

Playing to the gallery

The lure of Dublin extends beyond stag nights and the Liffey, as **Patricia Cleveland-Peck** discovers on an art break to the Irish capital

We are in Dublin in the Merrion Hotel, an elegant Georgian building created from four large townhouses, in one of which the Duke of Wellington was born. It is a luxurious hotel but one with a special secret – its art collection.

As we sit by the fire in one of the drawing rooms, enjoying the scent of peat and flowers, we have only to glance up to see Sarah Purser's lovely painting of Constance and Eva Gore-Booth as children in the woods at Lissadel to be transported into the midst of the Gaelic Revival. These two girls were described by the poet WB Yeats as "both beautiful, one a gazelle". Eva subsequently became a poet and Constance a republican who fought in the Irish Citizen Army.

If one painting can evoke so much history and culture then imagine the riches afforded to art-loving guests by the 150 Irish works of art here which make up one of the finest private collections in the city.

Our day starts on the way to breakfast with glimpses of John Boyd's disturbing masked men in *Futile Defence* and *Shut Eye With Acolyte*, while Walter Chetwood Aiken's *Feast Of St Barbre* bids us good-night as we take the lift up to bed. Besides paintings by such eminent exponents as Jack B Yeats, Louis Le Brocquy, William Leech, Mainie Jellett, Paul Henry and Sir John Lavery, there are sculptures, including a remarkable rendering of James Joyce by Rowan Gillespie in the garden.

Such is the commitment to art that when the hotel was refurbished in 1999, the intricate 18th-century plasterwork on the ceilings was patiently restored by a skilled young stuccadore, Seamus O'hEocha, who even managed to effect repairs to the reliefs of fruit and birds in flight with tiny sprigs of blackthorn. Further, a magnificent series of paintings depicting classical ruins and architectural details was commissioned from the artist Martin Mooney to adorn and complement the front stairwell.

There is so much fun to be had from searching out the paintings scattered throughout the hotel that we are almost reluctant to leave. We don't have far to go, however, before finding another treasure

house, the nearby National Gallery of Ireland, which has Irish and international works of art by all the great masters.

We are fortunate enough to meet, over a cup of coffee, Adrian Le Harivel, curator of British paintings, and Dr Brendan Rooney, curator of Irish art, both of whom I put on the spot by requesting they select just three must-see pictures from the collections. Le Harivel chooses Vermeer's famous *Woman Writing A Letter*, beguiled by the light and the sheer accomplishment of the painting, Poussin's *Lamentation Over The Dead Christ* and Gainsborough's charming *The Cottage Girl*. Rooney's choice of Irish paintings includes Orpen's *The Holy Well*, a strange satire on the idealisation of the Celtic Revival, George Barret's "sublime" *Powerscourt Waterfall* and Walter Osborne's *O'Connell Bridge*. Both say they could have chosen many others, which becomes obvious as we wander about enjoying the vast visual feast.

Returning, we almost literally enjoy a visual feast when we partake of the Merrion Hotel's unique Art Tea. First comes a cake-stand laden with sandwiches (old Irish smoked salmon on brown soda bread and horseradish cream, rare Irish beef on white bread), scones, lemon bread and a rich fruit confection known as porter cake. Next the waiter brings three little stands each bearing a tiny copy of a painting; they vary, and this afternoon we see the lovely but melancholy *Self Portrait* by Saurin Elizabeth Leech, *Farm Buildings* by Stephen McKenna and John Boyd's *Shut Eye With Acolyte*. Finally we are each presented with the pieces de resistance, three exquisitely crafted little cakes inspired by these paintings.

The next day, armed with a copy of the Dublin culture map, we board the hop-on, hop-off bus which stops in Merrion Square and head out to Kilmainham. This bus service is a boon as it not only stops at all the major sights but offers what can, depending on the driver, be an amusing commentary. Thus we learn the Duke of Wellington, ashamed of being born in Dublin, once said, "Being born in a stable does not make one a horse," to which a





The National Gallery Of Ireland is a vast shrine to artworks both Irish and international

PHOTOGRAPH: DANITA DELIMONT/ALAMY

local wit replied, “But it does not stop one being an ass.”

The Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, which is adjacent to the jail in which the leaders of the 1916 Easter Uprising were executed, is one of the most imposing buildings in the city. Built in 1684 by Charles II’s Viceroy, James Butler, Duke of Ormond, it was a home for retired soldiers, similar to Les Invalides in Paris and the Royal Hospital, Chelsea (which was built two years later). It now houses the splendid Irish Museum of Modern Art.

There was some controversy when three of the four wings around the central quadrangle were developed as galleries but the elegant exterior was retained and the old banqueting hall and chapel are still used for smart functions. Free tours of the historic part take place in summer.

It is a very child-friendly museum and, with its setting amid spacious grounds, it is popular with families. The current exhibition, *Conversations: Photography From The Bank Of America Collection*, a collaboration with the Museum Of Fine Art in Boston which runs until May 20, is a selection from one of the largest collections of photographs in the world.

Back on the bus we cross the Liffey and make our way via Phoenix Park, along the quays and up O’Connell Street, past the iconic new Spire which replaced the old statue of Nelson. The bus stops right outside the Hugh Lane gallery where the permanent collection contains works by Manet, Monet, Degas, Vuillard et al together with a full complement of Irish artists including some of Harry Clarke’s stained glass. The reconstruction of Francis Bacon’s studio, transported from London in all its chaotic state, is something not to miss.

For our last evening in the city we are once again surrounded by works of art as we dine at the two-Michelin-starred Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud within the Merrion Hotel. Our meal is sheer bliss – in our scallops, truffle tortellini, Annagassan Blue lobster and slow-cooked black sole every flavour is vibrant. The service is impeccable and the ambience a joy.

The next day we leave the city – but our art break is not over, as we head for Carton

House Hotel in nearby Maynooth. Now a 160-roomed hotel with two golf courses, it was originally the home of the Dukes of Leinster and served as a location in the TV series *The Aristocrats* about the 18th-century Lennox sisters, one of whom, Lady Emily, married the duke and lived here with their 19 children.

We wander through the enfilade of elegant rooms, pausing to revel at the splendour of the Gold Saloon with its lavish stucco depicting *The Courtship Of The Gods* by the celebrated Swiss-Italian Lafrancini brothers. In this room one door is flanked by an attractive pillared organ while a portrait by Angelica Kauffman is found above the other. Another magnificent stucco ceiling is found in the adjacent dining room designed by Richard Morrison – but on a less elevated level is the dummy door behind which conceals a cupboard containing a chamber pot used in the past by male guests.

The Chinese Bedroom, created by Lady Emily in 1759 by fixing panels of valuable Chinese paper on a blue background, was possibly used by Queen Victoria. A disguised door leads to a primitive shower from which servants concealed behind a shutter would douse the bather with buckets of water. There is also a print room, a book-lined library with a gallery and a room displaying the 39 bells which rang for the servants to answer.

There are also many paintings. Carton came into the ownership of the Mannaghan family in 1988 and they bought back some of the dispersed art works, including paintings by Lely, his pupil Wissing, William Ashford and Allan Ramsay.

Within and without the buildings as many historic features as possible have been cleverly retained. The interior, although equipped with all modern

comforts, still manages to reflect the spacious elegance of the 18th century. We love our large uncluttered bedroom and the bath set on a plinth inset with changing coloured lights – surely something which would have captivated the Georgians.

The redevelopment has effectively given the house a valid *raison d’être* for the 21st century. The same is also true of the 1100-acre estate – the golf courses are not exactly a landscape garden but they have their own beauty.

Regaled with history, architecture art and good food, our Irish art break is something we’ll long remember. ■

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TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) and Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) have return flights to Dublin from Glasgow and Edinburgh from £65.

WHERE TO STAY

The Merrion Hotel (www.merrionhotel.com) has a Champagne Getaway – a standard room and full breakfast plus a bottle of champagne on

arrival – for €140pppn. Until March, Carton House Hotel (www.cartonhouse.com) has a Winter Wonderland package – B&B plus three-course dinner – for €90ppp.

LATE DEALS

Barrhead Travel (www.barrheadtravel.co.uk, 0871 226 2673) has seven nights in **the Algarve** from £399pp. Price includes self-catering in a four-star apartment and return flights from Glasgow departing April 5.

Thomas Cook Holidays With Style (www.thomascook.com, 0844 412 5970) has seven nights in **Turkey** from £338pp. Price includes all-inclusive at a five-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing February 22.

Ebookers (www.ebookers.com) has three nights in **New York** from £513pp. Price includes room-only in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 9.

Jet2holidays (www.jet2holidays.com, 0800 408 5599) has two nights in **Budapest** from £195pp. Price includes B&B in a two-star hotel and return flights from Edinburgh departing February 23.

Barrhead Travel (www.barrheadtravel.co.uk, 0871 226 2673) has seven nights in **Austria** from £319pp. Price includes half-board at a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 3.

Direct Holidays (www.directholidays.co.uk, 0844 879 8173) has seven nights in **Tenerife** from £432pp. Price includes half-board in a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing March 2.