

TO THE *Manor Born*

A Five-Star Trip Through Ireland's Castle Properties

by Linda Barrett

You've heard the saying, "A man's home is his castle." Well, what if his home-away-from-home was a castle? We travelled to Ireland to see just what it was like to stay in real-life five-star castles and estates.

DROMOLAND CASTLE



Photo by Linda Barrett

Flying into Shannon Airport, it's only eight miles to **Dromoland Castle**, one of the most famous baronial castles in Ireland and one of the world's "Leading Castle Hotels." Dromoland is the ancestral home of the O'Briens, one of the few native Gaelic families of Royal blood, and direct descendants of Brian Boru, the 11th-century High King of Ireland. Lord Inchiquin still lives on the property; if you're lucky, you might see him.

Just walking the richly appointed passageways stirs excitement. The walls are lined with original portraits of family members, tapestries, and trophies, and there are plenty of overstuffed couches and chairs to drop into for a cup of Irish tea. Don't miss afternoon tea at any of these properties—it's a real treat. Book the grand Queen Anne Suite, one of 22 uniquely different rooms in the castle itself, including a vertical Tower suite.

Service is top priority at all these estates and not a detail is overlooked, from the accommodations to the formally-dressed staff. "The staff really makes the experience. It's like being royalty in a way," says traveler Kate Gerard. Enjoy the brogue where locals say, "I tink," instead of "I think."

We enrolled in Dromoland's School of Falconry to learn the ancient "Sport of Kings." On our Hawk Walk, we saw the large Harris Hawk before we heard it. It made almost no sound as it landed on my gloved fist to retrieve the treat I held up. Royals come from around the globe to learn falconry skills from director Dave Atkinson.

Visit nearby **Bunratty Castle** and Folk Park for a rollicking medieval banquet where you might be crowned Lord or Lady. Sample the mead and eat with your fingers while enjoying period entertainment.

SIDE TRIPS:

- Cliffs of Moher, Durty Nelly's Pub, and Burren National Park.

CASTLEMARTYR RESORT



Photograph courtesy of Castlemartyr Resort

We next travelled to **Castlemartyr Resort**, built in 1210 by the Knights Templar under Richard de Clare, known as "Strongbow." Castlemartyr was also owned by Sir Walter Raleigh, and is one of Ireland's 2012 Top 25 Luxury Hotels.

The hotel today is housed in an 18th century manor house adjacent to the original castle ruins, with 220 acres of mature landscaping and classical parterre beds. Explore the ruins, then hop aboard a pony and trap for an exhilarating tour given by your local guide, if you can keep up with him! The speech pattern around here is fast and distinctly Cork.

After all this excitement, we opted to relax in the 25,000-square-foot Wellness, Spa, and Fitness Center for their signature Gaelic Body Experience and massage. All mentioned properties feature luxurious spas.

At both Castlemartyr and Dromoland, children are V.I.K.s—Very Important Kids. They receive a special check-in, teddy bear, pint-sized robes and slippers, their own high tea each evening, and children's menus and activities. Enroll them in the V.I.K. program.

SIDE TRIPS:

- Fota Wildlife Park, Cork, and Cobh—the Titanic's last stop.

THE K CLUB



Photo by Linda Barrett

We were awestruck by the **Kildare Hotel**, known as the **K Club**, a sprawling 1700s French manor featuring the most stunningly beautiful grounds imaginable. It was AA's "Hotel of the Year" in 2011. Besides the opulent décor, note the many portraits and historical documents lining the halls inside the K Club, including a Belfast Agreement document signed by all who attended and Christopher Columbus' diary.

We enjoyed horseback riding through adjacent fields, then tried our hand at fly fishing taught by the resident Ghillie along the banks of the serene River Liffey. For great golf, each property features outstanding courses in both Irish and American styles. The K Club hosted the Ryder Cup in 2006.

The best part about our castles tour is that these properties are surprisingly affordable, especially with the various packages offered throughout the year. The best rates are November through March.

SIDE TRIPS:

- National Stud and Japanese Gardens, and Old Jameson Distillery.

THE FITZWILLIAM HOTEL



Photograph courtesy of The Fitzwilliam Hotel

We opted for contemporary elegance at **The Fitzwilliam Hotel**, a boutique Dublin hotel adjacent to St. Stephen's Green and Grafton Street, the city's vibrant shopping scene. It won the 2012 Travelers' Choice award in the "Trendiest," "Luxury," and "Top 25" categories. Splurge on the 1,800-square-foot Penthouse with your own private 24-hour butler and private dinner service from Ireland's "Chef of the Year" Kevin Thornton from Thornton's Michelin Star restaurant.

We didn't stay in our final castle, rather, we visited it.

Dublin Castle was built in the 13th century and was used as a military fortress, prison, treasury, and law court, and remained the seat of English Administration for 700 years. View the State Apartments, craft shop, and heritage center.

THE IRISH ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR FOOD



Photo by Linda Barrett

Thanks in part to a country-wide food initiative called "**Good Food Ireland**," Ireland has been hailed as one of the top foodie destinations in Europe. No longer are lamb and potatoes the fare of choice. Today, in addition, fresh seafood, farm-fresh artisanal cheese, Irish-grass-fed meats, aromatic breads, and homegrown vegetables delight even the most discriminating palate.

Each estate outdid the next with its delectable, fresh menus. Most properties offered several dining options, ranging from elegant to casual, including special children's menus, and afternoon tea.

And speaking of food, no visit to Dublin would be complete without visiting the Guinness Storehouse, Ireland's #1 visitor attraction. Founded over 250 years ago, the name Guinness® is practically synonymous with Ireland.

Even Guinness has gotten in on the foodie movement, with four on-site restaurants highlighting Guinness pairings. Pair seafood with Guinness Foreign Extra Stout, Beef with Extra Stout, and Draught with dessert. Learn to pour the perfect Guinness here, then lift a pint with the locals and shout "Slainte" (pronounced "slan-sha"), meaning "Cheers!"

SIDE TRIPS:

- Trinity College and the Book of Kells, St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Queen of Tarts tea room.

CONTACT

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Castlemartyr Resort

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