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THE ROYAL TREATMENT

Ireland's Ashford Castle combines old-world charm with modern luxury

By ANNE Z. COOKE

Special to The Star

CONG, Ireland | If your last name is O'Connor — or Burke, Bingham, Oranmore or Browne — you've come to the right place here at Ashford Castle, a rambling stone pile and five-star resort hotel on the north shore of Lough Corrib, in County Mayo.

Admire your forebears' estate from the seat of a horse-drawn jaunting cart, following a network of country lanes beneath ancient trees. Inspect the castle's gray stone, the late-medieval-style towers, the crenellated parapets. Call for a rod and reel and cast a fly into the lake, famous in Europe for sport fishing. Ask the butler to tell the groom to saddle a horse for a bit of outdoor exercise. As Lord of the Manor, these privileges are your due.

As for the courtly arts, try archery in the morning and falconry in the afternoon. Or shoot clay pigeons down at the range. Alternatively, reserve a tennis court, play a round of golf or pamper yourself with a spa treatment. Later on, dine on Irish and international cuisine in the George V room, served by white-gloved waiters. End the evening with a brandy and Ireland's old sweet songs, sung live in the Dungeon Pub. You deserve it.

About the O'Connors, now there's a tale. It wasn't that long ago — about A.D. 1100 — that this battle-fit clan, rulers of west Ireland, built a medieval fortress where Ashford Castle now stands. The site, in a grassy meadow where the River Cong flows into the lake, was easy to defend, and the lake, full of salmon and brown trout, was bountiful. The views would tug at your heartstrings.

But the O'Connors' world was teetering. Sometime about 1228, an Anglo-Norman family, the de Burgos — also called the de Burghs or the Burkes — defeated the O'Connors in battle and built their own castle on the ruins. Then 361 years later, the de Burgos family lost it in a similar raid to one Lord Bingham, an Englishman and the governor of Connaught.

By now the castle, oft-repaired and enlarged, was growing. In 1715, the Oranmore and Browne families took title, building a chateau with a mansard roof. In 1852, the next owner, beer baron Sir Benjamin Guinness, added two large Victorian wings. When Guinness' son, Lord Ardilaun, inherited the 26,000-acre estate, he rebuilt Ashford's entire west wing and restored the woodlands, laying out many of the gardens you see today.

But by 1939, the era of the great landowners was over. In that year, Noel Huggard bought the castle and opened it to the public. He was succeeded in 1970 by John Mulcahy, who restored the entire hotel and built a nine-hole executive golf course. In 1985, a group of Irish-American investors took the plunge.

Spend a few hours rustivating within the castle. Ashford's Victorian interior is quite fantastic, though never gloomy or fey. Polished wood paneling, rich, warm and exquisitely carved, draws the eye toward monumental fireplaces and coats of arms. Austrian crystal and Venetian glass chandeliers glitter, illuminating gold-framed mirrors, oil portraits and voluminous silk draperies. Antique chests, ornamental artwork and plush sofas pamper the guests.

All guest rooms and suites are individually decorated, and contemporary niceties include 24-hour room service, hair dryer, television, electronic safe, bathrobes, large tubs and data port connections for broadband Internet service. Golf and tennis are free to guests. The concierge books other activities.; you pay only for those you use.

TRAVELER'S CHECK | Ashford Castle, Ireland

- Ashford Castle is in the village of Cong, County Mayo, 40 minutes north of Galway City. Shannon Airport is 90 minutes by car; Knock Airport is 45 minutes by car.
- Rooms for two start about \$240 U.S. per person, with full Irish breakfast. Special golf, fishing, honeymoon and other packages are available. Details: ashford.ie.
- Fishermen rate Lough Corrib, Ireland's second largest lake, tops in Europe for sport fishing. Ghillies (fishing guides), boats and tackle are available for rent. Orvis, the 150-year-old fishing outfitter, conducts fly-fishing courses at Ashford in April, June and July.

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