



MANE EVENT: Our Deirdre on her horse and, below, one of the stunning bedrooms

DEIRDRE REYNOLDS goes horsing around the beautiful Castle Leslie estate before finishing with a spa-tacular facial

MEDITATION apps are great and bubble baths are wonderful – but sometimes you just have to straddle a horse named Betty and clip-clop through the County Monaghan forest to see the wood for the trees.

One of the last sunny Sunday afternoons of the year is ambling to a close, and I'm crunching through the carpet of leaves adorning the sprawling Castle Leslie estate atop my new friend. My smartphone's in airplane mode, and though it's not officially equine therapy, it should be.

The regal 17th century pile may have been home to hard-partying pensioner Sir John Leslie, or 'Uncle Jack', who boogied his way to the great big nightclub in the sky aged 99 four years ago. Over the years, it may even have welcomed bon vivants such as Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney, who famously said 'I Do' (and later 'I Don't') to Heather Mills at St Salvator's church on the estate in 2002.

But there's another, more laid-back side to life at the castle, today run by Sammy Leslie, the great-great granddaughter of the 1st Baronet. Quite literally, in the case of The Victorian Treatment Rooms found in the

gorgeously-restored Lodge just inside the gates to the 1,000-acre estate.

Horse rides and rub downs are just two of the activities guests from all walks of life can now enjoy at the ever-evolving property, which opened to the public in 1995. First though, my two-legged friend and I check into our first floor bedroom overlooking the equestrian centre.

Having previously stayed in the 'Room of Calm', one of 20 opulent bedrooms in the nearby castle, it's not my first rodeo. Complete with a clawfoot bathtub, huge bed and private balcony, however, I soon discover you don't have to decamp to the citadel to stay-cay like a queen.

Far too few hotels in Ireland cater properly for differently-abled guests but Castle Leslie certainly does. Of 20 new bedrooms opened at the Lodge last year, two of them are completely accessible.

Elsewhere, in the self-catering Old Stable Mews, there is also dog-friendly accommodation where guests can whisk their woofs on a luxury weekend away.

Down below in the courtyard, Betty and her stablemates are chomping at

the bit to explore the sun-dappled grounds, and they're not the only ones. It's well worth ponying up the €40 (€30 for children) for a one-hour guided hack through the gently rolling parklands.

Afternoon tea overlooking glittering Glaslough from the grandeur of the castle, or pub grub and a perfectly-pulled pint in cosy Conor's Bar at the Lodge are just two of the dining options at the four-star escape beloved by foodies. But it's the nine-course tasting menu crafted from local ingredients by executive chef Philip Brazil at Snaffles Restaurant (€85) that books out weeks in advance among gourmands.

As live piano music tinkles in the background of the elegant brasserie, I select a Five Mile Town Goats Cheese starter and main course of Cod Cooked in Garlic Milk, and can see why. With 109 different gins from around the world to choose from (pictured above), Fighting Bishop – a small batch spirit made from botanicals found on the estate – is just



the tonic before bedtime.

Knickers may not be the most upmarket way to judge a spa hotel, but a discreet note to keep them on during treatments while filling out a consultation form the next morning is just one of the tiny touches designed to help guests relax to the max.

Spas can be an etiquette minefield that leave you feeling even more scrunched up than when you first arrived. So it's the highest compliment I can pay my beauty therapist that I drift off mid-conversation during a 45-minute Signature Facial (€60) in the Victorian Treatment Rooms.

Steeping in the outdoor hot tub overlooking the stables, it's not equestrian if it'll be back – but when.

- Castle Leslie Estate is based in Glaslough, Co Monaghan, just under two hours' drive from Dublin.
- Bed and breakfast starts from €160 per room per night at the Lodge.
- See www.castleleslie.com for more.

