



An aerial photograph of a lush, green landscape. In the foreground, a dark blue river flows through a dense forest. The middle ground is dominated by a large, vibrant green lawn that stretches towards a white manor house on the right. The background features rolling green hills under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is idyllic and scenic.

# Minding Others'

# *Manors*

by ANDREW MYERS

These lyrical Irish landmarks were designed for idyllic inspiration.

Every home might be its owner's castle. But three evocative properties in Ireland transport this idea to a realm of literal fantasy, one that can for a magical, finite time become reality—and not just for visitors with a king's treasury at their disposal.

Straffan House, Ballyfin and Lismore Castle are owned by men of means, accomplishment and connoisseurship, and each reflects that man's penchants and passions. Each is also decidedly different in style and history, as well as in its physical landscape and location within the Emerald Isle. Nevertheless, all are unique and uniquely beautiful, and each casts its own inimitable spell. All are also rentable in their entirety, allowing



visitors to become, if only for a little while, possessors of these eye-poppingly impressive piles.

While it's not inexpensive to rent a stately home (considering all three houses come with full staffs, including chefs and servers, and with much of the fare and other prerequisites), it can be surprisingly economical on a per-guest basis, especially for a major watershed event, such as a reunion or wedding. Regardless, individual rooms can also be booked at Ballyfin, and at the Kildare Hotel, Spa & Country Club (its grounds surround Straffan House, and they share proprietors as well). >

Ballyfin.

# Ballyfin

When in 1822 Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison, the most sought-after architects in Ireland, delivered their plans for a new house, Ballyfin was already a renowned demesne (the word for the land attached to a manor reserved for its owner's personal use). The 614 acres comprised one of the first romantically idealized "natural" landscapes in Ireland, and included a man-made lake fed by the nearby Slieve Bloom mountains, follies such as an atmospheric grotto (the "last word" in 18th-century parkland chic), as well as gardens, idyllic views and Arcadian copses, all enclosed by a serpentine stone wall encircling the entire estate.

There was also an existing manor, one built by the previous proprietors, the Wellesley-Poles (the family of the Duke of Wellington). But this was judged not fine enough for Ballyfin's new owner, Sir Charles Henry Coote, Ireland's premier baronet and one of its richest men. For him and his wife, Lady Caroline, the Coote family motto—*Coûte que Coûte*, or "Cost What It May"—would be exercised in full.

The result was a 35,000-square-foot Regency house, the finest of its kind in the country. Four Ionic columns supporting a pedimented portico punctuated a neo-classical facade, its elegant restraint belying the sumptuousness of the interior decoration. Parquet floors of unparalleled quality and variety of woods referenced Spain's Alhambra; stuccowork with flowers, fauna and fantastical forms seemed to burst from ceilings in animated three-dimensionality; and ancient Roman antiquities acquired on Sir Charles Henry's Grand Tour were placed alongside fine English, Irish and French furniture.

The Coote family lived at Ballyfin for just over a century before selling the property in 1927 to the Patrician Brothers, a Catholic teaching order. Vigilant stewards, the brothers, however, lacked the means to maintain the estate, and by 2001 portions of the house faced utter collapse. Fortunately, Fred Krehbiel, then the co-chair of the Illinois-based electronic components manufacturer Molex, arrived in time. He and his Irish-born wife, Kay, share a passion for Irish culture, art and architecture, and Krehbiel had for





many years dreamed of owning a small hotel that reflected his personal taste, the grand tradition of Irish hospitality and the singular atmosphere and ambiance of a great Irish country house.

Executing his dream took 10 years and involved an all-star cast of artisans, architects, advisers and contractors. It also required Krehbiel's willingness to embrace the Coote's "cost what it may" motto in order to bring Ballyfin back to its former glory, and then into the 21st century in terms of structural engineering and a floor plan that includes en suite bathrooms for all the 15 bedrooms.

Coote family portraits, sourced and purchased by Krehbiel and his team, once again hang from the walls lined in damask and look down on Chippendale furniture, Irish delft and a staff that seems to anticipate just when a cappuccino might be wanted by a guest reading in the 80-foot-long

library, or when a couple might appreciate a pre-prandial coupe of Champagne in the 19th-century glass conservatory. Likewise, the follies, park and acres of gardens have been restored and enhanced. Revived as well is the intangible but unmistakable air of hospitality, generosity and grace.

Ballyfin can accommodate a total of 29 guests in the 13 bedrooms and two suites in the main house, and an additional five in one of the two gate lodges. The entire demesne can be rented from €16,950 (\$23,216) per night, which includes full board; pre-dinner drinks; snacks, coffees and teas on command; full use of the fitness center and swimming pool; guided tours of the house and grounds; and a catalogue of other activities.

Room rates for single and double rooms start at €475 (\$652) and €800 (\$1,098). [ballyfin.com](http://ballyfin.com) ▷