



HOME STRETCH
Race meeting at Navan last month

Under starter's orders

MINNIE MOONEY grew up in a county steeped in racing but had never been to a meeting. Here's what happened when she put that right.

I had no idea of the customs and costumes of racing, which has grown in popularity with young people in recent years. It's exciting and stylish, so no wonder celebrities from Coleen Rooney to Brad Pitt are turf fans. When the opportunity came to go racing at Navan Racing Festival, I was chomping at the bit. Dressed in my finery, I headed off for the Winter jump meeting the beautiful Boyne Valley. In need of sustenance, I started the day in the Bective Stud Tea Rooms, a converted cottage decorated with pictures of the celebrated Bective studs. Fortified by French toast breakfast, it was off to the racetrack in Proudstown although the races are about much more than just runners and riders. It is a sociable day with live music, a festival marquee, bars, food, and, of course, it's the perfect excuse to wear a hat. I was lucky enough to have a great view from the Arkle

Bar, which overlooks the whole racetrack and is usually reserved for members, jockeys, and owners. Using my scientific selection process of picking the prettiest horse, or the best name, alas the seven races failed to produce a winner but that was half the fun. Just to watch the horses running was a treat in itself; the sound of them thundering past, especially when standing close to the track. For a novice like me, the Navan Races were a great way to get a taste of the different kinds of horse racing - there were hurdle races, flat races, and a steeplechase, although the course is probably best known for National Hunt. Along with Kildare, Navan is the home of Irish racing and the pride and excitement of that fact is felt all throughout the crowd. There is an awed silence as the horses come up the home stretch, followed by a murmur that builds to a roar as the last hurdle is jumped. After the thrill of the races, I visited Bellinter House Hotel, which, complete with a roaring fire, spiral staircases and a giant Christmas tree, would not have looked out of place in Bridgerton. I stopped for dinner at The

Central Bar, Navan, for a T-Bone steak, and was treated to a tour. The Central is deceptive - compact and cosy on first impressions, but also reveals two outdoor areas, two restaurants, a sports bar and a secret watering hole. The next afternoon saw a trip to Slane Whiskey Distillery, where the bar is decorated with records of all the famous artists such as Guns N' Roses, David Bowie, Bob Dylan and Harry Styles who have played at Slane Castle. To be walked through the intricate process of whiskey-making was fascinating. But the real treat was the tasting of the end. My high society weekend was topped off with a trip to Conyngham Arms Hotel, which, with its green walls and white furniture, was like something out of a doll's house. Meath is, of course, celebrated for its history - not least Newgrange and The Battle of the Boyne. There's a magic to the Boyne Valley, I'm glad I discovered. **Boyne Hurdle Day is at Navan Racecourse on February 11.** For more information about Meath - home of Ireland's ancient east - see www.discoverboynevalley.ie/



HISTORIC
Bellinter House Hotel



DELICIOUS
Lunch at Conyngham Arms Hotel



SHORT ORDER
Slane Distillery

On the piste

LATE-BREAK SKIING
BY PAUL MCDAID
FOR all the mountain lovers, Crystal Ski has these late-break deals to Europe's sunniest peaks. All the breaks include return flights from Dublin, transfers and a 20kg baggage allowance. **BULGARIA** March 2, seven nights half-board at four-star Hotel Lion Bansko, Bansko, €559. **FRANCE** March 3, seven nights B&B at three-star Hotel Vauban Briançon, Serre Chevalier, €679. **ITALY** March 9, seven nights B&B

at the three-star Bepy Hotel, Pinzolo from €559pp or €1,619 (2 adults + 1 child). **AUSTRIA** March 16, seven nights B&B at the three-star Sonnenhof, Soll from €819pp or €3,259 (2 adults + 2 children). **ANDORRA** March 17, seven nights self-catering at three-star Poblado Apartments, Arinsal from €409pp (sharing). Visit www.crystalski.ie. **Crystal Ski won Ski Tour Operator of the Year at this week's Irish Travel Industry Awards.** Spokeswoman Charlotte Brenner said it was "an honour to receive this award".

Buy of the week

BY PAUL MCDAID
WITH some reluctance I admitted my much-loved sunglasses were finished. The Ray Bans which had served me so well for four years were finding new ways to make me look stupid trying to catch them after they slipped off my nose without reason or warning. So I've got new pair of classic Ray Bans from SmartBuyGlasses.co.uk. Here's to another four-year shady love story. Visit www.SmartBuyGlasses.co.uk.



TRAVEL

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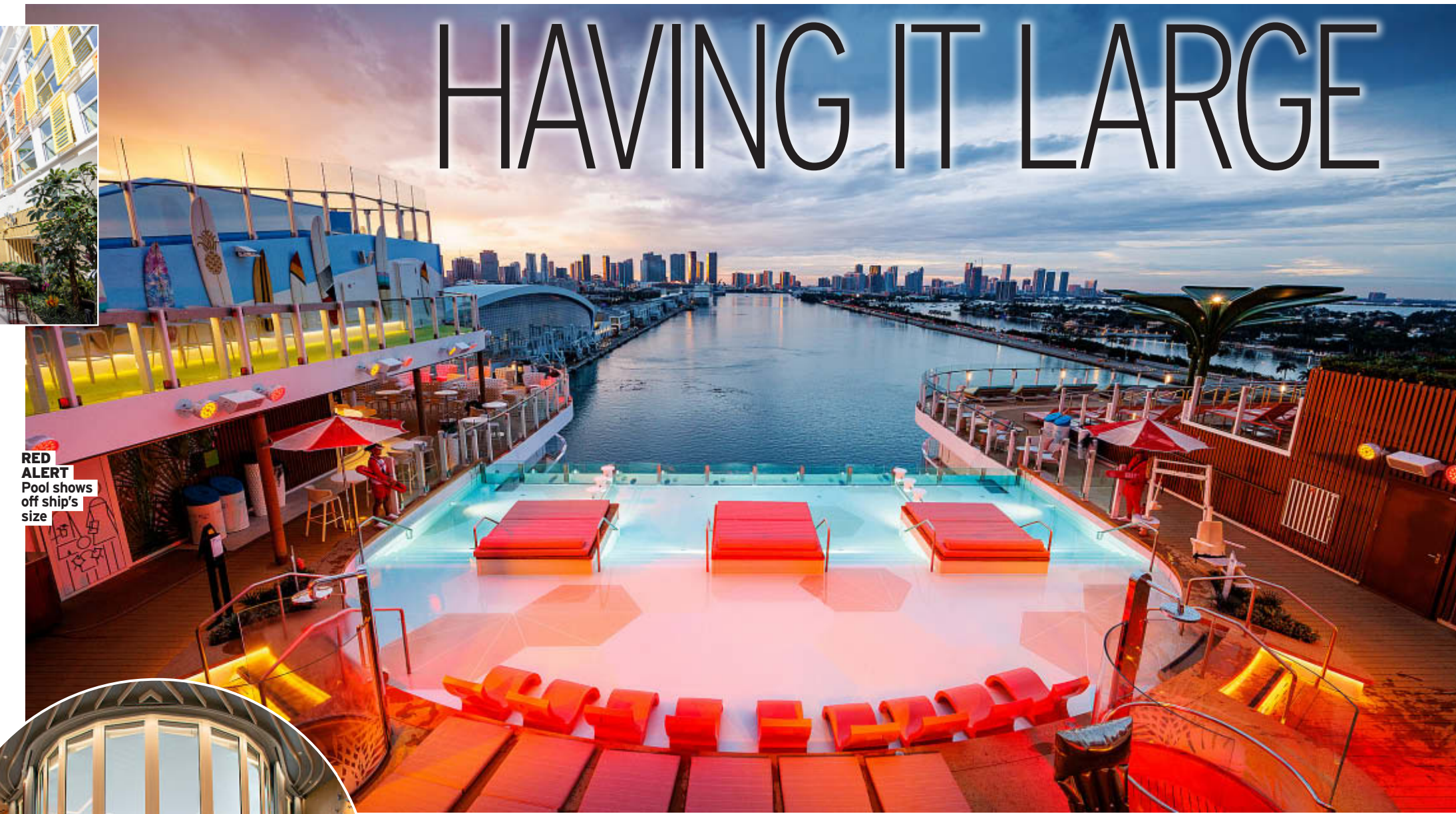


GREEN SPACE
Restaurants surround Central Park

7,600 passengers. Crammed into its 18 passenger decks are eight separate "neighbourhoods", plus more than 40 restaurants, bars and lounges, as well as seven pools. I'm used to big ships, having sailed on most of Royal Caribbean's Oasis-class vessels, which previously held the record. Even so, as I boarded in Miami I was still overwhelmed by Icon's size. I toured the biggest suite, the Ultimate Family Townhouse, which is three decks high, can sleep up to eight people, and is fitted with a slide, movie area, two private balconies and even a patio with table tennis. At a peak rate of €76,000 a week, it's already sold out for the rest of this year.

At the top of the ship is Thrill Island where I tried out the largest waterpark at sea, featuring drop, freefall and raft slides. There are also twin-mat racing chutes, like the helter-skelter of old. The next neighbourhood down is the three-deck Chill Island, home to four of the seven pools on board and a swim-up bar. Then there's The Hideaway with the first suspended infinity pool at sea. Families with young children have an expansive area called Surfside with its own pools and restaurants. Clubs cater for all ages from six-month-old babies to 17-year-old teens. Another new feature is the AquaDome, which hosts water shows and features a 55ft-high water curtain - basically a giant shower head. Cruisers who have been on Oasis-class ships will recognise Central Park, a verdant area of trees, plants and flowers surrounded by restaurants. Fifteen more dining venues sit in the Royal Promenade, a central shopping and eating mall. Here you'll find The Pearl, a huge structure with 3,600 moving metal tiles, whose main purpose seems to be as a fantastic backdrop for selfies.

A growing trend in cruising is to give high-spending customers their own area and on Icon they have a four-deck suite neighbourhood. Innovations that used to make headlines - such as a spa, ice rink, climbing walls, a surf machine or high-end shops - are now just part of the multi-coloured furniture on Icon. My three busy days on board didn't allow me to sample all the restaurants - which include a steakhouse, and sushi,



RED ALERT
Pool shows off ship's size



FINE DINING
Coastal Kitchen



LAI D BACK
Soak up the Caribbean sunshine



GAME ON
Casino Royale area



PREVIEW
Dave takes a breather

retreat flooded with light near the bow. It's good to know that on a ship which seems to always be busy, there are still oases of calm. Captains, officers and the attentive waiters, bartenders and cabin stewards are always welcome faces but they've been put in the shade by a new four-legged member of the crew - Rover, a golden labrador with the title of Chief Dog Officer, who lives on board and captures the hearts of the passengers she meets on her daily walks. I caught up with her stretching her sea legs when Icon stopped at Royal Caribbean's private island called Perfect Day at CocoCay. A planned helium balloon ride there was scuppered by some gusty winds and I didn't fancy climbing to the top of the 135ft-high Daredevil's Peak tower, the tallest waterslide in North America.

“After tens of thousands of steps, I still kept on discovering new areas

Instead, I chose to relax at the new Hideaway Beach, an adults-only area with a party vibe. After the ship returned overnight to Miami, I stayed on board to attend the glitzy naming by football legend Lionel Messi. Icon of the Seas made her maiden voyage on January 27, beginning seven-day Caribbean cruises including a stop at CocoCay in the Bahamas. The giant newcomer is wonderful if you want a holiday packed with sunshine, activities and a wide choice of food, drink and entertainment - especially if you have children. Of course, not everyone will love it and it's a very big, if moving, target for the cruise cynics and travel snobs. However, Royal Caribbean has gone some way to meet environmental concerns by using liquefied natural gas, the cleanest fossil fuel, in a transition towards more planet-

friendly sources such as biomethane. It has also spent a fortune on unglamorous but key technology such as wastewater treatment, air lubrication systems and desalination. For those who like a more intimate cruise, the line's president Michael Bayley confirmed it is considering launching a new class of smaller ships. In the meantime, he obviously believes Icon will be a hit as two more sister vessels are already being built. The only question is - will there be room in the Caribbean to fit them all in?

ICON IN NUMBERS

- 40+ restaurants, bars and lounges
- Eight "neighbourhoods"
- Seven pools
- Nine whirlpools
- Six waterslides
- 20 decks, including 18 passenger decks (but no deck 13)
- 2,805 staterooms
- 5,610 passengers, at two per room
- 7,600 maximum passenger capacity
- 2,350 crew from 80 countries
- 2,523 sq ft Ultimate Family Townhouse suite
- 250,800 gross tonnage
- 1,198ft long
- 30,550 plants in Central Park
- 50 musicians and comedians on board
- 93% of fresh water is produced on board
- 33,000 gallons in main pool



HAVING IT LARGE



Sails of the riverbank

SUNWAY has decades of experience in the maritime sector but it is increasingly involved in the river cruise holiday market. The Irish firm has partnered AMA Waterways River Cruises to offer luxurious and immersive breaks along some of the world's most iconic rivers. **DOURO DISCOVERY** Renowned for its picturesque landscapes and world-renowned wine region, this itinerary allows passengers to explore the heart of the Douro Valley, above, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Guests can savour the flavours of the region with wine tastings at renowned vineyards, visit historic wineries, and stroll through charming riverside villages. The cruise also includes curated shore excursions to explore Portugal's cultural heritage of medieval castles and baroque architecture. Departing August 28, with pre-night in a four-star Porto hotel, includes return flights, 20kg checked in bags, fixed window cabin, all meals, wine and beer with lunch & dinner, tea, coffee, shore excursions, guide, taxes and tips. From €3,453 pp sharing. **REFLECTIONS OF THE RHINE.** Showcases the beauty of the Rhine Valley, renowned for its fairytale castles, vineyard-covered hills, and historic medieval towns. The itinerary takes in jewels such as Amsterdam and Cologne, Rudesheim and Strasbourg. This trip allows guests to explore historic landmarks, sample local wines and experience the region's rich cultural tapestry. Includes return flights, 20kg checked in bags, 1 pre-night in hotel, seven nights on board, fixed window cabin, all meals, wine and beer with lunch & dinner, tea, coffee, shore excursions, guide, taxes, transfers and tips. Call (01) 811 2300 or go online at Sunway.ie

BIG DEAL
Canary Islands from €1,116. Save €753 on a seven-night self-catering getaway at Villa Laurita in Caleta de Fuste, Fuerteventura. Three bedrooms, sleeps up to six, private heated pool, close to the beach, arrival on February 17. Flights extra. solmarvillas.com