

Weekend Travel

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The hidden gems scattered through Ireland's ancient east

The heart of the Boyne Valley in the counties of Louth and Meath has plenty to offer visitors, from Neolithic tombs and First World War poets to whiskey tasting and great food

Long before the first Pharaoh of Egypt commanded a pyramid to be built along the Nile's fertile valleys, an Irish society was already thriving in a valley of its own.

Sprawled across a corner of Ireland's ancient east, the Boyne Valley was at the heart of advancement in Ireland, with some of the nation's oldest Megalithic sites dotted along the Boyne river.

The Boyne Valley's rolling green hills are part of an intricate 'ritual landscape' in counties Meath and Louth, where some of the most important examples of Neolithic structures lie, such as Newgrange.

It is one of at least 90 examples of ancient structures including standing stones, burial mounds and passage tombs built between 3,300-2,900BC.

While Egypt boasts the Valley of Kings, the Brú na Bóinne – also known as the Boyne Valley of Tombs – was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993, cementing its legacy as one of world's most important archaeological sites. However, the ancient region offers also a range of more modern attractions and activities, as well more recent examples of Irish history.

Although I was primarily familiar of the area for being the



Talking the walk: Tour guide Frank 'Dusty' Flanagan and, top, the Laurence Gate in Drogheda

historical location for King William of Orange's victory, my interest for the trip piqued further as I looked more into the small but densely packed region.

Holding your hand through the adventure will be Discover Boyne Valley, who offer guides, blogs and scheduled tours for families and solo travellers alike to explore the its famous sites as well as hidden gems nestled in the region.

To drop my bags and lay my head for the night I chose the Marcy Hotel – a spacious and vibrant boutique-styled hotel positioned on the main artery of Drogheda's high street.

For food enthusiasts that prefer tasting the region rather than seeing it, the Boyne Valley's fertile grounds are home to a host of farms producing some of the island's best cheeses and greens.

One of many examples is the Conyngham Arms Hotel in Slane, where they offer a range of dishes from home and abroad with a local twist. I got the chance eat a wild salmon dishes all sourced from the roaring River Boyne, caught as we approached the peak of the harvesting season. Seafood lovers can also indulge in the oysters from the renowned Carlingford Oyster Company, which

supplies rich flavours from the Carlingford Lough to local establishments and eateries and across to their British neighbours.

An exciting scheme is also currently underway in the region that seeks to continue Boyne Valley's practice of supporting nearby producers. Local food centres and councils have all come together to strengthen and connect the Irish food culture and network – the first venture of its kind in Ireland. Among these centres is Boyne Valley Flavours, which aims to develop the area's food identity and enrich the community's connection to the farms and fisheries located in their own back garden.

I was treated to dining at one of their partnering restaurants at the illustrious Scholars Townhouse Hotel where, after passing through their intricate gardens and boutique reception, I feasted from a short but quality-filled menu.

I had a flavoursome leek soup followed by locally sourced chips and delicately breaded fish topped off by freshly made tartar sauce. A classic dish that the restaurant has mastered perfectly.

The hotel is located just a short walk from Drogheda's town centre and is a perfect spot to fuel you up for a long day of exploring Co Louth's oldest town.

I was guided through the streets by one of Drogheda's local legends, Frank 'Dusty' Flanagan, from Boyne Valley Walking tour group and who is better known for helping Drogheda win the Irish League Cup in 1984. Dusty shared his detailed knowledge of the town's history and hidden gems and told the story of how the picturesque town was once the battleground for warring clans and armies over the years.

Protruding from the Drogheda skyline is unmissable Millmount Fort, which began as the site of Neolithic passage grave before being a fort for the invading Normans. Later the towering mount was home to a stone castle which formed as a vantage point during the siege of Drogheda by Oliver Cromwell's forces in 1649.

Prior to the siege, Drogheda was a fortified settlement strategic to the English Pale and walled off to protect its assets – remnants of these walls can still be seen, including St Laurence Gate transporting you back to a far more tumultuous Ireland.

Peppered around the town are classic stone churches creating a symphony of bells, while vibrant murals dedicated to Irish legends of old decorate the area – a constant reminder that you're in the heart of Ireland's ancient east.

And who better to accompany you along the tour than the Mayor of Drogheda himself, Paddy McQuillan, who offered his own insight into his constituency's past. But behind the gold chain of office and red robe is a former rock band member who was once a supporting act for Northern Ireland's very own Stiff Little Fingers.

Speaking of music, those who love to rock will know of Slane Castle, which sits at the heart of the Boyne Valley. The estate has seen the biggest artists on the planet – from David Bowie to Harry Styles – entertain hundreds of thousands of fans since its first event in 1981.

However, just a stone's throw away from the world-renowned concert venue is an emerging whiskey distillery that opened its doors in 2017. We were guided by a well-versed tour guide who brought us through the whiskey-making process from the barley to the bottle – with supporting local traders being at the heart of their business in any way possible.

For the more artistically inclined travellers, Caoimhe Tuthill's Boann Irish Felt art studio in her beautifully traditional cottage awaits, where you can create felt portraits and brooches.

Caoimhe will hold your hand through the ancient practice – which has existed for almost 6,000 years. Although I'm no Picasso, her patience and plethora



Louth and proud: Colourful flowers in Drogheda town centre; a meal at the Scholars Townhouse Hotel; St Peter's Church; and the Francis Ledwidge Cottage Museum



of material allows even the most modest of artists to create unique designs definitely of a place on the mantelpiece.

At the centre of the Boyne Valley's creative hub is Droichead Arts Centre, situated on the town's main street, where we got the chance to sit down with their director, Collette Farrell.

The passionate curator took us through the region's growing space for creative performances as well as alternative outings like the centre's late-night dance cafes – part of wider plan to further boost the town's night-time economy.

Kids also have the opportunity to join in on the fun with family-friendly festivals set up from summer, with the Fairy Festival at Loughcrew Estate, to autumn, where young peo-

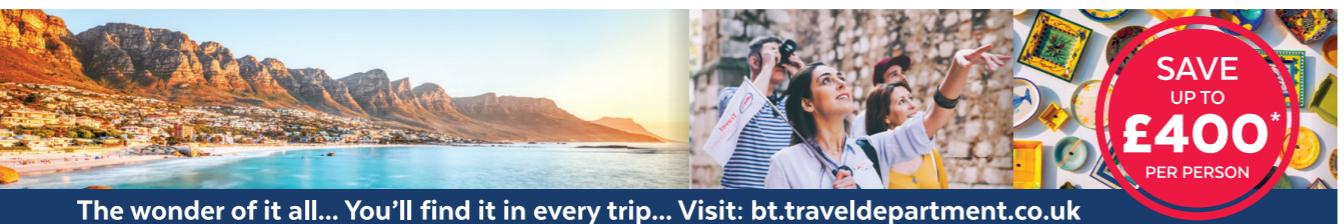
ple up to age 12 can celebrate all things culture from home and around the world.

Those eager to learn about local heroes can visit the Francis Ledwidge Cottage Museum, where dedicated volunteers provide informative tours out of the First World War poet's former home. The countryside cottage offers a snapshot of 20th century life for Edwardian Ireland.

So whether you're seeking to be transported back to Ireland's first footsteps into civilisation, rock out to some of the best artists in the world or just have your feed from some of the freshest food on the island – the Boyne Valley will be waiting for you.

Abdullah was a guest of Boyne Valley Tourism. For more, see www.discoverboynovalley.ie

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