

Fascinating: A chamber at the ancient site of Brú na Bóinne

The Boyne Valley is home to some of our most important historical sites, merging tradition and heritage among ancient marvels

Where 5,000 years of history come alive

BY **JOAN SCALES**

WHERE in Ireland can you connect the pyramids of Egypt, Stonehenge, Anglo-Norman lords, Christopher Columbus, Georgian and Palladian mansions, and the finest racehorses in Europe? In the Boyne Valley, of course.

My visit began at the mouth of the Boyne in Drogheda where the Nao Santa Maria replica wooden ship was visiting. This type of Spanish galleon was the flagship for Christopher Columbus, when he crossed the Atlantic to find the New World. Drogheda and the Boyne Valley have long-time trading associations with Spain, and the ship was paying a visit.

When you see the size of it, 29m x 8m, with its wooden masts, open decks and reliance on wind, there was no comfort for the 40 sailors that made that journey. This was a look back in time, to an area of Ireland that has an extraordinary amount of heritage for it size.

Nearby, the imposing Bective Stud has opened its doors to visitors, with tearooms serving brunch, lunch and afternoon tea. The grounds are dotted with beautiful equine sculptures.

The stud is open for visitors to see the 100 gorgeous racehorses based here. Visitors can stay in the beautifully renovated original estate houses and cottages. From next year you will be able to stay in the new 104-bedroom hotel, currently being built and incorporating the former Georgian Bective House. The estate has lovely woodland walks for visitors.

History is everywhere in the market town of Trim, where the Normans built their largest castle overlooking the Boyne. It was built by Hugh de Lacy in the 12th century and is probably more famous now for being the location of the film Braveheart. It is one of the best examples of medieval military architecture in Europe and managed by Heritage Ireland. You can feel its history in every step.

History is also on the driveway as you arrive at Bellinter House Hotel. There is a replica of a Wagon Lits, or sleeping carriage, from the Orient Express, under the trees. This little piece of history comes with a hot tub on its deck and lots of privacy.

Bellinter House itself is a magnificent Palladian building overlooking lawns and trees. It is very private and popular for weddings. It was built around 1750 by the architect Richard Cassels, and has 40 bedrooms, restaurants, bistro, café, bar, drawing rooms and spa.

The rooms are spread over the main house, east and west wings, and the former stables.

The house has been sensitively renovated to maintain the original features. My room had a very high ceiling with original beams.

The Bathhouse Spa takes full advantage of the woodland location and is located away from the main house among the trees. There is an infinity pool with massage jets, saunas, hot tubs and plunge pools outside. For couples there are some private pod experiences where you can enjoy a hot tub, outdoor seaweed bath, indoor massage chairs with a glass of bubbles.

A whole range of spa and beauty treatments are available, and the VOYA organic seaweed products from Co Sligo are used here.

Prestons Restaurant, named after the first owner of Bellinter House, was a lovely place for dinner and breakfast. It is on the lower floor and has lovely vaulted ceilings. There are lots of little touches that show its age, like the breakfast juices that were served from huge crystal decanters.

The restaurant showcases foods from a county that is known for its great farmland. It is no surprise that Prestons has two AA Rosettes. After a delicious breakfast we reluctantly left Bellinter House to head far back in time, thousands of years to discover our ancestors at Newgrange and Knowth.

Nowadays visits to these megalithic sites are organised with visitors first arriving at the Brú na Bóinne Visitor and Interpretative Centre. The flow is managed by the OPW, bringing visitors by bus to the sites, where guides tell its history.

In 1993, the area was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site, and the visitor centre opened in 1997. It is an interesting introduction to one of the most extraordinary prehistoric landscapes in the world. Long before the pyramids in Egypt and Stonehenge in England, around 3200 BC, our forefathers were building huge monuments, understanding astronomy and producing artistic works on stone.

This is even more remarkable when you hear that the life expectancy in megalithic times was mid to late 20s. That means that the monuments and mounds were built by generations of early farming communities.

First, we went to Knowth, which has one big mound, surrounded by smaller satellite tombs. These were grave sites and so far, 19 have been identified. The largest mound is surrounded by 124 massive kerbstones, all decorated with spirals, waves, crescents and zigzags.

I was charmed to see that sandpipers have made their nests in the sandy soil above the kerbstones. They were very busy, flying in and out the day we were there.

The highlight of this journey to the Boyne Valley is Newgrange. It is extraordinarily moving to be allowed inside the narrow passage tomb and stand in the burial chamber. Here there are massive, decorated stones and the roof is covered in spirals. An enormous carved granite bowl is believed to have held the ashes of a megalithic noble person.

This chamber is where the light from the winter solstice enters through the roof box and hits the floor exactly on the morning of December 21. Our guide turned out the lights, it was pitch black, and slowly the solstice moment was recreated for us. In that moment we were at one with our ancestors.

A flavour of the Boyne

The area will play host to two upcoming festivals that are well worth a visit. Boyne Valley Bites Dining Week runs from October 9-18, and will celebrate local food and producers. A highlight is a seven-course dinner at Dundalk Gaol on October 15, hosted by Kitchenetta Catering in the historic gaol. in November, the Samhain Festival of Food & Culture returns to Kells for its eighth year. Highlights include the Sheridans Irish Food Fair, Samhain Long Table Supper and a Literary Pub Crawl.





Attractions: Afternoon tea at Bective Tearooms and, above, the Nao Santa Maria replica

TRAVEL FACTS

Rooms at Bellinter House and Spa from €225 per night, *bellinterhouse.com*. Brú na Bóinne costs €18 for adults and under-12s are free. It must be booked in advance on *heritageireland.ie*. See also *discoverboynevalley.ie*.