

At Home at Ballyfin: Ireland's Best in Show

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By *Anne Z. Cooke*



BALLYFIN, Ireland- As the carriage rounded the lake and headed uphill, 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 Chadwick, twitching the reins, the answer he invariably gives when they reach this spot in the road, east of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, in central Ireland's horse country.

Until that moment, Billy had been clopping leisurely through the woods. 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-bred grandmother used 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 Chadwick, 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 Chadwick, 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 built in 1826 by Sir Charles Coote, Ballyfin has a creamy-grey sandstone façade, wide front steps and an entrance tall enough to admit a horse and rider. 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 manor. 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 not stuffy six-star hotel managed by a corporation and run by a starched-collar martinet. After visiting, I'm inclined to think that the outpouring of acclaim has missed the real secret of the manor's instant success. The Krehbiels intended Ballyfin to resemble a "private home, where guests would feel like friends invited down for a weekend," says Managing Director Jim Reynolds. And they hired the staff locally, preferring employees who know the neighborhood 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.



Like all Ballyfin guests I was greeted like an old friend, 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 point out directions, suggest a local pub, find the photo albums documenting every step of the manor's restoration, show the way to the kitchen garden or stop to share stories of the mid-19th-century years when Ballyfin was a private boys' boarding school, operating on the thinnest of shoestrings.



With shoestring financing a memory, the staff to guest ratio is one-to-one. But some estate tasks are shared, often by choice. Chadwick, whose primary role is as head butler, also plays coachman because it's his wife's family who owns Billy the cob. Knowing the horses and rig better than anyone, he looks forward to squiring guests around the estate. And later, when I headed down the valley to the trap and skeet range to shoot clay pigeons, Chadwick was there again, this time wearing khakis, a shooting vest and an Irish-style "flat cap." With Glen Brophy helping, the two young men, willing volunteers and experienced bird shooters themselves, set up the range, unloaded shotguns and boxes of shells and coached the beginners in the group.



For first-time visitors, especially collectors, the house and its treasures deserve an appreciative look. Besides vases, gold-leaf candelabra, Chinese porcelain, bronze statuary, decorative plaster-work, Empire mirrors and

Regency clocks there are inlaid wood floors, an authentic Roman mosaic floor imported from Italy, a stained glass dome, crystal chandeliers and the collection of paintings by Irish artists.

On a three-day visit you can fish in the lake, row across to the end where the swans make their nest, 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 (a Norman-lookalike tower), an afternoon at the shooting range and a horseback ride. You might even get a chance to drive the carriage, if Billy the cob agrees.



MAKING IT HAPPEN: 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 extra days in Dublin, stay at the moderately-priced, city-center Fitzwilliam Hotel. At www.fitzwilliamhoteldublin.com.

Writer Anne Z. Cooke's great-grandparents hail from the old sod.

Images courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld,.

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