



**Galway wrote the book**  
**Life: 2**



**Lifting the lid on pastry**  
**Food: 5**



**Ready to blaze a trail**  
**InGear: 19**

# Sunday



**Heading out for the night**

**Evenings you'll remember the day after**  
**Page 11**



# Travel

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TAKING OFF  
HIT THE ROAD WITH  
THIS ECO-FRIENDLY  
BACKPACK



## Wild nights out that will light up your life

As the sun goes down, Wild Summits' night hike takes walkers from the lakes of Glendalough over the Spinc ridge in the Wicklow Mountains National Park

As the evenings draw in, you can still have fun in the open air. From hiking to history tours, paddle boarding to kayaking, Ireland's after-dark outdoor adventures can leave you with a warm glow, finds *Yvonne Gordon*

**T**he end of the paddle is aglow as I push it down into the water. I put my hand over the side of the kayak and drag my fingers along the surface as we glide on. The water lights up with a trail of magical sparks from my fingertips, each tiny particle flashing and then disappearing.

I have heard a lot about bioluminescence – a chemical reaction inside certain living organisms that causes them to produce and emit light – and am now experiencing the phenomenon while kayaking in the dark. It is like a million tiny stars in the

water are mirroring the billion more in the night sky over our heads.

Even as the evenings start to draw in, the mild weather means that many of us want to stay outdoors as much as possible. So it is a good time to explore the riches that a dark sky can offer, which we do not always notice. The newly discovered Neowise comet hung in our night sky for weeks in July, there are regular meteor showers above us, and photos of bioluminescent plankton lighting up the waves on Fountainstown beach in Co Cork recently went viral on

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“We come across the spooky shapes of half-sunken boats — ghost ships lying on their sides at a graveyard for old, decommissioned vessels

→ Continued from page 11 social media. Many are discovering that observing the night sky and exploring the world of adventures to be had underneath it can be a reward for the soul. It is on a nighttime kayaking trip with Atlantic Sea Kayaking in Castlehaven Bay, a sheltered spot in west Cork, that I experience those social media-friendly light sparkles. We set off from the shore with our kayaks at dusk, and it is a clear night as we paddle out, a trail of light from a new crescent moon lighting up the silhouettes of some moored yachts. As it gets dark, stars appear and soon the sky is full of them. Guide Jim Kennedy tells us to keep our headtorches off to allow our night vision to kick in, so we can see more. Looking up, I see a bright light travelling fast across the sky in a straight line: it is the International Space Station. It orbits the earth every 90 minutes, but this is the first time I have seen it. We see Jupiter and Saturn, the two planets showing as constant bright lights and not twinkling like stars. Two SpaceX Starlink satellites whizz across the sky. At about 500km away, they look “near” compared with the Milky Way, which is also visible overhead.

On the water there is plenty going on around us, too. At one stage, we close our eyes and just float along. I am surprised at all the things we hear: herons calling in the distance and later the hum of tractors as they work through the night to save the hay from the impending rain. There are different smells, too: a burning wood fire and the rich, sweet smell of honeysuckle. We come across the spooky shapes of half-sunken boats — ghost ships lying on their sides at leaba na mbad, a graveyard for old, decommissioned vessels that are brought here and broken up, the hulls sinking into the mud little by little each year until they eventually disappear. The guides tell us about the nature and history of the area, once one of the richest fishing grounds in Europe. It was the scene of battles and a haven for pirates at one time, too. The trips run all year round and on any given night otters, seals, bats or foxes might be spotted in the surrounding area. There are herons, rooks, kingfishers, a family of peregrine falcons, barn owls, long-eared owls, ospreys at the end of summer and wading birds in winter. The experience is as much about the benefits of floating on water and being immersed in nature as it is about kayaking.

“We see the effect that the sea has on people — the darkness and the air, just sitting there in a slight meditation,” says Kennedy. “Some people call it mindfulness; I call it ‘mindlessness’. You don’t want to use your brain, you want nature to take you over. It’s not just about the kayaking, it’s where it takes us — that’s the whole experience.” The kayaking itself is gentle, and ideal for beginners. There are eight double kayaks with two people in each. We have headtorches, but we are encouraged to let our eyes adjust to the darkness. “Your night vision lets you see fairly OK, so you can get around — you become a nocturnal animal,” says Kennedy. “Your hearing improves. You start smelling stuff. It heightens the other senses.” The next test of my night vision is in Wicklow Mountains National Park, on the Night Hike and History Tour with Wild Summits, during which we hike from the lakes of Glendalough up over the Spinc ridge. It starts with a short tour of Glendalough’s “Monastic City” — an early Christian settlement founded by St Kevin in the 6th century — as guide Mark Keogh tells us about the graveyard, the round tower, the cathedral and the church ruins. There is light rain as we take the trail

Atlantic Sea Kayaking offers nighttime kayaking trips in Castlehaven Bay, a sheltered spot in west Cork

along the lower lake and begin our ascent. The trail takes us up through the trees and past the noisy Poulanass waterfall. Along the way, ecologist Patrick McQuinn tells us about the different trees we pass, such as oak and hazel, and about some of the national park’s wildlife. We go through an area of semi-natural oak woodland — where trees have regenerated naturally rather than being planted — and then through an area of clearfell, where the trees have been logged. In the brown vegetation, four deer stand perfectly still, almost camouflaged into the background. From here, it is a steep uphill hike and, about an hour after setting out, we reach the first viewing point, down over the lower lake and Monastic City in the distance. It’s getting dark and there is just one light in a valley far below. As we take to the narrow boardwalk across the blanket bog on top of the hill, the rain has stopped, but we need our bright headtorches to focus on the narrow wooden planks over the Spinc ridge. The valley of the upper lake below us to the right becomes a black void in the darkness and each move requires concentration to avoid any missteps. Every so often we spot a pair of tiny white dots — the eyes of a deer or sheep along the way, reflected by our torches. Later, a row of eyes watches us from under a group of trees. It’s a herd of deer, hidden in the darkness. The trail takes us from the boardwalk around the top of the valley onto a

“Every so often we spot a pair of tiny white dots — the eyes of a deer or sheep reflected by our torches

Photos of the bioluminescent plankton lighting up the waves on Fountainstown beach in Co Cork, above, went viral on social media in July



mountain track and descends past the ruins of the miners’ village. It’s rough and rocky here. The pathway has eroded away after heavy footfall and recent storms. Walking back along the lake, McQuinn switches on a bat detector: a device that picks up their ultrasound signals and plays them through a microphone. There is a lot of activity on it indicating the presence of bats, but we don’t see them. Finally, just before 12am, five hours after starting out, we are back walking through the graveyard. Those of us with overactive

imaginations hurry our pace so that we are not still in there when the clock strikes midnight. Night hikes can give a new perspective on a familiar place. Taking one through Union Wood in Sligo, with Northwest Adventure Tours, we look across to the outline of Knocknarea mountain and its cairn, and marvel at the lights of Sligo town below and the little dots of light from the carriages of a train moving across the now-mysterious landscape. We take in all the different sounds of the

forest as we descend along boardwalks and mountain-biking tracks. Another day, I sign up for a dawn paddle boarding trip on the Garavogue river, previously known as the Sligo. It is pitch black when we set off from the river bank. We are on the water as dawn breaks and the sounds of the dawn chorus are incredible as we watch a mist slowly clear and a family of swans make their way along the opposite bank. Sometimes, night adventures are just about finding a quiet area to observe the sky. One of Ireland’s darkest places is Mayo Dark Sky Park, an area of 150 sq km that partly covers Wild Nephin Ballycroy National Park, with viewing sites open all year. Co Kerry is home to an International Dark Sky Reserve covering about 700 sq km. Or just find a spot away from lights or light pollution and look up into the night sky. It takes about half an hour for your eyes to adapt to the dark. When you go out at night for an adventure — whether it is a gentle kayak or a tough hike — there is a certain calm to be had. The air feels different, sounds are different, and you notice things such as smells that you would not during the day. You also appreciate what you do see in the dark. So while our usual idea of nightlife is curtailed for the moment, maybe it is time to take a step out of your comfort zone and into the darkness, where you might discover a new type of good night out — and one you will definitely remember the next day.

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