

Herald Travel

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ARCHAEOLOGIST Ciaran McDonnell has never jumped out of a burning plane using an inflatable yellow dinghy as a parachute and ridden it down a Himalayan mountainside into a rapidly flowing river.

Then again, archaeologist Indiana Jones has never tobogganed down an icy Hill of Tara on a Harp lager tray and crashed it into a clump of spiky hawthorn bushes. Ciaran has, but he drew the line at joining me for a bone-rattling ride on Emerald Park's wooden roller-coaster, Cú Chulainn, during a day out visiting a couple of the Boyne Valley's biggest attractions. I understand why he declined. One, he's not daft; and two, if you don't have big bruises on your bum before getting on, you will have when you stagger off two-and-a-half decades of the Rosary later.



Rodney the secretary bird with rubber snake at Emerald Park

You can see the Hill of Tara, 10km away as the crow flies, from the top of Cú Chulainn before you plunge at 90kmh to the bottom, but only if you have your eyes open. Mine were clamped shut.

You can also see the builders hard at work on the site of Tír na nÓG, a new Celtic-themed area that will add two more roller-coasters to Emerald Park.

The names of the new rides are being kept under wraps for the moment, but what is known is that the larger will be a "suspended thrill coaster" while the smaller will be a "family boomerang".

Tír na nÓG will be twice the size of Crock and is scheduled to open next spring, but in the meantime, visitors can continue to marvel at the wonderful World of Raptors show.

You'd think the star of a birds of prey display would be the snowy owl, thanks to Harry Potter's pet, Hedwig, but you'd be wrong.

It's Rodney, the comical, long-legged secretary bird who gets the loudest cheers when he chases after a wriggling rubber snake and tries to stamp the living daylight out of it. The last time I laughed so

Prehistoric stone carvings inside the Mound of the Hostages on the Hill of Tara in Co Meath

Hole lot of history

Tom Sweeney enjoys a day out in the Boyne Valley

much was when someone told me the joke about the guy who walks into a bakery in Glasgow and says: "Is that a cake or a meringue?" And the baker says: "Naw, ye're no wrang - it *is* a cake."

My day out in the Boyne Valley had begun nice and early at the Hill of Tara before the tourist coaches began to arrive - at certain hours of the day in summer it gets so busy it's more like Hill 16.

Ciaran was brought up a snowball's throw from Tara, the ancient seat of high kings, and spent his childhood summers playing among its ditches, mounds and grassy banks and in winter sliding down its slippery slopes.

In time, he came to be fascinated by the site's historical and mythological significance, the legends and folklore going back 5,000 years, and from his early teens he knew archaeology was his calling.

His enthusiasm for his work in promoting tourism in the Boyne Valley and his eagerness to share his knowledge of Tara had me hanging on his every word as we stood by the Mound of the Hostages, which covers



How Emerald Park's two new roller-coasters will look

bars, nice guy Ciaran said: "On a clear day, you can see a quarter of the counties of Ireland from up here." It wasn't a clear day, but the views, which seemed to stretch for ever, were still

The ice-cream vans must have been doing a roaring trade, although one English newspaper opposed to the Irish fight for freedom put the crowd at "nine men and a dog".

Forty-five years earlier, on May 26, 1798, the Battle of Tara Hill was fought on this spot, with around 4,000 rebels and United Irishmen facing a mere 700 British yeomen and militiamen.

Although greatly outnumbered, the crown forces were far better armed and made deadly use of grapeshot fired repeatedly from a six-pounder cannon. As night fell, 400 rebels lay dead on the hill, and hundreds more succumbed to

their wounds in the days and weeks to follow. A Celtic cross marks the site where many were buried in a mass grave. The British lost 30 men.

Hitting me with another fascinating fact, Ciaran said Patrick Pearse originally planned for the proclamation of independence to be read from the top of Tara Hill on April 24, 1916, but logistics ruled it out.

"So you can see, this place has great significance in the ancient and more recent history of Ireland and the story of Gaelic resistance," he added.

"Incidentally, much of the important excavation work that was done here at the Mound of the Hostages - Duma na nGiall - was carried out in the late 1950s by archaeologist Ruaidhrí de Valera, the son of Eamon de Valera." All of which was very

interesting and will come in handy in a pub quiz, but who knew you could go hurtling down the hallowed Hill of Tara on a Harp lager tray? Roll on winter.

antique furniture and quirky art and with lovely gardens full of roses, it has the most fabulous cellar restaurant, Preston's, which I can't praise highly enough.

The Bathhouse Spa, which is open to non-residents, offers an extensive range of holistic, rejuvenating and relaxing therapies and massage treatments and specialises in seaweed baths, for which it's renowned.

The spacious bedrooms with big bathrooms are individually designed and furnished and ooze class. A special hats-off to the staff - they're absolute dotes and couldn't be more friendly or helpful, which is one of the many reasons Bellinter House gets so many repeat visitors. It's a gem.

● See bellinterhouse.com

NEXT WEEK: LAKE GARDA

Kevin Flanagan spends some quality time with his grandchildren in Italy



Sarah Marshall

YOU don't have to be a professional rider to enjoy some of the great cycling routes across Ireland and Britain that are designed to soak up glorious scenery and take in historic sites.

Whether you're gearing up for a mountain climb or packing the panniers for a gentle country ride, here are a few suggestions for cycling holidays this summer and autumn.

Great Western Greenway

Perfect for seasoned cyclists and beginners, the greenways are a network of off-road, traffic-free cycle routes running across Ireland.

One of the oldest sections is the Great Western in Co Mayo, weaving through bogs, woodland and farmland, with plenty of wildlife along the way.

Starting in Westport, continue to the Wild Nephin National Park.

Zippering below the Nephin Beg Mountains, get your pulse racing with a few easy gradients, but save enough puff to admire the breath-snatching views.

If you don't have your own set of wheels, rent a bike from Paddy and Nelly's Bike Hire in Westport.

Do it: Bikes from €22.50 a day, e-bikes €32.50 (paddy-andnelly.ie). See greenway.ie

Hadrian's Wall Cycleway

The Romans were masters at building roads, and pretty good at constructing walls too.

Admire work dating back nearly 2,000 years on a cross-country ride from Cumbria to the North Sea.

Largely following the line of Hadrian's Wall, this 210km self-guided route passes Roman forts, monuments, scenic villages and lovely market towns.

To lighten the load, luggage is transferred between guesthouses, and GPS pre-loaded routes make this a good entry option for cyclists attempting their first multi-day ride.

Do it: Five nights' B&B from £655pp (€769), two sharing, including luggage transfers.



Great Western Greenway and (below) Scotland's Caledonian Way

Saddle up for top cycling routes in Ireland and UK

Bike hire from £225 (€264), e-bike from £385/€452. See wilderness-england.com

Norfolk coastline

The pace of life is slow along one of England's prettiest coastlines.

Norfolk is home to landmark historic sites, superb sandy beaches and local pubs and cafes serving produce such as samphire and Cromer crab.

Inntravel has created a self-guided route on quiet backroads, stopping at a hand-picked selection of unusual cultural sites.

Halt at the Palladian Houghton Hall, once home to first prime minister Robert Walpole, window shop in the tempting stores of Burnham Market and head to pilgrimage site Little Walsingham, where the Virgin Mary is said

to have made an appearance in 1061.

Take some time to relax on Holkham Beach and give your tired legs a rest by returning inland on the Wells-Walsingham heritage steam railway.

Do it: Six nights B&B from £1,200pp (€1,409), two sharing, including four dinners, luggage transfers, route maps, cycle hire and taxi from/to local rail stations. E-bikes also available. See inntravel.co.uk

The Caledonian Way

Long summer days and epic scenery make Scotland the ideal place to explore on two wheels.

Winding from the Mull of Kintyre to the Highlands capital, Inverness, the Caledonian Way is Scotland's newest long-distance cycle route.

Visit the Kilmartin Glen and its 150 prehistoric monuments, enjoy a traffic-free stretch of mountain wilderness between Loch Creran and Loch Leven and rise to the challenge of taking on the Glendoe climb.

Although the trip is self-guided, organisers Wilderness Scotland provide full support throughout.

Do it: Six nights B&B from £1,465pp (€1,720), two sharing, including Wilderness Scotland soigneur, support van and luggage transfers. See wildernessscotland.com



MAKE A WEEKEND OF IT

If you fancy spending a couple of days exploring the attractions of the Boyne



Classy bedroom in Bellinter House

● For more information on the many great visitor attractions, activities, restaurants and accommodation options in the Boyne Valley, see discoverboynevalley.ie

Valley, Bellinter House Hotel and Spa just outside Navan provides the perfect base. Apart from being a fine period property packed with