



AN IRISH HONEYMOON

Hate flying? Loathe airports? Despair of sunbed hoggers? A home-grown honeymoon can deliver the trip of lifetime, writes Jillian Bolger, if you just know where to look...

If you were a fan of Downton Abbey you probably fantasised about what it must have been like to live in a beautiful country estate where your every whim was taken care of. Downton Abbey is, of course a fictional place, (filmed at Highclere Castle in England) but the finery, elegance and luxury of the era is very much real. Should you fancy a slice of such finery for your honeymoon you need only head to Ballyfin House in Co Laois.

One of Ireland's most astonishing neoclassical houses, it was home to the wealthy Coote family for 100 years before they sold-up amidst Ireland's political unrest. The entire 614-acre estate was sold to the Patrician Brothers in 1920 and run as a successful boarding school until 2001. Though they didn't have the funds to maintain the house properly they did their best to look after it, and, rather remarkably, left all the original fireplaces in situ – despite their considerable value.

Happily Fred Krehbiel, a Chicago-based electronics magnate and his Irish wife, bought the crumbling mansion and set about its meticulous restoration. Over nine years he poured time, love and money into Ballyfin to deliver Ireland's most luxurious hideaway. If you're expecting a gaudy, trophy project with intimidating staff and shades of the Celtic Tiger you'll be disappointed. There is nothing brash, blingy or pretentious about Ballyfin, which opened its doors as a luxury resort in 2011. The goal – to make it feel like the Coote family have just popped out and left you in their home as house guests – has been achieved with absolute perfection.



Your honeymoon planner

- * Full board rates include breakfast, lunch, including picnics, dinner, a pre-dinner drink, tea, coffee, cake and cookies, soft drinks, same-day laundry and pressing service, Wi-Fi, bicycle use, swimming, tennis, boating, coarse fishing, croquet and golf buggies to explore, tax and a gratuity, from €895* per couple per night (*mid-week Oct-Dec 2016).
- * Ballyfin Demesne can be hired out exclusively for weddings or private events. www.ballyfin.com



This is how the other lived and, for a brief and delicious moment, you too can live that dream. It may feel decidedly Downton – a line of staff standing out front to welcome you and wave you off on your departure – but there's nothing stuffy or intimidating about a stay here. Sure, the décor may be exquisite, from the elaborate plasterwork above to the detailed marquetry underfoot, rendered by master craftsmen true to age-old traditions. Yes, the rooms have grand proportions and are furnished in the finest of period pieces. Sure, the art and antiques are dizzyingly beautiful – even more so when you consider Fred's modern Irish art collection hanging in the basement. And indeed, the service is thoroughly five-star but it's also warm, chatty and relaxed.

Guests can loll in their exquisite bedrooms, take tea in the 80-foot library by a crackling fire, enjoy lunch in the iconic William Turner conservatory that's been sublimely restored to its former glories or explore the huge, immaculately-maintained estate (MD Jim Reynolds is also the landscape gardener.) Take bicycles from out front and cycle the 10 miles of paths that weave through ancient woodlands and glades of bluebells, past follies, around walled gardens and up a hill to climb to the top of the lookout tower. This Famine Project tower affords breathtaking panoramas across the 12 counties of Leinster and a bird's eye view of the magnificent Slieve Bloom mountain that sweep down to the estate.

Channel Lady Mary and go boating on the lake with a picnic, take a pony and carriage around the grounds or try clay pigeon shooting or archery. If that all sounds too active why not slip into the indoor pool, book a massage or indulge in a sauna and Jacuzzi session until you're ready for pre-dinner Champagne in the library. With so many lavish reception rooms to enjoy (the daily house tour will reveal their treasures) you'll often find you have a whole room to yourselves to chill in. Dinner is a formal affair, served in the impressive dining room and features many vegetables, salads and fruits from the walled gardens as well as seasonal local produce.

Laois is accessible from so many counties and offers plenty of interesting day trips for active honeymooners. Kilkenny, Carlow, Emo House, Heywood Gardens and Birr Castle are all close by as is Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum in Port Laois, which offers an interesting contrast.

Walkers should head to the beautiful Slieve Bloom Mountains while golfers will find top courses like Mount Juliet, The K Club and The Heritage close by. A world away from normality, yet easily accessible, Ballyfin Demesne is easily the most idyllic and romantic honeymoon spot in Ireland. Money and taste don't necessarily go hand-in-hand but when you see the transformation that's taken place at this relaxing Irish hideaway you'll understand that heaven really is a place on earth. ■



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