IRELAND IN SUMMER: 9,000 COLLEGE ROOMS HIT THE ACCOMMODATION MARKET

THE GREAT OUTDOORS
John Brennan
Goes Glamping

COUNTDOWN TO THE BOUNCE BACK
Harry Crosbie
Predicts a Turnaround

LUXURY RESTORED
BALLYFIN'S AMBITION TO BECOME ONE OF EUROPE'S BEST LUXURY HOTELS

FOOD FIT FOR A QUEEN + HOW TO SELL WEDDINGS + SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD
A BEAUTY TO BEHOLD AT BALLYFIN

When the good lady of Carton House, the Countess of Kildare, described Ballyfin back in 1759 as a ‘delightful place indeed, much beyond any place I have seen in Ireland’ she may have been on to something.

More than 250 years later Ballyfin is rejuvenated under new ownership and has set its sights on becoming not just Ireland’s most luxurious five star hotel, but one of the very best small luxury hotels in Europe.

A few short weeks after its official opening, SARAH GRENnan took a trip to the heart of Slieve Bloom country to check out this new jewel of Laois.

A oifs, a bright local girl with a beaming smile, appears at our side within nanoseconds of strolling into the stunningly elegant Saloon at Ballyfin.

She is eager to help but keeps a respectful distance as we literally gape at the magnificent surroundings of this 19th century pile, designed for the Coote family by the legendary father and son architects, Sir Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison, and recently brought back to life by Ballyfin’s current owners, Fred and Kay Krebsiel, who have recreated the house’s original grandeur following a near century of austerity under the Patrician Brothers.

It is fair to say that neither I, nor my sidekick for the trip (the husband), are frequently lost for words but as we weave our way through the Stair Hall and take a stroll around Ballyfin’s network of six lavish reception rooms the only utterances we manage to muster are ‘Ooh... Ash... Oh my God... Wow’. I mentally have a quiet word with myself, for as a journalist I should have a greater arsenal of phrases at my disposal. But thinking about the article that I am about to write I ponder, ‘how on earth am I going to do this place justice’?

The truth is that you cannot do Ballyfin justice – not even the breathtaking photos taken by photographer James Fennell for the
book on its restoration (and reproduced here) truly capture its magnificence. Its beauty — freshly unleashed after eight painstaking years of renovation — has to be witnessed in person to be fully appreciated.

As we stumble around open-jawed, captivated by the milieu, Aoife guides us through a secret door in the library and settles us into the cozy Richard Turner conservatory. What can she get us, she enquires. Still a little awestruck, we ask for a menu. ‘Well… we don’t really have a menu…’ she explains sweetly. ‘We can make you anything you want. What would you like to have?’

‘Anything!’ we ask, minds whirring with boundless possibilities. And just like that, the tone is set for a truly luxurious stay at Ballyfin.

We later learn that Aoife, who grew up on the fringes of Ballyfin Demesne, is a former pupil at the Patrician College which was run on the grounds by the Brothers until four years ago. She tells us about life as a student at Ballyfin, about the chapel which was once housed in the State Dining Room, the escape tunnel which ran from the Rotunda at the heart of the house under the grounds outdoors, and how wonderful it is as a past pupil to see the house and estate restored to its former glory.

Employing staff with personal ties to the house was a key strategy for general manager, Aileesh Carew, the in-demand hospitality consultant and former Hotel & Catering Review Gold Medal Awards judge who was lured back into full time operations last September by the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to run a house like Ballyfin.

‘Finding the right staff was one of the most challenging parts of the opening,’ she explains. ‘We want our guests to have an Irish experience so we wanted to hire as many local staff as possible, and in particular former students of the school, so that they could talk to the guests about their time here. I wanted staff who know where the Slieve Bloom Mountains are and who could talk about the locality, but at the same time, we are pitching ourselves at the luxury end of the market, so we have to get the skills right also.’

A few short weeks after Ballyfin’s 1 May official opening, the 44-strong team appears to have nailed the skills requirement. Service is virtually flawless — it is warm and welcoming, yet unobtrusive and respectful. Staff are chatty when engaged, showing flashes of personality without being overbearing. As if equipped with a sixth
Discovering Ballyfin

Located on the doorstep of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, Ballyfin Demesne was once the ancestral seat of the Cusack family, the family of the Duke of Wellington, and laterly the centre, which arrived in Ireland in 1601 and whose descendants commissioned Sir Richard and Sir William Vevres to design the Jacobean Georgian house in 1622. A century later, Ballyfin was sold to the Patrician Brothers who modified the Victorian Gothic on the estate.

Restored by its current owners, David and Kay Krehbiel with help from architects Parnell Miller Truitt and John J. Coates and interior designer Calvin O’Hara, Ballyfin includes 18 guestrooms comprising two suites, seven bedrooms, five deluxe rooms and one single room. An impressive network of six reception rooms includes the grand Saloon, the elegant GOLD Dinning Room, the 8th Library, the Turner-designed Conservatory and the Ballroom, which features intricate flooring inspired by the lion crest of the Alhambra Palace in Granada.

Guestrooms include 100 percent cotton, 300 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, iPads and docking stations, complimentary Wi-Fi, fine dining service, private butler’s pantry, and Sally Millar handmade soaps.

Activities on the 600-acre estate include fishing and hunting on the 12-acre lake, tennis, croquet, croquet, bowls, archery, falconry and hiking and golf starting around the parklands and ancient woodland. There’s even a fully equipped with a telescope if you wish to take in Ballyfin’s impressive panoramic views of the Slieve Bloom Mountains and indulge in a bit of star spotting. Indoor pursuits include wine and whiskey tastings, musical recitals and art and architectural tours of the house.

Ballyfin has been fortunate twice in its life,” notes Jim Reynolds, the well known landscape architect who now serves as the estate’s managing director and a 10% stakeholder. ‘The first was in 1922 when the Patrician Brothers acquired it when no one else wanted it, and the second was nine years ago when Fred Krehbiel bought it from the Brothers.’

Jim had been on the lookout for a house to develop as a small hotel for Fred and Kay Krehbiel for some time, he explains. He and Fred, the Chicago-based chair of the giant connect manufacturer, in 1984 had become fast friends years previously when Jim landscaped the couple’s garden at their home in Key’s native Kerry.

‘Over the years we went around all the great houses looking for somewhere to buy and turn into a hotel. Originally we wanted somewhere within two hours of Key, but it couldn’t be in the Cotswolds because we didn’t want to compete with the Allens in Ballymaloe. It was back in 2000 when I thought of Ballyfin. It wasn’t on the market at the time, but I heard a whisper that the Brothers might be open to offers.’

Jim had known of Ballyfin for sometime – he had visited with Myrtle Allen in the 1980s when she was looking for a glasshouse for Ballymaloe and he was so impressed with the house he had returned several times over the years to show it to others. It took him a year to encourage Fred to come to see it but once he did the American, who has a keen interest in Georgian architecture, immediately saw its possibilities. ‘The house wasn’t in great shape, but Fred could see that all the original fireplaces and doors were still in place. A quarter of the floor had been pulled up, but the rest was all in jigsaw boxes. It was clear that things hadn’t been hugely altered over the years.’

Once acquired, it took a year to negotiate the planning process. Cognizant that the planners would pay close attention to the project, Fred and Jim put a committee together to argue the case for Ballyfin’s registrative as a 21st century hotel. ‘We bought the Knight of Glin on board to talk about things from the Georgian Society’s point of view and we also had one of the Brothers, Darina Allen, and the architect Kevin Mulligan advising us.’

The plan worked. ‘The planners could see that we weren’t going to come back a year later and look for permission for 100 houses and a golf club. They knew we weren’t golfers, and they saw that we knew that the house was important and that we wanted to do the right thing.’

The right thing, says Jim, was to bring the old house back to life, lovingly remodelling its 15 guestrooms and six reception rooms and restoring Ballyfin to its original glory. ‘We certainly aren’t going to put 100 bedrooms on it,’ he scoffs.

But hoteliers will tell you, those 100 bedrooms are where the money is. It will be hard to make a return on investment on just 15 rooms to let. ‘It may not be worth what we spend on it in the open market today, but it will when property comes back,’ Jim believes. And what did they spend on it? ‘Do you know, I have a terrible memory,’ he says with a chuckle.

Jim may be trying to avoid the question, but it is clear that money was no object in Ballyfin’s restoration. The house is packed to the rafters with artistic and cultural goodies – from the stunning artworks, both period and modern, to the magnificent antiques and the deeply desirable collection of books in the library, including many first editions dating back to the 19th century.

The contents were amassed over years of...
collecting by Fred, who is evidently a renaissance
man with a passion for the arts, and Kay, his
Irish wife, who has a keen eye for design. Can
you put a price on Ballyfin and its contents? We
certainly wouldn't know where to start. 'It is fair
to say that it cost more than expected to restore
Ballyfin, but you only get one shot at this and
Fred thought it was important to do it right."
Jim divulges.

Aileesh Carew, a seasoned hotelier who has run
five star hotels around the world, realises however
that no matter how successful Ballyfin becomes,
with 15 rooms it will not generate enough cash
to cover the investment to date. Fortunately for
Aileesh, her boss realises it too. 'Fred knows he
won't make his investment back, but he wants to
make sure Ballyfin covers its running costs. For
him, this wasn't about making money. He has
always dreamt of owning a hotel as he has spent
his life in hotels. He was looking for something
to bring together his love of art, history and culture.
This house was built to entertain and to allow its
guests to spend time with friends. By restoring
Ballyfin Fred has been able to bring back to life
a part of history that is gone. I think in the long-
term this is his legacy.'

As legacies go, it's certainly impressive, but with
the notoriously high running costs associated with
running a stately home, not to mention an ultra-
luxurious five star hotel, how long will it take
before Ballyfin is able to wash its face?

'We would hope to break even in three to four
years,' says Aileesh, before confiding: 'I panic - I see all these staff and no guests and I
start to worry. But I'm ambitious, I want it to be
full overnight when in reality it will take a little
longer to get the word out there.'

And yet, while Aileesh worries, we were
somewhat surprised by the number of guests
staying during our visit: two American
gentlemen in their 30s/40s, an elderly American
couple, a party of three equally mature
Americans and two Irish couples in their mid-
years, plus ourselves, brought Friday night
occupancy to 13 out of a possible full house of

29. It may be 45% but it is very early days in
Ballyfin's life as a hotel. Factor in the dreaded
R-word which has put an end to much of
the lavish spend by domestic holidaymakers,
and Ballyfin seems to be getting its groove
on relatively quickly. The question did occur
to us however, how many of the guests are
paying and how many are there at the invite
of the owners, or on a familiarisation trip like
ourselves?

While Fred is sending a number of friends
through to test his newly finished temple,
Aileesh reveals that aside from that, occupancy
is shaping up nicely. They've already had
their first paying guests for exclusive use (an
Israeli family who took it for a week) and the
summer looks promising. June is pretty good
with occupancy in the region of 60-70% and
some nice group bookings. July is looking a
ilittle quieter (like everywhere, Ballyfin is at the
mercy of late booking patterns) but August has
good business on the cards.

Is it all Americans? We know from the
CSO first quarter figures, and from anecdotal
evidence at the coalface, that the North
American market is starting to rally.

'There is a lot of American interest, but there
is Irish too,' points out Aileesh. 'This, we must
admit, surprises us a little, bearing in mind the
continuing negativity doctored the economy.
Though Ballyfin's life as a hotel was conceived
prior to the economic Armageddon, surely
there aren't that many Irish around who want
to splash the cash like it is 2007! After all,
at €600 per night for the house's single
room, €390 for a deluxe room, €1,150 for a
state room, €1,400 for a suite, and €14,500
for exclusive use, Ballyfin is hardly a low cost
gateway.

While conspicuous consumption may no
longer be in vogue, Aileesh notes that - just like
the economists and politicians keep telling us
- there is still a lot of money around. Though
there is an approximate €108bn tucked away
on deposit for safekeeping, there are still a
group of Irish consumers who are ready, willing and able to indulge in a little luxury, albeit they wish to do so discreetly. ‘We think we will become a destination for special occasions,’ says the general manager.

Taking discretion as the better part of valour, there are few places in Ireland more valiant therefore than Ballyfin, which is accessed via discreet gates (with understated signage) that are closed to the public. The house is only open to overnight guests, ie hawker's can't pop in for a cuppa and a nose about. We can't help but feel a little sorry that this beautiful house can't be viewed by more, but it's a business, not a museum, and we understand the decision to keep it exclusively for those who are paying the big bucks to check in. ‘We want guests to feel like they are staying in a private house,’ explains Alleesh Carew, and everything is designed to reinforce this, from the absence of menus in the lounges, to the tasting menu at dinner and the picnics which can be whipped up for a boat trip on the lake. ‘We want guests to feel like they have a private chef when they're here,’ Alleesh adds, to that end Fred Cordonnier (ex Guibaud's, The Shelbourne, The Clarence and The K Club) and his kitchen brigade are available to cater to guests' every whim.

But what of those rates? Ballyfin is a long way from the Battle of Ballbridge where hoteliers are slugging it out for bargain basement prices, but even in the traditionally less price-sensitive five star market the rate contagion is spreading. Can Ballyfin hold the line? ‘Absolutely, but obviously we are businesspeople so we have to be savvy with our market. There are things that we can do to make it more attractive,’ Alleesh reveals.

For instance one guest recently came back to us and said she wanted to bring her mother here for her 80th birthday but she wasn't sure about the rate. We explained that we couldn't move on the figures, but we encouraged her to come early and make the most of the facilities. As everything is included in the nightly rate, we encouraged her to arrive in time for lunch, have dinner that evening, and to stay on for lunch before departing the next day. When you take that into account, the nightly rate doesn't seem so steep.'

Pricing is both an art and a science, notes Alleesh. ‘We are marketing ourselves among similar lines to Villa Fodrinelli in Italy but there the cheapest rate is €2,000 B&B. Here we are offering the idea of a private house so we are offering a 24 hour concept. Everything is inclusive food, laundry, soft drinks etc, the only thing you have to pay for is your alcohol - excluding aperitifs before dinner - and your spa treatments.’ Gratuity is also included, as Alleesh doesn't want guests to feel they need to tip all the time. She explains the pricing strategy: ‘I pitched the rate at just below €1,000 for a deluxe room. I looked at what the top five, five star hotels in Ireland were charging in their rack rates and I added the cost of food and beverage.'

Of course, with no pressure to make interest payments to an impatient bank, it is altogether easier to stand firm in the face of haggling and of all Ballyfin's luxuries this is the one which Irish hoteliers will be most envious of. ‘We've come to realise that if we have to explain our rate to people then they're not really our target market,' Alleesh notes. In other words, if you have to ask... In order to help Ballyfin tap into the right target market Alleesh has enlisted a crack team of experts to get the message out there. PR is a big part of getting awareness about Ballyfin. We've employed PR teams in the UK and the States and we had Fleishman working on the launch here. We are fortunate that in the Irish market there has been a lot of media interest.’ But it's not just the Irish media who have sat up and taken note. Condé Nast Traveller, In Style, The Financial Times, Tatler, House & Garden, Town & Country and many more glossies have provided glowing coverage. Sales agents such as Therese Fennelly of Highlife Marketing in the UK have also been hard at work, while the Ballyfin team is hoping to be accepted into the Blue Book family of luxury Irish hotels, restaurants and historic houses and castles.

Perhaps a Michelin star would also help place Ballyfin on the map, thus igniting the fires of Gordon's high standards. ‘It's not a defined goal, but we want to be at that level so, if it came, it would be nice to get that recognition for the chef,’ acknowledges Alleesh.

In the meantime, the team at Ballyfin are busy simply welcoming guests after eight long years of refurbishment, still putting the finishing touches to the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle - the ballroom and children's playroom. Like many things with Ballyfin, finishing the ballroom in the modern wing to the right of the house has gone over time and over budget, ‘but Fred wants it to right,' says Jim Reynolds. When finished the ballroom will be able to house parties of 120, but don't expect Ballyfin to be awash with weddings. ‘We will do some, but we couldn't have 50 a year, people would trash the place,' Jim worries. ‘There has been so much time and attention put into getting the interiors right that you would be afraid that the house would get wrecked.'

Fred Krebbiel's wish was to create something in Ireland that was unique, and in restoring Ballyfin he has achieved that. Not only has he revitalised this grand old house and preserved for future generations, he has created something that is the most unique and elusive of all, an Irish hotel which can rise above the challenges of the recession and be a beacon of hope in the face of worsening economic conditions.

As we reluctantly depart Ballyfin, cruising down its long and winding drive, we can't help but feel envious of Alleesh Carew and the team. Yes, they have their work cut out for them trying to carve a market for a new luxury haven in the midst of the worst recession since the Great Depression, but what a great hand they have been dealt by the Krebbiels. Ballyfin is indeed a beauty to behold.

** TAKE THE TOUR: ballyfin.com **