



Castle Leslie sits on the shores of a great green lake in the Gaelic Kingdom of Oriel. Seen from across the water, midway through a gallop over undulating parkland, its cut-stone facade is impressive and endearingly quirky. People are wandering about the lush, picture-perfect grounds

admiring the topiary, marble columns and walled garden, taking in the Irish country air. Somebody is in a row boat, fishing for pike; someone else is heading towards the old stone church and its snaggle-toothed graveyard. Up high at a castle window, in what my fellow riders insist is the Red Room – the crimson-themed master suite once occupied by poet William Butler Yeats – a figure stands admiring the view.

“A ghost,” quips our guide, Morag, wheeling her large bay towards the estate’s Hunting Lodge and Equestrian Centre. We follow in single file, spacing ourselves to avoid the clods kicked up by the horse in front, but finish shoulder to shoulder anyway. A pheasant darts out of the undergrowth, startled. Rabbits scamper near a large brush fence, one of 300 jumps dotted about Castle Leslie’s sprawling 400 hectares. Bridleways – 34km of them – meander in all directions.

We pass a group of seasoned eventers, their mounts puffing plumes of steam, then a gaggle of first-timers on fat, good-natured ponies. Back at the state-of-the-art Equestrian Centre (part of a recent \$17 million renovation package) a virtual horse – mechanically operated, with a mane and tail – is breaking in the truly terrified.

Castle Leslie is the seat of one of Ireland’s most prominent families. A place where “the horse is king” and where paying guests are treated like royalty. Food is fresh and proudly local. Dinner is formal but relaxed and covers five courses, held at a long, candlelit table in a room that hasn’t changed much in 100 years.

Master chef Gerry Molloy runs both the superb restaurant and the award-winning Cookery School (with executive chef Matthew King), helming courses with titles such as Men Only, Food & Erotica and Guilt Free Cooking. Over in the Hunting Lodge, the organic Victorian Spa pampers and restores. A post-ride massage by beautician Rita (whose accent, a mix of Lithuanian and Irish, was suitably soothing) had me gliding into the castle’s drawing room for aperitifs.

Praise is due to owner and hostess Samantha (Sammy) Leslie, a woman whose family tree stretches back to Attila »

