



Relaxing with a spot of fishing at Ballyfin Demesne.

Restored to glory

Denise Barkley discovers Irish hospitality at its best amid some stunning scenery

The exclusive quartet of luxurious Relais & Chateaux hotels in southern Ireland are ideally located for a driving tour that uncovers the sheer beauty and diversity of the country.

Starting out at Dublin airport, your journey will take you to the country house splendour of Ballyfin in the Slieve Bloom Mountains, then to the coastal delights of Sheen Falls Lodge at Kenmare and Cliff House Hotel at Ardmore, concluding in the genteel surroundings of Marlfield House at Gorey. From there it is a comfortable 50-mile drive back to Dublin airport.

The ever-changing scenery is a delight, and the driving is never a chore – taking you to four corners of Ireland where you will stay in inimitable Relais & Chateaux style while spending your days exploring and partaking of that famous Irish hospitality.

Appropriately, the Emerald Isle is indeed lush and very green. Obviously it is well watered – it was certainly pretty damp when we spent a week's touring holiday there last September.

However, it in no way dampened our enthusiasm for a laidback land where life seems that little bit less frantic than the UK and the people are friendly and welcoming, even when times are hard.

The currency is the beleaguered Euro, and tourism has never been more essential and central to the economy. Ireland's most coveted resource is the countryside itself. I had never visited before and was blown away by the beauty of everything I saw.

At the four Relais & Chateaux hotels we stayed at during our six-day holiday we found something to suit everyone looking for extraordinary levels of comfort, care and catering – the three 'Cs' in fact!

So we flew with Aer Lingus into Dublin airport, problem-free, and collected our hire car. Our first stop was Ballyfin, or Ballyfin Demesne to give its correct name (Demesne is a piece of land attached to a manor), which was a not-too-taxing 90-minute drive into central Ireland, to Portlaoise.

We knew that Ballyfin was grand, but not quite how grand. We had to buzz the intercom to gain access through the unassuming gates, but once inside the sprawling 600 acres of grounds, the great house we approached was nothing like unassuming.

It was impressive, and so it should be because Ballyfin is lauded as the finest Regency house in Ireland. It has been painstakingly restored to its full glory, a labour of love in the spirit of the original owners, the



Stately style at Ballyfin Demesne. Right, our four-poster



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