

Sunday Travel

Find thrills and frills in hidden Monaghan

If your idea of a perfect staycation is getting away from TripAdvisor traps, this is the place to go. By Valerie Flynn

When I tell my boyfriend, who is English, that we are going to Co Monaghan, he has questions – chiefly, “Where’s that?” and “What is in it?” “It’s... north,” I tell him, adding – as is typical of Dubliners who rarely leave the Pale and are thus a bit hazy on what lies beyond it – “I don’t think it’s that far from Dublin.”

I dig deeper, unearthing a suppressed Leaving Cert memory: “Stony Grey Soil – Patrick Kavanagh is from Monaghan!” Being English, he has heard of neither the poem nor the poet, but I’m on a roll now. “The Butcher Boy! Hills! Mushrooms!” And there ends my list.

“Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands” is the latest wheeze from Fáilte Ireland, the state agency that cooked up the phenomenally effective Wild Atlantic Way tourist trail. Tourism bosses are hoping similar numbers can be lured to the midlands – or “heartlands” – region that straddles the River Shannon, with the promise of “a journey into the unknown”. Sadly, Co Monaghan is not included in this, having been lumped into another Fáilte brand, the amorphous “Ireland’s Ancient East”, which covers what seems to be the rest of the Republic as far south as Cork. That’s a shame, because if anywhere on this tiny island visited by more than 11m tourists annually can be described as “hidden” or “unknown” – to both visitors and uninformed Dubs – it’s definitely Monaghan. Over the course of a two-night trip with my boyfriend and baby daughter, we spot only a handful of fellow travellers.

Kate Middleton’s wedding dress, right, was hand-stitched the Carrickmacross way



We start in Carrickmacross, which I can confirm really isn’t that far from Dublin: a little over an hour. In the town’s Market Square, we find the Collective gallery, full of beautiful, reasonably priced pottery, furniture, art and knitwear made by local craftspeople. Next door is the Carrickmacross Lace Gallery (carrickmacrosslace.ie), where I am shown around by Geraldine O’Reilly and Ann McMahon, two of 13 local women who make its famous creations to order for customers all over the world – the Emanuels used the lace on Princess Diana’s wedding dress and, 30 years later, Sarah Burton used a combination of French Chantilly and English Cluny lace hand-stitched using the Carrickmacross lace-making process on Kate Middleton’s. The lace-makers still use



From top: Daniel McNello’s bar was poet Patrick Kavanagh’s favourite pub; Lough Muckno; and an installation at Carrickmacross Workhouse



techniques developed in the town nearly 200 years ago, when it was introduced by local rector’s wife Margaret Grey Porter as a way for local women to earn extra income, though, like the crocheted lace made in nearby Clones, it took off during the Famine of the 1840s, when estate managers set up a lace school as a relief scheme for starving tenants. It would go

on to transform women into the main breadwinners in many destitute households; the garments they produced considered luxury, high fashion for wealthy Irish and Englishwomen.

The history of the Famine sits close to the surface in this part of the country. More than 160 Victorian workhouses were built in Ireland, but despite their ubiquity and the shadow they cast on the national consciousness, only a couple are now open to the public. One is the Carrickmacross Workhouse (€6; carrickmacrossworkhouse.com), where tours with local artist Orlagh Meegan-Gallagher, who has created paintings and installations for the building, can be booked year round.

The workhouse was built to house 500, but by the late 1840s had 2,000 inmates. The comfortable meeting room set aside for the board of governors contrasts with the bleak girls’ dormitory, furnished only with a wooden pallet stretching the length of the room. About 200-300 children would have slept on this structure, having been separated from their parents on

arrival. Meegan-Gallagher fills us in on the history, which she has gleaned from the surviving records of the board’s meetings – including the fact that 38 girls, aged 14-19, were sent from here to Australia to become the wives of British settlers.

In need of sustenance, we head to nearby Matilda’s Bakery & Delicatessen (facebook.com/MatildasArtisan) for a break. My boyfriend enjoys what he refers to as “the best sausage roll I’ve ever had – put that in your article!”; I concur for the chocolate biscuit cake.

Back in the car, we drive to the village of Laragh and stop for a wander around St Peter’s tin church, an unusual Swiss-Gothic building built on a rock beside a pretty stream, just off a road overhung with trees. Listed as a building of national importance by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, it doubles as a performing arts theatre. Later we lunch in Concra Wood Golf & Country Club in Castleblayney (concraclub.ie), a popular spot for families. Its clubhouse, perched atop one of Monaghan’s famous drumlins,



Lough Muckno Leisure Park, above; top, Monaghan’s town centre

looks down on Lough Muckno Leisure Park, which features a good playground. The town of Clones looks like it has seen better days, but features historical sites. We stay in the friendly Creighton hotel (creightonhotel.ie) and enjoy the food in its restaurant both nights while the baby miraculously sleeps upstairs in her cot. On one of our mornings, I visit the Ulster

Canal Stores (free entry; ulstercanalstoresvisitorcentre.ie), a former trading post on the edge of Clones where boats travelling up the Ulster Canal would have unloaded their wares. It is now a cafe and heritage museum, tracing the local lace tradition from its 1820 introduction by Grey Porter to its revival in the late 1990s by the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, and giving visitors a rare glimpse into a history predominantly about women. Local historians also host a walking tour of Clones at 11am on Saturdays during the summer, starting at the Ulster Canal Stores and taking in the medieval round tower and high cross, a Freemason’s hall and the remains of a Norman fort.

After lunch in the Cottontail Cafe (facebook.com/TheCottontailCafe), a family-friendly eatery in Monaghan town, we head to Sam Moore Open Farm (€5; facebook.com/Sam-Moore-Open-Farm). Seamus Keenan, the owner, and two of his grandchildren show us around. For me, the highlight is the peacock, hen and four peachicks, but our toddler is taken with

the chipmunk. Keenan has been building his menagerie for 10 years: there are also hedgehogs, quail, miniature goats, alpacas, ponies, and rabbits.

Next stop is beautiful Rossmore Forest Park, a Coillte property on the grounds of a former castle (free entry; coillte.ie/site/rossmore-forest-park). It’s a popular spot with anglers, but for families the main event is a sprawling adventure playground that includes two zip lines, plus a walking trail featuring wooden giants.

Nobody we spoke to on our trip had noticed a rise in visitor numbers since the Ireland’s Ancient East logos began appearing on Monaghan’s signposts a few years ago – this is an area of the country largely left behind by the tourism boom – but for those interested in history and heritage, there is much to explore that you won’t find in the better known TripAdvisor traps. Or as the local tourist board slogan would have it, there’s more to Monaghan.

monaghantourism.com; irelandsancienteast.com