20 EXTRAORDINARY WAYS TO SPEND YOUR SUMMER NIGHTS

WHO’S THE BOSS? PRE-FALL’S MENSWEAR-INSPIRED LOOKS

EVENING ESCAPADES WITH PRABAL GURUNG, DARYL HALL AND KATHRYN STOCKETT

THE BITE STUFF FOUNDATION SOCIAL EATERY HEATS UP ROSWELL

PLUS STARGAZING AT UMI ABSINTHE AT KIMBALL HOUSE JOHNNY’S HIDEAWAY: A RETROSPECTIVE THE SEASON’S MOST FABULOUS SOIÈRES
THE MANOR REBORN

A NINE-YEAR RENOVATION COMBINING 19TH CENTURY SPLENDOR WITH GRACIOUS HOSPITALITY USHERS IN A NEW ERA OF LUXURY FOR A SPROWLING IRISH ESTATE.

By Patti Dickey

As a longtime fan of Downton Abbey and anything Masterpiece Theatre, I eagerly anticipate visiting Ballyfin, a destination resort in County Laois, Ireland. Located about 60 miles southeast of Dublin, this Emerald Isle gem is well worth the journey.

With roots dating back to the 1700s, Ballyfin occupies property in 1822, during one of the Coote family’s European tours. Originally Sir Charles’ private study, my room is the sole occupant of the first-floor, with the other nine rooms and five suites on the second level, accessibility by one of two cantilevered Portland Stone staircases. Situated in the front of the manor, behind a hidden door in the stair hall, my handsome quarters feature a marvellous canopied bed outfitted with white damask and 100 percent Egyptian cotton Italian sheets, all facing a fireplace flanked by a comfortable armchair and topped by a flat-screen HDTV. (I confess to a tiny shiver when told that the floor of the closer blocks off a seawater leading to the lower levels, but the comfortable bed that bullied me into sweet dreams keeps my visions of ghosts at bay!) The adjoining bathroom—Sir Charles’ Strong Room—is a deep-rooted brick vault entered through a sturdy iron door. Lady Caroline’s Roman sarcophagus bathtub, an architectural hodgepodge, was hoisted through the formerly barred window and installed here, while the separate shower featuring numerous shower heads impinges with its presence. Also present are thick, heavy towels swaddled via a heated towel rack that make for a cozy cocoon, along with a heated pool overlooks the courtyard garden enveloping the rear and side of the manor) and the Cascade, a waterfall tumbling down the hill from a Claudian temple, an intricately patterned mosaic floor brought here from Italy and umbrellas for guests in need. Here, should weather dictate, there are wellies, warm jackets and umbrellas for guests in need.

Traditionally, guests would enter the hotel’s managing director, Jim Reynolds, with roots dating back to the 1700s, during one of the Coote family’s European tours.

To secure a room overlooking it are lulled to continued…

The conservatory—whimsically entered through a hidden door designed as a bookcase in the library—is an incredible space. Having fallen into disrepair during the Patrician Brothers’ occupancy of Ballyfin, this exquisite glass-and-iron masterpiece was dismantled and shipped to England for refurbishment. Located at the rear of the property, the conservatory overlooks the pleasure grounds (separate lawns enveloping the rear and side of the manor and the Cascade, a waterfall tumbling down hill from a Claudian temple perched atop. Reynolds’ inspiration, the Cascade looks like it’s always been part of Ballyfin, and those fortunate enough to secure a room overlooking it is all felled to ¡correrse!
...continued  sleep by the rhythmic sound of water spilling down rough-hewn steps.

Ballyfin is perfectly positioned to amuse and to occupy one’s time. There are miles of both hard-surfaced and mown-grass paths to explore via golf cart, on foot or horseback. There’s even an antique trap carriage driven by Lionel Chadwick and pulled by Billy, a wonderfully mild-mannered horse who gamely poses for photos. Add to this fun raiding the costume room (costumes purchased from Chicago’s Lyric Opera company), tooling around the manor looking like a 19th century lady of leisure, and enjoying high tea on the back terrace overlooking the Cascade.

Boating and fishing on the lake are among favorite pastimes as well, and there is an ongoing contest to see who will snag the largest fish—rumor has it there is a 40-pounder lurking in the depths. Near the lake is a refurbished 18th century grotto, one of several follies on the estate. A midmorning coffee and cookie break in its candlelit surrounds marks an enchanting diversion in my trek around the grounds. Refreshed, I make my way up the hill through the fields, behind the manor house, to the mid-19th century mock-medieval tower, crossing a moat to enter the structure. The reward for climbing to the top is a stunning 360-degree view of the property and surrounding environs. (Ballyfin also boasts two working walled gardens, a fernery, a restored rock garden and a wonderful small church with requisite churchyard.)

Given a choice, I decide to try my hand at clay pigeon shooting—Annie Oakley I’m not! Afterward, I lunch in the picnic lodge, and it’s one of the most elegant picnics I’ve ever had the privilege of enjoying, with fine wines and locally sourced food presented on white linens with fine china and crystal goblets. (So this is how the other half dines alfresco!)

For those who prefer golf, there is a championship course within driving distance, while luxuriating types will love the spa, which features a stunning indoor swimming pool, and all the amenities expected of a five-star property. Indulgences of a different sort are also located on the lower level—the pub is a cozy space for a pint and local entertainment, and the wine cellar conducts both vino and scotch tastings.

Dinner at Ballyfin is a ritual unto itself, with drinks served in the library warmed by fireplaces that fill the space with a wonderful woody aroma that mingles well with the scent of old books. Dinner is served in the elegantly appointed dining room—formerly the refectory when owned by the Patrician Brothers. Spot-on wine pairings accompany exquisitely prepared, locally sourced dishes, and the cheese course, impressive both in presentation and scope, is not to be missed.

Aileesh Carew, general manager of Ballyfin, tells me that the intent of the property’s renovation is to make their guests feel like they are honored guests of the Coote family. While I rather doubt the Cootes would have use for the property’s newly installed helicopter pad, I have no doubt that if they did walk through the front door now, they would, quite rightly, feel at home.

Open only to overnight visitors, this sprawling manor and vast grounds ensure privacy and impart a sense of peace to anyone who calls it home. Ballyfin is a wonderful way to experience the gracious hospitality that exemplifies 19th century country living, while unplugging from the fast pace of today. Rates vary by season, all-inclusive from $800 per night through September (high season), Sir Christopher Coote Suite, all-inclusive from $2,200 per night, ballyfin.com