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Where to stay



IRELAND FIVE COUNTRY-HOUSE HOTELS

Stepping up to the mark

A new generation of hoteliers has taken charge at some of Ireland's finest rural properties. Aoife O'Riordain checks them out

BALLYFIN, COUNTY LAOIS

This is easily the grandest hotel in Ireland. It has also been a labour of love for Chicago electronics magnate Fred Krehbiel and his Irish wife Kay, who spent years searching for a suitable property to transform. They settled on this neoclassical mansion at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, which was built in 1820s for the wealthy Coote family. Ballyfin opened last May after a nine-year renovation that has returned the building to its original Regency opulence. It overlooks a tranquil lake on a 600-acre demesne with a park laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens. The interior is lavish and sophisticated; there are 13 bedrooms and two suites, filled with the Krehbiels' collection of period Irish furniture and art, believed to be the finest in the country. As the rows of Hunter wellingtons in the entrance hall testify, nothing has been left to chance. Service is personable yet discreet and the French chef showcases local ingredients with an international twist, turning out dishes such as veal chop with morels and tagliatelle. A stay here gives guests a sense of what it must have been like to stay at one of the country's most magnificent private estates during its heyday, but thankfully with all the comforts of the 21st century.

Ballyfin, County Laois (00 353 5787 55866; www.ballyfin.com). Doubles from €950 full board

GREGANS CASTLE HOTEL, COUNTY CLARE

The 'castle' in Gregans Castle Hotel is a bit of a misnomer. This rambling, 18th-century property actually takes its name from a 13th-century tower house across the road. Castles aside, the hotel is in an enchanting spot looking out towards Galway Bay from its setting deep in the extraordinary, limestone landscape of the Burren in County Clare. Its current owners are Simon Haden and his wife Frederieke McMurray, who bought the place from Haden's parents seven years ago. Two years later, the departure of the chef gave them the chance to realise their ambition to launch one of the country's most exciting dining rooms. They installed youthful Finnish chef Mickael Viljanen, who displays an inventive approach to local ingredients, treating diners to an intriguing medley of flavours such as beetroot meringues and cod with oxtail dressing and eel cream. But for all its cutting-edge cuisine, Gregans still retains plenty of old-fashioned charm. The Corkscrew Bar is a cosy jumble of low tables, mismatched chairs and plaid and just enough chintz was chucked out of the 21 guestrooms, which are now a model of stylish country chic.

Ballyvaughan, County Clare (00 353 65 707 7005; www.gregans.ie). Doubles from €179 B&B



Where to stay



COOPERSHILL, COUNTY SLIGO

There is a long tradition of entertaining at Coopershill, which has been home to the O'Hara family since it was built in 1774. In the 1970s Simon O'Hara's grandmother began offering riding holidays to paying guests, or 'pgs' as they were affectionately known, and now it's his turn to meet and greet at the 500-acre estate with its antique- and portrait-filled Georgian house at the centre. With a former career as a safari guide in Africa and as a tour operator in Mexico, he is well equipped for the job. While his semi-retired parents run the estate's venison farm, he ensures his guests are treated to the traditional Coopershill experience. Dinner is eaten with the family silver and showcases the best local fare available, which in this case means freshly picked vegetables, venison and seafood from County Donegal. The house is also perfectly placed for striking out into some of Ireland's most under-appreciated counties, which inspired much of the writings of WB Yeats. Far from wanting to make radical changes, O'Hara is content to keep the property's sense of continuity intact. The main task he has set himself is to gradually update its eight bedrooms, currently decorated in classic grand-house style, in order to offer a more luxurious stay for the 'pgs' of the future. Riverstown, County Sligo (00 353 71 916 5108; www.coopershill.com). Doubles from €198 B&B



BALLYVOLANE HOUSE, COUNTY CORK

A sweeping gravel drive shaded by ancient beech trees leads to this handsome Georgian mansion in a bucolic corner of Cork. Its current proprietors are Justin and Jenny Green, who live here with their three children and various relatives. Green's parents started taking guests in the 1980s, and in 2004 he traded the buzz of running Nick Jones' media hangout Babington House in Somerset for the quiet charms of rural Ireland. He and his wife met while working in the hotel industry in Hong Kong, and have plenty of experience when it comes to pleasing guests: 'Some things you just can't compromise on, so we have the best beds money can buy,' says Green. His father Jeremy tends the fruit and vegetables in the walled garden and helps with breakfasts, and the atmosphere in the house is relaxed and faintly bohemian. Green is passionate about locally sourced produce, both at Ballyvolane and his other venture, the O'Brien Chop House in nearby Lismore. Days here can be spent fishing the salmon-rich waters of the estate's stretch of the River Blackwater, before returning home to trade tales over dinner at the communal table. Castlelyons, Fermoy, County Cork (00 353 25 36349; www.ballyvolanehouse.ie). Doubles from €190 B&B



HILTON PARK, COUNTY MONAGHAN

This Italianate-style mansion overlooks the rolling hills of the northern border county of Monaghan, and several members of the Madden family live on the estate's sprawling 600-acre expanse, home to their ancestors since 1734. Johnny and Lucy Madden started welcoming guests more than 25 years ago and have a reputation for relaxed and easy charm. Now the youngest of their four children, Fred, and his wife Joanna, are being handed the reins. There are just six antique-scattered guestrooms at Hilton Park, which makes it feel more house party than hotel. Guests fall into conversation over afternoon tea and dinner is served in the dining room with its views of the gardens and lake. This is also an opportunity for 32-year-old Fred to show off his culinary talents, honed in London under such chefs as Rowley Leigh at Kensington Place. The food is unfussy and delicious – perhaps stuffed courgette flowers followed by a simple rack of lamb. In June, the grounds play host to the annual Flat Lake Festival. Established by Madden's brother-in-law, Kevin Allen, it is now one of Ireland's go-to arts events, with past appearances by names such as poet Seamus Heaney and Allen's niece, pop sensation Lily. Clones, County Monaghan (00 353 47 56007; www.hiltonpark.ie). Doubles from €196, including breakfast and high tea