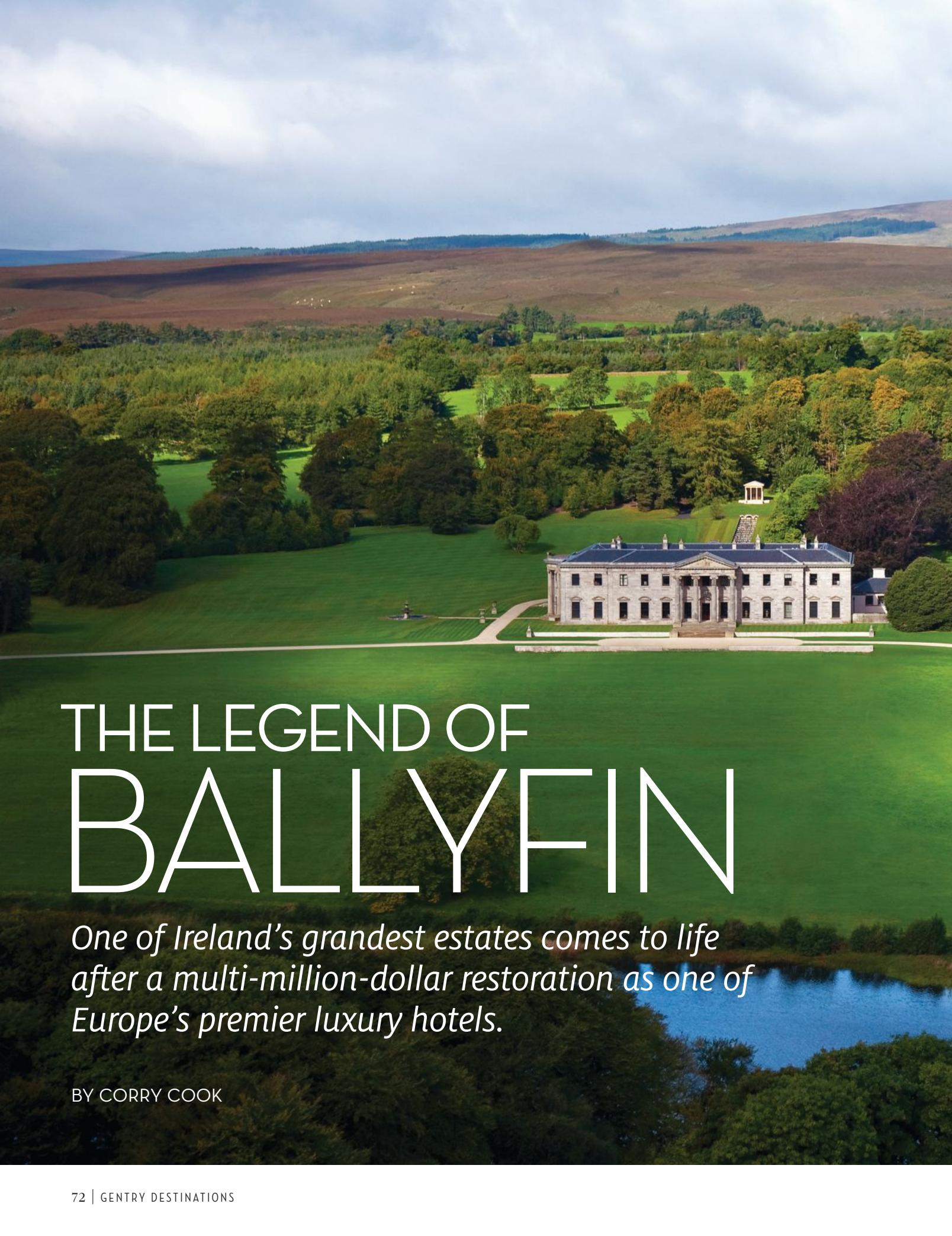


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THE LEGEND OF BALLYFIN

One of Ireland's grandest estates comes to life after a multi-million-dollar restoration as one of Europe's premier luxury hotels.

BY CORRY COOK



Ballyfin has long been admired as the most lavish Regency mansion in Ireland, the work of great Irish architects, Sir Richard and William Morrison. After eight years of restoration, Ballyfin re-opened in May 2011 as a 5-star country house hotel like no other.

Wearing camouflage, his hunting cap, and a shooting vest filled with shells, my instructor Eoin is a formidable figure with a bright ginger beard, almost passing for an Irish Rambo, except for his enormous, comforting smile. An experienced bird shooter, Eoin acts as instructor and bodyguard, monitoring boxes of shells and shotguns, encouraging novices like me, and directing gun safety.

"Ok, sure, I may be a beginner," I thought to myself and smiled. "But at least I know which end is the dangerous one." Eoin brought me back to reality. "Put the gun up to rest high on your shoulder and rest your cheek on the barrel," he explained. "Now face the target and stand strong. Practice a natural swing and imagine how it would feel to quickly track each target and squeeze the trigger. Proceed when ready." "What the hell," I thought. "You only live once." Set and ready, I yelled "PULL!" The clay pigeon flew with a bang and I pulled the trigger. Eoin laughed big and said, "A nice shot it was. Congratulations. Welcome to Ballyfin."

Set at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains' wooded foothills in the center of Ireland, Ballyfin Demesne is a place of history and romance alongside tranquility and great natural beauty. Over the last decade, the magnificent estate has been painstakingly restored to become the ultimate boutique experience. Travel aficionados have lavished the property with accolades, praising the manor on personal blogs and newsletters and recommending it on travel sites.

Recently, Condé Nast Traveler awarded the Irish luxury hotel with a "first place" on its Best Hotels in the World list. Men, women, the young, and the more mature are attracted equally to this special place, internationally known for restoring faith in every kind of sophisticated traveler.

My personal invitation from General Manager Damion Bastiat felt akin to a golden-ticket invite to the most elite Hamptons weekend getaway imaginable. My body and mind were looking to relaxing into my European escape, but my years living in Europe and seeing the sites left me yearning to be a fugitive from the familiar.

As with everything in life, first impressions count; whether by land or by air, the art of the grand entrance is alive and well at Ballyfin Demesne. After VIP-expedited immigration and customs procedures, choices for your arrival include private helicopter or a chauffeur-driven car to collect you at the airport and transfer you to Ballyfin.

Never one to pass up luxury paired with adventure, I chose to arrive by private helicopter. There's nothing like the sensation of hovering in a powerful, fast-moving helicopter just above the ground and then surging up to 1,000 feet. The velvety green landscape is even more extraordinary when glimpsed from this vantage. Our wonderful pilot dutifully pointed out the local landmarks along the way.

As our 20-minute thrill ride came to an end, the helicopter gently descended to the grounds of the extraordinary Ballyfin. Typical of many Irish country houses, the manse was created as a stunning showplace to delight and entertain. Stonewalls enclose 600 acres of private parkland, a 28-acre lake, ancient woods, and a number of delightful garden buildings, follies, and grottoes. Among other highlights on the property are a medieval-style tower, built as a folly in the 1860s, and a series of walled





Ballyfin is not just a place of unsurpassed elegance, history, and attention to detail, it is a priceless step back in time. Enjoy Ballyfin's leisurely boat trip on the 28-acre lake (above) followed by a picnic. The 80-foot library (left) occupies the entire south front of the house with matching fireplaces and over 5,000 volumes of books.



With its gracefully Rococo stucco work ceiling, the Lady Caroline Coote room (above) is among the most pleasingly elegant bedrooms at Ballyfin. Decorated with a collection of contemporary Irish art, the downstairs Ballyfin bar (right) is a favorite hotspot for guests. Van Der Hagen is a more intimate dining room (below), the walls hung with early 18th-century paintings by Van Der Hagen. Stair Hall (far right) is a room of its own with its cantilevered stairs and Coote family portraits.





gardens. Inside Ballyfin, guests discover that rooms live up to the elegance and majesty of the architecture. Each of the 15 bedrooms is unique and furnished with fine Irish art and antiques.

Under the watch of the refined and impeccably dressed Bastiat, guests feel more like friends invited for a weekend and less like hotel guests. With more than 20 years in European hospitality, the dashing Frenchman can personally welcome you in half a dozen languages. The personal attention and level of detail in the guest experience is astounding, from the staff's welcome outside the mansion (*a la Downton Abbey*) to the effortless check-in inside the Entrance Hall, which is home to a richly-patterned antique mosaic floor, imported from Italy in 1822.

Hidden behind a bookcase in a corner of the library is a mirrored doorway that opens, Alice In Wonderland-like, into a fragile iron cage and a balmy tropical atmosphere. A conservatory of ease and elegance, it was originally conceived as an exotic oasis—a novelty, really—filled with camellias and citrus fruits, designed to bring the outdoors inside through the extremities of winter. Today, it makes for a royal lunch spot.



"Famished?" Bastiat asked me soon after my arrival. "Always," I replied.

Sustenance at Ballyfin is no laughing matter. The gardens yield a wide abundance of fruit, herbs, salads, and vegetables throughout the year, which enables the kitchen team to provide the freshest local seasonal produce for the dining room. Ballyfin hens provide bountiful eggs every day for breakfast and guests are welcome to collect the eggs each morning. Even the honey is produced by busy Irish bees onsite, right near the property's famed grotto.

With each bite it is easy to see that the dishes here are more than food; they are an expression of love and passion for Ireland, and everything has been selected to be the best that Ireland has to offer, including fish landed from the day boats on Ireland's south coast and delivered by the Duncannon Fish Company. (Insider tip: be sure to order the breaded Goujons with Irish Cod tartar sauce served with chips and lemon.)

Seclusion, luxury, and privacy reign supreme here at Ballyfin (Kim Kardashian and Kanye West escaped the paparazzi here for their honeymoon). There is so much on which to feast the eye, from the rotunda's exquisite marquetry floor to superb stucco work, antique furniture, porcelain, paintings, and chandeliers. Deep sofas, crackling fires, and views over the pleasure grounds, cascade, and lake instantly soothe.

Even grownups like to play dress-up now and then. In an especially delightful surprise, Ballyfin is also home to a sensational costume house, where you will find a wonderful selection of 40 period costumes along with endless matching accessories. The costume department is not only highly skilled, but also incredibly patient, and you can try on countless frocks before deciding on the perfect one. Later that evening, your selected costume will be delivered to your room, pressed and laid out perfectly for you.

The cocktail hour is back at Ballyfin. This is luxury infused with warm Irish hospitality, impeccable attention to detail, and a rare sense of romance. As a piano player sets the tone, waiters provide the finest in libations, and guests—wearing the latest fashions or those of a bygone era—mingle freely. Even the mundane ordering process has plenty of flair, as guests make their dinner selections from the comfort of their ideal cocktail spot. Eventually, all are pleasantly ushered into dinner to enjoy the grandeur of the State Dining Room.

With a soft knock on my door, I opened my eyes to find fresh coffee and croissants

the morning after my arrival. Having decided to take a walk before the sun rose fully to explore the nearly 614 acres of private gardens, I stopped by the butler's desk for a map before heading out to enjoy my journey. Just a short distance from the house you can truly feel "lost in nature." There are many highlights that will keep garden lovers and outdoor enthusiasts exploring for days. The wildlife is a real treat. Wild birds alone include kestrels, sparrow hawks, hen harriers, buzzards, long-eared owl, cuckoo, pheasants, kingfishers, swans, cootes, and moorhens. I stayed alert, hoping to catch a glimpse of a sly fox, deer, red squirrel, or mink.

As I investigated the four-acre kitchen garden, where every cool-weather vegetable flourishes, there wasn't a soul around for miles. It seemed I had arrived at my very own safe haven away from the world. Taking off my shoes, I stepped off the paved path and let my bare toes feel the soft, wet grass. Looking up at century-old trees and then back at the mansion, it seemed incomprehensible that less than a decade ago, Ballyfin was a crumbling ruin of broken glass, cracked plaster, and wet mold with its gardens overgrown and neglected. Once a stately home to notable Irish gentry, it later became the Patrician Brothers school, only to fall into disrepair after the classrooms shut their doors for the last time.

Not only did owners and Chicago residents Fred and Kay Krehbiel spend the better part of a decade and millions restoring the 35,000-square-foot house, but they also duplicated the original interiors with period and reproduction furnishings, 19th-century-patterned toile and damask fabrics, and original colors and wall coverings. They filled the 80-foot-long library's shelves with antique books, topped original fireplace mantels with gold candelabra, and installed Empire mirrors. The result? A masterpiece.

At the end of a lovely walk in the fresh air I wended my way up to the trap and skeet range, where Ballyfin's resident adventure guides, Eion and Glenn, welcome novices and seasoned experts alike. Whether it's archery

or skeet shooting, they'll be the first to tell you that actually making contact with your target is a thrill like none other. Based on my experience, it can prove to be an addictive sport when you take the plunge. Like life, getting a sense of the trajectory and lead-time takes some practice, but once you get your rhythm, you'll be hooked.

Beyond taking aim, there is plenty of other outdoor "action," ranging from lake fishing to cycling on the estate's 10 miles of roads, exploring the stone grotto and the rock garden, shooting clay pigeons, and riding horseback. No matter which you choose, you deserve to celebrate as only the Irish know how. Discreetly hidden away in the former Servants' Hall downstairs, the Cellar Bar is the perfect place to celebrate or drown sorrows after great adventures. Despite mountains of competition from the United States, Japan, and everywhere in between, no whiskey on earth is better than Irish whiskey.

Whether it be a single cask whiskey that a master blender has determined perfect as is, or a rare blend of aged whiskeys from a variety of casks, the cellar has every luxurious sip your heart might desire. The Middleton range of whiskeys continues to dominate and inspire. As I sat sipping Middleton 21 over the convivial hospitality for which Ireland is famed, ideas flowed for future visits and new experiences to be had at Ballyfin across the travel spectrum, including stargazing, master gardening seminars, marathon training, hot air ballooning, painting classes, whiskey blending, grand entrances via self-driven Ferrari, and more.

An old Irish proverb comes to mind: there are only two kinds of people in the world, the Irish and those who wish they were. After a trip to Ballyfin, you'll understand just how true this is. ♦





Beginners and experts enjoy a clay pigeon shooting experience (opposite page) at Ballyfin. Hidden behind a bookcase in the library is a secret doorway that opens into the balmy tropical conservatory (center). Overlooking the courtyard garden, Ballyfin's 14m-heated indoor pool (above) is a beautiful space for invigoration and well-being. Water rushes soothingly down stone steps of the cascade (left).