

# IRISH FASHION

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# GLAMOUR COMEBACK

## AMANDA BYRAM

ON CAREER, MARRIAGE AND RECLAIMING LA

WIN!  
Luxury shopping break worth €2,000!





Jessie Collins travels to Ballyfin House in Laois to sample the luxury at this newly opened exclusive private country hotel.

If a house takes five years to build, and then eight years to restore, the maths of the restoration, it could be argued, don't add up. That's what you might think if you were told about Ballyfin, a historic Regency mansion that has just opened as a 15-bedroom hotel outside Mountrath in Laois, after a long period languishing under protective scaffold as every inch was cleaned, mended and brought back to its original glory. That's what you might think until, that is, you laid eyes on it.

Set in 600 acres of rolling parkland that includes a 28 acre lake, ancient woods, follies, grottoes and a tower (with its own working drawbridge), it is a building steeped in history.

Originally designed by Irish architects, father and son, Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison in the early 1820s, it was built with no expense spared by Sir Charles Coote who had amassed vast estates and wealth around the country. As you approach along the

undulating drive, the thirteen-bay façade appears gleaming, broken by a enormous portico with giant columns. And like a scene from *Downton Abbey*, the staff are on the front steps, waiting to greet you. The entrance hall, decorated with a richly-patterned Roman mosaic brought back from Italy in 1822, has been beautifully matched by antique Roman reliefs on the walls, the perfect country scene only modernised by the rows of Hunter wellies lined up inside the door. This leads into the Grand Saloon in the centre of the house but most guests go straight to the Whispering Room first, with its elaborate concave ceiling refracting any hum perfectly from one corner to the opposite.

From there you are led into the Stair Hall, top-lit with cantilevered steps running up three sides which finish at a screened gallery above. Original portraits of the Coote family decorate each side. The grandeur only grows from here as the house opens up into

"A secret door hidden in a far corner bookshelf gives access to the sun-filled conservatory, where each pane of glass has been remade bespoke. No two, apparently, are alike"

the Saloon, with its rich stucco-work and exotic marquetry floor. Everywhere you turn there are beautiful objects, lovingly chosen by the current owners, Kay and Fred Krehbiel. Through the Rotunda you pass to the eighty-foot Library which runs the length of the house's south façade, populated by an incredible array of rare antiques, from the chairs to the lamps and beautiful teak desks. A secret door hidden in a far corner bookshelf gives access to the sun-filled conservatory, where each pane of glass has been remade bespoke. No two, apparently, are alike.

And then there is the drawing room, with its French, Empire-style decoration and gold leaf ceiling, the chandelier originating from the Paris townhouse of Queen Caroline of Naples, sister to Emperor Napoleon, while displayed around the walls is just some of the owners' exceptional collection of Irish art. The thirteen bedrooms and two suites upstairs each have hand-painted wallpaper and all are furnished with rare and fine paintings and antiques. Individual touches like the original brushed marble nineteenth century baths and lion head taps are matched by luxury linens, handmade soaps from West Cork and organic Voya products.

Below stairs in what were the original vaulted ceiling store rooms is the Ballyfin Bar, plush and more modern in feel, it exhibits some of the more contemporary art from Louis Le Brocquy, Anna Madden and William Crozier. Further along the corridor there is a private dining room, decorated entirely with rare china, and is home to some of the prized tea sets (Fabergé being just one). Beyond that is the Cellar featuring a careful selection by sommelier Frederic Poivre of the fourteen vineyards established by Irish exiles. Here you can come and personally choose your wine, or dine at the chef's table made from a converted rustic butcher's block.

Which brings us to the food. Executive Chef Fred Cordonnier (ex-Longueville House, the K Club, Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud and

U2's Clarence Hotel) is creating Michelin-star standard food to match the hotel's level of excellence with expansive walled gardens being gradually re-sown and beginning to harvest fresh herbs, vegetables, fruits and honey from the orchard bees. The sourcing is local with details like private blended teas and bespoke Cocoa Atelier chocolates designed in collaboration with Cordonnier just an example of the level of detail.

For activities, guests are spoiled. There is the expansive indoor pool (decorated with gold carvings originally found in the drawing room), a gym and a recently added childrens' play room, plus two large treatment rooms

where you can receive a broad range of Voya treatments (therapist Sinead Hanlon comes highly recommended). Outside and weather permitting, there is fishing, boating, bike rides, garden tours, croquet, tennis, clay pigeon shooting, archery and falconry or you can just stroll through the stunning grounds, visiting the various follies, Victorian rockery and grottoes, or take a walk up to the tower where you can take tea (or, as one man who was there the week before us decided to do, propose).

None of this, as you can imagine, comes cheap. Rates per night start at €500 for a single room and range up to €1,400 for a suite while the cost to hire the whole of Ballyfin is €14,500 per day. But it is worth bearing in mind that these prices are inclusive of daily breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, drinks from the mini-bar, pre-dinner drinks, use of most on-site recreational facilities and gratuities so you hardly need put your hand in your pocket for your stay. These rates mean it is not for everyone, nor is that the point. It is there for those that can, or for the truly special occasions in life, and it is a huge addition to the luxury country house market in Ireland. It is the price of perfection, and it's worth it.

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