

Marvellous Monaghan

It may not be the first place that springs to mind for a staycation, but its sense of community and the opportunity to slow down make it an ideal escape from our busy world, says **Simon Kelly**

Within five minutes of parking up after an hour-long drive from Dublin, we're steeped in the history of Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan.

Right outside the Shirley Arms Hotel (*shirleyarmshotel.ie*; B&B from €179), where we'll be staying for the weekend, we're greeted by our tour guide, Mary, who, among others, leads groups around the historic town every Saturday morning during the summer months.

And for its size, Carrickmacross fits in a lot of unique history. Situated near the border between Monaghan and Louth, the main street is split virtually down the middle with two absentee landowning estates (the Baths and the Shirleys) once taking ownership of either side.

A whistle-stop tour ensues, and we're brought past Carrickmacross Lace Gallery (*carrickmacrosslace.ie*), regaled with stories of Patrick Kavanagh frequenting local pubs beside a mural in his honour, finished off with a visit to St Joseph's Church to gaze upon the incredible work of stained-glass artist Harry Clarke.

The tour forces us (and particularly the many locals in our group) to pause and reflect on buildings we may walk past every day without question, and to take in the stories behind them.

After absorbing enough history of the town to strongly consider it my chosen specialist subject in *Mastermind*, we head a few minutes down the road to meet Gareth Conlon and Karen Jeffares, owners of Síolta Chroí, a regenerative farm on the outskirts of town.

Described as a 'living education centre and demonstration site rooted in regenerative practice, ecological restoration, and community resilience', Síolta Chroí (*sioltachroi.ie*) is very much centred around slowing down and rethinking our farming practices. It offers courses, tours and community events to reconnect people with nature.

After Gareth and Karen greet us with some delicious pizza made fresh out of an incredible handmade cob and straw oven, Gareth tells us about the ethos behind the project.

"The hopeful message in amongst all the gloom is that it's possible to regenerate landscapes on a wide scale," he says, adding that they're only possible when we "work with nature instead of against her".

We're brought through the farm itself with Bingo the Jack Russell in tow. Gareth tells us of the trial-and-error process of creating the farm — how valuable it is to stop for a while and watch how the land reacts to planting trees or bushes, where the water lies and the wild animals forage. It lends itself to the laidback but purposeful feeling of the whole project.

By the end of the tour, my hands are full of chestnuts, grapes, raspberries and apples picked along the way. Then, we're whisked back inside and presented with a feast of food made from local companies (like fermented food experts Bia Cultures) and in-season veg from the farm.

As we sit down to eat, what strikes me most about Síolta Chroí is the sense of community that's been developed here — the passion Gareth has for showcasing what he has built and the community aspect that touches everything they do.

So welcoming are our hosts that we end up chatting about all things well beyond our allotted time together, but we're in no rush to leave.

As we say our goodbyes, I have a real sense of hope in the future, but also one of frustration that places like this are few and far between.

However, its growth and plans to expand even further in the coming years show that change is possible, and it all starts with roots in community. Something which Carrickmacross seems to have in abundance.

Get there

Simon was a guest of Monaghan Tourism. Find more on *monaghantourism.com*

The next morning, with the last of the summer weather holding up, we head down the road to Laragh to visit the beautiful and unique St Peter's Tin Church. Driving down an unassuming country road, we turn a corner into a different world as we're faced with the fairytale building with its red spire peering out from the surrounding trees.

It's dead quiet when we arrive and wander throughout the grounds, taking in the peace of the bubbling stream that passes by the church. The silence is soon broken by a lucky coincidence as one of the volunteers behind the church's restoration, Patrick Duffy, strolls in to set up for an event happening later that day.

We get chatting and he takes me through the history of the church, from its origins inspired by Gothic-style Swiss churches of old, its ownership under the Church of Ireland leading to its deconsecration decades ago, and its painstaking restoration from dereliction by the Laragh Heritage Group, a local volunteer group.

Since gaining a second life, the church has hosted many events, among them its popular Santa visits, which have families queuing out the door. "We were sold out in minutes," Patrick says of the first ever Christmas event, laughing as he recalls some couples visiting with their newborns to get in to Mr Claus's good books as soon as possible.

Once again, this meeting by chance brings back a running theme of my visit to Monaghan, the sense of community and the chance to slow down, have a chat and take in your surroundings.

We finish off our stay with a quick stop at Lough Muckno in nearby Castleblaney for a forest walk around the lake, followed by a return to the Shirley Arms for a wonderful meal in the hotel, which is packed with guests and locals alike enjoying their night out.

"We should really market ourselves as 'just an hour from Dublin'," joked Gareth the day before. Not a bad idea as, just an hour after leaving, we're back at home wondering why we haven't been to Co Monaghan before.





From left: The Shirley Arms Hotel; Lough Muckno. PHOTO: BARBARA EGAN/REPORTAGE; **and Gareth Conlon at Síolta Chroí.** PHOTO: SIMON KELLY

