Travel

A trip to Tipp

'Lonely Planet' has recently ranked the Premier County as one of the world's top 25 places to visit in 2026. Nicola Brady finds out why...

You never quite know how someone will react when faced with one of Ireland's most famous attractions. And when I walk up the steep slope that leads to the Rock of Cashel, I see both ends of the human spectrum.

"Oh, this is the most incredible thing I've ever seen," an American woman gasps, as the afternoon sun bathes the castle in a soft glow.

The Irish guy behind me isn't as enamoured. "Ah here, don't tell me we have to pay in," he says, upon seeing the queue to buy tickets.

We are spoiled with an embarrassment of riches when it comes to impressive sights around this country of ours. But Tipperary, it seems, has shot to the top of the pile – last week, it was named one of the world's best places to visit in 2026 by *Lonely Planet*.

The brand's *Best in Travel* guide highlights 50 experiences and destinations to see in 2026, and Tipperary is highlighted as one of the 25 places to visit next year, alongside others like Botswana, Peru and New Zealand's North Island, and experiences ranging from rafting the Colorado River to spending a night in a Japanese ryoken.

So, why Tipp? And why now? Well, *Lonely Planet* waxed lyrical about Tipperary as a place where "landscapes shift from dramatic mountain ranges to quiet valleys", where "family farms supply artisan cheese to Michelin-starred kitchens" and "hiking trails weave past medieval ruins". It's "a *Lonely Planet* favourite", the guide says, singling out its "stunning landscape", "remarkable farm-to-table culinary scene" and the prospect for adventure travellers of "almost too many trails to choose from".

An embarrassment of riches, indeed. "It's a tremendous honour and a real testament to the warmth of our people, the richness of our culture, and the authentic natural beauty of our county," said Tipperary County Council chief executive Sinead Carr.

I took a trip to Tipp to see what the fuss is about, booking activities like a cycling tour out along the back roads from Nenagh to Garrykennedy with Lough Derg eBike Tours (*loughdergebiketours.ie*). "I tend to use the term the 'Real Ireland' about this area, because nothing about it is fake," says Rob Queen, its owner. "You're seeing how people live. If you go to a pub here, it's not a tourist trap. Local people will be in there."

And as I open the door to Larkins (*larkins.ie*) in Garykennedy, one of the pubs namechecked by *Lonely Planet*, I see that he's right. I plonk down by the fire, settle into my battered armchair and watch locals drifting in and out as I tuck into my chowder.

Muireann Boyle is behind the bar, a spot she's very familiar with – her parents bought the pub in 2007. "I've been here more than half my life," she tells me. "Every weekend, I was here making coffees. I was too young to be behind the bar!"

After spells working abroad in London and Australia, she's back in Garykennedy, and says that others are following suit. "Lots of people my age are coming back as well, which is nice. This area is still a hidden gem. I think the food's amazing, and the lake is obviously a big draw. There's so much on offer."

Tipperary is dubbed "castle country" by *Lonely Planet* (with the "showstopper" Rock of Cashel, of course, getting a namecheck). Back in Nenagh, I dropped into the town's striking castle, a structure set in the middle of the town with a pretty garden next door and locals walking their dogs on the grass out front.

Clockwise from left: The Rock of Cashel; Swiss Cottage; and beekeeper Aoife Nic Giolla Coda PIC: NICOLA BRADY

Inside, I chatted with OPW guide Kevin Whelan about the history of the castle. In the building's former dungeon, I ran my hands against the old stone, still mostly held together by the mortar from 800 years back – only regretting doing so when Kevin explained that it was made from horse hair, blood and urine.

I heard a creak upstairs, beyond the spiral staircase. "That's just the ghost letting you know he's awake," said Kevin. I scrambled the 101 narrow, spiral steps up to the top of the tower, and sadly didn't see the ghost, but did see two nearby steeples through the ancient, thick stone windows. You can see why Americans would lose their minds at such a sight – a family from Chicago arrived as I left, and couldn't get over the fact that castles like this are prolific all around the county.

There's also been a shift in Co Tipperary, as there has in the rest of the country, towards the increasing popularity of wellness activities. Ritual (*ritual-lifestyle.com*) opened last year in Dromineer, for example, with a coffee truck, fire pit and one big sauna overlooking Lough Derg. Inside, I eavesdrop on local gossip as women share notes on upcoming sunset yoga and sauna sessions and breathwork events. Another new water-based business, Cormac Kelly's Derg Lake Tours (*derglaketours.ie*) began tours and water taxi runs on Lough Derg just a few months ago.

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In nearby Terryglass, Caragh Walsh runs both River Run House and Cottages (*riverrunhouse.ie*) and The Derg Inn. From outside, the latter looks like a quintessential country pub; inside, it's chic but cosy, with modernist walnut light fixtures, storm blue walls and tobacco brown leather banquettes.

"I've always loved it [Terryglass]," she says. "It's just the most bizarre place. There's a huge international population and they're all creative – this kind of area promotes that creativity."

It's not just Caragh who is charmed. Last month, the village received a gold medal in the Entente Florale Europe Awards, which recognises green spaces and community spirit. "It's a really strong community here. The place is very community-oriented."

Community is a word that pops up all over the county – there's a market every Saturday at the newly pedestrianised Old Bridge between Killaloe and Ballina, for example. The Littleton Labyrinth Peatway (*tipperary.com*), also namechecked in *Lonely Planet*'s *Best in Travel* 2026, is a charming greenway that weaves along the old Bord na Móna rail track between the Slieveardagh Hills and Horse and Jockey.

Other waterways warrant a visit, too. The Suir Blueway gets a mention – a gorgeous trail following the meandering flow of the water past sculptures, dense woodland and tiny fairy doors. I spend a lovely half hour walking from the fairytale Swiss Cottage along to Cahir Castle, which has a cannonball wedged right into the tower closest to the bridge.

But Tipperary is possibly best known for its thriving food scene. This is a county where you can tour the farmhouse where Cashel blue is made, wander around The Apple Farm, or visit the Galtee Honey Farm, to see the hives and taste their wares.

"Tipperary is such a lush, fertile county," says its owner, fourth generation beekeeper Aoife Nic Giolla Coda (*galteehoney.com*). "Whether it's vegetables, apples, the meat or the honey, it just has that abundance, particularly in the Golden Vale. We also have such a strong network of food producers that support each other."

She gives me samples of their honey, laced with tinges of floral heather or ivy, in the visitor centre overlooking the oak trees of Glengarra Wood, as her lurcher/wolfhound rescues sit outside the door. "We don't have the sea, we don't have the beach. We have to rely on what we have, and what we have are the mountains, the forests and also the food. We have wonderful history and heritage, too."

She's thrilled when I tell her that I actually ate her honey the night before – there are beehives on the grounds of Cashel Palace Hotel (*cashelpalacehotel.ie*), and she provides them with the honey served up in The Bishop's Buttery. The hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant is also highlighted in *Lonely Planet*, with a menu reading like a love letter to local producers. The provenance section takes up a whole page, with the highlight a brioche-like bread served warm right at the start of the meal, slathered in their own honey. It's so good, a table of women to my right order seconds... then thirds.

Cashel Palace hosted a long table dinner of over 30 Tipperary food producers in August, a network, some of whose names you'll also find in the complimentary in-room minibars – think juice from The Apple Farm, O'Donnell's crisps or Ponaire coffee with a very fancy filter set-up, instead of the usual Nespresso machines.

The five-star hotel is making a real effort to tie in with local experiences, too – guests can book horsey activities with the hotel's equine concierge, make their own trinket tray with Rossa Pottery (*rossapottery.ie*) or book e-bike tours with Rob Queen, for example.

While Irish guests see Cashel Palace Hotel more as a destination within itself, most Americans I speak to are in Cashel itself to see the rock (or the hotel), before shooting on to Cork or Kerry. "We're doing our very best to change that! It's our mission to increase the footfall into Tipperary and to increase the stay," says its director of sales, Karen Fleming.

You can see why the Rock of Cashel is a draw, of course – I can't think of many places where you can sit and eat breakfast with a view of such a landmark, or gaze at it while soaking in the hot tub in the spa.

But there's so much more to Tipperary than just this one spot. And in 2026, it seems like a lot more people will see just what it has to offer.

Nicola was a guest of Fáilte Ireland and the Cashel Palace Hotel. Find more on Lonely Planet's Best in Travel at lonelyplanet.com/best-in-travel