



PICTURES TAKEN ON THE CANON POWERSHOT SX60 HS AND THE CANON POWERSHOT SX70 HS

# THRILLS, SPILLS & AUTOMOBILES

Power up your brain, boost your body and take a leap of faith with **Norah Casey** as she reveals the best breaks that take just a few hours and a bucket load of courage.

**Y**ou never know what you can do until you try. Travelling to new places catapults us far away from the everyday pressures of life, work and stresses and where we choose to go is often dictated by our personal preferences or what we feel we need from that break away from daily living. For some, lying on a beach, binge reading books and sipping cocktails, is the perfect holiday. For others, it's exploring a new city. Great travels can often be as much about a boost for the mind as well as the body, which inspired me to seek out the shortest possible breaks. If you don't have the time or money for a weekend away, what could you do in just a few hours to give you that energy boost for life?

Here's a secret about me. I'm a little crazy when it comes to new things. If I feel I haven't jumped far enough out of my comfort zone for a while I will consciously make an effort to push myself to do something terrifying. In my hunt for the wildest possible experiences I wanted to strike a balance between facing fear and having fun. So here's my hot list: White water rafting; getting back up on a horse; motor racing; flying a plane; scrambling on rocks; cruising Dublin bay and learning how to make a decent cocktail.

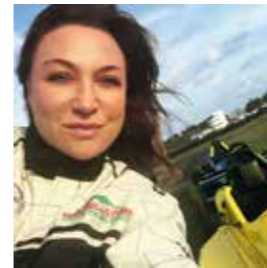
## WHITE WATER RAFTING

This was a brilliant experience and really accessible. I was a bit nervous at first, especially as we tipped headlong over the first weir at Lucan but we survived and stayed on board! By the time we reached the fourth I was more confident about lessening my white-knuckle hold on the ropes. The adrenaline-fuelled sheer drops into the weirs as you crash into the white frothy waves below may be heart-stopping but inbetween you get to row along a beautiful stretch of the Liffey. You see a whole different side to the areas it meanders through on the way to downtown Dublin – Shackleton Mill, which was a working flour mill until 1998, the rusted iron Guinness Bridge, the old linen mill at Wren's Nest and the incongruous sight of early morning golfers at the Hermitage waving over to us as we glided by. It was serene at times with only a kingfisher crashing into the banks for company. Among the group I cajoled into joining me on the trip

was a friend who had a near death experience white water rafting down the Zambezi river. So I have it on good authority that this is nothing like that. It's exhilarating and a great way to kick-start a day. I went with the team from Rafting.ie and we rafted for about eight kilometres from Lucan, through the Strawberry Beds finishing at their Canoe Centre at Mill Lane in Palmerston. Our guide was Ciaran, who made it very easy to navigate the water and all the more interesting because he knew the history behind some of the bank-side architecture as well as the wildlife and fauna we encountered in the unspoilt wilderness of this stretch of the Liffey. I know this part of the world very well but had never seen it from the river. All the guys who work at Rafting.ie, including Shane, the owner, are experienced and enthusiastic kayakers and rafters.



**ESSENTIALS:** Rafting.ie will provide you with a wetsuit, jacket, helmet and waterproof shoes. Depending on the season, wear something warm underneath. You will get wet so bring a change of clothes. I wore fleece-lined leggings and a couple of layers of thermals and zip up fleece on top. Wear really warm socks or double up as your feet will get cold with the water. You can wear a swimming hat under the helmet, but I didn't and as we didn't tip over my hair was fine! The raft takes seven people plus your instructor (children must be eight or over) and the journey is shorter in winter when the river is high and moving faster (around 1.5 hours versus 2.5 hours in the summer). The price is €299 per raft so get a group together for a brilliant day out. [info@rafting.ie](mailto:info@rafting.ie); **Tel: 01 6264363; rafting.ie**



## MOTOR RACING AT MONDELLO

This was one of the best bad-ass experiences ever and the biggest surprise. I'm the furthest you'll find from a petrol head and I would do anything other than drive...ordinarily. But they had to prise me out of that motor car at Mondello. I was hooked. I had no idea speed could be so great! So here's the low-down.

I had the most patient man on the planet as my instructor, Ken Elliot, and I did pick up one important tip: To listen. Surprisingly, it is the one thing that budding Formula One racers often don't do, especially men (sorry, but that's what Ken said!). And those who feel they know it all are the ones that crash. So I was definitely in listening mode. You can do all sorts of driving experiences at Mondello, supercars, motorbikes, racing cars and something called drifting (not for me). I opted for the closest to a Formula One experience I could get. After the instruction about the course it was time to get kitted out in the racing gear and



The single-seater Formula Sheane

“BRILLIANT DAY OUT, GREAT FUN, FANTASTIC ADRENALINE KICK”

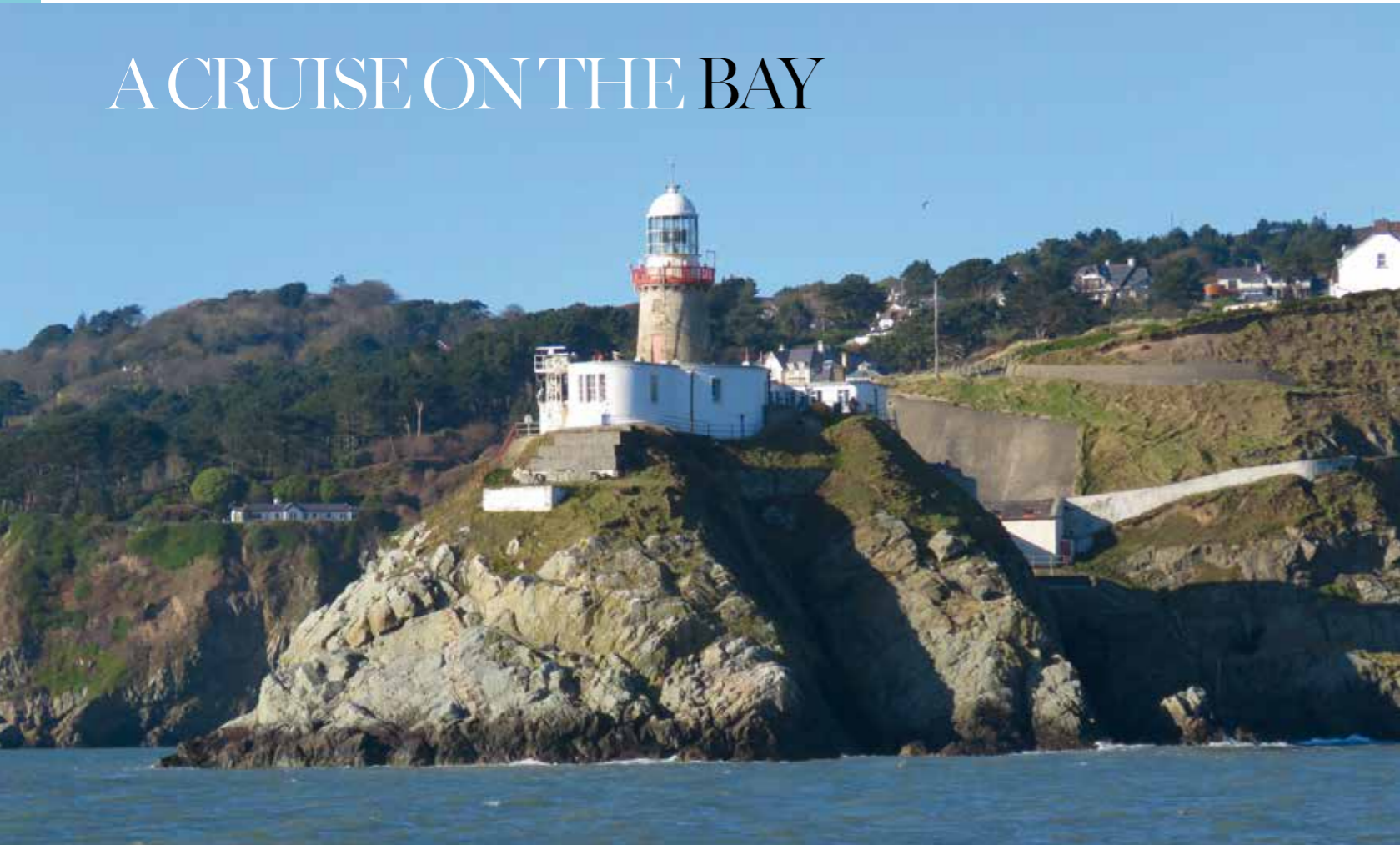
helmet – I already felt like Sterling Moss (yes, I know he's in his eighties now). Ken bravely sat next to me as I did my best impersonation of *Driving Miss Daisy* in a suped-up Mazda 3 to do some training laps. Anyone else would have been saying 'would you slow down, for God's sake!' but Ken has nerves of steel and kept encouraging me to go faster. As we hit the back straight he'd say 'foot to the floor, foot to the floor, don't hit that brake yet...don't touch it. Now... brake hard, turn the wheel, speed up, change gears'. I was more than a bit flustered to start with. I was braking too early, fudging the gears and turning too late. A natural (ha, ha). But after four laps I was on my own in a Formula Sheane – a single-seater racing car. Getting in was a bigger challenge than driving, you recline rather than sit, get strapped in from all angles (yes, *all*) and once the steering wheel is screwed back on and you work out that leaving your visor open a little will stop it misting, it's just a matter of trying not to think about the thin layer of steel between your ass and the tarmac. Oh and the gears are on the right at hip height. It was weird at first but after a couple of pace laps I was on my own and as I grew more familiar with the course and learned not to brake until I had to and to turn when I should, I was rocketing around the circuit. It was one of the biggest adrenaline kicks to screech around the hairpin, revving out of the turn, racing down the back straight. And I got a certificate at the end – my fastest lap was one minute seven seconds – bragging rights afterwards to calm down before you take the wheel of your own car for the journey home!



**ESSENTIALS:** The Mondello Park Motor Racing Experience includes instruction, training laps in a saloon racing car and 10 laps in a Formula-styled, single-seater racing car. Wear something warm for underneath the overalls and helmets are provided. Visit the museum afterwards, there are some great cars on view. Prices start circa €199, but check out the website for details of dates and prices. For more information see [MondelloPark.ie](http://MondelloPark.ie). [info@mondellopark.ie](mailto:info@mondellopark.ie); **Tel: 045 860 200**



# A CRUISE ON THE BAY



This is one way to leave the city without leaving the city. A cruise that only takes a couple of hours but transports you to a different space entirely. We boarded the St Bridget close to the East Link Bridge (next to the 3Arena). My host and companion for the trip was Dublin Bay Cruise's hidden gem, actress Aoibhín Garrihy (star of the Gaeity's *Breaking Dad*) who is the daughter of the owners – the same family who operate the ferries from Doolin to the Aran Islands and the Cliffs of Moher. We set off from Dublin Port on a rare sunny day that arrived like a gift, sandwiched between the howling winds and torrential rain of two of our newly-named storms. Within moments, the traffic jams and noise of the city were replaced by the waves and seabirds along the Great South Wall as we headed towards the beautiful northern coastline of Dublin Bay. Captain Eddie Keane pointed out the pontoon raft erected last summer especially for nesting pairs of migrating Arctic terns and the distinctive red Poolbeg lighthouse, which I have walked out to many times but had never seen from this perspective.

The views are stunning across the bay towards the Baily Lighthouse which has been saving lives for centuries, since the coal burning lamps of 1665, it has modernised from oil to gas to a 1500-watt bulb and now a fully automated radar beam signals the warnings. And there it still stands with a watchful eye out across the bay. Beneath the waves the shipwrecks are testament to how necessary this little beacon was. And from the vantage of the view from a boat, majestic Howth Head was glorious in the sunshine. You couldn't imagine a more fitting setting for Joyce's Leopold Bloom to propose to Molly. The trip to Howth takes about an hour, where you can disembark for a leisurely lunch at one of the great fish restaurants at the seafront or stay on board for a loop around the uninhabited island of Ireland's Eye, home to some stunning geology and colonies of seabirds, including gannets, cormorants, guillemots, razorbills, fulmars and gulls. There are even a few breeding pairs of puffins. And in the waters surrounding the Island you will find gorgeous grey seals. As we sipped a glass of red wine,



enjoying some crab and prawns, I couldn't help wonder how I had missed this real gem. I've been spreading the word ever since, so get booking. This is a great experience for you, the kids and friends young and old. And it's right on the doorstep of the city.

**ESSENTIALS:** Dublin Bay Cruises has seven sailings starting in March with cruises to Dun Laoghaire and Howth. You can buy a round-trip ticket or a one-way (my round trip from Dublin Port to Howth was €29). Your ticket price also allows you to travel on the DART for just €2, so you can enjoy a long afternoon at leisure and return when it suits. No special clothing required but wrap up warm as it gets cool out on the bay. [booking@dublinbaycruises.com](mailto:booking@dublinbaycruises.com); Tel: 01 901 1757; [dublinbaycruises.com](http://dublinbaycruises.com)



## A FLYING EXPERIENCE

I am the biggest wuss when it comes to flying, so to tell you the truth I almost bottled out of taking on this adventure. I am so glad I didn't. Everyone should experience the thrill of flying at least once. It was incredible. I was more nervous about doing this than anything else on my hit list. I am the least superstitious person you could find except when I sit on a plane. I have to sit in the same seat every time and I use a secret ritual that distracts me from thinking too much about the ordeal. So to voluntarily opt to go up in a little plane that looks less sturdy than my car (think go-kart with wings) is way up there on my 'what the hell were you thinking?!' of moments. I tend to smile more when I am anxious. Fair dues to my instructor, Trevor, for calmly talking me through the mind boggling gauges and levers as I grilled him on his safety record and training, while grinning like a crazy woman. All too soon we were strapped into the tiny cockpit, my shoulder leaning alarmingly against the little door (and another round of questions about what happens if that thing pops open) and we're hurtling down the runway. The rattle of the little Cessna lifting skyward was barely audible over the hammering of my heart as the windscreen filled with blue skies peaking through white fluffy clouds. But the door held solid, Trevor appeared unconcerned

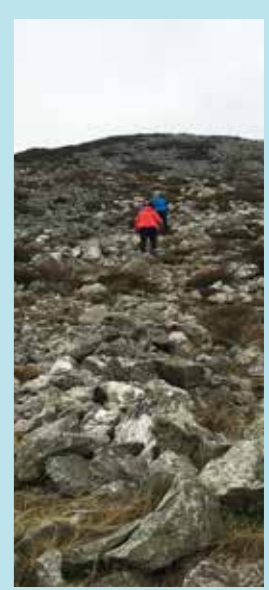
(always useful to watch for tell-tale signs of worry in the pilot) and we stayed up, which was the main thing. And then I took the plunge myself and gazed downwards. It was magical. Maynooth had never looked more beautiful. I was flying. Well at that point I wasn't technically doing the flying but after a watch-and-learn session from Trevor he bravely handed control over to me. Once my hands stopped shaking, I started to tentatively bank right, then left, nose up, steadying and getting a feel for the plane. It was awesome. I didn't dare look anywhere except straight ahead on the horizon but I felt okay. Better than okay, in fact. I felt like Amelia Earhart. Now, I know Trevor was really the boss of the plane. I hadn't a clue about the altitude or airspeed indicators, or what the altimeter really did. I steered clear of the throttle and I especially avoided the red stick which controlled the fuel (it was red for a reason I'm guessing). We did a big loop out from Maynooth to Killocock, Enfield and Summerhill with a great bird's eye view of Carton House, the Royal Canal and best of all the traffic on the M4 as we glided uninterrupted (thankfully) high above. When we landed I was grinning for real. I was insanely happy that I did something I never ever thought I would be brave enough to do. And I have my first flight certificate to prove it!



**ESSENTIALS:** I took an Introductory Flight Lesson with the National Flight Centre at Weston Airport and we flew in a Cessna 172. If you love it and get the bug you can go on to learn to fly with the NFC as a private pilot or to gain your commercial pilot license. All the instructors are professionally qualified pilots so you'll be in safe hands. The cost for a 30-minute First Flight is €110 and for 60 minutes is €215. For further information check out [Nfc.ie](http://Nfc.ie). [operations@nfc.ie](mailto:operations@nfc.ie); Tel: 01 628 2930

## THE SUGAR LOAF

Scrambling up the Great Sugar Loaf is a great workout for the body, it clears the mind and is completely free. You can choose the easy way or the hard way. We did neither, opting instead for the ferociously difficult way where you scramble up and down so often you will feel like you did three mountains! And the reward is glorious, panoramic views of the Wicklow mountains, out to the Irish Sea and the sprawl of Dublin in the distance. For a gentle hike head for the car park at the foot of the mountain, take a left from the roundabout after the bridge in Kilmacanogue and follow the signs. For the more adventurous, head to the GAA club on Quill Road where you can follow the trail or do what we did and start climbing upwards over those rocks for a good three hour work out.







## HORSE PLAY

Horses are amazingly intuitive. When I was younger I served my time cleaning out stables, grooming them and riding them when I could. I think horses saw me through the worst of my teenage years. So if I was going to try horse riding again I wanted to experience it in a place that loves those majestic animals as much as I do.

Festina Lente is so much more than a horse riding centre. It's a charity founded on the principle of equine therapy and taking a riding lesson here is to immerse yourself in the wonders of horses to sooth the mind and lift the spirits. You will come away feeling rejuvenated.

Psychologists have long since recognised the value of equine therapy. As herd animals, horses are intelligent and intuitive to emotions. They can sense vulnerability and move away from anger or fear. Jill Carey who runs the Equestrian Centre (her sister Clodagh runs the riding school) explained some of the benefits of working with horses for young people who suffer from social or economic exclusion, or with special needs or ability issues. But also for adults with physical impairments or mental health problems. And as she was talking I could see that therapy in action all around me. While the science is still developing around why horses have this counter intuitive response to humans, the benefits are quickly apparent in the laughter and camaraderie among the army of young trainees at the stables. And at the heart of Festina Lente's philosophy is the respect and love they show to their equine partners.

The bridles have no bits, the horses are barefoot and they are fed continuously and groomed beautifully. The centre is based on the grounds of an elegant eighteenth century house and the faithfully restored Victorian walled garden is home to stunning flora and fauna and a therapeutic sensory trail.

A visit to Festina Lente is so much more than a horse riding lesson. Spending time with these gentle animals will magically ease your stresses and all without saying a single word. Sometimes the best counsellors just listen.



**ESSENTIALS:** Festina Lente caters for all levels of horse riders and does private and group lessons. All of the instructors are experienced and patient so leave your worries at the gate. It also does therapeutic riding lessons with specially trained horses and will tailor the programme to the needs of the individual. For more information see [Festinalente.ie](http://Festinalente.ie). [clodagh@festinalente.ie](mailto:clodagh@festinalente.ie); Tel: 01 272 0704

## COCKTAIL CLASSES



If you like a bit of intrigue you will love The Blind Pig, a prohibition era-inspired speak-easy. Finding it is shrouded in secrecy so I cannot share the mystery but armed with a location (near Grafton Street), a phone number and a secret code, a helpful escort will take you to this underground cavern. The cloak and dagger entry heightens the excitement of a night of illicit cocktails. This intimate underground club, with vaulted ceilings, candlelit tables covered in white linen and exposed brickwork will catapult you back in time.

Inspired by one of Ireland's top mixologists, Paul Lambert (whose other brilliant speak-easy is above Kinara Kitchen in Ranelagh, Dublin 6) the cocktails are traditional, classic and far from the brash neon umbrella-adorned concoctions that gave cocktails a bad name. So don't ask for a Piña Colada or Tequila Sunrise. This is an uber cool space with a hint of burlesque – well more than a hint actually because a semi-clad, bare-bottomed woman danced and sang at some point while hiding her considerable talents with a white feather fan.

Andrei, our cocktail class tutor, gave us the low-down on some of The Blind Pig's signature cocktails and tried to keep order (we were a group of eight women more interested in sampling perhaps than learning!).



I am a big fan of one of Paul's great cocktails – The Pink Lady (a delicate blend of London Dry gin shaken with triple sec, fresh lemon juice, grenadine and topped with a frothy egg white). The Berlusconi is a witty interpretation of the man himself – a little bitter and twisted (Paul's description ,not mine!), dry vermouth mixed beautifully with Kamm & Sons aperitif and of course London Dry gin. Andrei then served up a stunning gin-based Martini cocktail and my fellow students enjoyed a lesson on how to make an Irish Old Fashioned, a unique take on a classic using Teeling Small Batch blended with sugar syrup and angostura bitters. We had an Italian-inspired dinner afterwards which was great value at €30 for three courses, including a very generous antipasti plate.

I learned something very important from the cocktail classes: Don't book to go white water rafting the morning after...and it is far better to taste than to make!

**ESSENTIALS:** Reservations are a must for cocktail classes or dinner. Be prepared for the cloak and dagger excitement of the big reveal when you finally reach your destination. Sink into the atmosphere and enjoy some of the finest cocktails in town. [reservations@theblindpig.ie](mailto:reservations@theblindpig.ie); Tel: 085 874 7901; [theblindpig.ie](http://theblindpig.ie)