



Battle of beauty - and why you'll put up a real fight to leave Dunboyne

It's a mere 11 miles from Dublin and close enough to the airport that you can see planes overhead, but Dunboyne Castle Hotel and Spa in Co Meath retains a magical sense of being secluded and far removed from the buzz of urban life. And as LAURA MCMULLAN discovered on a recent visit, it's also home to a number of majestic delights, from gorgeous grounds to the best seabass in the world

DUNBOYNE

For the majority of Northern Ireland based journalists, the Twelfth of July - or the July holidays, if you prefer - is a period in the office calendar when it's pretty hard to secure some time off.

There's normally far too much going on to keep us hacks busy at our computers.

It was no different for this desk bound reporter, so it was with fervour that I accepted an invitation for the following weekend to a location that really could not have been more appropriately named for the time of year - the luxurious Dunboyne Castle Hotel and Spa, in Co Meath.

This 145-bedroom luxury venue, which dates back to the 1700s, is just half an hour's drive north of Dublin, on the edge of a pretty village that is quaint and typically Irish; we were later told by resident and hotel sales manager Janet Weafer that it boasts just four pubs.

The lush grounds of the hotel were awash with colour when we arrived, in the form of a children's carnival event, which we were told by the friendly lady at reception was being held for children who had been affected by cancer.

The hotel had a lively ambience, we noted, as we made our way up to our room on the fourth floor, which was plush, comfy and modern, bedecked with all our favourite home comforts, from the flat screen TV to the spacious shower, pile of fluffy towels, and thoughtfully left toiletries.

We made our way down to find the Terrace Lounge

to sample the hotel's new kids on the block in terms of its Afternoon Tea / Spa / Overnight stay packages - the specially themed Aromathera-tea, the bespoke creation of the hotel's award-winning executive chef John Nagle, designed to complement the luscious aromas of the therapies available to guests in the wonderful Seroid Spa.

As well as the usual assortment of finger sandwiches (the poached chicken with basil mayonnaise were particularly yummy) and freshly baked scones, we tucked into Irish smoked salmon and chive cream on Guinness brown bread, and egg mayo and watercress on mini brioche with gusto, before greedily treating our tastebuds to the cakes and mini pastries.

There was an absolutely heavenly orange flower meringue pie, and my husband named the lavender and poppy seed cake as his favourite of the delectable selection.

I also adored the carrot cake, with its silky smooth white cream cheese frosting, and as a total chocoholic,

almost wept over what to me was the piece de resistance - the Chef's Signature Smashed Chocolate.

This particular treat is exactly what its name implies - a piquant mixture of dark, milk and white chocolate, pistachio nuts, dried cranberries, pink pralines, roasted hazelnuts, flaked almonds, and raisins.

Sated, we decided it was time to go for a walk around the gorgeous grounds of our home for the weekend and find out a little more about Dunboyne Castle.

The original castle on this estate was owned by the Butler family, but destroyed by

Dunboyne Castle Hotel and Spa.



Oliver Cromwell.

The building that we see today was completed in 1764, and since the last members of the Butler family left the Castle (the final one was the 22nd Baron of Dunboyne John Butler, Catholic Bishop of Cork), it has passed through many families, including the Butler-O'Briens, the Morrrough-Ryans and the Watchmans.

In 1955, it became home to the Good Shepherd Sisters who remained there until 1991 when it was bought by the Keating family, before the present owners bought it in 1999. It was in need of much repair and was restored to its original state and opened as Dunboyne Castle Hotel and Spa in 2006.

The hours seemed to fly by, and suddenly we were preparing for our second gastronomic treat of the day - dinner in The Ivy restaurant.

The service here was impeccable and the quality of the food second to none.

For my starter, I opted for

the St Tola goats cheese, which came with beetroot meringue, poached beetroot puree and foam, candied walnuts and horseradish mousse.

It was a myriad of flavours, prettily presented on a square shaped slab, and succeeded in whetting my appetite for my main.

My husband thoroughly enjoyed his choice - roasted butternut squash and parsnip soup with rosemary, seasonal vegetable crisp and smoked bacon foam.

My main meal was an absolute delight. I opted for the seared seabass and razor clams, which came with clam and cider vinegar glaze and sea vegetables.

I'm a huge lover of seabass, but what made this meal stand out from any others I had ever had was the texture of the meat - it was more succulent and less flaky than some of the more bland offerings I had encountered before.

My other half opted for the chargrilled Angus beef

fillet with Jerusalem artichoke puree, potato and shallot terrine, watercress condiment and red wine jus.

The dessert menu was extremely impressive, and in the end, I was unable to resist the most 'chocolatey' sounding option, namely the milk chocolate and hazelnut praline mousse, which was absolutely divine.

It came with a wonderfully rich espresso and toffee sauce, and Irish Cream ice cream, and was the perfect conclusion to what had been a faultless meal.

My husband chose the white chocolate meringue parfait with a pistachio macaroon and strawberry gel. It was light and sweet and truly fabulous.

We rounded off the evening with a drink in the Cellar Bar where we were entertained into the wee hours by a talented gentleman playing well known Irish songs on a guitar.

After what was possibly the best night's sleep I've had

in a long time, we arose and rushed down to breakfast, eagerly anticipating a breakfast that would live up to the fantastic foodie reputation set the previous evening.

We most certainly weren't disappointed.

Sadly, time didn't permit us the chance to luxuriate in the Seoid Spa, and try the new Aromathera-tea package, which offers the choice of a back massage with lavender, ginger, black pepper and rosemary; a luxurious facial with chamomile, rose and orange flower, or a stimulating juniper berry and pink grapefruit foot massage with spearmint gel.

The meaning of the word Seoid is 'gem' in Irish, and indeed it seems that the Spa at Dunboyne is its hidden gem, and one which we promised ourselves that we would have to return to, just to discover for ourselves.

● For more information, call +353 1 801 3500 or log onto www.dunboynecastle-hotel.com

Travel facts

Aromathera-tea in the Terrace Lounge costs €30 for two people. You can also enjoy the Aromathera-tea package, which includes the Aromathera-tea and your choice of one out of three spa treatments for €65

per person. Or why not make a night of it and indulge in a mid-week overnight break, which includes breakfast, dinner and the Aromathera-tea package (afternoon tea and treatment) for €155 per person.