



An aerial photograph of a wide, sandy beach meeting the ocean. Three kayakers in bright orange and red kayaks are positioned on the sand near the water's edge. The ocean is a deep teal color, and white waves are breaking along the shoreline. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

Wex APPEAL

Norman invasions, haunted houses, archery and coastline kayaking ... New Ross and the Hook Peninsula are rich with heart-stopping activities for lovers of Irish history.

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"This is where Ireland was lost and won," says guide Graham Doyle. It's a big statement to make as we sit in a two-person kayak in the middle of a huge bay. There wasn't a soul on the beach and there are no other boats in the bay – we have the whole blue expanse to ourselves. And today the calm and sparkly sea is extra blue, thanks to a cloudless sky.

Paddling over to an inlet under the headland, Graham explains that here at Baginbun, on the Hook Peninsula in Ireland's southeast, is where a wave of Norman landings changed the course of Irish history back in the 12th century. The invaders captured Waterford and Wexford, founded New Ross and Norman leader Strongbow later became the King of Leinster. I hear about "the greatest knight" William Marshall, a female knight called Alice of Abergavenny, about pirates and 1,000 shipwrecks on the sea bed.

"A lot of people think sea kayaking is going out to sea," says Graham, from **Hook Head Adventures** (hookheadadventures.ie). "It's not that at all. You're exploring the coastline. You're in a place that has a story and characters."

We paddle into the inlet where there's a tiny beach and, behind it, a cave in the cliff. It's an old test mine and you can climb through the cave to the other side. We glide in and out of more inlets, at one stage swirling through a narrow rocky gully, as seabirds cry overhead and Graham tells more stories.

At the tip of the headland, there's a sea cave called the Cell Hole, where you kayak into the dark and the sun lights up the water beneath a luminous green. It's



all a magical world to explore, made rich with stories of history and characters of times past.

My head is filled with tales of armies, knights and pirates as I drive around the Hook Peninsula. Just north of Baginbun is **Tintern Abbey** (051 562 650) built by the knight William Marshall. When he and his wife Isabel de Clare, daughter of Strongbow, were nearly shipwrecked in a storm on the way to Ireland, Marshall promised to build an abbey on his safe arrival. The result was a magnificent Cistercian Abbey, built in 1200 as a sister to Tintern in Wales. Monks lived there until the 16th century, when the Colclough family took up residence. It's now partly a ruin but you can tour the living quarters. A walk along a ✈

Previous pages, left, rug-maker Denis Kenny of Ceadogán Rugs in Barrystown, and right, kayaking at Baginbun Beach. Clockwise from top, a bronze horse at the studio of Gilly Thomas Sculpture in Gusserane; Graham Doyle of Hook Head Adventures on a sunrise kayak trip and Dunbrody Abbey.



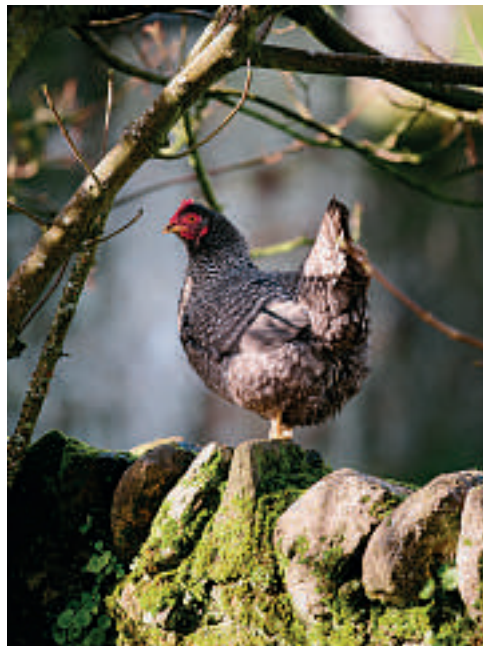


✈ woodland path lined with bluebells in spring leads to **Colclough Walled Garden** (colcloughwalledgarden.com) filled with everything from flowers to fruit trees.

Marshall also established **Hook Lighthouse** (hookheritage.ie), which stands proudly at the tip of Hook Head and has lit the way for ships for more than 800 years, making it the world's oldest intact working lighthouse. On a tour, I encounter Marshall's hologram. "I'm sure you've already heard of me as I am also known as The Greatest Knight," he boasts, listing his many achievements.

One of Marshall's legacies was founding New Ross on the River Barrow, a thriving town and once one of Ireland's wealthiest ports. **The Ros Tapestry** (rostapestry.ie) is a series of 15 hand-embroidered tapestries, telling fascinating tales in colourful thread of the Normans in Ireland and the founding of the town. New Ross's quays are no longer lined with longships, although you can't miss the tall masts of the **Dunbrody Famine Ship** (dunbrody.com), a replica of an 1840s emigrant vessel, which is open for tours.

"There's your ticket, 'Margaret Makasy, age 23'," says an old woman, handing me the ticket for a steerage passage to New York, dated March 1849. "Enjoy your voyage, hope you have your bags packed," she says. On board the *Dunbrody*, everything looks how it would have in the 1800s when it carried people to America and Canada in search of a better life, or to escape the Famine. Below in the hold, we see where families shared large bunks and we hear of the challenging conditions during the long Atlantic crossing. The ship itself was named after **Dunbrody Abbey** in



Opposite, clockwise from top left, inviting interiors at Kilmokea Country Manor; country house chic at Kilmokea; Hook Lighthouse is the world's oldest intact operational lighthouse; Highland cows roam the paddocks at Glendine Country House; colourful yarns at Ceadogán Rugs; sculptor Gilly Thomas working in clay; an ornamental pool at Kilmokea Heritage Gardens; a steak sambo at The Cracked Teapot and Dunbrody Abbey from above. This page, top, kayaking off Baginbun Head on the Hook Peninsula and a farmyard resident at Ceadogán Rugs.



Campile, founded in 1170. You can visit the ruins (self-guided; 086 375 9938) and opposite, at **Dunbrody Castle**, there's a fun, yew-hedge maze. Also worth visiting are **Ballyhack Castle** (051 389 468), a tower house built by the Knights Hospitaller of St John around 1540, and the impressive, star-shaped **Duncannon Fort** (duncannonfort.ie) overlooking Duncannon beach.

One of my last stops is a sunset tour at **Loftus Hall** (loftushall.ie) – said to be Ireland's most haunted house. Boarded up windows, crucifixes, peeling wallpaper and dark stories of past inhabitants and its troubled history leave an unsettling feeling.

With tales of ghosts, pirates and knights ringing in my ears, it seems fitting to have a go at **3D Archery** (3darcheryireland.com) in the grounds of Kilmokea House, where a Norman-themed woodland trail has three-dimensional animal shapes to aim at. The instructor, Andrew, patiently explains how to hold the bow and soon arrows are whizzing through the trees – though the landings are not as accurate as those of the Normans.

It's a thrilling way to end an adventure through so much history, exploring forts, abbeys, castles, lighthouses and ships. As the saying goes, "By the creek of Baginbun, Ireland was lost and won" – and this little corner of southeast Ireland is definitely where my heart was won. 🍀



Spooky – Loftus Hall, top, is said to be Ireland's most haunted house.

Clockwise from above, fish'n'chips at Roches Bar; pint o'clock at Neville's, Fethard-on-Sea and tea time at the Kennedy Homestead, New Ross.





FUCHSIA MACAREE

STAY

HERITAGE With cosy reception rooms, open fires, antiques and books, plus an indoor pool and three hectares of gardens, this 18th-century former rectory, **Kilmokea Country Manor**, is the ultimate country house hideaway. Some rooms have four-poster beds and free-standing baths and food includes garden produce. B&B from €75 per pps. (Great Island, Campile, 051 388 109; kilmokea.com)

LUXURY **Dunbrody House** is an elegant Georgian pile that has been converted into a small and relaxed luxury hotel. Original 1830s features are mixed with contemporary design and rooms have every detail from Nespresso machines to Bose sound systems. With a gourmet restaurant, pub, gardens and spa, it's tempting not to leave. B&B from €95 pps. (Arthurstown, 051 389 600; dunbrodyhouse.com)

RUSTIC Also dating from the Georgian era, **Glendine Country House** was the dower house of the Dunbrody Estate. The paddocks are home to Highland cattle, Jacob sheep and fallow deer and inside, you'll find a cosy drawing room with antiques and an open fire. B&B from €49 pps. (Arthurstown, 051 389 500; glendinehouse.com)

EAT

COSY TEAROOMS Drop in to **The Cracked Teapot** in New Ross for delicious treats such as beech-smoked salmon (from local Ballyhack Smokehouse) served with Guinness and treacle bread, or homemade lemon cake. (6 Quay Street, New Ross; 087 215 3744)

FINE DINING Billy Whitty and Joanne Harding have won awards for the food at **Aldridge Lodge**. The four-course tasting menu features plenty of local seafood – such as crispy Kilmore monkfish, plus meat dishes such as wild

venison loin. The lodge also has three guest rooms. (Duncannon, 051 389 116; aldrigelodge.com)

CASUAL Tuck into tasty beer-battered local fish and chips and craft beer at **The Local at Dunbrody House** (non-residents welcome). Dunbrody is also home to Arthurstown Brewing Co – hops, wheat and oats are grown locally so even the beer is truly local. (Arthurstown, 051 389 601; dunbrodyhouse.com)

DRINK

TRADITIONAL Nab a table near the fire in **Roches Bar** in Duncannon. There's an extensive whiskey and gin selection, as well as local craft beers and ciders, and food until 9pm (Quay Road, Duncannon, 051 389 188) or drop into family-run pub **Neville's Bar and Kitchen** in Fethard-on-Sea for local beers like Dunbrody Pale Ale and Hook Pilsner and a menu with everything from seafood chowder

to pizza. (Fethard-on-Sea, 051 397 160; nevilles.ie)

SMART TIPS

For a custom tour with a guide with a passion for everything from local history to Wexford's best food, contact Lorraine O'Dwyer of **Gallivanting Tours** (053 910 0779; gallivantingtours.ie). For other ideas on what to see and do, see irelandsancienteast.com.

The Hook Head Peninsula is popular for coasteering – an adrenaline-filled way to explore the coast through scrambling, swimming and jumping. Try **Shielbaggan Outdoor Education Centre** (Ramsgrange, 051 389 550; shielbagganoec.com). If driving back towards Dublin or Wexford town, drop into **Secret Valley Wildlife Park**. Kids (and grown-ups) will love the hands-on experiences such as animal feeding. (Clonroche, Enniscorthy, 053 924 4023; secretvalley.ie)