Clockwise from main: The Irish Experience 'Hell Hole' kayaking tour; Northwest adventures. PHOTO: CHRISTIAN MCLEOD; The Irish Experience sea cave kayaking tour in Wexford; and coasteering with Real Adventures in Connemara

Adventure island

Forget 'splash-and-dash' tourism or pre-recorded commentaries — one of the best ways to experience Ireland is to immerse yourself in its landscape, nature and history on an adventure tour with a passionate guide, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

Along a small stretch of the Celtic Sea off Baginbun Head, Co Wexford, under a rocky cliff, there is a mysterious-looking sea cave. Viewing it from a kayak, the giant entrance looks pitch black, but when you paddle in, everything lights up. Torches are not even needed on days when the sunlight shines in to illuminate the water, making the white sand visible underneath and even lighting up your hand if you immerse it.

It is on an adventure with The Irish Experience that I encounter the magic of the Hook Peninsula from a kayak with guide and company founder Graham Doyle (*theirish-experience.com*; three-hour sea cave kayaking trips from €79.99pp). As we launch from the pristine beach at Baginbun and paddle out into the bay, Doyle tells me that this is where the first Norman ships landed in the 1100s, kicking off the invasion which changed the course of Irish history.

"They took Waterford first, and then founded New Ross and Wexford. Then Strongbow became the King of Leinster," says Doyle, showing how what looks like a ditch is actually the remains of a Norman fortification, and a place where the Vikings, trying to defend the territory, were thrown off the cliffs.

Tours like these involve more than just paddling out to sea — you learn some of the area's history too. "It's not splash-and-dash," says Doyle. "It's wildlife, culture and exploring. It's the mix of stories, the history and the stunning scenery you are out in."

As we explore, we see coves in the cliffs with beaches that are only accessible by water. One of the bays has some old test mines. Another outcrop of rock forms a gully called Cromwell's Leap that we kayak into as the swell builds up behind us.

While the sea cave tour is popular, there's also a gentler paddle along Bannow Bay to Tintern Abbey, while hearing the story of knight William Marshal. Or for more adventure, the 'Hell Hole' tour paddles to a sea cliff crevasse with a narrow entrance, which leads to a circular arena surrounded by sheer cliffs, with the story of a dramatic shipwreck in the 1870s.

Doyle, who is from Newbawn village in Wexford, says he was always into adventure — as a teenager, he was out kayaking while his friends were playing hurling and football. He spent his childhood going to beaches like Baginbun and nearby Dollar Bay.

He says it was always on his mind to show off how beautiful the Hook Peninsula was, but on round-the-world travels 10 years ago, he found the thriving adventure industry in New Zealand an eye-opener. Getting some experience there under his belt, he got a BA in adventure tourism management in Tralee and more work experience in California and Scotland, before launching The Irish Experience in 2016, based in Fethard-on-Sea. The deeply personal tours contrast with more mass-market offerings — visiting popular areas, but often using pre-recorded commentary and not offering the same connection with a place.

"A lot of companies use the tagline 'authentic Irish experience' and it could not be further [from] authentic," says Doyle. "Even arriving down to the Hook Peninsula and into Fethard-on-Sea, you're instantly into an authentic Irish trip. There's nothing touristy about this area.

"Our customers are meeting myself and local guides from the area," he says. "We get a buzz out of telling people about our home. We know the stories here are unique and we know they are going to be stories that people will have never heard before — even Irish people, even people from Wexford!

"We tell the stories of Baginbun — the stories of the Norman landings are epic. To be able to go out into Baginbun on a kayak, telling stories like that, it's bringing the place to life. It starts giving our clients a connection with the place," he says. "It's being able to share it and help other people love our home place that we feel so passionate about."

While Hook Lighthouse is a big attraction in the area, Doyle loves that his tours also bring people in. "I love to see them in the village, going to the coffee shop or restaurant afterwards. I am doing something for my home."

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In Co Sligo, it's pitch black when myself and some others launch paddleboards from a slipway near Sligo town onto the Garavogue River before dawn. As we paddle slowly towards Lough Gill and the first light breaks, we find ourselves immersed in the dawn chorus as the river comes to life. Not only do we hear the sounds, but we are floating along with quacking ducks, while a swoop of swallows takes off nearby and swans glide gracefully along the reeds. As we travel, the guides tell us stories about old riverbank estates and characters who lived on islands on Lough Gill.

The tour is with Northwest Adventure Tours (*northwestadventuretours.ie*; from €35pp), a local adventure company owned by William Britton, who has a passion for showing off his area. He originally set up the company 13 years ago with two pals to do mountain biking tours.

"I realised how much I loved Sligo and sharing it, so it became more 'tours to see the scenery with information'," he says. He branched out into hiking, stand-up paddle boarding and diving. "It is seeing parts of Sligo that no one else would see. There are still loads of hidden gems that you probably only see on our trips. We don't promote them, so you get a surprise when you are on the trip."

William, who is from a Sligo surfing family, loves to take people off the beaten track and give people lasting memories.

"Anyone can walk up some of the popular trails here, but going somewhere special where there is nobody around is quite magical," he says. "We tell different stories in different areas — the geology, flora and fauna, and local mythology mixed with facts. The same terrain has different stories, for example soldiers being chased in the same places as the Fianna and Fionn Mac Cumhaill. Queen Maeve is always popular; we get a lot of people wanting to hear about her."

Northwest Adventures links up with other suppliers to create tours, for example with local archaeologists, seaweed baths, or a yoga teacher for stand-up paddle boarding (SUP) and hikes. For the summer solstice, they had sunset yoga at the Carrowkeel cairns. A 'SUP to Sip' tour goes paddle boarding up the Garvogue River, followed by craft beer tasting at Lough Gill Brewery.

Night hikes are often timed to coincide with meteor showers — and I join a night hike in Union Woods, where we walk along a forest trail and up a hill, which opens out onto views of Sligo Town. I can see Knocknarea in the distance, and a row of golden squares gliding across the landscape turns out to be the windows of an approaching train. We turn off our headtorches and look up to the sky — I don't see meteors, but I take in the big dipper and a satellite whizzing across the sky.

Stopping for tea along the forest trail on the way back — the guides boil up pots of water — we're watched by a deer in the trees.

Tours like this are a special experience. "You get to feel the area and meet the locals," says Britton. "Things happen around trips that you don't get on the ones that churn you in and out. There's never any rush, so if we are on top of a mountain and something cool is happening down the other side, we are going to check it out. We always have tea and coffee supplies with us. You go with the flow."

'Things happen around trips that you don't get on the ones that churn you in and out'

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In Connemara, Real Adventures (*realadventures.ie*) takes people out into the landscape for kayaking, paddle boarding, coasteering, surfing and hiking. Founder Clare Wheatley set off from the UK to travel when she was 20 and, when she arrived in Connemara, she immediately felt a connection with the landscape.

"I was just taken away by the coastline, the mountains and the beaches, and the air was so clean. There's just a great sense of peace and connection to nature here," she says. "I didn't know that this was going to be the beginning of a life-long attachment to the place."

Working in the adventure industry, she spent her free time exploring, rock-climbing or hiking, surfing, kayaking and eventually set up Real Adventures in 2012.

"I love showing people the area and putting my own spin on it. As opposed to just doing the activity, I talk to people about what you'll see on the tours, whether it's the watersports or the land sports. You might talk about the seaweed, all the different crustaceans and shellfish that you come across, or the seals and the dolphins, and the history of the area."

Wheatley says the adventure tours bring you to places you can't get to otherwise — the coasteering tour (€65pp) goes into nooks and crannies, tunnels and caves that you would not find or would not be advised to go to without a qualified guide. It's also important that guests have the right equipment, so they feel warm and comfortable, even if it's cold or raining.

"Making people feel safe in these environments is important to us. They are out of their comfort zone, so we try to make sure people are happy in the environment we bring them to." Somebody who seemed happy out of his comfort zone was comic John Bishop, who went coasteering earlier this month and posted on Instagram about his "brilliant exciting scary day".

While some will want that type of high-adrenalin adventure, Wheatley says, for some guests, they might be just looking to experience nature.

"That is one of our biggest passions, trying to get people out there from any walk of life and any level. People work so hard, so when they come to us, our main aim is to give people the best possible experience and make sure they have a great time."

Tours with small, locally owned adventure companies offer a connection with people who have a passion for their area and know the best ways to see it. Not only can you try a new activity, but you learn about nature, history — and possibly about yourself.

With all of us looking for more meaningful travel and ways to help local sustainability, these trips with local, passionate owners and guides are a nice counterbalance to the queues and busy car parks of some of Ireland's most popular attractions.