



My Home IS MY CASTLE

CASTLE LESLIE ESTATE IN COUNTY MONAGHAN IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING IRISH CASTLE ESTATES STILL IN THE HANDS OF ITS FOUNDING FAMILY.

There are many stories to tell and who better to tell them than current trustee and guardian of the castle, Sammy Leslie. "We can trace its ancestry back to Atilla the Hun," explains Sammy, "that's how much history there is here!"

The estate's colorful history is awash with politics, royalty and war. The Leslie family has lived on the Estate since 1665. It is the only family-owned estate operating on such a scale in Ireland and it has become one of the most individual and authentic castle estates to stay at in the country.

The estate is home to some of the most unique and enchanting accommodation, very much in the style of a fine country house rather than a traditional hotel. As Sammy says, "it is full of character, characters, personality and personalities." The estate offers a variety of accommodation options to suit all tastes, whether it be in the original house, in the beautifully restored lodge, self-catering homes in the old stable mews or traditional village cottages.

While the location is tranquil and picture postcard



perfect, there are a wealth of activities on offer including pike fishing for the nature enthusiast, a private cinema in the castle for movie buffs, exceptional walking trails for those who want to breathe in fresh country air, kayaking and clay pigeon shooting for the more adventurous, hot air balloon rides for those looking for exhilaration, a fabulous spa for rejuvenation and of course the world-class equestrian center.

And there's little chance of going hungry either – though it is easy to work up an appetite with so much to do. When it comes to dining at Castle Leslie Estate, it's all about choice. "We cater for those looking for casual dining as well as those seeking a more elegant and romantic experience. Guests can look forward to lazy breakfasts, light lunches or picnic lunches in the woodlands, Irish country cooking in Conor's bar or gourmet dinners in the 2AA Rosette award winning Snaffles Restaurant."

SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

Sammy took up the reigns of the family estate at a time when it was much in need of

repair. It was a huge challenge but anybody that meets Sammy will know that she is pretty unstoppable. She explains:

"The size and nature of the estate, the cost of its upkeep and the effects of the troubles on the border county ensured that Castle Leslie Estate was a 'hot potato' within the family.

"When I took it over from my father, I recognized it as a commercially viable opportunity that would not only ensure the future safe keeping of the estate and its history, but also prompt its regeneration.

"My ambition was to bring the estate back to life, gain sustainability through tourism and work symbiotically with local communities. I also wanted to have fun in the process! My desire was to restore the castle in the style and manner it was built to enable guest entertainment on a grand scale."

She started small, establishing tea rooms in the old conservatory which generated income to restore the roof. "I started with

a tea room and a business plan. The tea room was funded with a grant of 5,000 Irish punts from the Enterprise Board, but I needed to match it." Struggling to raise the money, Sammy decided to sell her father's car while he was on holiday!

"That car sale went a long way," she says. "The tearooms proved to be a success and they paved the way for further development."

Between 1995 and 1997 Sammy oversaw the complete refurbishment of fourteen of the castle bedrooms and bathrooms, each in its own original and unique style, in an effort to maintain the individuality and uniqueness of the property. In those days dinners were served by candlelight in the original dining room, just as it had been in the old days, with pre-dinner drinks served in the Drawing Room or Fountain Garden.

The castle was soon rewarded with The Good Hotel Guide Caesar Award for being 'utterly enjoyable and mildly eccentric'. It is a wonderful refuge for grown-ups



where there are no TVs, phones or radios -just wonderful food, relaxed and friendly service, lazy breakfasts served until noon and picnics by the lake.

When peace finally came to Northern Ireland with the Good Friday Agreement, Sammy took the opportunity to restore the rest of the estate to its former glory.

“Our family’s ethos has always been one of creativity and curiosity, openness and sharing, of innovation and entrepreneurship, of sensitivity and working together, of involvement and teamwork,” she explains. “With 1000 years of Leslie family history recorded, and with 2017 marking 25 years in business, it is my great honor to be the one tasked with bringing a unique and important part of Ireland’s living heritage through to the future.

“Like my father I strongly believe that we do not inherit nor own lands, we are just guardians doing our best for future generations. It is my hope that Castle Leslie Estate will provide

more decades of employment for those who live locally and continue to be a sanctuary for all our guests.”

What Sammy achieved in a relatively short space of time is remarkable and a testament to her steely determination. To what does she attribute her success?

“Using a good business plan to guide the way forward allowed me to hone my idea and to plan for the long-term. I was once told that everything is built three times; once in your head, once on paper and once in reality. My financiers got the vision I had for the estate and the potential strength in the business.

“I also followed in my ancestor’s footsteps and have taken an up to date twist on what was always done before. Entertaining lots of guests, cooking great local food, riding good Irish sport horses, and restoring and building classical houses and homes. It’s so important to understand that what is built will be there for decades and hopefully centuries - so do it right. Classic principles

of architecture and design always age well. Modern dates quickly.”

DREAM DINNER PARTY

As the lady of the manor Sammy has welcomed many guests to the family estate. Asked who she would love to have around the dinner table and why, she found it hard to contain herself because she has some pretty interesting relatives.

“I would love to invite all my American ancestors that I never knew. My Vermont grandmother Marjorie Clay Ide, who grew up in Samoa and the Philippines, with Robert Louis Stevenson as a friend (he can come too). Archie Butt, a military aide and advisor to Presidents Taft and Roosevelt, who went down on the Titanic going over to ask for her hand in marriage and her father Henry Clay Ide, governor general of the Philippines, chief justice in Samoa, and Ambassador to Spain.

“Her dear sister Anne, and her husband Bourke Cockran, the Irish man known as



the silver tongued orator with the golden heart. As a senator he did much campaigning for the rights of Irish immigrants. He also was one of the influencers for Gatsby with his lavish parties in his Long Island mansion. He actually died at one of Scott Fitzgerald's own parties. Scott would of course be on the list too. He and my grandfather worked together in Schreiber's.

"Sitting Bull, Chief of the Iroquois Tribe, and the Iroquois squaw who married a Jerome and was grandmother of the Jerome clan would make for interesting discourse. And of course, the rest of the Jerome clan including Leonard Jerome-New Yorker and Buccaneer. I would have loved to have seen his mansion on Madison Gardens and 26th, pulled down in 1967. It had a private theatre for 200 and huge stables for this Lipizzaner stallions. He would race his carriage with four horses up Park Avenue against friends such a Vanderbilt, Rockefeller and Carnegie. He built Jerome Park Race course in Brooklyn and was a founder of the American race horse society.

"I'd invite his 3 daughters; Leonie, (the kind) Jenny (the pretty) and Clare (the witty). Three amazing women in their own right. Leonie became my great grandmother, Clare was mother to Clare Sheridan the amazing

sculptress (she sculpted Chaplin, Lenin, Trotsky, and Ghandi among others) and Jenny was Winston Churchill's mother. Jenny had been close friends with Bourke Cockran before he met and married Aunty Anne (Clay Ide), and sent her son Winston who was poorly spoken to learn the art of public speaking from Bourke in those early days. I love the fact that Churchill's oratory skills came from an Irish man who left Sligo at 17 and became a great American senator.

"And finally, I could not leave out Winston (Churchill). I would like to ask him questions about his attitude to Ireland in his early days, and I just hope he would allow everyone else enough air space to speak! (I have a very old vintage car horn in my dining room, which anyone can honk during dinner if they think anyone is talking too much!) I would also like to invite Paul McCartney - married at Castle Leslie Estate in 2001.

"My table sits 14/16 so I should be able to fit them all in, and the menu would be very interesting too!"

With so much history and so many amazing ancestors, it's no wonder Sammy Leslie is a force of nature extraordinaire!



Sammy Leslie

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