

TRAVEL

Sheep Racing and Steel Drums: the Boyne Valley's Playful Family Escapism.



Funtasia Theme Park

By James Hendicott

Tucked in the back of Newgrange Farm, down a little track set at the side of their large pen, half a dozen sheep, teddies mounted on their back, are about to race for their dinner.

Or rather to their dinner: winning confers only a slightly earlier start, but the sprint, on which children can 'bet' (winning lollipops for having the right sheep sticker) certainly keeps at least one member of staff fighting fit.

Races are every Sunday, and can attract audiences of hundred in a spot where children can also walk amongst chickens, play with water and sand, feed lambs, hold rabbits and take an extended drive on a tractor together with witty commentary and a tiny bit of local history.

Just over a hedge beside the entry is the rather better known Newgrange World Heritage Site; a spectacular spot, undoubtedly. For the tiniest amongst us, though, wonky mirrors, ride-on go karts and shoving the back of the seat in front in order to 'push' a tractor up a hill simply have a little bit more pizzazz.

This is something of a theme for the Boyne Valley: while the modern world can transport the more fortunate amongst us across Europe for extended weekends, one of Dublin's nearest and more rural neighbours has quietly transformed itself into a genuinely exciting getaway, especially for families.

The big attractions largely feel quite well established, but the smaller ones are slowly but consistently upping their game.

Funtastia in Drogheda, of course, is a long-time favourite. The water park, Pirates' Cove, is largely only around a foot deep, but a friend to anyone who enjoys wildly spraying water, some dramatic slides and the opportunity to slip around in a floating zorb.

The area for the really small kids is often overlooked - it's hidden at the back right as you leave the changing rooms, and is far more suitable for those aged under about 5 - but the thrill-a-minute stuff is the main lure.

It includes activities like sliding up and down vertical walls on inflatable hoops, or dropping through the middle of a gigantic bowl. It's fast-

paced, but also quiet enough to avoid any really significant queuing.

The rest of the theme park is a bit of a 'what's what' in lively indoor entertainment. The roped climbs include a 'hang until you drop' exercise that's not for those who have nightmares about falling. It's just one of hundreds of small rides and games that include a full-sized bowling alley near the front door, and a token system ensuring the persistent leave with at least a small prize trinket.

A seriously underrated spot is Sonairte [meaning strength] eco-centre and gardens, near Laystown. What initially looks like little more than a road-side cafe stop off opens out into walkways along the most tidal part of the River Nanny, alongside sweeping great vegetable and flower gardens, put together by an active charity-led community.

The eco-friendly shop is based around selling what's grown in the gardens (but with lots of eco-positive additions), and the coffee shop, heavy on vegan offerings, sits in a courtyard where kids can play tunes

on metallic drums.

Tucked into a small stable-like side building is an education centre focused on bees, and if you turn up on the right day, offers courses range from yoga to graffiti.

Some days, a regular volunteer brings out his own sizable steel drum and patiently teaches every enthusiastic kid that walks past in a quiet corner of the garden.

The modest charity store here has to be one of the best value spots in Ireland, too. A short walking distance down the road is Laytown Beach, one of Ireland's broadest, down which you can walk as much as 5kms in one direction to where the Boyne runs into the Irish Sea.

In between the various charming stop offs, the Boyne Valley's food scene is growing, too. We're really taken with The Pantry at Dolly's, a slick looking cafe half hidden behind a pub in rural Balfeddock, where fruit and chocolate-laden acai bowls and top-end sandwiches seem to be the speciality, though the curry and salads are also superb.

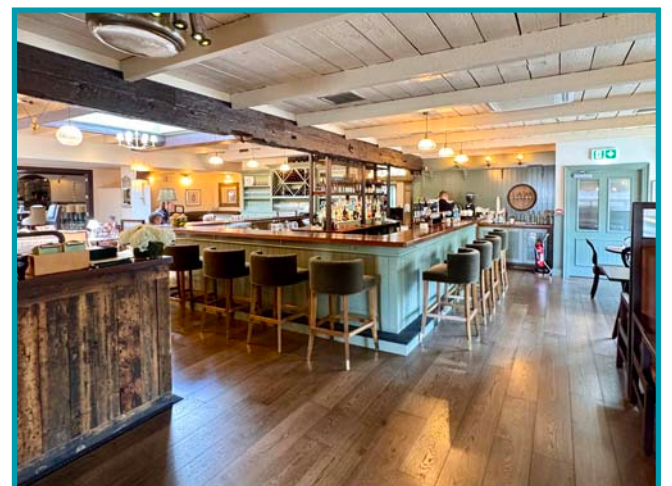
Matt The Threshers, opened this spring on the



The Pantry at Dollys Coffee



Highland Cow



Matt the Thresher Julianstown

location of the old Lime Kiln along the main road in Julianstown is another top spot, making full use of the Irish sea.

It has quickly become a crowded local favourite with gorgeously presented seafood options ranging from a gentle and nourishing chowder to generous platter and seafood pies. We particularly like the light, open space and the attention to detail that goes into the plating.

It does feel, in short, like the Boyne Valley is able to offer both playful and

charming, a spot that is fast developing into a welcome weekend playground for those prepared to explore to the north of the city. Ireland's Ancient East has its charms, but the less historical side of the area around Drogheda is genuinely colourful, and has plenty to occupy the domestic tourist, too.

Discover Boyne Valley operate their own website, where you can explore the various attractions on offer. This can be found at discoverboynevalley.ie