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THE MANOR REBORN

A NINE-YEAR RENOVATION COMBINING 19TH CENTURY SPLENDOR WITH GRACIOUS HOSPITALITY USHERS IN A NEW ERA OF LUXURY FOR A SPRAWLING IRISH ESTATE.

By Patti Dickey

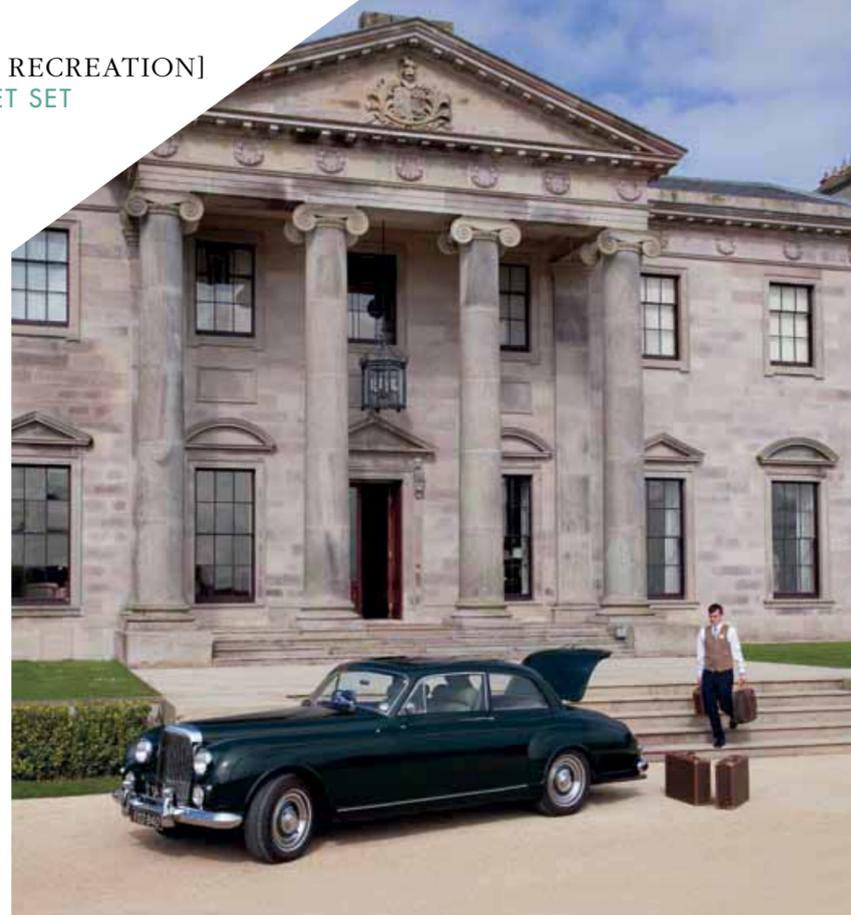
As a longtime fan of *Downton Abbey* and anything *Masterpiece Theatre*, I eagerly anticipate visiting Ballyfin, a destination resort in County Laois, Ireland. Located about 60 miles southwest of Dublin, this Emerald Isle gem is well worth the journey.

With roots dating back to the 1700s, Ballyfin occupies 600 acres at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. Procuring the property in 1812, Sir Charles Henry Coote built its current manor, designed by Richard Morrison and his son, William Vitruvius Morrison, in the 1820s. As the glittering jewel of the era, the Coote clan enjoyed Ballyfin for around 100 years before selling it in 1929 to the Patrician Brothers, who, while doing their best to preserve the property, ran it as a boarding school.

Luckily for Ballyfin, it eventually came into the possession of Chicagoan Fred Krehbiel, an electronics magnate with an Irish wife named Kay and a yen for developing a property into a world-class boutique hotel. The urge would lead Krehbiel to purchase the property in 2002, commencing what would be its nine-year renovation—an overhaul involving more than 100 workers and artisans that, during the first five years, revolved around the 500 students still occupying the school. (The children ultimately were transitioned to a community school in Mountrath, and all traces of the former institution vanished.)

Led by the hotel's managing director, Jim Reynolds, Krehbiel painstakingly restored the more than 35,000-square-foot manor house to its former 19th century grandeur, while incorporating all of the modern conveniences expected by savvy travelers. The result—a delightful blend of old and new—rightfully earned Ballyfin a spot in the exclusive Relais & Châteaux listing of the world's finest hotels. (One does, in fact, fully expect to turn a corner and encounter Sir Charles or Lady Caroline Coote—an impression intentionally cultivated.)

Pulling up to the massive front gate imparts an immediate sense of something special just beyond. Motoring down the driveway, winding through lush fields and immense woods, I'm offered a captivating peek of the 28-acre natural lake situated in front of the house; turn a corner and Ballyfin unfolds in all her glory. (Later I discover that a tweak to the original driveway has maximized the first glimpse of the Georgian manor.) Gliding to a stop before the impressively pillared front entrance reveals staff standing at the top of the steps waiting to greet me. My first impression is warmth and welcome. In a relaxed, friendly



IRISH SPLENDOR
Clockwise from top: The stately entrance of the renovated five-star Ballyfin welcomes with grand pillars and attentive service; the entrance hall features scagliola columns and ornate details throughout; the 600-acre Ballyfin property is grandly situated beside a 28-acre natural lake; the stair hall displays Coote family portraits.

manner, I'm ushered into the stately entrance hall, featuring an intricately patterned mosaic floor brought here from Italy in 1822, during one of the Coote family's European tours. Here, should weather dictate, there are wellies, warm jackets and umbrellas for guests in need.

Originally Sir Charles' private study, my room is the sole occupier of the first floor, with the other nine rooms and five suites on the second level, accessible by one of two cantilevered Portland Stone staircases. Situated in the front of the manor, behind a hidden door in the stair hall, my handsome quarters feature a marvelous canopied bed outfitted with white damask and 100 percent Egyptian cotton Italian sheets, all facing a fireplace flanked by a comfortable armchair and topped by a flat-screen HDTV. (I confess to a tiny shiver when told that the floor of the closet blocks off a stairway leading to the lower levels, but the comfortable bed that lulls me into sweet dreams keeps my visions of ghosts at bay!) The adjoining bathroom—Sir Charles' Strong Room—is a fireproof brick vault entered through a sturdy iron door. Lady Caroline's Roman sarcophagus bathtub, an attic discovery, was hoisted through the formerly barred window and installed here, while the separate shower featuring numerous shower heads impresses with its pressure. Also present are thick, fluffy towels warmed via a heated towel rack that make for a cozy cocoon, along with 100 percent natural bath and body products produced locally

GARDEN VIOLET ARTICHOKE PHOTO © ANDREA JONES/GARDEN EXPOSURES PHOTO LIBRARY

RICH DELIGHTS

From top: The all-inclusive Ballyfin serves a full Irish breakfast, alfresco; an ornate French bed is positioned in the center of the Westmeath Room, which also features a portrait of Marianne Jeffreys of Blarney Castle.



ELEGANT TASTES From top: The 14-meter indoor heated pool overlooks the courtyard garden and provides respite; Ballyfin garden violet artichoke with Ernesti Soulard foie gras, black summer truffle and garden gooseberries.

in Cork. And set to debut next spring on the site of the old ballroom are five new guest rooms.

Truthfully, I'm loath to leave my clandestine retreat, but the lure of exploration spurs me forward. Slipping through my secret door, I stroll through the stair hall, its walls featuring portraits of various Cootes, into the saloon. Accentuated with four massive dark-green scagliola columns, the warmly elegant room is bathed in a yellow glow and boasts an exquisitely detailed coffered ceiling. Adjacent to this is the rotunda, the home's central hub, where the Coote children would set up their model trains on the intricate inlaid floor. With a remarkable coffered top-lit dome supported by eight scagliola columns and capped with a stunning stained-glass crown, this circular space possesses such acoustic superiority that it became the Cootes' music room.

Accessible through the rotunda, the 80-foot-long library is enhanced by recessed mahogany-fronted bookcases. This sanctuary features matching fireplaces at each end of the room and floor-to-ceiling windows that flood the space with warm light. (Arguably my favorite time at Ballyfin is when gathering in the library for cocktails before dinner—one of the few times we encounter fellow guests.)

The conservatory—whimsically entered through a hidden door disguised as a bookcase in the library—is an incredible space. Having fallen into disrepair during the Patrician Brothers' occupancy of Ballyfin, this exquisite glass-and-iron masterpiece was dismantled and shipped to England for refurbishment. Located at the rear of the property, the conservatory overlooks the pleasure grounds (expansive lawns enveloping the rear and side of the manor) and the Cascade, a waterfall tumbling down the hill from a Claudian temple perched atop. Reynolds' inspiration, the Cascade looks like it's always been part of Ballyfin, and those fortunate enough to secure a room overlooking it are lulled to

CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED sleep by the rhythmic sound of water spilling down rough-hewn steps.

Ballyfin is perfectly positioned to amuse and to occupy one's time. There are miles of both hard-surfaced and mown-grass paths to explore via golf cart, on foot or horseback. There's even an antique trap carriage driven by Lionel Chadwick and pulled by Billy, a wonderfully mild-mannered horse who gamely poses for photos. Add to this fun raiding the costume room (costumes purchased from Chicago's Lyric Opera company), tooling around the manor looking like a 19th century lady of leisure, and enjoying high tea on the back terrace overlooking the Cascade.

Boating and fishing on the lake are among favorite pastimes as well, and there is an ongoing contest to see who will snag the largest fish—rumor has it there is a 40-pounder lurking in the depths. Near the lake is a refurbished 18th century grotto, one of several follies on the estate. A midmorning coffee and cookie break in its candlelit surrounds marks an enchanting diversion in my trek around the grounds. Refreshed, I make my way up the hill through the fields, behind the manor house, to the mid-19th century mock-medieval tower, crossing a moat to enter the structure. The reward for climbing to the top is a stunning 360-degree view of the property and surrounding environs. (Ballyfin also boasts two working walled gardens, a fernery, a restored rock garden and a wonderful small church with requisite churchyard.)

Given a choice, I decide to try my hand at clay pigeon shooting—Annie Oakley I'm not! Afterward, I lunch in the picnic lodge, and it's one of the most elegant picnics I've ever had the privilege of enjoying, with fine wines and locally sourced food presented on white linens with fine china and crystal goblets. (So this is how the other half dines alfresco!)

For those who prefer golf, there is a championship course within driving distance, while luxuriating types will love the spa, which features a stunning indoor swimming pool, and all the amenities expected of a five-star property. Indulgences of a different sort are also located on the lower level—the pub is a cozy space for a pint and local entertainment, and the wine cellar conducts both vino and scotch tastings.

Dinner at Ballyfin is a ritual unto itself, with drinks served in the library warmed by fireplaces that fill the space with a wonderful woody aroma that mingles well with the scent of old books. Dinner is served in the elegantly appointed dining room—formerly the refectory when owned by the Patrician Brothers. Spot-on wine pairings accompany exquisitely prepared, locally sourced dishes, and the cheese course, impressive both in presentation and scope, is not to be missed.

Aileesh Carew, general manager of Ballyfin, tells me that the intent of the property's renovation is to make their guests feel like they are honored guests of the Coote family. While I rather doubt the Cootes would have use for the property's newly installed helicopter pad, I have no doubt that if they did walk through the front door now, they would, quite rightly, feel at home.

Open only to overnight visitors, this sprawling manor and vast grounds ensure privacy and impart a sense of peace to anyone who calls it home. Ballyfin is a wonderful way to experience the gracious hospitality that exemplifies 19th century country living, while unplugging from the fast pace of today. *Rates vary by season, all-inclusive from \$800 per night through September (high season), Sir Christopher Coote Suite, all-inclusive from \$2,200 per night, ballyfin.com* 🏠



IN THE DETAILS

From top: Ballyfin's dining room is richly decorated and overlooks the pleasure grounds; water rushes soothingly down stone steps of the Cascade; the rich, red walls of the Ballyfin bar are accented by pieces of contemporary Irish art.

