



Can't all hotels be this good?

ms than we need and too much poor service, often at hotels kept open for tax reasons. With even the best places to stay
way to survive is by going even further beyond the norm. Bridgestone editor **John McKenna** knows what to look for

enjoy from their customers and to their ability to get better.

But even the good are fearful, for the collateral damage being inflicted by hotels being kept open at any cost in order to reap tax benefits is causing the virtuous to suffer, big time. Between 1634 and 1637 the Dutch nation lost its collective sanity, on account of tulips: "tulipomania" drove those solid, sensible Calvinists crazy. What can we call our own mania for allowing thousands of hotel rooms we had no need of to be built: hotelomania? McCreavy-Cowen syndrome?

Hospitality is an art form, but it is also a discipline, and a profession. Great hosts, like great cooks, are not born: they are made, and they are made through practice and professionalism, which is why they master all the nuances of the art.

Every time I meet someone who is truly great at the art of hospitality I also meet someone who is a truly hard worker, and a truly dedicated person at that.

It's almost 25 years since I first set eyes on Myrtle Allen, of Ballymaloe House. It was late during dinner service on a Saturday night, and Mrs Allen was clearing a table of its dirty dishes and cutlery and rolling up the messed-up tablecloths.

Fifteen years ago I made a television programme about Kelly's Resort Hotel, in Rosslare. My abiding memory of the programme and of the hotel is of Bill Kelly ferrying desserts out of the kitchen and into a packed dining room, late on a Saturday night.

In 2009, when the Irish Hotels Federation reckoned occupancy levels were not much above 50 per cent, Kelly's was reporting almost 90 per cent occupancy.

Time and again as we write our guides, the defining characteristic of a place is not the grandness, or the chicness or the design. Instead, it's this sort of thing, from my editor Eamon Barrett: "In hotels the greatest failing seems to be not getting the staff - every one of them - to understand how important it is

that they engage with the guests. Eye contact, a smile, a greeting: all add to that sense of calmness that one seeks when staying in any guest house or hotel.

"In a five-star hotel recently I stood at the bar for 10 minutes while staff members passed me by - all totally intent on their own task and problem, and oblivious to me as a guest."

But hang on a second: aren't we Irish brilliant at the eye contact, as we simultaneously take your bags, ask how your dog is and explain all 10 courses of the tasting menu? We are not. And the reason we aren't good is because we think we are great.

At one place everyone shook my hand when I arrived. Sadly, when it came to breakfast it took 45 minutes to get scrambled eggs. Perhaps the chef was shaking hands with the chickens

Even the guys who are running builders' hotels think they are great. At one place in Dublin every member of staff shook my hand when I arrived and left: it was like being the father of the bride in a wedding line. Sadly, when it came to breakfast it took no less than 45 minutes to get scrambled eggs. Perhaps the chef was shaking hands with the chickens.

Away from this comedy of errors, one central truth has emerged over the past five or six years as we have been selecting and describing the addresses that make it into our annual Bridgestone Guides: the best places to stay in Ireland are getting better and better.

They are trying harder and harder not only to create destinations that reflect the tastes

and interests of the owner but also to expand and develop the scope and depth of what they offer. And that no longer means having a golf course nearby for him, or a spa for her (women's golf, as folk in the business call it).

The six destinations I mention today, in the panel to the right, are places that exemplify this new trend, but we could have chosen many more.

On our last visit to Ballymaloe House, for example, my kids made some incredible pottery on a day-long course with the brilliant Kinsale Pottery & Arts Centre. We could have chosen the cutting-edge cookery courses offered at the Tannery, in Dungarvan, or Ballyknocken House, in Wicklow. If you want to learn to cook from the best chefs in the country, you could also choose Kelly's Resort Hotel, where chefs like Eugene Callaghan and Neven Maguire appear annually, in addition to serious gardening and wine-appreciation courses.

I like the way some houses, like Grove House, in west Cork, or Kilgraney House, in Co Carlow, are incorporating art galleries. If you are doing a spot of self-catering at the glam Inisbeg, also in west Cork, you can take a moonlight kayaking trip around Reen Harbour with Atlantic Sea Kayaking.

The best places to stay are becoming not just expert in hospitality but also expert in all the adventures and specialisations that their locations can offer. The days of just opening up your doors and thinking that you are magically blessed with the gift of hospitality are over. To succeed now you must be a master of the little universe that exists in and around your country house, B&B or hotel, and you have to know how to bring that universe to your guests.

■ *The Bridgestone 100 Best Places to Stay in Ireland 2010* and its companion volume, *The Bridgestone 100 Best Restaurants in Ireland 2010*, are published next Friday, €10 each. bridgestoneguides.com

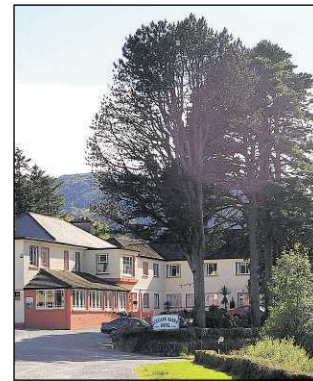
Six masters of their universes

1 Kilcolman Rectory
Enniskean, Co Cork, 023-8822913, kilcolmanrectory.com. In a perfect world, before you opened a country house you would train as a chef, an interior designer and a gardener. Sarah Gornall has trained in all these disciplines, and it explains why Kilcolman Rectory is such a dream country destination, hidden away a few kilometres west of Bandon. You could bury yourself in the gorgeous aesthetic of the house, but then there is fishing with an expert gillie, cookery classes from Gornall and, especially, the chance to locate your inner Winston Churchill by doing a course in watercolour painting with local artist Jenni White. Select some of the garden's beautiful flowers, set up your easel and the rest is surely easy.

2 Rathmullan House
Rathmullan, Co Donegal, 074-9158188, rathmullanhouse.com, rathmullansailing.com. You can't keep up with Rathmullan House. A pioneer of sustainable cooking and food production, and celebrated as one of the best kitchens in the country, with Kelan McMichael having succeeded Ian Orr, it even operates a mobile kitchen - which won our award for sustainable cooking at 2009's Electric Picnic. Back up at Lough Swilly, and the opening last year of the new Rathmullan Sailing & Watersports School is another enticement to head up to the Fanad Peninsula. Five days scooting around Lough Swilly in its new Laser Bahias, or exploring the coastline in sea kayaks, should build up a respectful appetite for great cooking.

3 South Aran House
Inis Oírr, Aran Islands, Co Galway, 099-75073,

southaran.com. A few years ago we went out one morning in Enda Conneely's boat. Only a short distance out from Inis Oírr we were hauling in mackerel and pollack on our rods. We brought them back to Conneely's Fisherman's Cottage restaurant, sliced them for sashimi and ate them with wasabi and soy sauce. It remains one of my favourite breakfasts, and I want to do it again, maybe taking in a powerboating course, or doing some more serious sea angling.



Splendid: the family-run Gougane Barra Hotel

If the water isn't your thing, then Enda and his wife, Maria, also offer yoga, Pilates and chi-gung courses, sea-vegetable and macrobiotic cookery courses, and life coaching.

4 Gregans Castle Hotel
Ballyvaughan, Co Clare, 065-7077005, gregans.ie. A number of places in the Burren, in Co Clare, are splendidly out-of-the-box, and feel as if they couldn't exist anywhere else - the Burren Perfumery and Tea Rooms, O'Lochainn's Whiskey Bar and An Fear Gorta, to name just three. But among modern Irish country houses, Simon Haden and Frederieke McMurray's Gregans Castle is one of the most singular, thanks to a sublime aesthetic - Freddie is

one of the great interior designers - and to Mickael Viljanen's incredible cooking. They can organise surfing, rock climbing, horse riding and more, but our ambition is to take a day-long guided tour of this extraordinary landscape with local guide Shane Connolly, digging deeper into the flora, geology and history of this out-of-the-box place.

5 Gougane Barra Hotel
Gougane Barra, Ballingearry, Co Cork, 026-47069, gouganebarrahotel.com. Every summer Neil and Katy Lucey set up the Theatre by the Lake, just at the back of their splendid hotel. Everyone arrives for dinner before the show, then troops into the little theatre, where Aidan Dooley might be performing his Tom Crean extravaganza, Des Keogh might be confessing the life of an Irish publican, or Mick Lally might be sorting out suitable matches in John B Keane's *The Matchmaker*. To see such chamber dramas and comedies in such a setting is a blessing, while the hotel itself is one of those traditional, modest, family-run Irish hotels that happily constitute the very antithesis of the brash builders' hotels.

6 Parkwood Country House
Passage East, Co Waterford, 051-380863, parkwood.com. Terrie Pooley used to run a fashion-design business in London, so if your ambition is to learn how to make dresses, fashion perfect trousers or maybe just understand how to work a sewing machine, all the while enjoying comfort, incredible views over the River Suir and great local food, then a course at Terrie and Roger Pooley's Parkwood Country House is just for you. The Pooleys are great people, and Parkwood is simply pristine.

Endless fun for Summer days & nights



The Fun Starts Here

DISCOVERIRELAND.IE/FESTIVALS

Féile Oriel

Féile Oriel is a spectacle of traditional music and entertainment culminating in the Fiddler of Oriel competition, where the cream of Irish musicians compete for the prestigious title.

Monaghan Town, Co. Monaghan
29th April - 2nd May

Bray Jazz Festival

More than 35 groups will perform concerts, recitals and play jazz trail gigs over the three days of the May Bank Holiday Weekend.

Bray, Co. Wicklow
30th April - 2nd May

Cape Clear Island Walking Talking Festival

A series of walks and events around the hidden corners of Cape Clear island focusing on different aspects of it's history, folklore, culture and ecology.

Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork
30th April - 3rd May

Limerick Riverfest

This festival is designed to showcase and celebrate all that's great about Limerick City - highlighting and revelling in art, culture, music, sport and food.

Limerick City
30th April - 3rd May

Sligo Kite Surfing Festival

Enjoy the amazing display of aerial acrobatics from Ireland's best kitesurfers as they compete in Round 1 of the Irish Kitesurfing Championships featuring freestyle and race events.

Rosses Point Beach, Co. Sligo
1st - 2nd May

Connemara Adventure Challenge

Crank up the pace at the Connemara Adventure Challenge, a race spanning 3 disciplines of trail/mountain running, kayaking and cycling over 26km of spectacular scenery.

Leenane, Co. Galway
8th May