

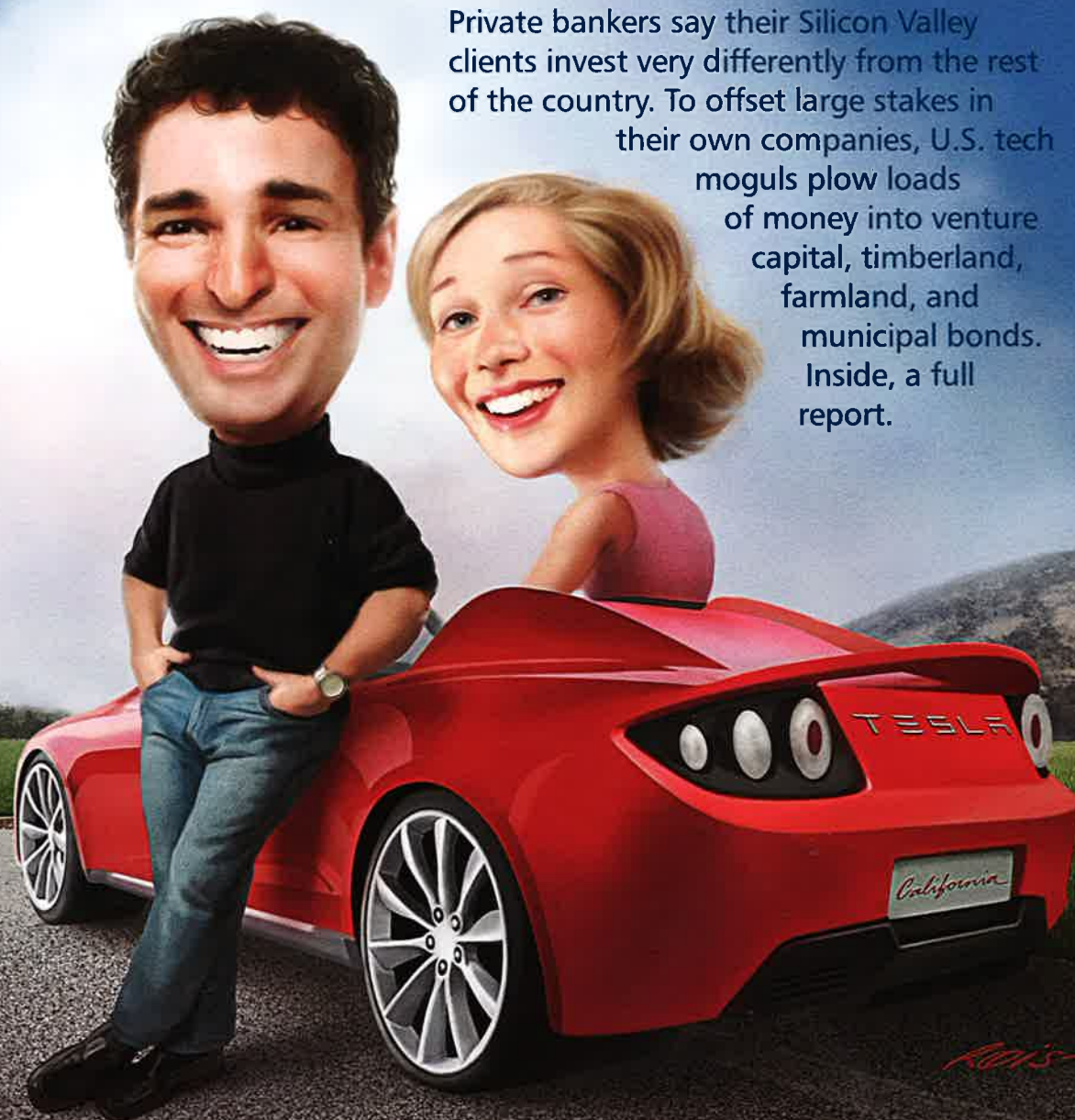
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September 29, 2014

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Irish Hospitality

Top-flight hotels on the Emerald Isle offer unusually good buys

By Richard C. Morais

SOME OF THE BEST HOTEL VALUES in the world can currently be found in Ireland. I came to this conclusion while soaking in a massive tub, a glass of ruby-red wine at my elbow, and an alarmingly lascivious Pan staring down at me from a mural on the wall. Outside the airy bathroom's Georgian window, an early evening mist was rolling into the court of the five-star Ballyfin Demesne, a 15-bedroom hotel that opened three years ago in County Laois, and is now on my personal short-list of top hotels in the world.

It's a deliciously quiet reserve, an hour-and-half drive from Dublin's airport, for those who crave architectural beauty and fine food. After booking my single room for 580 euros (\$777), meals included, I drove in late March through the hotel's sliding metal gates, and into the 600-acre estate, passing grassy hillocks, a family chapel, and a lake. The neoclassical great house with columns, built in the 1820s by the aristocratic Coote family, appeared suddenly alongside the lake like a miniature Brideshead in gray stone.

The hotel manager, slightly out of breath from having just run from somewhere, stood waiting at the stone-and-gravel entrance with her head of housekeeping, the head porter, and his second, all smartly lined up in a row to welcome me to Ballyfin. This bit of theater transparently mimicked how the *Downton Abbey* staff greets the fictional Lord Grantham, and I was deeply embarrassed by the



The cozy living room in the 15-room, five-star Ballyfin in County Laois. A pre-prandial Champagne was served in the library, while the wine list served up a history lesson on Irish vintners in 18th century France.

ritual, but also slightly pleased.

The Protestant Coote family, Elizabethan adventurers who came to Ireland in 1601 and were granted land for their soldiering efforts, sold Ballyfin in 1929 for 10,000 Irish pounds to the Patrician Brothers, a Catholic teaching order that ran the house into the ground as a boarding school. But in 2002, the Chicago billionaire Fred Krehbiel bought the dilapidated estate with his wife and spent nine years painstakingly restoring Ballyfin to its full Regency splendor, reportedly at a cost of \$20 million.

The smell of a peat fire filled the foyer, which featured a mosaic floor that had been imported from Italy in 1822. After checking in at an antique partner's desk, I was escorted to the staircase hall, where Tiffany-blue walls were covered in 18th and 19th century portraits of Coote ancestors bedecked in velvet and lace.

My first-floor Tapestry Room was a small suite with fireplace and sumptuous bathroom; it was formerly Charles Coote's dressing room, sandwiched between his and his wife's bedchamber, perhaps explaining the glint in Pan's eye. The walls surrounding the four-poster bed were completely covered in very fine gray-and-blue tapestries.

The head of housekeeping whisked away my soiled laundry; it returned in a few hours cleaned, ironed, tissue-wrapped, and smelling of heather sprigs. That afternoon, I jogged around the pike-filled lake, past a faux 19th century grotto, hives of bees making breakfast honey, and a mausoleum for a Coote, alone in a field. A workout in the gym

near the indoor pool was followed by a massage; the masseuse was too chatty and aggressive.

But the massage finale was peppermint tea served in a silver urn up in my room, alongside a cube of carrot cake. I completed my restorative regime with a hot bath: “Greensleeves” and “Peter & the Wolf” were piped in via overhead speakers, while sea salts and peppermint fizzed in the bathwater. Through the window, I watched the day’s gloaming roll in, decadently observed from my perch in the tub.

Champagne was served in the library. Dark green scagliola columns divided the room, and I took my Champagne flute over to a red armchair, where I leafed through a gorgeous coffee-table book about the Irish countryside, amused by the bookplate legend: “Consider it the vilest sin, to steal a book from Ballyfin.”

Summoned to my table in the dining room, I stared out a tall Palladian window at water cascading and gurgling down stone tumbles from a Claudian temple up on the grassy hill. Around me in the dining room: fireplaces, Chinese vases, a Gainsborough-style canvas of a mother and daughters.

The other guests were mostly well-heeled Dubliners lured by chef Ryan Murphy, a New Yorker who had once been sous-chef at Jean-Georges. Last year, hotel critic Andrew Harper made the Ballyfin dining room his “hotel restaurant of the year.”

The starter was an accident involving beetroot and carrots, oversized and dribbled with sauces. But the poached turbot—served with caramelized carrots, leeks, and grilled fennel—was delicious. Afterward, I swooned over a local blue



Ballymaloe in County Cork, above, and a sampling of its local culinary delights, left. The inn attracts the likes of Alice Waters, the doyenne of the farm-to-table movement in the U.S.

redolent of a Gorgonzola *dolce*, and a sheep’s cheese with a robust caramel-like flavor suggestive of the brown Norwegian goat’s cheese, *gjetost*.

Another example of Ballyfin’s clever attention to detail was found on the wine list. Many Irish Catholics, known as “wild geese,” went into exile, rather than stay in British-dominated Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries. Some settled in Bordeaux, France, and became vintners.

When Thomas Jefferson was in Bordeaux in 1787, writing to advise George Washington on his cellar, he noted that the top local producers were called “Gernon, Barton, Johnston, Foster, Skinner, Copinger, and McCarthy.” The Ballyfin wine list is an homage to these wild-geese winemakers and that night I became *very* familiar with the product of Anthony Barton.

In between dinner and coffee, I left the table, and soon wanted to move into the men’s loo. The relief room has a fireplace, rugs, Hogarthian

works by Thomas Rowlandson, and fantastic urinals with green-glass splash guards to protect feet.

Next day—after a brisk walk, shooting, and a breakfast of hot Irish oats and homemade honey—I paid my €894 (\$1,197) bill. Compare that with, say, the Four Seasons in Scottsdale, Ariz., where the lowest-level room with spa package, during the same travel dates in 2015, costs \$794.80 a night—without any gourmet meals, wine or extras like afternoon teas, laundry, and shooting thrown in. Ballyfin’s beautiful experience is excellent value for the money. A pity that Kanye West and Kim

Kardashian spent their late May honeymoon at Ballyfin, drawing attention to the hotel.

Also a bargain is Ballymaloe House, an ivy-clad country hotel on the southern coast, near the picturesque port village of Ballycotton. The Laura Ashley-like décor at Ballymaloe is pleasant and yet nothing to write home about. But Ballymaloe also sits in a 100-acre organic farm, and it’s the inn’s dining room and cooking school that attracts the cognoscenti from around the world. The doyenne of the American farm-to-table movement, Alice Waters of Chez Parnisse, regularly comes to Ballymaloe to celebrate her birthday. Three generations of the Allen family, including the acclaimed chef Darina Allen who made the hotel’s kitchen famous, run Ballymaloe.

My large room was off the courtyard, and I had a light lunch of hake with leeks, as briny as the sea. I was attending a friend’s birthday, and we dined one night at a buffet of fresh sea urchins from the bay beyond, tiny prawns filled with orange eggs, raw clams and oysters, a delicate lobster pie, a leg of lamb roasted with a dusting of Five Spices, shredded savoy cabbage, and a crackling-covered side of roast pork. There was even a creamy pudding made from seaweed. This is an inn for people who really know and love food. My room cost €115 a night; the hake lunch cost €19; the buffet, €70 per head. It was yet another example of the Irish value buy. ■

Photos: courtesy of Ballymaloe House