

TRAVEL

Boyne Valley and Bellinter House – a nice surprise

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The Boyne Valley was a nice surprise – it has some great elements if you want to learn about Ancient Ireland – combined with hills and lush valleys – it is making a strong tourism push.

The jewel in the crown of the Boyne Valley is the Hill of Tara, famous for being the residence of the High Kings of Ireland; while nearby monuments of Newgrange (book ahead) and Dowth Passage Tomb hark back to Megalithic and Neolithic Ireland.

We were asked to do a promotion on the Boyne Valley recently and won a prize to stay in Bellinter House, not far from Tara. As the saying goes – it is just an hour from Dublin, but three hours from Waterford if you get around outside rush hour via Sallins bypass.

A very kind local guide, Clare Tuffy, gave us great background to the Hill of Tara and many of its stories in our one hour chat.

The OPW has regular free tours with guides in the summer and is worthwhile, makes it better to get the full story, they operate from the former Church of Ireland building visitor centre.

Our visit included a paddle in a currach along the Boyne Canal beside the Boyne River, where our host told us some great stories about the area; which was followed by a lovely stroll around medieval Drogheda; and finished up with a visit to the splendid Trim Castle and lunch at Killeen Castle Golf Club.

The open area of Tara does need some interpretation, with the various mounds and burial areas. Our guide, Clare also pointed out the distant Cooley Hills of Co. Louth, the Mourne Mountains in Co. Down, and many of the other ancient hills in the region.

Try out the nice tea rooms in the area and check out the great little book shop nearby. There used to be may bus tours in the past here, but not on the day we visited.

Boyne Boats was another great discovery the next day of our stay, with Ross Kenny at the Lock House, Oldbridge. We met near the Battle of the Boyne Visitor Centre and walked to the lock.

This is near the Battle of the Boyne site and the boat man, Ross, gave us a great insight and background to the battle. He is also an expert on old Irish customs and fairy tales and the mystery of the Boyne Valley – a great companion for a boat trip. He built the old currach over a number



The Hill of Tara in early morning light.

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Ireland's Ancient Boyne River Experience with Boyne Boats.

of months as part of a special boat building programme, which included old Irish currachs.

Very affable and knowledgeable, Ross told us about some elderly Orangemen who came to the area quietly each May to see the site of the old battle and he gives them the strategy and details of how King Billy beat King James, who eventually took flight departing Ireland from Passage East near Waterford.

He would later be hired by 'Game of Thrones' film group to help build some of their boats on set for the mega TV series. On his return from the Game of Thrones set, he launched Boyne River Tours, which he started pre-Covid. This included the closure period, but with the boom on home holidays and good weather 2020-22, his enterprise succeeded.

Boyne Boats is just a short visit by road to Drogheda where Nelly's Pub provides nice lunches at 11 West Street and is lively and friendly, neighbouring a small hotel called Marcys.

We would later do a tour of Drogheda, an under-appreciated medieval town that has much to offer. Brendan Matthews was our guide here, a self-taught man, he was a mine of information and former archaeologist. The port of Drogheda is also impressive, we will write more on this another week.

About 30 minutes away was our accommodation – the fine Bellinter House, not far from Dublin Airport, but closer to Navan. A former large country home, the stables and courtyard out-houses are converted to rooms with modern standards. Great spa facilities

with outdoor jacuzzi and fine steam room. Food at the hotel is excellent and dinner was really good on each occasion. Their full Irish breakfast will keep you going for the day! Easy parking in the courtyard.

Behind Bellinter House is Boyne River – they do make the most of their features here!

Bellinter can also be handy for a Dublin Airport visit too, and we noted some taxis taking people to the airport.

Next morning, we set off for Trim about 25-30 minutes cross country, Google Maps and Sat Nav were a great help.

It has been a long time since we passed near this location, but Trim has received excellent support from the OPW during the Celtic Tiger period with the OPW carrying major work with



Bellinter House.



At the Hill of Tara.

PHOTO: KIERAN WALSH



At the Hill of Tara.

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scaffolding and board walks. Visitors can now visit the site safely near the centre of this heritage town that won the tidy towns several years ago.

At 10.30 a.m. each day an OPW guide gives the background to the work carried out and an outline of Norman history going back to Hugh de Lacy, a 12th Century Norman lord who had one million acres of prime Irish land at one stage and built the castle as a fortification and later a residence. At one stage, the Duke of Wellington family owned Trim Castle and its large estate. Some movies which were made here include Mel Gibson's renowned 'Braveheart'. The castle would lay vacant after the Cromwell period when it

was mainly a garrison with a few later owners trying to make a go of it. Today, it is lit up at night and is quite the spectacle.

Our final visit was to Killeen Castle Golf Club, close to Hill of Tara. A top quality golf club designed by Jack Nicklaus.

Visitors welcome with 18-hole green fees at €90 but also €30 for 9-hole options off-season. Normal green fee can be €125 for 18-holes – close to Dublin means a premium price. There are great views of the immense parkland and trees; a fine restaurant and bar, a good way to end the day after a round of golf.

We recommend the Boyne Valley – it will not disappoint.