



BALLYFIN



Fiona Duncan

'UK-based travel writer and hotel reviewer'
describes her visit to Ballyfin

We had just rounded a bend in the long drive that snakes across the Ballyfin estate from imposing entrance gates on the road. The site that greeted us had made us stop the car in amazement, for both the house and its lake had suddenly come into view for the first time. In front of the giant portico, its four ionic columns breaking the austere neo-classical façade, stood a Downtonesque knot of staff, neatly uniformed. They looked like a little flock of blackbirds and they were waiting for us.

I don't know precisely how many hotels I have stayed in over the last 25 years as a hotel critic and compiler of hotel guides, but it must be well over 2,000. I've written about hotels as far apart as Zanzibar and Bali, New York and New Delhi, and I have criss-crossed Europe, uncovering special places on the top of mountains and lost in deep valleys; in Venice I stayed in 29 different hotels on 29 consecutive nights and in Paris I moved like a millionaire tramp from the Plaza-Athénée to the Meurice to the Bristol to the Georges V. Ballyfin, I can say without hesitation, remains in a league of its own.

If my friend Julia, whose job as a ward sister doesn't allow for much travelling or many exotic hotels, was bowled over by Ballyfin, then so was I – Mrs Been-There-Done-That – in equal measure. We may have been feeling underdressed and a bit tired after an early morning flight and a tedious queue at the Dublin airport car hire desk, but the moment we rounded that corner and the moment the beautifully attired flock of birds moved forward to greet us, to take our bags and escort us into the house, the feeling of being somewhere quite other and quite wonderful, and yet at the same time of being at home never left us.

The trouble with Ballyfin is that it's difficult to drag oneself away from one bit of it in order to sample another. It was certainly almost impossible to emerge from our bedrooms, once we had been ushered to them via the noble Stair Hall, hung with Coote family portraits that have been returned to the house – their house until 1924 – after nearly a century's absence. More than anything else, these pictures,





dating from the 17th century onwards, give one the feeling of being part of the life of a grand country home as it evolves through the years.

"See you in ten minutes" Julia and I said to each other as we disappeared into our adjacent rooms.

"I'll be down in an hour", Julia telephoned five minutes later. "My bedroom is heaven; I can't leave it yet".

And so it continued. We bickered happily about which of the exquisite, yet deeply comfortable, reception rooms in which to have morning coffee, afternoon tea and drinks before dinner: the Whispering Room, the Saloon, the Library, the Gold Drawing Room or the Conservatory, the latter a tropical delight encased by a fragile iron cage hidden behind a mirrored doorway. For heaven's sake, can this place really be a hotel? It doesn't feel like one.

On that first day, we remained only dimly aware of the delights of Ballyfin's 600-acre Demesne that surrounds the house. We gazed at the lake on one side, and the Arcadian Cascade on the other, but it was all we could do to tear ourselves away from Colin Orchard's

interiors and their superbly chosen antiques, chandeliers, paintings, piles of illustrated books on Ireland, fabulously frothy plasterwork and exquisite marquetry. In order to take a modicum of exercise, we dragged ourselves to the languorous pool, surrounded by huge gilt-framed mirrors, and to treatment rooms for massages using Irish seaweed based Voya products that leave you feeling soft and squeaky clean. The gym? No way. Instead we inspected the wine cellar with its unique collection of wines from every French house founded by an Irishman – Lynch-Bages, Léoville-Barton, Château Yquem and so on. It set us up nicely for dinner and the dishes of Fred Cordonnier, whose cooking matches the surrounding in every way.

And so to bed, and in my case, to the former boudoir of Lady Caroline Coote, now enlivened by vivid blue wallpaper that looks like silken drapes, with a tent-like four poster, billing turtle doves on the plasterwork ceiling, a panel en grisaille by William van der Hagen above the bath and a sense of enclosure in a private, privileged, intimate world that is hard to describe.

The next day we broke out, touring the Demesne with the lovely, loquacious Lionel in his pony and trap. As we trotted along (a gripping adventure when the pony decides to get going) he painted a vivid picture of growing up in County Laois and of his wife and “wee man” at home. Later, having learned where to find all the charming follies and features of the estate, we borrowed bicycles to explore them. It’s surprisingly hilly in parts, and while Julia glided up every incline without the merest sign of exertion, I surreptitiously dismounted and trudged behind her, hoping in vain that she wouldn’t glance back. She did, every time.





We felt like children again, discovering the mysterious Victorian fernery, Edwardian rock garden, Grotto and old aviary, wandering amongst the fruit and flowers in the walled gardens, finding William Wellesley-Pole's initials carved on a tree by the lake, with the date of May 1810, and visiting the slender church he built where the lights were on but the door was locked, which only compounded our sense of youthful adventure. Best of all, and straight out of a children's book, we climbed the stone tower on its hill, surveying all. Next time, we'll have tea at the top, but for now we simply stood and marveled at the views of the Slieve Bloom mountains and beyond. Falconry, clay pigeon shooting, tennis and boating on the lake will all have to wait for next time too. There really is no need to leave Ballyfin, not for days and days, once you are ensconced there.

Enskonced is the word. It was tough to leave, waved off from the steps by the same flock of birds that had greeted us. I remember many beautiful things, from the recently specially commissioned paintings of each room by James Steinmeyer and Nesta Fitzgerald (not forgetting the one of the Library painted in 1855 by the Cootes' son-in-law, the Marquis de Massigny de la Pierre) to the Rotunda's exquisite marquetry floor, painstakingly reassembled after the original pieces were found boxed up in the attic by the Patrician Brothers, who kept a school here until Fred Krehbiel acquired Ballyfin at the turn of the millennium. But most of all, I remember the twinkle-eyed warmth of the staff and the sheer enjoyment of being in such a beautiful, unstuffy, engaging place, one as unlike a hotel as I have ever come across.