

There's something about Chléire



Nature and adventures are never far from a yurt, writes Christina Park

We're welcomed to Cape Clear Island by a basking shark. A sun-fish, an *liamhán gréine*, it would be called here, on this Gaeltacht island (in Irish, *Oileán Chléire*) off the coast of west Cork. We're standing outside our yurt, taking in the hulking bay that opens out to an infinity of Atlantic.

"It's back!" says Sally, owner of the yurts. "Look! Over there, in the middle of the bay." I squint against the light-dazzled surface. "There are two!"

"No that's the dorsal fin and the tail."

Slowly, rhythmically, it weaves its way towards the headland until we can make out its body clearly through the water.

"There! I see it!" Our five-year-old nearly leaps out of his father's arms.

His younger brother nods sagely. "Yes, it's very bigger than a castle!"

Nature is closer on Cape Clear. Whales, leatherback turtles, dolphins and sharks are spotted regularly here and it is renowned for its spectacular bird migrations in late summer.

Three miles long and one mile wide, it has coastal cliffs shattered into jagged edges and hollowed into tantalising caves. You can explore them by kayak, hike to the ruined fortress of *Dún an Óir* and the island's many prehistoric sites, or just stroll down boreens woolly with seeded grasses and speckled with wildflowers.

The boys spend the first evening play-

ing at the entrance of the Mongolian yurt, which is reminiscent of a gypsy caravan with its hand-painted patterns and double doors. Nomadic tent dwellings may seem an odd choice for the west of Ireland, but they are made to withstand abuse from the elements. Inside is a comfy double bed with duvet, a sturdy pull-out for the munchkins to share, and a cute wood-burning stove.

Nature is also closer when you stay in a yurt. Popping up to the shower block at night over the dewy grass, the stars are out, uninterrupted by light pollution. In the dark the scent of the grasses, the hushing sea, seem magnified and more intimate. The first morning we think it's raining, but when I tentatively open the door, it is a sun-washed day. The sound is the sloping, glugging water below the headland.

We meet other island residents. There are the goats responsible for a delicious ice cream, cheese and sausages. You can help milk them, but we instead get bossed around by Alfie, the billy goat, who insists on nudging along anyone who stays in one place for half a minute; the boys giggle as tickly goat-lips prise grass from their hands.

Human locals are friendlier. Neil at the *Siopa Beag* responds warmly to my halting *cúpla focail*. He tells me Chléire often escapes the rain that can sweep the mainland. You can see it across the sea, lowering over Baltimore, sometimes for days, but it doesn't make it this far out.

Michael-John takes us on a boat to Heir Island. A true gent, he spreads out a blanket on our seat, and takes us on an unannounced detour to view a seal colony. As we approach, it looks as if the rocks are writhing – until a couple of nosy youngsters slide off and swim towards the boat. It's all I can do to stop the three-year-old from jumping in with them.

On our return Michael-John offers us tea and biscuits, along with a couple of mackerel he caught while we were sampling the beach. We cook them at the yurt, the boys devouring their 'real fish' with gusto.

Tucking the children into bed is easy, so tired are they after their adventures. Gazing at the sky through the transparent centre of the yurt, the five-year-old asks, is this a Viking tent? I try to explain about Genghis Khan, how he might have slept somewhere like this. The following night, instead of a story, I am commanded to tell the boys more about this "worrier". They look around in wonder as I point to various details – plaited camel-hair ropes, painted designs on pillars and roof slats – stretching my less-than-adequate knowledge of the great man to satisfy their curiosity.

"We haven't been here before, Mummy," says the three-year-old, yawning. "Not even a little bit." I look out to where my usually stressed man is smiling and raising a glass of wine to the sea. No, we haven't. But we'll be back. yurt-holidays-ireland.com