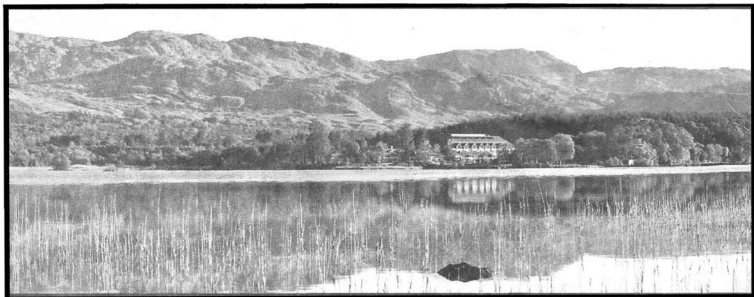


# The Sunday Telegraph

TRAVEL

(11/02/2007)

Rural Ireland makes for a rugged spa break, says **Jini Reddy** – without Guinness



**Splendid isolation** Harvey's Point Country Hotel, on Lough Eske, offers a remote, peaceful setting for the retreats – and room service for visitors with an urge to relax

## Detox, Donegal style

A windswept corner in the north-west of Ireland might not strike one as the ideal backdrop for an adventure spa. But a 42-year-old Irishman, Aidan Boyle, is giving it a whirl.

Boyle used to run a "bikini bootcamp" in Brazil but, six months ago, he decided to swap the rainforest for the green hills of his native County Donegal and launched what he calls the Body and Soul Experience, three- and seven-day retreats which offer a mixture of yoga, hiking, cycling, massage, and fresh, healthy food.

"It's about de-stressing, and spending time focusing on your fitness. It's not meant to be hardcore anything," says Boyle.

I've signed up for the weekend programme. So, too, have three fitness-mad females. One has completed the Marathon des Sables, a hellish footrace across the Sahara. Another is a fitness and detox enthusiast (in fairness, she is the director of a company that specialises in spa tourism). And the third is a former athletic champion from Slovakia.

With sinking heart, it occurs to me that group dynamics may be more of a factor in rating the weekend a success or failure than endorphin-boosting exercise or energising foods. But our Irish host is a quietly supportive presence, the mithosis of the following

drill sergeant. He also has the patience of a saint. "I can't cope without coffee!" shrieks the detox enthusiast on arrival. Her outburst is met with a quiet word: overload on caffeine if you must, but in the privacy of your room.

Our base is the four-star Harvey's Point Country Hotel, on Lough Eske, beneath the Bluestack Mountains. It's remote: there are more sheep here than humans. But our rooms are stately and come with all mod cons, including a whopping bathtub and widescreen plasma TV. The staff wreathe us in smiles, and we have access to room service – if we want to go off the rails, we can.

After a brief setting-in period, it's our first yoga class. Boyle teaches Astanga Vinyasa yoga, and he inspires confidence. The postures are flowing but gentle, and there is an element of meditation and breathwork, too, which I

relish. We are none of us novices, but Boyle tends to pitch sessions at beginner level. "Even advanced students can learn something from the basic postures," he says.

If I've not yet earned the in-room massage that follows – a real treat – I happily submit to the firm hands of therapist Joanne Travers. Much as I'd like to flop in bed afterwards, there is dinner to take in, a miniaturist's three-course meal: omelette with anchovy and tomato, scallops and thimble of risotto, and Aubergine curry. "Hunger makes a great sauce," quips our host.

Don't be put off by the word detox. The food is more gourmet vegetarian (with a fish option), than celery sticks, but it is low calorie. As to weight loss, Boyle says that it's "bound to be a residual effect of all the activity, but it's not the goal – it's the feel-

good factor that reigns." A 6.30 call the next morning ensures I make it to yoga – there are two classes a day without missing a beat. Breakfast afterwards, a bowl of porridge and prunes, and ginger tea in the cosy reading room, sets us up for our first, four-hour hike, along the Bluestack Way.

It is raining buckets and hailing, so on goes the waterproof kit. Ray Flynn, Aidan's charming brother-in-law, joins us, and buoyed by a bit of new (male) blood, our collective mood lightens. The trail is easy to navigate and we deftly sidestep patches of bog and grazing sheep. En route, we peer into the ruins of an old dance hall.

On a hilltop, we eat lunch: a cup of home-made tomato soup, and two pieces of fruit. The soup alone leaves me full. But 10 miles on, wet and stiff, I'm knocking back carrot and ginger juice and

squirrelling away nuts, our afternoon snack. That I still have energy to spare for the afternoon yoga session comes as a great surprise.

The pace is cranked up a notch or two the next day, when a 45-minute scenic drive along the stormy seacoast leads us to the foothills of Slieve League, the highest marine cliffs in Europe, some 2,000 feet above sea level. Gale force winds of 75mph – the worst in 15 years – mean our slow, blustery ascent is halted after three miles. Tougher still is the two-hour cycle in the hills around the lake on the last day. I finish long after the others. Boyle riding by my side, ducking like a mother hen, and finish I do.

By the end of the weekend, I'm feeling a mixture of virtue and relief. Best of all, barriers have broken down a little and confidences swapped. "The weekend has made me realise I need exercise to stay sane," says the Slovakian. Despite (or perhaps because of) several pots of contraband coffee, the spa enthusiast has chilled out, and the extreme fitness diard is looking, well, extremely fit. The verdict? A week later, I'm sleeping like a log, I've binned the junk food, shed three pounds, and feel more cheerful than I have in ages. What's more, my encounter with the Irish countryside has left me hankering for a return visit... preferably one that involves a visit to the pub.

### ESSENTIALS

#### Getting there

Ryanair (0871 246 0000; [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies from Stansted to Derry, less than an hour from Donegal Town, from £10. Flybe (0871 522 6100; [www.flybe.com](http://www.flybe.com)) flies from Gatwick to Belfast City, two-and-a-half hours from town, from £21.99 one way.

#### Staying there

The RenewU Weekend

hosted by the Body and Soul Experience (020 8144 2562; [www.bodysouleexperience.com](http://www.bodysouleexperience.com)) costs from £550 per person with three nights' full board at Harvey's Point Country Hotel, two full body massages, 24 hours of activities, five or six yoga classes, mountain hiking, Irish cultural background and biking. Flights and transfers are not included in the price.

