

# Travel



## Worlds away from home

With just over a week to go until we can travel across the country again, Dubliner *Yvonne Gordon* discovers that there are still adventures to be had on her doorstep

**T**he island looms on the distant horizon; a small green land mass in the middle of a sparkling blue stretch of water below a cloudless sky. It looks far away, and I feel tiny and low in the sea as I paddle through the chop of the waves. The water is clear and I can see the outline of rocks below. There's no sign of movement beneath the surface – yet.

In reality, the faraway island is less than 300 metres from the shore. It's Dalkey Island, off the coast of south Dublin, and I'm less than half an hour from home. If you went directly across from Coliemore Harbour it would take five minutes to cross the sound by boat. After months of

lockdown and all my preparations to arrive here, you'd think we were going up the Amazon. Today's expedition is a gentle three-hour kayaking tour from Bullock Harbour, paddling to the island along a couple of kilometres of shoreline, hoping to meet seals on the way.

I'm taking a socially distanced preview trip guided by Jenny Kilbride of kayaking.ie. As we leave the harbour she tells me that Dublin Bay, where porpoises and dolphins are sometimes spotted, is a Unesco-designated Biosphere.

"We are so close to the city but a world away," she says, listing the rare seabirds found in the bay, including Arctic terns and oystercatchers. We pass a row of



**Kayaking across to Dalkey Island, with its wildlife and history, past seals basking at Lamb Island, brings a welcome change of scenery**

black cormorants standing on a large rock, holding their wings out to dry.

At Lamb Island, grey seals bask in the sun on bladderwrack-covered rocks. I am thrilled when some swim out to have a closer look at our kayaks, popping their huge heads up at intervals – but they disappear every time I try to take a picture. It's a maritime version of whack-a-mole. As we near the island,

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**PANDEMIC PARADISE**  
THE US VIRGIN ISLES  
ARE A HAVEN ON A  
COVID-RIDDLED  
PLANET



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The Howth cliff path takes in views of Baily lighthouse and Dublin Bay, left; below left and right, Dalkey Island and the St Begnet's ruins; below centre, a sea cave beneath Howth Head

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Kilbride explains how Dalkey was once a walled town with seven castles and the now uninhabited island a trading post.

We reach the shore, and pull the kayaks up between rocks and seaweed on a tiny sandy beach. Underfoot the grass is full of rabbit holes and droppings – there are wild rabbits and goats, as well as herring gulls and plenty of other birds.

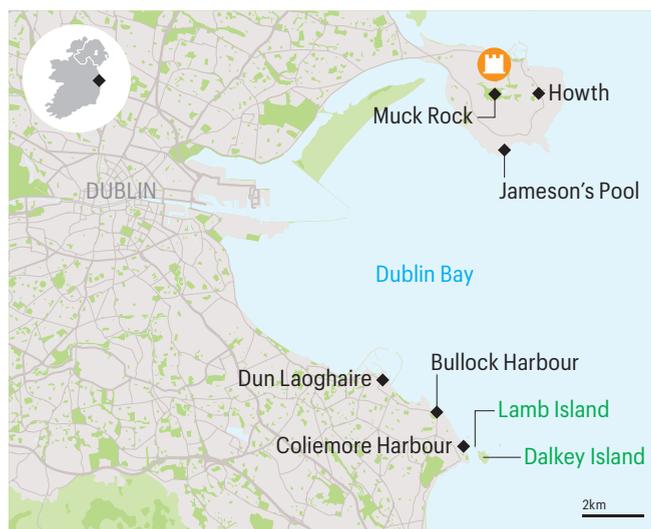
It's peaceful, the only sound a distant hum, perhaps from a boat engine. There's a promontory fort, the ruins of St Begnet's Church and a Martello tower, one of a series built in the early 19th century to defend against a possible invasion by Napoleon. Kilbride says that Deilginis – the Irish name for Dalkey – translates from the Norse for “thorn island” and Vikings once inhabited it.

The whole bay sparkles around us in the sun, with the blue silhouette of Bray Head and the Sugar Loaf in the distance across Killiney Bay. It's a special experience to be here on a rare sunny and calm day. “It looks different every time,” says Kilbride. “The light and the weather, the time of year – the sun is in a different place in the sky.” Dublin Bay is dotted with the white sails of slow-moving boats. The Poolbeg chimneys stand tall in the distance and the Howth peninsula marks the bay's most northerly point.

It's about 10km across the bay and 30km by road to Howth. The cliff walk and harbour are well known, but after my island adventure, I explore the peninsula further on a hike with Shane O'Doherty of Shane's Howth Adventures. “riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” O'Doherty says that the opening lines of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* are directions to Howth Castle. “Joyce was much inspired by Howth, as was WB Yeats,” he says.

We start our tour at the castle, stepping over fragrant petals under a magnolia tree to stand beneath Grace O'Malley's Tower. In the 1500s, Connacht's pirate queen came to the gates of this tower looking for hospitality and provisions but the Earl of Howth told his men to lock the gates and turn O'Malley away. She kidnapped his grandson; one of the terms of his release was that nobody would be turned away again.

“The story of Ireland is written within the landscape of this small peninsula,” O'Doherty says. “You can tell 10,000



“There was a disconnect between people and nature for such a long time – now there's a different feel about the place

years of history through its habitats, nature and wilderness.” He goes back to legends of Tuatha Dé Danann, the mythological race, and how they left stories and signs in the landscape, including the old Irish name for Howth, Binn Eadair, which means Éadar's peak. We talk through the Celts, the Fianna, the early Christians and how the first Viking ships came to Lambay Island. After that, it's the Battle of Clontarf and the Normans. The entire story of Ireland really is here.

Our next stop on the grounds is the rhododendron gardens, planted in the mid-1800s by the 3rd Earl of Howth, who brought in everything including the soil. We walk past the Deer Park Hotel, through rows of cherry blossoms and along a bramble-lined path, inhaling the aroma from a patch of wild garlic. Birdsong mixes with the strains of jazz drifting from the hotel's takeaway café. It's an appropriate backing track for this

escape into a jungle of giant ferns and rhododendrons, their trunks twisting up to bursts of pink flowers.

We stop at Aideen's Dolmen, a stone tomb that dates from about 5,000 years ago, and trace along mud paths and through tunnels of rhododendron branches. O'Doherty points out some “magic steps” carved into the rock and says that the hills are full of forgotten trails. We arrive at Muck Rock, with its sweet-smelling yellow gorse. There's a view down over Howth Harbour and back to Dublin Bay, and we can even make out the Mourne Mountains to the north.

Our next hiking terrain is coastal, along the south cliff path, with views of the Baily Lighthouse, over Dolmen Bay and down to Jameson's Pool, created in the late 19th century to catch seawater for swimming. We walk down onto a stony beach. The gentle sound of the waves lapping on the shore is soon joined by the rumbling of a ship heading to Dublin Port in the distance. It's low tide, so we go into a cave under the cliff.

I haven't left Dublin but I feel as though I've been to the Galapagos, to exotic jungles and the sea cliffs of Ireland's west

## THE BRIEF

Three-hour guided kayaking and sunset tours (€59) with [kayaking.ie](http://kayaking.ie); Four-hour Howth hiking tours (from €49) with [shaneshowthadventures.com](http://shaneshowthadventures.com). See also: [dublinundersail.com](http://dublinundersail.com); [dublinbaycruises.com](http://dublinbaycruises.com); [inss.ie](http://inss.ie); [bigstyle.ie](http://bigstyle.ie); [oceandivers.ie](http://oceandivers.ie); [hilltoptreks.com](http://hilltoptreks.com); [carrickminesequestrian.ie](http://carrickminesequestrian.ie); [gobeyondadventure.ie](http://gobeyondadventure.ie). Activities start from May 10 – check opening dates and Covid guidelines in advance.

coast. Even within the county he county of Dublin there are so many other outdoor adventures. You could cross the bay between Dun Laoghaire and Howth with Dublin Bay Cruises, or try a traditional sailing ship with Dublin Under Sail.

For something calmer, Big Style teaches stand-up paddleboarding in Dun Laoghaire harbour, or you could learn to sail there with the Irish National Sailing and Powerboat School. To see beneath the surface, licensed divers can go with Oceandivers to Dalkey Island (you need a recognised certificate or you can train with them), where you might get to interact with the seals.

Mountain-lovers could tour the Dublin Mountains with Hilltoptreks or go horse trekking from a stable such as Carrickmines Equestrian Centre. For rock climbing or abseiling, head to Dalkey Quarry, which is where granite for Dun Laoghaire piers was hewn. Dane Galligan from Go Beyond Adventure says that the quarry is suitable for all levels of climbing experience. “People are pleasantly surprised by the location,” he says. “You get amazing views out over Dublin Bay to Howth Head, especially on a sunny day. On summer evenings you get incredible sunsets over Dublin city.”

As well as the hiking and kayaking, I learnt about history and nature on each outing. One of the good things to come out of Covid-19 is that people are reconnecting with the environment, and city dwellers are connecting more with their county. “There was such a disconnect between people and nature for such a long time,” Kilbride says. “There's a different feel about the place now. People are having a drink outside, or swimming in or walking by the sea. They remember that it's here.”