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Is there any more exciting hotel opening this year? Is there any hotel that is more *Princess and the Pea*, more *Downton Abbey*, more long-walks-round-the-walled-garden-admiring-the-artichokes than Ballyfin? And how particularly satisfying that it's so close! Forget deconstructed in Delhi and groundbreakingly edgy in Puerto Rico – we barely have to move! Bliss! How on-trend could this be? The smartest people you know have booked their holidays in Dorset, everyone's gone nuts for *The King's Speech* and children who've had tea with the Maharaja of Jodhpur and waded down the Mekong on an elephant's back burst into tears at the thought of another aeroplane. Exotic? Pah. We'd all rather knit something meaningful and eat fruitcake, awash in the cocooned comfort of Colefax and Fowler.

Ballyfin is bang on target. It's downstairs-gone-upstairs, a Regency rock 'n' roller. Of course it's smart – there's a Roman mosaic floor in the hall, there's old Lady Coot's marble bath in the basement, there is serious art, lots of it. And it's stuffed full of four-posters, one of which is so Marie Antoinette-marvellous I'd like to turn it into a ring and wear it on my finger at all times. It hasn't tried to be trendy (although you can go foraging – and nothing is more 2011 than foraging). But it's also wonderfully relaxing in that very particular way, the way that makes you feel that you really rather belong here – that if only you'd made a series of quite different decisions this would be your life. It's quiet too; it's as quiet as a closed book. You forget how lovely that is. I sat in the library with fires that burned at both ends and at one point, through the three curved windows in front of me, I saw a rainstorm in one, a sunny day in another and a rainbow between the two. Very Irish, that.

There's also a wall around the whole property, all 600 acres of it. That's very Irish too. You can't move in Ireland for walls. Inside this particular wall there are other walls; there's the terrifically Rapunzel-esque tower with views of an empty purple wilderness as far as the eye can see and an 18th-century grotto for a hermit. You won't get that at a Marriott.

The point is this: Ballyfin is a hotel that doesn't look or behave like one. And, frankly, nothing befits a hotel more. Throw in the fact that it's so obviously an investment without thought of return and everyone can dance a jig. The light just pours into this house, despite that elephantine grey Irish stone, which reminds you of potatoes and endless feuds. The light pours in despite the rain, that famous Irish drizzle that comes at you sideways as if it's got something to say. When the sun shines here, the light dashes itself onto every yolk-yellow wall, butter-silk cushion and golden painted dress, setting the whole ablaze.

Although the house is not actually that big and there are only 15 bedrooms, there are discoveries at every turn. Here is a chandelier from Napoleon's sister's palace, its great crystal spheres hanging so low in the sitting room it's like a glorious affront. Here is a Whispering Room with curved ceilings. Here is a magical sunken walk through the pleasure gardens with caves and towering trees, the exposed roots of which look like seamstresses' fingers working around a rocky thimble.

So who is the person behind the passion? An American electronics magnate called Fred Krehbiel, who loves all things Irish. He loves his Irish wife Kay, he loves Irish art and he loves Irish history. As the story goes, Fred has 18,000 employees worldwide but always had a plan to open a hotel. And now he has. In 2001, he found a school run by monks here, in the county of Laois – known locally as the Queen's Country because there's such a profusion of big houses. He's employed the ex-GM of the Residencia in Mallorca, an Irishwoman, to run it, and he's employed a chef – also called Fred, who has worked with Raymond Blanc – to whip up Michelin feasts, as well as suckling pigs on spits and fish on fires.

Do I think it's good news there will be golf carts to carry people around if they want? Not really. But do you forgive Ballyfin, with its beds as warm as crumpets, its fabulous floorboards creaking like old violins? Of course you do. Mr Krehbiel is a non-hotelier who doesn't give a fig for normal hotel rules. He's built a hotel in the same way he would build his own house – uncompromisingly. I can think of nowhere I'd rather skin a squirrel. □
Double, from £950, including breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. Ring 00 353 5787 55866 or visit ballyfin.com.





Above left, the water cascade, descending from the neoclassical temple. Centre, the children of Sir Charles and Lady Caroline Cootte, Ballyfin's former owners, by George Hayter (1792-1871). Above right, the Lady Caroline Cootte room. Below left, the walled garden. Below right, the Sir Christopher Cootte suite. Opposite page, top, the gold drawing room. Opposite page, bottom, the staircase hall



Three of a kind
 Around the world you will find other hotels with kickass firepower. They are the one-off show-offs that pull out all the stops and, crucially, follow through. But it is all about management of expectation, so there is simply no point looking like a palazzo of Chagall-like dreamy delight if the kitchens and staff don't also have rockets strapped to their backs. For supernova properties, consider the lakeside **Villa Feltrinelli** on Lake Garda, a kind of *Tender Is the Night* vision of mottled-mirrored drawing rooms and octagonal bedrooms with windows in the shape of orange slices. Consider the powerhouse that is **Huka Lodge**, an all-guns-blazing New Zealand hotel of lawns and summerhouses and blazing fires next to the raging Waikato river. And do not gloss over the inimitable **North Island** in the Seychelles, a shipwrecked hippie vision of Gandalf wonderment. If you are one of the most difficult people you know, if your room is always too small, if the service is always too slow, if you always find disappointment swirling about in your soup, then you could do worse than put these in your pipe and smoke...

