

There's a surf school taking place in the bracing swell of Strandhill Beach, Sligo, on Ireland's west coast Wild Atlantic Way. But I'm after something gentler and that happens to be luxuriating in the Irish tradition of a seaweed bath.

When 12th-century monks harvested edible seaweed along the rocky shoreline to feed the poor, could they have envisaged this humble sea vegetable evolving into the holistic treatment known as Thalassotherapy, whereby when added to warm water, the seaweed releases its healing alginates?

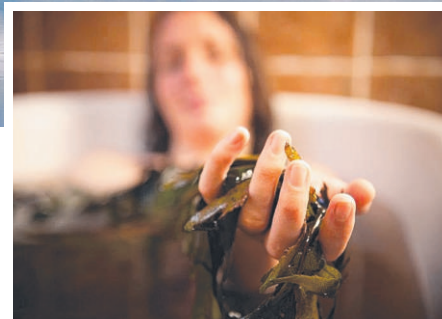
Bathhouses flourished in the Edwardian era, with more than 300 devoted to seaweed scattered around Ireland. The turquoise and white building of Voya Seaweed Baths sits between Sligo's two striking landmarks — the glaciated tabletop mount of Benbulbin and Knocknarea Mountain, where Warrior Queen Maeve's passage tomb sits atop. After donning my swimsuit and opening up my skin's pores in the steamroom, it's time for immersion. I'm a devotee of flotation tanks, where my analytical mind shuts down and my senses take over. Here, by candlelight, I slip into the roll-top bath of steamy Atlantic Ocean seawater that looks like vegetable broth, only with fronds of locally harvested serrated wrack. It feels strange to slide beneath the foliage of this gelatinous seaweed but soon it's easy to give over to its gloopy warmth. I pull the oily strands between my fingers, then mound its luscious fleshiness over me and massage it into my hair. As I wind the seaweed around my limbs, my mind is also unwinding.

The sound of soft ocean waves is piped into the room. The water feels slimy, yet soft and velvety. There's something hypnotic and primal about it. I close my eyes and sniff the aro-



Sligo Bay, Ireland; soaking in a seaweed bath, below

ALAMY



The unlikely charms of a seaweed bath

MARIAN McGUINNESS

mas; I am enclosed in a spicy, brine-perfumed cocoon. There are many claims for the healing wonders of a seaweed bath. It softens the skin, improves circulation and purges toxins. In what sounds like a pharmaceutical list, this wonder vegetation is rich in vitamins, trace elements, amino acids and essential fatty acids. Because seaweed mops up a vast range of elements from saltwater, it's also rich in iodine-protein complexes. Ancient mariners called it the Sailor's Cure for its ability to

renew damaged skin. The absence of heavy industry on the west coast of Ireland means the Atlantic is unpolluted. This seaweed is pure. By using sustainable, hand-harvesting practices in special areas of conservation, the coastal environment is kept unadulterated.

There's a gentle knock at the door reminding me my 50 minutes is nearly up but I don't want to leave my bathtub broth. My transformation is almost complete. I just have to check that I still have legs and not a mer-

maid's tail. I opt out of a shower after my soak. I want to relish this sensation of glowing skin and nourished hair even though I probably smell like a rock pool at low tide.

Another upside is that local bathers can bag up their spent weed and take it home to enrich the veggie patch. Voya Seaweed Baths owner, Michael Walton, is testimony to this healthy horticultural practice. He's won the All Ireland Vegetable Championships.

I'm now too relaxed to drive. So, back in the biting coastal air, I take a walk and seek sustenance at Shells Cafe next door.

■ voyaseaweedbaths.com

■ sligotourism.ie

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