

STAYCATION: Co. Monaghan

BY JIM MURTY

THERE'S only one thing worse than being late for a party and that's being early! Arrive late and the party's in full swing; arrive early and you'll catch your hosts on the hop, still trying to get everything ready.

Arrive a full week early and... the Westenra Arms Hotel on the Diamond in Monaghan town will look after you, find you a room at the inn, settle you down and point you in the direction of a good restaurant.

Like all good hosts, Sherry and Lam make room at the table at their Just In Asian Street Market restaurant at 30 Market Street (tel: 047 77771) and introduce you to their friends.

They'll be Nelius and his wife then, who are helping the owners' son and heir Justin colour in his Power Rangers book. He's a good teacher Nelius, he painted the scene of an Asian street restaurant on the wall behind us and included Justin eating a crispy pancake in the corner.

I eat the same pancake, one of a number of exotic dishes in Lam's €25 three-course meal which is a tour of the countries of the Far East, my favourite dishes are tinged with lemon-grass and coconut. I'm no connoisseur but I'm purring at the end of it all when a panting Sherry arrives back from the neighbours to tell us they want us to nip in for a drink or two for the road.

There's the group photo first,

Caught in time

There's always a warm welcome in homely Monaghan with its old-fashioned charm

Rich pastures: Stunning views in Glaslough

of course, before Lam walks us over to Teach Aindi or Andy's Bar (andysmonaghan.com) and tells us he'll be by later.

Half a dozen fancy gins - I'd especially recommend the Bath-tub gin with blackberries - from suited and booted ginoisseur Kevin, and I'm telling everyone I love them and that they're my family now.

Full of belly and dizzy of head the sensible thing then would have been to turn into our comfortable bed for the night but the strains of music entice us into the hotel bar. Well, it is a

Bank Holiday weekend and no-one's working tomorrow, and as the band remind us 'this is our land, this is your land'.

It's time for me to find out more. Country roads take me the next day to Glaslough, the home of the Leslie clan and the sumptuous Castle Leslie estate, much favoured by celebrities, and where Paul McCartney and Heather Mills got married. Today another couple are getting spliced - strangely, they don't want to rearrange their plans so we can get a new slot for our afternoon tea.

It gives us more time, though, to walk around the heritage village and learn about some of the colourful characters past and present, starting with the scion of the family, Bartholomew who saved the life of a drowning Queen of Scotland by throwing her his belt and telling her to 'grip fast' the buckle, the motto they hold on to today.

Then there's the doctor who had his leg buried in the new graveyard to save his fellow villagers from having to be the first poor soul to be buried in a new graveyard.

A handy free app helps you navigate the village at your own pace - punctuate it with a pit stop at the Ambledown cafe and artisan chocolate shop Glaslough Chocolates (glasloughchocolates.com) whose produce visitors to Castle Leslie will recognise from the treats on their bedside tables.

If you want to overload on chocolate try too Dinkins in Monaghan (Dinkinsbakery.com). We took a cake chocolate back with us and hid it from the kids.

AWORD or two more here on country roads. These country roads don't take me home, they take me around in circles... and I've got a thirst on and an appointment with a craft beer at a small brewery in Inniskeen.

I'm almost tempted to get out and walk. The 56km Monaghan Way threads its way through these hills and roads from Clontibret, near Monaghan to, yes, you've guessed it, Inniskeen.

But I'm rambling - back to the story.

So just when we were about to give up and head home... and by

TRAVEL FACTS

WHERE TO STAY

The Westenra Arms (westenrahotel.com/Tel: +353 47 74400) offers double rooms from €89 midweek, €99 Friday and €130 Saturdays, including breakfast.

FOR MORE INFO

Visit Monaghantourism.com. Also visit Monaghan Museum (www.monaghan.ie/museum)

this point we were on mooring terms with the Monaghan cows... we fell upon the sign for Brehon Brewery (brehonbrewhouse.ie).

Savouring our Ulster Black at the bar 15 minutes later and after the tour we learn that the lads from the next townland have been known to tinker with the signpost in a turf war over GAA!

I have one more for the road... I'm not driving and suddenly feel all poetic, as you do. I'm in good company.

Patrick Kavanagh is a son of this soil and rests for all time in it in St Mary's graveyard next to the church he frequented which has now been turned into a commemorative centre (patrickkavanaghcountry.com/ tel: 042 937 8560). Stepping stones on the plot lead up to a simple cross.

I reflect on his words from his poem Inniskeen Road: July Evening:

'A road, a mile of kingdom. I am king

Of banks and stones and every blooming thing.'

And now that we finally know where every blooming thing is we'll get there quicker next time. Now when is that again?



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PS: We did finally make our tea appointment at Castle Leslie (this is the before shot!). Uncle Jack's Great Afternoon Tea at Castle Leslie (www.castleleslie.com/castle-dining-afternoon-tea.html) costs €25pp; €43pp with a glass of champagne.