



Thrills, spills and chills!

WHAT different sports or outdoor activities did you try this year? As there are only 26 more sleeps to the turn of the year, I thought we should look back at the current year before we can look forward to the next one.

It would now be an opportune moment to cast a glance over the shoulder, as it were, at some slightly different sporting activities I got up to in 2018.

I managed not only to get to 12 new countries in a whirlwind two weeks of travel but had great fun in three separate adventures much closer to home over the course of the summer. They included three very different activities – a helicopter ride (thrills), paddle boarding (spills) and Coaststeering (chills). Which was most fun? Which was most terrifying?! Well, lets' find out....

I have always wanted, ever since I was a wee wane, to have a ride in a helicopter. As you know from the tragic news from Leicester a few weeks ago, when something goes wrong in a helicopter, there are very few plan 'Bs'. If you are in a plane and something untoward happens, you just hope your calm and collected "Captain Sully" is able to land your plane on the River Hudson – or Lough Foyle without



Back on terra firma. NCL49-12s

any drama, but my attitude to a helicopter trip was to look forward to the thrills and just go for it - what will be, will be. If you thought about everything that could go wrong, you wouldn't get out of bed, never mind put on your running shoes or your wetsuit and you certainly wouldn't strap yourself onto a bike and launch yourself onto our dangerous roads.

Thanks to my very

kind children, I was delighted to receive a Christmas present last December of a trip in a cutting edge helicopter, which funnily enough was with Cutting Edge Helicopters! They are based just a stone's throw to the west of the City of Derry Airport. After having to rearrange the scheduled date on a number of occasions due to prior commitments and atrocious weather, I was

eventually all set for July 20.

Sharon and I arrived at the CE HQ and went into their prefab building for a safety briefing to wait for the chopper to return. I was signed up for the North Coast tour and I've often looked up enviously from the beach at Castlerock at the helicopter overhead, transporting several lucky punters on the trip of a lifetime.

There were two other people on the tour. They were from Belfast and the husband was very anxious about the whole thing, he kept disappearing to the loo every five minutes. I just hope for his sake that the pilot didn't do a loop the loop! Eventually, our flying chariot appeared and we walked outside with our security passes to get through the automatic turn style onto the aerodrome. The pilot introduced himself and before you know it, we were sitting in a "bonofodo" helicopter wearing the cans (earphones) and sporting the shades and imagining the "Ride of the Valkyries" from "Apocalypse Now" as the background track for a running through our heads. I am not saying Micky from Belfast was still nervous but he was hanging onto the seat in front as if it was a lifeline and he was to proceed to grip that seat ferociously for the next 30 minutes! The pilot did all the necessary flight checks. He was in contact with ground control (no Major Tom alas, but still) who gave

him the ok to take off. We then rose, hovered and shot off much quicker than a plane down the runway where we banked steep left and up, up and away we went. It just makes a flight on a plane so dull. For a start we all had floor to ceiling visibility and secondly the weather was playing ball and I had fantastic views, north, south, east and west.

I was immediately aware of the noise. A helicopter is not as insulated as a plane. It was also throbbing so you were in the middle of this noisy, humming, vibrating, cylindrical machine which had practically unlimited manoeuvrability. It was an immense joy and a privilege to be riding the crest of an aerial wave. Helicopters were invented just a wee while after the Orville Brothers more famous aviation creation and only saw the light of day on September 14 1939 when the world's first helicopter took off from Straford, Connecticut. Mind you, nearly 500 years earlier, one Leonardo DaVinci has been credited with having made drawings of a machine for a vertical flight called "the air screw". The helicopter for me has been ingrained in my consciousness since April 30 1975 when a US forces chopper took off with one last load of evacuees from the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon before it was overrun by the North Vietnamese, to signal the end of the Vietnam war. Ever since then, I

wanted to experience that visceral thrill of being fully part of the flying experience as opposed to being cocooned in a long thin tube full of drink trolleys and overpriced snacks and no leg room. The pilot confidently steered us eastwards along the north coast. I had the usual dilemma - to film it or just marvel at it. I tried to do a bit of both. I have seen some fairly spectacular coastline in the world in dozens of countries, the most recently being Croatia and Bosnia a few weeks ago but our own coastline is just staggering. You had Lough Foyle shining in the sunlight, then the

green fields below which were like a patchwork quilt and then suddenly, there was Benevenagh. We were at a 1,000 feet looking down at it, how did that happen? The pilot asked us what speed we thought we were doing, 50 miles an hour I guessed, - instead, we were doing 125 knots i.e. 143 miles an hour, it certainly didn't feel that fast but there below us was Benone Beach, then Downhill, then Mussenden Temple, then the Castle, then my favourite village in the whole world, Castlerock all in a matter of minutes. When I eventually did so, I felt both my legs were quivering blobs of jelly as they tensed up to try to prevent me from capsizing. Eventually we were up and running, (sorry, paddling) and made our way down towards the mouth of the Roe. Patrick and I both fell in a couple of times and it was probably the best thing to happen as you realise that its an occupational hazard and not the end of the world. On the way back we had a new perspective of the cliffs of Benevenagh and the multi coloured rows of forest which lit up the late summer morning, what a privilege it was to witness this spectacle of nature in the company of my two precious globe trotting boys.

One month later, when both of my big sons were in the same country at the same time I booked a trip for all of us with the Long Life Surf school, not to go surfing but paddle boarding! Paddle boarding has really taken off over the last ten years. It was originally invented in Hawaii about 100 years ago, where, I am fairly sure, the water was a lot warmer than the River Roe! We assembled at Swanns Bridge and met up with the boss himself, Dan the Man, who introduced us to our instructors. There was another family there as well and I fervently hoped we wouldn't be shown up

by their eight year old! We were given a wet suit, a life jacket and a paddle and we waddled down to the rivers edge ready for adventure! I could just see Enid Blighton writing a book, "When Six Went Paddle Boarding". After a quick safety briefing, we were let loose on a big long board each. Firstly, we were on our knees using the paddle to push us gently up the river. We were miraculously able to turn without ending up in the drink. Patrick was the first to rise up and stand while Mark and I tried to summon up the courage. When I eventually did so, I felt both my legs were quivering blobs of jelly as they tensed up to try to prevent me from capsizing. Eventually we were up and running, (sorry, paddling) and made our way down towards the mouth of the Roe. Patrick and I both fell in a couple of times and it was probably the best thing to happen as you realise that its an occupational hazard and not the end of the world. On the way back we had a new perspective of the cliffs of Benevenagh and the multi coloured rows of forest which lit up the late summer morning, what a privilege it was to witness this spectacle of nature in the company of my two precious globe trotting boys.

After we had mastered (I used that word loosely) our individual boards the three of us were then encouraged to get onto an even bigger board. Patrick thankfully took control in the middle while Mark and I wobbled on the front and back of this 14 long foot leviathan.



The rambling Roe. NCL49-11s



All set to go paddle boarding. NCL49-10s