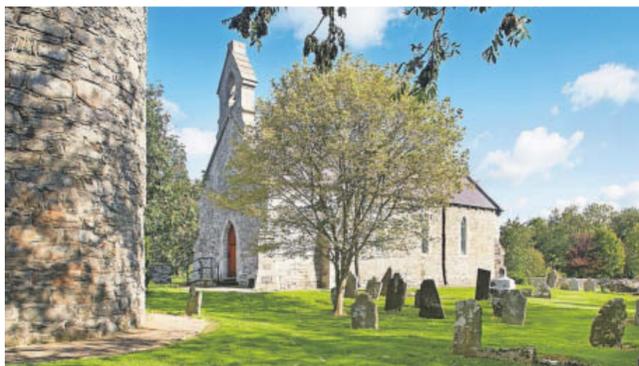


Travel



Kavanagh country has new tale to tell

Monaghan, long renowned for its poet, is now a destination for food, crafts and outdoor activities, writes *Julianne Corr*



Until about a fortnight ago, if you mentioned Monaghan to me the only image of the county that sprung to my mind was that of Patrick Kavanagh, the Irish poet who grew up on a farm in the rural county in the early 20th century.

I'm not an avid poetry reader and, in fact, I knew very little about Kavanagh – at least beyond what I learnt for the Leaving. So it was probably going to take a lot more than some dead poet's notoriety for the "stony grey soil" to impress me.

Furthermore, when most of us choose a staycation we head for the Wild Atlantic Way: Galway, Cork, Clare, Mayo, Kerry or Donegal; destinations packed with stunning beaches, small country pubs and friendly close-knit communities well versed in entertaining outsiders.

I have always been curious about the more neglected inland counties yet have been guilty of avoiding them myself. "They're not beside the sea" was my excuse. Monaghan too is inland, but despite this it is also relatively close to Dublin, at roughly an hour's drive. Off I went.

The first stop on my itinerary was the Patrick Kavanagh Centre (€10; patrickkavanaghcentre.com) located in his home village of Inniskeen, where he was also buried in 1967. I arrived on a wet and dreary Friday afternoon accompanied by my mother, who in her 62 years had also never been to Monaghan. Admission includes access to an exhibition of Kavanagh's life featuring various artefacts, from pictures of his family to copies of *The Irish Statesman*, a newspaper edited by George William Russell, a leader of the Irish literary revival. Russell, who went on to become Kavanagh's literary adviser, helped kick-start his career by publishing some of his early work in the newspaper. The exhibition includes a series of displays with digital touchscreens that take you through the important stages of Kavanagh's life.

The second part of the centre, and my favourite, involves a cinema-like experience in which Kavanagh's poems are read aloud to scenes of Monaghan's beautiful landscape that inspired much of his work.

We were then directed to the graveyard at the back of the centre where he is buried. This was followed by the Kavanagh Trail, a ten-stop walking route that follows in his footsteps and includes places of significance to him, such as the house he grew up in and where his grand-niece lives with her family.

Like almost every other county these days, Monaghan has its own craft beer scene. Brehon Brewhouse, a five-minute drive from the Patrick Kavanagh Centre, is owned by the McMahons and built on a farm that has been in the family for more than 100 years. The owner, Seamus McMahon, took us on a tour that included entertaining stories of his own family as he was growing up – this was my first taste of the county's endearing storytelling culture. We ended the tour at McMahon's old family cottage, now a beautiful bar where we tried some of his beers – or in my case, as the designated driver, took some home. Tours are by appointment (brehonbrewhouse.ie).

Just before we were about to drive off, however, McMahon waved at us to roll down the window. Would we like to try milking the cows, he wanted to know. Having lived in Dublin city all my life, this was not something I was acquainted with, so I welcomed the challenge. It was a

bonus to the trip and, if you pay the brewery a visit, I would recommend asking for a go.

After a 40-minute drive to Monaghan town we checked in at the Four Seasons Hotel for its "nearcation" package (an overnight stay with a full Irish breakfast from €99 per couple; 4seasonshotel.ie). The location was very good, with most of the attractions on our itinerary close by.

At Andy's Bar and Restaurant on Market Street in the town – a €5 taxi from the Four Seasons – we were greeted by Kevin Redmond, a gin expert whose family opened Andy's in 1983. The food was delicious but what really made the experience was Redmond's gin masterclass. He served up a number of the fine gins he imports from across the world and shared some tips on how to make the perfect gin and tonic (andysrestaurant.ie).

Next morning we headed to Liz Christy's Swallow Studios, a handweaver in the nearby village of Annayalla. Inside her luxury boutique we were able to watch her in action on the loom; her colour palette is inspired by Claude Monet and she keeps a handwritten record of the methods and materials that she uses to create her pieces (lizchristy.com).

Onwards to our next artisanal stop: King's Forge Glass in Castleblayney, where we met Grace Brennan who in 2003 turned the remains of a blacksmith forge



into a glass workshop. A glassmaking experience for visitors demonstrates how to carefully cut coloured glass to create a special gift – Brennan kindly sent our handmade masterpieces to us by post a few days later once they had baked in her kiln chamber (by appointment; kingsforgeglass.com).

Lunch was at the View at Concra Wood, located on the beautiful grounds of the Concra Wood Golf & Country Club just outside Castleblayney – the views

are worth trying to secure yourself a window seat (concracrowd.ie).

Five minutes away is the Castleblayney Outdoor Adventure Centre, where I burned off lunch with some stand-up paddleboarding on picturesque Lough Muckno.

I had stand-up paddleboarded before, but if you were trying it for the first time this is a good spot to do so because the lake is calm (even though it rained while I was there). There are also kayaks and

“ We spent the evening dining on Mexican tapas and sipping cocktails in a heated barn

Clockwise from above left: the grave of Patrick Kavanagh; Julianne Corr experiences glass-making; a statue to the poet in Inniskeen; the Patrick Kavanagh Centre; Inniskeen, the home village of Kavanagh

canoes to rent, as well as forest trail walks (email castleblayneyoac@gmail.com for bookings/tuition).

Dinner was at Street Yard, located at Hughie's Pub in Corcaghan, a 15-minute journey from our hotel. In 2017 Seany McKenna and Nikita McCroary set up Blasta Street Kitchen, a gourmet food truck and catering business that brings their Tex-Mex food and handmade sauces around the country; in the summer months they also run Street Yard. We spent the evening dining on Mexican tapas and sipping cocktails in a quirky heated barn – the fact it was in the middle of nowhere made the experience more special (blastastreetkitchen.com).

After a good night's sleep we spent our final morning at Sliabh Beagh Adventures, where we rented bikes. Our guide, Martin Connolly, helped us explore the wilds of Bragan in north Monaghan, taking us up to stunning viewpoints where we could see as far as Donegal and filling us in on the local history. The centre also offers battle archery, orienteering and archery (bikes €15 per day; sliabhbeaghadventures.ie).

Now when I hear of Monaghan I'll think of a county of storytellers with a passion for food, craft and the outdoors. And as for Kavanagh? Mullahinsa, Drummeril, Black Shanco – wherever I turn I see, in the stony grey soil of Monaghan, dead loves that were born for me. monaghandtourism.com

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