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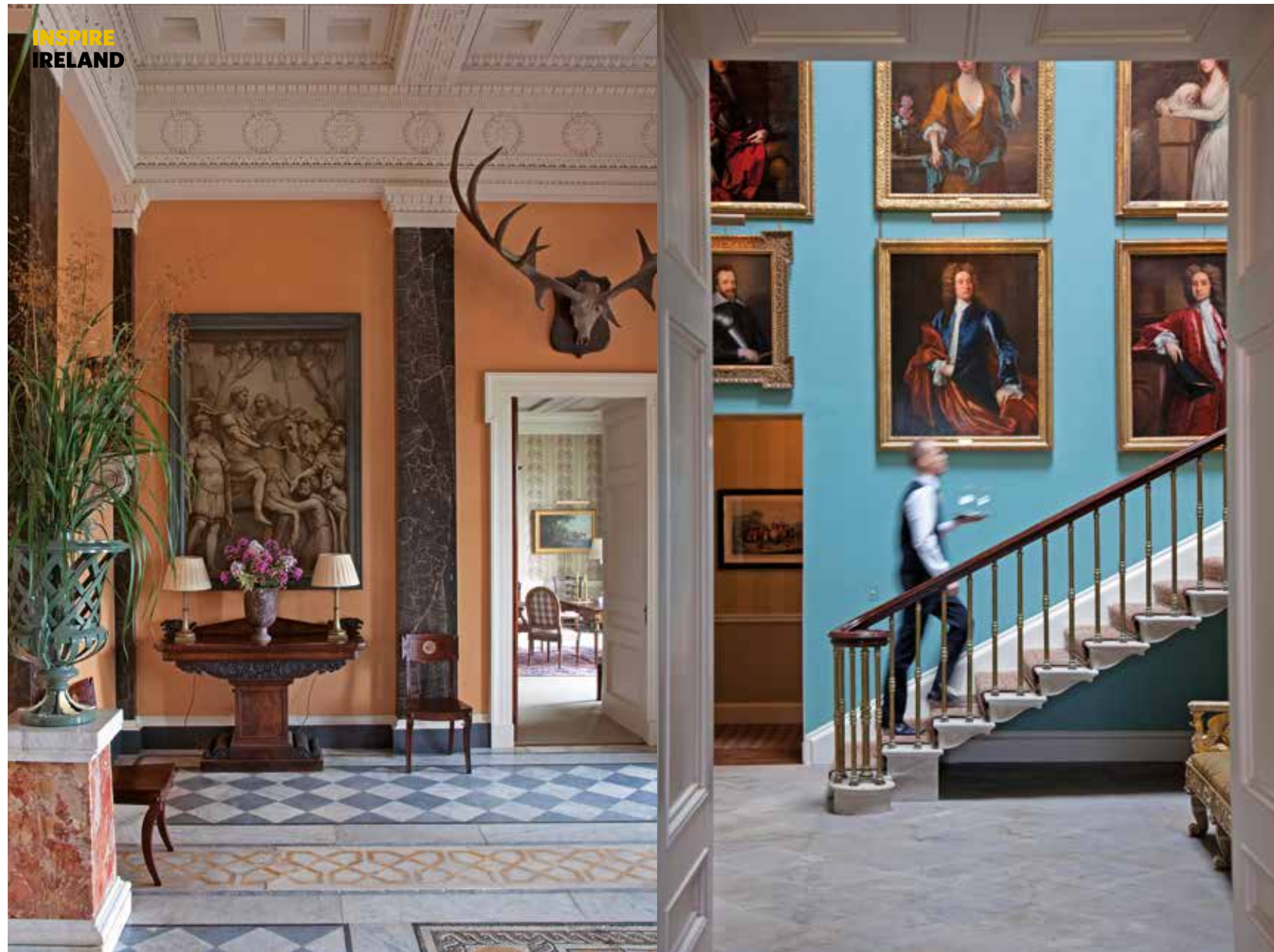


COUNTRY LIVING

FROM ANTIQUES AND
ARISTOCRACY TO ROSE GARDENS
AND ROCKERIES, LAUREN HOLMES
HEADS TO THE EMERALD ISLE FOR
A TASTE OF DOWNTON ABBEY,
IRISH STYLE...

Opposite page:
Ballyfin
This page: The
view out from the
grand mahogany
doors





Photos: James Fennell

“Ballyfin’s dramatic drives were designed to tease and entice, and flashes of the manor flit by through the trees as we skim past rose gardens and rockeries”

Picture a regency mansion of speckled grey sandstone, magnificent in size and set overlooking a glimmering lake enveloped in woodland. It’s 1820 and the Cootes, Ireland’s wealthiest landowners, have just departed, leaving you with the keys to the estate. Overnight billionaires hellbent on establishing their new status on the social scene, no expense has been (or ever will be) spared in the creation of the greatest of country houses, a pleasure dome for the aristocracy. A heady scent of logs crackling in the hearth hits as a member of staff swings open mammoth mahogany doors to welcome you as master of the house.

This is not the opening sequence to the latest British TV period drama; this is what it feels like to arrive at Ballyfin, a spectacular 20-room country house hotel tucked amongst the meadows of County Laois, a 90-minute drive from Dublin. The secret sin of many an English person is that they have never explored Ireland, and despite crisscrossing the world on a professional basis, it was certainly one of mine. It took Ireland to be tipped as one of this year’s hottest travel destinations, driven by a booming economy that has ignited a reverse-brain drain and a dynamic creative scene, for me to catch up. And where to begin but Ballyfin: the ultimate introduction to Ireland’s mystical landscapes, rich history and charismatic approach to hospitality.

And so I find myself on a Saturday morning, not poring over papers with coffee in hand, but hopping up onto the rug-strewn seat of a handsome horse-drawn trap to tour Ballyfin’s 600 acre *demesne* with head butler Lionel and Billy, the Irish Cob horse. Light shimmers off the lake as we set out, and there’s a scent of warm stables mingling with spring. Ballyfin’s dramatic drives were designed to tease and entice while flashes of the manor flit by through the trees as we skim past rose gardens and rockeries, through woodlands and meadows painted 40 shades of green. We are out to explore Ballyfin’s plentiful follies, carefully contrived indulgences that range from secret grottos to mock-medieval towers, built with the sole purpose of keeping the aristocracy suitably amused. While you get the sense the Cootes may have been a little *nouveau* (their family motto was “cost what it may”) it doesn’t detract from the fact it’s fabulous. As we crest a hill to snake around the lake, dappled groves of ivy-clad birch unfold, and below, the first buds of Ballyfin’s legendary bluebells. “Give it a few weeks, and they’ll put on the grandest show,” says Lionel.

While it’s impossible not to be charmed at every turn by Ballyfin’s beauty, it’s the staff who bring it to life, a cast of such charismatic storytellers, many local with a personal and passionate connection to the estate, that its secrets unfold as a living, breathing being. Since *Downton Abbey* snowballed into

a global phenomenon, there has been a growing trend among the global elite to take over country homes and live life as turn-of-the-century aristocracy, with one estate in Scotland even offering a “below the stairs” experience where guests learn how to make beds and dress the master. Thankfully Ballyfin needs no gimmicks: be it the totalitarian attention to detail in the no-expense-spared restoration, the inherent magnificence of the grounds or the refined fleet of discreet staff, it’s the most authentic of fantasies that I have no trouble slipping into – the problem comes when I have to tear myself away.

While Billy isn’t always on beck and call to take guests out across the estate, bikes and golf carts set out on the main drive give guests’ total freedom to explore. As we head out to visit the ice house and custom-built picnic cabin, we run into Ballyfin’s billionaire owner Fred Krehbiel – whose family founded tech manufacturing giant Molex – and managing director Jim Reynolds, out for a morning stroll. As the many stories behind Ballyfin’s resurrection unfold, it’s their vision, courage and ingenuity that you’ll hear referenced countless times – how the pair hunted for years for a country house suitable to house Fred and his Irish wife Kay’s ever-growing collection of art and antiques; how they heard through the grapevine that the mythical Ballyfin may be for sale, a boarding school since the 1920s when a Patrician brotherhood had purchased it from the Cootes for the princely sum of £10,000. It was the start of the Troubles (the bitter guerilla war that preceded Irish independence) and the Irish gentry were out of luck, out of land and out of pocket. In turn the brothers, crippled by expenses, were finally persuaded to sell. What followed was a resurrection that pulled the house back from the brink of ruin, a passion project that took nine years, four of which were dedicated to the interiors.

Finally opened in 2011, the result is less a hotel, more a living, breathing piece of history. There are some jaw-dropping details: from the mosaic Roman floor, installed after the Cootes’ grand European tour, to prehistoric elk antlers, an intricate glass house, designed by Kew Gardens architect Richard Turner, to a Baccarat crystal chandelier that once belonged to Josephine Bonaparte and now graces the Gold Room – palm-sized crystals dripping to the tip of your head. But it’s the Cootes’ personal family treasures, family portraits and pencil drawings that have found their way back through the ages thanks to a web of antique dealers, that give it such an authentic soul. Serious credit goes to British interior designer Colin Orchard, who has succeeded in crafting a world where not one piece of the Krehbiels’ private collection of antiques feels out of place. Of the 20 bedrooms, large sash windows overlooking the lake or water cascade, each is a work of art,

Above left: One of the elk antlers inside Ballyfin
Above right: Portraits on the stairs
Below left: View of Ballyfin from across the lake



“We spend afternoons curled up by the fire in the Library, devouring books while being waited on with chamomile tea poured from solid silver pots”

defined by the most opulent wallpapers that range from hand-painted woodlands to an antique Asian print picked up at auction from the House of Habsburg. It's heaven to soak in the giant marble bathtub and wake up in a four-poster bed hung with silk, to be surrounded by so many antiques that it soon feels normal. If one needed 20 reasons to return to Ballyfin, sleeping in each of the bedrooms would be it.

While there are enough activities – from clay pigeon shooting, horseback riding and history tours to whiskey tastings and nature walks through the mystical Slieve Bloom Mountains – to keep you entertained for weeks, in the end, the best way to spend the time is soaking up the house. We spend afternoons curled up by the fire in the Library, devouring books while being waited on with chamomile tea poured from solid silver pots, and then return again after dinner for battles of chess when everyone's gone to bed. One evening, we pay a visit to the costume closet, a treasure trove of corsets, Napoleon hats and military jackets dripping in gold fringe, sourced from the Chicago Opera House. Contrived as it sounds, it's a unique experience to descend for cocktail hour as chatter bubbles over the grand piano and sip Kir Royales in the Gold Room. Much fun at Ballyfin revolves around dining, each meal beautifully laid out in a different drawing room. We feast on exceptional Irish home cooking, traditional dishes that showcase the best of seasonal local produce, from duck confit to wild boar sausages and vegetables from the garden, served in mercifully restrained sizes. The breakfast alone, an endless carousel of smoked salmon, slow-cooked fruit and eggs benedict, is worthy of a sonnet and I develop such an addiction to their Irish soda bread that the staff present me with a loaf when I leave.

Run on a fabulous sense of occasion perfect for a celebration, Ballyfin is a place where memories are made. While we watch a multi-generational family celebrate a 60th birthday in the most spectacular, yet relaxed, fashion, it's also the most romantic of places, demonstrating a versatility that's rare to find. Late on our last afternoon, we take one of the wooden boats out into the heart of the lake, iridescent at sunset as swallows swoop off to the horizon. Totally timeless, it's like landing in a fairytale that I plan to come back to again and again.

Offering a similarly world-class approach to service yet coupled with an entirely contemporary shot of Ireland's rugged, raw beauty is five-suite Inis Meáin, located on the smallest of the Aran Islands 23 miles off the west coast and accessible by small plane. With a population of just 150, its seclusion makes it one of the last strongholds of Irish culture, where you can still catch Gaelic spoken on a daily basis and stumble across the local pub in



Top: Embracing the natural beauty

Above: Inside the Belmond Group's The Belmond Grand Hibernian train

spontaneous collective sing along. It's here that stressed-out executives go to switch off while romping the length and breadth of the island, gourmet hotpot in hand and enveloped in endless sky and sea, testament to the highly personalized attention from owners Ruari and Marie-Thérèse, contemporary design and a 16-seat restaurant that was rated one of the world's 12 best restaurants of 2011 by the *Financial Times*. While up until recently, it has been standout individual experiences, such as Ballyfin and Inis Meáin that have drawn travelers from across the globe, change is afoot. This August, the Belmond Group launches The Belmond Grand Hibernian, an Orient Express-style experience of two, four or six nights, for up to 40 guests, that opens up the country in a new way for luxury travelers to explore Ireland's dramatic landscape and charismatic culture. Step aboard the contemporary carriages for a feast of fine cuisine with local delicacies, then savor Irish whiskey in the Observation Car while watching the enchanting scenery go by.

Add it all together and it's clear that Ireland is on the up and that this is no passing fad. In truth, there's little new to what makes Ireland so special, it's just taken the world a little while to catch on. I, for one, am in love.

THE DETAILS



Stay Ballyfin. From \$640 bed & breakfast, low season midweek & \$780 for a Friday or Saturday night. Full board rates begin at \$955 midweek and \$1,100 Friday or Saturday night. To book, contact the reservations manager, on +353 5787 55866 or email reservations@ballyfin.com. For more information visit ballyfin.com

Stay Inis Meáin. Two-nights with exclusive use of the restaurant, from \$13,700. To book, contact the reservations manager, on +353 8682 66026 or email post@inismeain.com. For more information, visit inismeain.com

Train Belmond Grand Hibernian will be available later this year. Two-night private charter, from \$115,000, based on 40 guests. To book, contact the reservations manager on +44 845 077 2222 or visit belmond.com