

TRAVEL

Áine Bonner took her brood on a staycation, and found fun and relaxation in Co. Monaghan

GRANDEUR: The magnificent Castle Leslie in Co. Monaghan

Like many parents across the country, I now live my life based around the school calendar. It dictates when I can escape the nine-to-five grind and tells me when I have to get back to reality. It's the first year I've had to worry about any of this kind of thing – my eldest is in junior infants. So although we're only just back after a blissful two weeks of Christmas holidays in Granny's house, I'm already dreaming of the Easter holidays. And this year it's a whopper of a three-week break.

Thanks to Easter falling early and the St Patrick's Day bank holiday falling alongside it, school will be out for 19 days in total. That's a hell of a lot of entertainment required and there's only so many days an Easter egg hunt will cut the mustard. We had explored the option of going overseas this year but flights cost a premium now thanks to being tied down to specific dates outside of school term. A staycation it is.

During the Halloween break, we stumbled across the perfect family break away: a blend of luxury for the adults coupled with outdoor adventures for the kids, it really was exactly what we were looking for. Before children (BC) I'd heard of Castle Leslie in Co. Monaghan as a luxury adult destination – if it was good enough for Paul McCartney's nuptials it must be swanky – so it hadn't occurred to me that it'd be somewhere suitable for kids. I was wrong. Not only did they cater for families like ours – with three children under five – they made us feel extremely welcome. Not an eye-roll in sight and they addressed the kids with a smile and good humour.

Our self-catering Stable Mews was luxurious and allowed us the space and scope to have a relaxing time and room to breathe in the evenings when the kids finally went to sleep. We arrived to find a warm, inviting townhouse style of accommodation with our fridge stocked with beer and wine and a welcome hamper with goodies galore, along with some DVDs suitable for the whole family. And best of all, the 1,000 acres of the splendour that is the Castle Leslie Estate is located in a really handy spot, slap bang in the middle of our hellish journey from West Cork to where I grew up in Donegal. It was the perfect three-day stopover that spoiled us rotten.

The estate, which is located in the picturesque village of Glaslough, boasts the castle itself, the lodge (where you'll find the main restaurant, bar, reception etc) a lake, an equestrian centre and a host of beautiful woodland walks that left us muddy but exhilarated. The kids were delighted with the opportunity to run freely and splash in muddy puddles à la Peppa Pig while myself and himself had our own down time at the spa and eques-



A castle that's fit for your family



HORSEPLAY: An equestrian centre is just one of the outdoor activities on site

trian centre respectively. We felt as if we'd arrived in a little world of our own as we could walk along the estate for ages without coming across another soul. Yet when we trudged back to the lodge afterwards for a hot chocolate to warm up our bones, the place was buzzing with people – couples, families and people reading the paper at their leisure. It really had something for everyone and our neighbours at the Stable Mews even brought their family pet, a boxer called Lola.

There's also the option for fishing, kayaking, clay pigeon shooting and even hot air ballooning at Castle Leslie Estate. And for people with older children (5+), there's the brilliant Saddle Club available on selected dates at a cost of €25 per session per child.

Given that it was Halloween, the Castle went all out with the spooky decor. The kids adored it. And as for the food, the breakfast in Snaffles Restaurant at the Lodge was to die for. Every morning of our stay, we tucked into a buffet of fresh fruits, pastries, cereals and yogurts, and

stuffed ourselves with full Irish breakfasts or pancakes or French toast from the menu. Delicious. On our first night, for dinner we opted for a pizza delivery, which was kindly organised by the hotel reception. And on the second evening we dined in Conor's Bar. The restaurant sources all its food as locally as possible and they have an impressive kids menu that doesn't just contain chicken nuggets and chips.

Glaslough village itself, located just outside the front gates of Castle Leslie is small yet charming and extremely picturesque. It's got a few pubs and an artisan chocolate café, as well as the aforementioned pizza place that delivered our dinner. It's located in a really handy spot about



15 minutes from Monaghan town and close to Emyvale – not much more than 1.5 hours from Dublin, so perfect if your kids aren't seasoned car travellers like mine.

COMFORT: Castle Leslie's attractive Stable Mews are fully equipped if you want to cook or just sit in, order a pizza and watch a DVD

For Easter, Castle Leslie is offering packages perfect for families – there's a three-night or a five-night stay to choose from. A five-night break in the Old Stable Mews, for example, includes a welcome basket with beer and wine for the adults and ice cream and chocolate for the kids. A treat box for the perfect night in includes popcorn, snacks and sweets and some family classics on DVD. Included in the stay is breakfast in Snaffles and a dinner in Conor's Bar on a night of your choice. The kitchens at the Mews are fully equipped for you to whip up meals, or you could dine out or order pizza as we did. The five-night break for a family of two adults and two kids costs €1,000, while the three-night break is €800.

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