

To the MANOR borne

JANE THOMPSON enjoys a riding holiday at the glorious Castle Leslie in Ireland, and rediscovers a love for cross-country jumping

Ireland is the perfect destination for those who have even a passing interest in horses. While the weather may not attract those after a summer holiday, Ireland's scenery, history and the people more than make up for any weather shortfalls. The opportunity to visit one of my best friends and go to the Tattersalls Horse Trials near Dublin was enough, but then to have a night at Castle Leslie was the cream on top of the Guinness!

Adding to my anticipation was the reaction I got when talking about my forthcoming stay with the local horsey

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crowd. Everyone was very enthusiastic; plenty had been there for weddings, hen or stag nights or special treats.

Sunday morning, after a week of being a tourist with activities ranging from watching club rugby through to the thrill of sea-kayaking, Karen and I had a lovely drive into what seemed to be the centre

of Ireland, passing through fields of peat harvests plus countless acres of greenness.

On arrival in Glaslough, County Monaghan, the Castle Leslie Estate was very easy to find – besides a couple of pubs, there isn't much else in the cute little town. We drove up to the main castle (as you do), and parked alongside Range Rovers and sports cars. We were then diplomatically redirected to the Lodge. There had been a very large wedding the day before, and the Castle was booked out for the whole weekend by a famous football player and his bride, so no room for us!





ABOVE The estate boasts at least 100 cross-country jumps from knee-high to knee tremblers
BELOW The gallant Two Tone **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Karen and I set out for our ride; The Lodge bedroom and lovely bathroom; Not all the bits on the wall at Snaffles restaurant were snaffles!; The Lodge exterior; The Lodge fireplace and sitting room

The Lodge didn't feel like a downgrade though – it felt like we were in heaven. In our excited anticipation we were early, so the lunch at Conor's Bar was a perfect way to fill in time. Everywhere we looked the equestrian theme 'jumped' out at us. On the walls there were fabulous pictures from hunting to humorous, there were horse shoes in the footpath, the main restaurant was called *Snaffles*, complete with a wall full of bits (not all snaffles, I noted).

both confessed to being a little nervous about what we had let ourselves in for, and being issued with back protectors wasn't exactly reassuring. Suitably attired, we went to meet our horses, already tacked up. When Two Tone was brought out of the stables for me to ride, I gasped! The Irish sporthorse was about 17 hands high. Cranky old knee and hip joints celebrated the announcement there were mounting blocks.

‘I had visions of jumping into the water nonchalantly one-handed like Andrew Nicholson...’



A walk around revealed beautiful gardens and enticing pathways but all thoughts were on our booked afternoon ride. While we both had international experience with horses as young things (and that is how we met so many years ago), it was some time since Karen's riding had involved "leaving the ground" and my recent jumping had been merely small logs encountered on my farm hacks. We

So with Karen on her mare, me on my gentle giant, our Kiwi-born but Irish-raised guide took us off through forest tracks, but not before we proved we were up to it in the sand arena over a few small show jumps. The first cross-country jumping challenge was a log combination. While past coaches Ted Harrison and Lockie Richards are long gone, they are not



forgotten; I could hear their voices in my head. "Let the jump come to you, let the horse jump, don't interfere!"

Once again, it worked and I breathed a sigh of relief, let go the clump of mane and turned to see a big grin from Karen after her successful completion. This was going to be fun!

Two Tone was a real pro, and it wasn't long before I started looking out for more challenging fences as we headed towards the lake. I had visions of jumping into the water nonchalantly one-handed like Andrew Nicholson, but the fences were designed far more in keeping with my competence, and Tone safely carted me through and over.

The two-hour ride reminded me how exhilarating jumping can be. I would have

THE FACTS

- CASTLE LESLIE is located in Glaslough, Monaghan, just 80 minutes from Dublin and 60 from Belfast. There is a variety of accommodation available, from the gorgeous castle itself, to the Lodge, the Stable Mews (very suitable for families) as well as self-catering cottages in the village.
 - THE ESTATE boasts 21 miles of bridleways, at least 100 cross-country jumps and an indoor arena. You can go for a gentle hack, or try the cross country challenge, or have a one-on-one lesson. It won't matter if you are just starting (or restarting) your riding, or have been in the saddle for years; there are horses and activities for all levels.
 - THERE IS NO NEED to use precious suitcase space with riding boots and hats, there's a great selection available, as well as gumboots for any muddy walks
 - THERE ARE PLENTY of options for the non-horsey members of your party to be entertained while you are off riding. A number of golf courses are nearby and there are some great places to walk. Clay bird shooting, fishing and kayaking are available, and even a falconry display (bookings essential).
- For more information, visit www.castleleslie.com

IMAGES: JANE THOMPSON AND SUPPLIED BY CASTLE LESLIE



ABOVE With 21 miles of bridleways, you can enjoy hours of hacking
BELOW The Old Stable Mews courtyard
OPPOSITE Just some of the 64 different varieties of gin on offer!

‘Waking up to the noise of the horses stabled below nickering for their breakfast is my idea of an alarm clock.’

joined the local hunt with Tone; together we could have done anything! Our ride covered the area immediately around the Castle; we encountered many couples out walking, but horses get priority.

Apparently the 1000-acre property includes many fences from "knee high to knee tremblers" although we didn't get to see the whole selection. My two disappointments: we didn't get out in the open for a really good gallop and I hadn't booked in for another ride the next day!

Our room in the Stable Block was called 'Barrister' after one of the founding horses, and overlooked the stables. I always tend to judge a hotel by the bathrooms and was very impressed with the divine claw-foot bath and huge shower. Obviously no water shortages in Ireland! The bottle of chilled

Prosecco awaiting us after our ride was very welcome, and the limited wi-fi in the rooms, usually something that stresses me out, was a clear signal it was time to focus on the here and now.

Five courses awaited us for dinner, each of them a special treat. The entrée of tomato – presented four different ways – was a highlight, as too the fish main course, and then the desserts...

My gin-loving friend delighted in the fact there was a whole menu devoted to her favourite tittle – 64 different varieties including previously unheard of Sipsmith from New Zealand.

The charming Spanish waiter advised the list is expanding to 85 and talked us into an after-dinner gin, suggesting the Mediterranean with hints of olives, basil,

rosemary and thyme would aid digestion.

We were led into an adjoining room with luxurious couches, and given a bucket-like glass of gin and tonic which really did finish off one of the finest meals in my life!

Waking up to the noise of the horses stabled below nickering for their breakfast is my idea of an alarm clock.

After a fine breakfast, we had a tour of the Castle, oohed-and-aaahed at the copper bath in a magnificent bedroom, the ornate furniture and beautiful rooms. The final treat was a massage and facial in the spa, then we were reluctantly on our way, plotting ways to return.



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