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WHEN IT COMES TO IRISH CASTLES THERE ARE MANY PRETENDERS, BUT ONLY A FEW TRUE STRONGHOLDS WHERE YOU CAN LORD IT UP IN STYLE WITH YOUR CLAN. STANLEY STEWART LAYS CLAIM TO FOUR. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL PHELPS
The Westmeath Room at the restored, 19th-century Ballyfin. Opposite, one of the bedrooms at Ballybur.
board games, of inviting sofas and Sunday papers, of cozy window seats and roaring log fires. Though, of course, any castle deserves its moments of formality. It might have just been the two of us but Sophia liked the preparations for dinner every evening; laying her clothes out on the high bed, bathing in a tub the size of Norfolk, reprimanding her Papa on his choice of shirt. After drinks in front of the fire – apple juice for Sophia, peaty Irish whiskey for me – we went in to dinner among a dazzling array of family silver and cut glass, beneath the dour Van Dyke portraits of the 17th-century owners. Sophia took charge of the table bell to signal the butler when we were ready for the next course. In this way, we got to pudding without any unnecessary delays. In the end we both felt like Fred. It was a wrench to leave.

www.lismorecastle.com. The castle can sleep up to 37 people in the castle’s 15 bedrooms and an additional five rooms in outlying buildings. Prices are from about £14,850 for a two-night stay for a group of up to 16 people, including breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner as well as full butler and concierge service

BALLYBURN

Ballybur Castle is a medieval ghost at the end of a country lane in County Kilkenny. The most iconic type of Irish castle, this is a tower house rearing up from fields and woodlands. The exterior is grim and forbidding, its irregular stone courses streaked with lichen, its battlements mottled with ivy, its windows narrow slits. But the interior, through the kind of door accustomed to being unlocked with battering rams, is a romantic retreat. The battles are done. Let the fun begin. The ground-floor kitchen has a farmhouse feel with a long wooden table, a butler sink, armchairs by the fire. I followed a scampering Sophia up the spiral staircase to three delightful bedrooms with bathrooms hidden away in corner nooks, then up again to a grand dining room with a minstrel gallery – presumably bring your own minstrels – and finally to the top floor and what would once have been the Great Hall, now a large drawing room with a fireplace the size of a small bus. Delighted with a castle that might have housed Rapunzel, Sophia bagged the four-poster bed, laying out teddy bears on the pillows, leaving me a cozy room next door with a vaulted ceiling and a pirate’s chest.

In the Middle Ages there were said to be more than 8,000 tower houses in Ireland, each proclaiming the status and the power of a clan chief. Ballybur comes with the usual accoutrements – a ghost, a garderobe (the fancy word for an overhanging medieval loo), a prison, and a murder hole. The ghost didn’t seem to like the look of us; apparently it is picky about who it consorts with. Modern plumbing mercifully has replaced the garderobe. The prison was a small enclosure beneath the flagstones just off the Great Hall while the murder hole was a nifty arrangement which allowed the occupant to drop boulders, boiling oil, poisonous snakes or whatever they fancied onto anyone who had not rung the bell. Every house should have one.

Ballybur had a brief heyday – it hosted a Papal Legate in the 1640s and Cromwell blew the roof off in the early 1650s – followed by several centuries of slow decline. By the 1970s it was inhabited by two elderly women who lived modestly on the
bottom floors. Which was when Frank and Alfric Gray spotted Ballybur in an estate agent’s window in Kilkenny. They bought it for £20,000. They reckoned the renovations would take five years. Twenty-five years later, they were still putting the finishing touches to what had become a life’s mission.

Ireland is full of castles that stray into Castle Kitsch, a style that is part regal Victorian and part Antiques Roadshow, heavy on swagged red velvet, heraldic wallpaper, suits of amour, endless knick-knacks and the kind of varnished baronial furniture that looks like it comes from Castles R Us. But at Ballybur the Grays have found the perfect castle aesthetic, a spare understated style that enhances the drama of architecture. Pale fabrics and oriental rugs and cushions enhance the exposed stone, the ironwork, the great fireplaces and the soaring roof timbers. In the evenings, with the Irish rains lashing the windows and the candlelight flickering on the old walls, I read Sophia stories that might have been set in Ballybur’s own rooms. www.ballyburcastle.com. From £984 for a weekend and from £1,476 for a week self-catering. Sleeps eight adults and four children.

BALLYFIN

Ballyfin is not a castle at all. But it is Ireland’s most elegant representative of what castles became. When the old stone towers went to wrack and ruin, when the draughts could be measured on the Beaufort scale, or when the country was simply peaceful enough that you didn’t need to keep a lookout for chaps in horned helmets, this is the upgrade that castle owners dreamt about: an elegant manor house at the heart of their estates. The world beyond is no longer rough terrain glimpsed through narrow slits but landscaped parklands seen through French windows. The drawbridge was replaced with gracious semi-circular steps, the great hall with a drawing room of leather-bound books and pale Wedgwood vases, and the boiling oil of the murder hole with an obliging butler and a welcoming glass of whiskey.

At Ballyfin, the transition took place in the 18th century when the old Elizabethan castle was pulled down. In the 1820s Sir Charles Henry Coote, one of the richest men in Ireland, built the present house, a Regency masterpiece. While he oversaw the work, his wife Caroline toured Europe burning her way through her husband’s credit notes as she snapped up Roman floor mosaics, Italianate fireplaces, Belgian chandeliers and the kind of artwork that would have beggared lesser fortunes. Everyone agreed the result was the grandest house in Ireland.

A century later, with Irish independence, the Cootes beat a retreat from Ireland and Ballyfin was sold to the Patrician Brothers who turned it into a boarding school. For the next 80 years, schoolboys at rows of graffitied desks knuckled down to their Latin conjugations in the grand ballroom while the old house gradually disintegrated around them.

Ballyfin’s restoration is as spectacular as its original construction. It was bought by the sort of wealthy Americans...
that all threadbare European aristocrats dream of: sympathetic souls with deep pockets. Fred and Kay Kruebbei embarked on an eight-year project that restored the great house to its original grandeur. The Roman mosaic in the entrance hall was revived and the gorgeous marquetry floors were meticulously pieced together again. The cornice and the friezes in the Gold Drawing Room were recast. The original paint palettes were rediscovered for the columns in the library. The rust-eaten conservatory, accessed from the library via a secret door, was restored. In 2010, Ballyfin opened as a 15-room luxury hotel, and this spring five new bedrooms are unveiled as the hotel reopens for its 2015 season. The result is irresistible. The grandest house in Ireland is now one of its grandest hotels.

www.ballyfin.com. Doubles from £800 full board; the entire castle costs £17,890 per night. Closed during January and February.

**BALLYPORTRY**

Sprawled across the north-west corner of County Clare is a bleak landscape of stone, water and sky. Open moorland stretches to long horizons. Wild flowers bloom between sheets of scarred karst limestone. Black turlough lakes pool at the feet of brooding hills. Swept by Atlantic gales, the Burren is made for castles. Prehistoric ring forts and medieval towers appear like natural outcrops, the guardians of this harshly beautiful country. Ballyportry is one of the most impressive, a tower house built in the 15th century for the O’Brien family, descendants of Brian Boru, the High King of Ireland.

We think of these western regions of Ireland as being remote and parochial. But in medieval times, when the sea was more reliable than the land for travellers, areas like the Burren would have been closely connected to the continent. In its day, Ballyportry would have had a cellar of French wines, tapestries from the Low Countries, pottery and silks from Spain, books and rosaries from Rome. This was not the strongholds of a barbarian chiefdom, but home to an educated and sophisticated elite, the aristocrats of the Old Gaelic Order, who thrived in the days before the English arrived to wreak such havoc on Irish culture.

The reconstruction of Ballyportry in the 1960s was the work of an American, Bob Brown. When Brown discovered that his vices in New York – staying up late and drinking too much – were virtues in County Clare, he decided to stay, and in a moment of madness he bought Ballyportry. Brown became a pioneer in the restoration of medieval tower houses and an inspiration to many later renovators, including Frank and Ailric Gray at Ballybur.

We were welcomed by the present owners, Siobhan and Pat Wallace, who have brought an intellectual life back to the tower. Siobhan is an architect while Pat, the director of the National Museum in Dublin, is an archaeologist. A grand dinner at their long wooden table was a feast of good food and great conversation ranging from the Old Gaelic Order to Ian Paisley, from the Burren’s rare wild flowers to the collapse of the role of sports in Irish identity.

Sophia and I set off for walks every day with local friends, visiting megalithic dolmens on bleak highlands, skirting the mysterious turloughs, searching for the rare pine martens in the woods, visiting the wind-hallowed ruins of the Cathedral at Kilfenora. One evening we sat by the peat fire in Linnane’s pub entranced by airs and reels of the Kilfenora Céili Band.

Another evening, in the Great Hall at Ballyportry, I had a medieval moment. A fire was burning in a grate large enough to roast an ox. From the high windows, I gazed across wetlands and tussocky pastures where two donkeys were grazing. On the horizon was the iconic shape of Mullaghmore. The wind was sighing among the battlements.

We have all trooped round castles at some point, climbed the stairs, peered into rooms from behind the velvet ropes. But at Ballyportry I had suddenly stopped over that velvet rope. In the Great Hall, beneath the massive roof timbers, I was throwing logs on the fire, lighting candles on the iron candle stands round the stone walls, sinking into the sofa with an account of the Flight of the Earls, that seminal moment when Ireland’s greatest chieftains fled the country for exile on the continent. For a moment I felt close to the people who had once lived here, who had sat by this same fireplace, listened to the same winds, in a distant age when these castles were the centre of culture and longing in Ireland. Until Sophia arrived with a request to play princesses and pirates. And then we chased one another up and down what WB Yeats used to call the ‘winding, gyring, spiring treadmills of a stair’.

www.ballyportry.ie. Three nights from £1,482; one week from £1,975 (sleeps eight people). Dinner can be prepared on the day of arrival from about £25 per person. For those who prefer a hotel in the Burren, the Gregans Castle Hotel (www.gregans.ie; doubles from £140) has one of the finest restaurants in the west of Ireland.