



The value of Stirling

A Battle of Bannockburn re-enactment gives *Sheena Davitt* the perfect excuse to check out what **Stirling** has to offer

IT'S mid-day in a field five minutes' drive from Stirling town centre, and the crowds have been queuing for the past hour to watch two armies of costumed enthusiasts re-enact the Battle of Bannockburn, the famous rout of the English by the Scots that took place 700 years earlier.

So significant is the anniversary to the Scottish that there's an entire festival, Bannockburn Live, taking place to mark it: more bagpipes, Celtic rock bands and full-killed American tourists than you will ever see in one place again.

As the audience take their seats, there's a pantomime atmosphere, with loud booing for the English knights (who are having fun riling up the crowd with shouts of 'Scottish peasants'), and cheers for the big lad sitting on an enormous warhorse who's playing Robert The Bruce.

With the independence referendum coming up in just a few months, the battle couldn't be more topical. And dotted about the festival, you can spot earnest French camera crews pressing battle re-enactors in chainmail for their views on the forthcoming vote.

It's certainly an interesting time to visit Scotland – 2014 also happens to be the Homecoming, a year of special events and

festivals laid on for visitors, a bit like the Irish Gathering (well, a lot like the Gathering actually, considering we nicked the idea from Scotland's Homecoming 2009).

And for anyone who feels the call of the pipers this year, Stirling is a fascinating town to spend a few days in. It's one of those places that seems to pack in an incredible amount of heritage into one small area. Aside from the Bannockburn battlefield outside the town (which has a new visitors' centre, as well as the already famous statue of Robert The Bruce), there's also the epicentre of all the historical upheavals of the past millennium or so: Stirling Castle (left).



In a country over-run with medieval castles, Stirling is one of its best. Viewed from a distance as you approach the town, it's a fine sight, standing on a crag that dominates the landscape, rather like Edinburgh Castle, but much more striking. A visit there can take up half a day – there's a lot to take in.

Built in the 12th century, and added to by various

Stewart kings over the centuries, it has links to most of the big names of Scottish history – it was besieged by Bonnie Prince Charlie (and Robert The Bruce), was the childhood home of Mary Queen Of Scots, and from its ramparts you can see the neogothic William Wallace memorial two miles away, which marks the spot where Braveheart scored a victory over the English (a visit to the memorial tower, a short bus ride away, is worth it for the views alone).

Around the castle, there's more to see in the winding streets of the medieval old town

(right) – the Church of the Holy Rude and its graveyard, the restored Victorian prison and Cowane's Hospital, a 17th-century almshouse that now houses a café. And if you like architecture, be sure to check out the beautiful Georgian sandstone homes on Albert Place on the way to the Smith Museum – they brought on a case of house envy on my part.

The surrounding countryside is just as attractive. Although Stirlingshire was traditionally a coalmining area, the scenery seems unscathed, mainly rolling farmland, stretching up to the Ochil hills.

I did catch a glimpse of the mining heritage at my B&B, West Plein House, a 19th-century building that used to be home to the mine owners – you can tell from the abundance of chimneys. It's a comfortable spot that would make a good base if you are exploring the region by car – and there's a lot to see if you're driving: you're only an hour from Glasgow, Edinburgh and the Loch Lomond National Park. The guesthouse is a working farm with



extensive grounds, and the friendly owners do a rather excellent cooked breakfast – with venison haggis on the side, naturally. As an invigorating way to start the day, it's enough to make you want to don some chainmail and join in the nearest historic mele.

Bannockburn Live is one of more than 900 events in the Homecoming 2014 programme, which include the Forth Bridges Festival, Whisky Month, John Muir Festival, Ryder Cup Concert, World Sheepdog Trials and the MTV Europe Music Awards.

Getting there

Sheena stayed at West Plein House (www.westpleinhouse.com), which charges £55 (€70) per night for a single room. For more on holidays in Scotland (and on Homecoming 2014) see www.visitscotland.com. Aer Lingus flies Dublin to Glasgow daily with return flights from approx €72.

CAMINO WAYS WALKING FESTIVAL

To coincide with this year's St James' Day, CaminoWays.com has organised its first ever walking festival, which takes place on Sunday in Roundwood, Co Wicklow. Keen walkers, outdoorsy types, families and anyone who's ever completed – or considered completing – the Camino (the medieval pilgrim route from France to the reputed burial place of St James

in Santiago, Spain) are welcome. Walks ranging from a leisurely 4km to a taxing 14km are planned, while a scavenger hunt for children, a giant paella made by FoodFiesta.ie, music from Galician singer Susana Garrido and fitness advice from a host of experts will add to the day out. Tickets from €5 (per child) to €20 (family). See www.CaminoWays.com