

# Soul Searching

JEREMY DRAKE FINDS REST AND RELAXATION  
AMONG THE ELEMENTS IN IRELAND.

PHOTOS BY JEREMY DRAKE

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There's trepidation as I step into the dimly lit bathroom. There is a modest claw bathtub at one end and a glass steam room that simmers away at the other. A hundred metres away, outside the window, violent waves rumble against the beleaguered County Sligo coastline of Ireland's famed Wild Atlantic Way. The noise of the waves, coupled with the grey clouds and distinct autumn chill in the air, helps draw me in closer to the steamy, briny, seaweed-filled concoction into which I'm about to plunge my travel-weary body. The smell of hot steam and salt is intoxicating, and as I peel off my robe and step in, the first thing I have to do is come to grips with the slimy textured leaves now underfoot, which normally have me in a panic in the open ocean.

The thick carpet of kelp envelops my entire body and I shimmy left and right as the seaweed tentacles into all manner of crevices. Before I realise it my eyes are closed, I feel my heartbeat slowing and my hands become clasped gently above my chest. Something very strange is happening.

The Irish tradition of bathing in a seaweed broth like this has been around for more than three centuries, Neil Walton of Voya Seaweed Baths in Strandhill ([voyaseaweedbaths.com](http://voyaseaweedbaths.com)) tells me as I'm briefed ahead of my 50-minute salty soak. At the beginning of the 20th century there were an estimated 300 of them in Ireland.

It was once considered a sure-fire treatment for the pain associated with arthritis or rheumatism back in the 18th century, but now seaweed bathing

has reached new mainstream heights in treating circulatory complaints and skin disorders like eczema. The iodine-rich plants are also believed to help leach toxins from your body and improve the function of your hypothalamus as you bathe. But it's my transition to the 'alpha state' during my bath that Walton is most excited about. This is the moment, he says, where I'll become conscious of my surroundings, but my body will move into a deep state of relaxation. It's something he tries to encourage all his clients to strive for. Because of this Walton doesn't call Voya a spa. He avoids the word if he can, because it tends to downplay the real magic of one hour of deep seaweed healing.

"If you go to a regular spa with a different coloured light and a tinkle of water on your back, what good is that to you?" he says. "There are a lot of treatments

out there that I would question the benefits of. In my opinion, if you are going to go for a treatment it needs to be as close as it can be to nature."

For Walton, seaweed collected sustainably just off the County Sligo coastline outside his shop front is as natural as it comes. After a few minutes, with my trepidation all but dissolved and the consistency of the water akin to a translucent goop – the result of calcium alginate leaching from the seaweed – I leave my Sligo seaweed bath, my skin glowing like a newborn's, and drive into the lush Northern Ireland countryside.

Right: Fanad Head lighthouse was built in the early 19th century and still operates today, complete with romantic luxury suites for couples. The lighthouse is roughly a one hour and 45 minute drive from Finn Lough Resort.

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## BATHING IN NATURE

There's an eco-wellness renaissance sweeping across the Emerald Isle, one that is steeped in the green rolling hills and natural elements of this ancient Celtic land. These unique back-to-nature experiences are everywhere, and are being celebrated by a generation of young British and Irish folk who seek the type of escapism that only gentle bird calls, thick birch forests and a lack of mobile phone reception can provide. As I crisscross my way by car between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, I journey down single-lane country roads lined with medieval stone walls and eventually stop for the night in the picturesque border region of Fermanagh.

Once I've checked in at the Northern Irish luxury eco-resort of Finn Lough, I realise 'living life in a bubble' has a contradictory meaning.

Where life in a bubble usually shelters you from the outside world, at Finn Lough its intricately designed and well-appointed forest bubbledomes allow me to be more connected to the outside world than I've ever felt before.

Each of the domes is individually set on its own allotment on the water's edge of the stunning Lough Erne. It's so private they're only accessible by a chauffeured golf cart from reception. Tucked on a raised and discreet peninsula just behind the domes is the resort's newly opened Elements Trail, which is all about becoming immersed in nature.

No longer do you need to squeeze in next to a semi-naked stranger in a crowded hot tub, or have a therapist rush you through a treatment. Instead you traverse your way solo around five different Scandinavian-inspired huts, each designed for a sensory altering 20 minutes of pure bliss. I wander the wooded forest at dusk in my robe, with nothing but the sounds of bird calls and the scrunch of gravel under foot to accompany me. Each of the huts is linked by faint light sources and an orange glow through the heavy glass doors.

I start the trail at the Epsom Salts Float Shed, before a choose-your-own-adventure spa experience has me blissfully meandering between a lakeside sauna, an aromatherapy room, a private hot tub and a relaxation den.

After the trail, feeling so relaxed that time has new meaning, I retreat back to my luxury dome like a child who's just built a cubby house in his bedroom. It's only three degrees outside, but the heated flooring has transformed my snow dome into a comfortable greenhouse temperature. Where I would normally reach for my iPhone on the bedside table before sleep, the 180-degree view of the night sky directly above my bed prompts me to grab the dome's stargazing manual and drift off dreaming of constellations.

Clockwise from left: Finn Lough's forest bubble domes in Fermanagh all come with their own stargazing manuals; the Element Trail at Finn Lough includes an epsom salts float shed and lake-view sauna; sheep graze on Malin Head, Ireland's most northern point; Galgorm Castle is home to a luxury golf club that shares the same name.







## PAR FOR THE COURSE

Galgorm Spa & Golf Resort in Northern Ireland's Ballymena is a couple's oasis with private log-fired hot tubs, indoor heated pools, steam rooms, saunas with varying temperatures and even a new snow room that, at a brisk  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ , is designed to help you cool off between sessions. All of these experiences are linked by elevated boardwalks that lead to the heated River House centrepiece perched gracefully over the River Maine.

Later, I meet best friends Betty and Nan on the back nine of Galgorm Castle Golf Club – a 15-minute drive from the resort. The two women, both in their 60s, invite me to join them on the last three holes. They talk about their experiences playing together on some of the great golf clubs of Northern Ireland. In the past month, they've teed off at Royal Portrush, Ballyliffin and now Galgorm Castle. "We really do take it for granted, don't we? Golfing here is spectacular," Nan says to Betty with a smile as the three of us approach the 16th hole with our carts. The fairway doglegs sharply over a water trap and, as with the rest of the course, is flanked by huge oak trees, rolling green hills, hairy

Irish cows and a 19th-century castle, which peeks at us off in the distance. We all sank our tee shots, but it doesn't matter. We giggle together as new friends having just walked on and played a golf course that still hosts one of the best-attended events on the entire European Challenge Tour. I certainly won't be taking today for granted.

Above: A golfer walks down the fairway of the 18th hole at Galgorm Castle Golf Club.

### ▶ GETTING THERE

There are flights to Dublin from every major Australian city. Ballymena and Fermanagh are both 2.5 hours by car from Dublin airport.

### 🏠 STAY

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