EXCLUSIVE
Top 100 restaurants in the world

Lord of the manor
ELEGANT ATTIRE FOR THE MODERN GENTLEMAN
COUNTRY LIVING

FROM ANTIQUES AND ARISTOCRACY TO ROSE GARDENS AND ROCKERIES, LAUREN HOLMES HEADS TO THE EMERALD ISLE FOR A TASTE OF DOWNTON ABBEY, IRISH STYLE...
“Ballyfin’s dramatic drives were designed to tease and entice, and flashes of the manor flit by through the trees as we skim past rose gardens and rockeries”

Picture a regency mansion of speckled grey sandstone, magnificent in size and set overlooking a glittering lake enveloped in woodland. It’s 1820 and the Costes, Ireland’s wealthiest landowners, have just departed, leaving you with the keys to the estate. Overnight it becomes your estate on establishing their new status on the social scene; no expense has been (or ever will be) spared in the creation of the greatest of country houses, a pleasurable home for the aristocracy. A heady scent of logs cracking in the hearth hits as a member of staff swings open mammoth mahogany doors to welcome you as master of the house.

This is not the opening sequence to the latest British TV period drama, this is what it feels like to arrive at Ballyfin, a spectacular 20-room country house hotel tucked amongst the meadows of County Laois, a 90-minute drive from Dublin. The secret sin of many an English person is that they have never explored Ireland, and despite crossing the world on a professional basis, it was certainly one of mine. It took Ireland to be tipped as one of this year’s hottest travel destinations, driven by a booming economy, no-expense-spared restoration, the inherent magnificence of the grounds or the refined fleet of discreet staff, it’s the most authentic of fantasies that I have no trouble slipping into – the problem comes when I have to tear myself away.

Billy isn’t always on beck and call to take guests out across the estate, bikes and golf carts set out on the main drive give guests ‘total freedom to explore’. As we head out to visit the ice house and custom-built picnic cabin, we run into Billy’s billionnaire new friend, a manufacturing giant Molex – and managing director Jim Reynolds, out for a morning stroll. As the many stories behind Ballyfin’s resurrection unfold, it’s their vision, courage and ingenuity that you’ll hear referenced countless times – ‘how the pair hunted for years for a country house suitable to house Fred and his Irish wife Kay’s ever-growing collection of art and antiques; how they heard through the grapevine that the mythical Ballyfin may be for sale, a boarding school since the 1920s when a Patrician brotherhood had purchased it from the Costes for the princely sum of 30,000$. It was the start of the Troubles (the bitter guerilla war that preceded Irish independence) and the Irish gentry were out of luck, out of land and out of pocket. In turn the brothers, crippled by expenses, were finally persuaded to sell. What followed was a resurrection that pulled the house back from the brink of ruin, a passion project that took nine years, four of which were dedicated to the interiors. Finally opened in 2011, the result is less a hotel, more a living, breathing piece of history. There are some jaw-dropping details from the mosaic Roman floor, installed after the Costes’ grand European tour, to prehistoric elk antlers, an intricate glass house, designed by Kew Gardens architect Richard Turner, to a Baccarat crystal chandelier that once belonged to Josephine Bonaparte and now graces the Gold Room – palm-sized crystals dripping to the tip of your head. But it’s the Costes’ personal family treasures, family portraits and pencil drawings that have found their way tip of your head. But it’s the Costes’ personal family treasures, family portraits and pencil drawings that have found their way back through the ages thanks to a web of antique dealers, that gave it such an authentic soul. Serious credit goes to British interior designer Colin Orchard, who has succeeded in crafting a world where not one piece of the Krehbiels’ private collection of antiques feels out of place. Of the 20 bedrooms, large sash windows overlooking the lake or water cascade, each is a work of art,
defined by the most opulent wallpapers that range from hand-painted woodlands to an antique Asian print picked up at auction from the House of Habsburg. It’s heaven to soak in the giant marble bathtub and wake up in a four-poster bed hung with silk, to be surrounded by so many antiques that it soon feels normal. If one needed 20 reasons to return to Ballyfin, sleeping in each of the bedrooms would be it.

While there are enough activities – from clay pigeon shooting, horseback riding and history tours to whiskey tastings and nature walks through the mystical Slieve Bloom Mountains – to keep you entertained for weeks, in the end, the best way to spend the time is soaking up the house. We spend afternoons curled up by the fire in the Library, devouring books while being waited on with chamomile tea poured from solid silver pots, and then return again after dinner for battles of chess when everyone’s gone to bed. One evening, we pay a visit to the costume closet, a treasure trove of corsets, Napoleon hats and military jackets dripping in gold fringe, sourced from the Chicago Opera House. Contrived as it sounds, it’s a unique experience to descend for cocktail hour as chatter bubbles over the grand piano and sip Kir Royales in the Gold Room. Much fun at Ballyfin revolves around dining, each meal beautifully laid out in a different drawing room. We feast on exceptional Irish home cooking, traditional dishes that showcase the best of seasonal local produce, from duck confit to wild boar sausages and vegetables from the garden, served in mercifully restrained sizes. The breakfast alone, an endless carousel of smoked salmon, slow-cooked fruit and eggs benedict, is worthy of a sonnet and I develop such an addiction to their Irish soda bread that the staff present me with a loaf when I leave.

Run on a fabulous sense of occasion perfect for a celebration, Ballyfin is a place where memories are made. While we watch a multi-generational family celebrate a 60th birthday in the most spectacular, yet relaxed, fashion, it’s also the most romantic of environments. At Ballyfin, even in the height of the summer, entire households can come back to again and again.

Offering a similarly world-class approach to service yet coupled with an entirely contemporary shot of Ireland’s rugged, raw beauty is five-suite Inis Meáin, located on the smallest of the Aran Islands 23 miles off the west coast and accessible by small plane. With a population of just 150, its seclusion makes it one of the last strongholds of Irish culture, where you can still catch Gaelic spoken on a daily basis and stumble across the local pub in spontaneous collective sing along. It’s here that stressed-out executives go to switch off while romping the length and breadth of the island, gourmet hotpot in hand and enveloped in endless sky and sea, testament to the highly personalized attention from owners Ruari and Marie-Thérèse, contemporary design and a 16-seat restaurant that was rated one of the world’s 12 best restaurants of 2011 by the Financial Times. While up until recently, it has been standout individual experiences, such as Ballyfin and Inis Meáin that have drawn travelers from across the globe, change is afoot. This August, the Belmond Group launches The Belmond Grand Hibernian, an Orient Express-style experience of two, four or six nights, for up to 40 guests, that opens up the country in a new way for luxury travelers to explore Ireland’s dramatic landscape and charismatic culture. Step aboard the contemporary carriages for a feast of fine cuisine with local delicacies, then savor Irish whiskey in the Observation Car while watching the enchanting scenery go by.

Add it all together and it’s clear that Ireland is on the up and that this is no passing fad. In truth, there’s little new to what makes Ireland so special, it’s just taken the world a little while to catch on. I, for one, am in love.