

SOAK UP SLIGO

A break for two in scenic Sligo promises to be restorative, writes
Róisín Healy

Any time spent in the west is a tonic for the soul. I haven't visited Sligo very often but returning there this summer I found each landmark instantly felt familiar. I suppose it is because the scenery in that part of the country tends to arrest your attention, cementing its place in the memory. And so a weekend spent strolling, driving and eating our way around Sligo and the surrounding area, making new memories, was also awash with nostalgia. It's reflective of the area too; Sligo is connected to its heritage as much as it embraces the new.

We stayed at the four-star Sligo Park Hotel, which has recently benefited from a €4 million refurbishment. You can see the results as soon as you walk in. The hotel reception is an elegantly decorated space that is particularly cosy and inviting, with a lovely atmosphere as guests were constantly milling about.

The sister hotel of The Mespil in Dublin, the Sligo Park Hotel has been recognised as one of the best wedding venues in Connacht. On the weekend of our stay, the hotel was busy with an elegant wedding showcase.

After a long drive, all you want is to settle in and the bedrooms here are the epitome of comfort, without sacrificing style. The 136 bedrooms in the hotel are spacious and decorated in a calming palette of blues and greens, inspiration no doubt taken from the Wild Atlantic Way, with furnishings in natural tweeds and smooth velvet.

There wasn't too much time for lounging as we were keen to check out the Hazelwood Restaurant. It's a beautiful, light-filled room and we were delighted to get a table in the conservatory. Head chef Chris Friel is keen to let Sligo producers shine on the menu, which was full of delightful touches on traditional favourites. I had the grilled salmon, served with a creamy herb risotto and wilted spinach, with the addition of crispy mussel tempura that didn't disappoint. The star of the show however was the Oreo biscuit-based red velvet cheesecake, which is guaranteed to draw envy from dining companions.

The next morning we were up early as we were booked in for an iconic Sligo experience. Neil Walton and his family opened VOYA Seaweed Baths in 1996. It was in fact a reopening. Seaweed baths would have been a popular therapeutic remedy in the 20th century, with an estimated 300 baths in Ireland at that time. The coastal village of Strandhill was home to nine of them at that point. But in 1961 Hurricane Debbie destroyed what remained of the last of the original bath houses. When Neil, then a professional triathlete, learned about the recuperative properties of natural seaweed baths from



Strandhill Beach with Knocknarea mountain in the background



A refurbished bedroom at The Sligo Park Hotel



Harvesting seaweed

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athletes in Australia, he investigated the history of the therapy in Ireland. Now the VOYA baths attract 40,000 visitors a year, all hoping to enjoy the healing and beautifying effects of seaweed.

The experience is an invitation to genuinely unwind, and I assure any sceptics that it definitely feels different to taking a bath at home. First you step into an individual steam room for a few minutes to open the pores. Then you immerse yourself in a bathtub of hot water and seaweed. Far from that unpleasant situation of seaweed brushing against your legs in the sea, the bath draws out the gels from the seaweed, so you can feel the smoothing and moisturising effect on the skin. As the seaweed contains iodine, it turns the bathwater an

amber colour. Seaweeds contain algal polyphenols and carotenoids, which are proven antioxidants to protect against the signs of ageing. What really forces you to relax is the wakeup call of realising how difficult it is to sit in a bath for 50 minutes without a phone or any distractions. Afterwards, feeling red-faced and soft-skinned, it was time to stroll along the breath-taking Strandhill beach. I felt the benefits of the bath right away, as I realised that any muscle tension had evaporated from my body and I felt full of energy. A trip to Strandhill is synonymous with a visit to Shells Café, for the moreish calamari salad.

Back in Sligo town, we stopped at Knox for a brownie to fuel an afternoon of browsing the shops. Cait and I is a brilliantly curated haven of Irish design and craft, with everything from jewellery from the likes of Ruby Robin Boutique and Starling Bridge, to Moobles and Toobles baby clothes. Nearby, The Cat and The Moon is run by Sligo jewellery maker Martina Hamilton, and you will find lots of brilliant jewellery pieces and work by Irish artists to take home with you.

That evening we grabbed a G&T from the extensive selection at Bourbon Bar before settling in for dinner at The Embassy Steakhouse. The restaurant was doing a roaring trade with birthday celebrations and hen parties all in full swing but our waiter made us feel welcome even in the hustle and bustle. Most importantly, the food was fantastic, with options to suit all tastes. From there we headed to The Swagman to enjoy a pint in one of the cosy nooks, and plan a return visit to lovely Sligo. 🍷