Ballyfin is now a magnificent hotel but it's not the only historic house hereabouts with a story to tell, says Anthony Gardner.

In a country rich with attractions, the Midlands of Ireland do not come high on most visitors' lists. "What are you going to see?" a sceptical Dubliner asked me. "Prosperous jail and lunatic asylum?" But this is unfair; the area has a beautiful range of mountains (the Slieve Blooms) and a high concentration of castles and historic houses. Among the last is Ballyfin, one of Ireland's most splendid - and most

expensive - hotels. The Republic is currently an economic disaster zone. Hotels are closing left, right and centre. So why would anyone choose to open one charging top dollar?

"When the economic crisis hit in 2008, we did stop work for six months," admits Ballyfin's managing director, Jim Reynolds. "But then we thought, 'We've come such a long way, we can't stop now.'"

A long way indeed. Abandoned by its Anglo-Irish owners during the Twenties, Ballyfin spent the next 50 years as a school. By the turn of this century it was on the point of collapse. Restoring it to pristine condition has taken a decade.

Arriving after a 90-minute drive from Dublin, we drove up to an impressive entrance, with handsome lodge and then, two miles farther on, we found an even grander gateway, opening onto 600 acres of private park and woodland. And there, at the end of a mile-long drive, overlooking a 28-acre ornamental lake, was the great neoclassical facade of Ballyfin, complete with sphinxes and huge portico. Ballyfin is considered one of the finest houses in Ireland, and in its restored state it is quite simply astonishing. The entrance hall contains an ornate mosaic floor brought back from the Grand Tour. The salon and library are dominated by towering sconces and columns. The Gold Room takes its name from the gilded plaster ceiling and silk-covered walls. The rotunda has an inlaid wooden floor inspired by the Alhambra Palace. The furniture and paintings are worthy of a museum. Except for the slimline telephones and fully functioning plumbing, you could be enjoying life as it was lived here 200 years ago.

Wandering through the grounds, you come across walled gardens, grottoes and a six-storey stone tower. With an estate like this, there is little incentive to explore beyond the gates - but to do so is to find delightful countryside and other great houses which make fascinating points of comparison.

On a morning of mist giving way to bright sunshine, we followed a narrow, winding road over the gently rising Slieve Bloom Mountains which dictate County Laois (pronounced "Leesh") from Offaly. From the top, at 1,250 feet, you can (on an unmisty day) see all four provinces of Ireland. Covered with forest and moorland, this is prime walking country; the Slieve Bloom Way, a 28-mile loop, starting from Glenarrow, takes in the best of it. At Xmas we stepped to visit a classic Anglo-Irish folly: a tomb in the Church of Ireland graveyard designed as a 300 scale model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. For ambition, however, it does not compare with the observatory at Birr Castle, 10 miles away, built by the third Earl of Rosse in 1845. His 12-ton "Leviathan" was the most powerful telescope in the world for 70 years; today you can see a full-scale replica in the beautiful castle gardens, with the Heath-Robinson machinery needed to manoeuvre it.

South of Birr lies a castle of a very different kind - Leap (pronounced "lep"). reputed to be the most haunted in
Ireland. The stories told about it range from the three cartloads of human bones found in the oublotte to the ordeal of two young soldiers who spent a night here: one died of a heart attack, the other went stark, staring mad. It is now owned by Sean Ryan, a renowned tin-whistle player, and those brave enough to venture past the rusty gates and death's-head door knocker can visit it by appointment.

It certainly feels spooky; so have the present inhabitants been troubled by the ghosts? "No," says Sean Ryan. "But they let us know they're there."

The frightening way is Roscrea Castle, on the road back to Ballyfin. Dating from the 13th century, and unusually well preserved, it contains behind its drawbridge and working portcullis a large and elegant Queen Anne house. As you enter the gates, you feel as if you're playing architectural pass-the-parcel.

There is plenty more to see within easy reach. Emo Court, to the east of Portlaoise, is another great Georgian house; the Heywood Gardens, to the south, were designed by Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Cashel with its famous rock and Kilkenny with its splendid castle are only an hour away.

Personally, if I were paying €450 plus for a night at Ballyfin, I would stay put - especially as the price includes all your meals (and drinks, except wine at dinner). Most of its guests, I imagine, will be international jet-setters for whom such a sum is small change. But if I had something to celebrate, and a sudden windfall, Ballyfin would be top of my list of places to go.