

# MIDLANDS MOVES TO GET BIG SLICE OF TOURISM PIE

Once almost dismissed as the hole at the centre of Ireland's glorious coastal doughnut, the Midlands is making moves to claim a slice of the tourism pie, on foot of recent news that Fáilte Ireland plans to rebrand the region as Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, writes Lorraine Courtney.



**F**áilte Ireland has announced the new designation for an area stretching from Leitrim to East Clare, extending through Longford, Roscommon and East Galway, and incorporating parts of Westmeath, Cavan, North Tipperary and Offaly.

The tourism body says the new brand will offer a unique experience of the Irish countryside for visitors interested in activities such as walking, cycling, fishing and water sports. It will focus mainly on the River Shannon and on sections of the Beara Breifne Way (a 500km trail that runs from West Cork to Leitrim through Galway, Cavan, North Tipperary, Roscommon and Leitrim).

It is also designed to complement the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East, after locals complained that the Midlands was being ignored as "the hole in the doughnut" by Ireland's tourism authorities. Tourism operators in some areas will now be able to choose whether to designate their facilities as part of one or both brands.

The new brand and emerging campaign for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands has been described as "an exciting development" by Westmeath County Council's Tourism Officer Una Doris. "It has the potential to energise and reanimate the Midlands region, including the strong visitor destination of Athlone," she added. "The quality of the natural environment in this region lends



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itself to a variety of outdoor recreation pursuits and Athlone provides the ideal base from which to explore the River Shannon and surrounding landscapes.

“Westmeath County Council is looking forward to realising the potential of this region and building on the extensive work already completed in providing greenways, lakeside amenities, water-based recreation and enhancements to the public realm in Athlone,” says Doris.

### FOOD NETWORKS AND TRAILS

Fáilte Ireland has allocated €2 million for the first round of investment to develop visitor experiences, support the tourism industry and develop marketing campaigns for the region, and it has noted that more funding will follow.

A series of food networks and trails will also be developed as part of the



*Fowley Falls in Co. Leitrim – Leitrim is one of the counties designated in Fáilte Ireland's new Hidden Heartlands tourism initiative.*



*Tree climbing in Lough Key Forest Park, Boyle, Co. Roscommon.*



*Westmeath's Sorca Clarke, county councillor for the Mullingar District, says the best tourism ambassadors for the Midlands are those who engage with visitors.*

new brand, and it's hoped that this will encourage visitors to stop off at small towns and villages near walking and cycling routes.

So, it is time to break the mould and to look elsewhere, apart from popular destinations such as Dingle, Connemara and West Cork, where – if you're lucky to wangle a hotel bed and restaurant booking – you may encounter the same cookie-cutter tourist experience as everyone else.

"Westmeath is teeming with visitor attractions across the larger towns of Mullingar and Athlone, and also in our picturesque smaller towns and villages," noted Sorca Clarke, Sinn Féin county councillor for the Mullingar District.

"As a tourist destination, Westmeath caters for all interests and ages. We're exceptionally proud of our lakes and waterways, Belvedere House and Gardens, The Luan Gallery, Mullaghmeen Forest not to mention equestrian facilities, Mullingar Arts Centre, our new Mullingar to Athlone Greenway, Kilbeggan Distillery, Fore Abbey, Kilbeggan Chocolate, Lilliput, Dun na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park, Tyrellspass, Multyfarnham, Tullynally and Athlone Castles to name just a few. A trip to the magical Hill of Uisneach is also an absolute must," she noted.

### RELAXATION AND ACTIVITY BREAKS

From fishing activities to water sports and forest walks,

Westmeath is being marketed by Fáilte Ireland as an excellent location for either an activity-based break or relaxing holiday. "The national initiatives of Ireland's Ancient East and the new Hidden Heartlands have provided the county with more national and international exposure and that's very positive," said Clarke.

"A quality online presence is vital to attract tourists and Fáilte Ireland's website provides excellent advice on what we can offer to visitors. The increase in the number of suppliers who rent biking, boating and water sports equipment is thereby attracting an increasing number of visitors to see our county from a different viewpoint and opening up new markets in ways that only a small number of years ago would not have been possible."

Independent Councillor Michael O'Brien pointed out that there's something for everyone on visiting the Athlone District. "The River Shannon is central to the tourism product in Athlone. The recently refurbished Athlone Castle and the Luan Art Gallery are located on the banks of river. You can explore the river and lakes by taking a boat trip, and the kids can avail of water sport activities," he added.

If you're a cycling fan or just want a leisurely cycle or walk, The Old Rail Trail is a 40km Greenway that stretches from Athlone to Mullingar along the old railway line. "Along that route you can take in Dun Na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park, and the beautiful surrounds and history of Moate Railway Station," according to O'Brien.

"If you're a golfer, there is an abundance of great courses including Athlone, Glasson, Mount Temple, Moate, New Forest and Mullingar. There is ample shopping in Athlone, a plethora of tremendous restaurants and a cracking nightlife including the oldest bar in Ireland – Sean's Bar."

According to Cllr Sorca Clarke, the best tourism ambassadors for the Midlands are those who engage with visitors. "Our reputation as a warm, welcoming and friendly county with quality facilities and amenities is growing; and it's evident with reviews on websites like TripAdvisor, which are widely read and can influence the decisions of potential visitors."

### HIDDEN HEARTLANDS BRANDING

She would like to see more people using social media to showcase the county, citing popular platforms such as Google, Twitter and Instagram as quick and easy to use. "They can have a global reach, which would complement existing initiatives very well in bringing our tourist attractions to a much wider audience."

However, what about the impact of the new Hidden Heartlands branding? "The new branding is a very welcome addition to the tourism product in the Athlone District and right across the Hidden Heartlands region," said O'Brien.

"We've all seen how successful other tourism brands such as Ireland's Ancient East and The Wild Atlantic Way have been. Up to now, the east and west of Ireland were in a much stronger position when it came to tourism; they had the product and the branding. We know we have the product and the potential, now we have the branding that will help bring us to the next level."

With tourism a very important factor within Cllr O'Brien's own area, he claimed that despite significant growth in tourism

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in recent years, there is so much more potential. "I think that Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is a timely boost for people involved in the tourism industry. It is important that all stakeholders and communities work together and embrace this new branding; doing so will ensure that tourism will prosper here into the future."

### SHOWCASING AMENITIES

"There is no doubt that it will benefit the Athlone area in Westmeath and that is to be welcomed, however it was met with some questioning regarding the benefits to the other areas of the county which also offer some truly fantastic heritage

areas," says Clarke.

"The reality is that this county has tourism potential and while it is unfortunate that it has yet to reach its full potential, we are working hard at showcasing our amenities to both national and foreign visitors and will work with any agency or branding opportunity that shares that objective.

"This summer has been helped immensely by the excellent weather, but there is always room for more visitors and they will always be most welcome. Traditional holidays are not necessarily what people now want, and while there will always be some demand for the two-week holidays in the sun, there is enormous potential for Westmeath to continue to tap into the weekend/mid-week getaway market and short breaks market."

Cllr Sorca Clarke remains hopeful that next year will see an increase in tourist numbers, adding that the reality of Brexit may impact on the number of UK visitors. "From speaking to visitors, it is apparent that those who visit us once, often return and bring others along with them and stay for longer periods in order to fully appreciate what we can offer," she concluded.



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