



A sense of Ireland as it once was –

Ballyfin is now a magnificent hotel but it's not the only historic house hereabouts with a story to tell, says **Anthony Gardner**

In a country rich with attractions, the Midlands of Ireland do not come high on most visitors' lists. "What are you going to see?" a sceptical Dubliner asked me. "Portlaoise jail and lunatic asylum?" But this is unfair: the area has a beautiful range of mountains (the Slieve Blooms) and a high concentration of castles and historic houses.

Among the last is Ballyfin, one of Ireland's most splendid – and most

expensive – hotels. The Republic is currently an economic disaster zone. Hotels are closing left, right and centre. So why would anyone choose to open one charging top dollar?

"When the economic crisis hit in 2008, we did stop work for six months," admits Ballyfin's managing director, Jim Reynolds. "But then we thought, 'We've come such a long way, we can't stop now'."

A long way indeed. Abandoned by its Anglo-Irish

owners during the Twenties, Ballyfin spent the next 80 years as a school. By the turn of this century it was on the point of collapse. Restoring it to pristine condition has taken a decade.

Arriving after a 90-minute drive from Dublin, we drew up at an impressive entrance, with handsome lodge, and then, two miles farther on, we found an even grander gateway, opening onto 600 acres of private park and woodland. And there, at the

end of a mile-long drive, overlooking a 28-acre ornamental lake, was the great neoclassical façade of Ballyfin, complete with sphinxes and huge portico

Ballyfin is considered one of the finest houses in Ireland, and in its restored state it is quite simply astonishing. The entrance hall contains an ornate mosaic floor brought back from the Grand Tour. The saloon and library are dominated by towering

scagliola columns. The Gold Room takes its name from the gilded plaster ceiling and silk-covered walls. The rotunda has an inlaid wooden floor inspired by the Alhambra Palace. The furniture and paintings are worthy of a museum. Except for the slimline telephones and fully functioning plumbing, you could be enjoying life as it was lived here 200 years ago.

Wandering through the grounds, you come across walled gardens, grottoes and a six-storey stone tower. With an estate like this, there is little incentive to explore beyond the gates – but to do so is to find delightful

countryside and other great houses which make fascinating points of comparison.

On a morning of mist giving way to bright sunshine, we followed a narrow, winding road over the gently rising Slieve Bloom Mountains which divide County Laois (pronounced "leash") from Offaly. From the top, at 1,500 feet, you can (on an unmisty day) see all four provinces of Ireland. Covered with forest and moorland, this is prime walking country: the Slieve Bloom Way, a 50-mile loop, starting from Glenbarrow, takes in the best of it.

At Kinnitty we stopped to



visit a classic Anglo-Irish folly: a tomb in the Church of Ireland graveyard designed as a 30ft scale model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. For ambition, however, it does not compare with the observatory at Birr Castle, 10 miles away, built by the third Earl of Rosse in 1845. His 12-ton "Leviathan" was the most powerful telescope in the world for 70 years; today you can see a full-scale replica in the beautiful castle gardens, with the Heath-Robinson machinery needed to manoeuvre it.

South of Birr lies a castle of a very different kind – Leap (pronounced "lep"), reputed to be the most haunted in



at a price

Ireland. The stories told about it range from the three cartloads of human bones found in the oubliette to the ordeal of two young soldiers who spent a night here: one died of a heart attack, the other went stark, staring mad. It is now owned by Sean Ryan, a renowned tin-whistle player, and those brave enough to venture past the rusty gates and death's-head door knocker can visit it by appointment.

It certainly feels spooky; so have the present inhabitants been troubled by the ghosts? "No," says Sean Ryan. "But they let us know they're there."

Remarkable in a less

frightening way is Roscrea Castle, on the road back to Ballyfin. Dating from the 13th century, and unusually well preserved, it contains behind its drawbridge and working portcullis a large and elegant Queen Anne house. As you enter the gates, you feel as if you're playing architectural pass-the-parcel.

There is plenty more to see within easy reach. Emo Court, to the east of Portlaoise, is

another great Georgian house; the Heywood Gardens, to the south, were designed by Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Cashel with its famous rock and Kilkenny with its splendid castle are only an hour away.

Personally, if I were paying €450-plus for a night at Ballyfin, I would stay put – especially as the price includes all your meals (and drinks, except wine at dinner). Most of its guests, I imagine, will be international jet-setters for whom such a sum is small change. But if I had something to celebrate and a sudden windfall, Ballyfin would be top of my list of places to go.

Have you been to central Ireland? If so, send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.co.uk or post them at telegraph.co.uk/travel

YOUR SAY

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (0871 718 5000; aerlingus.com) offers a return flight from Heathrow to Dublin 75 miles north-east of Ballyfin from £60. Sixt (0844 248 662; sixt.co.uk) has cars for hire from £35 per day. Trains from Dublin Heuston to Portlaoise (10 miles east of Ballyfin) run frequently at peak times, but only once every two hours in the middle of the day; the journey takes approximately an hour and return tickets cost from €28.50/£24 (irishrail.ie).

THE INSIDE TRACK

● The most desirable of the five rooms at Ballyfin is the Lady Caroline Coothe Room, with its lake view, four-poster and beautiful trompe-l'oeil wallpaper designed to look like silk curtains. The most unusual is the Sir Charles Coothe Room which has a concealed entrance beneath the main staircase and a bath made out of a Roman sarcophagus. For a truly spectacular night, choose the Westmeath Room, which has a domed and gilded bed festooned with silk. The Little Library, which was once the nursery, lacks the grand high ceilings of the other bedroom, but has a particularly splendid bathroom.

● Birr Castle – still the home of the Earl of Rosse – is not normally open to the public, but a visit to it (and lunch with the family) can be arranged through Ballyfin. Anyone can visit the grounds (00353 5791 20336; birrcastle.com); don't miss the small but fascinating Science Centre, with its collection of astronomical instruments and early photographs.

● Morrissey's in Abbeyleix (Main Street; 5787 31281) is a real taste of Ireland as it used to be – a pub which is also a grocery store.

● Guided walks through the Slieve Bloom Mountains (8627 89147; slievebloom.ie;) take place every Sunday; from €5/£4 per person.

● One of Ireland's most elusive tourist sites, Stradbally Steam Museum (5786 41878), is open for only three hours a week, from 2pm to 5pm on Sunday afternoons (plus bank-holiday Mondays). It contains everything from a home-made tractor to a fire engine.

● The Kilkenny Design Centre, in what used to be the stables

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