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NOVEMBER



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Ballyfin, Ireland

In setting, decor, and sensibility, Ballyfin is as much country manor as small hotel—and that's exactly how its owner, Chicago-based Irish-art collector Fred Krehbiel, envisioned it. After picking up the 35,000-square-foot County Laois mansion and its 600-acre estate in 2002 for a fire-sale \$6 million, Krehbiel called upon landscape designer Jim Reynolds (the Merrion in Dublin) to oversee Ballyfin's restoration to its Regency glory days: Long one of the most revered homes in Ireland, it had spent much of the 20th century as a Catholic boarding school, with a leak-

ing roof that caused extensive damage to its library and bedrooms.

Eight years of painstaking labor later, the manor has recaptured its grandeur. Guests are greeted in the relatively restrained entrance hall and make themselves at home in the saloon, which, for

all its soaring coved ceilings, Chippendale mirrors, and Corinthian columns adorned with minutely detailed plaster relief work, communicates warmth and comfort.

In the next room, the cantilevered staircase is lined with family portraits of Ballyfin's longtime owners, the Coote family. The 15 bedrooms are all of generous size (approximately 500 square feet) with enormous bathrooms and

king-size canopy beds. My favorite happened to be the one in which I stayed, called Lady Caroline Coote, with lovely east-facing views of the lake that comprises the estate's front yard, expansive windows, and a sumptuous bright-blue, trompe l'oeil wallpaper that mimics the visual feel of silk drapes.

Long on charm, a weekend at Ballyfin is not an active holiday (though the property does offer an indoor pool and gym), but somehow that didn't matter to this highly active visitor. The place commands its guests to relax. One morning I had a massage, soaked in my huge tub, and promptly fell asleep again. All impulses to exertion were stymied; the most I could manage was a pleasant bike ride around the grounds later that afternoon, and a stroll through the gardens and grotto the following day.

Results of such sloth are compounded by the extraordinary meals prepared by chef Fred Cordonnier—including the most succulent roast duck I have eaten anywhere. I



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could have set up a round of off-site golf or shooting, or fished for bream and trout in the lake, but I and many fellow guests contented ourselves mainly by curling up in a leisurely succession of rooms, marveling at the outlandish decorative touches: the library's four non-load-bearing scagliola columns and its Greek-inspired ceiling frieze featuring griffons and urns; the gilded plasterwork of the more feminine, Empire-inspired Gold Room. Although it evokes past glory, this reanimated Ballyfin also prompts a delighted wonder at the present. —L.C.

➔ \$1,075. 353-5787-55866, ballyfin.com

Left: The Lady Caroline Coote Room, one of the finest examples of Empire design in Ireland. Right: A secret door in the library leads to the conservatory (shown.)