



SURF N' TURF IN SLIGO

Sligo wants to be the adventure capital of Ireland. Award-winning travel writer *Yvonne Gordon* puts it to the test...

The lake surface is a silver mirror as we glide along. Then a burst of sunlight illuminates some sand-coloured rocks just under the waterline. From the shore, the water looked grey — but now, out in the middle of the lake on a paddleboard, with the sun shining, I can see a lot of life under the surface.

I'm on Lough Gill in Sligo, enjoying a peaceful morning of Stand-up Paddleboarding (SUP) during a few days of adventure in the northwest. When we launch from a small beach at Hazelwood Forest, I worry about falling off the board. But I soon forget about balance as I become absorbed in nature.

Three ducks sit on a navigation mark as we pass by. The lake is surrounded by green hills and trees full of chirping birds and there are tiny islands in the distance. We paddle through some tall rushes to the side of an island.

As we glide along, we hear stories of the old woman who lived on Beezie's Island and the legend of how the lake was supposedly created by tears. The rich folklore of the area inspired poet WB Yeats, who spent his childhood holidays here and went on to immortalise the Lake Isle of Innisfree. Nowadays, you can get out on the lake on a kayak, SUP or sailing dinghy and even explore an isle for yourself.

With its flat-topped mountains, endless beaches, rocky reefs and freshwater lakes, Sligo is styling itself as the adventure capital of Ireland. It has lots of competition from other counties on the Wild Atlantic Way, but Adventure Sligo, a new network of 14 activity providers, says that

the variety of adventures on offer in such a compact area and in such stunning locations is a big advantage. The county's size also makes it easy to do more than one activity in a day.

What I realise too, is that so many of Sligo's adventure locations have a rich cultural history and some fascinating legends to go with them.

On a surfboard at Strandhill, for example, every time I whizz in towards the shore — the times I am actually standing up on the board, that is — I am in awe of Knocknarea Mountain in front of me. The hill takes on different colours as the light changes with each passing cloud. This is where the legendary Queen Medb (or Maeve) is said to be buried standing up, and I can see the mysterious rocky cairn on the summit.

The mountain top is an easy walk, so I climb it later to see the cairn and the views back down to the beach. There is a cluster of 14 Neolithic cairns over at Carrowkeel, so another day I sign up for a guided walking tour with Seatrails ([seatrails.ie](#)) to explore them.

Adventure is in guide Auriel Robinson's blood — she grew up with sailing and has a master's in maritime archaeology. She tells me how the hills here were on the sea bed 300 million years ago and are full of coral, how the old mining trail we walk on is an ancient sea gorge.

We climb in and out of the ancient passage graves, which date back as far as 3,500BC and have 360° views over the surrounding mountains, with views as far as Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim and Donegal.

For a more challenging climb, Benbulbin with its distinctive flat top sits at the start of the Dartry Mountain range and looks down over Lough Gill, Donegal Bay and Sligo town. This mountain was also once underwater and the mountain top is full of the fossilised remains of tiny sea creatures. On a hike here, I expect the surface to be covered in rocks and grass but it is covered in soft and sometimes soggy blanket bog.

The mountain is steeped in legend too — with stories of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and Diarmuid and Gráinne — and is even said to have a fairy portal to the underworld on its side.

Legends aside, Sligo is full of adventure opportunities. You can go horse-riding on the beach, take to the sea or the lakes for angling, sailing, kayaking or SUP, or explore the county by cycling, climbing, hiking and walking.

There are surfing spots for all levels too, from the consistent beach break at Strandhill, where you'll find several surf schools and a surf club, to scenic beaches like Enniscrone and Streedagh, plus reef breaks at Easkey which attract more advanced surfers.

For a unique adventure experience, take a moonlit mid-night kayak tour, a dawn chorus SUP tour, a catch-and-cook fishing trip, a bike-to-seaweed-bath tour or even a 'star-b-q' night hike.

The new network brings many of these activities together and chair of Adventure Sligo, William Britton from Northwest Adventure Tours, says what is special about Sligo is the people and the variety.

"We have everything from high octane, thrill-seeking adventure sports to a family's first adventure with small kids on canoes, to offer visitors and locals alike," he tells me. "It's time we worked together to make some noise about our creative providers, beautiful landscape and our unique trips and tours."

My final adventure, after a sound sleep at country manor Temple House ([templehouse.ie](#); which has a fascinating tower and castle) is kayaking with guide John Barrett of Wild Wet Adventures ([wildwetadventures.ie](#)) on Temple House's lake. Here, we cut out from the boathouse through lily pads and reeds. A gentle breeze whips up tiny wavelets on the water as we pass two *crammógs* (man-made islands) on the lake, and we stop to watch swans on the opposite shore glide gracefully among the reeds.

We land the kayaks here, and John leads the way to a ring fort in the forest, telling stories of the woods and of ancient underground passages, before producing, to my delight, a flask of tea and scones from his backpack to enjoy before our return paddle.

Having surfed, paddled, kayaked and hiked my way around the county, I finish with a hot seaweed bath at Kilcullen's in Enniscrone ([kilcullenseaweedbaths.net](#)); a fitting way to ease sore muscles. As I soak up the oils, I think back over the stories of mountains that were once under the ocean, warrior queens and idyllic lake isles and what an adventure it has all been.

So is Sligo the adventure capital of Ireland? This island has so much adventure that I am not sure if any one county could claim that title, but it's been fun putting it to the test.



Adventurous spirit: (clockwise from main) Benbulbin's distinctive summit; the stunning Temple House manor; on horseback with Island View Riding Stables

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What to pack

Wear layers — temperatures can change quickly! Bring waterproofs and, for mountain hiking, proper boots with ankle support. For watersports like SUP or surfing, bring swimwear to wear under a wetsuit plus a towel. Don't forget sunscreen and a reusable water bottle.



5 TO TRY

Two nights B&B at Temple House ([templehouse.ie](#)), plus dinner and a choice of kayaking, canoeing or SUP with Wild Wet Adventures costs from €149pps.

Sligo's Riverside Hotel ([northwestadventuretours.com](#)) has a two-day guided hike with two nights' B&B from €205pp.

An Appetite for Adventure on Lough Talt, with SUP, kayaking, canoeing, archery or hillwalking and lunch at Cawley's ([cawleysguesthouse.ie](#)) costs from €45pp

The Benbulbin hike and picnic at Coopershill ([coopershill.com](#)), with two nights B&B, one dinner and a picnic, costs from €277pps.

Two nights B&B at Pier Head Hotel in Mullaghmore, with dinner and horse riding with Island View Riding Stables ([islandviewridingstables.com](#)) costs €296pps.

For more information, see [adventuresligo.ie](#).

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