

DESTINATION ♦ IRELAND



Music in a kayak enriches the view of the Liffey and its famous bridges.

PICTURES: CITY KAYAKING

SONG STOP

CRAIC IN A KAYAK

Paddle your way into Dublin's creative heart

MEGAN HOLBECK

Our convoy of bright plastic kayaks is strung along the empty Liffey, following a speedboat loaded with musicians and instruments. The sun is shining, the riverbanks busy with tourists and locals. Ahead, the elegant white arch of Ha'penny Bridge crosses the river, forming a finish line bustling with spectators. Someone yells: "Paddle faster: they'll catch you!" There's more barracking, the pace quickens until it's like dodgems on water, along with dubious steering, low-speed collisions and a soundtrack of splashing, laughing and different accents.

There's not much more Irish than music, craic and the Liffey, but it takes a genius to combine them into a two-hour package. That genius is Darinka Montico, office manager of Dublin's City Kayaking, who came up with the idea after mentioning the amazing acoustics under the bridges to a musician friend. "It's not

a normal kayak tour," she says. "It combines music with paddling, scenery, poetry and the city to show off the creative Irish personality."

I'm an hour into Music Under the Bridges, which is one of those special trips that gives outsiders a glimpse of what it's like to actually live in a city. And Dublin looks good: there's happy paddling along the Liffey, admiring the famous bridges and beautiful streets. Instant friends are made as you "bump into" people along the way: the double sit-on-top kayaks are stable and easy to use, but the steering (and paddlers!) can be slow to react. Then it's culture time as we raft up and bob under old bridges as music echoes around, the musicians playing water-themed songs for the occasion.

The trips, which cost €39 (about \$63), run weekly in summer but each is unique, with musicians, paddlers, weather and the tides determining the flavour. This Saturday afternoon we have two regulars: Fin Divilly and poet John Cummins are in a band called Shakalak (renamed Shakayak when afloat) and play us original numbers and Irish classics.

It's not just the music though: a big part of the magic is the banter, humour, warmth and stories, all flavoured with a love of Dublin.

City Kayaking (citykayaking.com) sprang from this affection for the city and its most famous river. Six years ago, two keen paddlers, Jonathan O'Brien and Michael Byrne began running kayak tours in an bid to build a community around the unloved Liffey.

According to Jonathan, "Nobody really used the river – people thought the water was dirty. We wanted to change Dubliners' perceptions."

While I wouldn't drink it, the water is fine, although surprisingly quiet – during our two-hour trip we don't encounter another boat. This means there's no stress with our haphazard steering, and no jostling for the best listening spots under the bridges. There are three sessions under three different bridges, each lasting about 15 minutes. Half the challenge is to stay in the right spot, especially under the low arches of O'Connell Bridge.

Luckily we've got help, otherwise there would be bumps, bruises and no one within

earshot of the music. Jonathan not only drives the speedboat, he keeps it (and the 10 kayaks) in place during performances. With his long hair and beard, he looks like Thor of *The Avengers*, especially when braced off a bridge to keep the fleet still.

It's not only Irish culture we absorb, but the country's history. The location of City Kayaking's jetty helps: looking upstream you can see the massive cruise liners in Dublin Port, part of the booming modern tourism industry. This contrasts with centuries past when the traffic was the other way, as millions of Irish left due to famine, war and the economy.

Moored next door is the *Jeanie Johnston* "coffin ship" replica (jeaniejohnston.ie), now a museum. It gives insight into the desperate conditions during the Potato Famine (1845-1852) when about a million emigrants left Ireland in similar boats heading for North America. (Another million people died, from a population of only eight million.)

Just up the road is the huge interactive EPIC, the Irish Emigration Museum (epicchq.com), which tells the story of Irish diaspora and its huge effect. Then there's the history along the route itself. The neoclassical Customs House stretches along the north bank, stately below its copper dome, with a turbulent past that includes being burnt down by the Irish Republican Army during the Irish War of Independence.

The seven bridges we paddle under each have a story. O'Connell Bridge was named after Daniel O'Connell, "the Liberator" who achieved Catholic emancipation in 1829, while Rosie Hackett Bridge (named after a union activist) is the newest to cross the Liffey and the only bridge in the city centre named after a woman.

After all the exercise, culture and history, it's time for the other part of the Irish experience: a drink. Pub crawls after the paddle are par for the course, so keep your plans flexible and your afternoon free.

THE WRITER TRAVELLED COURTESY OF TOURISM IRELAND AND FAILTE IRELAND, IRELAND.COM



WORLD HERITAGE PARADISE

AIR NEW ZEALAND SALE!

YOUR HOLIDAY INCLUDES:

- Return airfares flying Air New Zealand
- 7 nights accommodation
- 7 days car hire with full insurance
- VIP on Island Concierge
- Wonderland by Night Show
- Half Day Orientation Tour
- Welcome Dinner
- Life as a Convict Tour
- Pitcairn Pioneers Tour
- Norfolk Language Class
- The World of Norfolk Exhibit
- DIY History Tour
- Bounty Pass - Exclusive on island shopping & dining discounts

CREST APARTMENTS

Self-contained one bedroom apartments only minutes from World Heritage Kingston.

\$1149
SAVE \$950

GOVERNOR'S LODGE RESORT HOTEL

Unique resort style accommodation with onsite café and pool.

\$1249
SAVE \$800

ALOHA APARTMENTS

Self-contained one bedroom apartments located in the heart of town.

\$1349
SAVE \$830

JACARANDA PARK HOLIDAY COTTAGES

Boutique 4 star self-contained country cottages, close to town and historic Kingston.

\$1649
SAVE \$680

SALE ENDS 4 DEC!

There's more to NORFOLK ISLAND AIR NEW ZEALAND

Spacifica
travel

HEAD SOUTH. FIND NORTH

We know the South Pacific like the frond of every palm

Ph **1800 800 722**
Visit www.spacificatravel.com



HA'PENNY BRIDGE

Prices are departing Sydney, per person, twin share, inclusive of pre-payable taxes and for new bookings only. Valid for sale until 4DEC2018 or until sold out. Please consult our website for travel dates and for full terms and conditions. Spacifica Travel is a division of Wave Hospitality Group Pty Ltd, an accredited travel agency and member of the International Air Transport Association. (IATA). Images courtesy of Norfolk Island Tourism.