

# My hair's like a bird's nest now, but I do love my owl

## STAYCATION: Dunboyne Castle, Co. Meath

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**I**T'S not every day, it's true, that you find yourself standing in the middle of a field with an owl on your head.

But having spent many hours attempting to recreate Don Conroy's barn owls growing up, not to mention being a Harry Potter fan, this was an opportunity not to be missed.

And so there I was on a chilly winter afternoon, living out my Hogwarts fantasy with a barn owl called Twinkle Toes making herself at home on my head.

And while Twinkle Toes may have been cute, he certainly didn't live up to his name, thrashing about my carefully blow-dried hair until it resembled, well, a nest. But hey, at least HE was comfortable.

Aside from Twinkle Toes, our falconry expert Bernard Byrne also introduced us to Tiddlywinks, a brown owl, and Bugsy, a Harris hawk.

Tiddlywinks was a fairly docile creature but Bugsy was another story altogether. Once Bernard removed his leather hood, which incidentally made him look like a WWII pilot, the power and speed with which he flapped his wings was something to behold.

Playtime over, it was time to feed

the birds. This was the stomach-churning bit. Bernard laid some worms on my arm and allowed the birds to come swooping in for the feed. Seeing a bird of prey coming towards you at lightning speed hungry for his dinner, is enough to set your heart racing but thankfully they were all very well behaved.

Bernard's dedication to the birds was clear from the outset when he told us stories of raising them from birth and how some of them have become so domesticated that

they'll happily land on his pet dog.

He told us all sorts of interesting facts. Did you know that owls have fixed eye sockets and can't move their eyeballs? Instead, they rotate their heads up to 270 degrees to be able to see sideways.

We were so engrossed in the birds that our session rang long and we had to be dragged away for our next activity - it was time to shoot some arrows.

Dunboyne Castle works closely with Dynamic Events to offer guests a range of exciting outdoor activities on their 20-acre estate,

including air rifles, falconry, Gaelic Games, quad biking, grass karts, team challenges crystal maze and, of course, archery.

And I have to say our instructors could not have been more patient with our feeble attempts.

After learning how to draw an arrow, which to my dismay meant pulling the bow back under my

chin, instead of across my face, dashing my hopes of looking like Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, I squared up to the target.

After a couple of turns, I realised that it was a good thing I wasn't

actually in *The Hunger Games* or I'd never have made it out alive.

I managed to hit the board all right but couldn't get the bow anywhere near the centre.

In fact, the only part of the competition in which I excelled was when the object of the game was to hit the board but as far away from the target as possible.

I scored 11/10 for hitting the tiny sliver of cork board showing at the back of the board TWICE.

My best friend Phuong was ten times better, narrowly missing out on winning the competition.

There was just time for a quick soak in the pool before dinner. The Thermal Suite in Dunboyne Castle's Seoid Spa features a eucalyptus room, lanconium, dry sauna and heated loungers.

The hydrotherapy pool, meanwhile, uses specially designed jets to help relieve pain and induce relaxation - just what we needed after an afternoon of archery.

Dinner in the award-winning Ivy restaurant is always a pleasure. I'd eaten there once before and found the roast supreme of chicken out of this world. This time around I opted for the venison which comes with parsnip purée, red cabbage marmalade, charred onion petals,



fondant potato and venison Jus and found it to be just as good.

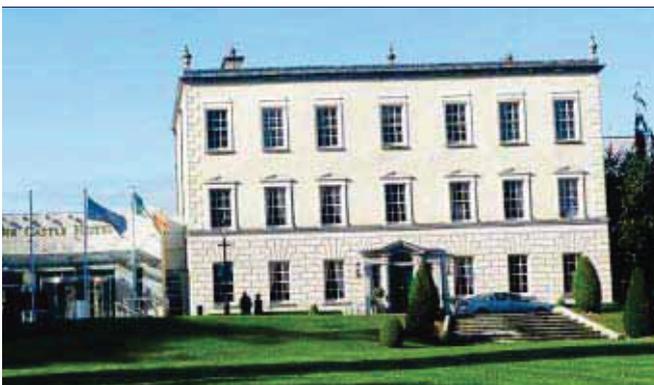
I also somehow managed to squeeze in the passion fruit tart with chocolate ganache. We retired to the Sadler Bar for drinks but it didn't take long before we all drifted off to go to bed.

If you've an occasion coming up, be it a birthday or hen party, and are looking for a way to mark the occasion beyond the usual dinner-and-drinks session then Dunboyne Castle is a great choice.

And with activities such as falconry, go-karting and team sports, the hotel is the perfect spot to keep the kids entertained on school holidays.

And who knows, you might pick up a new hobby. I would never have thought to try out archery but now that I have, I can see myself doing it again in the future - I'll have to work on my aim.

■ A one-night stay at Dunboyne Castle, Co. Meath costs from €130 per twin occupancy including breakfast. Working in partnership with Dynamic Events the hotel offers outdoor activities including archery and falconry. Prices from €55pp (for a minimum of ten guests), contact events@dunboynecastlehotel.com.



**This year's must-wear hat: Dunboyne, and our Claire**

