

A castle that's fit for a king

Noel Baker spied on Paul McCartney's wedding at Castle Leslie – so who better to return and review the five-star destination

First, a small confession: the last time I was in and around Castle Leslie, I wasn't an invited guest. In fact, I may have strayed dangerously close to being a full-on trespasser.

It was 2002 when, as a mere whelp of a reporter, I was sent by some former employers to Co Monaghan to scope out rumours that Paul McCartney was going to wed his girlfriend, Heather Mills, on the grounds of the estate. Being a bit of a greenhorn, I seemed to get lost when trying to find the place and eventually blundered up a country lane. After a bit of traipsing I caught sight, from some distance, of a large marquee. Strolling back out onto the road, some kindly staff enquired was I lost, and when I came clean, they said: 'Oh no, all that stuff is for a Swatch watch conference.'

It was the only foot they put wrong. Macca did indeed wed Ms Mills that week, happily greeting the press — at the eye-catching front entrance, rather than the scene of my off-road attempt — and revealing that Castle Leslie was the perfect location for such an epic bash. Having stayed in this absolutely beautiful quarter of Co Monaghan last Hallow E'en, I can only agree with the fab opinion of Mr McCartney.

The Castle Leslie Estate is 1,000 acres of glorious countryside, seemingly close to most things in this part of the world, and a place apart once you pass through its quaint entrance in the equally lovely village of Glaslough. It's owned by the Leslie family, and the reception area is full of books about their interesting history, one that was recently updated when Sir John Leslie, at 98, was last year granted the Legion d'Honneur by France for his role in that country's liberation during World War II. The centrepiece is the castle itself, next to the lake, and which at the time of our visit was entirely booked out for a two day wedding (no, not Macca).

I'm not really an aficionado of all things five star, but it's easy to appreciate it when people go that extra bit to make your stay some-

thing special. This is something Castle Leslie did in numerous ways. With my wife and children, we were staying in one of the Old Stable Mews, a gorgeous square, a short drive down from the Lodge — which holds the reception and restaurant areas near the entrance — and even closer to the castle itself.

Since it was Hallow E'en, all the stops had been pulled out. At the Mews and at the Lodge, there were lit-up pumpkins everywhere, all imaginatively designed. Add in realistic-looking severed hands reaching out of pot plants, cobwebbed shrubs and plastic skulls emitting scary noises (you could turn them off, of course, if so minded) and it was brilliantly atmospheric. The *piece de resistance* was the coffin-shaped box in the middle of the mews area filled with hay and with a skull and some skeleton arms peaking out. The effort required to put all this together for the guests was considerable, my children were mesmerised.

The mews was cosy and classy in equal measure, with a real townhouse vibe. There is a real fireplace, stylish fittings and a stack of DVDs, plus a small kitchen which was stocked with some chocolate and crisp treats and even frozen yogurt in the freezer — this went above and beyond the tea pot and the tumbler of Nescafe coffee packets you get elsewhere. Peering out from the upstairs sash windows, all you could hear was the sound of leaves rustling in the nearby woods — a comforting soundtrack as you went to sleep in the luxurious beds.

I could write a chapter about the buffet breakfast. I'm practically slobbering on the keyboard as I recall the array of treats on offer, like the locally-sourced sausages and rashers in the fry, the generous portions. That is upstairs in the Lodge, which downstairs houses Snaffles Restaurant and Bar. Its award-winning offerings are also sourced from as near to Glaslough as possible, whether it's duck, sea bass, lamb, or the beef for my delicious burger. I washed it down with a pint of



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Joker IPA, seriously tasty stuff, and then treated myself to a seat in the area outside, guarded by the glowing pumpkin heads. A special word also for the staff, who were endlessly patient and helpful. And when it comes to food choices, it's not like you're short of options: the first night of our stay we had pizzas delivered from a restaurant just outside the estate gates in Glaslough.

With all the eating, it's just as well there's plenty to do. Activities include fishing, kayaking, clay pigeon shooting — even hot air ballooning. The scenery is eye-popping, all the more so in the Autumn sunlight and the fallen leaves in every shade of red and brown. Trails seem to go off in every direction, and sometimes you arrive at a lovely old building, like the Gothic Lodge, or natural clearings in the woods where the children can run around. Just remember to bring your wellies. Plus there's a playground and a games room if it's raining. They seem to have thought of every-

While my wife had a session at the spa, I elected for a visit to the equestrian centre, and so it came to be that I sat on a horse for the first time in my life. His name is Wilson, a full Irish draft, mild in temperament and very accommodating. I hadn't a clue. However, by the end of my hour-long training session, conducted under the watchful gaze of Patrick, one of the instructors, I had learned about posture, the cues for stopping and starting, and had even managed to break out into a little trot.

It's telling that it was Wilson doing the work and not me. The fresh air and the glorious food meant that the prevailing mood was one of taking it easy. I strolled up to Glaslough village at one stage, located outside the front gates of Castle Leslie, and had a quick nose around. It's charming in its own right and has an artisan chocolate cafe and a few pubs, including the Pillar Bar, where I had the nicest late afternoon pint of stout I've had in many a year.

It should be pointed out that

while Glaslough and the Estate seems to exist in splendid, scenic isolation, it is actually just 15 minutes drive from Monaghan town, a short hop from the town of Emyvale, and if anything, it's even closer to the Co Tyrone village of Caledon, a nice spot with Georgian buildings and, in Allen's, an excellent coffee shop which also has a nice line in home furnishings, if that's your thing.

Paul McCartney's marriage to Heather Mills might not have worked out, but the wedding must have been amazing. Castle Leslie is made for repeat visits, something I hope will be the case with us. For me, the best part of the weekend was walking back to our lodgings as dusk was falling and the sky was throwing up the first stars. As the great man is wont to sing: "Get back to where you once belonged."

■ See www.castleleslie.com for information and bookings. Midweek deals start at €80 per person sharing. Access via the N2 Dublin to Derry road, turning right at Emyvale for Glaslough.