



TO THE MANOR BORN

AFTER AN EIGHT-YEAR-LONG RESTORATION, IRELAND'S GRANDEST REGENCY MANSION IS HAVING A REVIVAL – AS THE EMERALD ISLE'S MOST EXPENSIVE HOTEL – EDGAR CHECKS IN...

BY LAURA BINDER
IMAGES COURTESY OF BALLYFIN

It's like Ireland's answer to Downtown Abbey," was how our chauffeur put it when I could no longer get a hold on my anticipation at seeing Ballyfin – a neoclassical manor on a 600-acre estate that, if you listen to the hype, has claimed the crown as Ireland's most luxurious hotel since its 2011 opening. But it seems the Middle East jet set is yet to cotton on to its charms (its guest book reads like a who's who of affluent Irish and Americans), which is why Edgar saw fit to make for County Laois (pronounced 'leash') at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

Ballyfin hasn't always been a hotel. For a century it was the home of an aristocratic Anglo Irish family (the Cootes) before being bought by the Patrician Brothers in the 1920s and converted into a boarding school – an identity it kept until 10 years ago, when it was snapped by an American electronics magnate by the name of Fred Krehbiel. Eight painstaking years of renovations later (and a reported spend of \$50 million), Ballyfin was reborn as a five-star hotel. Ballyfin's advertised "90-minute drive from Dublin" is no ploy (we arrived after a traffic-free 80 minutes) – and for those who prefer to head skyward, Ballyfin can be reached via helicopter.

On arrival at the hotel's stone walls (they hug the entire estate for optimum privacy), our chauffeur uttered what I like to believe was a secret password, triggering the towering black iron gates to open. At Ballyfin, I'm told, there's no such thing as 'openings to the public', nor are non-guests able to eat or drink here. The result is a palpable exclusivity from the moment those gates close behind you (and with 600 acres at your disposal there's really no cause to leave – and, frankly, little to do in sleepy Laois if you did). We cruised our way along a winding charcoal driveway, flanked by bluebell woods, emerging at a glass-clear lake before Ballyfin's handsome facade – a butler waiting on the formidable stone steps.

Stepping inside, I was struck by the feeling that I wasn't checking into a hotel, rather settling into an aristocrat's mansion, the owners having sloped off to their city residence: there's no dated reception, no time-consuming check-in, no generic hotel features or branding; just a chirpy Irish butler who led us into the stately Saloon where a fire flickered and coffee arrived in pristine silverware, with just-baked cookies.



'IRELAND'S ANSWER TO DOWNTON ABBEY' WAS HOW OUR CHAFFEUR DESCRIBED BALLYFIN, A NEOCLASSICAL MANOR ON A 600-ACRE ESTATE



It's a feeling that Ballyfin's owner (who staff simply call 'Fred') fully intended when he began his eight-year labour of love. The result is ravishing yet homely: silk furnishings, oil paintings, porcelain, stuccoed ceilings, rare tomes, antique furniture (I overheard one guest commenting "it's like a National Trust house you can actually touch") – every detail, every room, has a history. We saw it as we stepped onto the Saloon's wood parquet flooring, made for Ballyfin in 1825 (the only design of its kind, bar one in Windsor Castle); in the powder-blue stair hall where doe-eyed family portraits of the Cootes are hung (originals donated by the family's last living relative); or while admiring The Gold Drawing Room's chandeliers (they once hung in Napoleon's sister's palace).

The property's 15 bedrooms are equally characterful – not a single one bearing the same style as the next. While your wives are sure to swoon over The Lady Caroline Cootie Room (bright sky-blue and very elegant), the lake-facing, sage-green Sir Charles Cootie Room will please you both: it's the only suite on the ground floor, set behind a secret door in the stair hall's wall. Once inside more mysteries unravelled – behind a particularly heavy metal door we found a sizeable stone bathroom (it was once Sir Charles's gunnery), including a freestanding marble bathtub that, impressively, was bought in Rome in 1819. Outside, there's country pursuits on tap – take your pick from a parade of Hunter wellies in the entrance hall on your way out. The best way to get around the estate is by bicycle or golf buggy (the latter being much more fun) which are permanently lined up outside the house.

Make for the boathouse, as we did, and you can step into a pea-green boat, row out onto clear waters and cast your fishing rod to catch Pike, Roach and eel. If you do hook the catch of the day the chef can cook it for you. Scooting off past the estate's moss-covered tower (climb to the top for stellar vistas), we met a butler for a brief tutorial in





clay pigeon shooting before we were let loose on the targets – which get trickier as your aim improves.

At the estate's magical 'grotto' we made a date with five feathered beauties: a Little Owl, a Barn Owl, a Peregrine Falcon, a hawk and a Golden Eagle called James, all of which we found assembled with an expert falconer. Out stretch an arm and you can form a human perch for each one – though I needed extra gusto to take on James: his muscular legs and razor-sharp talons are so strong he can take a goose, lamb or deer as prey!

Elsewhere, noble endeavours like archery, croquet, tennis, horse-riding (a nearby stable has an impressive 40 horses for all levels) or hiking were ours for the taking, while inside we made for the indoor pool and, if you fancy a spa treatment, you can book the likes of a Gentlemen's Facial or back massage with Aromatic Moor Mud. But don't underestimate the pleasure that's derived from simply swanning about the house (on a rainy day we lounged in the lavish 80-foot-long library; home to 5,000 tomes). Our explorations led us down to the former Servants' Halls, where we partook in a whiskey-tasting session that had us swilling 15-year-old malts around our gums, while in the library I pushed a mirrored doorway to find The Conservatory – a glorious glass-encased sun-trap that's perfect for long, lazy lunches.

Gourmands will take real pleasure in Ballyfin's cuisine too – after all, its head chef, New Yorker Ryan Murphy, credits London's The Savoy and Jean George in the Big Apple's Trump Tower among his culinary credentials. Staff in black tie welcomed us with pre-dinner drinks (including champagne), which we supped in the lavish Gold Drawing Room. Inventive canapés arrived soon after (try the Foie Gras Macaroons) along with Ballyfin's seven-dish dinner menu, which changes nightly. It's suggested you choose three to four dishes – highlights of which included a deliciously juicy Kilmore

Quay Lobster, an Irish Beef Tartar topped with a delicate Quail Egg Yolk and a wickedly bouncy Valrhona Chocolate Fondant with salted caramel and coffee ice cream. But it's well worth saving space for the Irish Farm House Cheeses, which arrive beneath a glass dome for you to handpick. Wine connoisseurs are in good hands here too – each dish can be expertly paired by Ballyfin's sommelier, Carolina, who hails from Argentina's wine region. And if you really want to have some fun with meal times you can raid Ballyfin's costume cupboard beforehand and dine in full 18th century dress. Some four hours later our meals typically drew to an end. Evenings here, like the rest of Ballyfin, are best savoured slowly. ■

THREE THINGS TO DO IN COUNTY LAOIS

THE SLEEPY REGION OFFERS A TRIO OF TOURIST-FRIENDLY TRIPS...

IRISH NATIONAL STUD

The hub of the isle's thoroughbred industry, equine enthusiasts can admire the cream of the world's racing horses at this working stud farm, which has produced some of Ireland's biggest champions, starting with Minoru in 1909. irishnationalstud.ie

JAPANESE GARDENS

You don't have to be into horticulture to enjoy a scenic stroll in these gardens, named Europe's finest. A philosophical, religious and historical context gives it wings beyond the fauna. discoverireland.com

KILDARE VILLAGE DESIGNER OUTLET

Invest in threads befitting of a country gent at this mini-mall; home to 55 top-name boutiques – book a chauffeur-driven car and fill the boot with designer buys. kildarevillage.com
