

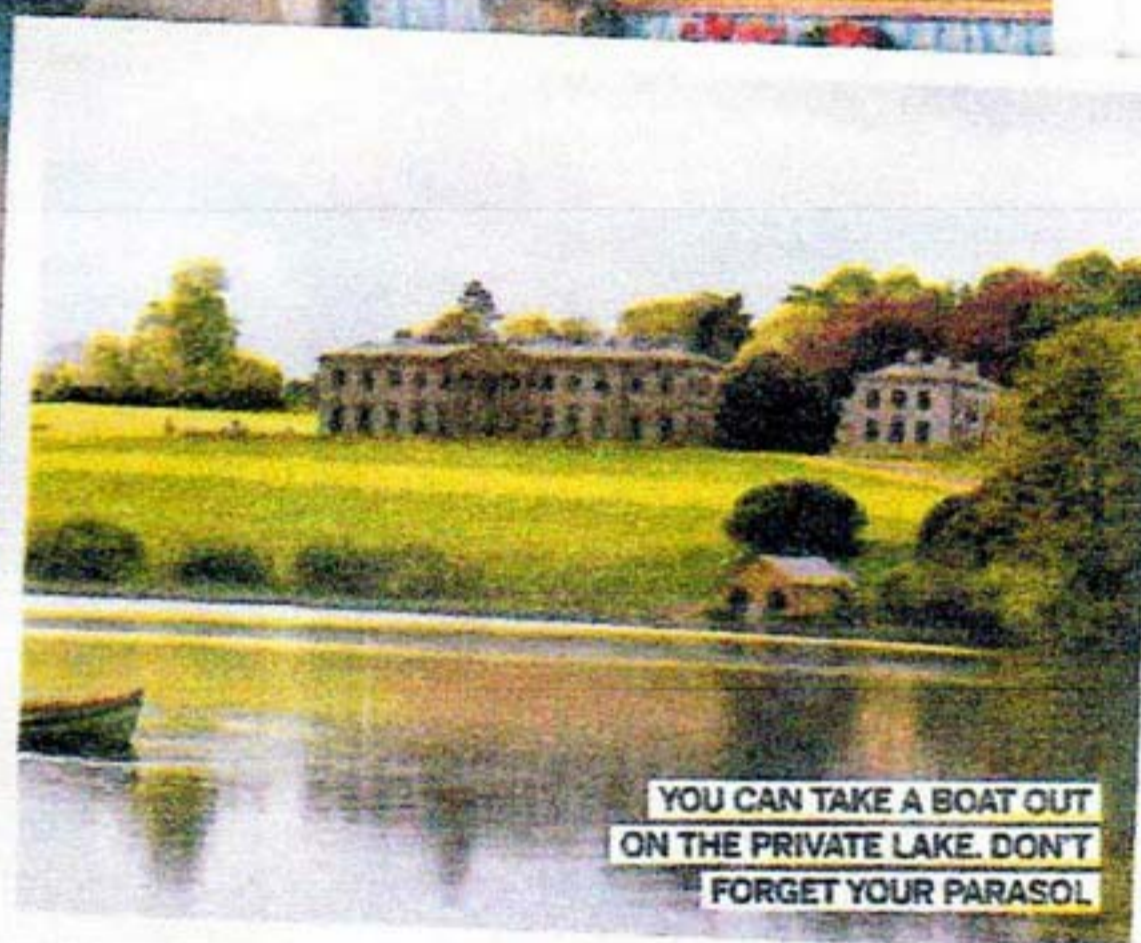
TRAVEL

ESCAPE ROUTES

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THE EMERALD ISLE



THE ROOMS AT BALLYFIN HOUSE ARE BIG ENOUGH TO STAGE YOUR OWN REGENCY DRAMA



YOU CAN TAKE A BOAT OUT ON THE PRIVATE LAKE. DON'T FORGET YOUR PARASOL

GO BACK IN TIME IN AN IRISH MANSION



Stylist's Anna Hart visits Ballyfin House in Ireland and finds a carefully restored slice of history – that

also happens to be a secret five-star celebrity hideaway

I often think that money is wasted on the rich, who use it to buy ugly things like superyachts and spend their time glaring into their phones in posh restaurants. But every so often, a rich person does something utterly brilliant with their millions and then I concede that they can keep hold of their black Amex card.

Ballyfin House, a beautifully restored country house hotel in Portlaoise, 60 miles southwest of Dublin, is one of those brilliant things. Built in 1822 by baronet Sir Charles Coote, it was Ireland's most lavish Regency mansion, set within a 600-acre estate which

includes a moated, medieval-style tower, a walled garden and a boating lake. The Coote family sold it in 1923 and it was run as a boarding school for over 70 years. By the end of the 20th century, it would have fallen into disrepair had it not been bought by Fred Krehbiel, a US electronics billionaire with an Irish wife.

"Yes, Ballyfin House was very fortunate to fall into the hands of Mr Krehbiel," murmurs a footman – yes, a footman – escorting us up the marble cantilevered staircase. The Krehbiels poured £12 million into restoring the house, more as a philanthropic gesture than a canny business decision, and it's a triumph. I've stayed in my fair share of country houses, but Ballyfin is bigger, better and blingier than any of them.

We're shown to the Marquis de Massigny de la Pierre room (named after a French nobleman who married into the Coote

family), with its marble bath overlooking a Grecian-style cascade fountain below. I feel as if I've fallen into a Daphne du Maurier novel. When we tear ourselves away from our reverie, we're served tea and scones in the gold drawing room, beneath chandeliers that once belonged to Napoleon's sister – a lady who clearly had impeccable taste in lighting.

All activities – shooting, boating, archery, riding, cycling – are free to guests, so we spend a sunny afternoon biking through the forest, discovering secret grottos and generally pretending we own the place. I can see why it's so popular with wealthy New Yorkers who've long fantasised about spending a lavish long weekend in the Irish countryside. (Staff are dutifully tight-lipped, but the locals have spotted Kim Kardashian and Kanye West here. I don't imagine they went mountain-biking).

Later we eat a four-course meal of Alaskan king crab, Irish Dexter cote de boeuf, Kilmore quay cod and Valrhona chocolate and orange torte, surrounded by Chippendale furniture and gold-framed ancestral portraits. It's hard to shake the feeling that you've sneaked past the velvet ropes in a museum, but the staff are experts at putting people at ease. Most are local and a few were even schoolboys here. There's a palpable sense of pride that here, in an unassuming place like Portlaoise, is Ireland's most important neoclassical property, which also just happens to be a highly desirable word-of-mouth celebrity hideaway. See, this was a far, far better purchase than a superyacht.

Doubles at Ballyfin House start at £660 per night, including breakfast, lunch, pre-dinner drinks and dinner for two, plus activities; ballyfin.com