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HA HA
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Editor *Garàn Casey*
discovers the luxury and
escapism of Ballyfin

ARISE
and
go

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and watties made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree (W.B. Yeats)



W.B. Yeats wrote this poem as a young man living in London

deeply homesick for his native Ireland. In just three short stanzas, he brings us on a romantic journey away from the hectic madness of the modern world to an idyllic place of peace and solitude where the only sounds are of nature – this is Innisfree.

‘We all should have some place in the world that is ‘our’ Innisfree and having read this poem as a young boy, I have often sought mine. Over the years I have occasionally enjoyed a temporary harmony with nature, such as Yeats describes, but it has been all too fleeting, too temporary. And then I visited Ballyfin.

I left Dublin at lunchtime, a little later than planned, following a packed morning of back to back meetings and phone calls. Throughout the 90-minute journey I made and received calls, adding to the usual daily stress levels of my modern world. With my mind racing about things to do, I arrived at Ballyfin weary from what the day had already thrown at me but curious.

There is no big external signage, just a gate that rolls open when I introduce myself via intercom. I drive along a winding avenue, distracted by the natural beauty of the landscape washed by the low November sun. Around a bend, the building appears – it’s like a sparkling version of O’Connell Street’s GPO looking onto a beautiful lake but it’s like it should be exactly where it is, like it’s always been here. In front of the pillars there are people waiting. I panic a little when I realise they are waiting for me and I’m not ready for this. My car boot is packed with footballs and jerseys (I coach a schoolboy soccer team), my overnight bag is open with some items strewn across the back seat. I have water bottles and

sandwich wrappers scattered around a floor that’s splattered with mud from kids’ football boots. I arrive, the door is opened and 30 seconds later, following the warmest and most natural of welcomes, I start to relax. I felt like I had been transported through a magical portal to a parallel world that wanted me to be here; a world in which I shall have some peace that comes dropping slow.

This is a place where mankind and nature have colluded to deliver splendour and beauty on a spectacular scale. The Slieve Bloom Mountains provide a stunning backdrop to this superb mansion set in a walled demesne of over 600 acres. There is a beauty and serenity here that connects to the soul. Ballyfin has a hypnotic effect with a seductive charm underpinned by the most wonderful staff that deliver superior service without fuss and pomp.

I meet with Jim Reynolds who oversaw the loving restoration of the house and grounds. As we toured the house, he told me about the Coothe family who built the house in the 1820s and then sold it 100 years later to the Patrician Brothers who ran it as a boarding school for 70 years. In 2002, it was purchased by Fred Krehbiel who set about restoring it to create a 19th century experience with all the conveniences of the 21st century.

There are only 20 bedrooms, each unique in style and theme with meticulous attention to detail and craft. The reception rooms are magnificent – my favourite is the library which has a hidden bookshelf through which a glorious conservatory is accessed. The elegance of all the interiors is so stunning that in other circumstances it might be intimidating, but at Ballyfin it feels cosy, homely and amazingly calming. A fully equipped gym, spa treatment rooms and an indoor pool provide further opportunities to revitalise and recharge the body and soul.

Dinner that evening, served in the dining room, is a five-star experience and following the obligatory brandy, I retire early – a new man.

In the morning it snowed but the soft ground slowly dissolved the snowflakes along with my childlike fantasy that I might be trapped here for days. Breakfast is another wonderful dining experience following which I take a leisurely walk around the lake to the front of the house. This is Ireland’s biggest man-made lake and is stocked with fish – it would hard to find a more peaceful spot for the enthusiastic angler.

I meet with Sam Moody the newly arrived Head Chef who tells me how he works with the estate’s gardeners and local suppliers to source the finest and freshest produce from the surrounding countryside. They even make their own honey.

Lionel Chadwick took me on a tour of the grounds in a horse drawn carriage (why not) and it’s really only now that I begin to understand the scale of the estate. As we traverse the narrow roadways, Lionel, who was a former pupil of the school, describes how the estate operated in the Coothes’ time. We trot past the walled gardens and rose garden before stopping and climbing the Famine tower which has incredible views as does the picnic house complete with indoor heating.

By mid-afternoon, it’s time for me to leave and with farewells as warm as the previous day’s welcomes, I climb into my car and plot my journey back to Dublin. I drive across the beautiful parkland away from the lake and the gates roll open to let me out. It’s been just over 24 hours but that was one hell of an experience.

With room rates starting from €560 per room per night on a bed and breakfast basis, this is not for everyone. But for that really special occasion when you want to escape the world and drop down a couple of gears, there is nowhere like it. www.ballyfin.com