

WITH all the current issues in airports around

Europe, there are few more welcome words in travel right now than 'direct flight'.

I also love visiting places that I know nothing about and both of these boxes were ticked when I stumbled upon an article advertising the launch of new direct flights from Dublin to Guernsey. Apart from being 75% sure it was in the Channel Islands, I knew literally nothing else about this mysterious gem.

Emboldened by a new-found sense of adventure, I had no hesitation in accepting a three-day excursion to the 65sq km island. A simple Google search will tell you that Guernsey has a wide variety of stunning beaches, rugged cliffs, fabulous views and a lively capital of Saint Peter Port.

At first glance, you may think you've landed yourself in Dublin's seaside town of Dalkey, but on closer inspection you will find that the island possesses a notable French influence and a unique complexion of its own. Numerous large, ugly concrete German fortifications around its coastal areas are dominant features, but act as a stark and historically important reminder of the Nazi occupation in 1940.

Perhaps the most famous illustration of the island's dark past is depicted in the 2008 hit-novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Americans are apparently so enthralled by the book and portrayal of the island that they come to Guernsey actually looking for the homes of the characters.

Flying with Guernsey's own airline, Aurigny, I was pleasantly surprised that it took just 1.5 hours to reach the British crown dependency.

The first thing that I noticed was that the weather wasn't that much different than Ireland, but in general Guernsey's climate is among the mildest and sunniest in the whole of the British Isles. We arrived at the end of March, but anyone traveling during the summer months should definitely expect the thermostat to hit beyond 20C.

Just a ten-minute drive from the airport along the narrow winding roads led us to the four-star Farmain Valley Hotel on the east side of the island. Set in a stunning location surrounded by idyllic woodland with rooms from £120 (£141) per night, I was delighted to notice that the sea, as seen from my

A new short flight from Dublin to Guernsey leads to an island rich in history

Colourful:
The clock tower in Saint Peter Port and, right, Ian with his trusty bike



DIRECT

BY
IAN BEGLEY

room's balcony, was within walking distance.

I made a mental note to get up early one morning and take a dip, despite knowing full well that this would never happen.

My room itself was everything that you would expect from a modern lodging, but notably spacious and well-lit. But just before I allowed myself to get too

comfortable it was time to sample some of Guernsey's famous gin at the nearby Bella Luce Hotel.

Despite not being a big fan of the head-splitting elixir, I was willing to sample anything that our gin sommelier had on offer, all in the name of journalism. Sitting in the hotel's cellar lounge next to a large copper distillery still — named Old Nick — definitely helped to make the stuff go down much easier.

The main thing that I took away from our 30-minute 'Gintroduction' at £25pp (£29.50) was that it is actu-

ally the tonic water that gives gin its bitter taste.

Having built up an appetite, myself and my slightly tipsy companions made our way to the Copenhagen Bar & Grill at the Hotel de Havelet, which was just a few minutes' drive away.

For starters, I ordered a pot of mussels (£9/€10.50) and for my mains I had the honey roasted crispy pork belly (£19.95/€23.50) which came with a side of sautéed potatoes, tenderstem broccolini, apple sauce and light roasted gravy. I was stuffed by the end of it, but that didn't stop me from having the chocolate lava cake (£8.50/€10) for dessert and a few more drinks for the road.

Up bright and early the next morning, our acclaimed local tour guide Gill Girard met us in the lobby of our hotel to give us a jam-packed tour of the island. Looking far fresher than any one of us, Gill led the way as we walked around the capital of Saint Peter Port, located on the east side of Guernsey.

Referred to by the locals as just 'town', the vicinity has a distinct Mediterranean feel with an abundance of charm. We rambled through the cobble streets, which possessed a wealth of attractions.

Close to the Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery, we marvelled at a very dramatic and striking statue of the

French poet and novelist, Victor Hugo. He spent a number of years in exile on Guernsey and it was during this time that he wrote several of his most famous books, including *Les Misérables*.

With a plethora of picturesque and historical sites around, it's no surprise that he knocked out so many great works during his 15 years on the island.

From Saint Peter Port, we hopped on to a ferry which took us to the neighbouring island of Herm in less than 20 minutes. From the get-go I knew that I was going to enjoy this jaunt. In spite of its small size, the island really has a lot going on, including an abundance of idyllic walkways, unspoilt beaches, beautiful views and not a car in sight.

The gentle undulating route took us to Shell Beach, which consists of millions of tiny shell fragments that gives the beach its name.

We continued our walk around Herm while on the lookout for one of its most famous inhabitants — puffin birds. Unfortunately, none graced us with their presence but we were well distracted at the popular Mermaid Tavern, where we had a cup of tea next to a roaring fire while deciding what to order. I had the buffalo chicken burger with a side of



Novelty: A hike on Herm island and, left, the Little Chapel



beans, cheese, rice and plenty of jalapeno salsa.

On my last day in Guernsey, I awoke relatively early and had a wander around the hotel and its grounds. I strolled through the vast gardens and wooded paths that led to a beautiful view of a secluded beach.

On my way back, I stumbled upon the hotel's yoga house and its four Tree House rooms, which are hidden within a tract of stunted trees and dense vegetation. Anyone interested in a relaxing retreat would be a fool to pass up on one of these dwellings.

On our last series of tours, Gill guided us around some of the most spectacular coastal views on the island, followed by a visit to the famous Little Chapel — the smallest consecrated church in the world. The

DINING alfresco in rural Spain, my daughter, Hannah, 16, points at the menu, horrified. Her finger hovers above the translation of local specialty *cabrito guisado*: stewed kid. Minutes later, her brother Gabriel, 18, bravely orders it.

We're on a long-awaited getaway. My husband, Marc, has an aversion to flying and reasons it's far easier to load up the car and stick it on a ferry.

So we booked a Brittany Ferries crossing to northern Spain and found a cheap hotel. Just 72 hours later, we're driving off the boat in Bilbao and up a winding road towards the Picos de Europa mountains in Cantabria.

The appeal of this region is its variety — nothing is too far away, which means you can spend a morning at altitude and the afternoon on golden beaches or surrounded by lush countryside.

Our two-star Hotel Infanto is a surprise hit. It looks out on to the Picos foothills and resembles a rustic-chic *parador*, with a riot of pink geraniums garlanding its wooden balconies. It even has a pool set in beautifully landscaped gardens.

A 15-minute walk away is the medieval town of Potes. Its cobbled streets and ancient bridges huddle around the twists and turns of the river Deva. We pronounce it 'Diva', which is ironic considering the town's lack of pretension.

It's a world away from the Costas; Spain at its most quiet and authentic.

AT THE heart of Potes is the 15th-century Infanto Tower, a former duke's residence. It can be climbed for views, and clustered at its base are several restaurants, including the one of 'stewed kid' fame. (Next time, my son will order a burger.)

Monday is market day and Potes thrums with locals stocking up on cheese, salami and olives. We settle on a picnic lunch of empanadas to take to Fuente De, where a funicular whisks passengers 6,000ft high in the Picos.

The cable car attendant describes the walk down from the top: 'It's nine miles downhill, easy.'

What we haven't bargained on is the whiteout at the summit, making it tricky even to identify the path. But soon enough the sun burns through the cloud to reveal a vista of

Head to the little-known Cantabria region for unspoilt beaches and soaring mountains



Picture: GETTY / MOMENT RF

Unexpected burst of Spanish sun

BY JO KESSEL

Bring the family: Jo with Hannah and Gabriel. Top: The Cantabrian coast

imposing, jagged limestone peaks whose ashen colour gives the illusion of them being snow-capped.

The path meanders downhill at a gentle gradient. Mountain tops give way to pastures of horses, cows and sheep, who eye us when we tuck into our empanadas. The pastry is deliciously light and flaky, oozing with bacon, tomato and cheese.

It's the fertile valley towards the bottom, however, that's the most striking: an abundance of Mediterranean Sea Holly — a spiky blue flower indigenous to the Picos — tints the grass sapphire.

At 1,650 sq km, the Picos de Europa National Park is one of Spain's largest. Our receptionist advises: 'The main trails are overcrowded. Stay here and you'll have the mountains to yourselves.' Her suggested circuit starts in the remote farming village of Tudes, whose inhabitants still use horses for transport. They trot past and bid 'hola' with a tilt of their gaucho hats.

The Picos are omnipresent during our hilly, five-hour hike. We pass through Porcieda, an abandoned hamlet. A 'SE VENDE' sign on a crumbling house prompts Gabriel to wonder if he could afford it. Later, we learn the entire hamlet is on sale for €1 million.

For the next few days we lounge by the pool or on Oyambre beach — a wild stretch of sand near the seaside resort of San Vicente de la Barquera.

And on a tailor-made excursion with ToursByLocals, guide Hans introduces us to regional delicacies.

We visit an artisan dairy to taste blue cheese (aged traditionally, in caves) and one of Cantabria's blended sheep and cows' milk cheeses. Both are rustic, robust and have a spicy kick.

Our last stop is a vineyard where we try some wines and 'Orujo', a Cantabrian grappa that's like rocket fuel. Our favourite is the wine jam, which pairs perfectly with cheese. We shove an entire crate in the boot.

We've had a wonderful time in this truly diverse area. And Gabriel is still figuring out how to buy that hamlet.

TRAVEL FACTS

THREE nights' B&B at Hotel Infanto from €130pp. Cabin and car booking on a return Rossllare to Bilbao sailing (*brittany-ferries.ie*) from €266. A wine and tapas tasting tour is from €70pp including transport (*toursbylocals.com*).

fries (£15.95/€19), which was a much-needed pick-me-up up before we set off for our next activity back in Guernsey.

After we returned to Saint Peter Port, we took a taxi ride to L'Eree on the west coast of the island. From there we ditched our cab for bicycles, courtesy of Outdoor Guernsey, and followed another experienced guide around the locality's coastal and inland lanes.

We explored numerous ancient monuments, military forts and bunkers, while learning about some of Guernsey's local legends, most of which involve fairies or witches. For instance, an ancient fairy ring we passed by is one of its best-known folklore sites. It's said that walking around this mysterious dug out circle three times and making a wish will see it granted by the fairies. Sadly, since we were on bikes all our wishes were invalid.

We later gathered for a not-so-traditional Mexican dinner and a few well-earned cocktails at Buho in Saint Peter Port.

I went all in and had a burrito (£15.75/€18.50) filled with pulled pork, refried

entire structure is decorated with seashells, pebbles, and broken china — it was definitely one of my favourite attractions during my three-day stay.

Other essential sights that should not be missed are the Nazi fortifications and bunkers. The Channel Islands were seen as a perfect stepping-stone to the invasion of Britain. However, when it became clear this was not going to happen, Hitler issued a directive in October 1941 that they should be converted into an indestructible fortress as part of the Atlantic Wall. Many have been perfectly preserved and serve as a fascinating reminder into Guernsey's dark past.

With the new direct flights from Dublin, Guernsey is likely to become very popular so book your ticket before the masses arrive.

TRAVEL FACTS

How to get there:

Aurigny (*aurigny.com*) operates three flights a week from Dublin, from €66 one-way.

What to do: For more information see *visitguernsey.com* or to book a tour with Gill Girard see *gillgirardtourgide.com*.

