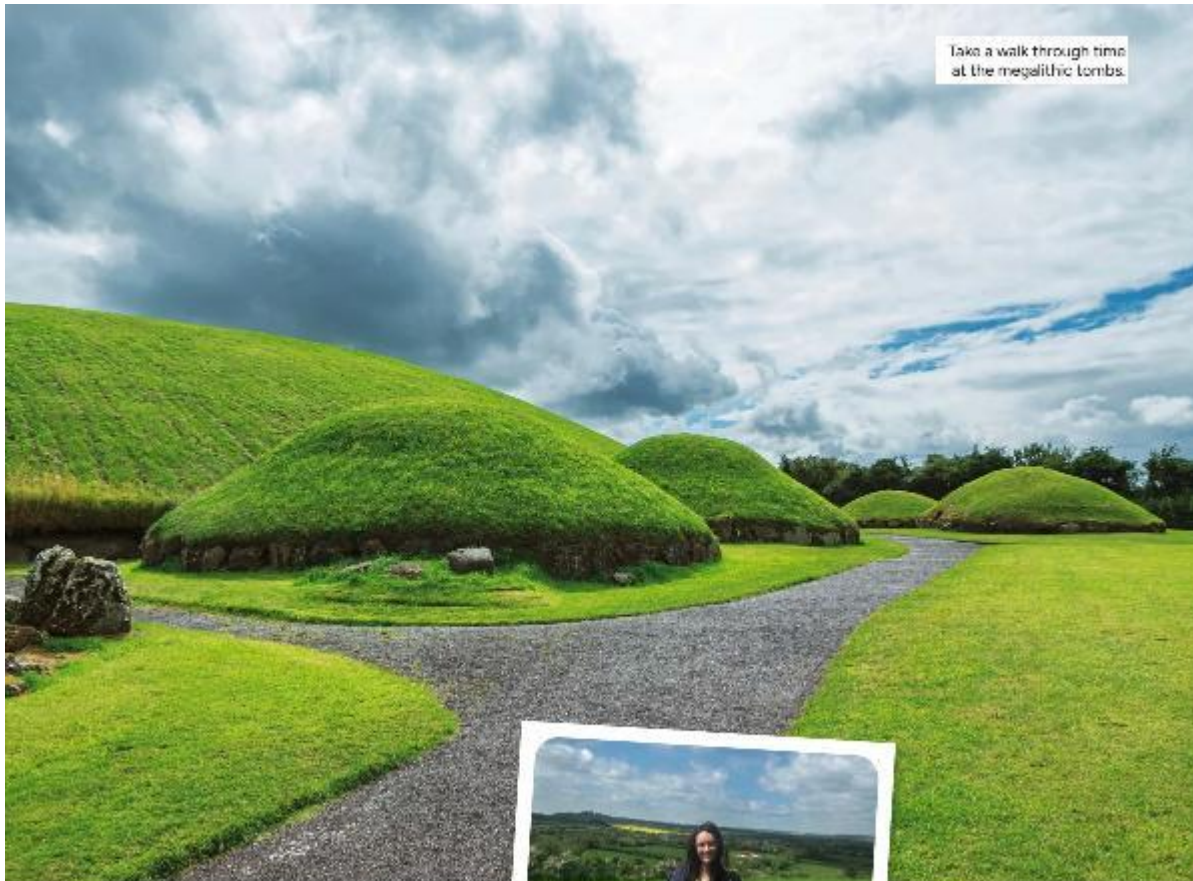




TRAVEL: Sophie Mcvinnie soaks in culture in Ireland's Boyne Valley

Sophie Mcvinnie soaks in culture and Neolithic history in Ireland's picturesque Boyne Valley.



Take a walk through time at the megalithic tombs.

THE beautiful Boyne Valley is a wondrous gorge of greenery, luxurious views, fascinating Neolithic ruins and some of the best cultural experiences you can have in the Republic of Ireland.

I learned all this and more when I visited, greeted by a delightful splash of sunshine and the friendliest locals.

After leaving the airport, our driver Rodney from chauffeur company Transfer Me took us to our first stop for breakfast.

There, we had a clear view of a key “Braveheart” filming location, Trim Castle.

Suffice to say we were fairly distracted while eating delicious pancakes, eggs Benedict and avocado on toast!

We then headed to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Brú na Bóinne, which is home to the ancient Neolithic tombs Knowth and Newgrange.

What's particularly fascinating is that they not only date back to 3,200 BC, but Newgrange is in fact 400 years older than the Pyramids of Giza!

It's an incredible fact to think about when you tour the grounds.

Spirals, which are some of the world's oldest geometric shapes found on prehistoric artifacts, are still clearly carved onto the walls of these tombs, having survived for thousands of years.

The largest of the two main tombs, Newgrange, is surrounded by 127 giant kerbstones and 18 smaller tombs.

Visitors can stroll along the paths which wind between them with a chance to get up close and examine the ancient artwork left on the stones.

Be mindful of the fragility of these landmarks when you walk amongst them – don't touch the tombs and make sure to admire from an appropriate distance.

You can't go into all of them because most are now lacking structural integrity.

Archaeologists are still researching the remains that have been left inside. That said, there is a special opportunity to walk into the chamber inside Newgrange. This experience isn't suitable for anyone with claustrophobia.

Once past the entryway, the passage to the tomb is severely narrow. You'll need to duck, squeeze between gaps and watch your step as you make your way along it towards the centre.

It's a breathtaking experience to be standing in the middle of an intact prehistoric structure.

Once inside, there's a captivating demonstration showing how the light would have entered the tomb during solstice.

Newgrange's passageway was constructed in such a way that allowed a single beam of sunlight to pass through to the centre of the tomb, uninterrupted and direct enough to illuminate the whole interior. Historians aren't sure what solstice meant to those of the Stone Age – perhaps it had religious value, or practical importance, or something entirely spiritual.

Whatever it represented, learning more about the Neolithic period at Brú na Bóinne is an unforgettable experience.

Next, we took a turn in the opposite direction activity-wise and let off steam . . . literally.

The Hot Box Sauna is an outdoor sauna experience just off the River Boyne at Bective Mill House, and it's an excellent option for those who enjoy relaxing on a short break.

We enjoyed a quick pit stop in one of the private box saunas before drying off and heading back for our evening meal at Trim Castle Hotel, where we also stayed for the night.

The next morning, we took a pleasant tour round the Poppy Garden in Oldcastle, Meath, which is just by the Loughcrew Hills.

We marvelled at the rows of colourful flowers, vegetable plots, miniature orchards and the locker garden on an hour-long stroll.

The whole experience takes place at a public cottage garden with two happy dogs ready at the gate to greet you.

It's open Thursday to Saturday from May to September. There's no need to book a slot if you're in the area – just drop by!

Tickets cost six euros per adult, with children entering free, and there's free parking available on site.

Moving swiftly on, we took a hike up towards the Loughcrew Cairns, a big megalithic cemetery including roughly 30 passage tombs.

Although it's a tiring climb to get there, the view is well worth the effort. Again, the best-preserved and most accessible tomb in Loughcrew – known as Cairn T – has been built to align with solstice, when the sun can illuminate symbols carved on the back wall of the tomb. Witnessing a prehistoric tradition right before your eyes is well worth it.

The last few stops on our Boyne Valley tour involved the magnificent Killua Castle, which has connections to Sir Walter Raleigh and Lawrence of Arabia. It's the home of the Krause family, who launched a charity called the Montpascal Foundation to help with the upkeep of the landmark. It funds works to restore and maintain the castle's historic legacy. To plan a visit or enquire about tickets, email info@killuacastle.com.

We ended our trip learning all things sourdough with nutritional experts Bread With Benefits.

Chris and Sara Brownlow host bread and wellness workshops to teach enthusiastic bakers how to make perfect sourdough.

After a bread-baking session with the Brownlows, we learn that making sourdough is not as challenging as you'd think!

If baking bread isn't for you, worry not. The couple are also offer plenty of chances to take part in other classes and lunches – or you can learn more about Ireland's ancient east on one of their bespoke expeditions.

• For more information about booking your experience and other opportunities on offer, visit breadwithbenefits.ie.

Want To Know More?

- For more information about Ireland's Boyne Valley, visit www.discoverboynevalley.ie.
- We stayed at Trim Castle Hotel and Dunboyne Castle Hotel.
- The Hot Box Sauna: thehotboxsauna.ie.
- To book tickets for Brú na Bóinne, go to www.heritageireland.ie/places-to-visit/bru-naboinne-visitor-centre/newgrange-knowthand-dowth.
- Killua Castle information can be found at killuacastle.com.
- For more on the Poppy Garden, visit www.thepoppygarden.com.
- To learn more about Loughcrew Cairns, go to www.loughcrewmegalithiccentre.com/loughcrew-cairns.

