

TRAVEL



Edited by Siobhán Breathnach

An ancient adventure

FIONA AUDLEY tackles the Medieval Mile on a short break in Kilkenny City...

WHILE there are many places I have visited, loved and will return to again, I do like nothing more than exploring a new city.

From the first time you set out onto those unfamiliar pavements to begin your sightseeing adventure, to the moment you find an unexpected beauty spot or your favourite watering hole, I love everything about it.

So when the opportunity came to enjoy a short break in Kilkenny I grabbed the chance to sample one of the few counties in Ireland I had yet to visit.

And with just a weekend to spend in the city, which we would access via a flight from London to Dublin and a 90 minute drive, my companion and I were prepared to speed sightsee this tourist hotspot.

The first thing we noticed when we arrived is that despite Kilkenny winning city status in 1609, in terms of its size it's really more like a large town.

This also meant that we could get to the many highlights the city has to offer on foot, ensuring the best possible use of our time.

And in a city which used to be the medieval capital of Ireland – which, despite its size, still manages to boast a castle, cathedral, various churches and a brewery within its boundaries – there were plenty of places that we wanted to visit while there.

Luckily for us, Kilkenny is currently a focus point of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative, devised by the national tourism board Fáilte Ireland.

That drive has been promoting the highlights of medieval Ireland, largely found along the country's eastern coast, to tourists and natives who have yet to experience it.

As a result Kilkenny's ancient history highlights have been packaged up in the Ireland's Medieval Mile discovery trail – which takes you from Kilkenny Castle across town to St Canice's Cathedral, and includes 21 other points of interest to stop along the way.

That walk starts pretty much from the door of the Pembroke Kilkenny hotel, where we stayed, which offers Ancient East packages for guests, like ourselves, who want to sample as much of the city's culture and heritage as possible while in town.

And this welcoming boutique hotel is pretty perfectly positioned to do just that, as it flanks Kilkenny Castle – one of the highlights of the trail and a great starting point for a self-led tour.

This impressive castle sits at the top of the city, along the banks of the River Nore, and looms large on the hustle and bustle of what is in fact quite a cosmopolitan space below.

It offers stunning gardens to roam outside and plenty of history inside, as this 12th century Anglo-Norman structure has had a number of owners in its time and has been consistently reinvented over the centuries.

It was eventually handed over to the people of Ireland for a token payment of £50 in 1967, and has been lovingly restored to its former

glory since then, ready for tourists and Kilkenny natives to finally explore.

From there the tour winds its way through the town, with a stop every few minutes or so offering more of Kilkenny's heritage.

Among my highlights were the Rothe House and Garden, which was built in 1594 by local merchant and former Kilkenny City mayor John Rothe as a home for himself, his wife and their 11 children.

This antiquated townhouse consists of three houses and a 17th century urban garden which was built on the roof.

To step from Kilkenny's modern streets into this ancient abode is truly like stepping into a time warp.

As with the castle, simply being in this house transports you to a time and place you could never have imagined, but there is enough information and original artefacts on display here to allow you a sense of what it might have been like for those who once called it home.

However the trail isn't all about ancient homes, as the people of medieval Kilkenny had to eat and drink too.

There are two great pubs to be found along the mile – with great stories to match.

For those interested in tales of witchcraft Kyte's Inn is a must.

Founded in the 13th century, by Dame Alice Kyte, this watering hole is said to be one of the oldest in Ireland, although this is not its only claim to fame.

It founder first drew attention to the inn in 1324 when she was involved in Ireland's only witch trials – where she stood accused of using poison and sorcery against her four husbands (gaining a fortune from them in the process).

However, legend has it that before Dame Kyte could be tried she fled to England, leaving her poor maid to be flogged and burned at the stake in her absence.

Today, this is a lively traditional pub, with plenty of space – filled with tourists and locals alike – and a hearty menu, which proved the perfect place for us to break from our tour for lunch.

The other bar, which really must be seen to be believed, is The Hole in the Wall.

This is a small tavern located inside the remains of a Tudor-era mansion which was built in 1582 by a man named Martin Archer (who would later become a mayor of Kilkenny City).

This building underwent many changes of ownership over the years, and earned its name due to a hole being punctured into its rear wall in the 1700s, to allow access to the inner house from the high street.

In 1999 it was purchased by its current owner Dr Michael Conway, a cardiologist, who then spent 10 years restoring it.

It is now a popular haunt both for regulars and visitors to the city, offering the



WHERE TO EAT

Ristorante Rinucinni
1 The Parade, Kilkenny City
www.rinuccini.com

This family owned, award-winning Italian restaurant has been based in the heart of Kilkenny City for more than 25 years. With a vast menu, and an even greater wine cellar, it's a must for any foodie visiting the city

opportunity to grab a drink and soak up some history in a small, but perfectly formed, bar.

But be warned, once you have found it and bagged yourself a stool you could easily lose a few hours here without even trying.

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eloquence, with a glossy exterior, but founded on a culture, history and purpose that refuses to be forgotten.

Of course a weekend break would not be complete without experiencing some of those glossier highlights too.

Thankfully our hotel proved a perfect base for enjoying a little luxury and some of the less strenuous elements of being in a new city for the weekend.

Nestled in the heart of the old city quarter Pembroke Kilkenny is surrounded by local landmarks – we even had a view of Kilkenny Castle from our room – and also boasts a helpful team of staff who were on hand to help at every occasion, from providing tips on visiting local attractions to organising restaurant bookings and even checking our best route for driving out of the city.

The short walk through this slip evokes notions of what went on here in its past – as this is a passageway, built in 1616, which was once the street market location for butter vendors, who were drawn to the spot due to its naturally cool temperatures.

When it came to the evening, the hotel bar offered a great array of cocktails to begin the night and their Statham's Restaurant menu

proved exactly what the doctor ordered after a day spent pounding the streets.

My guest and I both chose the Chef's Signature Seafood of the Day option for dinner, which was a succulent fillet of seabass, served on a bed of mixed vegetables and topped with juicy prawns, all of which was sourced locally.

After dinner the bar area became a hotspot for Saturday night revellers when an impromptu session kicked off following the arrival of two local musicians.

The craic was so good that we stayed put for the evening, which meant we didn't have far to travel when it was time to retire for the night.

We woke the following morning ready to continue our tour – while taking time to visit the city's busy shopping district.

And the hotel came up trumps again that day, when we enjoyed lunch at

Ristorante Rinucinni, which was suggested and booked by the always obliging staff.

This Italian eatery looks tiny from its exterior view, but opens up to far greater proportions once inside.

Being so close to our hotel it is also just a short hop from Kilkenny Castle, and clearly does a bustling trade.

There, from an extremely varied lunch menu, we decided to opt for the Cosse Messinesi (Wexford Mussels tossed in garlic, white wine and chopped tomato) to start with, followed by a Risotto ai Frutti di Mare (risotto with Kilmore Quay seafood) for me and a Spaghettini Con Gamberoni (spaghetti with Kilmore Quay prawns) for my companion.

Everything was top notch here – fresh, flavoursome and filling.

If you are a fan of Italian food, seafood or simply fine dining you must find time

to stop at Rinucinni's when visiting Kilkenny.

Also if you are a fan of wine – as below this cosy restaurant sits a wine cellar like no other in the city, boasting thousands of bottles of red, white and sparkling wine that the Italian/Irish family who run the business source from only the best Italian vineyards.

Due to all of this – great food and an impromptu tour of the cellar – we happily spent far longer than we expected at Rinucinni's, but we couldn't leave without sampling a Kilkenny Coffee, which offered the perfect combination of strong coffee, local liquor and a luxurious layer of cream.

That proved the perfect end to our brief trip to the city, and set us on our way with a spring in our step.

It turns out that Kilkenny is one of those cities that you visit, love and want to return to again.

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TRAVEL

Ireland's Medieval Mile – some of the highlights

KILKENNY CASTLE

A 12th century castle set in extensive parklands built for William Marshall and remodelled in Victorian times. This was the principal seat of the Butler family, Marquesses and Dukes of Ormonde. The castle park and gardens are accessible free of charge, while daily tours of the castle are available.

MEDIEVAL MILE MUSEUM

Unearth 800 years of history at this newly-opened museum, located in the heart of Kilkenny City and at the centre of the Medieval Mile trail.

Tickets are available for daily entry via www.medievalmilemuseum.ie

HOLE IN THE WALL

This hidden 16th century tavern is located in Ireland's oldest surviving townhouse, which today serves as a unique venue for an array of cultural events. Find out more at www.holeinthewall.ie

SMITHWICKS EXPERIENCE KILKENNY

With over 300 years brewing experience this tour leads you on a journey through the history of Ireland's favourite ale. From the 1300s, when the monks of St Francis Abbey first discovered how to make beer, to the processes that currently produce a pint of Smithwicks.

For further information or to make a booking visit www.smithwicksexperience.com

ST CANICE'S CATHEDRAL AND ROUND TOWER

A site for Christian worship led by St Canice in the 6th century, the cathedral was erected in the 13th century. It boasts one of only two medieval round towers in Ireland that can be climbed – the 9th century tower also offers some of the best views of the city. Daily tours are available for both attractions.