

Places

Time and place –
Newgrange was
built before the
invention of the wheel

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From Newgrange to castles, Meath offers a thrilling chance to travel back in time, writes **Fran Power**



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I'm standing in a grave with three metres of stone and earth piled above me. It's cold and dark and the air is thick with history. The passage tomb at Newgrange has been standing on this bend in the Boyne river for over 5,000 years, since before the pyramids of Egypt, before Stonehenge, before even the invention of the wheel. Along with nearby Knowth and Dowth, it's just one of 40 or so passage graves in Co Meath.

The hubby, our teenage daughter and myself are on an overnight stay in the Boyne Valley, doing a bit of time travel through history, and first up is our trip back to the Neolithic period.

The passage tomb is narrow – Neolithic folk were a mite smaller than this 21st century grain-fed human – and flanked with massive stones that lead to a chamber with three recesses. Our guide from the Office of Public Works points to the huge scooped-out boulders lying in one of them.

"What do you think the purpose of these was?" she asks.

"A bath?" says someone.

"A baptismal font?" says my teen.

"That's nice," nods the guide, "most people say 'executions', but no."

In fact, the basins were used to hold the remains of the dead. Not much more was known about them until two years ago when researchers carried out genetic sequencing and found that an adult male buried there was likely a member of a ruling elite, a deified royal family that, like the Egyptian pharaohs, protected their power and lineage through incest.

Distant cousins were traced in the genetic remains at other Irish passage tombs, including at Carrowkeel and Carrowmore in Sligo, suggesting that the dynasty may have held power across the country for half a millennia. They would have built these monuments as places to perform public rituals to cement their rule.

But the real show here is the magic that happens at the winter solstice. Our guide switches off the lights so we can experience the inky blackness of the shortest day of the year. At 8.58am on December 21, and for the few days before and after, she tells us, a shaft of light hits

GETTING THERE

● While the lottery for tickets to witness the solstice from inside Newgrange is over, anyone can present themselves at the newly refurbished Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre on December 21 and take the free shuttle bus to the site. After ticket holders have left the passage tomb, other visitors can queue for access. Entry to Newgrange is only via the visitor centre where there is also an excellent multimedia display. Shuttle buses and tours run from the centre to the site, booking advised, Donore, Co Meath, 041 988 0300; heritageireland.ie

● Fran and family stayed at the Conyngham Arms Hotel, Slane, Co Meath, 041 98 84444. Prices for two for B&B plus afternoon tea, from €140. conynghamarms.ie

● For more on the Ancient East, discoverboynevalley.ie.



Family day out – Fran, Grace and David at Newgrange

the roof box above the entrance lintel of the mound at Newgrange. As the minutes tick by the beam inches 19m along the floor to light up the entire chamber. By 9.20am, it's all over. The tomb returns to darkness for another year.

The precision of those ancient builders would leave many a modern architect in awe. If the lintel had been 20cm lower, say, or the passage a few metres shorter, the rising sun would not have lit the chamber. Its south-east orientation aligns exactly with the sun's arc through the sky, just as Dowth is aligned south-west to catch the setting sun's light.

Later, back in 21st century Slane, we check in to the Conyngham Arms Hotel, a restored coaching inn on the main street that's buzzing with diners. It's a popular spot for overflow guests from the many weddings hosted at nearby Tankardstown House, which is owned by the same couple, Trish and Brian Conroy. Our family room is luxurious without being starchy, with comfortable beds and a good-sized bathroom.

We tuck into vast portions of fish and chips and pasta, before we drive 15 minutes up the road to the Solstice Arts Centre in Navan (solsticeartscentre.ie). I wouldn't normally think of seeing a play on a weekend away but the chance to see actor Pat Kinevane's one-man show *Forgotten* is not something to pass up. And it's spellbinding. Part kabuki dance, part storytelling, *Forgotten* seems an unlikely mash-up, but we're riveted by the tales of four people living in nursing homes. There's some great repartee with the audience and Kinevane finishes to a standing ovation.

The next morning, we tip up the road to Slane Castle (slanecastlevisit.ie; adult €14) for a tour.

First, we look out over the Boyne and a grassy arena where mega stars from Springsteen to Queen to Bowie have played. I was one of the 70,000 or so who shelled out £12 to see the Rolling Stones back as a teenager in 1982. I thought the jaded 40-something rockers wouldn't be up to much. How wrong I was. It was electric, with Jagger, stripped to the waist,

dousing the crowd in buckets of water to stop us keeling over in the heat.

Ten years later saw "a catastrophic event", says Lord Henry Mountcharles, owner of the 18th century Gothic Revival pile, in a 15-minute interview we're shown on the tour. A fire started in the kitchens and ripped through the house.

"I went into the ballroom and there was a fireman behind me, and he pulled me back as the ballroom disappeared into a ball of fire. It was devastating."

The night club, the restaurant, many of the paintings and furniture were lost. It was devastating. But against all the odds, by 2001, the place was restored and reopened to the public, thanks in part to the concerts.

These days, Lord Henry lives in nearby Beauparc House, while his son Alex, wife Carina and their children have moved into the upper floor at the castle. A pair of eco-dynamos, they run a glamping site (rockfarmslane.ie), a 90-acre organic farm, and have opened a whiskey distillery (for tours, slaneirishwhiskey.com) as well as an elegant bar and private dining room at the castle. We stopped in for a snifter.

"Very smooth," said the husband dreamily.

We could've happily stayed for brunch but we were bound for Bellinter House (bellinterhouse.com), the 35-room boutique hotel near Navan.



The husband and myself last visited Bellinter when it was a yoga retreat, owned then by the Sisters of Sion. It was spartan to say the least. This time round, there's not a trace of the hair shirt.

Bought and restored back in the early 2000s for a reported €16m by Jay Bourke and John Reynolds, the fine Palladian manor has since changed hands, but that sense of playfulness – a silver grand piano, rich plum walls, old paintings 'defaced' by a block of gold – is still intact. Better still, lunch is delicious.

Our final history stop is Trim Castle (heritageireland.ie; adults €5). Nowadays,

Epic spot – Trim Castle was one of the locations used in the filming of 'Braveheart'



The massive, bleak-looking ruin spreads over three acres

it's a massive, bleak-looking ruin spread over three acres in the centre of the town, but once it was the largest Anglo-Norman castle in the country, a symbol of the power of the invader Hugh de Lacy.

It took 30 years to build and its size and crucifix form made it the versatile location for *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson's 1995 epic film. Around 1,600 extras, many recruited from the FCA, our guide Susan tells us, got into the battle scenes with such gusto that a fleet of ambulances were waiting in the wings to cart off the injured.

It's time to make our own solar calculations and head east and homewards. Next year, we decide, we'll enter the lottery to see the winter solstice. After all, the light show won't last forever.

In another 3,000 years' time, the Earth will have shifted on its axis so the sun will no longer shine into Newgrange.

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