



SURF N' TURF IN SLIGO

Sligo wants to be the adventure capital of Ireland. Award-winning travel writer *Yvonne Gordon* puts it to the test...

The lake surface is a silver mirror as we glide along. Then a burst of sunlight illuminates some sand-coloured rocks just under the waterline. From the shore, the water looked grey – but now, out in the middle of the lake on a paddleboard, with the sun shining, I can see a lot of life under the surface.

I'm on Lough Gill in Sligo, enjoying a peaceful morning of Stand-up Paddleboarding (SUP) during a few days of adventure in the northwest. When we launch from a small beach at Hazelwood Forest, I worry about falling off the board. But I soon forget about balance as I become absorbed in nature.

Three ducks sit on a navigation mark as we pass by. The lake is surrounded by green hills and trees full of chirping birds and there are tiny islands in the distance. We paddle through some tall rushes to the side of an island.

As we glide along, we hear stories of the old woman who lived on Beezie's Island and the legend of how the lake was supposedly created by tears. The rich folklore of the area inspired poet WB Yeats, who spent his childhood holidays here and went on to immortalise the Lake Isle of Innisfree. Nowadays, you can get out on the lake on a kayak, SUP or sailing dinghy and even explore an isle for yourself.

With its flat-topped mountains, endless beaches, rocky reefs and freshwater lakes, Sligo is styling itself as the adventure capital of Ireland. It has lots of competition from other counties on the Wild Atlantic Way, but Adventure Sligo, a new network of 14 activity providers, says that

the variety of adventures on offer in such a compact area and in such stunning locations is a big advantage. The county's size also makes it easy to do more than one activity in a day.

What I realise too, is that so many of Sligo's adventure locations have a rich cultural history and some fascinating legends to go with them.

On a surfboard at Strandhill, for example, every time I whizz in towards the shore – the times I am actually standing up on the board, that is – I am in awe of Knocknarea Mountain in front of me. The hill takes on different colours as the light changes with each passing cloud. This is where the legendary Queen Medb (or Maeve) is said to be buried standing up, and I can see the mysterious rocky cairn on the summit.

The mountain top is an easy walk, so I climb it later to see the cairn and the views back down to the beach. There is a cluster of 14 Neolithic cairns over at Carrowkeel, so another day I sign up for a guided walking tour with Seatrails (seatrails.ie) to explore them.

Adventure is in guide Auriel Robinson's blood – she grew up with sailing and has a master's in maritime archaeology. She tells me how the hills here were on the sea bed 300 million years ago and are full of coral, how the old mining trail we walk on is an ancient sea gorge.

We climb in and out of the ancient passage graves, which date back as far as 3,500BC and have 360° views over the surrounding mountains, with views as far as Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim and Donegal.

For a distinctive range of activities, Sligo offers the most sea creatures covered sometimes.

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