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HAVE A ROYAL HOLIDAY IN IRELAND'S HISTORIC CASTLES

BY MARK A THOMPSON

LATELY, IT SEEMS WE'VE BEEN SUCKED INTO A ROYAL TIME WARP; WE'RE HAVING A MONARCHY MOMENT. Whether we're tangled in the bedsheets with *Red, White & Royal Blue*, or caught up in the Regency bodice-ripping of *Bridgerton*, or the soapy seduction of *The Crown*, or the never-ending *Game of Thrones* sequels and prequels, it feels like we're all pining for our very own *Downton Abbey* where barons and earls beckon with the promise of a regal life. In which case, why not join in the royal fantasy and frolic through some of Ireland's more historic castles for the holidays.



Dromoland Castle Hotel exterior (photo courtesy of Dromoland Castle)

For more than 500 years, Dromoland Castle has been welcoming guests to its 500-acre estate located in the heart of County Clare, Ireland. After an overnight flight from the States, few welcomes are more magical than the castle's *Horse & Hound Welcome*, complete with huntsmen on horseback, canines in formation, and a formal staff line-up along the front lawn à la *Downton Abbey*. Champagne, sir? Don't mind if I do.

The 16th-century castle was once the ancestral home of the O'Brien family who were direct descendants of the last High King of Ireland Brian Ború. That was then, however, and the castle was rebuilt in the 19th century, and subsequently redesigned in the 1960s by the inimitable interior designer Dorothy Draper. The same Dorothy Draper who redecorated Manhattan's Carlyle Hotel, and the Sherry-Netherland, and the Greenbrier. Think cabbage roses and resplendent reds. Throughout the castle, gilt-framed portraits of various illustrious residents include the intrepid women of Dromoland who married into the family and kept the castle afloat during times of economic turmoil.

Surrounded by a wooded demesne that includes a walled garden as well as a country club with golf course, Dromoland is an imposing limestone edifice with four castellated turrets and a Gothic porch. No matter where I wandered, the baronial castle lurked in my shadow, and yet, in the words of Marie Chawke, Director of Business Development at Dromoland, the resort prides itself on "lighthearted luxury." As Chawke states, "Consider it like Sandringham, the country house where the Royals go to relax." In which case, reach for your trusty Barbour jacket and a pair of wellies—and off we go.

Dromoland offers a variety of outdoor activities, which include boating, archery, clay pigeon shooting—as well as its celebrated falconry program where guests interact with various birds of prey. Once the falcon alights on my gloved fist (thanks to a smidgen of raw meat), I'm as smitten as the falconer. Despite the cute names (Owlvin, Pickles, Mac), these hawks, owls, and falcons are not lovebirds to be kissed so much as sleuths of the sky with killer instincts.

When the sun sets over Lough Dromoland in a brilliant display of pink and mauve, it's a good time to retire to the castle's Cocktail Bar which is situated in the octagonal room that once housed the family library. Draper's design sensibility is readily apparent in the stacked Staffordshire pugs, one of which was a trysting signal when the lord was away and the lady ready to play. Bespoke cocktails are equally playful and designed



The Europe Hotel and Resort at sunset (photo courtesy of The Europe)



The Library chess at The Europe



Gardens & Courtyard courtesy Hayfield Manor



Perrotts



courtesy Castlemartyr Resort



around a tarot deck with its promises of fortune and favor. By the time I headed into dinner at the Earl of Thomond restaurant, I was fairly certain that I was "to the manor born," a feeling that was amplified as I sipped champagne and dined on poached lobster.

Overlooking the shores of Lough Dromoland, the castle is located a short 15-minute drive from Shannon Airport, which offers direct flights from various airports in the States. Slightly further afield is the maritime city of Galway, easily accessible by car and driver (unless you're comfortable driving on the left side of the road) in less than an hour from Dromoland Castle. Galway has been designated a European Region of Gastronomy, and one of the best ways to discover the city's culinary bounty is with Galway Food Tours. Local guides lead you into award-winning restaurants and cafés where you feast upon artisanal chocolates, cheeses, and the best of Galway's gastronomy such as squid toast with katsuobushi tuna flakes.

It's very easy to feel completely sated and indulged at Dromoland, especially after a proper Irish breakfast, at which point, it might be a good time to consider the next stop on this royal promenade of Irish castles, all of which are members of the Legend Collection of Preferred Hotels & Resorts. Founded in 1968, Preferred is the world's largest independent hotel brand, and the portfolio's Legend Collection represents the highest standards of luxury for the discerning traveler.

Heading south into County Kerry, I arrived at The Europe Hotel & Resort, which sits on the shores of Lough Léin. Surrounded by 26,000 acres of national parkland amidst Ireland's highest mountain range, The Europe is home to the acclaimed ESPA, a two-level, 50,000-square foot hydrotherapy wellness sanctuary complete with indoor/outdoor vitality pool, saltwater pool, ice fountain, and thermal suites.

As tempting as it is to remain at ESPA at The Europe, the resort is just across the lake from Ross Castle, a 15th-century tower fortress and castle keep that is open to the public with guided tours. Equally fascinating is Kate Kearney's Cottage, a 170-year-old establishment at the entrance to the Gap of Dunloe where guests traverse the mountain pass by pony and carriage while serenaded with Celtic songs.

Lakefront suites at The Europe are as streamlined and elegant as staterooms on a classic Cunard cruise liner from the Art Deco era. The expansive balconies overlook the lake and the mountains with panoramic vistas of sunrise and sunset. The hotel offers various lounges and bars, as well as a private library and a majestic lobby,

all with lakefront views. The overall atmosphere at The Europe is akin to an Alpine retreat where royals luxuriate in blissful anonymity.

Driving across the Emerald Isle, heading east into County Cork, it was easy to see the world from Elphaba's perspective: a viridescent empire in varying shades of green. Upon our arrival into Cork, the imposing iron and brick gates of Hayfield Manor opened into a verdant enclave. The five-star property is but a ten-minute stroll into the center of town where visitors flock to the English Market. One of Ireland's most celebrated food halls, the English Market is equally well-known as the locale where Queen Elizabeth laughed in gay mirth with one of the fishmongers. For Irish whiskey aficionados, the Midleton Distillery Experience offers a two-hour guided tour with tastings of premium whiskey and a visit to the historic Distiller's Cottage.

Originally owned by wealthy merchants of Cork, Hayfield Manor has been a five-star property since its opening in 1996. Flanked by University College Cork, the landscaped grounds include an aviary and courtyard, walled garden, as well as spa and indoor pool. The cocktail lounge Bloom is housed in a shimmering glass conservatory that overlooks the manor house's back lawn and gardens. Dinner at Orchids is helmed by Chef Mark Staples whose mastery of Irish cuisine ensures that no guest ever questions the supremacy of Irish butter. In the morning, I slathered breakfast scones with more butter, all the better to hike the cliffs of Ballycotton along the eastern shores of Ireland.

Less than an hour's drive from Cork, Castlemartyr is named for the 13th-century tower house built by the Knights Templar. Once owned by Sir Walter Raleigh, Castlemartyr Resort was originally an 18th-century country house. The 220-acre resort is surrounded by landscaped topiary gardens, meandering streams, and lush green fields. The 18-hole golf course features a club house and pro shop. An indoor pool overlooks the formal garden. Outdoor activities include kayaking, cycling, croquet—as well as the Irish national sport, hurling. With the help of semi-professional hurlers, I attempted the Gaelic game. I did as I was instructed; I practiced with the wood stick known as a hurley and the small ball—but in the end, I left the field to the pros and headed to dinner.

Housed in Castlemartyr's original manor house, the two Michelin-starred Terre restaurant is helmed by Chef Vincent Crepel who oversees an exemplary dining experience that is as theatrical as it is visceral, and completely satisfying. The evening commences with an immersive garden tour,

and continues with snacks in the open kitchen, before guests are escorted into the dining room for a multi-course tasting menu with wine pairing, which is then followed by post-prandial digestifs in the grand salon. At evening's end, I felt a kind of giddy elation, as if I'd just completed an extraordinary gastronomic odyssey.

From Castlemartyr, we headed north into Country Kildare toward the outskirts of Dublin where The K Club awaited our arrival. Built on the grounds of the original 19th-century Barton estate in the style of a French chateau, The K Club opened as a five-star property in 1991. The 550-acre property boasts a pair of golf courses designed by Arnold Palmer which were host to the Ryder Cup in 2006. Bisected by a private mile-long stretch of the River Liffey, The K Club also features a fishing lodge for fly fishing, as well as extensive woodland trails for hiking, cycling—or tours via Segway.

Under the watchful tutelage of our ghillie Robert, we chose archery for our afternoon pastime. As we aimed for the bullseye, we were observed by young members of The K Club's Junior Einsteins Science Club. Such a strenuous physical workout merits Afternoon Tea, with plenty of clotted cream—and champagne, of course. Served in the Drawing Room of the original Straffan House wing of the hotel, The K Club's tea service features a three-tiered *étagère* laden with sandwiches and scones that replicate the various artworks scattered around the grounds.

The history of The K Club is entwined with Barton & Guestier, the oldest winery in Bordeaux which was founded in 1725 by Thomas Barton. While it might be hard to imagine an Irishman in charge of a Bordeaux winery, a tasting held in the wine cellar with the Chief Sommelier leaves no doubt about the visionary excellence of the Barton winemaking dynasty and its legacy at The K Club.

Country Kildare is well-known throughout the world as an equestrian destination, notable for its exceptional thoroughbreds, and consequently, The K Club offers various equine activities and tours. After a hearty Irish breakfast served in The Barton Restaurant, we headed off to Jessica Harrington Racing for a tour of her 120-acre horse farm. With the Wicklow Mountains in the distance, we witnessed the thoroughbreds process through their morning workout with their trainers and jockeys. After visits to the paddocks and the training facilities, we headed to the Harrington family kitchen for morning tea and cakes—because who could refuse another scone with Irish butter?

From Shannon to Dublin, from the West



The K Club exterior during holidays (photo courtesy of The K Club)



The K Club Drawing Room



The K Club in holiday finery

coast of Ireland to the East, or vice versa, there's a string of Irish castles and historic manor houses that enable any visitor the ability to imagine life as a royal. All queens are welcome on the Emerald Isle where marriage equality was won by popular vote. Ireland is one of the more LGBTQ+-friendly places on the planet, having passed a Gender

Recognition Act, as well as a Children and Family Relationships Act. Throughout the year, various Pride parades and festivals celebrate LGBTQ+ solidarity, and in Dublin, the Pride Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024, with a 10-day festival. In short, there's every reason to wear a crown and let your royal shine bright in Ireland. ■