ruggedness of County Kerry's mountains or the dramatic, Atlantic-bashed coast of its western extremities but the region is home to a velvety, undulating landscape dotted with historic towns, ancient castles and towers.

Less than 20 miles up the road towards Dublin, I am standing amid the more presidential surroundings of the Wellesley-Pole Suite of the Ballyfin hotel, a magnificent Regency mansion set in rolling parkland. Through the window there are views of a cascade tumbling from a small classical temple down a long flight of steps, the water glistening in the early May sunshine.

By chance, Obama's visit coincides with the opening of this palatial hotel, a second event that locals hope might put this area of Ireland on the map. Serendipitously, the hotel is the brainchild of another American, indeed another Chicagoan, Fred Krehbiel, and his Irish-born wife Kay.

They had toured the country seeking out a suitable property before settling on Ballyfin. Built in the 1820s for Sir Charles Coote, for much of the past century the house was a boarding school. Now, after a 19-year restoration project, it has been returned to its original opulence (with added indoor swimming pool and treatment room). The Cootees were not afraid to spend their money, as the gilded ceiling of one of the house's most impressive rooms, the aptly named Gold Drawing Room, testifies.

With just 15 bedrooms and two suites, Ballyfin can still feel more like a stately home than a hotel. It is possible to dine in splendour in the State Dining Room, or spend an afternoon curled up with a book in the 70ft long library with roaring fires at either end. From the library, you can venture, Alice in Wonderland-like, through a secret door into a beautifully restored 19th-century wrought-iron conservatory, which is the perfect place to contemplate the clouds rolling in on a soft Irish day.

The Celtic Tiger years brought golf courses and ill-conceived modern wings to the grounds of many an Irish stately home and castle. It's almost a relief to discover that at Ballyfin there are 600 acres of unimpeached parkland and gardens, laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens, waiting to be explored on foot or by bike. During my stay, dappled sunlight shone through the majestic woodlands of beech, oak and horse chestnut that were awash with bluebells. Lionel, one of the butlers, can also take guests out for a leisurely turn in a rowing boat or fishing for pike.

Even for those without the budget for Ballyfin (which costs at least £250 a night), the area has much to offer. Just beyond the hotel gates are the Slieve Bloom mountains, an expanse of heather flecked hills criss-crossed with miles of hiking trails. Encircling the mountains is a necklace of nine small towns and villages that can be explored by car or bike, while just to the west is one of Ireland's best kept secrets, the charming town of Birr.

Full of elegant Georgian architecture, the

Heartland Clockwise from top: the main street in Moneymore, County Offaly; publican Ollie Hayes; the Westmeath Room at the Ballyfin hotel; the Ballyfin estate and gardens; US tourists take photographs outside a bungalow painted with the US flag in Moneymore

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**Short cuts**

**Paris** French tourism authorities have awarded a new top grade to just eight hotels, prompting controversy over those overlooked. Traditionally French hotels were rated on a scale of one to four stars but, in 2009, a fifth was added, and now the very best can apply for the designation "palace". The Meurice and the Plaza Athénée, both part of the Dorchester Collection, were successful but François Delahaye, the group's chief operating officer, said the omission of renowned hotels such as the George V and the Ritz had "removed all credibility" from the award. "I have a bitter taste of victory in my mouth," he said.

**Santiago de Compostela** A new film about the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrims' trail through northern Spain, is expected to draw a surge of walkers to the route. The Way (released in the UK

and Ireland this weekend) tells the story of a pair of American twins who travel from the US in September and follow the trail for the first time. The film, directed by My Left Foot star Richard Dreyfuss, is the latest in a string of films that have put Spain's cultural heritage on the map for visitors.

**Open-air** 'Fire Sailor Boat 4' by Teo San Jose at The Grove, Hertfordshire

**Hannover** The Fireworks Company has announced that the fireworks display will be held this weekend in the parkland of the

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dent Wellesley-Pole, a magnifi-
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Full of elegant Georgian architecture, the
town is also home to Birr Castle, the family
seat of the Earls of Rosse, which has 120
acres of glorious gardens. A few miles to
the east of the mountains, just outside the
town of Portlaoise, is one of Ireland’s lesser-
known but most significant archaeological
sites, the ghostly remains of the Rock of
Dunamase – a 150ft outcrop crowned with
the ancient, shattered remains of a large
castle and fortress. Emo Court, another
impressive neoclassical pile open to the
public, is close by. All are very rewarding
and largely overlooked by visitors in a
hurry to get to Ireland’s better-
known attractions.

But perhaps this year, thanks to two men
from Chicago, Ireland’s undiscovered heart
might finally start to get the attention
it deserves.

Ballyfin (www.ballyfin.com) has double
rooms from £380 per night, full board.
For more on visiting the region, see
www.ireland.is/eng/visit/republic

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the US in September) stars Martin
Sheen, and follows his character’s
progress on a 500-mile trek along
the route. To coincide with the
film, luxury tour operator Cox
and Kings has launched an altogether
more indulgent alternative. Starting
in Bilbao, its new eight-night
itinerary lets visitors drive rather
than walk to Santiago, stopping
each night along the way at
historic hotels. It costs from £995
per person.
www.coxandkings.co.uk

Hannover The International
Fireworks Competition kicks off
this weekend in the baroque
parkland of the Royal Gardens of
Herrenhausen. Five teams
stage displays over the
starting tonight with the
and, closing with a
display on September 2.
www.hannover.de

Hertfordshire A major
of sculpture has opened
grounds of The Grove,
house hotel close to W
than 80 pieces by 28
on show, including wor
King, Ann Christopher
Westerveld. The exhibi
open to non-resident
continues until August.
www.thegrove.co.uk

Open-air ‘Fire Sailor Boat 4’ by Teo
San Jose at The Grove, Hertfordshire.