

CONDÉ NAST

Traveler



THE BESTS

Kayaking the 'River of Life' in Ireland

by ALEX SCHECHTER

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Sure, you could drive alongside it. But what's the rush?

When I heard you could paddle all the way from Kildare to Dublin, on the 37-mile River Liffey, I jumped at the chance. After all, this is the mythical (and **literal**) “river of life,” cutting right through the center of **Dublin**, neatly dividing the city along its north-south axis. Placid though it seems, the Liffey packs a punch. Kayaking novices and pros alike brave its waters, but if you’re a beginner, be warned: progress comes slow on the Liffey. Your kayak will wobble and veer off in crazy directions. Haggard trees will appear from out of nowhere to undermine all your efforts. You will, to be sure, get wet. And the time it takes? Consider a kayak trip on the Liffey a little like **walking the Brooklyn Bridge**: it won’t necessarily get you there faster (it’s about four hours from Kildare to Dublin via water, versus **40 minutes in a car**)—but when the view’s this beautiful, why rush?

A private stretch of the Liffey runs through the  **Kildare Hotel, At The K Club**, a 550-acre golf resort that in 1997 hosted the prestigious Ryder’s Cup tournament. Recently, the hotel began offering kayaking excursions for guests, and tours begin on the hotel grounds, at the bottom of a sloping lawn with marble statues and towering oak trees. Though the river extends from here all the way to Dublin, that distance would have been beyond my ability, so my instructor and I tackled a condensed seven-and-a-half-mile stretch of the Liffey, finishing up near Leixlip village (the Irish name means ‘leaping salmon’).

The outing became more like a crash course in kayaking, and my first challenge was to confidently pass what my instructor Luca called the “eddy line,” the point that divides the relative safety of the still, pond-like eddy from the river’s more dynamic, unpredictable flow. “Just point the kayak upstream, lean out a little, and paddle,” Luca said. I paddled furiously. I leaned. I tried paddling more gently. I fought the current. I let myself get carried away. And then, just when I thought I was getting the hang of it, my kayak would start spinning out of control, and another attempt at gracefully making it to the other side of the river was forfeited.

Luca showed me a trick: to paddle in a straight line, all you have to do is gaze ahead at the point you wish to reach. The idea being, if your eyes wander, so will the boat. I couldn’t help getting distracted by a lone pelican swooping low on the rippling river, or a trio of white horses beckoning from a farm gate—the unbroken farmlands surrounding us were too beautiful to ignore. It’s the occasional weir—sudden, six-foot drops, which you essentially treat like a **water slide**—that’ll keep you on your toes. I was starting to catch on.

After my tutorial in the safe confines of the eddy, we enjoyed the Liffey’s lively twists and turns—until Luca realized he’d left his phone at the launch point. Unfazed, we paddled to the river’s edge, pulled our kayaks up a steep bank, and climbed up through wild ivy and gnarled tree roots back to street level.

The plan was to walk back a little more than two miles, leaving the kayaks unattended, and retrieve **the phone**. But along the way, as we were trudging up a two-lane road that shadowed the river (aptly named River Road), a white-haired man in a tiny Honda pulled up. Did we want a lift? It seemed a bit of Irish luck was at work: the smiling Good Samaritan turned out to be the chairman of the local canoe society; a genial, soft-spoken old timer who'd been paddling these waters for 40 years.

A broken oar was balanced on the arm rest, the result of a rough ride our driver had last week, out on the Liffey himself. "This is a grand place to learn," he told me. But the real time to come out is in September, he said, for the annual **Liffey Descent**, a kayaking race, where PA speakers are put up along the river so locals can follow the action. But this is no small-county hootenanny: the Liffey Descent draws an international crowd of more than 2,000 kayakers from all over Europe. Some are pros, some are paddling just for the heck of it.

A few minutes later, Luca hopped out to grab the dry box containing his phone, just where he left it. And the older man—because this is **Ireland**, and because good manners are an unspoken rule—turned around and drove us right back to the embankment where we'd climbed out. Thanking him, we scrambled back down through the trees, hopped into our kayaks, and continued on down the river.

The Details

How to do it: A kayak tour on the Liffey can be booked through The K Club, who recently began offering the activity through a partnership with local outfitter **kayaking.ie**. I paid €80 (\$98) for a two-hour excursion that doubled as a beginner lesson, but a range of different tours are available, depending on your ability and interest. (The full trek to Dublin requires an L2 skills certification. A skills assessment can also be offered on-site). All of the tours are family-friendly, and open to all levels of experience; the youngest age to participate is 12 years old.

When to go: Summer is the best time to kayak on the Liffey, due to lower water levels and warm weather. The water is generally too cold during winter, but starts to warm up by March, and the full season runs from March through September. To coincide with the Liffey Descent kayaking marathon, plan to visit in mid-September.

What to wear: A wetsuit, helmet, and life jacket are provided (packed lunch is extra). Wear clothes (and **shoes**) that you don't mind getting wet. ♦

MAP

Places We Went



HOTEL

**Kildare Hotel, At The K
Club**

