

National treasure

With domestic travel back on the agenda, Katie McGonagle leaves London in search of outdoor adventures in County Down, Northern Ireland

Stealing a glance to my left as the road winds around the edge of a quiet inlet, I catch my first, heart-lifting glimpse of the sea – still and glassy, surface barely rippling against the low sea wall, but connected to the wild, open waters of the Irish Sea nonetheless.

The road curves again, and the domed peaks of the Mourne come into view, looming so large in the windscreen it feels as though I'm driving right into the heart of the mountains themselves. A refrain from the Irish folk song – 'where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea' – plays through my head as I carry on towards the seaside town of Newcastle, County Down.

Moments later, I pull in to the drive of Slieve Donard Resort and Spa, its grand, red-brick façade a beacon against the moody sky, with waves crashing against the shore to one side and the Mourne in full view up ahead.

After months in lockdown,

in a one-bedroom London flat, it's no exaggeration to say the very sight of sea and mountains feels like fresh air and freedom at last, a much-needed antidote to weeks of non-stop news about Covid-19.

Little did I know at this point that those mountains would become my constant companions on this outdoorsy adventure weekend – greeting me from my bedroom window each morning, watching the mist steal across before burning off in the sun, tasting the peppery notes of herbs picked fresh from the mountainsides or hiking steep trails in search of sweeping views.

With travel trends pointing towards a spike in staycations and an appetite for the outdoors, an active escape to Northern Ireland could be just the tonic your clients need to remind them of the joys of travel once again.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

The Mourne are the greatest draw here, with hikers and mountain bikers coming ➤



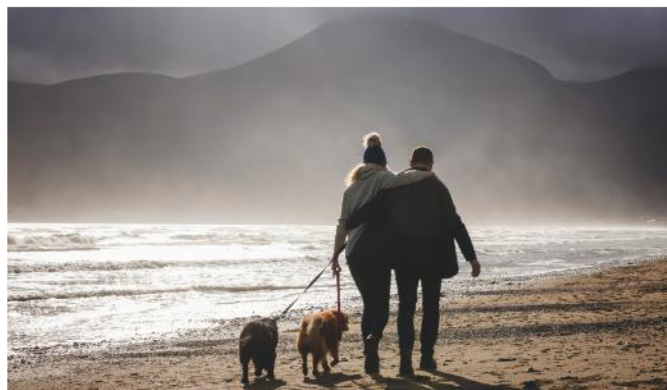
SLIEVE DONARD RESORT AND SPA

This grand dame was built in 1897 as a railway hotel for weekenders from Belfast (incidentally, the former station is now a rather ornate Lidl), and now sits perfectly placed between the sea, the mountains and the Royal County Down Golf Club.

The hotel has limited capacity to 50 of its 181 rooms, and hygiene measures are reassuringly visible – from hand sanitiser stations to a socially distanced reception, requirement to pre-book dining times and suspending daily room cleaning – but don't infringe on the enjoyment.

Food and drink is excellent, rooms well-appointed and the heritage decor offers an added level of elegance. Many guests visit primarily for the golf – the hotel has practice nets, its own buggy and access to the neighbouring course – or the spa, which has just been upgraded. It remains closed, but the pool and gym are expected to reopen on August 7.

Book it: B&B at Slieve Donard Resort and Spa starts at £85 per person. hastingshotels.com



top tip

Tourism Ireland is running product webinars for the trade in August. To sign up, contact trade team David Wood or Juno Thompson on dwood@tourismireland.com or jthompson@tourismireland.com

from across Ireland to test their mettle on the trails across the *slieves* (mountains). As we set off up a steep path on Slieve Martin, we passed families with young children, groups of teens, and hardy hikers and bikers kitted out in all-weather gear.

Guide Peter Rafferty, who runs local outfit Walk the Mournes, told me the trails had become a favourite spot for people getting their daily exercise during lockdown, and with these open, untouched landscapes on their doorstep, it's no wonder.

Peter pointed out wild heather growing by the side of the path and picked fresh blueberries (bilberries) for us to try. Then the trail evened out and the giant granite boulder of Cloughmore – aka the Big Stone, said to have been thrown there by legendary Irish giant Finn McCool – came into view.

It's impressive for sure, but look beyond the rock and there's the real reason why this is one of the most popular paths here, revealing the sweeping scene of Carlingford Lough below. On a sunny day, it would have been stunning, but even though the weather wasn't playing ball, being high up in the mountains with nothing but grey sky above and green slopes below was enough to make me forget what was going on in the world for a few precious moments.

The same was true of a visit to Castletwellan Forest Park, another oasis of calm where people were camping or biking along its traffic-free trails – though I was here for adventures on the water not on land.

“Ducking through tiny doorways carved out of stone felt like stumbling into a real-life version of *The Secret Garden*

The peaceful expanse of Castletwellan Lake, overlooked by a Victorian-era castle standing high on its tree-lined banks, is a favourite for canoeing, kayaking and fishing. Pushing off from the edge in a two-person canoe, with guide John Keating from the on-site Life Adventure Centre to keep me on track, it wasn't long before we were out in the middle of the water, far from the gaze of the few people strolling its banks.

As we paddled out past the lake's tiny islands and back again, I peered into the dense tangle of branches reaching right into the water's edge for the flash of a native red squirrel, and searched the array of bright-pink water lilies for any sign of its resident otters. Alas, they were nowhere to be seen, but with so many stories of nature and wildlife flourishing during lockdown, the chances of a sighting are higher than ever.

Life Adventure Centre also hires out bikes and e-bikes, which can be ridden on Northern Ireland's roads following a recent change in the law, from £38 a day, plus £7.30 delivery in the Mournes area. All equipment



OPPOSITE PAGE: Murlough Bay Beach, near Newcastle; Castletwellan Forest Park mountain bike trails; Katie on a hiking tour with Walk the Mournes
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Cloughmore Stone; Castletwellan Lake; Royal County Down Golf Course; Montalto Estate
PICTURES: Outdoor Recreation NI; NITB Photographic Dept; David Corder

is sanitised between uses, and the centre – set in the estate's former buttery – is open only to those with a booking to ensure hygiene standards are maintained.

GENTLER PURSUITS

If that all sounds too much like hard work, this region has plenty to offer those who like to go at a slower pace too. Castletwellan is better known in gardening circles as the home of Northern Ireland's national arboretum and Annesley Garden, so named for the influential family that once owned much of the surrounding area.

With so many rare tree and plant species in one small space, this is a delight for anyone with a gardening bent. Yet even though I'm not green-fingered, strolling past its cloistered walls draped with brightly coloured blooms and ducking through tiny doorways carved out of stone felt like stumbling into a real-life version of *The Secret Garden*.

Families looking for an outdoor escape might prefer to take the

short drive to Montalto Estate, another beautifully landscaped lakefront demesne open to the public. Its forest trails and exotic blooms are more compact, making it manageable for little legs, plus the owners have used their recent closure to upgrade children's play area the Low Wood with a treehouse and rope bridges.

The other pastime for which this area has earned renown is golf, thanks to the Royal County Down Golf Club, whose Championship Course frequently tops lists of the best links courses in the world.

Founded in 1889, it's one of Ireland's oldest golf clubs, and many of the guests at neighbouring Slieve Donard Resort and Spa (see *Tried & Tested*, opposite), travel thousands of miles just to play here.

Perhaps no surprise, then, that waiting lists for a tee time can be up to a year, with green fees of £270 per round – although keen golfers could be in luck as cancellations from the club's American clientele mean those tee times could be up

for grabs once the club reopens.

“Unusually, you might be able to get a tee time at Royal County Down,” says head professional Kevan Whitson. “Golfers are a pretty resilient bunch so once they can travel again, they will. But for now, you can contact the club as there may be availability at short notice.”

The club is currently open to members only, but is reviewing its plans to reopen for public bookings later in the year. “It's one of those iconic courses, being so different from anything else,” adds Whitson. “It's an incredibly tough challenge, but it's beautiful. You have a sea view all the way through the first three holes, then you turn and see the mountains instead – no other links course in the world has that setting of mountains as well.”

I turn to follow Whitson's gaze from the golf course, and there they are again, the rolling ridges of the Mourne Mountains seen from yet another glorious angle, standing steadfast and glinting in the bright mid-morning sun. **tv**

FOOD AND DRINK EXPERIENCES

Oak Restaurant, Slieve Donard Resort and Spa

The hotel's signature Oak Restaurant serves Irish classics done to chef standards – think cabbage and bacon and tender Irish beef – with a side of sea views across the bay.

Brunel's Restaurant, Newcastle

This popular spot has reopened with fewer diners but still creates a buzzy atmosphere along with a standout tasting menu offering a modern twist on classic Irish ingredients.

Killowen Distillery, Killowen

Ireland's smallest distillery, set up by a former architect, makes small-batch gin, whiskey and poitin using botanicals harvested in the mountains. Tastings are £15 for an hour.