

An aerial photograph of a large, historic estate in Ireland. In the foreground, a large, dark blue lake reflects the sky. A white path winds through a lush green lawn towards a large, white, classical-style mansion with a central portico. To the right of the main house is a smaller, yellow building. In the background, there are rolling green hills, a stone wall, and a small stone tower. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds.

Minding Others' *Manors*

by ANDREW MYERS

These lyrical Irish landmarks were designed for idyllic inspiration.

Every home might be its owner's castle. But three evocative properties in Ireland transport this idea to a realm of literal fantasy, one that can for a magical, finite time become reality—and not just for visitors with a king's treasury at their disposal.

Straffan House, Ballyfin and Lismore Castle are owned by men of means, accomplishment and connoisseurship, and each reflects that man's penchants and passions. Each is also decidedly different in style and history, as well as in its physical landscape and location within the Emerald Isle. Nevertheless, all are unique and uniquely beautiful, and each casts its own inimitable spell. All are also rentable in their entirety, allowing

visitors to become, if only for a little while, possessors of these eye-poppingly impressive piles.

While it's not inexpensive to rent a stately home (considering all three houses come with full staffs, including chefs and servers, and with much of the fare and other prerequisites), it can be surprisingly economical on a per-guest basis, especially for a major watershed event, such as a reunion or wedding. Regardless, individual rooms can be also be booked at Ballyfin, and at the Kildare Hotel, Spa & Country Club (its grounds surround Straffan House, and they share proprietors as well). >

Photo: Corbin Sullivan

Ballyfin



The K Club

Straffan House

Straffan House was inspired by an inspiration, an elegant echo of an elegant echo. It's also part of a larger story, one aspect belonging to the Irish industrialist who created Ireland's first multinational company, the other reflecting the modern trajectory of many of Ireland's historic country estates.

From his start in 1955 in the family business, Jefferson Smurfit & Sons Ltd., to his retirement and the end of his tenure as chairman and CEO of the Jefferson Smurfit Group in 2002, Sir Michael Smurfit left an indelible mark on Irish business. He created the world's largest manufacturer of paper-based packaging, and in so doing created the country's first multinational company. Passionate about contemporary Irish art and sports as well as Ireland's potential to act as a premier global platform for both, he also left a lasting legacy on the Irish landscape, specifically 550 acres in County

Kildare along the River Liffey.

Built in 1832 by Hugh Barton of the venerable Irish-French wine manufacturing and shipping firm Barton & Guestier, Straffan House was based on a chateau at Louveciennes, near Versailles, which Barton greatly admired. The house and grounds were acquired by the Smurfit Group in 1988, and thereupon transformed into the Kildare Hotel, Spa & Country Club.

The K Club, as it's most often called, opened in 1991 as Ireland's first AA Five Red Star hotel, and is complemented by an 18-hole golf course designed by Arnold Palmer. Over the ensuing 23 years, the historic house was augmented with a new wing in a sympathetic architectural style, and a second 18-hole, Arnold Palmer-designed golf course was added to the property. In 2006, Sir Michael realized his long-term goal of Ireland hosting a first-tier



Pool at the Straffan House

international sporting event when the 36th Ryder Cup, the biennial men's golf competition between teams from Europe and the United States, came to The K Club.

Whether for tea, to tee off, or for a sumptuous meal or massage, visitors are welcome to stroll through the elegantly proportioned 19th-century public rooms and their contemporary counterparts. Peruse Sir Michael's extensive art collection, which spans several centuries but is especially strong in postwar and contemporary Irish works, or gaze through the many large sash windows to see the landscape and River Liffey unfold in swathes of green and ribbons of blue. The atmosphere is one of timeless, well-tended tranquility. Still, the best way to soak up the ambience is to check in to one of the 69 guest rooms and stay the night.

When building his own house on the grounds

a short golf-cart ride from the hotel, Sir Michael chose the original Straffan House as the model. The resulting 34,000-square-foot home spans four floors and includes a lower-level swimming pool, spa, gym, games rooms and wine cellar. The traditional interiors of the ground floor's public rooms are given artful spark by choice modern picks from Sir Michael's art collection. The upper floors house a media theater and eight bedrooms, all en suite, and two more bedrooms and baths can be found in an adjacent guest apartment.

Straffan House rents from \$16,000 per night, which includes a dedicated service team, concierge and private chef, as well as unlimited use of both championship golf courses, admission to The K Spa and fishing on a private stretch of the River Liffey. Guest room rates start at €350 (\$480). straffanhouse.ie >

Ballyfin

When in 1822 Richard and William Vitruvius Morrison, the most sought-after architects in Ireland, delivered their plans for a new house, Ballyfin was already a renowned demesne (the word for the land attached to a manor reserved for its owner's personal use). The 614 acres comprised one of the first romantically idealized "natural" landscapes in Ireland, and included a man-made lake fed by the nearby Slieve Bloom mountains, follies such as an atmospheric grotto (the "last word" in 18th-century parkland chic), as well as gardens, idyllic views and Arcadian copses, all enclosed by a serpentine stone wall encircling the entire estate.

There was also an existing manor, one built by the previous proprietors, the Wellesley-Poles (the family of the Duke of Wellington). But this was judged not fine enough for Ballyfin's new owner, Sir Charles Henry Coote, Ireland's premier baronet and one of its richest men. For him and his wife, Lady Caroline, the Coote family motto—*Coûte que Coûte*, or "Cost What It May"—would be exercised in full.

The result was a 35,000-square-foot Regency house, the finest of its kind in the country. Four Ionic columns supporting a pedimented portico punctuated a neo-classical facade, its elegant restraint belying the sumptuousness of the interior decoration. Parquet floors of unparalleled quality and variety of woods referenced Spain's Alhambra; stuccowork with flowers, fauna and fantastical forms seemed to burst from ceilings in animated three-dimensionality; and ancient Roman antiquities acquired on Sir Charles Henry's Grand Tour were placed alongside fine English, Irish and French furniture.

The Coote family lived at Ballyfin for just over a century before selling the property in 1927 to the Patrician Brothers, a Catholic teaching order. Vigilant stewards, the brothers, however, lacked the means to maintain the estate, and by 2001 portions of the house faced utter collapse. Fortunately, Fred Krehbiel, then the co-chair of the Illinois-based electronic components manufacturer Molex, arrived in time. He and his Irish-born wife, Kay, share a passion for Irish culture, art and architecture, and Krehbiel had for



many years dreamed of owning a small hotel that reflected his personal taste, the grand tradition of Irish hospitality and the singular atmosphere and ambience of a great Irish country house.

Executing his dream took 10 years and involved an all-star cast of artisans, architects, advisers and contractors. It also required Krehbiel's willingness to embrace the Coote's "cost what it may" motto in order to bring Ballyfin back to its former glory, and then into the 21st century in terms of structural engineering and a floor plan that includes en suite bathrooms for all the 15 bedrooms.

Coote family portraits, sourced and purchased by Krehbiel and his team, once again hang from the walls lined in damask and look down on Chippendale furniture, Irish delft and a staff that seems to anticipate just when a cappuccino might be wanted by a guest reading in the 80-foot-long

library, or when a couple might appreciate a pre-prandial coupe of Champagne in the 19th-century glass conservatory. Likewise, the follies, park and acres of gardens have been restored and enhanced. Revived as well is the intangible but unmistakable air of hospitality, generosity and grace.

Ballyfin can accommodate a total of 29 guests in the 13 bedrooms and two suites in the main house, and an additional five in one of the two gate lodges. The entire demesne can be rented from €16,950 (\$23,216) per night, which includes full board; pre-dinner drinks; snacks, coffees and teas on command; full use of the fitness center and swimming pool; guided tours of the house and grounds; and a catalogue of other activities.

Room rates for single and double rooms start at €475 (\$652) and €800 (\$1,098). ballyfin.com ▶

Photos: Courtesy Ballyfin

Lismore Castle

King of the castle is a misnomer at Lismore Castle since the Dukes of Devonshire have owned the property for the last 261 years. Perched on a cliff above the River Blackwater in County Waterford, its crenellated towers and imposing edifice attest to a long, fascinating history. The castle was originally built in 1185 by King John of England on a site that earlier had housed an abbey dating from the early 7th century. Sir Walter Raleigh, that great roguish favorite of Elizabeth I who was instrumental in the colonization of America and in the introduction of tobacco to the English court, was a later owner, as was Richard Boyle, the first Earl of Cork. By the time the 4th Duke of Devonshire claimed the castle, the result of a fortuitous marriage in 1753, the grounds already boasted over eight acres of gardens sheltered by 17th-century defensive walls, much of which retained its original Jacobean plan (and which have since come to comprise the oldest continually cultivated garden in Ireland).

The castle's present appearance owes much to the 6th Duke, who lavished both attention and lucre upon Lismore. Called "the Bachelor Duke," he rebuilt, renovated and enlarged the castle in the neo-Gothic style, all the rage in the early and mid 19th century, and filled its interiors with Gothic Revival furniture by the estimable likes of J.G. Crace and A.W.N. Pugin. Presently the castle houses the largest private collection of Pugin furniture in the world.

The Bachelor Duke loved Lismore, a passion shared by his descendants. The 11th Duke, who succeeded to the title in 1944 and held it for five decades until his death in 2004, complemented the castle's existing Van Dycks and other Old Master paintings with contemporary works by art stars such as Ai Weiwei and Lucien Freud. Likewise, the leafy avenues in the castle's lower garden are punctuated by contemporary sculpture by luminaries like Antony Gormley and Marzia Colonna.

Under the current and 12th Duke—and beneath the watchful eyes of his son and heir, the Earl of Burlington, himself an avid contemporary art collector—major renovations have been made to the castle's interiors and private rooms, among them

an art gallery carved from a little-used wing that now hosts top-flight exhibitions of contemporary art. No drafty, dark or dank castle, Lismore is complete with every creature comfort: The bells in the butler's pantry summoning servants to specific rooms have never been out of use, only now they're accompanied by WiFi.

As grand as Lismore is, it remains first and foremost the treasured getaway of a family, albeit one of the wealthiest families in the United Kingdom, whose seat is the 126-room Chatsworth House, among England's stateliest homes. Wellies are left by the door following afternoon walks, fishing rods lean on

walls (Blackwater is renowned for its salmon), and afternoon tea is less ritual than homey tradition, but with crested porcelain.

While the gardens and art gallery are open to the public, Lismore Castle has only recently been available to rent when the family isn't in residence. Up to 27 people may occupy its 15 bedrooms (three singles, two twins and 10 doubles) for a minimum stay of two nights.

Rates start at \$23,000 for up to 12 people and include full staff, breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner, and activities that range from golf to tennis to fishing. lismorecastle.com >

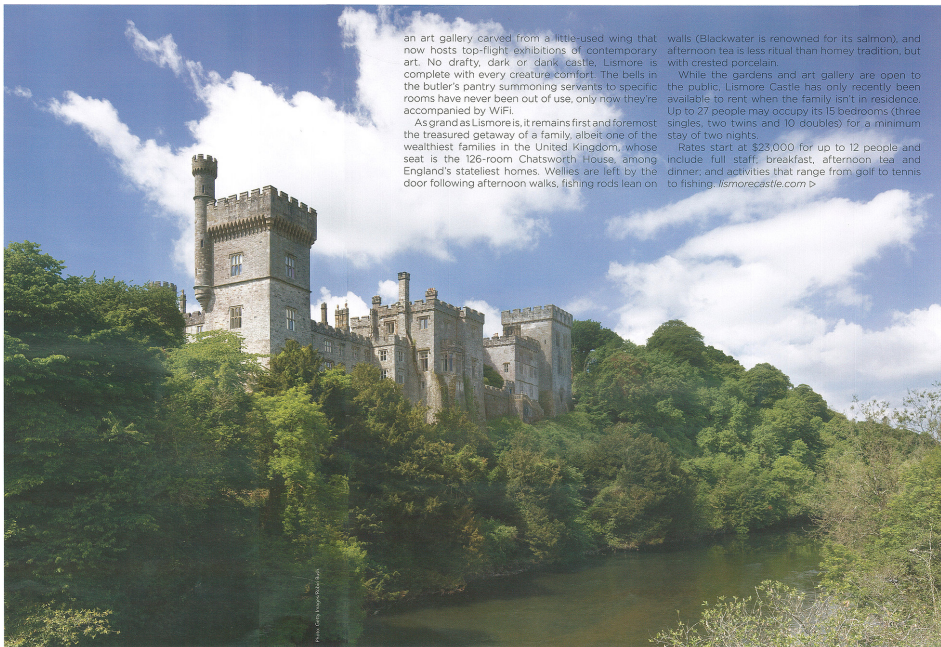
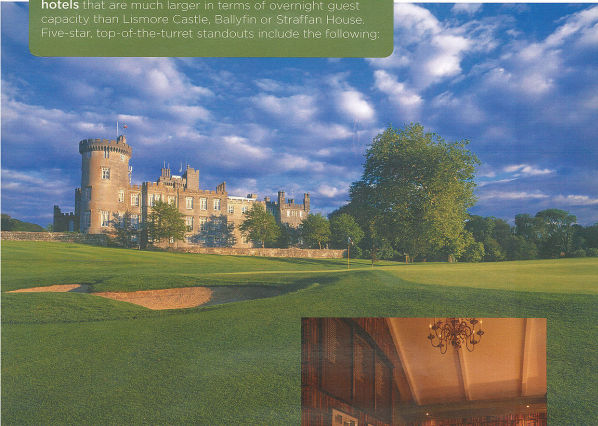


Photo: Getty Images/Robert Borch

Ireland has a catalogue of well-established castle hotels that are much larger in terms of overnight guest capacity than Lismore Castle, Ballyfin or Straffan House. Five-star, top-of-the-turret standouts include the following:



Dromoland Castle

For more than 900 years, Dromoland Castle was the ancestral home of the O'Brien family, direct descendants of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland in the 11th century. Eight miles from Shannon Airport in County Clare, and dating from the early 19th century, the current Gothic Revival-style castle was purchased in 1962 by American industrialist Bernard McDonough and re-imagined as a luxury hotel. The conversion was deftly done. The castle's hand-carved wood paneling and stone architectural details were left intact, and newly acquired antiques and bespoke furnishings were purchased to harmonize with existing antiques and works of art. Unchanged was the long, curving, magical drive from the front gate and lodge, which skirts the 40-acre property's picturesque lake and championship golf course. From \$322 per night. dromoland.ie

Photos: Courtesy Dromoland Castle and Ashford Castle



Ashford Castle

Situated in County Mayo near the border with County Galway, and reputedly the oldest castle in Ireland, dating to 1228, Ashford Castle fits the fantasy of a medieval fortress. Set on a fairy-tale site on the shore of Lough Corrib, it has been expanded, redefined and redecorated over the centuries. The biggest modifications came courtesy of the Guinness family in the 19th century. Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness purchased the estate in 1852, adding two large Victorian extensions to the castle and 26,000 acres to the property. On Sir Benjamin's death, Ashford Castle passed to his son, Lord Ardilaun, who made additions in the neo-Gothic style, rebuilt the castle's west wing and continued to improve the park and its gardens. Sold to the Irish government in 1939, Ashford Castle has been a hotel of luxury and legend ever since. From \$267 per night. ashford.ie



Adare Manor

Construction of Adare Manor in County Limerick lasted 30 years, from 1832 to 1862. It's a good thing too, as the colossal building on the banks of the River Maigue provided years of steady work for surrounding villagers during the devastating potato famine of the mid-19th century. Built in the Tudor Revival style by the 2nd Earl of Dunraven and Mount-Edgar, it was sold by the 7th Earl in 1984 to Irish-American businessman Tom Kane, who converted the house and 840-acre estate into the Adare Manor Hotel. An 18-hole championship golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr. was added in 1995, and has since hosted the Irish Open twice. From \$274 per night. adaremanor.com/en ♦

Photo: Getty Images/Stephen Rodriguez