

Fishing, facials and footing it along the river: Can a ‘Cork girl at heart’ be seduced by the Boyne Valley?

Rich history and lush countryside make this overlooked part of the world worth a visit



The Camino walk along the river Boyne

The Wild Atlantic Way may have captured much of the attention when it comes to holidays at home in recent times, but there's plenty on offer away from the western seaboard.

With lush surroundings, natural bodies of water, rich history and delicious food, the Boyne Valley brims with great trip potential and I set out to discover it all in two jam-packed days.

The Boyne Valley, naturally, is synonymous with the 1690 Battle of the Boyne so it's fitting that my adventure should start at its visitor centre (heritageireland.ie).

I met local guide Frank 'Dusty' Flanagan there, a Drogheda native who spent decades working in finance and training before redundancy forced him to consider a new path in 2020. He was always an avid walker, he says, so it was a natural progression for him to turn that into a job.

These days Flanagan operates walking groups locally, as well as guiding and championing the Boyne Valley Camino – the 25km loop necessary to complete if you're thinking of walking the Celtic Camino, which ends in Santiago de Compostela. The Irish leg is new. When Flanagan set out to help establish it, "there was no script".

Once you finish your 25km on Irish soil, collect your stamps and travel to the port city of A Coruña in Spain where you'll spend four days walking.

"It's not the 20km a day that is difficult," Flanagan says, "it's the consecutive days, getting up when you have an ache." A good motto for life.

As a guide, he knows his stuff and his people. We travelled to Drogheda, to begin our walk along the river. Every few metres, we bumped into people Flanagan knows – fellow walkers and even people training for their upcoming Camino. It had been raining in recent days, so we were warned at regular junctions that the river path up ahead might need wading through.



The Battle of the Boyne Visitor Centre

The last leg of an enjoyable but surprisingly intense 8km walk brought us back to the grounds of the visitor centre, where Flanagan pointed out everything from optimal fishing spots to military pillboxes used to spy.

I'd be remiss not to have explored the grounds and museum on site. The visitor centre has a gorgeous garden that on a Tuesday was quiet and perfect for taking in the seasonal theatre space, the dog kennels from hunting days, and the vegetable and fruit garden.

Inside the museum, you can dive into the history of the area and get a closer look at the battle that defined it. It's a short tour, but an extensive one, with lots to learn along the way. Take lunch at Brambles if your stomach is rumbling after your walk. Flanagan and I did, refuelling with restorative sandwiches and soup.

After a long day on the banks of the Boyne – with the muddy trousers to show for it – I was set for bed, which was ready for me in the CityNorth hotel in Gormanston, Co Meath

(citynorthhotel.com). Comfy pillows were calling, but first came a hot shower, a quick tour, and a delicious dinner at the hotel restaurant.

The next day, after a buffet-style hot breakfast, it was out the door and back to the river. But this particular stretch is a private affair.

At Slane Castle, a concert venue as well as home to Henry Mountcharles, a section of the river is about to be fished by residents for the first time in 30 years. While Lord Mountcharles and his family occupy a part of the castle – and who, as I discover firsthand, are very amenable to visitors – there are plenty of other rooms to stay in.

They're often used by wedding parties, but Bruce Springsteen and Bono have stayed here. Harry Styles opted to head back to Dublin after his concert there in 2023, and more fool him. Ordinary folk can stay at the castle for around €900 per night for a party of two.

Chris Barry of Go Fishing Ireland is spearheading the fishing project. He works in educational publishing and is now a fishing coach too. "It's like being a golf coach, but imagine the hole moved and hid and some days isn't there," he explains.

"I've been fishing since I was a boy," he adds during our rapid-fire lesson on a serene and picturesque slice of the countryside. "I once caught a perch and put it in the fridge for three days, I wouldn't let anyone touch it. My brother threw it out."

His experience is obvious – he has extensive knowledge of the different kinds of flies different countries use, the methods for casting, where to get the best fish, and how to do it safely.



Gone fishing - Saoirse Hanley

Barry's love of fishing shone through, and he was patient and giving with both his time and expertise. I'm not one to brag, but he did say my accompanying friend Katie and I were in the top 20pc of the people he teaches.

Did we catch anything? No comment.

A morning spent at a castle is best followed up with lunch fit for a queen. We made our way to the Hill of Tara for lunch at Tara Cafe, which is part cafe, part gift shop with friendly and prompt service.

After all that exploring, our trip ended at the Dunboyne Castle Hotel and Spa (dunboynecastlehotel.com) where a comprehensive upgrade has just been completed, including in the spa.

A Himalayan salt suite was relaxing and I particularly enjoyed the storm shower. There was also hot tea, cool water, plenty of reading material and lots of space to lay back and relax before a treatment.

I opted for a facial, and it was a real treat from start to finish. The therapist even massaged my head and so I left the room glowing. After a short lie down in the post-treatment suite, Katie and I headed to the hotel bar for dinner where a pulled pork burger was the perfect way to end the day.

I'm a Cork girl at heart, who has long harped on about the beauty of the southern coast, but if nothing else this trip was a great reminder of how much else our country holds. I'm told, throughout my stay, that the close proximity of Dublin airport (around 40km) can mean the Boyne Valley area gets overlooked.

However, if you like warm hospitality, delicious food, and views people have fought battles to lay claim over, stepping off the well-worn tourist track and venturing northeast is well worth your time.

Saoirse was a guest of Discover Boyne Valley (discoverboynevalley.ie).