

# From rolling mountains to

**KATE CHAMBRÉ** samples the many delights of Donegal on a journey taking in the beautiful Inishowen and Fanad

Peninsulas. Plus she gets some pampering along the way...



**CHILLING OUT:** Kate Chambré enjoying a walk on one of Donegal's many beautiful white, sandy beaches

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**AMERICAN HOLIDAYS**

**D**ONEGAL has long been a bolt hole for many Northern Ireland holiday-makers come the Twelfth of July fortnight break, and it's easy to understand why. With its awe-inspiring mountain ranges and miles of unspoilt, white, sandy beaches, it offers a tranquil world away from parades and crowds, yet it's practically on our doorstep. During a recent weekend break to the north-west, I decided to explore the Inishowen Peninsula before heading across to the Fanad Peninsula. While no stranger to the county, these are two areas which I knew comparatively little about. Traditionally, people travel via Londonderry to reach north-east Donegal but on this occasion, I took a less conventional route, crossing to Greencastle by the ferry (www.loughfoyleferry.com) from Magilligan. My first port of call after arriving on the Peninsula was the Carlton Redcastle Hotel and C Spa which comes highly recommended as an ideal place from which to explore the region. A mere 20-minute drive from Londonderry, it boasts 93 luxurious guest bedrooms set in 42 acres of mature parkland with stunning views of Lough Foyle. Over 111,000 tourists have stayed there since it reopened in August 2005 after undergoing extensive renovation work. Once home to Clan McLaughlin's prominent castle Caire MacEwlyn, this four-star hotel with its nine-hole golf course is very popular with golfers, who also use it as a base to visit other courses, such as the famous and nearby Ballyliffen Golf Club. (www.ballyliffen-golfclub.com).

But it was the Carlton Redcastle's renowned C Spa which caught my eye; no place better to rest the soul and pamper the body after a hectic week's work.

After a sound night's sleep followed by a light buffet breakfast, I headed downstairs to the C Spa, where I received a thorough going over during a highly relaxing Swedish back and shoulder massage, in a room filled with scented candles and mellow music.

Afterwards, I was given an informative skin consultation followed by an Elemis Fruit Active Glow Facial which made my face feel smooth and revitalised.

Equipped with a complimentary goodie bag, containing a variety of sample products used during my treatment, I decided to try out the C Spa's heated, saltwater Thalasso Pool.

With its special jets, neck showers, massage seats, a waterfall, underwater massage jets, geysers, air spas and micro-bubble seats, I could almost have been bathing under the Niagara Falls. One of the few Thalasso Pools in Ireland at present, the facility is specifically designed for therapeutic purposes. It's also a great place to improve one's fitness levels and more to the point, have lots of fun.

After a truly pampered morning, a characteristically short session in the gym and a spot of traditional pub grub in the Carlton's maritime-themed Captain's Bar, it was time to slip on my walking boots and explore this spectacular coastal region.

The Inishowen peninsula derives its name from Eoghán, who was made First Lord of the island by his father Niall, High King of Ireland. History has left a legacy of fine historic buildings, monuments and relics, from the



**CHEERS:** Guests can enjoy a pre-dinner drink on one of the Carlton Redcastle Hotel's picture perfect outdoor balconies.

Grianán Ailigh fort at Burt to a host of sacred early Christian crosses such as Mura, Cloncha, Carrowmore and Cooley. The Peninsula also offers a diverse and visually exciting landscape, from rolling mountains to sandy coves and beaches at Kinnego Bay, Culdaff, Tullagh and Pollan.

The towering headland cliff edges of Malin, Inishowen, Dunaff and Fort Dunree Military Museum (www.dunree.pro.ie) which stands guard over Lough Swilly are all worth a visit, even if just for their beautiful locations alone.

A highlight of my trip was to the Isle of Doagh Famine village (www.doaghfaminevillage.com) - a museum of themed cottages which offers a rare glimpse of Irish history through its inspired collection of artefacts, preserved customs and traditions.

Coupled by insightful anecdotes delivered by brilliant tour guide Pat (Shane) Doherty, one was given a real sense of how tough life must have been on the Peninsula and throughout Ireland over the centuries. The centre also offers a great variety of exhibitions telling the story of famine, fear and eviction

as well as replicas of a Presbyterian Meeting House, an Orange Hall, an interdenominational Mass Rock and a Republican safe house with hidden doors which visitors are tasked with finding. After a day spent taking in the sights, I returned to the Carlton Redcastle for drinks on one of its outside balconies overlooking the Lough before dinner in the Water's Edge Restaurant. The baked oysters with garlic and parmesan soufflé to start, followed by a main course of herb rack of Donegal lamb (on a bed of fine ratouilli and spicy couscous with rosemary jus) were exquisite. After my pampering session in the morning, sight-seeing expedition in the afternoon, it was the perfect way to end the day.

■ A midweek Special Offer is currently available at the Carlton Redcastle for two nights B&B plus one dinner from approximately €125 (or £99) pps subject to availability and valid until August 30, 2008. Visit www.carltonredcastle.ie for further information about offers or tel: 00353 (0) 74 9385555.

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