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# DREAM LIFESTYLES IN IRELAND

In our togetherness castles are built

Steve Gillick

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03 MAR 2014: There's an Irish proverb that says "In our togetherness, castles are built". The expression refers to teamwork and cooperation, as much as it relates to tourism in Ireland, where the

combination of warm hospitality and amazing castle hotels elevate the travellers' experience to a high level of satisfaction, enjoyment and comfort.



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On a recent trip to Ireland I stayed in castles on my first and last nights ♦ a perfect 'comfort sandwich'. Each castle had its own unique personality and charm based on its history, location and the staff who work to make guest stays ♦ and lifestyle dreams -- as memorable as possible.

After arriving at Shannon Airport, I drove to Recess for my night at Ballynahinch Castle Hotel and Estate. I checked into my room and immediately engaged in some Irish taste bud immersion, first with a crisp Guinness and followed by freshly baked soda bread, perfectly grilled scallops and tender, moist baked cod. Then it was time to explore the ambiance of the Castle: historic rooms, lush furniture and comfy quiet lounges to relax and reflect.

The Ballynahinch Estate dates to the 16th Century when the O'Flaherty Clan ruled the area. The castle itself was built in 1756 by Richard Martin, a Member of Parliament and later, the founder of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In the early 20th Century, the castle was owned for a time by Shri Sir Ranjitsinhji (Ranji, for short), renowned as the Prince of Cricketers in Ireland.

In the drizzle and darkness of the next morning, I met Noel my walking guide, for a two hour stroll along the paths, laneways, fields, mazes, rivers, and extraordinary views of the lake and the 12 Bens Mountains. We climbed over old gateways, stood on salmon fishing piers, and visited some of the old estate cottages. Noel explained the history of the Connemara area, a name that literally means 'Hound or Dog Sons of the Sea'; referring to one of the early tribes who used the rugged, rocky coastline for smuggling. He also noted the remnant of a tower on the far side of the lake; recalling the exploits of Grace O'Malley, the infamous Pirate Queen who plundered ships in the area. The tour was fascinating and full of photographic opportunities.

After a tasty breakfast of grilled kippers and eggs, I had to depart. For those fortunate to stay longer, there are many outdoor activities to take in the country air, including salmon fishing, cycling, horseback riding, woodcock shooting and, not too far off at Roundstone Bay on the Atlantic Ocean, visitors can learn about lobster fishing from one of the Ballynahinch staff –an activity that is listed as one of the 'secrets' of the coastal drive known as the Wild Atlantic Way.

For the next five days I visited different towns in

the South West before heading north, past Shannon, to Newmarket-on-Fergus. On a cool and rainy day, I entered a gated area where, across a golf course (full of dedicated golfers), on the far side of the lake, sat Dromoland Castle. This area was the ancestral home of the O'Briens who were direct descendants of Brian Boru, the High King of Ireland in the 11th Century. The first castle was built in 1014. A second castle/house appeared in the early 18th Century and then the structure was rebuilt in 1963 with a castle/hotel design in mind.

The two suits of armour in the reception area immediately established the theme for the Castle: regal, luxurious, historical and very friendly. I was taken up a flight of stairs marked "Private" to the Queen Anne Suite where I was humbled by the plush couches, wardrobes, three flat-screen televisions--each welcoming me by name, a king-size bed with views of the golf course and lake, and a washroom equal to the size of my living room in Toronto.

With camera in hand, I wandered around the red carpeted, picture and portrait-filled corridors of the Castle. The bar, once the estate library, was warm and cozy, as was the lounge area. For lunch, I sat on a six-inch deep couch, sipping a glass of Pinot Noir and savouring six juicy fat Galway Bay oysters.

At 3:00 pm, Jim Hennigar walked into the Castle lobby with Alice, a very curious Harris Hawk, perched on his arm. My Hawk Walk was about to begin.

Ignoring the pouring rain, we walked into the woods of the estate and pretty soon I was given my own thick leather glove and shown the proper

way to stand when a Hawk is about to land on my arm. Using a tiny morsel of meat as a lure, Alice flew from a branch and grabbed my glove in her talons with an inelegant thump.

The next 90 minutes were a fascinating introduction to the world of Hawks and Falcons, their care, characteristics, eating habits and even some of their history. A 'Falconet', for instance, was the name chosen for a cannon used in the 15th century. The musket (gun) was named after the male sparrow hawk and the Toyota Tercel (automobile) takes its name from the male peregrine falcon. Throughout our conversation and walk, Alice would fly off into the trees and anxiously await the next piece of meat so she could swoop in for a bite.

The Hawk Walk ended at a shelter housing a number of raptors. I was introduced to the goshawk, various falcons and several owls, before heading back to the castle to dry off and warm up. What an amazing way to spend an afternoon! For the record, Dromoland Castle also offers golf, fishing, cycling, clay shooting, archery, croquet, tennis, horseback riding, and has a fully appointed spa.

I stayed at some very fine hotels while in Ireland, but somehow the castle experience stood out as something special. In a way, I guess it appeals to our dreams of what it would be like to live in a castle with attentive service and delicious foods and then to actually experience it. Perhaps for some of my generation, it appeals to the Disney stories we grew up with; a realization of the Prince and the Pauper and all the rags-to-riches imagineering to which we are all exposed from time to time.

In the context of tourism, the theme of togetherness in building castles unleashes the dreams that many travellers embrace; a perfect complement to the very idea of travel and the ability to turn dreams and wishes into reality especially when in Ireland.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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