

# i Lifestyle

## Welcome to my patch: Meet the locals unlocking hidden gems for tourists

In this summer of the staycation, growing numbers of people are reinventing themselves as tour guides to show a new generation of visitors what their homeplaces have to offer. **Kathy Donaghy reports**

**M**uch of travel in pre-Covid times was about far-flung destinations and savouring different cultures and cuisines. For two weeks every summer we soaked up the Provincial sunshine or swam in the warm waters of the Algarve. This year the pandemic has put paid to many of our travel plans and we're seeking closer to home. When Bronagh O'Rourke set up her business training tours of her farm, which is situated inside the Burren National Park last year, she couldn't keep up with the demand from US tour groups. But as one fell swoop her bookings got cancelled and Bronagh had to diversify, hoping to capture some of those holidaying at home. She's found that the pandemic has unlocked a hidden desire in Irish people to explore what's on their doorstep. Now offering wellness events and yoga as well as visits to the 500-acre family farm in the townland of Boston with its antique limestone pavement, hah, grasslands and shieling tents, Bronagh says the season is going better than she ever expected.

She is Antonelle (90, Ida 86) and Alice (14). Bronagh worked for a pharmaceutical company, travelling to London for meetings once a month, but was finding it tough to juggle work and the kids. She knew the rich heritage and diversity of land around the farm could provide the basis for a business offering her domestic part of the world to visitors. The Burren Farm Experience was born after Bronagh qualified as a tour guide over a year ago. Aided by her husband Cathal, who is the fifth generation on his family to farm the land, Bronagh is bringing visitors on wellness days to the ancient woodland for forest bathing. There's also a 30k hike around Burren Lake on the moorlands and this year through her farm to a cross country on the way to the lake as well as a public landing. "Cathal has all the history from the generations of his family. I bring in all the flora and fauna and the geology of The Burren

— we're a good team. It's sustainable and I hope it's something the girls will be involved in as we progress," says Bronagh. She believes that the pandemic has unlocked a curiosity in people to discover the richness that's right here on our doorsteps. "People are blown away by it — they didn't take the time to look below," she says.

The forest bathing idea was born after she read about the ancient Japanese practice of going to the woods for your health and wellbeing time there. "I've all learned something from Covid it's that we can find beauty in what we have if we just take the time. What we've found on the tours is that kids are really enjoying getting back to nature and coming to a farm like ours. You won't find a swing or a slide but the kids will have a great time," she says.

"It's like a sociological and agricultural history of Ireland when you come, our own micro national park within the national park. We had archaeologists in last year and we found a settlement where people lived in pre-Famine times," she adds.

Auriel Robinson, originally from Co Meath, had been travelling to the north west of the country ever since she was a child. When she qualified as an archaeologist and started working in Dublin, she still travelled regularly to Sligo where she was drawn for surfing.

During her trips to ride the waves, she fell in love with Sligo's big mountains and wild sea and had the realisation that perhaps this was somewhere she could live. She started researching maritime history as well as the archaeology and myths in the area, setting up her business Sealtrails to guide others on walking and horseback tours of the area some years ago.

"I'm fascinated with pre-history from the first farmers coming to Ireland and their tombs and their buildings. The tombs always evoke a curiosity in people. I would always bring in the mythology, the archaeology and the science as I interpret our ancient stories," she says.

Auriel tries to connect the person to the landscape on her trails, describing the landscape in layers from the geology, the mythology, the archaeology as well as the natural environment and the biodiversity. The impact we have as humans on our environment is something she's passionate about and she sees it as her role to educate people with awareness as they're walking the trail with her.

When the pandemic began sweeping the world earlier this year she felt the whole season would be written off and the first few months of the pandemic were actual for her business.

Keeping it local: Auriel Robinson (right) runs Sealtrails at Stredagh Beach in Co Sligo. PHOTO: JAMES CARMICHAEL

Below: Cathal and Bronagh O'Rourke of Burren Farm Experience with their children Alice, Ida and Annabelle at home on the farm near Boston, Co Clare. PHOTO: EAMON WARD



But as restrictions eased, she found that people were keen to get out and explore the world closer to home. All through lockdown she had produced videos of her going from place to place keeping people up to date on her adventures. She knew there was a keen appetite for what she was doing in the number of views her videos were attracting. Auriel says her customers now are Irish people or people from other countries living in Ireland who want to delve deep into their own environment and get to know it up close and personal with the help of an expert guide. While she may have brought 10 people on a tour in normal times, these days it may be a family on staycation or even a small group of two or three.

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Her trails vary in duration taking in the mountains and the coastline — all you need is a pair of hiking boots and a water-proof jacket. On her Spanish Armada trail she invites visitors to step back in time with a walk at Stredagh beach, one of the most pristine and beautiful beaches in Ireland which was made famous recently for the beach scenes in *Normal Heart*.

On this trail, walkers will trace the footsteps of a captain named Francisco De Cuellar who was shipwrecked after a horrendous storm hundreds of years ago. He was an important figure in the story of the infamous Spanish Armada fleet when they were trying to flee back to Spain after a failed invasion on England.

"I love getting away from everything to escape to the wilds and that's what keeps me here. Every time I'm out of Sligo I'm drawn back," says Auriel.

At her home in Ravenstone, Co Louth, Venora O'Brien, decided that retirement would not mean sitting around taking it easy. Her love of history and hill walking brought her on a tour guiding course and now she's guiding people through the ancient places of her own homeplace.

"I've travelled the world and gone on tours with locals and always delighted in the pride people took in their history. There are so many

stories in this area from those about Fionn Mac Cumhail to the sacred sites and holy wells. It's the most wonderful loop walk over two hours to Urney Graveyard in Co Louth where Peadar O'Donnell, who wrote the lyrics for 'Mná na hÉireann' is buried," says Venora, a former social worker.

Some of her walks take in parts of the Tin Trail which explores the places around one of Ireland's most epic sagas involving the theft of the brown bull of Cooley and the ensuing battle between Queen Maebh and Cú Chulainn of the Red Branch Knights from the Kingdom of Ulster.

Over the years Venora did many charity walks travelling all over the world, including a very memorable one to the jungles of Sumatra where she visited an orangutan orphanage. Her curmudgeon moment for setting up her own business, Warrior Walks, happened on a trip to Myanmar when she hired a local guide.

"That was the trigger for me. I felt that we have beautiful and sacred places where I live and why not take people out? Mindfulness is a big part of some of my walks. I offer foraging and forest bathing at Feede, a small mountain near where I live. The culturally curious are who I focus on. The people who come out forest bathing want to get away from it all. I like to stop and point out plants along the way or identify a bird calling. It's a day out. It's slow and engaging and all about chatting and people enjoying themselves."

For more information see sealtrails.ie and burrenfarmlifeexperience.ie. For more information on Warrior Walks contact venora.obrien@gmail.com

## Stuck in the Midlands with you: A local lockdown put an end to our family staycation

Ed Power

**W**ith hindsight, I should have known something had was on the horizon. The Sunday before we were due to go on holidays, my wife, the kids, and I drove to Dun Laoghaire. We made sure to arrive early, before the crowds.

Amid the very occasional sunshine, life seemed almost normal. We got coffee, a take-out meal. I even picked up a record store and purchased the Fontaines DC album, doing my bit for their ultimately fruitless Blur v Oasis tussle with The Coronas to reach number one. It wasn't entirely like the old days. To be clear, everyone was clearly slightly on edge. Facemasks were ubiquitous. Our quest for a public loo threatened to descend into a remake of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, until we thought of nipping into the shopping centre.

But still, it seemed like a positive omen for our upcoming week back in Cork where we could catch up — at a distance — with family. That was still the case the following Friday morning as I tried to get through all my work while my wife and the kids packed. This time tomorrow we would be leaving Kildare and driving to Cork. Has a sweeter sentence ever been written in the English language? "You know the punchline. All day Friday reports had swirled about a huge uptick in Covid cases in the Midlands. Initially I struggle to get my head around the statement. Not that there was a spiral in Coronavirus. But that Kildare was considered the Midlands."

Yes, we live a mile from a literal bog. But we moved here from the same reason many people do — because we couldn't afford Dublin. And so in my head we have always lived in a suburb of Dublin... just a little further out.

But suddenly we were about to learn that we really, truly didn't live in Dublin. And also that holidays were off. The kids were devastated. My wife disappointed. My own feelings were more mixed. A family member has been seriously unwell and with Coronavirus making a comeback in Kildare I would have had to stay away, for fear I was an asymptomatic carrier.

Plus, because I'm self-employed "holidays" are a nebulous concept. I'd have ended up spending most of the time working anyway, only five times as stressed as usual that's... quite stressed.

On Friday evening though, part of me was tempted to fling caution to the wind and try to keep one step ahead of the lockdown at midnight. It wasn't yet 7pm. The packing was essentially done. What if we bundled everyone in the car and just drove. *Mad Max: Fury Road* style, for the promised (ish) land? We didn't have any accommodation booked for that night but surely we could stay... somewhere?

The plan, let's just say, didn't survive peer review. And so we had to break it to the kids that they wouldn't be seeing cousins or grandparents. The long, strange, monotonous summer of 2020 was destined to carry on, as long, strange and monotonous as ever. Only now we couldn't even go to Dun Laoghaire, gaze at the sea and heroically ignoring social distancing along the pier (Iron Man doesn't know what it's missing guys). For at least another fortnight, an exciting day out meant going to Newbridge or Naas — Maynooth if we were especially daring.

What does a summer without holidays feel like? Well, I expect a great many people are learning the answer to that.

It isn't that the incidence of lows in your life increases dramatically.

Last week we went shopping for facemasks for the kids and had help me, it was actually an occasion

It's just that a few more of the highs have been snatched away. Every day is the same as that which went before. Your idea of what constitutes a thrilling departure from the norm grows increasingly desperate (last week we went shopping for facemasks for the kids and I'd help me, it was actually an occasion).

All going well the Great Kildare Lockdown of 2020 will lift at the end of the original fortnight. As we emerge blinking into the light, it will be too late for holidays. Not with the schools due to reopen so soon (and that is obviously going to proceed without a single hitch).

My own opinion is that holidays are overrated (they are if you're self-employed). But they're a lot better than planning for a break only to learn the night before that the shutters are coming down and that you're confined to your adopted commuter county for days on end. In a summer of bummers, that's right up there.



You're going to miss a Garda check point near Naas in Co Kildare. PHOTO: MIA CONNOR