

WEEKEND BREAK

Keeping up with the Kardashians at Ballyfin Demesne

The honeymoon choice for Kim and Kanye, Ballyfin is a holiday destination like no other, says **Conor Power**

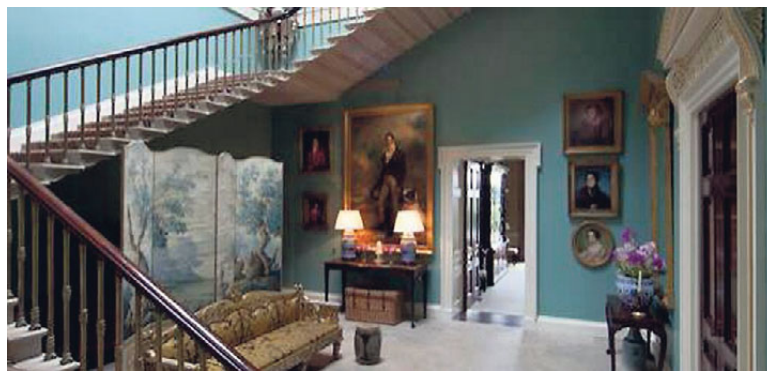
The entrance to Ballyfin Demesne in Co Laois is so discreet my wife and I briefly wondered if we had arrived at the right place. I imagine this thought also went through Kanye West and Kim Kardashian's heads when they arrived here last year on honeymoon. I got out of the car and went to the intercom system, whereupon a polite lady bade me welcome and made the gates open.

After what felt like driving through a whole county devoid of modern-day distraction, we rounded a bend and beside a lake. The huge pile of Ballyfin stood before us and before it, stood a selection of costumed staff in our honour. We felt like the Lord and Lady returning triumphantly to

Downton Abbey. We both instinctively checked the car interior for tidiness.

Ballyfin looks as though it hasn't been touched in 200 years. This is the classic Regency mansion — enormous in size, with adjacent stable buildings and various out-houses; set above a fishing lake; enormous walled gardens; elegant ornate conservatory to the rear; superb interiors with marbling, coving, tiling, commissioned portraits... But that's not the full story.

It began as the house of a grandee some centuries ago — the spoils of the War of the Three Kingdoms. In 1820, the uber-wealthy Coothe family transformed it into the mansion more-or-less as it is today, complete with enormous man-made lake. For most of



Ballyfin, Co Laois. For most of the 20th century it was a boarding school before falling into a state of semi-derelection until US billionaire Fred Krehbiel took it over and painstakingly re-awakened it.

the 20th century, it was a boarding school run by the Patrician Brothers, before falling into a state of semi-derelection, until a man with perhaps even more sense and taste than Money (American electronics billionaire Fred Krehbiel) took it over and painstakingly re-awakened it to its current state of unparalleled splendour.

For getting around the 614-acre estate, you have the choice of complimentary bicycle or a golf cart. We opted for the slightly warmer and more fun-filled option of the golf cart. They give you a map at reception so that you can find the highlights — the Ice House, the Tower (a folly built in the 19th century to look like an ancient Norman construction), the Walled Garden and the Summer House with its stunning panoramic views across several counties.

The Relais & Châteaux people took over the day-to-day management of Ballyfin a few years ago and their focus and vision involves keeping carbon emissions to a minimum and self-sufficiency to a maximum.

"The Relais & Châteaux vision started in France and it's always been the case that you make the most of your immediate surroundings — your garden, principally." So says youthful-looking Frenchman Damien Bastiat — general manager at Ballyfin, who explains how Ballyfin is working to become more self-sufficient every year.

"It's definitely one of the most self-sufficient places I've worked in," says head chef Mike Tweedie, talking over coffee in the appropriately named Gold Room. He cuts a dramatically non-Downton Abbey presence: an energetic young wiry tattooed Englishman from Devon. "There's probably no other property like this in either the UK or Ireland, where you've got so much wild foraging around the estate, as well as the garden itself... From a chef's point of view, we're very lucky to have such a garden."

We felt very lucky ourselves to have had the chance to taste some of his handiwork the night before in the sumptuous dining room: a superb meal with the appropriate accompaniment of a bottle of Domaine des Anges; a great wine from a Southern French vineyard owned by one of the Patrician Brothers' former pupils Gabriel McGuinness.

Over in the walled garden, Liz O'Connell showed us around the vast ground that gives Ballyfin such a high level of self-sufficiency. Food and gardening are in the blood with Liz — a sister of Darina Allen — and she effuses as we stroll around the 4.5-acre garden, showing us arrays of potato types ("The Rattles are very much in fashion with the chefs at the moment"), masses of colourful lettuces, fruit trees (some of them of ancient variety) and multiple berry bushes.

Inside the main house, one can only marvel at the attention to detail. Walking over the Ancient Roman floor mosaic to the

Whispering Room (the curved ceiling allows one to hear perfectly clear whispers from one corner to another), you feel more like a high-ranking diplomat signing a significant treaty rather than just checking in.

The enormous library is the kind of place I would happily hang out in with a glass of brandy in hand (and I don't even like brandy) and peruse books for hours on end, staring out at the fountain outside and the manicured croquet lawn beyond.

In many ways, the story of Ballyfin charts the history of Ireland. The house and lands have endured through the most turbulent chapters of our history; from the plantations of the 1600s to 21st-century globalisation, passing through the Civil War and the central role of the Catholic Church in education and Irish life in general.

All of these elements have been painstakingly researched and presented in Ballyfin Demesne today with a level of taste and elegance that is just jaw-dropping.

Up the cantilevered staircase that brings you around the huge central chandelier, our room was the Butler Suite. Formerly the bedchamber of Lady Caroline Coothe, it was a masterpiece in taste — the four-poster bed, period furnishings, ornate fireplace, pale mahogany George II secretaire, and front windows overlooking the peaceful lake... Next door, the enormous bathroom looked like a beautiful marbled apartment itself.

The level of accommodation, food and service is fairly set apart from anything else I've visited and its position shut away from the rest of the world is a unique bonus. So rich is the property in cultural heritage, that one of the less frequented parts of the property is one that would be a major highlight in any other 5-star hotel in the world: the Ballyfin Bar is an atmospheric cavern Irish bar with an exterior terrace surrounded by gorgeously restored 18th and 19th century buildings.

The walls of the bar, as well as those of the corridors upstairs constitute one of the finest private collections of contemporary Irish art that you'll see anywhere.

■ Ballyfin Demesne, Ballyfin, Co Laois. Tel (057) 875 5866 www.ballyfin.com or www.relaischateaux.com



Topflight

Amazing Ski Deals

From Ireland's Award Winning Ski Tour Operator

Fly Direct from Cork

AMAZING SKI HOLIDAY DEALS
FROM ONLY
€579
PER PERSON!
BOOK BY THURSDAY 12TH NOVEMBER!

Hotel Garni Schönblick ★★★

Söll, Austria / 2 Sharing / B&B

19TH DEC FROM **€689** PPS WAS **€719** PPS

Pension Faistenauer★★

Söll, Austria / 2 Sharing / B&B

19TH DEC FROM **€619** PPS WAS **€649** PPS

Pension Konrad★★

Söll, Austria / 2 Sharing / B&B

16TH JAN FROM **€579** PPS WAS **€649** PPS

Gasthof Mauth★★★

St. Johann, Austria / 2 Sharing / Half Board

19TH DEC FROM **€789** PPS WAS **€819** PPS

Parkhotel Kirchberg★★★

Kirchberg, Austria / 2 Sharing / Half Board

26 DEC FROM **€1099** PPS WAS **€1212** PPS

Hotel Harfenwirt★★★

Niederau / Austria / 2 Sharing / Half Board

26 DEC FROM **€1119** PPS WAS **€1219** PPS

Call **01 240 1775** • Visit topflight.ie • Ask for **Topflight** at your Local Travel Agent

Prices include flights, 7 nights accommodation, transfers, taxes, a representative service, an on-line discount of €30 per person & are subject to availability. All holidays are licenced by the Commission for Aviation Regulation under Licence Nos: TO 074 & TA 055