



ruggedness of County Kerry's mountains or the dramatic, Atlantic bashed coast of its western extremities but the region is home to a velvety, undulating landscape dotted with historic towns, ancient castles and towers.

Less than 20 miles up the road towards Dublin, I am standing amid the more presidential surroundings of the Wellesley-Pole Suite of the Ballyfin hotel, a magnificent Regency mansion set in rolling parkland. Through the window there are views of a cascade tumbling from a small classical temple down a long flight of steps, the water glinting in the early May sunshine.

By chance, Obama's visit coincides with the opening of this palatial hotel, a second event that locals hope might put this area of Ireland on the map. Serendipitously, the hotel is the brainchild of another American, indeed another Chicagoan, Fred Krehbiel, and his Irish-born wife Kay.

They had toured the country seeking out a suitable property before settling on Ballyfin. Built in the 1820s for Sir Charles Coote, for much of the past century the house was a boarding school. Now, after a 10-year restoration project, it has been returned to its original opulence (with added indoor swimming pool and treatment room). The Cootes were not afraid to spend their money, as the gilded ceiling of one of the house's most impressive rooms, the aptly named Gold Drawing Room, testifies.

With just 13 bedrooms and two suites, Ballyfin can still feel more like a stately

home than a hotel. It is possible to dine in splendour in the State Dining Room, or spend an afternoon curled up with a book in the 70ft long library with roaring fires at either end. From the library, you can venture, Alice in Wonderland-like, through a secret door into a beautifully restored 19th-century wrought-iron conservatory, which is the perfect place to contemplate the clouds rolling in on a soft Irish day.

The Celtic Tiger years brought golf courses and ill-conceived modern wings to the grounds of many an Irish stately home and castle. It's almost a relief to discover that at Ballyfin there are 600 acres of uninterrupted parkland and gardens, laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens, waiting to be explored on foot or by bike. During my stay, dappled sunlight shone through the majestic woodlands of beech, oak and horse chestnut that were awash with bluebells. Lionel, one of the butlers, can also take guests out for a leisurely turn in a rowing boat or fishing for pike.

Even for those without the budget for Ballyfin (which costs at least €950 a night), the area has much to offer. Just beyond the hotel gates are the Slieve Bloom mountains, an expanse of heather flecked hills criss-crossed with miles of hiking trails. Encircling the mountains is a necklace of nine small towns and villages that can be explored by car or bike, while just to the west is one of Ireland's best kept secrets, the charming town of Birr.

Full of elegant Georgian architecture, the



**Heartland** Clockwise from top: the main street in Moneygall, County Offaly; publican Ollie Hayes; the Westmeath Room at the Ballyfin hotel; the Ballyfin estate and gardens; US tourists take photographs outside a bungalow painted with the US flag in Moneygall

## Short cuts

**Belfast** In recent years airports have been investigating new ways of generating revenue – from charging drivers to drop off passengers, to charging for the clear plastic bags required to take toiletries through security. The latest innovation comes from Belfast International Airport, which has started charging passengers who want to smoke a pre-flight cigarette. To access the airside smoking area, passengers must put £1 into its coin-operated lock. Critics say the airline is profiteering on pre-flight anxiety; the airport argues that maintaining the smoking facility is expensive, so a charge is reasonable. [www.belfastairport.com](http://www.belfastairport.com)

**Paris** French tourism authorities have awarded a new top grade to just eight hotels, prompting controversy over those overlooked. Traditionally French hotels were rated on a scale of one to four stars but, in 2009, a fifth was added, and now the very best can apply for the designation "palace". The Meurice and the Plaza Athénée, both part of the Dorchester Collection, were successful but François Delahaye, the group's chief operating officer, said the omission of renowned hotels such as the George V and the Ritz had "removed all credibility" from the award. "I have a bitter taste of victory in my mouth," he said.

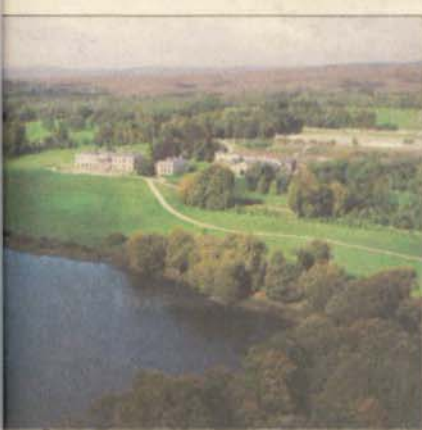
**Santiago de Compostela** A new film about the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrims' trail through northern Spain, is expected to draw a surge of walkers to the route. *The Way* (released in the UK



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Carrickfergus, County Antrim. In all, genealogists have traced Irish roots for 22 of the 44 presidents to date.

The motivation behind such research is not hard to fathom. At least 44m US voters identify themselves as Irish Americans, so Irish heritage has obvious electoral advantages. At the last election, Obama's running mate Joe Biden, as well as opponents John McCain and Sarah Palin, claimed Irish links too.

Since Kennedy (both great-grandparents born in Ireland) toured Ireland in 1963, it has been routine for presidents to visit their "ancestral home". In 1984 Ronald Reagan visited Ballyporeen in County Tipperary, birthplace of his great-grandfather. "It is like coming home after a long journey," he told villagers in a speech outside O'Farrell's pub. According to the following day's FT, he even seemed to speak with a slight Irish brogue.

## Fernando Augusto Pacheco

town is also home to Birr Castle, the family seat of the Earls of Rosse, which has 120 acres of glorious gardens. A few miles to the east of the mountains, just outside the town of Portlaoise, is one of Ireland's lesser-known but most significant archaeological sites, the ghostly remnants of the Rock of Dunamase – a 150ft outcrop crowned with the ancient, shattered remains of a large castle and fortress. Emo Court, another impressive neoclassical pile open to the public, is close by. All are very rewarding and largely overlooked by visitors in a hurry to get to Ireland's better-known attractions.

But perhaps this year, thanks to two men from Chicago, Ireland's undiscovered heart might finally start to get the attention it deserves.

## Details

Ballyfin ([www.ballyfin.com](http://www.ballyfin.com)) has double rooms from €950 per night, full board. For more on visiting the region, see [www.midirelandtourism.ie](http://www.midirelandtourism.ie) and [www.discoverireland.com](http://www.discoverireland.com)

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and Ireland this weekend, and in the US in September) stars Martin Sheen, and follows his character's progress on a 500-mile trek along the route. To coincide with the film, luxury tour operator Cox and Kings has launched an altogether more indulgent alternative. Starting in Bilbao, its new eight-night itinerary lets visitors drive rather than walk to Santiago, stopping each night along the way at historic hotels. It costs from £995 per person. [www.coxandkings.co.uk](http://www.coxandkings.co.uk)

**Hannover** The International Fireworks Competition kicks off this weekend in the baroque parkland of the Royal Gardens of

Herrenhausen. Five theatrical stage displays over the starting tonight with the team, and closing with display on September 2 [www.hannover.de](http://www.hannover.de)

**Hertfordshire** A major of sculpture has opened grounds of The Grove, a house hotel close to W than 80 pieces by 28 artists on show, including work by King, Ann Christopher and Westerhuis. The exhibition is open to non-residents and continues until August [www.thegrove.co.uk](http://www.thegrove.co.uk)

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