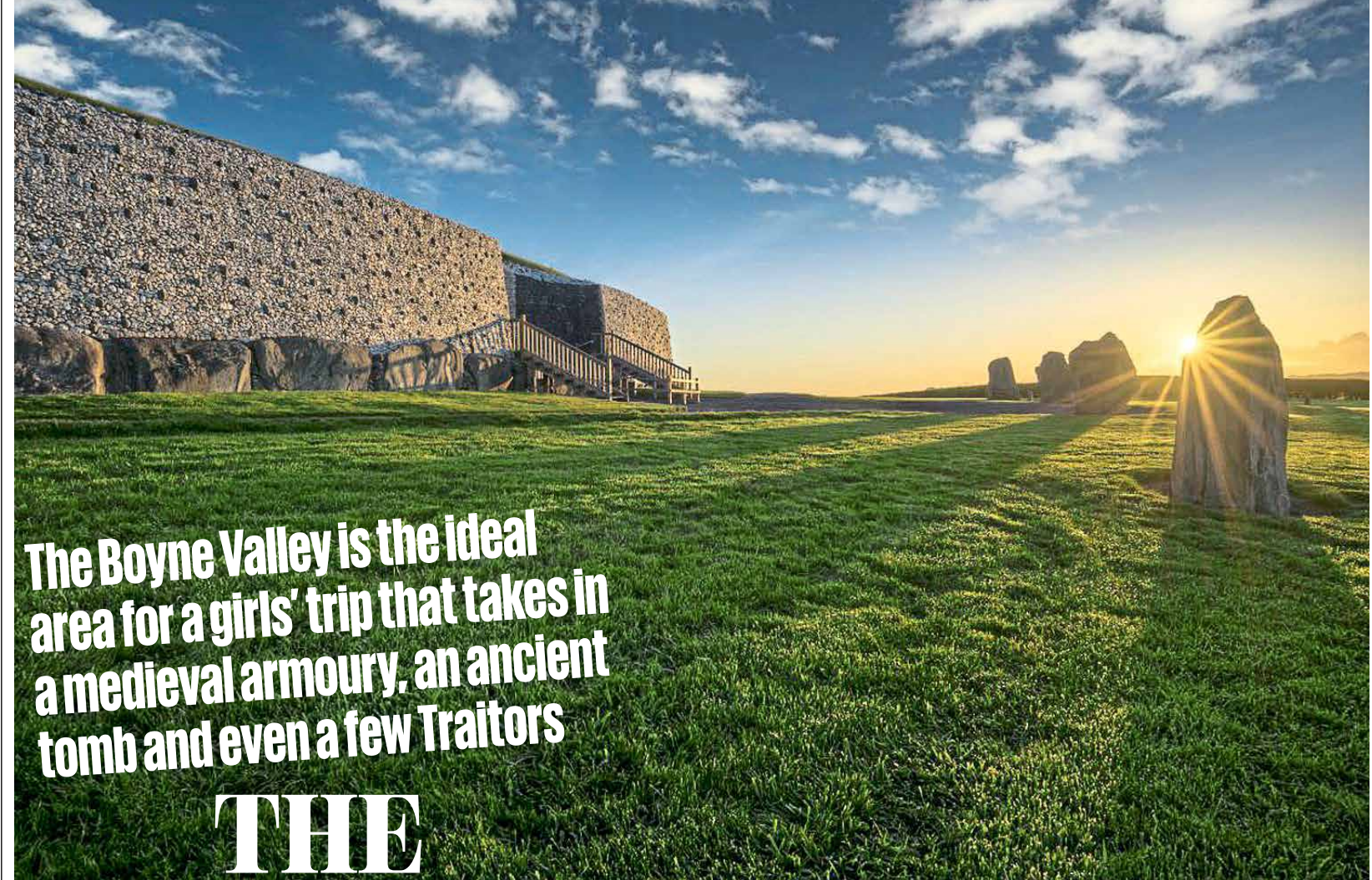
One of the absolute highlights of our trip was our visit to nearby Slane Castle, home to Traitors Ireland and, of course, so many iconic concerts over the decades. We are huge fans of the show, so getting the chance to take a Traitors-themed tour felt surreal in the best possible way.

It began with a recorded video message from the late Lord Henry Mountcharles. Seeing him on screen after his sad passing in June made the whole experience all the more poignant.

From there, we were guided through the very rooms where all the drama happened – the breakfast room where the tension simmered, the round table where banishments played out, and finally the conclave, revealed, to the girls' shock and delight, to be the castle's actual dungeon.

After exploring the castle's very own retro nightclub, we got to put on the Traitors cloaks ourselves. The girls huddled together, giggling as they tried to look menacing, and we snapped a photo that has already become one of my favourites of them. If you can manage to book a tour, I genuinely recommend it, even if you're not a superfan like us. In fact, you can even stay in the castle, or hire it for private use.

From here, we had a lovely afternoon tea at the nearby Conyngham Arms Hotel, an 18th-century coaching inn

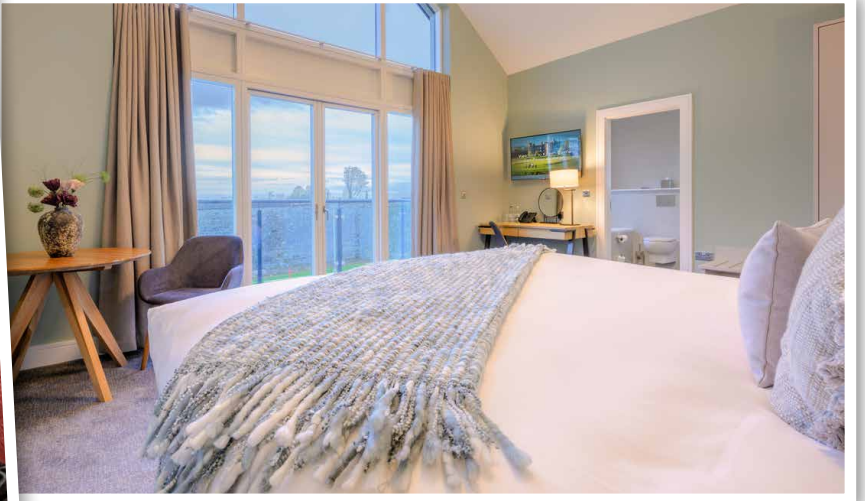


The Boyne Valley is the ideal area for a girls' trip that takes in a medieval armoury, an ancient tomb and even a few Traitors

BY LISA BRADY

Medieval marvel: Clockwise from main, Newgrange passage tomb; A room at Killeen Castle; and Lisa and Layla as Traitors in the Slane Castle dungeon

THE ULTIMATE QUEENS' DAY OUT



full of charm. The girls took great delight in

their children's tea, feeling terribly grown-up as they sampled little pastries and sipped hot chocolate.

We paid a visit to Causey Farm in Fordstown. The girls adore the annual Pooka Spooka Halloween event but now is the perfect time to visit for the Causey Christmas Experience. Don't worry,

the killer clowns of the venue's frightfest Farmaphobia have been replaced by Santa and his elves, plus you can say hi to all the animal residents too – a full, wholesome day out.

If you're out this direction, pay a visit to Trim Castle, the largest Anglo-Norman castle in Ireland and the setting for Braveheart. It's well worth the €10 for a family of four.

My girls are little history buffs and were transfixed by

the guided tour, which was excellent, full of personality and the kind of gory medieval detail that kids revel in. My girls were fascinated – and horrified – by the old garderobe system and the idea that clothing was stored nearby because the ammonia fumes from waste kept moths away.

We climbed to the top of the keep to take in the views over Trim, feeling like queens surveying their kingdom, and

then popped into the Trim Medieval Armoury, where the girls got to try on helmets and handle swords.

If the garderobe reference didn't turn your stomach, check out Fifty50 Mediterranean in Kells for a good value, family-friendly restaurant. I ticked the boxes for us one evening when I was struck with a virus and also had to keep my very picky eaters happy.

Of course, no visit to Boyne Valley is complete without visiting Newgrange. Part of the Unesco World Heritage Site of Brú na Bóinne, these passage tombs are older than the pyramids.

We started at the excellent newly-developed Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre before hopping on the shuttle to the surrounding sites, but Newgrange itself is the real showstopper. The guides brought the Stone Age to life with stories of early farmers and incredible celestial alignments. The solstice light demonstration inside the chamber was a highlight for all of us. Just remember to bundle up – Boyne Valley winds are no joke.

If you are thinking of a Boyne Valley festive break, there's plenty going on. Emerald Park's Jingle Fest, the light displays at Loughcrew Estate and the Christmas markets dotted around the region will keep you glowing this season.

We will definitely be returning – perhaps even to pay Santa a visit.

TRAVEL FACTS

Winter Warmer from €200 per couple at Killeen Castle includes overnight stay in a lodge with €35 dining credit per adult, usable at The Kiln or Sixteen restaurants, see killeencastle.com. For more information, see discoverboynevalley.ie.