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Ballyhoo, Ballyfin! Ireland as you've never seen it

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As the carriage circled the hill, Billy the Irish cob glanced back at Lionel Chadwick, the coachman at Ballyfin manor, as if to say, "I'm ready, old son. What about you?"

"Chirrup," clucked Lionel, twitching the reins, the answer he always gives when they reach this spot in the road, in sight of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in central Ireland's horse country.

Until that moment, Billy had been clopping leisurely through the woods and beside the lake. Now he took off like a steeplechaser over a fence, galloping uphill with the carriage swaying behind. In the shake of a lamb's tail, as my Irish grandmother liked to say, he'd hauled the carriage - and the dead weight of Lionel and four eager visitors - up and over the crest.

"Come round, Billy, come round, that's a good fella," said Lionel, guiding the horse to a half-turn stop so the passengers, out for an introductory tour of the 680-acre estate, could get a good look at the manor house where they'd be spending the next four days.

"It's a picturesque setting, so it is," said Lionel, gazing at down at the late-Georgian manor set on a swath of green lawn on a lake-side slope. A neo-classic pile with a creamy-grey sandstone facade, wide front steps and an entrance tall enough to admit a horse and rider, Ballyfin was built in 1826 by Sir Charles Coote. Designed to impress, it succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. And it still does, especially since 2011, when the restored property opened as a boutique hotel.

Recent guests to Ballyfin have been lavish with accolades, praising the manor on personal blogs and newsletters, and recommending it on travel sites. Hotel reviewers lucky enough to have stayed in one of the house's 15 named, uniquely furnished bedrooms have done the same, calling Ballyfin Ireland's finest luxury inn. Is it? I haven't seen every historic house on the Emerald Isle, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Not only did owners Chicago residents Fred and Kay Krehbiel spend seven years and millions restoring the 35,000-square foot house, but they duplicated the original interiors with period and reproduction furnishings, 19th century-patterned toile and damask fabrics, and original colors and wall coverings.

They filled the 80-foot-long library's shelves with antique books, topped original fireplace mantels with gold candelabra and installed Empire mirrors. The home is as much a masterpiece as are the paintings hung over fireplaces, Sheraton chests and game tables.

Grand it is. But Ballyfin is no stuffy 6-star hotel managed by a corporation and run by a martinet of

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a manager. The staff is certainly well trained. But there are no career hoteliers on staff, no bell boys standing stiffly, eyes averted, and no maids in starched caps murmuring "yes ma'am," and "no, ma'am."

And after visiting, I'm inclined to think that the outpouring of easy superlatives - spectacular, opulent, sumptuous, refined, magnificent, elegant, heavenly, breathtaking, and all the rest - have missed the real secret of Ballyfin's success.

According to Managing Director Jim Reynolds, the Krehbiels restored Ballyfin as if it were "a private home, where guests would feel like friends invited down for a weekend." The house would be luxurious but low-key, where you could wander through the library, read a book beside the fireplace, settle in any quiet corner to answer emails; or explore the estate - called by its Anglo-Norman name, a "desmesne" - on your own.

The secret - whether intentional or not - was building a staff from a pool of local people, native Irish (for the most part), who know the neighborhood and culture. As they brought color and character to their jobs, they made Ballyfin come alive. Listening to my fellow guests gush about this or that staff member, it was obvious that those brief but personal connections were as memorable as the exceptional cuisine or the silk-draped four-poster beds.

As a guest, I, too, was greeted with a warm welcome, offered tea and a sandwich, and given an informed tour of the house. At breakfast, the waitress remembered my name, asked if I'd adjusted to jet lag, and offered the weather forecast for the day. When she thought I still looked hungry and suggested grilled tomatoes and mushrooms on the side - "Tis no trouble a'tall," she said - Ballyfin looked like more than a pretty face.

The fellows on staff - "lads," as they say, Lionel, Glen, Declan, Brian and the rest - were never too busy to find a map, suggest a pub, find the photo albums documenting every step of the manor's restoration, show the way to the kitchen garden, or stop for a chat if - and only if - I initiated it. When I asked about the mid-19th-century years when Ballyfin was a private boys' boarding school, operating on a shoestring, they made me feel the loneliness and the high jinks.

Some of the same boys, now on staff, remember the kindness of the Christian fathers who taught Latin and geometry. They also remember being hungry most of the time, and the occasional highlights: the single link of sausage at Sunday breakfasts; and the Friday and Sunday suppers of "tea, bread and butter," when it was served with a spoonful of jam.

Some staff duties seemed to be shared, not because Ballyfin was short-staffed, but because the lads jumped in when needed, to help each other out. Lionel Chadwick, who is, in fact, the head butler, in charge of the rest of the lads, plays coachman because it's his wife's family who owns Billy. As such, he knows the horses and rig better than anyone.

When I headed down to the trap and skeet range, to try my hand at breaking clay pigeons, Lionel surprised me by showing up with a huge smile, wearing khakis, a shooting vest and a rakish "Irish flat cap." Assisted by Glen Brophy, the two young men, both experienced bird shooters, act as guides and guards, carrying boxes of shells and shotguns, coaching beginners and monitoring gun safety.

For first-time visitors, especially collectors, inspecting the house and its treasures will surely test your powers of observation. Only photos can help recall the vases, gold-leaf candelabra, Chinese porcelain, bronze statuary, decorative plaster-work, inlaid wood floors, and the original Roman mosaic floor imported from Italy, the stained glass dome, crystal chandeliers, Italian marble pillars, Empire mirrors, Regency clocks, and an array of paintings by Irish artists.

For Type A visitors, there's plenty to do beyond the estate. Most popular is a drive over the misty tops of the 2,000-foot Slieve Bloom Mountains heading for Birr Castle and its botanical gardens, with lunch at a local pub. You can tour the house (Ballyfin can arrange it), a neo-Gothic monster a century overdue for restoration, is owned and occupied by the 7th Earl of Rosse and his son Patrick and family. You'll meet them briefly, before going on with Lorna Shannon, the guide.

Or spend a few hours in modern Ireland, shopping or pub-hopping in nearby Port Laoise (pronounced LEASH) town.

But your Ballyfin visit will be short; spend it on the estate. There's lake fishing from the banks or in the rowboat; cycling on the estate's 10 miles of roads; exercising in the workout room; swimming laps in the indoor pool; arranging a breakfast at the top of the Tower, a Normal-lookalike folly; exploring the stone grotto and the rock garden; investigating the four-acre kitchen garden, where every cool-weather vegetable flourishes; shooting clay pigeons; and riding horseback. In three or

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IF YOU GO:

Ballyfin is in County Laoise, 60 miles west of Dublin. Rent a car and drive, or ask the manor to arrange an airport pickup. The driver, John Ward, can be booked for longer drives through Ireland, a nice add-on before or after Ballyfin. Contact him at john@wardtours.com.

Rates at Ballyfin include all meals, snacks, tea, picnics, and most estate-provided activities. Prices start at \$1,000 per night. Concession or guide-provided activities such as horseback riding and shooting sports cost extra.

For several extra days in Dublin, I recommend the newly renovated, moderately-priced Fitzwilliam Hotel, in the heart of town, walking distance from everything. On-duty Manager Corah Caples provided unlimited assistance. Pat and Tony, the concierges, found theater tickets when there were none. At www.fitzwilliamhoteldublin.com.



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