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Ballyfin showcases Ireland's best



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A seven-year restoration makes Ballyfin look better than ever.

Courtesy of ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

BALLYFIN, Ireland- 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?”



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“Chirrup,” clucked Chadwick, twitching the reins, the answer he invariably gives when they reach this spot in the road, near 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 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 gentle hillside in County Laoise. A neo-classic pile with a creamy-grey sandstone façade, 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.

Grand it is. But Ballyfin is no stuffy six-star hotel managed by a corporation and run by a martinet of a manager. After visiting, I'm inclined to think that the outpouring of acclaim has 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." And they hired the staff from a pool of local people, native Irish (for the most part), who know the neighborhood and culture and bring color and character to their jobs.

Listening to fellow guests gush about this or that staff member made it obvious that those brief but personal connections were as memorable as 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 informal tour of the house. At breakfast, the waitress remembered my name, asked if I'd adjusted to jet lag, and took my breakfast order with a smile. "Tis no trouble a'tall," she insisted, suggesting grilled tomatoes and mushrooms on the side.

The "lads" on staff – 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 to share memories of the mid-19th-century years when Ballyfin was a private boys' boarding school, operating on a shoestring.

With the shoestring gone, the staff to guest ratio is one-to-one. But some tasks are shared from either necessity or choice. Chadwick, the head butler, acts as coachman because it's his wife's family who owns Billy the cob. Knowing the horses and rig better than anyone, Lionel is always ready to show them off to guests.

When I headed down the valley to the trap and skeet range to shoot clay pigeons, Chadwick showed up again, this time wearing khakis, a shooting vest and a "flat cap." With Glen Brophy helping out, the two young men, experienced bird shooters and willing volunteers, unloaded shotguns, loaded shells, set up the range and coached the beginners in the group.

For first-time visitors, especially collectors, the house and its treasures deserve a leisurely look. Besides vases, gold-leaf candelabra, Chinese porcelain, bronze statuary, decorative plaster-work and inlaid wood floors there are an original Roman mosaic floor imported from Italy, a stained glass dome, crystal chandeliers,

Italian marble pillars, Empire mirrors, Regency clocks and the collection of paintings by Irish artists.

On a four-day visit you can fish in the lake, row around the perimeter, cycle on the estate's 10 miles of roads, work out in the gym and swim in the indoor pool. With a five-day vacation you can add a breakfast in the folly (the Norman-lookalike tower) and go horseback riding. Maybe even drive the carriage, if Billy the cob will let you.

THE NITTY GRITTY: Ballyfin is in County Laoise, 60 miles west of Dublin. Rent a car and drive, or ask the manor to arrange an airport pickup. Prices start at \$1,000 per night and include all meals, snacks, tea, picnics, and most estate-provided activities. A few guided activities may cost extra.

For several extra days in Dublin, stay at the moderately-priced Fitzwilliam Hotel, in the city center. At www.fitzwilliamhoteldublin.com.

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