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Ballyhoo Ballyfin! A different Ireland

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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," Lionel clucked, 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 up and over the crest.

"Come round, Billy, come round, that's a good fella," Lionel said, guiding the horse to a half-turn stop so the passengers, out for an introductory tour of the 275-hectare 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," Lionel said, gazing at down at the late-Georgian manor set on a swath of green lawn on a lake-side slope.

A neoclassical 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.

Not only did owners Chicago residents Fred and Kay Krehbiel spend seven years and millions restoring the 3200 square metre house, but they duplicated the original interiors with period and reproduction furnishings, 19th century-patterned toile and damask fabrics, and original colours and wall coverings.

They filled the 25 metre-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 six-star hotel managed by a corporation and run by a martinet of a manager. The staff is certainly well trained.

But no career hoteliers are on staff, no bell boys standing stiffly, eyes averted, and no maids in starched caps murmuring "Yes ma'am," and "No, ma'am".

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.

I 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 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.

There's plenty to do beyond the estate. Most popular is a drive over the misty tops of the 600m Slieve Bloom Mountains heading for Birr Castle and its botanical gardens, with lunch at a local pub. Or spend a few hours in modern Ireland, shopping or pub-hopping in nearby Port Laoise (pronounced "Leash") town.

IF YOU GO:

Ballyfin is in County Laoise, 96km west of Dublin. Rent a car and drive, or ask the manor to arrange an airport pick-up. 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 about AUD\$1080 a night. Activities such as horseback riding and shooting sports cost extra.

For several extra days in Dublin, try the newly renovated, moderately-priced Fitzwilliam Hotel in the heart of town at www.fitzwilliamhoteldublin.com.

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